

Something Rotten

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Published by Hodder

Extract

I

A Cretan Minotaur in Nebraska

'Jurisdiction is the name given to the policing agency *inside* books. Working with the intelligence-gathering capabilities of Text Grand Central, the many Prose Resource Operatives at Jurisdiction work tirelessly to maintain the continuity of the narrative within the pages of all the books ever written, a sometimes thankless task. Jurisdiction agents live mostly on their wits as they attempt to reconcile the author's original wishes and readers' expectations within a strict and largely pointless set of bureaucratic guidelines laid down by the Council of Genres. I headed Jurisdiction for over two years and was always astounded by the variety of the work: one day I might be attempting to coax the impossibly shy Darcy from the toilets and the next I would be thwarting the Martians' latest attempt to invade *Barnaby Rudge*. It was challenging and full of bizarre twists. But when the peculiar and downright weird become commonplace you begin to yearn for the banal.'

THURSDAY NEXT — *The Jurisdiction Chronicles*

The Minotaur had been causing trouble far in excess of his literary importance. First by escaping from the fantasy-genre PrisonBook *Sword of the Zenobians*, then by leading us on a merry chase across most of fiction and thwarting all attempts to recapture him. The mythological half-man, half-bull son of Queen Pasiphaë of Crete had been sighted within *Riders of the Purple Sage* only a month after his escape. We were still keen on taking him alive at this point so we had darted him with a small dose of Slapstick. Theoretically, we needed only to track outbreaks of custard-pie-in-face routines and walking-into-lamp-post gags within fiction to be led to the cannibalistic man-beast. It was an experimental idea and, sadly, also

a dismal failure. Aside from Lafeu's celebrated mention of custard in *All's Well that Ends Well* and the ludicrous four-wheeled chaise sequence in *Pickwick Papers*, little was noticed. The Slapstick either hadn't been strong enough or had been diluted by the BookWorld's natural aversion to visual jokes.

In any event we were still searching for him two years later in the Western genre, among the cattle drives that the Minotaur found most relaxing. And it was for this reason that Commander Bradshaw and I arrived at the top of page seventy-three of an obscure pulp entitled *Death at Double-X Ranch*.

'What do you think, old girl?' asked Bradshaw, whose pith helmet and safari suit were ideally suited to the hot Nebraskan summer. He was shorter than me by almost a head but led age-wise by four decades; his sun-dried skin and snowy-white moustache were a legacy of his many years in Colonial African Fiction: he had been the lead character in the twenty-three 'Commander Bradshaw' novels, last published in 1932 and last read in 1963. Many characters in fiction define themselves by their popularity, but not Commander Bradshaw. Having spent an adventurous and entirely fictional life defending British East Africa against a host of unlikely foes, and killing almost every animal it was possible to kill, he now enjoyed his retirement and was much in demand at Jurisdiction, where his fearlessness under fire and knowledge of the BookWorld made him one of the agency's greatest assets.

He was pointing at a weathered board that told us the small township not more than half a mile ahead hailed by the optimistic name of Providence and had a population of 2,387.

I shielded my eyes against the sun and looked around. A carpet of sage stretched all the way to the mountains less than five miles distant. The vegetation had a repetitive pattern that belied its fictional roots. The chaotic nature of the real world that gave us soft undulating hills and random patterns of forest and hedges was replaced within fiction by a landscape that relied on ordered repetitions of the author's initial description. In the make-believe world where I had made my home, a forest has only eight different trees, a beach five

different pebbles, a sky twelve different clouds. A hedgerow repeated itself every eight feet, a mountain range every sixth peak. It hadn't bothered me that much to begin with but after two years living inside fiction I had begun to yearn for a world where every tree and rock and hill and cloud had its own unique shape and identity. And the sunsets. I missed them most of all. Even the best-described ones couldn't hold a candle to a real one. I yearned to witness once again the delicate hues of the sky as the sun dipped below the horizon. From red to orange, to pink, to blue, to navy, to black.

Bradshaw looked across at me and raised an eyebrow quizzically. As 'The Bellman' – the head of Jurisfiction – I shouldn't really be out on assignment at all, but I was never much of a desk jockey and capturing the Minotaur was important. He had killed one of our own, and that made it unfinished business.

During the past week we had searched unsuccessfully through six civil war epics, three frontier stories, twenty-eight high-quality Westerns and ninety-seven dubiously penned novellas before finding ourselves within *Death at Double-X Ranch*, right on the outer rim of what might be described as acceptably written prose. We had drawn a blank in every single book. No minotaur, nor even the merest whiff of one, and believe me, they can whiff.

'A possibility?' asked Bradshaw, pointing at the Providence sign.

'We'll give it a try,' I replied, slipping on a pair of dark glasses and consulting my list of potential minotaur hiding places. 'If we draw a blank we'll stop for lunch before heading off into *The Oklahoma Kid*.'

Bradshaw nodded, opened the breech of the hunting rifle he was carrying and slipped in a cartridge. It was a conventional weapon but loaded with unconventional ammunition. Our position as the policing agency within fiction gave us licensed access to abstract technology. One blast from the eraserhead in Bradshaw's rifle and the Minotaur would be reduced to the building blocks of his fictional existence: text and a bluish mist – all that is left when the bonds that link text to meaning are severed. Charges of cruelty failed to have any meaning when at the last Beast Census there

were over a million almost identical minotaurs, all safely within the hundreds of books, graphic novels and urns that featured him. Ours was different – an escapee. A PageRunner.

As we walked closer the sounds of a busy Nebraskan frontier town reached our ears. A new building was being erected and the hammering of nails into lumber punctuated the clop of horses' hoofs, the clink of harnesses and the rumble of cartwheels on compacted earth. The metallic ring of the blacksmith's hammer mixed with the distant tones of a choir from the clapboard church, and all about was the general conversational hubbub of busy townsfolk. We reached the corner of Eckley's Livery Stables and peered cautiously down the main street.

Providence as we now saw it was happily enjoying the uninterrupted backstory, patiently awaiting the protagonist's arrival in two pages' time. Blundering into the main narrative thread and finding ourselves *included* within the story was not something we cared to do, and since the Minotaur avoided the primary storyline for fear of discovery we were likely to stumble across him only in places like this. But if, for any reason, the story *did* come anywhere near, I would be warned – I had a Narrative Proximity Device in my pocket that would sound an alarm if the thread came too close. We could hide ourselves until it passed by.

A horse trotted past as we stepped up on to the creaky decking that ran along the front of the saloon. I stopped Bradshaw when we got to the swing-doors just as the town drunk was thrown out into the road. The bartender walked out after him, wiping his hands on a linen cloth.

'And don't come back till you can pay your way!' he yelled, glancing at us both suspiciously.

I showed the barkeeper my Jurisdiction badge as Bradshaw kept a vigilant lookout. The whole Western genre had far too many gunslingers for its own good; there had been some confusion over the numbers required on the order form when the genre was inaugurated. Working in Westerns could sometimes entail up to twenty-nine gunfights an hour.

'Jurisdiction,' I told him. 'This is Bradshaw, I'm Next. We're looking for the Minotaur.'

The barkeeper stared at me coldly.

'Think you's in the wrong genre, pardner,' he said.

All characters or Generics within a book are graded A to D, one through ten. A-grades are the Gatsbys and Jane Eyres, D-grades the grunts who make up street scenes and crowded rooms. The barkeeper had lines so he was probably a C-2. Smart enough to get answers from but not smart enough to have much character latitude.

'He might be using the alias Norman Johnson,' I went on, showing him a photo. 'Tall, body of a man, head of a bull, likes to eat people?'

'Can't help you,' he said, shaking his head slowly as he peered at the photo.

'How about any outbreaks of Slapstick?' asked Bradshaw. 'Boxing glove popping out of a box, sixteen-ton weights dropping on people, that sort of thing?'

The barkeeper laughed. 'Ain't seen no weights droppin' on nobody, but I heard tell the sheriff got hit in the face with a frying pan last Toosday.'

Bradshaw and I exchanged glances.

'Where do we find the sheriff?' I asked.

We followed the barkeeper's directions and walked along the wooden decking past a barber shop and two grizzled prospectors who were talking animatedly in authentic frontier gibberish. I stopped Bradshaw when we got to an alleyway. There was a gunfight in progress. Or at least, there *would* have been a gunfight had not some dispute arisen over the times allocated for their respective showdowns. Both sets of gunmen – two dressed in light-coloured clothes, two in dark, with low-slung gunbelts decorated with rows of shiny cartridges – were arguing over their gunfight time slots as two identical ladyfolk looked on anxiously. The town mayor intervened and told them that if there was any more arguments they would *both* lose their slot times and would have to come

back tomorrow, so they reluctantly agreed to toss a coin. The winners of the toss scampered into the main street as everyone dutifully ran for cover. They squared up to one another, hands hovering over their Colt .45s at twenty paces. There was a flurry of action, two loud detonations and one of the gunmen in black hit the dirt while the victor looked on grimly, his opponent's shot having dramatically only removed his hat. His lady rushed up to hug him as he reholstered his revolver with a flourish.

'What a load of tripe,' muttered Bradshaw. 'The real West wasn't like this!'

Death at Double-X Ranch was set in 1875 and written in 1908. Close enough to be historically accurate, you would have thought, but no. Most Westerns tended to show a glamorised version of the old West that hadn't really existed. In the *real* West a gunfight was a rarity, hitting someone with a short-barrelled Colt .45 at anything other than close range a virtual impossibility: 1870s gunpowder generated a huge amount of smoke; two shots in a crowded bar and you would be coughing – and almost blind.

'That's not the point,' I replied as the dead gunslinger was dragged away. 'Legend is always far more readable, and don't forget we're in pulp at present – poor prose is far more common than good prose and it would be too much to hope that our bullish friend would be hiding out in Zane Grey or Owen Wister.'

We continued on past the Majestic Hotel as a stagecoach rumbled by in a cloud of dust, the driver cracking his long whip above the horses' heads.

'Over there,' said Bradshaw, pointing at a building opposite that differentiated itself from the rest of the clapboard town by being made of brick. It had 'Sheriff' painted above the door. We walked quickly across the road, our non-Western garb somewhat out of place among the long dresses, bonnets and breeches, jackets, dusters, vests, gunbelts and bootlace ties. Only permanently billeted Jurisdiction officers troubled to dress up, and many of the agents actively policing the Westerns are characters from the books they patrol – so don't need to dress up anyway.

We knocked and entered. It was dark inside after the bright exterior and we blinked for a few moments as we accustomed ourselves to the gloom. On the wall to our right was a noticeboard liberally covered with Wanted posters – pertaining not only to Nebraska but to the BookWorld in general; a yellowed example offered \$300 for information leading to the whereabouts of Big Martin. Below this was a chipped enamelled coffee pot sitting atop a cast-iron stove, and on the wall to the left was a gun cabinet. A tabby cat sprawled upon a large bureau. The far wall was the barred frontage to the cells, one of which held a drunk fast asleep and snoring loudly on a bunk bed. In the middle of the room was a large desk which was stacked high with paperwork – circulars from the Nebraska State Legislature, a few Council of Genres Narrative Law amendments, a campanology society newsletter and a Sears/Roebuck catalogue open at the ‘fancy goods’ section. Also on the desk were a pair of worn leather boots, and inside these were a pair of feet attached, in turn, to the sheriff. His clothes were predominantly black and could have done with a good wash. A tin star was pinned to his vest and all we could see of his face were the ends of a large grey moustache that poked out from beneath his downturned Stetson. He was fast asleep, and balanced precariously on the rear two legs of a chair which creaked as he snored.

‘Sheriff?’

No answer.

‘SHERIFF!’

He awoke with a start, began to get up, overbalanced and tipped over backward. He crashed heavily to the floor and knocked against the bureau, which just happened to have a jug of water resting upon it. The jug tipped over and its contents drenched the sheriff, who roared with shock. The noise upset the cat, which awoke with a cry and leapt up the curtains, which collapsed with a crash on to the cast-iron stove, spilling the coffee and setting fire to the tinder-dry linen drapes. I ran to put it out and knocked against the desk, dislodging the lawman’s loaded revolver, which fell to the floor, discharging a single shot which cut the cord of a hanging

stuffed moose's head which fell upon Bradshaw. So there were the three of us; me trying to put out the fire, the sheriff covered in water and Bradshaw walking into furniture as he tried to get the moose's head off. It was *precisely* what we were looking for: an outbreak of unconstrained and wholly inappropriate Slapstick.

'Sheriff, I'm so sorry about this,' I muttered apologetically, having doused the fire, de-moose Bradshaw and helped a very damp lawman to his feet. He was over six foot tall, had a weather-beaten face and deep blue eyes. I produced my badge. 'Thursday Next, head of Jurisdiction. This is my partner, Commander Bradshaw.'

The sheriff relaxed and even managed a thin smile. 'Thought you was more of them Baxters,' he said, brushing himself down and drying his hair with a 'Cathouses of Dawson City' tea cloth. 'I'm mighty glad you're not. Jurisdiction, hey? Ain't seen none of yous around these parts for longer than I care to remember - quit it, Howell.'

The drunk, Howell, had awoken and was demanding a tippie 'to set him straight'.

'We're looking for the Minotaur,' I explained, showing the sheriff the photograph.

He rubbed his stubble thoughtfully and shook his head.

'Don't recall ever seeing this critter, Missy Next.'

'We have reason to believe he passed through your office not long ago - he's been marked with Slapstick.'

'Ah!' said the sheriff. 'I was a-wonderin' 'bout all that. Me and Howell here have been trippin' and a-stumblin' for a whiles now - ain't we, Howell?'

'You're darn tootin',' said the drunk.

'He could be in disguise and operating under an alias,' I ventured. 'Does the name Norman Johnson mean anything to you?'

'Can't say it does, Missy. We have twenty-six Johnsons here but all are C-7s - not 'portant 'nuff to have fust names.'

I sketched a Stetson on to the photograph of the Minotaur, then a duster, vest and gunbelt.

'Oh!' said the sheriff with a sudden look of recognition. 'That Mr Johnson.'

'You know where he is?'

'Sure do. Had him in the cells only last week on charges of eatin' a cattle rustler.'

'What happened?'

'Paid his bail and wuz released. Ain't nothing in the statutes of Nebraska that says you can't eat rustlers. One moment.'

There had been a shot outside followed by several yells from startled townsfolk. The sheriff checked his Colt, opened the door and walked out. Alone on the street and facing him was a young man with an earnest expression, hand quivering around his gun, the elegantly tooled holster of which I noticed had been tied down – a sure sign of yet another potential gunfight.

'Go home, Abe!' the sheriff called out. 'Today's not a good day for dyin'.'

'You killed my pappy,' said the youth, 'and my pappy's pappy. And *his* pappy's pappy. And my brothers Jethro, Hank, Hoss, Red, Peregrine, Marsh, Junior, Dizzy, Luke, Peregrine, George an' all the others. I'm callin' you out, lawman.'

'You said Peregrine twice.'

'He wuz special.'

'Abel Baxter,' whispered the sheriff out of the corner of his mouth, 'one of them Baxter boys. They turn up regular as clock-work, and I kill 'em same ways as regular.'

'How many have you killed?' I whispered back.

'Last count, 'bout sixty. Go home, Abe, I won't tell yer again!'

The youth caught sight of Bradshaw and me and said:

'New deputies, Sheriff? Yer gonna need 'em!'

And it was then that we saw that Abel Baxter wasn't alone. Stepping out from the stables opposite were four disreputable-looking characters. I frowned. They seemed somehow out of place in *Death at Double-X Ranch*. For a start, none of them wore black, nor did they have tooled-leather double gunbelts with nickel-plated revolvers. Their spurs didn't clink as they walked and their holsters

were plain and worn high on the hip – the weapon these men had chosen was the Winchester rifle. I noticed with a shudder that one of the men had a button missing on his frayed vest and the sole on the toe of his boot had come adrift. Flies buzzed around their unwashed and grimy faces and the sweat marks on their hats had stained halfway to the crown. These weren't C-2 generic gunfighters from pulp, but well-described A-7s from a novel of high descriptive quality – and if they could shoot as well as they had been realised by the author, we were in trouble.

The sheriff sensed it too.

'Where yo' friends from, Abe?'

One of the men hooked his Winchester into the crook of his arm and answered in a low Southern drawl:

'Mr Johnson sent us.'

And they opened fire. No waiting, no drama, no narrative pace. Bradshaw and I had already begun to move – squaring up in front of a gunman with a rifle might seem terribly macho but for survival purposes it was a non-starter. Sadly, the sheriff didn't realise this until it was too late. If he had survived until page 164, as he was meant to, he would have taken a slug, rolled twice in the dust after a two-page build-up and lived long enough to say a pithy final goodbye to his sweetheart who would have cradled him in his bloodless dying moments. Not to be. Realistic violent death was to make an unwelcome entry into *Death at Double-X*. The heavy lead shot entered the sheriff's chest and came out the other side, leaving an exit wound the size of a saucer. He collapsed inelegantly on to his face and lay perfectly still, one arm sprawled outward in a manner unattainable in life and the other hooked beneath him. He didn't collapse flat, either. He ended up bent over on his knees with his backside in the air.

The gunmen stopped firing as soon as there was no target – but Bradshaw, his hunting instincts alerted, had already drawn a bead on the sheriff's killer and fired. There was an almighty detonation, a brief flash and a large cloud of smoke. The eraserhead hit home and the gunman disintegrated mid-stride into a brief chrysanthemum



'The gunman disintegrated mid-stride into a brief chysanthemum of text which scattered across the main street ...'

of text which scattered across the main street, the meaning of the words billowing out into a blue haze which hung near the ground for a moment or two before evaporating.

'What are you doing?' I asked, annoyed at his impetuosity.

'Him or us, Thursday,' replied Bradshaw grimly, pulling the lever down on his Martini-Henry to reload, 'him or us.'

'Did you see how much text he was composed of?' I replied angrily. 'He was almost a paragraph long. Only *featured* characters get that kind of description – somewhere there's going to be a book one character short!'

'But,' replied Bradshaw in an aggrieved tone, 'I didn't know that before I shot him, now, did I?'

I shook my head. Perhaps Bradshaw hadn't noticed the missing button, the sweat stains and the battered shoes, but *I* had. Erasure of a featured part meant more paperwork than I really wanted to deal with. From form F36/34 (discharge of an eraserhead) and form B9/32 (replacement of featured part) to the P13/36 (narrative damage assessment), I could be bogged down for two whole days. I had thought bureaucracy was bad in the real world, but here in the paper world it was everything.

'So what do we do?' asked Bradshaw. 'Ask politely for them to surrender?'

'I'm thinking,' I replied, pulling out my footnoterphone and pressing the button marked Cat. In fiction, the commonest form of communication was by footnote, but way out here . . .

'Blast!' I muttered again. 'No signal.'

'Nearest repeater station is in *The Virginian*,' observed Bradshaw as he replaced the spent cartridge and closed the breech before peering outside. 'And we can't bookjump direct from pulp to classic.'

He was right. We had been crossing from book to book for almost six days, and although we could escape in an emergency, such a course of action would give the Minotaur more than enough time to escape. Things weren't good, but they weren't bad either – yet.

'Hey!' I yelled from the sheriff's office. 'We want to talk!'

'Is that a fact?' came a clear voice from outside. 'Mr Johnson says he's all done talkin' – less you be in mind to offer amnesty.'

'We can talk about that!' I replied.

There was a beeping noise from my pocket.

'Blast,' I mumbled, consulting the Narrative Proximity Device. 'Bradshaw, we've got a story thread inbound from the east, two hundred and fifty yards and closing. Page seventy-four, line six.'

Bradshaw quickly opened his copy of *Death at Double-X Ranch* and ran a finger along the line:

'... McNeil rode into the town of Providence, Nebraska, with fifty cents in his pocket and murder on his mind...'

I peered cautiously out of the window. Sure enough, a cowboy on a bay horse was riding slowly into town. Strictly speaking it didn't matter if we changed the story a little as the novella had been read only sixteen times in the past ten years, but the code by which we worked was fairly unequivocal. 'Keep the story as the author intended!' was a phrase bashed into me early on during my training. I had broken it once and suffered the consequences – I didn't want to do it again.

'I need to speak to Mr Johnson,' I yelled, keeping an eye on McNeil, who was still some way distant.

'No one speaks to Mr Johnson less Mr Johnson says so,' replied the voice, 'but if you'll be offerin' an amnesty, he'll take it and promise not to eat no more people.'

'Was that a double negative?' whispered Bradshaw with disdain. 'I do so hate them.'

'No deal unless I meet Mr Johnson first!' I yelled back.

'Then there's no deal!' came the reply.

I looked out again and saw three more gunmen appear. The Minotaur had clearly made a lot of friends during his stay in the Western genre.

'We need back-up,' I murmured.

Bradshaw clearly thought the same. He opened his TravelBook and pulled out something that looked a little like a flare gun. This was a textmarker, which could be used to signal to other Jurisdiction

agents. The TravelBook was dimensionally ambivalent; the device was actually *larger* than the book that contained it.

'Jurisdiction know we're in Western Pulp; they just don't know *where*. I'll send them a signal.'

He dialled in the sort of textmark he was going to place using a knob on the back of the gun, then moved to the door, aimed the marker into the air and fired. There was a dull thud and the projectile soared into the sky. It exploded noiselessly high above us and for an instant I could see the text of the page in a light grey against the blue of the sky. The words were back to front, of course, and as I looked at Bradshaw's copy of *Death at Double-X Ranch* I noticed the written word 'ProVIDence' had been partially capitalised. Help would soon arrive – a show of force would deal with the gunman. The problem was, would the Minotaur make a run for it or fight it out to the end?

'Purty fireworks don't scare us, missy,' said the voice again. 'You comin' out, or do wes have to come in and get yer?'

I looked across at Bradshaw, who was smiling.

'What?'

'This is all quite a caper, don't you think?' said the commander, chuckling like a schoolboy who had just been caught scrumping apples. 'Much more fun than hunting elephant, wrestling lions to the ground and returning tribal knick-knacks stolen by unscrupulous foreigners.'

'I used to think so,' I said under my breath. Two years of assignments like these had been enjoyable and challenging, but not without their moments of terror, uncertainty and panic – and I had a two-year-old son who needed more attention than I could give him. The pressure of running Jurisdiction had been building for a long time now and I needed a break in the real world – a long one. I had felt it about six months before, just after the adventure that came to be known as *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco*, but had shrugged it off. Now the feeling was back – and stronger.

A low, deep rumble began somewhere overhead. The windows rattled in their frames and dust fell from the rafters. A crack opened

up in the plaster and a cup vibrated off the table to break on the floor. One of the windows shattered and a shadow fell across the street. The deep rumble grew in volume, drowned out the Narrative Proximity Device that was wailing plaintively, then became so loud it didn't seem like a sound at all – just a vibration that shook the sheriff's office so strongly my sight blurred. Then, as the clock fell from the wall and smashed into pieces, I realised what was going on.

'Oh . . . NO!' I howled with annoyance as the noise waned to a dull roar. 'Talk about using a sledgehammer to crack a nut!'

'Emperor Zhark?' queried Bradshaw.

'Who else would dare pilot a Zharkian Battle Cruiser into Western Pulp?'

We looked outside as the vast spaceship passed overhead, its vectored thrusters swivelling downward with a hot rush of concentrated power that blew up a gale of dust and debris and set the livery stables on fire. The huge bulk of the battle cruiser hovered for a moment as the landing gear unfolded, then made a delicate touchdown – right on top of McNeil and his horse, who were squashed to the thickness of a ha'penny.

My shoulders sagged as I watched my paperwork increase exponentially. The townsfolk ran around in panic and horses bolted as the A-7 gunmen fired pointlessly at the ship's armoured hull. Within a few moments the interstellar battle cruiser had disgorged a small army of foot-soldiers carrying the very latest Zharkian weaponry. I groaned. It was not unusual for the emperor to go overboard at moments like this. Undisputed villain of the eight 'Emperor Zhark' books, the most feared Tyrannical God-Emperor of the known Galaxy just didn't seem to comprehend the meaning of restraint.

In a few minutes it was all over. The A-7s had either been killed or escaped to their own books, and the Zharkian Marine Corps had been dispatched to find the Minotaur. I could have saved them the trouble. He would be long gone. The A-7s and McNeil would have to be sourced and replaced, the whole book rejigged to remove the twenty-sixth-century battle cruiser that had arrived

uninvited into 1875 Nebraska. It was a flagrant breach of the Anti-Cross-Genre Code that we attempted to uphold within fiction. I wouldn't have minded so much if this had been an isolated incident, but Zhark did this too often to be ignored. I could hardly control myself as the emperor descended from his starship with an odd entourage of aliens and Mrs Tiggy-Winkle, who also worked for Jurisdiction.

'WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE PLAYING AT?!'

'Oh!' said the emperor, taken aback at my annoyance, 'I thought you'd be pleased to see us!'

'The situation was bad but not *irredeemable*,' I told him, sweeping my arm in the direction of the town. 'Now look what you've done!'

He looked around. The confused townsfolk had started to emerge from the remains of the buildings. Nothing so odd as this had happened in Western since an alien brain-sucker had escaped from SF and been caught inside *Wild Horse Mesa*.

'You do this to me every time! Have you no conception of stealth and subtlety?'

'Not really,' said the emperor, looking at his hands nervously. 'Sorry.'

His alien entourage, not wanting to hang around in case they *also* got an earful, walked, slimed or hovered back into Zhark's ship.

'You sent a textmarker—'

'So what if we did? Can't you enter a book without destroying everything in sight?'

'Steady on, Thursday,' said Bradshaw, laying a calming hand on my arm, 'we did ask for assistance, and if old Zharky here was the closest, you can't blame him for wanting to help. After all, when you consider that he usually lays waste to entire galaxies, torching just the town of ProVidence and not the whole of Nebraska was actually quite an achievement . . .' His voice trailed off before he added: ' . . . for him.'

'AHHH!' I yelled in frustration, holding my head. 'Sometimes I think I'm—'

I stopped. I lost my temper now and again, but rarely with my colleagues, and when that happens, things are getting bad. When I started this job it was great fun, as it still was for Bradshaw. But just lately the enjoyment had waned. It was no good. I'd had enough. I needed to go *home*.

'Thursday?' asked Mrs Tiggy-Winkle, concerned by my sudden silence. 'Are you okay?'

She came too close and spined me with one her quills. I yelped and rubbed my arm while she jumped back and hid a blush. Six-foot-high hedgehogs have their own brand of etiquette.

'I'm fine,' I replied, dusting myself down. 'It's just that things have a way of, well, *spiralling* out of control.'

'What do you mean?'

'What do I mean? *What do I mean?* Well, this morning I was tracking a mythological beast using a trail of custard pie incidents across the old West, and this afternoon a battle cruiser from the twenty-sixth century lands in ProVIDence, Nebraska. Doesn't that sound sort of crazy?'

'This is fiction,' replied Zhark in all innocence, 'odd things are *meant* to happen.'

'Not to me,' I said with finality. 'I want to see some sort of semblance of . . . of *reality* in my life.'

'Reality?' echoed Mrs Tiggy-Winkle. 'You mean a place where hedgehogs don't talk or do washing?'

'But who'll run Jurisdiction?' demanded the emperor. 'You were the best we ever had!'

I shook my head, threw up my hands and walked over to where the ground was peppered with the A-7 gunman's text. I picked up a 'D' and turned it over in my hands.

'Please reconsider,' said Commander Bradshaw, who had followed me. 'I think you'll find, old girl, that reality is much overrated.'

'Not overrated *enough*, Bradshaw,' I replied with a shrug. 'Sometimes the top job isn't the easiest one.'

'Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown,' murmured Bradshaw, who probably understood me better than most. He and his wife were the best friends I had in the BookWorld; Mrs Bradshaw and my son were almost inseparable.

'I knew you wouldn't stay for good,' continued Bradshaw, lowering his voice so the others didn't hear. 'When will you go?' I shrugged.

'Soon as I can. Tomorrow.'

I looked around at the destruction that Zhark had wrought upon *Death at Double-X*. There would be a lot of clearing up, a mountain of paperwork – and there might be the possibility of disciplinary action if the Council of Genres got wind of what had happened.

'I suppose I should complete the paperwork on this debacle first,' I said slowly. 'Let's say three days.'

'You promised to stand in for Joan of Arc while she attended a martyrs refresher course,' added Mrs Tiggy-Winkle, who had tiptoed closer.

I'd forgotten about that.

'A week, then. I'll be off in a week.'

We all stood in silence, I pondering my return to Swindon, and all of them considering the consequences of my departure – except Emperor Zhark, who was probably thinking about invading the Planet Thraal, for fun.

'Your mind is made up?' asked Bradshaw. I nodded slowly. There were other reasons for me to return to the real world, more pressing than Zhark's gung-ho lunacy. I had a husband who didn't exist, and a son who couldn't spend his life cocooned inside books. I had retreated into the old Thursday, the one who preferred the black-and-white certainties of policing fiction to the ambiguous mid-tone greys of emotion.

'Yes, my mind's made up,' I said, smiling. I looked at Bradshaw, the emperor and Mrs Tiggy-Winkle. For all their faults, I'd enjoyed working with them. It hadn't been *all* bad. Whilst at Jurisdiction I had seen and done things I wouldn't have believed. I'd watched grammasites in flight over the pleasure domes of Xanadu, felt the

strangeness of listeners glittering on the dark stair. I had cantered bareback on unicorns through the leafy forests of Zenobia and played chess with Ozymandias, the King of Kings. I had flown with Biggles on the Western Front, locked cutlasses with Long John Silver and explored the path not taken to walk upon England's mountains green. But despite all these moments of wonder and delight, my heart belonged back home in Swindon and to a man named Landen Parke-Laine. He was my husband, the father of my son, he didn't exist, and I loved him.

