

Lily Lovebug and the Unconquered Planet

T P Ripley

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This story is dedicated to my lovely daughters, Kazia and Aniela

The Author

Born, educated and still living in Rotherham (a small town 6 miles from the industrial city of Sheffield), Trevor left school at 16 years old, having received a relatively poor education. He tried his hand at carpet fitting, microbiology laboratory technician, school chemistry technician and limestone quarrying where he attained an HND in Engineering. He finally settled for his current vocation – Case Manager (senior nurse) at Rotherham Hospital.

It was whilst juggling his nurse training with bringing up two young girls that he started his new hobby: creative writing.

Now whilst he pursues a Masters in Managing Medical Conditions, he continues to write both children's fantasy books and adult crime thrillers. Trevor has several projects on the go at once, utilising a somewhat disorganised style of writing. It seems to work!

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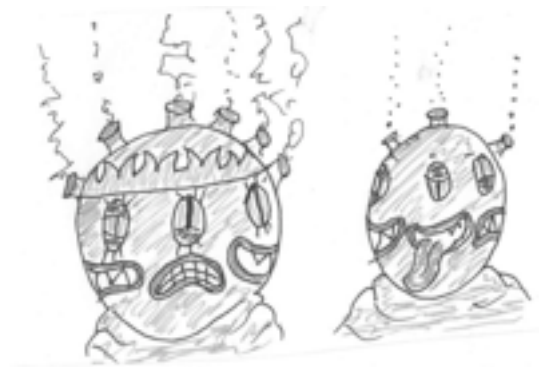
I would also like to thank my daughters – Kazia and Aniela. Without realising, their constant badgering for home-made, and instant, bed-time stories during their younger years help me develop a vivid imagination and the knack to produce an instant adventure.

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Chapter One: Gresslons

The room should have been in pitch darkness. No window or vent occupied its walls, no skylight in the ceiling, no lamp, no light bulb, not even a flickering candle.

Yet it was not dark, for this was no ordinary room, if room was the appropriate word. It was more of a cavity; a wet and sticky cavity, a moving cavity, a breathing cavity, a cavity with a life of its own.

The flesh pink ceiling rose up and down like a great pair of lungs. The walls were coated with a yellow jelly substance from which hung thick folds of cloth-like skin. The entire structure was criss-crossed with purple rubbery tubes.

These tubes throbbed like grotesque veins with sticky brown fluid pulsating through them. In places this foul-smelling liquid had leaked from the veins and dribbled freely to the pitted floor. Acidic juices seeped up from the floor in yellow puddles. The two disgusting fluids married and a continuous bubbling reaction emitted a radiant green glow and a pungent smelling gas.

The entire cavity thudded with a rhythmic thump. In the centre of the chamber sat a huge carbuncle; a canker of a structure in blood red and pus yellow, a hideous tonsil protruding from the floor. It too throbbed with a life of its own.

Perched clumsily upon this grotesque object, in all her terrible splendour, sat the Queen. Her gruesome head was adorned with a diabolical crown made from the teeth of long dead dragons. A lethal sceptre, which looked weirdly like a bunch of meat cleavers twisted together, rested conveniently on her massive lap. Her malevolent trio of eyes stared intently into the darkness, her vicious mind revelling in evil intentions as she filed away at her sharp black and grubby claws with the backbone of some unfortunate beast.

Queen Revolta Gressla was annoyed. She was annoyed because things weren't going to plan; a plan that she had spent many Earth hours, well...er...planning.

It is important to mention here that this story is not only about events happening on the planet Earth, but also events happening much further away from it. This story tells of events that are happening this very minute in the known universes.

There are six known universes, although we Humans are only aware of one of them. A universe is a vast expanse of...whateva - mixed gases, probably, in which hundreds or thousands or millions of planets and stars float around minding their own business.

All of them that is, except one; one planet that simply cannot help interfering with all the other planets. It is called Gresslonathaliaznusswatsit (if you can't read this name, don't worry, we'll call it Gresslon from now on).

Gresslon is populated by billions of very inquisitive people, who also happen to be the most wicked, cruel and destructive race of people in all the universes. Whatever a Gresslon touches, he or she (or it) ruins it in one way or another. But please don't be hard on the Gresslons; they don't mean to be like this, they were just born (or hatched) that way. Earth, of course, is populated by Humans, who, when you think about it, have quite a lot in common with the Gresslons.

So back to Revolta Gressla. Full title: Queen of Gresslonathaliaznusswatsit and Empress of five of the six known universes. As we know, Queen Revolta is annoyed, and when Queen Revolta gets annoyed, everyone else (including her much loved personal guards, the Royal Gressloneers) runs for their lives.

They hide to avoid being sprayed by the green and yellow acidic fluids that spill from Revolta's lizard-like eyes and dribble from her mouths and they shelter from the fumes and pebble-like lumps of wax that erupt from her seventeen chimney pot ears.

A few words about the Gresslons' facial features: Gresslons have three eyes which blink independently. What would be the whites of our eyes are usually orange in colour and Gresslon eyes are kept moist by putrid juices.

They also have three mouths which can eat different things at the same time. In fact, a Gresslon can eat a three course meal all at once - one mouth dealing with the starter, whilst the other two mouths polish off the main course and dessert. When a Gresslon has finished eating, it releases a cacophony of belches.

It is quite weird to look at a Gresslon as it talks. Sometimes the three mouths take it in turns to speak, or one mouth might start a sentence and the second mouth will finish the sentence off, or all three mouths will say the same thing simultaneously, but with a different tone or pitch or sometimes with a slight delay so it sounds like there's an echo.

Ears are a status symbol for Gresslons. The Queen has seventeen ears. Only her Great-Great-Grandmother Queen Terribla Terrible, known for her thousand terrible deeds and the inventor of the word terrible, has ever had more. Lesser Gresslons have fewer ears and some have none at all. A no-eared Gresslon is treated like a medieval peasant on the planet Gresslon. All Gresslons with ears can produce noxious fumes from them, but none can produce as much of the deadly smoke as Revolta Gressla, who has been known to cover small moons with it when enraged.

The Queen's ability to be so vile and deadly is the reason why she proclaimed herself Queen at the tender age of two years and has held this position for the last three thousand, five hundred and twenty-six Earth years.

She is, of course, the reason the Gresslons are such wretched creatures. In the years of Revolta's rule, the Gresslons should have evolved into a peaceful, happy race. But the Queen and her ancestors have slowed, some say even stopped, the Gresslon race from evolving, keeping them in a miserable state, simply because it suited the Gressla dynasty.

Why is that, you ask. Well, the answer lies in Revolta's little secret (or weakness) which she has managed to hide completely for her entire life until now. Revolta's secret is that she has been struck by a deadly allergy.

Passed from one generation to the next, all her family and ancestors have had this same affliction. It is not a normal allergy like we might have to hay, cats and crying babies which might make us sneeze and wheeze and maybe go yuk! She has a very strange allergy – get this – she is allergic to beauty. That's right: anything remotely pretty or cute or in any way pleasing to the eye causes Revolta and any member of her family to have happy thoughts.

Now, Humans enjoy feeling happy, and so do the majority of the Gresslon people. But to the Queen and her family, such feelings are very dangerous. You see, if they have happy thoughts, usually because something bad has happened or they have experienced something disgusting, like a horrid smell or a yukky taste, well that's okay, that sort of happy thought is harmless to them, because there is something unpleasant about it. But if the happy thought is due to something nice, their allergy kicks in and they break out in an itchy rash.

For us Humans, a rash is not that bad. We can use creams and take medicines, but not the Gresslons. They have slimy crocodile-like skin that is covered in protective warts which will not absorb any type of cream. So there is no cure for the itchy rash. Before long, all the scratching causes the warts to fall off, and if this happens, a Gresslon will dry up like a prune and stick to the floor for eternity.

As time goes on, this prune-like blob begins to resemble a huge rock or boulder, some of which have been mistaken for ancient religious artifacts (if you've ever been to Stonehenge, believe me, you have seen a dozen or so of Queen Revolta's relatives).

So despite her huge size, as tall as the tallest of giraffes and weighing as much as three large cows, not to mention being as strong as a bull elephant, Queen Revolta can be easily subdued with something as paltry as a buttercup.

And this is why Queen Revolta is so angry and frustrated at the moment. You see, planet Earth is teeming with beautiful things: plants and flowers of all shapes and colour decorate it; numerous animals in many unique forms populate it.

Some are exceedingly beautiful, like birds of paradise, butterflies and fish. Others are huge and majestic like great whales of the oceans, elephants, giraffes and bison. There are tiny cute ones, like those little Russian

hamsters that you simply can't catch if they escape, and scary ones, large and small, like lions and spiders! All (except the spiders) fill the human race with excitement and bring a smile to a human's face, and this just won't do for a Gresslon.

To make matters worse, our world is packed full of breathtaking scenery: snowcapped mountain ranges reaching into the blue skies, vast deep oceans overflowing with coral reefs of every colour and great rain forests bursting with life.

All these things infuriate the Queen. Why? Because she desperately wants to take over our planet. It is the last one she needs to complete her set and be crowned Queen of the six known universes.

So, why doesn't she just send her army to Earth to do the dirty work for her? Well, because Queen Revolta has been personally involved in the destruction and demoralisation of every planet with signs of life in all six universes. Causing misery satisfies her immensely and she just adores reducing cities to rubble. Her passion for destruction has helped her destroy every great city in every great country on every planet in the six known universes. She simply isn't going to be beaten by the very last one. Queen Revolta Gressla has never been beaten!

Now you know a little about Gresslons and their way of life, let's get back to the story.

The hideous Queen slid off her bizarre throne and paced up and down in the primary cavity of her space vessel. This living cave was the control centre for the entire Gresslon Empire; here, in this dark and damp spot, Queen Revolta had spent most of her miserable life.

She opened one of her huge mouths and bawled. 'Tarpit, Tarpit - where are you, you delicate vase of flowers?' (It is important to point out here that being nice to a Gresslon is an insult, to call them a horrid name is a compliment. Now you know, try not to get confused).

'Here, my Queen, at your most disgraceful side as always.' The Queen's advisor emerged from his sleeping perch hidden in the thick folds of scales and slime that lined the walls and immediately began to grovel at her hairy clawed feet. He was almost a perfect copy of her. There is no difference in appearance between male and female Gresslons except size. Tarpit was a little shorter than the Queen, reaching half her height; very short for a Gresslon, and he was much lighter, weighing as much as a large bull. Tarpit also possessed five less ears and his skin was more of an olive colour, which was quite normal; Gresslon skin did change colour slightly with age.

Tarpit was at least a thousand years older and a little wiser, you might say more cunning, than the Queen, which is why he has lasted so long in her presence. Tarpit was a very clever Gresslon. He knew exactly how to behave in the Queen's company, always keeping himself just underneath her suspicious radar and always managing to place someone else in the line of fire when she was angry. Now was one of those times.

'What progress are we making? Have we destroyed any of this infuriating beauty yet? Don't say no. If I have to look at it a minute longer, my eyes will turn to dust.'

Tarpit said nothing, his mind searching frantically for an answer. How he wished the Queen would turn to dust. The treacherous thought nearly slipped out of one of his mouths, forcing him to bite down on his tongue.

'Well, answer me, you son of a daffodil. What's got into you! And stop chewing your tongues, I command you to stop entertaining yourself in that way.'

'Forgive me, your gruesomeness, it's just -'

'Just what?'

'Well... well, with disrespect.... you said not to say no...so I thought I'd better say nothing.'

'Oh, you are truly a rainbow, a little cute pony if ever there was one. Can I rely on no one? Do I have to do everything myself? What is it you're doing wrong?'

'Nothing -'

'Nothing? You must be doing something wrong; otherwise you would be getting somewhere. Haven't I given you enough ideas? All you have to do is wreck, poison and pollute. Cut a forest down here and there, drop something deliciously horrid into the seas and release the spawn shell's radiation into the atmosphere. How hard can it be?'

'But...'

'But what, you pretty little canary, but what?'

'We've tried all the usual stuff, it's the planet, it keeps repairing itself, your grossness.'

'Repairing itself! You foolish little jewel, planets don't repair themselves. I should know, I've destroyed enough of them. Am I not the great provider for my people? Have I not created a vast empire for handsome little ducks like you?'

Tarpit felt uneasy. He needed to get out of this sticky situation before it became stickier with his vile blood. He

needed to think fast, and he had to answer the Queen, whose third eye was extending towards him on a snakelike stalk. He felt an urge to bite the eye off its stalk, but knew she would instantly kill him. He needed to talk her round. Blaming the planet for his inadequacies wasn't working, he had to have more, that's it - a scapegoat - and he knew just the Gresslon for the job. With a little patience and the correct opportunity, he would place the blame on someone else.

He answered the Queen's question. 'Yes, your loathsomeness, for which I am most ungrateful,' he said sheepishly. 'But it's uncanny: it's as though the planet is fighting back - I think it's used to being ill-treated, I've never encountered such a thing.' Out of ideas, Tarpit shook his head. 'Your wickedness...what if we forget this little insignificant planet? After all, no one else knows of its existence. Why, we could even hide it - cover it with a thick cloud of gas so that no other race will ever discover it. Do we really need to add it to our sizeable collection?'

'Of course we do,' Queen Revolta snarled. 'We can't have a huge empire and then one single solitary planet next to it. An unconquered planet! That's absurd. It's all or nothing and I want it all!'

'But if I may be so rude...why not just sit back and wait fifty of their Earth years and the job will be done for us. These Humans are incredibly horrid you know, can't leave anything alone, they destroy and ruin whatever they touch. Let's go home and forget about it - put our feet up and have a disgusting cup of hairy curd.'

'Go home - go home! Why, that will take us nine duo-deco-dilligon gressometers!'

'Yes, my Queen, at least three Earth hours.'

'No, no, no, there must be something we can do. You give up too easily, butterfly brains.'

'But I don't think there is any more damage we can inflict which the Humans haven't already tried. Believe me, I've racked my brains but I can't think of anything new and Admiral Sludgebogg is just not pulling his weight.'

'What's this you say about Sludgebogg? Not pulling his weight, is he? Probably since I chewed off one of his legs. I think I need words with Admiral Sludgebogg.'

Tarpit smiled. In one stroke he had extricated himself from his perilous predicament and put the blame on his greatest rival.

The Queen continued. 'Ahh, Humans, totally despicable. I hate them with all my heart. You know, I'm thinking of making their leader one of my husbands. Nasty little man he is, would suit me down to the ground.'

'Oh yes, good choice, my despicable one, the one in charge of that America place.'

'No, no, I don't mean him, though he is exceedingly bad, I mean the one who -'

'Oh, you mean the one that lives deep inside the Earth - that devil guy, Zebub, or something like that.'

'No, no, not that evil freak...come to think of it, I'll marry him too, he has some very interesting servants, you know. Anyway, stop interrupting, you pile of fairy glitter. I mean that tycoon fellow, the one who owns half of the world. Vile creature - turns animals into balls of fat-soaked meat. I've heard they taste disgusting - I can't wait to try them.'

'Oh yes, my Queen, I know him, short and fat he is, has an ugly red nose.'

'Yes, that's the one - what name does he go by, I forget?'

'Wait a minute, your slyness, it's on the tip of one of my tongues - that's it - Deathnell, Horace Deathnell, yes - yes, terrible choice, my Queen.'

'Displeased that you agree. Now, enough of this idle chatter, where were we?'

'I suggested we let the Humans destroy their own world for us.'

'I have to say, Tarpit, that is a dastardly idea; your brains are stinking today. But no, why should they have all the displeasure. I'm the Queen of five universes, I want to have a hand or two in this matter.'

'But with disrespect - may I ask what's stopping you, oh savage one? You didn't hesitate to attack the other planets.'

The Queen was upset by the question and was careful not to reveal her secret. 'I hope you're not questioning me, Tarpit. I haven't finished digesting the last Gresslon who did that.'

Tarpit remembered the fate of Stinkpitt the Goo, Emperor of Little Gresslon and shuddered. 'Please, your rancidness - I would never be so foolish as to question you.'

'Very well. Now fetch me my instruments - I have a plan.'

Tarpit released a high-pitched scream and immediately a hidden orifice within the room sort of slurped open. In waddled three more Gresslons, each one carrying a rusty box. The boxes were laid at the feet of the Queen and opened. A rank odour wafted up from them. The Gresslons breathed in deeply and smiled.

'Your foretelloscope, your discustacle and the great triangulorb, your wickedness.'

Queen Revolta picked up the three objects in her huge flabby arms.

First, she placed the discustacle in front of her eyes. Worn in the same way as a pair of spectacles, the discustacle spanned three eyes. Instead of glass lenses to improve the eye sight, a smelly film a bit like fish skin

stretched around a bone frame. This device enabled Revolta to see through solid objects.

Then the Queen placed the foretelloscope in front of one of these strange lenses. The foretelloscope resembled a kaleidoscope, but instead of the beautiful coloured shapes seen in a kaleidoscope, the Queen could see bogeys, toenails and rotting teeth mixing with snot. Now, she was not only able to see through solid matter, but she could also view what was happening at that moment in time, as well as what was going to happen in the future. It all sounds a little crazy – but it is true - honest!

Finally, Queen Revolta focused the two instruments on the third and most important object, the triangulorb.

This piece of equipment looked like an ice-cream cone. The ice-cream part was made out of a giant pearl and the cone part was fashioned from an enormous tooth. (Incidentally, Queen Revolta's triangulorb is the only one in the six known universes. However, in the seventh and unknown universe, triangulorbs are so numerous that you can get one at any car boot sale for an American dollar or a Gresslon splodge or twenty-thousand English pounds). Its function was to search out the object or person who would prove to be most useful for the task at hand.

The Queen looked hard through the discustacle and foretelloscope into the triangulorb. A flash of gold light filled the air, accompanied by a low moaning sound.

Within seconds, the interior of the cavity turned into a giant screen and the view through the three instruments appeared for all to see. The window opened for only a few short Earth minutes before the triangulorb glowed a sickly green-yellow colour then faded into a dull grey and finally went out all together in a short puff of acrid smoke.

Having seen enough, the terrible Queen raised her heavy head and, with the discustacle still in place, discharged a hearty and evil laugh.

The control centre filled with yellow smoke.



Chapter Two: Lily

Lily Loveland sat on the rickety gate and rocked back and forth. She watched as a group of angelic-looking little girls, cute in frilly dresses with bobbles in their hair, played happily with skipping ropes and hopscotch on Littlespring Road.

One of the girls turned to Lily and waved. Lily stuck out her tongue in return. Upset, the kind little girl stomped off. Lily laughed. She didn't like these girls; she wasn't like them. She didn't have nice plaits in her hair or wear pretty dresses and shiny shoes.

In fact, Lily hated these things. Her hair was short and greasy and it hung over her eyes if she didn't tuck it under her old baseball cap. Lily preferred to wear T-shirts and jeans. Her current favourite pair had holes at the knees and her old 'Spiders rule' T-shirt no longer went in the wash since the 'S' of 'Spider' had dissolved in the washing machine.

No, Lily was not a typical girl and she was not a nice little girl; she was more like a boy, to be honest.

Lily had been hard work since she was born. Always screaming and never sleeping, she drove her parents to despair. Although she was doted upon and always had plenty of toys and attention from her family, Lily was never content.

Except that is, when she was destroying her belongings and those of anyone else, much to the displeasure of her parents who were finding her increasingly difficult to cope with. Never mind, her parents convinced themselves, she'll grow out of it eventually.

Then, at the tender age of five, she did grow out of it, only to enter a new phase, one that would horrify her mum, but secretly pleased her dad. One day, whilst ripping apart a teddy bear, Lily found a creepy crawly scampering under a chair. She was so fascinated with the woodlouse that she picked it up and placed it carefully in her toy box. Pleased with her find, Lily presented it to her mum (who was absolutely disgusted), before she frantically began combing the house for more.

It wasn't long before she had a considerable collection of assorted insects, including spiders, silverfish, daddy longlegs, a few centipedes, a weird looking beetle with horns and anything else with six or more legs that ventured into the house.

Lily's parents didn't mind too much at first. Her dad, a short, bald and pleasant man who always had a smile on his face, actively encouraged her fascination with nature. He taught science at Lily's school and was the favourite teacher of all the kids at the school, including Lily, who was secretly very proud of her dad. The feeling was mutual; maybe his only daughter would become a renowned botanist or archeologist, something along those lines would be fine.

In contrast, Lily's mum was a tall slender woman who, due to the fact that she taught ballet, always made a great effort to look elegant and act in a proper manner. She had plans to shape Lily into a miniature replica of herself. Together they would enjoy shopping, make-up and dancing, all the girly things expected of mother and daughter. With mum's encouragement and expert training, Lily might grow up to be a world famous prima ballerina, adored and envied by millions of fans. Hopefully, Lily would quickly grow out of this horrid obsession with bugs – yuk!

But as Lily grew older and was allowed more freedom, her creepy crawly collection also grew in size. Beetles and ladybirds were her favorites at six, then back to the largest spiders she could find at the age of eight.

'Look, mum, an orb web spider - it's huge!' she exclaimed one day, whilst chasing her screaming mum into the house, much to her dad's amusement. This type of event became a regular occurrence in the Loveland household.

By the age of ten, Lily had boxes all over the house full of rats, mice and lizards, all extremely wild and all reluctant to leave her. An assortment of birds flew around her room, causing her mum to despair at the droppings everywhere, and the smell – phew!

'At least she's interested in something, I suppose,' Lily's mum moaned one day as she observed her scruffy looking daughter flicking through yet another book about animals.

'A real Charles Darwin,' commented her dad from behind his newspaper, 'a Nobel Prize winner in the making,' he said, just before a large wolf spider crawled over the top of his paper. 'Ughh!' he yelled, leaping up and whacking the spider with the Daily News.

'No, no - stop it, stop it,' Lily shouted, as she dashed into the kitchen. 'That's Charlotte the Third, leave her alone!' But it was too late. Lily looked down at the breakfast table to see a clump of mangled spider, three legs still twitching. 'How could you!' Lily screamed. 'How could you, you murderer, I hate you, I hate you!'

'It's only a spider, Lily,' her dad protested.

'Only a spider, only a spider - it happens to be a living creature, or it was until a minute ago, anyway...and do you know how important spiders are to the ecosystem, do you? If it wasn't for spiders we'd be knee deep in fleas and other pests.'

'But spiders don't eat fleas, they eat flies.'

'Of course they eat fleas.'

'Well, they'd have to be little spiders, shouldn't think one that size would get much pleasure in eating a flea,' Lily's mum joined in.

But Lily scowled, her cheeks burning red. 'Anyway,' her dad added, 'I thought you liked all creatures, including fleas.'

'I do!'

'Well, there you go then, this house is now a safer place for fleas.'

Furious now, Lily stomped her feet. 'Ooh - you think you're so smart,' she said, as angry tears welled up in her eyes. 'You'll be sorry,' she shouted, and ran out of the house as fast as she could, slamming the door shut behind her.

A minute later, Lily was in her favourite spot, swinging violently on the garden gate, the rusty hinges buckling under her weight; she was determined to unhinge it. Tears in her eyes, she wondered what to do.

She looked down at the ground and was delighted to notice a line of ants busy at work. She watched as the line zig-zagged out of the garden, down the curb, into the gutter and across the road.

One disoriented ant had been displaced from the rest. Lily gently retrieved it and delicately placed it back in line. 'There, now, off you go, back to work.' The ant scurried off with his brothers (or sisters, definitely relations of some sort), followed the line into the road, and was instantly squashed by a passing lorry.

'Bother, bother, bother!' Lily cursed. She stamped her feet hard on the pavement then turned and kicked the gate with all her might. The exhausted hinges finally gave way and the gate crashed to the ground. 'I'll show them,' she thought, 'I'll run away and find somewhere safe for my animals, somewhere no one can interfere...I'll make them sorry and that's for sure.'

Back inside the house, Lily's dad watched her closely. 'What are we going to do with her?'

'I don't know, but these awful things have got to go,' mum said, referring to Lily's pets.

'But it'll break her heart to get rid of them...what if I build her a shed?'

'Anything - anything, just get them out of the house.'

'OK, I'll start it tomorrow, it'll be a surprise.'

'I hope it lasts longer than that gate you made last year.'

As Lily climbed over the wreck of the gate, deep in thought and making plans to run away, she was unaware of her dad watching her from the kitchen window. What was more, she had absolutely no idea that other eyes, menacing and malevolent eyes, were also scrutinizing her from much further away.



Chapter Three: Kidnapped

Queen Revolta smiled and placed the three strange instruments back in their rusty boxes.

‘You see, Tarpit. How easy it is when you have the right tools for the job. She’s the one for me. See how she sent her army to their death. See how they obeyed her without question. Obviously hates authority, and so destructive, she turned that defensive gate into splinters in no time at all, and she’s about to run away to boot. Makes it a whole lot easier to grab her.’

‘But she’s just a child; how is she of use to us, your viciousness?’

‘Yes, just a child, an infant, a harmless toddler. Wrong again, Tarpit! You’ve forgotten the most important part - she is a Human child. Humans, as you’ve just pointed out, are the most destructive creatures in the six known universes - after Gresslons, of course.’

‘Oh, with disrespect, my Queen, I agree. But is she destructive enough, does she have what it takes to help our despicable cause? A Human child is no match for a Gresslon child. Why, I remember with horror what you yourself were like at the sinewy age of two. You were the most horrific thing that ever existed within the known universes.’

‘Your unkindness is duly noted. At this rate, you will be promoted to Grande Grovelleur.’ Tarpit turned ever so slightly red. The Queen sniggered. ‘This Human child, Tarpit, my stinking bucket of bile.’

Tarpit turned deeper red, pleased that his Queen was paying him compliments for a change (she was obviously in a better mood, or a more agreeable mood, but these words simply don’t fit a Gresslon. So, we must settle for – an unhealthy mood).

The Queen continued to appraise her new found discovery, her potential saviour. ‘This child is the one we want, she has evil within her. Did you see how she sent her own troops into battle against such a powerful enemy? Why, those soldiers stood no chance – crushed they were in an instant, yet she showed no remorse. Instead she was filled with anger, angered at the pitiful fight her army had offered.’

Behind his false smiles, Tarpit was amazed, utterly amazed at his Queen’s stupidity. Indeed, Tarpit had seen the images of Lily on the cavity wall. But he hadn’t seen a hardhearted general sending her troops into battle. All Tarpit had seen was a little girl, a pitifully weak specimen, a spoilt brat, and one who cried a lot. How he hated Human children, though he confessed they had their uses. They were, of course, delicious spread on toast or tossed with a giant maggot salad or baked in jellied bogey pie – yummy, he thought as he licked all three sets of his grizzly lips. But not this child; she was all skin and bone, a mere appetizer. Why, she wouldn’t satisfy the hunger of a new born baby Gresslon; no, she simply wasn’t worth the effort.

Were they talking about the same insignificant creature? Perhaps his Queen had seen a different subject. Was something wrong with her grotesque dribbling eyes? Had the foretelloscope malfunctioned? Surely she hadn’t misunderstood what she’d seen in the triangulorb?

Tarpit shrugged. Like all Gresslons, he was deviously cunning and cared only for his own profit and advancement. But Tarpit was cleverer than most Gresslons. He hadn’t lasted this long in the Queen’s presence by contradicting her. So, Queen Revolta remained ignorant of Tarpit’s views and a pack of Gressloneers was dispatched from the mothership towards the village of Littlespring with orders to bring back Lily.

Lily, meanwhile, had marched back into the house and was now busy choosing which of her pets to keep and which to release. Her (new) favourite spider, Wolfie, (a wolf spider measuring at least six centimeters across) was placed in a matchbox and seventy-three others were let out of the window, along with a host of centipedes,

woodlice, fleas and moths.

Her two hamsters (Scratch and Digger) were bundled inside her coat pocket and Kit, her maimed kestrel, was pushed carefully up her T-Shirt. Snake, a poisonous adder, was placed underneath her baseball cap and an assortment of rodents and reptiles were freed into the back garden (half of which ran straight back into the house).

Lily then packed a lunch box with jam sandwiches, raw bacon for Kit, nuts for the hamsters and dead flies for Wolfe. Snake would have to find his own food, no way was Lily going to put live slugs in her lunch box.

Satisfied that she was ready to go (with no thought of packing any spare clothes), Lily quietly slipped out of the back door, climbed over the fence and disappeared into Little Spring wood.

Lily loved the wood, with its fresh smells and pleasant sounds, especially in midsummer. But most of all she loved the solitude it offered. Very few people trod the rough overgrown paths of Little Spring wood, preferring to take their fat dogs for a waddle in the park instead where they could poo on the pristine lawns.

So Lily found she was alone there most days, where she would simply wander around, comparing specimens of fungus or insects with the pictures in her resource books. Strangely enough, she had discovered many species which should not have existed in England. She found them easily; it was like the creatures wanted her to find them. Sometimes she thought they had come looking for her, but of course, that was absurd. One day she spotted a very beautiful butterfly which she had never seen before. The butterfly landed on her arm and Lily could have sworn it was attempting to tell her something. Later, when she looked it up in her encyclopedia, Lily realised the butterfly came from an area of South America where they were destroying the rain forest – how sad. She told no one of her findings, they were her discovery, her secrets.

But today was different for Lily. For the first time in her life she was sad to enter the wood. Yes, Lily had really made her mind up to leave, 'I'm not kidding this time,' she promised herself, remembering all the other times she'd run away, never getting further than the garden gate. She was determined this time and sad because she was definitely leaving, and might never again see the place she adored so much. This was her last chance to admire the beauty of the place and breathe in the familiar perfumed aromas as she wandered her personal paths through the undergrowth to the far side of the woods.

There was something else different today. Lily had ignored it at first; it was because she was sad, that's all. But at last she had to admit it, there was something wrong. The place didn't seem quite right - Lily couldn't put her finger on it. Then suddenly it dawned on her – the usual cacophony of animal noises was gone and the entire wood was silent - deadly silent.

'Strange, the wood's not talking to me today,' she uttered her thoughts to herself before sniffing the air. 'There's a funny smell, is there a fire - oh no, please not fire. But there's no smoke, and dad says there's no fire without smoke...or something like that. What could it be?'

As Lily walked deeper into the wood, the smell grew stronger. It became acrid, causing her to retch, she didn't like it at all. Then to her alarm, the scenery began to change. Trees were losing their leaves and small animals could be heard scurrying away into the undergrowth. Further on, the trees had begun to die, turning grey and crumbling.

Finally to her horror, Lily noticed the animals. Unfortunate animals: rabbits, squirrels, birds and badgers, lying dead, their bodies giving off a putrid gas. 'Oh my – no, no!' Lily covered her mouth, distressed at the sight. Lily had seen dead animals before, death was an important aspect of nature – but she could tell that these deaths were not natural.

She stepped forward carefully, the unbearable odour now causing Lily to hold her nose. She stooped to examine the dead animals; she had to know what had happened.

Then suddenly, she heard a sound. What was that - branches breaking, breaking and falling heavily, getting nearer, and something else - heavy breathing? Alarmed and filled with panic, Lily turned - but it was too late.

Something had hold of her, gripping her with powerful sausage-like fingers, hard, sticky and scaly. She was powerless in the grip of her assailant. It was not strength that she succumbed to, however, but the pungent aroma that wafted up her nostrils.

Lily felt dizzy and a weird spinning sensation consumed her. Her head filled with images of coloured shapes that danced and entwined; she was going to faint. As her eyes closed, the shapes dissipated to be replaced by a dark shadow of a large creature standing in front of her.

'Wow - it's an ogre...' Lily managed to utter before descending into darkness.