

Skylord
A Dr Who/ James Bond short story by T.R. Peers
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Commander James Bond stared gloomily out of the dining car window at thick, white clouds that looked solid enough to walk on. His mood was such that he was almost tempted to try it. Around him, the soft hubbub of murmuring voices contended with the distant hum of powerful engines. It was early afternoon, and a reception was under way for his host, a Mr Michael Fotherington.

Fotherington was, to put it bluntly, not the type of man with whom Bond preferred to associate himself. In his late fifties, hair greying and thinning, and dressed in a poorly-cut suit that would have given any respectable Saville Row tailor an attack of the vapours, he resembled far more a Q department 'boffin' than a captain of industry. Not that Bond had any more time for penny-pinchers and profiteers than he did for inventors. At least the works of the latter were sometimes useful. Whether the same could be said of the device for which Fotherington was most recently responsible, and in which he, Bond, and an assortment of the rich and idle were currently embarked, was yet to be determined. For this was an idea whose time was largely believed to have passed.

And yet, the great airship, R200, had been constructed. Fotherington had made himself appreciably useful in the War, both to the code-breakers of Bletchley Park and to the aero engineers of Vickers, where his circles had intersected those of the celebrated Wallis. This association had taken place some time after the debacle of the R101 and Fotherington had been able to convince enough investors and political figures that he had learned both from his friend's genius, and from his mistakes, to raise the capital for a new venture. He had purchased the great sheds of Cardington, and built this most enormous of vessels there, known to the public and a sceptical Press as *HMAS Skylord*.

The moniker, at least, contained some grain of accuracy. *Skylord* measured over one thousand feet long from her doped-cotton nose to silvered tail, and her girth was almost two hundred of the same Imperial unit. Fotherington had boasted that the *Yamato* could have been contained entirely within his creation's envelope, though the comparison with another giant vessel that had proved utterly useless for its intended purpose did nothing to assuage Bond's doubts. In most other metrics, *Skylord* compared rather less favourably to Hirohito's doomed super-dreadnought. A crew of some 60 men and their century of passengers would have been lost in *Yamato's* near three thousand, and her three thousand pounds of weight were as nothing to seventy thousand long tons. *Skylord* could certainly accomodate *Yamato*, but only at the cost of terminal indigestion.

Such comparisons, of course, were mostly specious. More sensible metrics were applied in both the Press and Government circles by matching *Skylord* against the new jet airliners and their fading aquatic cousins, the ocean liners. Here, the airship fared a little better. While she could not equal the speed of the first, she outclassed even the newest Comets for capacity, and matched anything that Cunard could put into the water for luxury whilst leaving them for dead with her eight Rolls Royce engines. Those engines, it was claimed, produced over six thousand horsepower- doubling that of R101- and could propel the craft at over a hundred miles per hour.

Overall, though, what had sold *Skylord* was that spirit of adventure and defiance that a crumbling British Empire pined desperately for. No other great power on Earth had dared tug the beard of Thor since his bolts had ripped R101 open and slain *Hindenburg* (with good reason, the sceptics pointed out, and indeed the crew of *Skylord* were under orders to avoid thunderstorms at all costs.) No other Empire would dare once more to harness the fickle powers of hydrogen gas for so mundane a task as providing lift for a metal box containing one hundred and fifty human beings. So it was, then,

that this maiden passenger voyage from Cardington to New York was filled to capacity with those who craved adventure with the veneer of security.

They were a disparate lot, who filled the cavernous dining area that made up most of *Skylord's* 'A' deck. Few were of any interest to Bond- there was money here, but mostly the money of the middleman and the third-in-line, for no company of note or family of name would risk their valued or beloved on a conveyance of such dubious provenance. There were women, of course, some of whom might have turned the eye, but the majority were unattractive and none were unchaperoned. Perhaps there was still sport there for a certain kind of hunter, but Bond preferred not to poach another man's game without excellent cause, and there was little here worthy of rifle and pith-helmet.

He lit a cigarette, and contemplated the last sips of the Martini. The luncheon had been fine, the drinks perfectly prepared, though the restrictions on smokers aboard the vessel were tedious, if understandable. Every exit from the dining room led to a pressurised airlock, manned by attendants whose sole job was to ensure no flame nor smouldering remnant of the same left the sanctuary, lest it meet some errant, wandering tendril of escaped hydrogen and react in that manner which the gas inevitably would in the face of such provocation. Understandable it might be, but having to leave all one's smoking material in the stern custody of a functionary barely old enough to shave somehow rankled. In part, it was the youth of most of the crew that affected Bond. With the long hiatus of the technology, there were no veteran airshipmen left, and so the crew of *Skylord* were mostly newly-minted sailors, with some engineers and officers begged, borrowed, or outright stolen from the submarine service. At least one lesson had been learned from R101, for this crew had undertaken a solid year of shakedown and training voyages before civilian passengers had been allowed anywhere near their vessel.

Bond's mouth twisted briefly into a harsh smile. There was something he and *Skylord* had in common. Since the affair in Turkey, and the near-fatal dose of tetrodotoxin that had concluded it, there had been those in Mi6 who had come to regard Bond himself as a dangerous liability. The Jamaican escapade had helped, but perhaps he too was only just coming out of a new shakedown test. Well, this assignment would do little to change matters. There had been rumours and one definite warning from the Deuxième Bureau in France that the Russians planned to sabotage *Skylord* as part of their continuing campaign to quietly undermine Britain's, or most particularly England's, international standing. Mi6's counter-gambit was to place several agents amongst the crew, whilst Bond himself, in his capacity as a Commander in the Naval Reserve, kept up a more visible presence in the public spaces of the airship. Effectively, he was reduced to the cheese in M's trap, but neither the nature nor the capability of the mouse was a known element.

James Bond was not a man naturally disposed to the defensive. In matters of espionage, he was a firm believer that victory most often lay with he who took the initiative and retained it in the face of any and all countermeasures. He knew for a fact that there were those, like the SMERSH mastermind Kronsteen, who were more than capable of matching or beating the best planners Mi6 had to offer. If such a man- or indeed woman, for he had a scar on his ankle that would forever remind him not to underestimate the fairer sex- had planned the demise of *Skylord*, then the underwriters of Lloyd's would give her poor odds of ever seeing the Empire State. So it was that, bored though he was, Bond was still alert and vigilant, and so it was that he saw reflected in his glass the beginnings of an altercation at the aft airlock door.

A man had come through that door, and had begun to stride into the dining room before being accosted by the rating on duty there. Initially, he was impeded for no more reason than to check his boarding ticket so his impounded tobacco and matches, if any should exist, could be located and returned to him, but it did not take long for the rating to realise, as Bond already had, that this man was neither a scheduled passenger, nor one of the crew. He was dressed almost entirely in black

from head to toe, and that head was topped with a mass of somewhat unruly grey curls. A high, lightly lined forehead fell down towards large, fierce-looking eyebrows of a matching grey which surmounted grey-blue eyes. Those eyes, even in the reflection in Bond's glass, were striking. There was nothing unusual in the colour, nor in the slight bulge which affects those of most men over the age of fifty who have not yet run to flab in the face, but these were nonetheless eyes both of intellect, and of command. Those eyes had seen war, had seen men go into battle and not return. They flanked a nose that was long, thin, somewhat aquiline- in fact, thought Bond, it was a face that would not look out of place on a Roman coin. Finally, there was a thin, hard-set mouth that suddenly flashed into a triangular slash of a smile as the newcomer fished out a small leather wallet from the pocket of his red-lined jacket and brandished it at his captor. The effect was almost instantaneous, and after the briefest of glances at the document within the young man allowed his charge to proceed about his business, whatever that might have been.

Bond watched the man for a few more minutes- he seemed particularly interested in the inflatable seat-cushions, which were the traditional Cambridge green and printed with "R200 HMAS Skylord"- before quietly rising to his feet and walking over to the rating.

"Commander Bond, Sir!" exclaimed the young man, snapping smartly to attention. They always teach them to salute before they teach them to fight, thought Bond, sourly.

"At ease, Seaman. Who was that man you just allowed into the dining lounge?"

"A Mr John Smith, Sir." replied the rating, perhaps the smallest hint of uncertainty creeping into his voice. "His documents checked out, Sir, he's from the Air Ministry."

"What department? What's his cabin number?"

The young man creased his brow in consternation, the expression of a man who has just fallen foul of a Calcutta cut-purse taking root in his features. "He's... he's.. from the Air Ministry.." he repeated, more slowly.

This was going nowhere. Bond dismissed the floundering youngster and resolved to interrogate his suspect directly. His endeavour proved less complicated than it might have, given that when he turned around the newcomer was seated at his vacated table, studying the wine list.

The man let out a long "Oh!" as Bond approached, a sound of some warmth and genuine pleasure. As he spoke, a strong Scottish brogue was immediately apparent, and to Bond's ears it did not seem affected. "Oh! It's you! I'm a great fan of yours, please, please, sit down!" That smile was back, broader than ever. Not yet taking the invitation to sit at his own table, Bond covered his confusion by glaring down at the man. After a moment, he spoke again. "Come on, come on, sit! I'm a big fan, like I said, 'Stardust'- brilliant! D'you know it's one of the most recorded American songs ever? Sit down!"

Light began to dawn in Bond's mind, at least on this new mystery. He returned the smile, though with little sincerity, and sat down. "I'm afraid you have me confused with someone else, Mr..?"

"You're not Hoagy Carmichael?" said the Scot, ignoring the implied question.

"I'm sorry, no. The name's Bond, James Bond. And you are?" he tried again, offering his hand.

"John Smith.. *Doctor* John Smith, with the Air Ministry." said the man in a slightly bored tone, ignoring the handshake as he had the question. He was looking at the wine list again. Suddenly his head snapped up, the curls bobbing with the motion as those grey-blue eyes locked with Bond's, as if seeing him for the first time. "Wait.. James Bond? *Commander James Bond*? Shaken not stirred, license to kill, all of that?"

"Keep your bloody voice down!" hissed Bond, hand sliding under his suit jacket to where the comforting weight of the Beretta nestled. Q Division had been very particular about avoiding firing the weapon aboard *Skylord*, but no force on Earth would have compelled him to face potential danger unarmed. If the other noticed the implied threat of violence in either word, tone, or action, he gave little sign of it.

"Oh, this is bad. This is very bad." he looked up. "You're not the Scottish one, are you? He's my favourite. Clara likes the newer one, the one with the ears, but he's too much of a thug for me. I'm

doing it again, aren't I? Sorry. Anyway, this is really bad.”

Bond relaxed an iota, despite the man's strange, and seemingly ominous, words. At least he wasn't blabbering about Mi6 to the entire room. The head whipped up again, now wearing a large pair of dark glasses through which Smith scrutinised him. The smile again. “Y'know, we've got something in common, we have!”

“We do?” said Bond, wondering if this Smith was in fact the enemy agent, and his very reputation might have scared the truth out of him.

“Yes- we both have lots of different faces!” his eyebrow, just visible above the glasses, dipped as he threw a conspiratorial wink “I've had more, though.” He ripped off the glasses, stuck out a hand.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr Bond, James Bond. I'm the Doctor, and it's quite possible we're all going to die.”

Bond took the proffered hand, and shook it. Despite the man's warning, and the obvious consternation he was hiding beneath manic bravado, the grip was firm and steady. His impression from the Doctor's eyes was reinforced- this was not a man unused to danger. “What do you mean, we're all going to die? Is it the Russians? A threat to *Skylord*?”

“Actually I'm not.” said the Doctor. “Pleased to meet you, I mean. I don't like soldiers, and I especially don't like killers, and you, Mr Bond-James-Bond are both of those, aren't you?”

Bond found the man's habit of mangling his name profoundly irritating and his apparent politics at best naive, but there were more pressing matters. “The threat to *Skylord*, Doctor?”

It suddenly struck him that the Doctor was still gripping his hand.

“Me.” came the reply, and simultaneously there was a terrible pressure in his wrist and the world went suddenly black.

Bond swam furiously up from the inky depths of unconsciousness, cursing his stupidity before he had even forced his eyes open. His mouth felt terribly fuzzy, his wrist throbbed and his eyesight wavered as he blinked himself back to alertness. *Dim Mak*, perhaps, the Indian *Chakra* or some related technique. Whatever the Doctor had used on him, he had walked straight into it as surely as a prize-fighter with his hands in his pockets and lost a fight he didn't know had started. And yet, there had been no warning, no hint of malice that his fine-honed instincts could detect- and had the man truly meant him harm, there were a myriad of ways in which a sleeping man could be quietly made to never awaken again. Bond knew them, and it was inconceivable that a man who could knock you out with a handshake would not.

It was pointless to waste whatever time he had left wondering why he still had it. From the looks of the plates and glasses of those diners who were still eating, he had not been out of commission for long. Finding to his relief that the Beretta was still in place- and from its weight, still in possession of its deadly payload- he ran over to the rating who had originally detained the Doctor, hoping his hunch would play out. “John Smith” he croaked, coughing and swallowing to massage his dry throat back into action. “Where?”

“He went back through here, Sir.” replied the youngster, smartly. “If you want to follow, I'll need your-”

“Take it, damn it!” snarled Bond, thrusting cigarette case and lighter into the rating's arms. “Open the door, and call Captain Hollister. Situation 32 is in effect, as of now!”

The young man's eyes went wide, and he quickly dumped Bond's accoutrements on his desk, leaving both hands free to cycle the airlock mechanism and operate the telephone that would put him directly through to *Skylord's* bridge. Even as Bond, gun drawn, waited impatiently for the airlock to cycle, the Captain's voice came through on the address system. Hollister was a Northern Irishman, a veteran of the Dardanelles, and his rich accent was somehow reassuring even as his words were anything but.

“Now hear this. Now hear this. Situation 32 is in effect. All passengers please return immediately to your cabins until the all-clear is sounded. All hands report to emergency stations. Issue of special

equipment is authorised. I repeat..”

The words were just vague enough to allow the crew, if pressed, to reassure the passengers that there was merely some inclement weather approaching for which all hands were required to steady the ship, but in truth Situation 32 had only one meaning- an intruder was at large on the ship. The 'special equipment' was the crew's arsenal of 12 gauge Browning A5 semi-automatic shotguns. These weapons, which had served the forces of the US Army and Navy with distinction during the War, were not standard issue to the British, but the 'Humpback' as it was affectionally known was considered an ideal gun for the dangerous task of repelling boarders. By the contingency of loading the weapons with buckshot cartridges filled not with lead, but with hard rubber pellets, it was hoped that the dangers of firing them within the confines of a hydrogen-filled airship might be greatly reduced. Still, there was the risk that the flash of discharge might ignite a leak, and so the man in charge of each search party would be under strict orders to allow firing only when vitally necessary.

All over the ship, gun lockers were opened by men who had never believed that such an order could ever come. Nonetheless, regardless of the tender years of many of those men, there was no panic. These were still sailors of the Royal Navy, trained by the hardest, loudest-voiced instructors the Empire could provide, who showed their love for their young charges by putting them through every kind of hell imaginable in the hope that they might never meet it again, or at least not be found wanting if they should. It was the love of the strict father, of the most hated school-master, that often goes unrecognised until long after the giver has passed from the world, and yet was often the most cherished once the recipient had distance enough to appreciate it. Such and more attended the upbringing of James Bond, and it kept him calm as he stalked the halls of *Skylord's* rear decks.

Here, aft of 'A' deck, were found the upper cargo hold, and below that the engineering section, containing the eight mighty engines whose power was transmitted through a cunning series of bearings to the outer pylons which held eight correspondingly huge propellers. By virtue of a design that doubtless would have brought tears of joy to the eyes of the old Graf Zeppelin himself, the thrust and angle of attack of those propellers could be individually adjusted to allow *Skylord* an unprecedented amount of maneuverability for an airship, or for that matter for any airborne conveyance short of the most modern helicopters. All of this was of profound disinterest to Bond, who was concerned more with what lay beyond even that extreme of the vast vessel. For at the very rear of the airship, borrowing an idea that the Americans had tried with the ill-fated *Akron*, lay a small (by the standards of the ship in general) hanger, holding a single Pioneer CC.1 STOL aeroplane. Known colloquially as a 'parasite' aircraft, the Pioneer nestled in a 70 foot wide nook that accomodated, though snugly, her 49 foot wingspan. With only one hundred feet of run-up before the hanger door, the little plane would have no time to reach her take-off speed, and so instead would dive away from her uncaring mother to gain velocity. This concept had been tested several times during the shakedown year, and found to be sound. The reverse, which relied on an arrester hook, the forward velocity of *Skylord* (which at maximum was some sixty miles per hour greater than the stall-speed of the Pioneer) and the skill of the pilot to affect a landing, had only been tried once. The successful test pilot had immediately taken retirement and no other man bold or foolish enough to attempt the feat had since been found. As a vessel for mail delivery or emergency medical transport, however, the Pioneer still had merit and was retained. As the escape route of a SMERSH operative it had obvious appeal.

He was about to start down the ladder to 'B' deck when a sound came from the rear cargo hold. To describe this sound as indescribable would be to do injustice to its alien nature, but to paint it in mere words would have challenged the skills of Homer or Shakespeare. There was grinding and scraping, there was pulsing, there was the suggestion of music, the sound of the memory of battles won and loves lost. Had Bond been merely walking in Hyde Park, he would have been compelled by that sheer curiosity that is the mark and scourge of the human animal to investigate such a sound. In his present state, with every sense straining, he was halfway to the hold door before

reason had even a chance to herd the cat of his wits. Still, there was no decision to make- that noise, whatever it was, could not be coincidental to the matter at hand, not in any world where the Sun still rose in the morning and set at night.

With the comforting, cold weight of the Beretta in hand, he gently pushed open the access door to the hold. Filled as she was to capacity with passengers, *Skylord* was carrying only a bare minimum of other cargo, the weight of its human charges and their accoutrements bringing her close enough to her lift limit that little ballast water was needed. So it was into a largely empty chamber, some eighty feet square, that Mi6's scion pointed his trusted Italian paramour. Empty, but for what looked for all the world like a police call-box in the rough centre of the hold. Bond had seen the type before, of course, but this one was painted in what seemed, in the half-light of the windowless environment, to be a deep blue rather than the red he would have expected. Far more distressing than any discrepancy in its pigmentation, however, was the fact that he appeared to be able to see straight through it. He blinked, fearing some after-effect of the *Dim Mak*, but the scene remained stubbornly the same. As he watched, transfixed, the unearthly sound continued, and the box faded further and further, pulsing back to solidity a little less each time its cycle repeated.

He was struck by the sudden, mad thought that the Doctor was escaping. Reflexively, the instinct of the caveman took over and the Beretta cracked, sending one of its eight precious bullets whining across the intervening space in less time than it took to process the probable foolishness of the action. In the event, no vagrant wisp of hydrogen was present to punish the misdemeanour, but the effort was nonetheless wasted as the round struck nothingness seemingly inches from its target and vanished. And yet, was there maybe a subtle change in tone? Whether action had caused reaction, or the two events had simply correlated he could not tell, but the box seemed now more solid than before. Seconds later, and the sound faded to nothingness as its apparent source returned to tangibility. The door opened, and the grey-maned head stuck out.

“Ah.” said the Doctor, taking in Bond and the levelled Beretta without apparent concern. “I’m still here, aren’t I?”

“Yes.” replied Bond, not really sure what other reply might suffice in the circumstances.

“And you’re pointing a gun at me- wait, at the TARDIS. Did you shoot my TARDIS? Did you?”

It occurred to Bond that, as the holder of the only lethal weapon in the equation, he ought to feel more authority than he in fact did. He felt, in point of fact, like a junior field agent in receipt of one of M’s infamous carpetings. The Scot advanced on him, eyebrows beetling and a rising tone of indignation in his voice.

“You’re shooting a gun, inside an airship, full of hydrogen. Yes, it’s hydrogen, not helium” he continued in a sing-song voice, head bobbing from side to side “believe me, I checked. I’m the Doctor. I. Check. Things. Do you know what might happen if you fire that thing in here?” he held up two fists to either side of his head, palms forward, then popped them open to punctuate his diatribe. “BOOM!”

“That’s actually not very likely.” said Bond, deciding it was time to regain some control of the situation. “I’ve already fired one shot and unless you stand very still and answer my questions exactly, I shall fire another. When I do so, either you will die, or we all will.” his mouth quirked with that cruel smile. “I doubt you will enjoy either outcome.. Doctor.”

Though he seemed less than cowed by the threat, the Doctor did at least halt his advance. He snapped to attention, standing on the balls of his feet, and thrust both hands theatrically into the air. “All right, all right, hands up, don’t shoot, all of that. We’re probably all going to be dead soon anyway, so ask away!”

“What is that device?” asked Bond.

“*She* is called the TARDIS, Mr Bond Ja-” Bond shot him a warning glare “Mr Bond. A Type 40, Mk3 but don’t let her hear I told you that, she gets a bit touchy about her age.”

“A what? She?”

“A TAR- it's a time machine, all right? I'm a time traveller, okay? This is much harder work than the last time this happened. Maybe it's the face, or the clothes? Would you like me more if I wore brown tweed and a bowtie and looked about twelve?”

“Just answer the questions.” said Bond through gritted teeth. “How did you get here?”

“It's a *time machine*.” said the Doctor again, as if any simpleton could understand how such a thing might allow him to appear in the hold of an airship four thousand feet in the air. “Actually that doesn't answer the whole question. You see, there was this Cyberman Mothership which was harvesting the atmosphere of a gas giant- ordinarily I'd just leave them alone, let them get on with it but the atmosphere of Hakkonianatha is actually a sentient hive-mind organism and they were pretty much sucking its brain out through a straw, so I had to put a stop to *that*, obviously.”

“Obviously.” agreed Bond, deciding that humouring the madman might be the easiest course.

“Sooo, the thing is the Cybermen were harvesting the energy from the planet by sucking up the gas, which meant that the energy signature of the Hakkonianatha was starting to form in their control matrix, so I just reconfigured their communication circuit to re-establish the hive-mind- it's just that some of it was on the Mothership. So the Hakkonianatha got control of the ship and... well, hive-minds aren't the most original thinkers so they just dumped the whole thing into their sun, lock-stock and Cybermen.”

“And Doctor.” put in Bond. The whole insane story somehow made a certain amount of sense, even though he could understand little of the details. It struck him that for a man who was contemptuous of the soldier and the killer, he was remarkably sanguine about consigning these 'Cybermen' to fiery doom in a star. The judgement must have shown on his face.

“They're Cybermen, it doesn't count.” said the Doctor, a little defensively. “Yes, anyway, I got dumped too, but I have a TARDIS!” he gestured dramatically, as if expecting applause. When none was forthcoming, he continued. “So, I travelled in time to escape, which *obviously* means I also travelled in space, by the way, but I must have left it a little too late because I got caught up in the backwash when the Mothership's main reactor went up. Once again, our friend the materialisation circuit decided to get a little stropky which is happening *far too much recently*” he said, shouting the last phrase back at the TARDIS “and before you can say 'Moonraker' I'm back in fiction-land again.”

The Beretta had begun to drop a little as the Doctor talked, but the mention of Hugo Drax's failed Doomsday weapon brought it back to its deadly intent. “How do you know about that? The Moonraker affair is double top-secret! Talk!”

“I read it, of course.” sniffed the Doctor.

“The file? How? Is there a mole in Mi6?”

“No, the book. 'Moonraker' by Ian Fleming. You aren't real, Mr Bond, and right now neither am I. Well, relatively speaking we are, but in the dimension I come from, and where I would have stayed if *someone* didn't get in a tizzy every time a little antimatter explosion in the core of a sun interfered with her navigation circuits, we aren't. Real, that is.”

Bond gave him a hard, cold stare. The Doctor returned fire with that strange smile. Finally, he lowered the Beretta. “Fine. You might be insane, I don't care, but you aren't a SMERSH agent. Konsteen couldn't come up with a story that outlandish to save his life. It doesn't solve the main problem either way- someone is going to try to destroy this airship.”

“Oh, you mean him?” said the Doctor, gesturing to the corner of the hold. Incredulous, Bond followed the motion and saw a boot sticking out from behind a small pile of locked-down cargo crates. Rounding the stack revealed a man, dressed in the coveralls of a Cardington maintenance worker, slumped insensible next to a multi-tubed device that could only be a bomb. He checked for a pulse, found one.

“He was here when I arrived.” said the Scot, conversationally, as if foiling bomb plots were a matter of no more consequence than the cricket scores. “He was hiding in one of the crates, with his nasty little bomb. Gave him a bit of the old Venusian karate and totally banjaxed the bomb just in case- I

don't like explosions unless I make them.” He rounded on Bond. “Do you know, I don't usually go around knocking people out and here I've done two in one day! You're a bad influence, Mr Bond, d'you know that?”

Bond considered pointing out that one of the offences had taken place before their meeting, and the other had occurred against his own person, but decided against it. Whatever else had happened, this man had performed a great service to Queen and Country. Under the circumstances, reward might not be forthcoming, but simple gratitude could be. He stuck out a hand.

“Thank you, Doctor. You've saved over a hundred lives today.”

The Doctor regarded the proffered hand. “Only a hundred? Slow week.” Nonetheless, he shook, gravely. “None of the Venusian this time, Mr Bond, I promise. I'm afraid this is a little premature, though.”

“How so?” Bond had begun to relax, to consider getting Hollister to rescind the Situation 32 order, but something in the Doctor's tone brought him back to full alert.

“I can't leave. If I can't leave, it means something from my world is still in yours, and it doesn't belong. It's not anything of mine I can think of, so I think I might have brought a hitch-hiker along with me, something that got caught up in the Vortex. If I can't find it in time, the consequences could be..”

“Bad?” suggested Bond.

“Apocalyptic.” corrected the Doctor.

Some distance below the hold which Bond, the Doctor, and his enigmatic TARDIS shared with the recumbent SMERSH man and his disabled bomb, separated by deck-plates and a latticed superstructure of duralumin, lay the engine room, which in its oily vastness took up a good two-thirds of 'B' deck. Within this noisome chamber lay the eight mighty Rolls Royce engines which propelled *Skylord* towards New York at her cruising speed of some ninety five miles per hour. Each engine was attended by a dedicated team of two ratings, still referred to as 'Stokers' despite the absence of both coal and shovel, in addition to which was a five-man unit of veteran mechanics, known colloquially as the 'Flying Squad'. These men roamed the deck, keeping a watchful eye on the younger Stokers and their thirsty metal charges. Should a problem occur, each engine was equipped with an electric light and buzzer alarm system which its custodians could trigger to summon the Flying Squad, whilst the other engines were overseen by their own staff.

In the current, Situation 32 state, the Flying Squad had taken on a different role, now walking their routes of patrol armed with Humpbacks rather than spanners and wrenches. They, at least, had the comfort of knowing that the chamber in which they stood was protected by an airlock seal, since the chance of hydrogen entering the engine room was one which could not be contemplated.

Nonetheless, surrounded as they were by diesel fuel lines, water lines for the cooling and reclamation systems, and the sensitive drive-shafts for the propellers, they had no more desire to fire their weapons than did any other member of the crew. This was a situation that was soon to experience a diametric reverse.

It was Stoker Barnes who heard it first. Eighteen years of age, and hailing from the docks of Liverpool, he was a young man who had, until very recently, been greatly enjoying his posting aboard *Skylord*. The much-touted dangers of airship travel seemed mostly exaggerated, and compared to the cramped confines his late father had experienced during his time aboard HMS *Strongbow* his quarters were positively luxurious. The current crisis had dampened his enthusiasm somewhat, but he retained the presence of mind to note that the cacophony of sound in the engine room had gained a new instrument. From the rear of the room, near where the bearing tube exited to transmit power from Engine P-2 (Port, second engine) to the propeller of corresponding name, came a rhythmic clanging. Remembering his training, Barnes fought down the instinct of his youthful curiosity to investigate, and pressed the 'Alarm' button.

The Flying Squad, weapons at the ready, were halfway to P-2 when the screams started. Led by Chief Engineer Jack 'Badger' Flynn- so nicknamed for the streak of white that shot through his otherwise black beard- these hardened men steeled their souls and redoubled their pace. Passing P-1, and ignoring the pale, worried faces of the two Stokers trying desperately to focus on their own, critical tasks, they rounded the bulk of P-2 to witness the last moments of Stoker Barnes. It seemed at first blush that the young man had been assaulted by an ancient knight. He was held, suspended by the throat, by a figure standing a little over six and a half feet tall, clad head-to-toe in steel. This covering was charred and pitted in several places as if the wearer had been in some great fire, but its protection appeared inviolate. The head of the steel man was encased in a great helm of that same steel, surmounted incongruously by two pipes, which emerged from where the ears might have been, bent at right-angles, and rose to meet above his head. The effect was much as if he were wearing a pair of radio-operator's headphones, but even the merest glance showed that if so, they could not easily be removed. To the credit of Flynn and his men, it was not this sight that stirred their blood to action, not the outlandish armour nor the ominous demeanour. It was the sight, beneath the steel-booted feet of that metal fiend, of the broken body of Barnes' fellow Stoker. This being, whatever it was, had slain one of their charges, and such an act brooked only one response from the men of the Royal Navy, be their boots on land, sea, or air. "Open fire!"

The Browning A5, in the 12-gauge configuration, usually discharges a mass of lead shot over a cone-shaped area in front of it. Those weapons carried by the crew of *Skylord* differed in two important respects. Firstly, as previously discussed, they were loaded not with deadly lead shot, but with hard rubber, described by the naïve as 'non-lethal', and by the cynical (and better informed) as 'less lethal'. Secondly, they had been choked in such a manner as to render their spread as narrow as possible. By so doing, it was hoped to reduce the likelihood of hitting an unintended bystander, or more importantly critical equipment which might endanger many more lives if damaged. The concentration of the rubber pellets was also hoped to restore some of the stopping power lost through the use of the lighter, softer projectile. The volley which struck the steel man, mostly on his left side as the Engineers avoided hitting their entrapped comrade, would have killed most men where they stood and mortally inconvenienced a bull elephant. It pattered from the armour like gentle spring rain. Worse, the thing merely ignored the assault, speaking instead one short, dreadful word: "DELETE."

That voice, deep, sonorous, inhuman, accompanied an act no more humane. There was a flash, which seemed for a split-second to turn the world into a photographic negative of itself, and a jolt of electric fire coursed through the body of young Stoker Barnes. With a sudden, brief spasm, his weak struggles ceased entirely. As a second volley of rubber achieved no more than the first despite being fired, if such were possible, with even more venomous intent, the thing bent, with no apparent haste, and seized the body of the other Stoker in its free hand. Seeing that their weapons had no more effect than the blows of a child on the skin of a Rhinoceros, Flynn spat the order which no military man, even one in a traditionally non-combatant role, ever wishes to issue or receive. "Retreat!"

Morale shaken, but unbroken, the Flying Squad fell back in good order. As they passed P-1, Flynn reached out to a second button next to the station alarm, a button any but the Chief were forbidden to press. This button simultaneously sounded the evacuation alarm for all stations in the Engine Room, and began the process of shutting down the engines themselves, since the risk of them running unattended was deemed too great. One of the Stokers stared at him, aghast. "But Chief, the engines-"

"Damn the engines! Get out, for Christ's sake!"

The Stokers streamed towards the exit, the Flying Squad covering them, though no man was foolish enough to believe his weapon would achieve more than possibly drawing the attention of their silver Nemesis away from their charges. As Flynn watched from the gantry next to the doorway, the thing turned stiffly on its heel, marching away with that rhythmic tramp that had alerted poor, dead

Barnes. It spoke another word, less deadly in intent but no less ominous in aspect than the first. "UPGRADE."

The Chief then witnessed an action that at once summed up the great weakness, and the underlying strength, of Humanity. As the thing marched past Engine P-3, whose crew had for whatever reason been to the far side of their charge and had not witnessed its advance nor drawn its attention, he saw a young Stoker still ensconced there. This in itself was no cause for undue alarm, since the lad was well hidden and their assailant seemed to have no particular desire to search out fresh victims. What turned his blood to ice was the fact that the Stoker had armed himself with a heavy wrench. The Greeks have a word- *Kairos*- for that moment of significant time when all seems to slow to a near stop, and it was in such a state that Flynn witnessed this act of magnificent valour, and of horrific foolishness. As the steel man passed him by, the youngster leapt from his concealment and brought his heavy bludgeon down with all his youthful strength upon that terrible head. The head was knocked to one side with a deafening clang, and the mighty feet broke their step to stagger for purchase. Then the moment was gone- that brief second of Man's glorious defiance of Monster- and the Stoker was himself seized, and his terrible fate pronounced. "DELETE." The *Thunderchild* was no more.

Flynn lowered his gaze, and saw the last of his men from the room.

In the control cabin of *Skylord*, which its Navy crew preferred to refer to as the 'bridge', an air of quiet consternation prevailed. Captain Hollister, feeling every one of his sixty five years, fretted helplessly as he waited for some news, some report, which would tell him of the location and magnitude of the threat to his command. Over the preceding year, his attitude towards the great vessel and her crew had gradually shifted from indifference, (his acceptance of the post being motivated by the prospect of a comfortably-funded retirement) to quiet pride in the capabilities of both. Now, however, despite the six thousand horsepower at his command, he felt helpless as a new-born babe. His mood was not improved by a sudden exclamation from the Helmsman.

"Captain Hollister, Sir! We're losing power in the engines!"

"Which ones?" snapped Hollister, starting forwards.

"All of them, Sir! Airspeed dropping rapidly.. throttles aren't responding. She's dead, Sir."

Hollister snatched up his command telephone, and was about to press the button to connect to the Engineering room when he saw the green light above it wink out, to be replaced by its angry red neighbour. That meant Engineering had been evacuated, which at least explained the loss of power. He looked over to the Navigator. "Navigation, status on the storm we were tracking?"

The Navigator, an ex-patriot Pole recruited for his experience with Bomber Command, responded smartly. "Not good, Captain. If we drop below sixty knots on this course, we'll find ourself right in the middle of it within two hours."

The Helmsman called back, unbidden. "Dropping below fifty now, Captain. I have helm control, but nothing in the throttles."

"*Bože...*" exclaimed the Navigator.

"XO, get me someone who can tell me what the bloody hell is going on in my engine room! And get Fotherington up here!"

"Aye, Captain." responded the First Officer, gesturing to one of the stern, shotgun-armed men on guard at the bridge door even as he began making fresh connections on the internal telephone exchange.

Hollister swallowed. "Helm... turn us into the storm. Port.." he looked across at the Navigator, who flicked the numbers on his hands "Port fifteen degrees."

"Captain, our orders.."

"Damn our orders! The storm winds will at least give us some attitude control, but if we aren't facing into them when it hits us, we're as good as dead. Port fifteen degrees, now!"

"Aye aye, Sir."

Five hundred or so feet from where Hollister fought his desperate battle to keep *Skylord* intact,

'Badger' Flynn and his men reached Station B-12, the emergency post nearest the Engine room. Flynn had just picked up the receiver to call the bridge when Bond and the Doctor clambered down the connection ladder from 'A' deck.

"Who the bloody hell- Oh, Commander Bond, Sir!" said the Engineer guarding the rear as they approached. "Badger's just on the horn to the Captain, won't be a tic. Nasty business in the Engine Room, Sir."

Bond heard the end of the conversation. "I understand, Captain, but that thing took everything we could throw at it. No Sir, no effect.. well, one of my lads brained it with a wrench but... well, a little, Sir. Yes Sir, understood. Commander Bond has arrived, Sir, I'll put him on." He handed Bond the receiver, and the Doctor put on his glasses again.

"Bond here."

"Bond! Where the hell have you been?"

"Dealing with the Russians, Sir." Bond committed a lie of simplification. "I've taken one of their men off the board and dealt with a bomb--"

"Oh! Oh you did that, did you?" grumbled the Doctor, but mercifully not loud enough for Hollister to hear. Bond shot him a warning glance. "but we appear to have another intruder in the Engine room."

"So I'm told." replied Hollister, grimly. "Chief Flynn tells me the shotguns have no effect on the thing, a man made of metal-" *Cyberman* mouthed the Doctor, who could clearly somehow hear the whole conversation "but it seems one of his men got a reaction by brute force. I'm sending all available hands down to you with crow-bars, bailing hooks, sledges and anything else they can find. We'll beat the damn thing to death bare-handed if need be."

The Doctor was shaking his head. "Sir, that could lead to serious casualties if this thing is as dangerous as it seems-" began Bond, but Hollister cut him off. "Damn the casualties! If we don't get the engines back on and under control within" the briefest of pauses "twenty minutes, we hit a storm-front and then God only knows what could happen without power. Look, it's your show down there, Bond. If you think you can stop that thing by some other means, do so, but after those twenty minutes are up a black mark on your record will be the least of your troubles. Understood?"

"Understood, Sir." Bond hung up.

"It's worse than the Captain knows, Commander." said Flynn, morosely. "Those engines don't just start and stop on a whim, from cold it's a good hour or so of work to get them going. If we can get to them before they cool and the pressures drop too low, we--"

"How long?" snapped Bond.

"Ten minutes, tops."

"Christ." Bond rounded on the Doctor. "Well? This is your mess, how do we stop this 'Cyberman' in under ten minutes?"

"Well I don't know about you." said the Doctor cheerily, sweeping his glasses back into his jacket, "but I think it's time Rusty and I had a little chat. Coming?"

They stole back into the Engine room, or at least Bond and Chief Flynn, who had insisted on coming along, did. The Doctor merely strode in as if he owned the place, calling out. "Hello? Rusty? Anyone home? Doctor calling!" he turned back to the two incredulous men "You know, I used to have one of them as a sort of pet- well, his head, anyway. I called him 'Handles'. They're not too bad once they stop trying to kill you."

As the Doctor hurried ahead, babbling away, Bond caught sight of sudden movement in the shadows. It was small, low to the ground, certainly no *Cyberman*, but it came on swiftly, and the Scot hadn't seen it. Another man might have hesitated, but James Bond was not other men, The Beretta barked once, and the skittering thing was smashed from its many-jointed feet to writhe on the duralumin deck-plates.

"What?" the Doctor exclaimed, whirling. "Oh, no, no, no don't die! Don't you die, come on little fella!" He swept up the tiny metal beast and put on his glasses, from which a whirring sound emanated.

"Fine shot." commented Flynn.

"Oh yes!" snapped the Doctor. "Very good, Mr Bond! You're very good at doing lots of things I really don't like, aren't you?"

"What is that thing?" asked Bond, pointedly ignoring the other's displeasure.

"Cybermat, or some version of one. It.. well, actually was trying to kill me so thanks for that, by the way. Now, take this and don't lose it." He passed Bond a small metal mass. "It's your bullet. It's vital we keep anything from your world and mine strictly segregated. Ahh, got you."

As he spoke, he put the little metal beast down on the deck, where it immediately scampered off.

"Come on, this way!"

They jogged lightly after the Cybermat, the Doctor still talking. "It was a rat until a little while ago, then Rusty upgraded it- press-ganged it into service, if you like. Poor little chap, no more cheese for him after the old Cyber-shilling. You shooting it scrambled its circuits for a while, and I took the opportunity to recruit him for our side."

Bond shot him a glance. "Doesn't that make you as bad as R- the Cyberman?"

The Doctor stopped dead, looked at him over the top of the glasses. His smile returned. "Very good point, Mr Bond. Once the Cybermen get their hooks in you, there's no going back. Well.. not usually. Anyway, Roland here is leading us to his boss, come on!"

"Roland?" Flynn's brow creased in confusion.

"Roland, because he's a rat. Roland Rat? No? Oh, I miss having Clara around in these situations."

Towards the rear of the room, the Doctor suddenly motioned them to a halt. Flickering lights lit the darkness of the chamber.

"What should be down there?" the Doctor asked Flynn.

"Electricity generator." replied the Engineer. "Just a small diesel powered thing, we check up on it occasionally but it doesn't require supervision like the main engines do. It's probably still running, the lights haven't gone to backup power." he frowned "It's darker back here than it should be, though."

They crept forward, even the Doctor moving quietly now, and were met by an awesome, terrifying sight. In the back wall of the engine room, near to the doors that led to the hanger, was set an alcove, seemingly torn into the metal through sheer strength. Within the alcove rested the body of Stoker Barnes, and tendrils of metal from the alcove attended him cruelly. Much of the young man's body was encased in metal, not the steel of the Cyberman but seemingly duralumin scavenged from *Skylord's* structure. Suddenly, with a snap, the tendrils released, and Barnes stepped jerkily forward. "Barnes!" cried Flynn, starting forwards.

"Wait, you fool!" hissed the Doctor, suddenly looking around. "Wait a moment, where'd Roland go? Oh, he's there, behind us. Oh dear."

The reason for the Doctor's consternation hit Bond immediately. If the Cybermat had been leading them to its master, and that master was the Cyberman, and the Cybermat was behind them, then that meant..

In a clump of steel boots, the Cyberman stepped out of the shadows, cutting off their retreat. With a motion savage in its indifference, it stepped firmly on the Cybermat, crushing it into the deck.

"Drat." said the Doctor. "Sorry, they're so big and slow and stupid that it's easy to forget that they can be very quiet when they're not moving. Anyway, RUN!"

But there was nowhere to run to.

As the Doctor and Bond backed slowly away from the advancing Cyberman, Flynn struggled in the grip of the reanimated Barnes. His two fellow Stokers, similarly encased in metal, moved to assist their comrade, and between the three endeavoured with jerky, uncertain movements to manhandle the Chief into the dread alcove from which they had recently emerged.

"What is that thing?" hissed Bond, jerking his head towards the alcove as the Beretta tracked, uselessly.

"Cyber-converter." replied the Doctor. "A bad one. Rusty here looks like he took some damage on

the way over, which is probably why he hasn't shot us all by now. He hasn't got a Cyber Controller giving him orders, so he's fallen back on his default programming- make more Cybermen with whatever he can find, and anyone who gets in the way-”

“DELETE.” announced the Cyberman, still advancing.

“Yes, we know, we know!” said the Doctor. “Look, we can't let them get Chief Flynn in there. Those are Cyber-slaves, made from dead material, but a live host will be far more dangerous and retain all the knowledge of the original.”

Bond nodded. “Keep Rusty busy.”

“You called him Rusty!” crowed the Doctor. “Wait, what are you..”

Bond charged the struggling knot with Flynn at the centre. The Chief was still clutching his unfired Browning, but lacked the space or leverage to bring it into play, so Bond made this the first order of business. The Beretta's butt crashed down on the neck of the nearest Cyber-slave, and the mechanised corpse went down as if pole-axed. He thrust the gun down and gave the thing a round through the eye-socket to make sure of it, then pocketed the weapon and wrenched the Browning free with savage, irresistible force, immediately hammering its own, heavier stock into the second slave and blasting the third as Flynn tore loose from its grip.

“Thanks.” said Flynn, as Bond tossed the shotgun back to him.

“Think you can put that thing out of commission?” said Bond, gesturing to the conversion chamber.

“Aye.” said Flynn, picking up a heavy wrench. “I may not understand how it works or what it does, but that doesn't mean I can't break the bloody thing. What about you?”

“I have a Doctor's appointment.”

As he rushed back to the Doctor's side, Bond studied the Cyberman properly for the first time. The damage to the metal man was more severe than he had first noticed. Not only was the armour scored with black soot in several places, there was a melted metal mass on the right forearm. That arm, which still seemed dominant from the way the thing employed it to swipe at the Doctor, also moved with a noticeable stiffness when compared to the comparatively undamaged left. The head, additionally, was set at a slight angle and a little dented. Clearly Flynn's man had met with some success before leaving the payroll of the Navy and embarking on his brief career as a Cyber-slave. He considered, decided, acted. The Beretta cracked out six more times, emptying its payload in a largely impotent display of defiance. Each shot, however, was aimed at those points where the armour seemed most damaged, and one, at the very least, sank home into the neck of the Cyberman. It was enough. His enemy turned, disregarding the Doctor, and advanced upon him, arm outstretched and terrible killing power sparking at the fingertips.

As the Cyberman came on, Bond stepped forward to meet it, empty gun discarded, hands open and loose. That deadly arm reached out, slowly, stiffly, and grasped only air. Bond stepped, twisted, ducked, and grasped the overextended limb just past the wrist, performing a simple *seoi-otoshi* judo throw. The weight of the thing was incredible, its strength no less monstrous, but this weapon in the arsenal of the *judoka* was designed to negate such advantages and turn them against the possessor. Nevertheless, every muscle in his back and side screamed as the Cyberman sailed gracelessly over his shoulder to slam into the deck with such force that the plates buckled and dented.

“Are you mad?” shouted the Doctor, running forwards. “You can't just beat up a *Cyberman!*”

The thing lay prone on the deck for a moment, then clumsily began to rise. Bond kicked down at the head with all the force he could muster, and the impact hammered it back to the floor. Once again, it began to move. Bond struck again, and this time a tiny rivulet of white fluid began to leak from the damaged neck.

“Stop it!” shouted the Doctor. “It won't work, you can't-”

He struck again, and again. Flynn, seeing his endeavour, broke off from his vandalism of the alien device and wordlessly set to work with his wrench upon the same target.

“Stop.. stop it.” complained the Doctor again, but now there was a small, sad tone to his voice,

which was suddenly that of a very old man.

And then, it was done.

“Okay.” said the Doctor into the silence. “Apparently I was wrong, you *can* beat up a Cyberman. I suppose I shouldn't be too surprised, after all this is your world. Your world, your rules.” He suddenly seemed struck by a terrible thought. “Y'know, it's probably just as well I didn't bring Clara with me.”

Finally, Bond had had enough. “Who the hell is Clara, for Christ's sake?” he panted, still recovering from his exertions whilst simultaneously beginning to feel the pain from them.

“A very beautiful, wise, and clever young woman who I am extremely glad to say will never end up in your clutches, Mr Bond.” said the Doctor, gazing sadly down at the ruin of the Cyberman. “Do you know, a while ago I met a group of humans from the future- the real future, not yours- who told me that Humanity had defeated the Cybermen. Wiped them out to the last, utterly. I didn't really believe them, and it turned out they weren't quite right, but now I see how they might have managed it. You, Mr Bond, are the personification of the human being's limitless capacity for violence in pursuit of survival. It's like Fleming saw so much of it that he tried to trap it in a book to stop it from getting out. But it always does. You always do.”

A chill ran through Bond. God, he was tired, everything hurt, and now in what seemed like the moment of victory, it instead felt like he had failed some sort of test. He needed a drink.

An hour or so later, and Bond was once again sat in the comfort of *Skylord's* dining lounge. Flynn and his men, assisted incomprehensibly by the Doctor, who seemed able to fix damaged equipment simply by staring at it through his glasses, had managed to get the engines back online with minutes to spare, giving the passengers a spectacular, but ultimately harmless, close-up view of the passing storm as the great vessel sped away from it. Even then, the damage to the engine room and the surrounding structure was such that the airship would have to turn back for Cardington for emergency repairs. Fotherington's reputation would be dented, but in his own way the man was a survivor. The loss of the three Stokers would have to be quietly covered up, just as the Russians would need to do some swift work to deal with the man now languishing under double guard in *Skylord's* small brig. The Doctor had insisted on having every last scrap of the Cyberman transferred to his TARDIS, along with a few small, select components from the slaves, the converter, and even the poor, crushed remains of the Cybermat.

The object of his thoughts bustled in, this time unchallenged by the attendant. “Ah, I thought I'd find you here. Vodka Martini, shaken, not stirred, right?”

Bond gave a small smile. “Of course. Can I get you one?”

“Oh, no. I'm a whisky man myself, and anyway if I eat or drink anything here it might stop me from leaving. As it is, the TARDIS is starting to get a little antsy. Look, I came back here to apologise to you. A bit.”

“Oh?” Even the third Martini was struggling to dull the pain in his side.

“Yes. Look, I don't like you- people like you- *real* people like you, but that isn't your fault. It's not fair to blame you for not living up to the standards of a world you can't even imagine. So!” he exclaimed, clapping his hands together. “I'm going to give you a present. Come on!”

He led Bond back through the ship, to the cargo hold containing the TARDIS. Up until now, he had refused to let any of the crew, even Bond, see inside, but now he threw wide the door, and motioned him in.

Bond entered, and stopped dead. Instinctively, his hand went to the empty Beretta. The Doctor bustled in behind him.

“It's.. it's..”

“Bigger on the inside. Yes, I know, I do live here. Come on, Mr Bond, hop to it, we're off to Russia!”

“What?”

The Doctor was throwing levers and turning dials, seemingly talking more to the controls than Bond as the strange noise began again. “Yes, I know you want to go home, but we owe him a favour. I know he shot you, but it didn't hurt and he's really very sorry, aren't you Mr Bond?”

“Huh?”

“I said you're very sorry for shooting the TARDIS, aren't you?”

“Er.. Yes?” said Bond to the empty air. He shook his head to clear it. “Yes, Ms TARDIS, I apologise unreservedly for shooting you. It was a mistake borne of a desperate situation, and I can only beg your forgiveness.”

The Doctor chuckled. “Ms TARDIS! Oh, I think she liked that. You'd make a good Time Lord, Mr Bond, you could charm the chameleon circuit out of a MkII.”

“I thought you said you didn't like me because I was too violent?” said Bond.

“Yes.” said the Doctor. “Like I said, you'd make a good Time Lord. You'd fit right in on Gallifrey, more's the pity. James Bond, Time Lord, doing Rassilon's dirty work, now there's a thought to make a Dalek tremble. Actually, Rassilon looked a lot like you once- not this you, another one. Anyway, we're here. Number 13, Sretskaya Ulitsa, Central Index. Take a look!”

“Don't be ridiculous.” snapped Bond, marching to the door and wrenching it open. The hold of *Skylord* had gone, replaced by a nondescript office room, the walls painted in pale olive green where they were not covered by a vast array of filing cabinets. From the quiet, it was late at night, though the murmur of distant voices could still be heard, for the headquarters of SMERSH could not be left unattended. Bond sprang back from the threshold as if kicked by a horse.

“Are you mad? If we're discovered...”

“Don't worry, I popped in earlier for a little look. The staff here think I work for something called the 'Praesidium'. Anyway, I left your present in that filing cabinet over there, just pop out and pick it up. Top drawer, the one with the little smiley face sticky note on it. You'd better bring that back to me too, whilst you're at it.”

Heart hammering, not believing where he was or what he was doing, Bond stole silently across the bright, soft carpet and did as he was bid. The top drawer contained a bulky cardboard file, with a white stripe running from the top-right to the bottom-left corner. On the front of that file were printed letters and words which, despite the Russian, were not unfamiliar. First, under the initials 'S.S.', 'SOVER-SHENNOE SEKRETNNO', meaning broadly 'Top Secret'. Across the middle, in white, followed 'JAMES BOND' and underneath 'Angliski Spion'. It was all he could do not to laugh as he silently returned to the TARDIS.

In mere moments, they had returned to *Skylord*.

“You haven't asked me yet.” said the Doctor as they left the TARDIS.

“Asked you what?”

“Why I picked that file to give you.”

“I can guess.” said Bond, with a faint smile. “You wanted to impress me, give me something of great value that no-one else could. Almost any other file from that office could be used by Mi6 to do some serious damage to the Russians, but you picked one that I've always wanted to read that would tell me nothing I don't already know. You haven't asked me yet, either.”

“Asked you what?”

“Why I haven't tried to capture or kill you, and take your TARDIS and those trick glasses of yours to Q Division to be pulled apart and studied. You know I could.”

“I don't doubt it.” said the Doctor. “But I think you know by now that that would be a really, *really* bad idea. Anyway, then you wouldn't get the other part of your present.”

Bond was simultaneously intrigued and alarmed. “And what might that be, Doctor?”

“Cabin A37. Her name is Marianas Trencher, 22, blonde, lovely girl, husband is a drunken lout who's been just waiting for any excuse to take his belt to her. Oh, and she's a big fan of Hoagy Carmichael.” He shot a wink at Bond as he stepped back into the TARDIS. “After all, we both know how your stories end, don't we?”

The next morning dawned bright and fair, and Captain Hollister felt a well justified sense of relief as *Skylord* passed over the Welsh coast, *en route* to Cardington. There would be questions, of course, some of which he would be unable to answer, but Commander Bond had placed such matters firmly under the seal of Mi6 and he was confident that the affair would be professionally and discretely handled. His morning coffee felt good in his mouth, six out of eight engines hummed contentedly, and the improvised repair to the electrical generator which had (officially) so catastrophically failed and (officially) cost the lives of three of his men was holding. Yes, under the circumstances, this was a good morning to be Captain Edward Hollister, RN, DsC.

“Captain!” came the alert from his XO. Hollister sighed. Of course something else had to go wrong now.

“Yes, XO?”

“Warning light, Captain. The hanger bay door is opening.”

“What? On whose authority?”

“Commander Bond's, Sir.” said the XO, phone receiver clamped to his ear. “Apparently he left a message for you with Chief Flynn.”

“What is it?”

“It just says 'See you in London', Sir.”

Marianas Trencher screamed as the Pioneer hurtled towards the Celtic Sea. After a few seconds, and with a mere five hundred feet of altitude to spare, the tough little plane levelled out and began to climb. At the controls, with a slightly bruised right hand to add to his collection of injuries, Commander James Bond passed a heavy file to Mrs Trencher.

“Maria, do me a favour and throw that out of the window, please. Don't worry, it's not important, just something a friend gave me to read. Keeping it would lead to too many questions.”

Papers fluttered down in the breeze as the plane purred away towards the rising sun.