

THE
INSTITUTE
OF
FANTASTICAL
INVENTIONS II

MAGNETIC
ATTRACTION

DAVE LEYS



FOR GAZ, WHO HAD ALL THE BELIEF THE WORLD NEEDS, AND IS MISSED.

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BALANCING

Leo McGuffin sighed. It was the midsummer holidays, which meant that nearly everyone at the Institute of Fantastical Inventions was away. That meant that no one was ordering inventions, which in turn meant that as Chief Technical Officer he had no scientific problems to work on.

The Institute of Fantastical Inventions, or IFI, was a private company that had one central mission. It was to take the wishes, the dreams, the fantasies of ordinary people and to make them come true. How? Incredibly clever boffins like Leo McGuffin used the science of gadgets, mechanics

and technology. You wanted to be a champion sprinter but you were too slow? Easy – the IFI could make you an extra leg. Perhaps you always felt cold but hated being restricted by jumpers and coats. Simple – the IFI could grow bear’s fur all over your body.

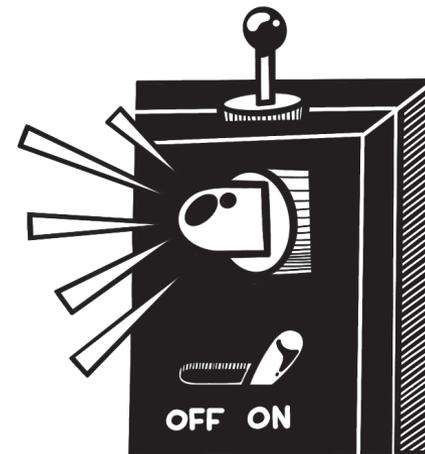
The Institute of Fantastical Inventions was, essentially, a place where the craziest desires could come true.

When Leo sighed a second time he knew he had to snap out of it. The holiday would soon be over. In fact in exactly forty-eight hours and twenty minutes the place would be humming again. There would be a plethora of complex scientific conundrums to solve, a waiting line of clients with their abstract and unique demands.

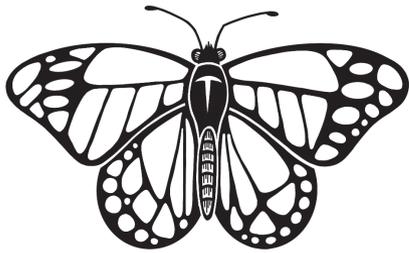
“I wonder what my colleague Dr Andrea Allsop is up to,” he wondered aloud. Then he remembered he didn’t have to speculate. He had put tracking devices, complete with microphones and cameras, onto her aeroplane, luggage and even into the brim of her favourite red hat.

Not that he was spying on her. He was merely developing some advanced surveillance technology he planned to use in a future project. This was a chance to test it out. He just hadn’t had the opportunity to tell her about it before she left.

He switched on his video interface and flicked through the different camera shots. There was a blur of blue, and then the deepest of greens, which resolved itself into the image of a thick mass of trees. It looked like she was about to land her aeroplane in, of all places, a jungle. That made



sense, he thought. She had mentioned using the holiday break time to study the mating habits of selected species of butterflies in the Amazon – the blue morpho, the kite swallowtail, the monarch.



That was Andrea Allsop – an absolute workaholic. The rumours were that every night she went to bed with headphones through which was playing a recitation of the chemical equations of all known substances, over and over again. She did this so even when she was sleeping she was still learning: still working and maximising her efficiency.

They had had some differences previously, he and Dr Allsop, but that was all in the past. While she could be difficult, he respected her scientific ability. And he was sure she respected him.

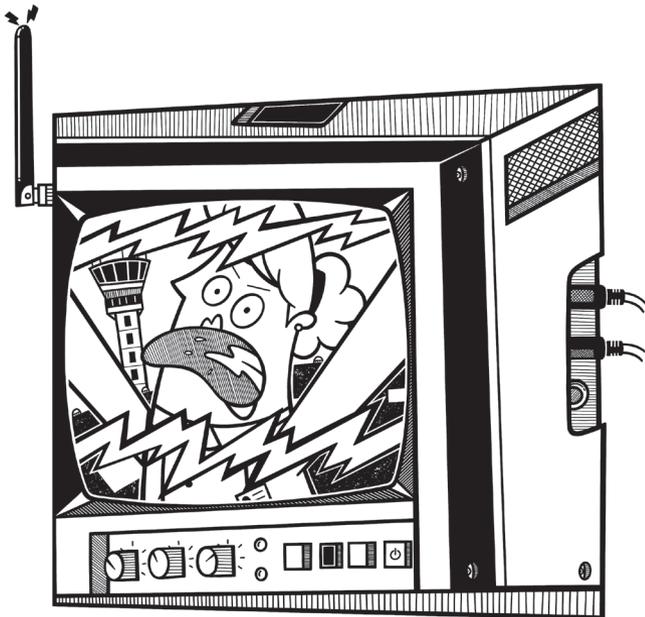
The speakers crackled into life and he heard her voice. Her plane had landed in a short makeshift runway deep in what looked like the lower reaches of the Amazon.

“Where is that microscope?” she muttered to herself. The camera inserted into her hat showed her disembarking from the plane and walking to the back wing section. “That fool McGuffin had better not have taken it! I saw him bumbling around the plane for some reason just before I took off.”

The humidity, McGuffin reflected, seemed to be negatively affecting her mood. Interesting.

“Hang on,” she said. “What’s this?” Leo saw her hand come towards the camera and detach it from the plane’s fuselage. “That rat! He’s put a recording device on my plane!”

She jammed her face right up into the camera lens and seethed. “McGuffin, if you are watching this right now, this is a warning! You had better have an explanation for this when I get back, or I’m going to take action!”



Leo blinked, went a little red and switched off the interface.

“Excellent,” he said. “Visuals, audio, yes ... it all seems to be in working order.”

He could feel his heartbeat increase in frequency. Thud. Thud. Thud.

He disconnected the interface and packed it away, inside an aluminium box, then inside a black canvas bag, and finally the whole thing was stacked at the back of a cupboard.

You could never be too careful with audiovisual equipment. Best to keep it where no one could find it. Ever.

Still her voice echoed inside his mind, banging from one side of his head to another like an angry bee caught in a glass container.

Warning.

That rat.

You had better have an explanation, or I'm going to take action.

Taking a deep breath he slowly repeated the table of minerals in alphabetical order from acanthite to zoisite, until his heart rate slowed and he could think more clearly.

Geological phenomena – what a comfort they were!

Now at a loose end once again, he started to wander the corridors of the building. The silence was eerie – so quiet he could hear the faint hum of the lights overhead.

Before he knew it he had turned a corner and come to the doorway of the Fantasy Request Allocation Salon. This was where the Institute of Fantastical Inventions processed all of the requests clients made. The job of the Fantasy Request Allocation Officer was to take whatever came in to the IFI – whether it was someone wanting a new skin colour, a feeling of enchantment or invisibility – and then to sort it into a category.

For instance there was Category A: Aqueous. This covered the surprising number of people whose fantasy had something to do with water.

There was the man who had wanted to be able to talk to sharks. Or the old lady who was so addicted to wallowing in the bathtub she wanted one permanently installed around her body so wherever she went she could always be in the bath. There was the young couple who wanted to turn their house into a goldfish bowl and themselves into hybrid-goldish-humans. When asked why, they claimed it was because they always fought with each other and they wanted to forget their troubles quickly. It was no use telling them that it was a myth that goldfish had short memories.

This last example, actually, got to the heart of one of the special skills of the IFI. An inferior organisation would have just found a way to meld the couple with goldfish, but that would not have in fact solved the problem of the memory. There was nearly always a wish *beneath* the wish that also needed to be addressed in order to secure maximum customer satisfaction. In that particular case the couple was first treated by marine biologists who transformed their bodies with golden fins and tails and then a team of

neuroscientists spliced in chimpanzee brain matter into their craniums, for it turned out, surprisingly, that it's actually chimpanzees who have terrible memories. It meant of course that their appetite for bananas increased and occasionally they would jump out of the water and want to swing on things, but once a series of vines had been slung across the top of their goldfish bowl house things calmed right down and they were happy. Yes, they still argued with each other, but they forgot all about it two minutes later. It was a result only the IFI could have achieved.

Once they were sorted into categories, the requests were then matched to the scientists of the IFI who were best qualified and equipped to work on them.

Leo stuck his head around the door. Professor Sal Genus, the Fantasy Request Allocation Officer, was sitting at her desk. She had a packet of Smarties – small rounded chocolates in a rainbow spectrum of colours – and was attempting to balance a series of them in a stack.

Her ginger hair hung midway over her eyes and her tongue twisted into the side her mouth as she concentrated.



Leo held his breath, afraid to interrupt her. She had four balanced on top of each other and was in the process of delicately placing a fifth one on top.

Plink. It went on, vibrated, and then the whole pile of Smarties toppled over and scattered across her desk.

“The trick is to balance the competing bearing

loads, so that there is no overbearing tension in any particular direction, Leo,” she said without turning to look at him.

“Impressive,” said Leo. “How did you know I was here?”

“Simple,” she said. “The slight variation in the light caused by your standing in the doorway was exactly matched by the shape of your skull.”

Self-conscious for a moment, Leo McGuffin put his hand to his head.

“And by the way the answer is no,” she continued.

“But I haven’t asked anything,” he protested.

Sal turned and pursed her lips. “I know what you’re sniffing around here for. A request. A task. A problem to solve. It’s the holidays. It’s only logical to deduce you’re bored.”

“Is that too much to ask?” said Leo.

Sal swivelled on her chair to face her computer. “All client requests have been fulfilled, and no new ones have come in, on account of the holiday.” She

paused and pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “But you know that ...”

“Sal,” Leo said, his voice taking on a warm, familiar quality. “We’re such old friends ...”

At this she swivelled back to him and narrowed her eyes. “No! I know what you’re up to!”

He smiled weakly, until finally Sal, with a snort, turned back to the computer.

“You know it’s not authorised ... you can’t just turn up and ...” She sounded flustered.

“Here,” Leo said, moving towards the desk, “is how you do it.” He took a handful of Smarties from the bag in front of her and gently cracked the shell of each candy until it had tiny fractures spread across its top and bottom. Then he placed five, six, seven on top of each other in a perfectly symmetrical tower.

“That’s cheating,” she muttered, but her eyes shone.

“Just one,” he said. “I’m sure I can do it.”

Sal flicked through some windows on the

computer until she reached the file marked *Unresolved, Unsolvable Client Requests*.

“They’re in here for a reason,” she said. “No one can solve them. With most of these we had to give the money back to the clients.”

“Uh huh,” said Leo, edging closer to the screen.

“You’ll just send yourself crazy,” Sal whispered.

“Now, now,” he replied. “That’s a little alarmist, don’t you think?”

He sat down next to Sal as she opened up the first folder. It was marked *Fictional Fairies: Impossible and Regrettable!* They read it together.

SUMMARY: Client has requested that she and her daughter become fairies every night. On fuller discussion client has revealed she is referring to the fairy commonly known in European mythology – complete with wings and supernatural powers of glamour, healing, flight and shape-shifting.

After complete psychological evaluation it has been determined the client has no hidden wish and in fact she and her daughter merely

wish to enjoy each other’s company while invoking the full range of “fairy” powers.

Client has been informed that the IFI can provide a pair of wings that will enable short flights. Client has also been informed the more completely supernatural powers of healing, glamour and shape-shifting are, in fact, fictional magical abilities. Given the IFI is actually a scientific organisation with no belief in magic we are unable to fulfil this request in full.

NOTE: Client is charming and determined.

RESULT: Client has been denied request but has refused to take her money back, insisting we keep trying. Effort has been suspended.

“See,” said Sal, “I told you – these are all impossible.”

“Nonsense,” said Leo. “Nothing’s impossible.”

“What do you mean,” said Sal. “Didn’t you read it? She wants magical powers! We’re scientists, we don’t believe in magic.”

“Of course not,” said Leo, “that would be irrational.”

“So how on earth could we do what she wants?” she cried. “How could scientists who think magic is not real create what she wants? It would be like declaring black is white, or up is down!”

If there was anything that the staff of the IFI hated it was failing to complete a customer request.

Sal took a Smartie from the top of the tower Leo had created, put it in her mouth and chewed in frustration. Leo noticed she had faint chocolate smears all over her grey jumper.

Leo remained silent. What Sal said was true, of course, but something was beginning to burn away in the back of his mind. Finally he spoke clearly and loudly. “Give it to me.”

“You’re being nonsensical,” Sal mumbled, her mouth now almost full of Smarties. She snorted and swallowed. “You’re being ludicrous, absurd, and downright impossible.”

“Those words,” said Leo, “are all subjective and dangerously close to emotive.”

He stared pointedly at her until she threw her hands up in the air in surrender. “Okay, you win.” She downloaded the complete file and gave it to him. “But I think you’re wasting your time.”

Leo looked at a clock on the wall. The IFI would reopen to the public in forty-seven hours from now.

“Time,” he said to Sal, “is a resource I currently have in abundance.”