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The Web of Fire

Written by

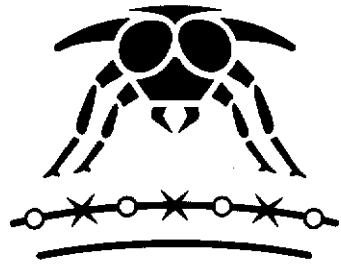
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One

General Martock stood in the silence of the Outer Chamber and glanced up at the clock on the wall.

Three minutes to seven.

Walking across to the window, he stared at the snow that lay in thick drifts across the lawn of the Emperor Odoursin's Palace. A bronze statue of Odoursin gleamed in the pale morning sunshine and beyond it Martock could make out the icy fingers of a waterfall, crystallised in time above a frozen, artificial lake. In the distance, a tall, emerald-green tower stood out against the winter sky while below the streets of Vermia shivered and stirred beneath a blanket of ice and snow.

Turning away from the window, Martock glanced around at the gold lamps, the ornate chandeliers and the floors constructed from the finest marble, plundered from the tombs of Vahlzian graveyards. There had been no expense spared, and Martock had been a strong supporter of the palace's lavish construction, arguing that it

was a visual symbol of the Emperor's power. But over the last few months he had begun to dread coming here.

Odoursin was becoming dangerously unpredictable.

Only last week he had ordered the execution of one of his most loyal ministers, accusing him of being a traitor. Nothing was further from the truth, but once Odoursin got an idea into his head, there was no point in arguing. Just the other day, Martock had made the mistake of disagreeing with the Emperor on some small matter of policy and he had lain awake afterwards in a cold sweat, waiting for the knock on the door in the middle of the night.

It had been four years since Vermia's failed attempt to infect the humans on Earth with a deadly virus. Vahlzian forces had foiled their plan, attacking Vermian mosquito squadrons and destroying all remaining stocks of the deadly virus, both here and on Earth.

But Odoursin had been resourceful. Together with his generals and the cream of his fighting force, he had retreated underground into an intricate network of tunnels, bunkers and laboratories that lay hidden beneath the streets of Vermia. As Vahlzian soldiers searched the alleyways above, Odoursin and his men had bided their time, listening, watching and plotting their next move. Odoursin had known that, despite this humiliating setback, his scientists were busy developing a range of deadly new weapons.

A year later, just as Vahlzian forces were beginning to relax and drop their guard, the long-awaited breakthrough came.

A new, powerful generation of insects had been created and they were ready to attack.

On a dark, moonless night when the streets of Vermia lay silent beneath a heavy snowfall, the creatures came creeping from their holes and burrows. Giant robber flies took to the skies and began hunting down Vahlzian wasp squadrons with ruthless efficiency, seizing their victims from above, piercing their bodies with a needle-sharp proboscis and sucking the life out of them. Ambush and assassin bugs moved rapidly out of the northern deserts to attack ant and wasp formations on the ground while bombardier beetles, fire ants and huge tarantula spiders swept through the streets and alleyways to engage the enemy wherever they found them.

The Vahlzian forces were taken completely by surprise. Unprepared for an attack of such speed and ferocity, they were overwhelmed in a matter of weeks. The Vermian armies moved in to occupy the once great city of Vahlzi and began to exact a terrible revenge upon its inhabitants. Those who were not killed immediately were forced to flee into the mountains as their comfortable homes and quiet suburban neighbourhoods were torn apart around them. Thousands were either sent back east to the slave labour camps or simply never seen or heard of again.

From a military point of view, it had all been a tremendous success.

But Odoursin wasn't happy, and Martock knew why.

Odoursin had never forgiven the people of Earth for causing the wasp crash which had killed his brother and

left him with terrible burns. He saw them as selfish parasites, responsible for the desecration of their world. Since his attempt to destroy human life on Earth had been thwarted by the Vahlzian attack four years ago, his rage and frustration had known no bounds. And now that Odoursin had Vahlzi beaten, his obsession with the destruction of humanity was total.

He wanted revenge.

All of which left Martock with a big problem.

The problem being that, with all traces of the original virus destroyed, no one could figure out a way to do it.

'His Excellency will see you now,' said the middle-aged woman with her hair scraped back in a tight bun, gesturing toward the double oak doors from which she had just emerged carrying a small brown medical bag.

'Thank you,' said Martock, wondering whether she derived any enjoyment from being nursemaid to the most feared man in Aurobon. Looking at her sour little face he decided, on reflection, that it was probably right up her street.

'This will not do, General. Do you understand me?' Odoursin's eyes flashed threateningly. 'It is not acceptable.'

Martock peered through the gloom and saw the burned, twisted face of his Emperor glaring back at him with a look of determination that bordered upon madness. The fact that the curtains were closed and the only light came

from a dull, orange wall lamp merely added to Martock's discomfort.

'I understand, Your Excellency. I am sure that we are very close to finding a solution to the problem. It can only be a matter of time before –'

'Do not patronise me, General,' hissed Odoursin, his lips flecked with foam. 'Do you take me for a fool?'

'Of course not, Your Excellency,' replied Martock hurriedly. 'It is just that the solution is proving more complex than we had imagined.'

He swallowed nervously. 'I am afraid the search for a new virus powerful enough to destroy the human inhabitants of Earth has – so far – been unsuccessful. We have been unable to find anything virulent enough to pose any real threat.'

Martock felt the intensity of Odoursin's rage as the cold eyes regarded him from their sunken, skeletal sockets. Then Odoursin rose from his seat and moved slowly and deliberately towards Martock, his voice becoming harder and angrier as he spoke.

'Have you forgotten the prophecy, General? Am I not the Great One who shall save the Earth from its human parasites? Are you trying to tell me that the prophecy is false? Is *that* what you are telling me, General?'

'No, n-no, Your Excellency,' stammered Martock nervously, suddenly afraid for his life. 'I am just saying that perhaps we need to find another way!'

At this, Odoursin stopped in his tracks, clasping his bony hands together in front of him. Focusing his gaze

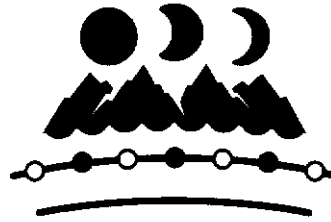
upon Martock he began to sway almost imperceptibly back and forth, like a praying mantis about to strike.

'*Is* there another way?' whispered Odoursin.

'I am certain that there is,' replied Martock. 'I know we can do this.'

Odoursin nodded.

'Very well,' he said at last. 'I will give you a month.'



Two

The last bubbles of oxygen trickled from the boy's mouth as he tumbled through liquid darkness, falling away from the light that was already fading behind him. As the warmth seeped out of him and the freezing water poured into his lungs he no longer knew where he stopped and the water began. And finally, when the light was gone and it was finished, he understood nothing and everything, and saw all at once how he was forever lost and it was the beginning. And then he was cold and awake, and it was morning.

He opened his eyes and saw ice crystals frozen on a pebble. He thought that he had never seen anything so beautiful. Blinking, he got unsteadily to his feet and saw the blanket of snow that covered the rocks and stones all the way to the edge of the lake. Clouds heavy with snow hung from a winter sky above him and he watched their bruised, grey reflections move silently across the face of the water.

He was surrounded on all sides by thickly wooded, mountain slopes which rose steeply from the rocky shore. The branches of trees were bent low under the weight of snow which had fallen during the night. The boy began to shiver violently in the cold wind and his teeth chattered so loudly that he failed to notice the approaching figure until he was standing right in front of him.

The man was dressed in a thick woollen robe and his long, dark hair was woven with coloured threads. He carried two more robes and as he held one out in front of him, the boy saw that his eyes were full of kindness.

'You have been cold for long enough,' he said. 'It is time that you were warm again.'

He slipped the robe over the boy's head and the boy immediately felt warmer as the soft fur lining enveloped his skin. But as he looked around at the lake and the snow-covered mountains, he felt lost, like a boat adrift in an endless sea.

'Please,' he said softly. 'I am so afraid.'

The man put a hand on his shoulder. 'It will be difficult at the beginning. But there are others here who will help you, Sam. You must find them quickly.'

When the boy heard this, something stirred in his memory and his eyes widened. He looked up hopefully at the man and asked, 'Is that my name? Sam?'

The man nodded and smiled. 'Yes,' he said. 'That is your name.' He put his hand on Sam's shoulder.

'And there will be many in Aurobon who will be glad to hear it once more.'

A light snow was falling, drifting from the sky above Vahlzi and settling on the rubble that was strewn across its empty streets. The occasional crack-crack-crack of gunfire suggested groups of Vahlzian Resistance fighters were still engaging the enemy on the east side of the city, but otherwise the streets were eerily quiet.

A Vermian soldier picked his way cautiously through the debris, nervously scanning the blackened ruins for signs of life. As his boots disturbed a sheet of corrugated iron there was a flurry of brown and he swung his rifle around to see a large rat darting away across the stones. Swearing under his breath, he kicked at the rusty metal before resuming his slow progress over the bricks, nervously training his rifle upon each doorway as he passed. When he finally disappeared around the corner, there was silence for a moment, followed by a faint scraping sound and then the strip of rusty corrugated iron began – very slowly – to move. Below it, the face of a young man was just visible, his anxious expression framed by a straggle of dark, shoulder-length hair.

'We have *got* to get out of here, Mump,' said Zip, lifting the sheet of metal just enough to peer out from his hiding place at the street above. From behind him there came a loud clang, followed by a yelp of pain.

'For goodness sake keep it down!' he hissed as the air was filled with loud, angry curses. 'If anyone spots us, we're dead meat!'

'Suits me,' said Mump, rubbing his head. 'Might as

well be dead anyway, the amount of time we've been buried under this thing.'

Ignoring him, Zip turned his attention back towards the street. He knew how Mump felt. They were part of a well-organised Vahlzian Resistance movement which operated from a secret base back in the mountains. They'd been hiding in this bombed-out cellar for over a week now, observing enemy movements and carrying out attacks on supply lines in order to cause as much disruption as possible.

But Vermian forces were getting wise to them. It hadn't taken them long to work out that the attacks were coming from groups operating in the heart of Vahlzi. So Vermian soldiers had started to carry out a systematic search of the city in an attempt to hunt down and kill the people responsible. If a place looked slightly suspicious, they either torched it or – if they were especially annoyed – came with high explosives and blew it apart. So now the streets were full of hollow-eyed refugees, women, children and old men picking their way through the ruins in the hope of retrieving something of value: clothes, shoes, warm blankets or – the greatest treasure of all – food.

The Vermian attack had been so unexpected that the people of Vahlzi were completely unprepared. One moment they were tending their gardens, visiting the theatre or having friends round for dinner, the next they were huddled in bombed-out buildings, scrabbling around for food and arguing over who had eaten the

last slice of rotting potato. Suddenly they had woken up to find their beautiful city torn apart and filled with ruthless men in black uniforms; men who bullied or murdered them on a whim and then went on to plunder their farms and food stocks, filling their bellies while the people of Vahlzi starved.

It was a terrible time and it seemed that things could only get worse.

Zip knew that the Vermian High Command was desperate to discover where the Vahlzian Resistance fighters were hiding out and would stop at nothing to find them.

And if they discovered the location of the Resistance base, then the war would be as good as lost.

'Maybe we should head back to the mountains for a while,' suggested Zip, keeping a watchful eye on a group of soldiers at the far end of the street. 'I reckon things are getting too dangerous here. Let's go and get cleaned up, maybe find something to eat. We can come back in a week or two when the heat's died down a bit.'

From the cellar below came the sound of Mump's boots splashing about in the puddles. Zip lowered the sheet of corrugated iron again and looked down to see Mump busily ferreting around in the dark.

'What do you reckon, mate?'

Mump stopped what he was doing and looked up, squinting into the light.

'Eh?'

'What d'you say we get out of here?'

Mump furrowed his brow, the idea gradually filtering

into his mind like water seeping through stone. Finally he nodded his head vigorously up and down.

'Good idea, yep. Let's get out of here. Yeah. Only . . .' Mump hesitated. His face wore the expression of someone who has had a great idea, but is worried that their opinion of its greatness will not be shared by others. 'Only what?' said Zip. 'Come on, buddy. Those soldiers are getting a bit close for comfort.'

'Only I think we might as well use this stuff before we go,' said Mump. 'It would be a shame to waste it.' He raised his eyebrows and looked hopefully in Zip's direction.

Zip stared down into the gloom of the cellar and saw that Mump was standing proudly with his arms folded and a small wooden crate between his feet. Stacked up in the crate were about half a dozen square lumps of what looked like grey plasticine. Each lump was about the size of a pack of sausages.

'Explosives?' Zip raised one eyebrow quizzically. 'Where did you find that little lot?'

Mump grinned. 'Remember when C troop stopped off here on their way to blow up the ammunition dump?'

Zip nodded.

'Well they left this behind.'

'Left it behind?' echoed Zip. He looked at Mump doubtfully. 'And I suppose they asked you to look after it for them, did they?'

'Well, not exactly,' said Mump, staring awkwardly at the floor. 'But I figured they had more than enough

explosives to do the job. Anyway, it was a bit unfair to expect them to carry so much.'

The corner of Zip's mouth turned up in a little half smile.

'You nicked it, didn't you?'

'No!' said Mump indignantly. 'I re-*assigned* it, that's all. It was a logistical decision.'

'A logistical decision,' repeated Zip, jumping down onto the cellar floor. 'Mump, you wouldn't know a logistical decision if it came up and whacked you in the woolahs.'

He picked up a lump of explosive and weighed it thoughtfully in his hand for a moment. Then he tossed it to Mump who smiled happily and held out his shirt to catch it.

'OK,' he said. 'But first we need a plan.'

Sam stared into the fire and watched the embers glow red against the dark stones. He tried desperately to remember something – anything – but his mind was full of wispy, insubstantial memories that floated around him like silken scarves in a breeze. Whenever he tried to catch one he would feel it slip from his grasp, spinning and whirling with all the others in a dance that he could not understand. But suddenly, as he looked at the stars and the lake and the mountains he remembered: this was Aurobon and he had been here before.

He had fought in a war against Vermia, training as a wasp pilot to stop Odoursin's mosquitoes infecting the

people of Earth with a deadly virus.

As he looked at the man who sat opposite him on the shore, he recalled how the two of them had once walked together upon these stones.

'I remember you,' he said. 'Your name is Salus.'

'Good,' said the man and smiled. 'Now we both have a name.'

Sam watched in silence for a while as snowflakes fell into the fire and melted in the heat.

'Why am I here?' he asked after a while. He shook his head and stared across the dark waters of the lake. 'I went home to my family on Earth again, I know I did. Why have I come back?'

When Salus made no reply, Sam said, 'I feel as though I have lost something. Have I left something behind?'

'Now is not the moment to be looking back,' answered Salus. 'These are dangerous times in Aurobon. Your friends are in grave danger and you must go to them without delay.'

Sam was puzzled. 'My friends?' he asked. 'But how will I find them?'

'You will find them,' said Salus, 'because they are already calling to you.'

'All done,' said Zip cheerfully, rolling the last lump of grey explosive into a ball and pushing a piece of wood into it. 'Now for the sticky stuff.'

He held the wood firmly in one hand and dipped the explosive into a large pot of thick, gooey axle grease,

wiping it around the inside until it was completely covered.

'Well, don't they look scrummy?' said Mump admiringly. 'Those bugs are in for a treat.'

He watched as Zip placed the finished sticky-bomb with the others on the metal lid of an old biscuit tin and wiped his hands on the front of his jacket.

'Right,' said Zip. 'The one nearest you has got the twenty-second fuse. The rest of them are about eight seconds. Now remember, we don't want to be hanging around out there. Soon as we've got one of those things after us, we leg it straight back here, do the business and then get out. OK?'

'OK,' said Mump.

He picked up the nearest sticky-bomb and smiled.

'Toffee apple, anyone?'

They edged slowly and carefully past the crumbling walls of bombed-out buildings until at last they reached the end of the street. Zip peered cautiously around the corner and immediately drew his head back again.

'We're in business,' he whispered. 'Six man patrol plus an eight-leg.'

Mump giggled nervously and put a hand over his mouth.

Zip gave him an angry stare.

'This isn't a game you know, Mump. Those things'll tear you apart.'

He took another look around the edge of the building

and saw that the soldiers were heading in their direction. But the soldiers weren't the real problem. The real problem was the massive, brown-haired tarantula spider crawling across the rubble in front of them. Zip could see its black, beady eyes staring into every building as it passed, checking for signs of movement. As it squeezed its way through the narrow street and rubbed up against the ruined houses, brickwork smashed and crumbled to the ground, filling the air with clouds of dust.

Zip shuddered and stepped back hurriedly.

'We really don't need to do this, Mump,' he said. 'There's a whole bunch of trouble waiting around that corner. Maybe we should just leave it.'

But turning around he saw that the fuse on Mump's sticky-bomb was fizzing and that leaving it was no longer an option.

'Too late,' said Mump. 'I've gone and lit me lollipop.'

Then he ran off around the corner.

'Wait!' shouted Zip. 'Come back!'

Peering around the side of the building he saw Mump standing in the middle of the street, waving his sticky bomb above his head and dancing around like an enthusiastic cheerleader.

'Cooo-eee!' Mump shouted at the top of his voice. 'Spiiiiideeeee!'

The soldiers raised their guns.

Zip watched Mump throw the sticky bomb high into the sky.

Then the air was alive with the crack and whine of

bullets and Mump sprinted past him like a whippet with its tail on fire.

'Quick!' he yelled in a hoarse, wheezy voice. 'Leg it!'

Zip turned and ran just as the sticky bomb ignited with a loud thump and a hot wind of smoke and dust came howling down the street behind him. Up ahead he saw Mump pull aside the strip of corrugated iron and disappear down into the cellar. His heart pounding in his chest, Zip reached the hole and jumped down without breaking stride. He landed heavily next to Mump and noticed that he was already holding two sticky bombs in each hand.

'You OK?' he asked.

'I'm good,' said Mump. 'Come on. Let's blast 'em!'

They scrambled back up to the entrance hole and Zip quickly pushed the cover back into place so that there was only a thin strip of light showing. As the huge spider approached, the ground began to shake and a shower of loose earth cascaded between them into the cellar below.

Zip lifted the cover slightly, peered out and then turned to Mump.

'Right, here they come,' he said, unbuttoning the top button of his jacket and taking out a box of matches. 'Remember, these are only short fuses. The moment that thing's on top of us, we light, stick and cover. Got it?'

Mump nodded and shook the sticky bombs in the air as though demonstrating how to play the maracas.

'Showtime,' he said.

Zip gingerly lifted the cover again. Adrenalin shot

through his veins as he saw that the gigantic spider was only a few metres away now, its massive body crouching low above the street as it advanced. He noticed that some of its hairs had been burned off in the explosion and pieces of dust and debris were lodged in its thick bristles. A pair of sharp, curved fangs hung from its slime-covered mouth, glinting in the winter sunlight like silver scimitars. From somewhere behind its legs a group of soldiers began to fire indiscriminately into the ruins, the flashes from their guns clearly visible as they attempted to flush out their unseen attackers.

Zip flipped over onto his back and took a match from the box.

'Ready?' he asked.

Mump nodded.

'Ready.'

'OK,' said Zip. 'Let's do it.'

He struck the match against a stone and as it flared he saw Mump's eyes blinking in the darkness. For a brief moment he wished that all the horror and killing was over and that the two of them were fishing once more, high in the mountains where salmon leapt from bright streams and the water ran clear across polished stones.

Then the fuses were lit, the cover was off and in the confusion of smoke and gunfire he thrust a sticky bomb deep into the bristles of the spider's leg, threw another one at its belly and dived back into the hole just as the bombs ignited and the world blew apart in a blistering roar of fire and flame.

Crashing down into the cellar he covered his head with his arms as lumps of rock and earth rained down on top of him. Something hard struck his arm and he cried out in pain, but he was quickly distracted from his own troubles by another cry which came from the far side of the cellar. Kicking off a slab of stone that lay across his legs, he staggered through a cloud of dust towards the shouting figure in the corner.

'Get it off me,' breathed Mump's scared, shaky voice in the darkness. 'Zip please – get it off me!'

Peering into the gloom, Zip saw Mump lying awkwardly on his back next to the wall. Something had fallen across his chest and pinned him to the rubble.

He seemed very frightened.

'Hold still, mate,' said Zip. 'I'll get you out of there.'

Coughing his way through the smoke and dust, he bent down to get a better view of the obstruction and then suddenly leapt backwards with a shout of alarm.

'Aw, *no*!' he exclaimed, recoiling in horror. For what he had thought was a piece of wood was, in fact, a fat bloodied segment of one of the spider's legs. As Zip stared at it in disgust it twitched spasmodically, like a worm caught in the heat of the midday sun.

'Take it away, Zip,' Mump pleaded. 'Please!'

'Don't worry, buddy,' said Zip as the limb continued to jerk and tremble. 'We'll soon have you out of there. Now when I say push, you push, OK?'

'OK,' wheezed Mump breathlessly. 'But hurry up, will you? I can't breathe!'

Zip braced himself against the wall of the cellar, shouted 'Push, Mump!' and kicked the spider's leg with both feet. The still squirming limb rolled off and fell with a loud crash onto the sheet of corrugated iron that lay with the rest of the debris on the cellar floor.

Zip pulled Mump to his feet and they stared at the circle of grey sky above them, listening to the sporadic rattle of gunfire.

'Time we were gone I think,' said Zip.

Slipping away through the smoke, they saw that the huge spider had crumpled over onto its left side and was now engulfed in flame. Mump stooped to pick something up from the wreckage and when they had put several streets between themselves and the trigger-happy soldiers, Zip saw that it was half a loaf of bread. It had been toasted on one side by the flames, but it smelled delicious and Zip realised how long it had been since they had enjoyed proper food. They stopped beneath the twisted metal of a lamppost and Mump broke off a piece, handing it to Zip before breaking off another chunk and stuffing it hungrily into his mouth. For a moment, the warm, yeasty taste reminded Zip of his childhood, when his mother used to feed him freshly baked bread from the oven.

He was about to tear off another piece when he noticed Mump staring at a blackened house on the other side of the road. The first-floor wall had been torn off in an explosion, revealing a room with two little beds. The interior walls were covered in a yellow, flowery wallpaper

which was now ripped and peeling. A small dressing table could still be seen against one wall and items of children's clothing were strewn untidily across the floor. A tiny wooden cot lay crushed beneath a heavy timber beam.

Zip followed Mump's gaze to where two young children – a boy and a girl – stood silently in the doorway, their clothes no more than rags which hung in tatters from their tiny frames. The horrors of war had taken the shine from their eyes and they now stared blankly out at a world that had abandoned them.

Without a word, Mump crossed the street and held out the loaf of bread. The girl snatched it from his hand and the two children ran quickly away across the rubble, darting off through a sea of grey stones until they were lost from sight.

Mump stood staring after them for a long time until finally the sound of gunfire brought him back to his senses and he crossed the street again to rejoin Zip.

Zip put an arm around his shoulder.

'Come on,' he said. 'Let's go and get the bikes.'

Together they made their way to the outskirts of the city before heading out towards the mountains over fields of freshly fallen snow.

Sam stretched out his hands and felt the heat begin to warm them. He watched Salus push a piece of wood into the fire and saw how quickly the blaze engulfed it until at last the wood became the flames and there was nothing

left except grey embers, crumbling away to nothing.

'It's strange,' he said, 'but I feel younger here than when I was on Earth.'

'That is because you have become the person you were the last time you walked in Aurobon,' Salus replied. 'You are here because Aurobon needs you, Sam.'

Once more, Sam tried to remember how he had got here, but instead a blackness grew inside him until he could bear it no longer and cried out in fear and loneliness. Then Salus put a hand on top of his head and Sam felt the fire and the flames, and the smoke twisting away into the sky. When he opened his eyes, the cold mountain air rushed into his lungs and he felt refreshed and clear-headed, as though he had just woken from a long sleep.

'The darkness comes again,' said Salus, picking up the other robe, 'and the people of Earth are in terrible danger. You must find the one who is true of heart. And remember: if you should ever lose your way, look for a guiding light.'

'Wait!' called Sam as Salus began to walk away across the shore toward the mountain. 'I don't understand!'

'Be patient,' answered Salus, 'and in times of trouble, listen with your heart.'