

Excerpt.

One Man: No Plan, K'Barthan Trilogy: Part 3
by M T McGuire.

Like most Spiffles – and their Blurpon cousins – Simon wore two belts, bandolier style. His were heaving with gizmos, though, in a way that The Pan had only ever seen on some of the employees he'd dealt with at Snurd. They were the sort of gizmos that said only one word 'engineer'; a laser tape measure, a small thing which The Pan thought he had seen being used to test electrical circuits on Big Merv's MK II, a torch, a set of screwdrivers, a monumentally large bunch of jangly keys, a satellite navigation device, a pager and a paper pad – ooh, the little guy must be old school – a sleeve containing a tablet pc? Possibly, it was difficult to tell when it was in its case, then there was the mobile phone. The crowning glory, or at least the piece that Simon clearly regarded as the crowning glory, was an ammunition clip converted to carry clear plastic biros, in assorted colours. Mmm... definitely an engineer, then.

"What can I do for you?"

"I'd like a pint," The Pan reached for the designated non-regulars' pump, "No, this one please," Simon pointed a different one. The Pan raised an eyebrow.

"You've been here before, have you?"

"A long time ago. I did my MSc at Ning Dang Po University."

"Ah, so you are an engineer."

"Yes," he seemed nonplussed, "how did you know?"

The biros thought The Pan with a chuckle.

"Just a lucky guess," he said.

"The strangely smelly chap over there, with the teeth—"

"Norris," said The Pan as he bent down and took a clean glass from the tray under the bar.

"He said you drove for the Mervinettes."

The Pan supposed pretty much everything about him was in the public domain, now, but even so he realised he was going to have to have a word with Norris.

"Did he?" he said.

"Yes." He could feel Simon watching him as he placed the beer glass on the drip stand.

"Is it true?"

"It depends who's asking," said The Pan as he took hold of the lever and pulled.

"Me." The beer gurgled out of the pump with a satisfying squelch.

"Yeh, nice try, on whose behalf?"

The Spiffle hesitated and shifted uncomfortably on the stool, causing it to wobble so much that he nearly fell off. The Pan pointed to the one next to it.

"You might want to try that one... especially if you're intending to drink any of your beer. Right now you've picked the shuggliest stool and the strongest beer in the house."

"Thank you," Simon hopped over to the next stool.

"That'll be four K'Barthan Zloty," said The Pan.

"It's gone up a bit since I was last here," said Simon, handing over a note.

"Maybe but it's what the owners charge." The Pan put the note in the till and counted out the change.

"I thought you were the owner," said Simon as The Pan put the change into his paw.

"No. Caretaker manager perhaps, owner, definitely not."

"Why d'you say that?"

"Because the Grongles had no right to take this place, and since they gave it to me, that means I've no right to own it."

The Pan slipped a beer mat onto the bar in front of Simon, checked that the beer had settled, topped up the glass and put it on the mat. Simon took a sip and closed his eyes in something approaching ecstasy.

“Ooo, that’s every bit as good as I remember it. Brewed to the original recipe, I assume?”

“Brewed by the original brewer, and I’m going to have to learn how she did it, very fast, before this lot dink me dry.”

“You are looking after it well; a fine start to your career as a publican.”

“Thank you.” The two of them fell into an awkward silence. “I’m assuming you’re not just here for a drink.”

The little Spiffle had the good grace to be bashful.

“No.”

“Then, what are you here for?”

“I want to talk to you.”

“I might not want to talk to you.”

“You are though.” Simon, took another sip of his drink.

“Fair point. What d’you want to ask?”

Simon cast a sideways glance around him and patently quipped at the first question.

“I’d like a round of cheese sandwiches, please.”

“Uh-ha.” The Pan laughed and the little Spiffle didn’t seem to know what to do. “Sorry, I thought you were going to say something else.” Simon seemed even more nervous and took a big pull at his pint. “Would you like pickle with those?”

“Yes please.”

The Pan raised his eyebrows.

“Are you sure about that? It has quite a kick.”

“I know. I told you, I’ve been here before, remember?”

“Mmm,” so he knew about the pickle, presumably. “Fair enough.”

“Two rounds, please.”

“Coming up.”

The Pan went into the Holy of Holies and sawed four slices off a new loaf. He was working on a surface close to the door and, as he buttered the bread, Simon continued the conversation through the open door way.

“You outran the Interceptor,” he said.

“Once or twice.” The Pan buttered the bread and laid some thick slabs of cheese on top.

“You’re the only man who can.”

“So it would seem. How much pickle?”

“Oh, I’ll help myself, just bring the jar and a spoon.”

“Arnold,” muttered The Pan. The little guy must have a bomb-proof digestive tract – or a death wish.

“Believe me, I can eat more of this stuff than anybody,” Simon added. Bomb-proof then, presumably, “when this was my local I could beat all comers.”

“That sounds like a challenge,” said The Pan.

“It would be, if anyone dared,” said Simon

The Pan laughed. It reminded him of his own exploits.

“That’s what everyone says. Then they actually eat some and change their view.”

He finished making the two rounds of cheese sandwiches, without pickle, and put them at two ends of an oval plate. Then he put the jar of pickle in the middle, not forgetting to use a doily as Gladys and Ada would have wanted, and laid a spoon beside it.

“Here you are,” he said as he brought the plate through and placed it on the bar.

Simon opened a couple of his sandwiches and ladled the pickle over the cheese with

abandon.

“Watch and learn,” he said and he picked one up, took a large bite, chewed and swallowed with no discernable effects. He flipped the plate round so the chutney-laden sandwiches were facing The Pan.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Can’t take the heat?”

“Oh, I know I can take the heat.”

“It doesn’t look like it. You run the pub, you should be able to handle the fare.”

This was definitely a challenge. The kind of macho challenge The Pan normally made a point of ignoring. Unfortunately, his love of cheese sandwiches, Gladys and Ada style, outweighed his sense of caution.

“You want a demonstration?”

“If you’re hard enough.”

The Pan laughed.

“I’m not hard at all but I’m Hamgeean, which makes me a dab hand at hot food.” Simon locked eyes with him. “Alright,” said The Pan. He picked up the fullest sandwich and ate a large mouthful. It tasted fantastic if blindingly hot, even for Gladys’ pickle. He swallowed it. Yep. Hot but it was simple enough to keep a straight face and not cry. Simon was clearly impressed. The Pan was merely thankful to have pulled it off. He didn’t doubt his ability to eat vast quantities of Gladys’s pickle, but he usually paced himself, and he wasn’t one for machismo consumption.

“May I propose a wager?” said Simon. His confidence unnerved The Pan.

“Only if you want to redistribute some of your wealth. Trust me on this, I’m Hamgeean, I can – and do – eat pretty much anything,” The Pan warned him, with a bravado he didn’t entirely feel. He hoped he could bluff Simon to stand down.

“Then the bet is on.”

Arse. Clearly not.

“How much?” The Pan was painfully aware that the cash in the till was Gladys and Ada’s – and in their absence, Trev’s – rather than his. And he didn’t want to put too much of it on a bet because of Simon’s worrying confidence. What if the little Spiffle was about to be eat him under the table?

“Let’s play for something more interesting.”

Phew.

“I seek information. I work for some people who spend a lot of money. When they require funds then, like many of us, they visit a bank. However, there is something standing in their way.”

Arnold’s toe jam.

“Really?” asked The Pan as innocently as he could.

“Yes and I think you know what I’m talking about.”

The Interceptor.

“I might, and if I do, that’s a bet I’m not taking,” he picked up a cloth and started to polish the bar, “I’m retired.”

“Lost your nerve?”

Cheap shot. The Pan laughed bitterly.

“I never had any. I think you’re confusing cowardice with talent.”

“Perhaps you’re confusing talent with cowardice,” oooh nice back-hander there. “There is a saying, give a starving man a fish and he can eat for a day, teach him how to catch a fish and he’ll never starve.”

“Unless the fish die... or I’m his teacher. Seriously, if you’re asking what I think you’re

asking, I doubt I could help.” Not unless the Resistance’s drivers had eyes in the backs of their heads, too. “Anyway, I’m only going to be here until Saturday.” Deliberately, without breaking eye contact, The Pan took another, enormous bite from his chutney-laden sandwich. That flavour! Like angels tiptoeing over his tongue, angels with lava-hot feet. Despite the tears pricking the corners of his eyes, he managed to chew and swallow without altering his expression. This was definitely an extra hot jar. Half of him was confident, enjoying himself, but that was probably because of the stimulants in the chillies. The wiser part of him wished he’d selected a different jar. He felt a certain dampness beginning around his temples and the back of his neck.

Simon seemed to be a little exasperated.

“We are both aware that no amount of teaching will give my colleagues something they don’t have.” That was one hell of an admission. “I’m not asking you to teach.” He snatched up his own sandwich, stuffed all of it into his mouth and washed it down with a swig of beer. He showed no obvious reaction but The Pan thought he detected a slight bulging of the little creature’s eyes.

“What do you want then?” Asked The Pan as he ate the last remnant of his sandwich at Simon. Mmm, three to go. Could he eat three more? Yes, absolutely but he would have to up the pace or slow it right down. The trick in a duel like this was to eat fast and finish before the true force of the heat kicked in or take it slowly and savour it; there was no middle path to victory.

Simon picked up his second sandwich, took a bite and washed it down with some more beer. Schoolboy error. If he wanted to put out the flames he should smother them with bread, adding liquid would only stoke them higher. The Pan saw, with relief, that he would win this contest.

“I need information.” Simon started his second sandwich, swallowing it quickly, presumably in the hope that not much of its burning contents would touch the sides. Even so his voice sounded slightly higher when he said, “I have to find a weakness.”

The Pan tore the second sandwich in half, put the two halves on top of one another and took a gargantuan mouthful. He managed to keep his reaction to a minimum but couldn’t help raising his eyebrows as he chewed and swallowed.

“There is no weakness. This is Lord Vernon you’re dealing with. It’s hardly more than a joke for him, picking off your boys for fun.” The Pan was pleased that he’d kept the heat of the chutney absent from his voice but he’d failed to hide his emotion.

“I can see that angers you,” said Simon and he took a final bite out of his second sandwich and swallowed, his eyes shone with capsicum induced tears but, power to him, none fell.

The Pan finished his second sandwich, too.

“Yeh. It makes me angry. All of this does,” he said, keeping his voice calm and level once again, despite the burning in his throat.

“Would you like a second round?” wheezed Simon.

The Pan shrugged.

“I don’t think you would,” he said.

“We have a wager.”

“No we don’t.”

The Pan picked up the jar and the spoon and as Simon watched him incredulously, he ate the rest of the chutney. Then he put the jar down and ate the rest of the sandwiches, the ones Simon had not put pickle in. The soft bread neutralised the capsicum oils, subduing the furnace like heat to a pleasantly warm buzz accompanied by very clear sinuses.

“Arnold,” whispered the Spiffle.

“I did warn you,” said The Pan. He looked straight into Simon’s eyes which seemed to give the little Spiffle a shock, so he tried to pretend he’d seen the depths of Simon’s soul, when what he’d actually seen was a pair of green eyes, giving away nothing. “Alright, you weren’t to know how much chutney I can put away and you’ve eaten more than anyone else I’ve seen. I think you’ve earned my help. I have some information for you; quite a lot of it, but nothing you’re going to like; and I love and trust my punters too much to endanger their lives by sharing it here.” There was a sense of deflation from around the room. It told The Pan that despite the low rumble of background conversation going on, the punters had been listening, avidly, to him and Simon. He waved Pub Quiz Alan over from the other side of the room. In the background he could hear the soft rustling and chinking of coins changing hands.

“Norris, if you’ve been running a book remember Ada’s rule, there’s a ten percent owner’s premium on all winnings.”

Norris looked both guilty and surprised. Grumbling and muttering he got up and put a banknote in the charity tin.

“Thank you,” The Pan turned his attention back to Alan, waiting patiently by his side. “Can you look after the bar for a minute or two? Simon and I need to have a chat.”

“Yeh, sure.” Alan cast a brief glance at Simon and fixed The Pan with a knowing look. “You OK with that?” he asked.

“Yeh. We’re good Alan.”

“The snug’s free.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll keep it that way shall I?”

“Please.” The Pan strolled round the bar, trying to pretend he was in control and at ease. Alan seemed to be buying it but he wasn’t sure about Simon. “OK, I can give you twenty minutes. Follow me,” he said and led him to the snug.