## Omnitron, What Ho!

## Tad Williams

What’s that, you say? You want to hear how I first met Omnitron, my robot servant, the admirable, clanking Crichton who has saved my bacon more often than a pig-herder with a Tommy gun? Very well, but I warn you—it is not a pretty tale.

Like many grim things, it begins with an aunt. You all know what it is to have an aunt, I think. It is much like having a fish, and a cold one at that, if said fish had control of your finances and conceived you to be a complete waste of human tissue. And if there was anyone who was an authority on the subject of human tissue, it was my Aunt Jabbatha, owing to her having lost most of hers.

As usual, when she deigned to see me at all, I found Aunt Jabbatha floating in her transparent vat in the day parlor, while all manner of supporting devices hissed and gurgled. The gimlet eyes of aunts are not made softer when couched in a disembodied head floating in a very, very large jar, with only a kelplike swirl of spinal cord and branching ganglia washing softly back and forth to keep them company. Downright eerie, some might call it, but we Boosters are made of stern stuff.

“Werner Von Secondstage Booster,” she proclaimed by way of a greeting, “you are a waste of human tissue.”

“Of course, Aunt Jabbatha. I think we established that fact in our earlier interviews. Every single one of them.”

“Don’t talk dribble to me, boy. We have a family emergency. You are being pressed into service.”

There is only one word more frightening to a Booster than those dreadful two syllables, “service,” but in deference to those of tender feelings, I will not disclose that word at present. “But I don’t want to be of service to anybody, Auntie.”

“And you’ve made a splendid start, because you are completely useless.” Her head floated up to the front of the glass and bumped against it like a withered olive in an extremely unappetizing martini. “But that’s about to change. Your cousin, Budgerigar Scallop, is eloping with a young woman of very dubious parentage from some backwater outer rim planet. Her biology militates against her inclusion in this family. You will put a stop to it.”

“But Aunt Jabbatha,” I said, hoping desperately to stall long enough for something on the order of a medium-large meteor strike to cripple civilization yet again and distract her, “how could I possibly do that? Budgie never listens to me. Besides, I’ve been invited to a rather jolly costume ball at the Suborbital Drones Club...”

“Hang your costume ball. And hang your cowardly piffle, Wernie, you worm. This is your chance to redeem the dreadful failure that has been your life so far.” She floated higher in the tank so that she was looking down on me, rather like a child’s balloon with the face of a gargoyle. “The shuttle for the HMSS Chinless is leaving tonight from Luton Spaceport. Your cousin and his...inamorata will be on board. So will you, because we have booked you a place. You will bring young Scallop back untethered, or you will throw yourself into the nearest star. Actually, no, if you fail, you must still come back and receive your punishment in person.” She frowned. “I may have other plans for you, even if you manage to botch this, as you have botched almost every other small favor I’ve asked you to do.”

Her confidence in me was so inspiring I thought I might as well leave on this high note, and so rose to my feet. But it was not to be!

“You will be accompanied on this voyage by my butler,” she said. “At least then there will be some chance of everyone surviving your involvement. Omnitron, come in.”

What stepped from the shadows then was something like a man, but more like an espresso machine. It had the futuristic gleam that one associates with the hood ornaments of very fast hover cars, and an air of confidence not usually seen in the lower classes, especially the artificial ones.

“Omnitron,” Aunt Jabbatha said, “this is my famously worthless nephew, Werner.”

“Sir.” It tilted its shiny chin ever so slightly toward its shiny chest.

“You will make sure he gets on the shuttle and then onto the Chinless, Omnitron. If he does not fulfill his duties as I have detailed, you have my permission to twist off his ear. Ears are worth little. They can be grown on a saltine cracker these days.”

The robot bowed with a whir of well-oiled gears. “As you wish, Madame.” Then he lifted me up and tucked me under his arm as easily as a padded matron might hoist a small dog dressed in an embarrassing sweater, and carried me out of Aunt Jabbatha’s parlor.

“Try to get things right for once,” she called after me. “Don’t be a weed, boy!”

I wasn’t sure what a weed was—something that used to grow on the planetary surface, I suspect, before the Big Oh Dear—and so my flashing riposte was delayed until after the lift door had closed behind us.

“See here, Omnitron,” I said as I surveyed my cabin. “This will never do. Old Budgie has a stateroom the size of Berkshire, but I seem to have been stowed in one of the laundry room dryers.”

“I admit the room is not large, sir,” said Omnitron, “but it was the best that could be done with a last minute booking—the ship was quite full. All that was available was Third Class.”

The purser, who seemed to have taken against me since my first cry of “Yo ho ho! Where’s my bottle of rum?” as I walked up the gangway, surveyed me with cool disdain. Considering that he had those glowing red cybernetic eyes so many people are wearing these days, it was most unappealing. “Does sir have an objection to the accommodations?” he asked.

“Oh, of course not,” I replied, rapier-like. “Who could jolly well object to a stateroom the size of a face flannel? And where am I supposed to sleep?”

The purser again fixed me with his smoldering gaze. He was a small, thin man, the kind who look as though they only enjoy themselves at funerals. “Ah, but sir misunderstands. There is a bed. It folds down, thus.” He fiddled with something on the wall and let down what I swear was a child’s toy ironing board. It had a teeny tiny blanket, and a pillow that had probably been stolen from a gerbil. “I’m afraid those who wait until the last moment to book passage cannot blame the staff for the lack of choice, sir.”

“No,” I said under my breath, “but I can blame the staff for being unpleasant, abominable, red-eyed swine.”

The purser, who had been about to leave, turned and squinted his glowing cyber eyes at me, which gave rather the impression that a couple of maraschino cherries had leaped out of a Manhattan glass and rolled into a deep ditch. “Beg pardon, sir?”

“My master merely asked for some of that pleasant Andromedan red and white wine,” Omnitron cut in—quite deftly, I thought, for something that looked like a washing machine hammered into the shape of William Gladstone. This Omnitron fellow was nothing to sneeze at. “Mr. Booster likes to drink both sorts at the same time. Thank you for your help.”

“Hmmmph,” said the purser, and went about his business.

“Thank you, Omnitron,” I said. “Considering that you are a robot, you are still a vastly superior human being to that fellow. Did you see him sizing me up? You’d think I had snuck on board in a fishing net.”

“Quite, sir. A bad sort, no doubt. But now I think you had better put on your dress coat and make your way up to the Lido Deck. Your cousin and his friend will be there.”

“No time for a little room service, or a swift nap? That shuttle flight took it out of me, Omnitron. I had the vacuum-hose to my mouth the whole time. Dashed bumpy.”

“I’m afraid not, sir. But I understand your aunt has provided you with the wherewithal for a couple of free drinks.”

“Say no more—it’s Booster into the breach. Lido on, MacDuff.”

The scene on deck was quite cosmopolitan, with not only all manner of Earth quality present, but the wealthy and well-fed from many other colonies and alien cultures as well. In the midst of all those unfamiliar green and blue and occasionally downright startling faces, it took me no small time to locate Cousin Budgie, but at last I spotted his generous silhouette. Budgie is a well-fed sort himself, and his cummerbund bulged like a mainsail in a stiff breeze.

“Hullo, Booster,” he said as I walked cautiously across the antigravity dance floor. “What brings you out here? Didn’t think this was your sort of picnic. Because it costs money and all.”

I scowled as pleasantly as I could at this unneeded reminder of my current financial inconveniences, namely my continued debt-slavery to Aunt Jabbatha and the collection agents of several well-known Fleet Street touts. “Cheers, Budgie, old sprat!” I replied. “And who is this lovely young lady...?”

I almost didn’t finish the sentence, because in point of fact his companion was indeed rather lovely—no, rather stunning, to be brutally precise. Black hair, raven’s wing, that sort of thing, and a face like a Tanagra figurine, except less terracotta-ish, if you grasp what I mean. Clear, limpid eyes (Why do people say that anyway? Weren’t those a kind of shellfish once?) and a figure that, beneath her modest netwear, would have made a tea-sipping vicar choke on his profiterole.

“This?” asked Budgie. “This lovely creature is my fiancée, Krellita Thoractia Du Palp, from the planet Cunabulum. I suppose you ought to call her Krelly, like I do.” He turned to the wondrous female creature next to him. “Say hello to Wernie, Krelly, darling. He’s a bit of a worn old sock, but he’s good for some laughs.”

She greeted me demurely. Budgie went off to find more drinks.

“And how did you meet my cousin, hey?” I asked her. “House party? The Hunstman’s Ball?”

“His private cruiser crashed in the jungles of my home planet.” I could hear the tiniest trace of an accent. Ha, I thought. That proves she’s a gold-digger. She’s foreign! “I nursed him back to health,” Krellita explained, “and we became fond of each other. He is everything I ever wanted in a man. He is ideal.”

I watched Budgie coming back, doing a sort of clumsy samba to avoid spilling the three Scorpio Slings he was carrying. It was hard to think of my pale, pudgy cousin as a man, let alone an ideal, but I supposed that on whatever backwater world Miss Du Palp came from, the pickings might be a bit on the slender side.

“Yes,” I said, deciding to get to work. “And he’s coped so brilliantly with his illness.”

“Illness?”

“Oh, nothing serious. In most cases it has run its course and the victim is dead long before he reaches the homicidal insanity stage.”

She gave me a startled look, but before I could elaborate (and believe me, I was prepared to elaborate—I’d spent the entire shuttle trip up to the Chinless thinking up things to tell her to frighten her off) Budgie reached us.

“Oof!” he said. “What a crush! Some bounder elbowed me right in the brisket, Wernie. Can you imagine that?” He turned to his fiancée. “What do you say to a little whirl around the floor, my dove? They’re just starting up with the Neptunian Tango and the gravity’s turned way down low, the way you like it.”

“No, thank you, darling,” Krelly said, “though it does sound terribly romantic. You dance, if you’d like. I’ll watch.”

He shrugged and made his way off again in search of suitably bipedal partners, which were a bit thin on the deck tonight.

“Brave, brave lad,” I said, shaking my head in admiration. “He’s always put such a courageous face on things. Acts just like everyone else!”

“Are you certain he has this...illness?” Krellita asked. “Because, well... we have plans.” She brushed prettily. “We’re going to have a family.”

“Oh, I shouldn’t worry about that,” I said. “I’m quite certain good old Budgie will be an excellent papa, until he gets to the screaming stage.”

“Screaming stage?”

“Oh, you know, when the pain of the disease becomes so great that the sufferer begins to screech continuously and tear off their own limbs and skin. Same disease took Budgie’s uncle, poor old fellow. They found the old man’s bloody fingertips and nails all over the National Library, but nothing else of him. Sad. Their first edition of Burke’s Peerage was unusable afterward—they could never get the stains out.”

“Oh, my!” she said, those lovely clear eyes wide. “Why didn’t Budgie tell me this?”

“Oh, I’m sure he wanted to spare you the worry,” I said. “Most sufferers shoot themselves long before most of the other things happen, so it seldom gets to that point. He was just looking out for your happiness.”

Krellita Du Palp’s eyes now narrowed, precisely like those of any young tootsie on the make who has just discovered that her golden goose is really a sitting duck. (Or something like that. To be honest, I’ve never really got the hang of metaphors.)

I looked up to see Budgie dancing with a long drink of champagne from the Proxima colonies. His partner was nearly eight feet tall, so he was having trouble not treading on her feet. The trotters in question were about the size of my stateroom bed—small for a bed, but perhaps a touch overlarge for a young lady.

“Poor man,” I said, sipping my drink and reaching behind Krellita to the buffet table, having orbed a sumptuous, steaming ham that was almost begging to become part of Greater Boosterdom. “So brave, our Budgie, when he must already be losing control over his neuromusculature.”

“Excuse me, sir.” The familiar, chill tone brought me up short. It was my nemesis, the purser, his little artificial eyes glowing with schadenfreude. “The buffet is for First Class passengers only.”

Faced with this sudden assault on my person, I decided on a dignified retreat. I gave the attractive Miss Du Palp a conspiratorial wink, then took the ham and the Scorpio Sling with me, leaving Budgie and his ladylove to their romantic destiny, into the spokes of which I hoped I had just rammed a jolly large stick.

I may have taken a bit more ham than I should have, to be honest, but I hadn’t had any breakfast owing to my shuttle-impaired stomach works, and my appetite was back. Still, I could barely get the entire ham into the lift down to Third Class, and had to ask an old, limping woman to get out to make room. Such a grumpy look she gave me! I thought these cruises were supposed to make people cheerful.

“You should have seen me, Omnitron,” I told him. “I was nothing short of magnificent. As soon as I mentioned Budgie’s hideous illness, the young lady’s attitude changed like a shot! I’ll wager she can’t wait to be shut of him now.”

“His hideous illness, sir? As far as I know, young Lord Scallop suffers from nothing worse than a mild case of Venusian Drip, which can be easily treated these days with proper medical care...”

“I made it up! That’s the genius part, Omnitron, old bucket. She’ll never go near him now. Ah, I can hear her gnashing her teeth clear down here in the ship’s underbelly...”

“I suspect the sound you hear is me lowering your bed,” Omnitron said, folding down the tiny, handkerchief-sized platform with a squeaking, ratcheting noise like someone deboning a live rabbit.

“As I said, before some metal buffoon short-sheeted my commentary, ‘I can hear her gnashing her teeth.’ Young Miss Du Palp is no doubt furious at having sunk her claws into such a sad, doomed specimen of Earth manhood when she thought she’d bagged a prize.”

“You say that as though she is not of Earth herself, sir.”

“I should say not! Not an earthly thing about her, except for her quite astonishing beauty and shapeliness. And her jolly nice legs. I’ve never run across the Du Palp family before, but I must admit they do rather sparkling work in the daughter department, her avaricious man-hunting notwithstanding.”

“Did you say ‘Du Palp,’ sir? As in, the Cunabulum Du Palps?”

“Yes, Omnitron, I think that was her awful old planet, something like that. What of it? You have that cursed expression on your featureless face that I have already come to loathe, and your hydraulic tubes are practically rigid with disapproval.”

“I’m sure you’re mistaken, sir. Perhaps you should climb into bed. I will endeavour to hold it for you while you attempt it. The affair seems a bit...flexible.”

Flexible, hah! “Impossible” is the word Omnitron was too craven to utilize, but I will speak the truth and shame the Chinless. After struggling for an hour to make myself comfortable on that slice of Melba toast they called a berth, I decamped to the floor, which although not large enough even for a proper game of blow football, let alone the nocturnal thrashing of a Booster in his prime, was still much more spacious than the Procrustean saltine I’d been given to sleep on. Thus, when somebody knocked at my stateroom door shortly after two in the AM, Earth time, I had only to crawl a few feet to find out who had so cruelly disturbed my slumbers.

“Oh, dear Mr. Booster,” said Krellita Du Palp, “please don’t make me stand in the corridor. Someone might see me!”

“Hmmm? Oh, right. Can’t have that.” Although I couldn’t imagine why. As far as I knew, these cruises were like a Feydeau farce, with various coves and their hard-mouthed molls ducking in and out of each other’s staterooms left and right. Still, perhaps back on Cunabulum they were a modest bunch and didn’t like to be seen dashing about in their—I had to admit—somewhat spectacularly filmy nightwear. “Right ho,” I said when she was inside, which necessitated me speaking almost directly to her forehead, owing to the size of the room. “Now, my dear, what can Wernie do for you? A little counseling, perhaps? Are we having second thoughts about Lord Scallop?”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Booster. Yes, you’ve opened my eyes! You’ve saved me from a hideous sham of a marriage!”

“Well, shucks, ma’am, as our American cousins like to say.” I was feeling quite proud of myself. Useless, Aunt Jabbatha? Wernie Booster, useless? Way-hey! “I’m sorry I have to be the bearer of such terrible tidings, dear lady. I only wanted to spare you any unnecessary heartbreak...”

“Budgie would never survive the rigors of conjugal expression,” she said. “But you, Mr. Booster—you are perfect! Healthy as can be, and with a fine appetite!” She leaned closer, which in those intimate confines actually caused her chin to press rather discomfortingly against my Adam’s apple. “Do you care for me, Wernie? Just a little?”

I was nonplussed, as the French say, and my usually considerable aplomb was also slightly undercut by the very thick, musky-sweet scent Krellita was giving off. I could not help thinking of her shapely lower limbs and how much like springtime they had made me feel back on the Lido Deck. “Of course, I find you a very admirable woman,” I began. “Sensible, too, with your unwillingness to yoke yourself to a shambling near-corpse like Cousin Budgie. But that is all I’m prepared to say at present...”

“Kiss me, you romantic fool,” she said, then sort of attached her mouth to mine.

Now, I don’t want you to think your humble narrator is anything less than a man of the world, but I must confess I’d never thought kissing could be quite like that, sort of...probing and...well, biting. At one point, as things were getting a bit too hot and heavy for my way of thinking, I actually felt something in my throat that seemed to be her tongue, except it was far too long and sort of scaly. It also seemed to be...jointed? Here, the Booster lexicon falters.

“Say, now,” I squeaked, “what are you doing, Krellita? I mean, Miss Du Palp, of course, since we hardly know each other. I mean, my stateroom, middle of the night and all, you hardly dressed...I mean, isn’t this a bit of a rum do?”

She laid a cool finger on my lips. “Oh, Wernie, you silly boy, it’s all right! We’ll be married soon, so there’s nothing wrong with it!”

Even with the scaly, jointish, tonguelike thing no longer lapping at my uvula, I confess I choked and spluttered for a while. Do you remember how I explained that “service” was the second most feared word in the Booster dictionary? Now I can reveal that the arch-curse “married” is the Booster champion of champions, an utterance whose doomful sound turns women into grinning monsters itching to plan things, including the end of a fellow’s freedom.

“M-M-Married?” I finally managed to say. “Hold on, there, dear lady. I think you have the wrong end of the stick...”

“I don’t care,” she said. “I’m sure it’s a lovely stick, anyway. And I know I probably do things a bit differently than you—we’re a bit of a backwater planet in some ways—but you’ll come to relish it.”

“Relish what?” I said, but she had turned away from me, not that she could go very far in that doll’s house of a cabin.

“Don’t look!” she said, and began to undo the straps for her gown. “Turn around! Don’t be so eager, you naughty boy!”

“Eh, um, well, perhaps we should slow down for a moment and take stock of things,” I said. “I mean, you’re a lovely girl and all, but you see, I have a number of irons in the fire just now, and when you don’t attend to them—well, you get frightfully hot irons, for one thing...”

“I knew it would be like this,” she declared with the dreamy sound of a chubby schoolboy regarding a stolen éclair. “Both of us eager, panting for consummation, our breasts heaving with desire...”

“Come now,” I said, and reached out to grasp her shoulder, despite its alarming nakedness, because I was thinking about shaking a little sense into her. “If anybody’s breast is heaving around here, it’s not mine, Miss Du Palp. No, at the moment my breast is heaveless—positively torpid.”

“Don’t look yet, darling,” she said as she shucked off the rest of her outfit. “It’s bad luck for you to see my final form before I’m ready.”

I was just wondering what kind of bridal trousseau a “final form” might be, and how I could escape from a cabin as small as this one without being noticed, when she turned and I saw her final form. It was not quite what I had expected.

The skin and face and legs and complexion I had admired—in fact, pretty much everything that had pleased the Booster eye, and doubtless the Scallop eye before me—now were revealed to be mere window-dressing, on the order of an insect’s chrysalis. (Or is that some kind of fancy American hover car? Let’s say “cocoon” instead.) In any case, the aforementioned lovely skin cracked and peeled away in broad sheets before tumbling to the stateroom floor, discarded like a losing ticket at Epsom Downs, as Krellita Du Palp unveiled her true self in all its...well, dash it, in all its something. Something bad, is what I want to say, like a giant sticky spider-centipede sort of thing.

As I stared in dismay, she lifted me up as though I were a kitten— and not one of your manlier kittens either—and flung me to the floor, then stood over me on her jointed legs, dripping long ropy strings of something awful onto my face and chest.

“Oh, Wernie, to think that you, the one to warn me of Budgie’s unfitness, should turn out to be my true love after all!” Krellita’s compound eyes glittered with affection for Yours Truly. I was looking around for a house slipper to hit her with, but since it would have taken a slipper the size of a mail van, my search proved fruitless. “And you, Wernie, healthy, strong you, after I lay my eggs inside you, you’ll provide such fine nourishment for our young when they begin to grow!” A large tubelike object rose from her abdomen, a sort of garden hosepipe made of jointed plates. The hole on the end of it coming toward me was surrounded by spiky, toothy objects that looked meant to do some kind of serious harm, and I was fairly certain that Your Humble Narrator was the intended victim.

“Here now!” I said, indignation struggling with mortal terror. “No ovipositors, please! I’m British!”

“Darling! Love me!” she cried—I think that’s what she said, but her clicking, drooling mouth-parts slightly impaired her speech—and then she clutched me with all her legs. I felt the tube beginning to nudge my stomach like a pickpocket searching for Grandfather’s gold watch.

“Help!” I said, quite loudly. “Help, help, help, help, dash it all, somebody help!” In fact, I said over and over (and over and over) but nobody came. The clicking and drooling increased in intensity, and the toothy probe nibbled exploringly at my tum-tum. Things looked very bad for Your Humble Etc.

“Yoo hoo!” called a strange voice from the open door of my stateroom.

The most horrible thing I had ever seen was already squatting on top of me, preparing to introduce me to the joys of involuntary fatherhood, but the weird, blobby shape in the doorway was a close second. It was lumpy and misshapen, had glowing red eyes, and was waving its limbs around in a manner only slightly less frenzied than Miss du Palp, who had the advantage of having more of them to wave.

“Hey, sweet-cheeks,” the strange apparition said in a curiously metallic voice. “Why don’t you lose that gink and get with a real man?”

“Who are you?” demanded Krellita. While she was distracted, I took the opportunity of buttoning my hired tuxedo over my exposed underpinnings.

“Just the man of your dreams, that’s all.” The thing in the doorway wiggled from side to side like a worm impaled on a dull fishhook. “Healthy, fat, full of protein, and anxious to settle down and raise a whole brood of larvae.”

For a moment, Krellita hesitated, but then she rose off me, the joints of her legs creaking like an ancient dumbwaiter. “You do...smell good,” she said. “Fatty. Meaty.”

“Kiss me, you fool,” said the lumpy, red-eyed thing. “We were meant for each other! Leave that pale, scrawny, inbred weasel and come to me, my exoskeletal sweetheart. Let me spirit you away to a place where our love will not be disturbed by search parties or worried relatives—somewhere we can raise our young to crawl proudly toward the future!”

That did it. With a sound that was halfway between the joyous whoop of a Red Indian and the slurping noise of a toothless man finishing his soup, Krellita Du Palp leaped across the room and fastened herself to the stranger, drool flying like confetti. As the two of them fell to the passage floor outside, the door of my stateroom clicked shut and I was alone again.

Nearly half an hour later, somebody knocked on my cabin door. I didn’t answer, since I had folded up the bed and was sharing the alcove in the wall with it, hoping to remain there until the Chinless docked, but I heard the door open and close.

“Master Wernie?” someone called.

To my great joy, I recognized the tinny tones. “Omnitron?” I managed to get the bed-cupboard open and tumbled out onto the floor. “What are you doing here? Did you see what happened? That woman was...well, she was a creature, Omnitron! A hideous, man-destroying creature.”

“Yes, sir. The fairer sex can be difficult at the best of times.”

“What do you mean, ‘difficult’? She was going to scoop out my insides and fill them with some kind of caviar—and not the nice yummy kind, I daresay. I was going to be baby food for a very unwanted group of offspring!”

“I know, sir, which was why I took the liberty of luring Miss Du Palp away from you.”

I gasped. “That was you in the doorway, then? That red-eyed thing?”

“Not exactly, sir.” Omnitron had a look of great complacency on its face. At least that’s what I assume it was—it’s hard to tell with robots. “You see, I knew that a young woman like that would not give up a prospect like you for a lifeless array of metal components like myself. So I took the liberty of knocking the ship’s purser on the head. He was sneaking around in the hallway outside trying to catch you with Miss Du Palp in your room. Then I manipulated his limbs and spoke as though I were him, to draw her away.”

“You coshed the purser? Thumped him on the dome and knocked him out cold? Good lord, Omnitron, you are a hardened villain.”

“I am an omnitronic butler, sir. I am programmed to respond usefully in most situations.”

“Well, that explains the red eyes—those horrid, superior glowing peepers of his will haunt my dreams. Although not quite to the degree that Miss Du Palp will.” I shuddered. “But the shape I saw in the doorway was quite stout, Omnitron. I recall that purser as being rather slender.”

“After I had rendered him senseless, sir, I stuffed his clothing with leftover ham from your breakfast. You really took quite a bit, sir, I must say. There was enough remaining to nearly double his weight, which made him appear to be exactly the sort of mate Miss Du Palp was seeking.”

“Omnitron, you are a pearl among machines. But what about when the arachnid lady finds out her liaison was begun on false if still quite meaty pretenses? What then?”

“I took an additional liberty, sir, of flushing them both out the airlock while they were engaged in their...romantic conversation. The erstwhile couple are frozen now, floating in airless space.”

“Good God! Well, I can’t say she didn’t have it coming, but what about the purser? He was a nasty bit of work, true, but he was just doing his job—in an unpleasant sort of way.”

“I dare say, sir, that he would prefer being frozen to the kind of fatherhood that was planned for him. I understand the young of Cunabulum are slow eaters, and it takes their victims many months to die.”

“You know about those creatures?”

“I have run across references to them in my light reading, sir.” Omnitron helped me to my feet and began straightening the stateroom. “I believe there was a pictorial in the Sunday Times. The Du Palps are an old and well-known Cunabulumian family. As soon as you told me her name, I knew you were in danger.”

“Huh.” I thought about it for a moment. “Well, I have definitely had a near brush today with jolly old extinction, Omnitron, and I learned two very important lessons as well.”

“Yes? What are those, sir?”

“First, that matrimony is for suckers. Second, that one should always have a faithful robotic servant handy on an interplanetary trip, because in space, nobody can hear you scream.”

“Oh, I rather think everybody on the ship could hear you scream, sir.” Omnitron tugged loose the tiny coverlet I was still clutching in fear-cramped fingers and laid it out on the bed. “In fact, you were shrieking like a little girl. Quite piercing.”

“Then, dash it, why didn’t anybody help me?”

“Well, sir, after all—this is Third Class.”

“I must say, Werner,” said Aunt Jabbatha, “I am surprised—no, ‘shocked’ would be more accurate—to discover you didn’t utterly botch this affair. In fact, you have almost done well. Your cousin Budgerigar is saved from a most unpleasant marriage, and you have scarcely broken anything I will have to pay for. There is the matter of several thousand credits worth of expensive Betelgeusian ham you filched, of course, which will come out of your allowance.”

“Of course,” I said glumly. The thing with aunts is, one does not argue if one wants to keep receiving one’s allowance, even the tiny remaining fragment thereof. “Whatever you say, Auntie.”

“And I think I shall leave Omnitron with you to keep you out of trouble.”

Now that was a bit better. I could get used to being waited on by a stout machine like Omnitron, especially if it was going to prove useful in scraps like the one on the Chinless. “As you say, Auntie.”

“He will in fact keep you company on your trip tomorrow to the spa on Indignation Nine.”

“Beg your pardon?” Aunts have the habit of saying things that quite sneak past one’s ears sometimes and don’t reveal themselves in their true horror until they reach the old brainbox. “Spa? Is that meant to be a reward?” It didn’t seem like my idea of the thing at all, which would have been an increase in allowance, or at least Aunt Jabbatha breaking out my late uncle’s quite good brandy and offering me a snifter. “Is it at least one of those sun-and-tennis places?”

“No, you young idiot, it’s a place to dry out. You’re going to Indignation Nine for the cure. You drink too much, and you are endangering your liver and kidneys. I intend to use them one day.”

“Beg pardon? Did you say...use them?”

“Goodness, yes. You don’t think I keep a blithering fool like you around because I like your conversation, do you? Someday I will harvest your organs and use them for myself.” She frowned at the vat that contained her. “A person can grow tired of living in a jar, you know. I haven’t been able to beat a servant properly in centuries. And I want to go dancing again!”

I left Aunt Jabbatha’s house, accompanied by Omnitron. I was pensive with the awful twin visions of bits of the Inner Booster being removed and of my aunt cutting a rug at the Duke of Buckingham’s spring do.

“Well, I can’t say I’m very happy about any of this,” I said. “Indignation Nine is supposed to be a famously dreadful place. They give you mineral water and rye toast and nothing more, then laugh at one’s distress. I’ve even heard ugly rumors of...”—I lowered my voice—“...jumping jacks, Omnitron. Sit-ups! Calisthenics!”

“Buck up, sir.” Omnitron leaned over and plucked a piece of lint from my lapel with one of his metal claspers. “At least you now have learned the falseness of your aunt’s longtime allegations against you. That should be some comfort.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, sir, she has just made it very clear that, at least in the case of your kidneys and liver, she doesn’t think you’re a waste of human tissue after all.”

I considered that for a moment. “By Jove, Omnitron,” I said, “you’re right.”

“Of course, sir.”