
THE CYBER CIPHERS
OF EARTHA QUICKSMITH
Loris Owen

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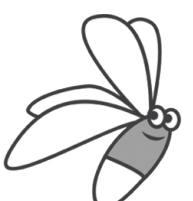


For Luke, Kai and Charlie

Other books in this series:
The Ten Riddles of Eartha Quicksmith
The Myriad Mysteries of Eartha Quicksmith

The Cyber CIPHERS of Eartha Quicksmith

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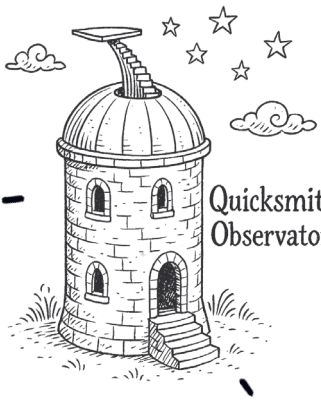
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Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood.
Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less.

Marie Curie



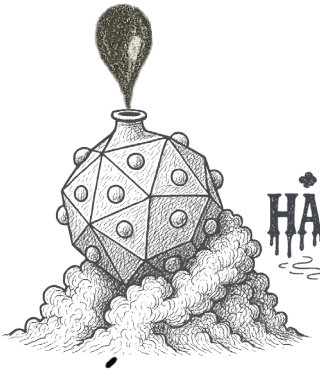
Quicksmiths Observatory



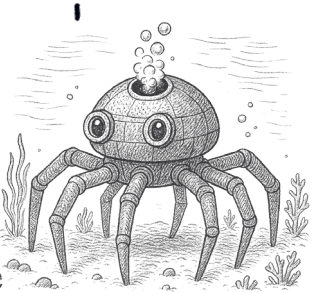


Quicksmiths




HADES


THE CITADEL


The
SMOULDERSTONE
MINE


The
Mysterious
Cave

The Cyber Ciphers of Eartha Quicksmith

There are two bonus puzzles
for you to solve in this book:

Reveal the secret three word message hidden in the Strange Elements at the back of the book; you'll need to search the whole book for 9 clues.

Find all the Futurescopes scattered throughout the book (they look like this:)
Have fun and check into
www.quicksmiths.com
for hints, or when you have your answers.

Who knows, Quicksmiths might be on the lookout for someone just like you…



Chapter One

Futurescope

Outside, the wind cried winter. But here inside, the Candlelight was warm and soft.

Kip was sitting at the small round table by the bookshelves, looking at an ancient telescope. A golden otherworld of reflections flickered back and forth in its polished metal. The Futurescope: legendary, shivering with immense power, it lay quietly here in this ordinary room. Yet its secrets were still so far out of reach.

It was still their first year at Quicksmiths College of Strange Energy but five onths had passed since they'd found this buried treasure on their journey through the Myriad worlds. And it had been four hundred years since Renaissance genius Eartha Quicksmith had crafted this extraordinary device.

Kip picked it up. In his hand – his ordinary hand – that had drawn with pencils and opened packets of crisps and

thrown tennis balls – was a device that could scry into the future and help to sculpt the present. It felt heavy for something so slender, so finely formed from a perfection of elements. Collapsed as it was now, it was small enough to hang on the belt of a bold adventurer. Kip extended the telescopic tubes. Two thin grip-bands of dark leather were soft to the touch, like the straps of well-worn watches. He raised the Futurescope to his eye, although he knew it wouldn't work without the missing eyepiece.

At that moment, the red badge pinned to his jacket beeped. Each end of his Candle badge was topped with a small white flame, each flame contained a golden eye, and one of them was flashing.

Albert looked up. Two magnified eyes the size of mince pies peered out from behind his visor. He was hunched over his desk in their shared college bedroom, doing Albert things. The spotlight controlled by his Candle badge shone down on him out of nowhere, turned up to laser brilliance. His hair was bunched into two messy space buns and despite the warmth of the room, he was wearing his current favourite jumper, splashed with a bright image of an axolotl in its own Christmas jumper.

'Your badge is beeping,' he said, helpfully.

When Kip double-tapped the badge, the strange virtual reality of the Carousel awakened, and a speech bubble icon floated out of the Candle. With a flick to the Touchlight bubble, a life-sized face appeared. Leela. Her

dark eyes strained with excitement, trying to tell snatches of a story before her mouth could blurt the words out.

'Hey, are you…' she started, then made a face, stopping to push something away.

'Ugh, mowl! Have you been eating cat litter again?'

There was a mischievous wurble off-camera. Leela's enormous grin took over the screen again.

'What are you doing right now?'

'Just finishing off Pinky's obstacle course,' Albert called over.

'Meet us in the corridor for a sec!'

Kip reached the door first and opened it. He looked out. There was no one there. He turned back to Leela's floating face.

'What are you…?'

A laugh was stifled somewhere in the background. 'Don't close the door; we're on our way.'

As Albert poked his head out of the room alongside Kip's, a cacophony of squeaks started up somewhere not too far off.

Kip ventured a bit further into the corridor. 'What is that?'

'That is an entire orchestra of clowns,' said Albert, 'tuning up their shoes.'

The noise seemed to be getting closer. Kip and Albert stepped fully out of the doorway and looked to the left. Nothing. They looked to the right. Nothing. They looked back to the left to see a tangled ball of fuzzy material and

slender metal coils, roughly the size of a space hopper, rolling down the corridor on a direct collision course.

'It's a trap!' yelled Albert. 'Take evasive action!'

They both tried to reverse back through the doorway but got in each other's way and then it was too late. The hurtling tangle broke apart into many smaller chick-yellow balls. Out from each one a trunk and a curly tail unrolled. Each opened a single eye, and a small spring unwound beneath its body. Zestier than lemons, they bounced, wriggled and sprang up at every ankle they could find.

'Hahaha,' said Albert. 'Adorabubble. What *are* you?'

'Magical ping-pong balls?' Kip replied.

Albert picked one up. 'Spherical kittens?'

Timmi's face joined Leela's in the Touchlight, both second years still gasping with laughter. 'Wrong and wrong. We already have the perfect name for them. *Chugwins*.'

'What are they, then?' asked Kip. 'A Timmi invention?'

'I wish,' said Timmi. 'Tell you when we get there!'

'Get where?'

'Meet us at the old oak. Incognita's back online and she's asking for you!'

Albert, still wearing his visor, blinked a goldfish-bowl blink at Kip, who looked back with eyes almost as wide.

'That's incredibubble!'

'What he said!' said Kip. 'See you in five.'

He swiped the air to end the call. This was big – the news they'd been hoping to hear.

Despite their efforts to keep the room free of invading forces, a couple of the chugwins slipped between their feet. Albert wasted several minutes trying to catch them while Pinky watched warily from a rope swing.

Kip went back to the bookcase and lingered for a moment, transfixed by the gentle blue light fluttering around the Futurescope. Like Eartha, Kip saw the waves of Aeon Light. As he stared now at the telescope, ribbons of this energy branched around it, branching again and again, off into infinity. Even without his extra sight, Kip knew how important this was. The Futurescope dripped with possibility, the power to change many lives. Perhaps all lives.

He pulled out a thick book called *Starwax and the Superknowver*, placed the Futurescope in a dark purple shadow at the back of the shelf – a hidden wormhole safe – and replaced the book. As he grabbed his dad's old coat and put it on, Pinky glided down to land neatly on Kip's shoulder. Headfirst, she scurried confidently down the coarse wool to a big, comfy pocket, which was always filled with fluffy gloves for her to nest in. Pinky was technically nocturnal, but this flying squirrel was never happy about being left out, and camping in a pocket meant she could always poke her nose out when things got interesting.

Kip glanced at the two rolled-up hoverdiscs by the window.

'Are we taking the Skimmies?'

'Always take them, ask questions later,' Albert replied. 'Your feet will thank me when we suddenly have to go on an epic quest.'

Kip grabbed the long bundles of rolled-up Skimmies by their carrying straps and waited by the door.

'Come on!'

'Got to wrap up first,' said Albert. 'It's double-socks weather out there.' He had almost disappeared behind a pile of odd socks, pulled at random from a drawer.

'Watermelons go with Christmas elves, right?' he asked, pulling more socks over the top of the ones he was already wearing. 'I want to look my best when I meet Incognita properly.'

'Your socks are magnificent,' said Kip. 'It's obviously going to be the first thing a fearless, multiverse-travelling android notices after months of surgery.'

Best Friends

Outside, the chugwins were nowhere to be seen, but instead the college grounds were buzzing with students sharing plans, racing to the iron gate, swapping numbers. These were the last few travellers heading out all over the world for the extra-long holidays that pupils at Quicksmiths enjoyed, whether they came from Stonetown or Svalbard, Phnom Penh or Providence.

'I'm actually glad for once that Dad took one of those last-minute, extra-cash jobs,' Kip said. 'If he'd been at home and I'd left for the hols already, we'd have missed Incognita.'

'Good job I stuck around to keep you company.' Albert grinned.

There was little point in unrolling the Skimmies for the short walk to the old oak, so they hurried down the path. Just ahead of them, the Professor-in-Charge of the college was leaving Confucius Courtyard.

Miss Twiss stood tall and straight-backed, despite her age, and wore a no-nonsense brown suit. A thick green cape was fastened around her neck and reached stiffly to her knees. It made her look ever so slightly like a pine tree.

They stopped to greet her at the small wooden gate. The lower part of her face was fixed, unmoving – as if it were carved from wax – left this way by an old illness. But her kindly eyes made up for the wistful mouth. The Thoughtwave Lens under her grey beehive of hair was well hidden, but everyone knew it was there and knew how the words travelled from her mind to theirs.

'I gather you've heard the wonderful news,' her voice said, in between Kip's thoughts. 'Incognita is waiting for you at GENI's house.'

The two friends carried on for the old oak, calling out

their thanks. Above them, the sky began to dribble half-heartedly.

'Oh, goody,' said Albert, looking up. A fat raindrop plopped on the pale brown skin of his palm.

He double tapped his Candle badge and his Carousel span itself out of thin air. Quickly swiping through the rings of Touchlight icons orbiting around him, he stopped to tick one in the shape of a beaming sun. A paper-thin cloud with a yellow centre scooted out from behind the rooftops and settled over Albert's head like an upside-down fried egg. The yolk of the weather drone lit up his face in summery sunshine.

'You know with the Easy-Breezy Drones GENI could make it perfect weather here all year round if she wanted to,' said Albert. 'I mean what's the point of being a Strange Supercomputer if you don't make it warm and sunny all the time?'

Kip scrunched up his face. 'Who decides what's perfect weather though? I quite like winter. Heard they took a vote years ago and the students decided to keep it.'

'If it was just snow, that *might* be OK,' said Albert. 'But only ducks and dolphins would vote for drizzle.'

A girl of about thirteen shouted over in their direction. Behind her, the dark, bare branches of a great oak tree scratched the age-blackened stones of Celestial Hall. Written in silver script on its wall, the college motto twinkled merrily in hundreds of different languages:

Change Your World.

Kip waved back. Albert was technically his best friend, but Kip and Timmi had travelled through Myriad worlds together. They were close: brother and sister close.

Maybe you can have two best friends, he thought. Then he remembered Leela, how she'd always been there for him when things got tough. *Or three.* Then of course there was Pinky, and his dad. *More than three.*

'Just waiting for Leela,' Timmi said, as Kip and Albert got closer. 'She's tidying up after the mowl as usual.'

'Can't believe Incognita's finally back online,' said Kip.

'D'you think she'll be the same?' Albert asked.

'Eartha made her,' Timmi replied. 'So Incognita's built to last. And even if she's not completely better, she'll still be the same old Incognita to us.'

Kip glanced at his friends and smiled. They couldn't be more opposite. The buttons on Albert's duffle coat were done up wrong and he wore one green glove and one black one. Timmi's red gloves matched her shoes, and her scarf matched her cow-print coat, which had practical press studs.

She ran a hand through her inch-high hair. It was getting harder to remember how it had looked – long and blonde – before it had been burned away at the battle of the ziggurat. The tops of her mousey ears caught a fleeting winter sunbeam that broke through the rain clouds, and glowed a translucent, fuzzy pink. She didn't

care at all now about those sticky-out ears, although they had bothered her so much before. Somehow that made her more beautiful.

'What's keeping them?' she said. 'I bet the mowl has stolen something. Or eaten something. Or eaten something he's stolen.'

'Sorry we're late,' said a voice behind them. 'The mowl thinks I'm his personal food bank. I had to clean out a load of dry roasted peanuts, some olives and a bit of cheese-and-onion pasty that were stuffed in my hood…'

'Yummm,' said Albert. 'Old hairy crumbs.' But there was no space between the words for anyone else to join in when Leela Lee was telling a story.

'…I mean at least it wasn't dead spiders, or chewed moths – I've had that before, haven't I, Timmi? –he'll leave me presents, which are almost always slobbery – come to think of it he never leaves me any of the shiny things he's always collecting – where *do* you keep those, mowl? – in his burrows I expect … although last night he left me a toadstool he'd found in the garden – he'd stolen my earrings and hung them all around the cap – I mean it looked really pretty … I guess you're wondering why we took so long – well he gets awfully nungry if he doesn't get *four* types of cheese in his mid-morning snack – nungry you know what that means, right – it's when he gets so hungry he's extra naughty… he smashed a banana in our room because we only had *three* types of cheese

and I had to make him tidy it up – d'you know what, I've never really thought about this, but if oranges are orange, why aren't bananas called yellows?'

Leela was wrapped up in a puffy, purple coat and on her head was a hat that looked something like a woollen flowerpot. Tufts of soft black hair poked out at intervals around the hem.

The mowl, sitting on a leather pad on Leela's arm, was also wearing a knitted flowerpot on his round head. Born of old bones from the museum and a stormblast of Strange Energy, he was a biological mystery – something like a bird-mammal hybrid, although no one was sure, not even Leela. The luscious black fur of his coat had grown thick for the winter, hiding his stubby arms and ottery hands, his talons and even most of his felty beak. If Kip had been meeting him for the first time, he might have thought that the beard of a very pampered pirate had come to life, grown two huge orange eyes and put on a hat.

When the mowl saw Pinky he spread his wings, swooped to the ground, wurbled and rolled on his back, hands poking up through his thick fur and cycling in the air. Pinky leapt on his belly and the mowl lirriped, wrapping his wings around her.

'Those two. Honestly,' said Leela, 'every time they see each other it's like they fall in love all over again.'

'To think I was ever worried the mowl might eat her,' said Kip. 'Anyway, what are we waiting for? Incognita's awake!'

'Ballmoth,' said Albert. 'Take us to GENI's house.'

A ball of light gathered itself together out of the pale day like the dream of a Christmas tree bauble. It rolled in the air before them, impatient to set off.

'Last one there has to wear a wig made of mowl hairballs!' yelled Leela.

Everyone flicked a Skimmi open, each one hand-decorated in a different design – Kip's flying squirrel, Leela's peacock, Timmi's liquorice allsort, and the artistic masterpiece Albert liked to call 'Godzilla in red wellies'. As the small flock of humans rose off the ground and fanned out, the Ballmoth darted away. Kip pointed his thoughts forwards and the Skimmi responded, following the ball of light closely across the courtyard.

The Ballmoth took them away from Celestial Hall and past the Botanical Gardens, following a trail that wound through a peaceful, peach-tree orchard. They landed in a clearing beaded with rich, red hawthorn berries, and squirming with chugwins. At the centre of the clearing was a spiral shell as big as a cottage, its glossy black surface speckled with sprinkles of aquamarine.

Chugwins

The chugwins tumbled among the hawthorn berries, racing each other to the spot where the humans were landing.

'Ma-ma,' one of them squeaked, presumably from its trunk.

'Aw,' said Albert. 'We're not your mama, chugwin.'

'That would be me,' said GENI's voice. 'Meet my cubs.'

The voice of a Strange Supercomputer is an incredible thing to hear. It's very like a human voice, only there's something *different* about the soundwaves – an extra, silvery overlay of bells that tease the ears and always seem to be sharing a deeper layer of meaning.

'*Your* cubs?' said Leela.

'Yes,' said GENI. 'My children.'

She had appeared at the entrance to the cottage, wearing a flowing robe the same colours as the shell. Her arms and face were the warm golden-brown of a beach at last light, and she had the easy poise of a yoga teacher on their day off.

Even as she was here talking to them, she was working tirelessly in the background. She breathed life into the Candles and the Carousel that shrank the might of Strange Energies into useful apps. The Wormhole Positioning System, which made travel to distant places possible, worked with her assistance. She managed the college's vast energy requirements, directed the Slipstream rivers around the grounds, and kept the Skycrackle Tower running safely as it harvested explosive plasma from the upper atmosphere. She shepherded the Oddjob Drones, the Easy-Breezy Drones, and all manner of helpful flying instruments. At the mere mention of her name, she was always ready to answer questions and amaze Kip

with some new wisdom. And now, it seemed, she was a mother too.

The cubs wormed around everyone's feet, occasionally crashing into each other. The mowl cooed. A cub leapt up at him and he cradled it in a tubby embrace. The other cubs crowded around him, bouncing rowdily. He raised a fat mowl finger and wurbled and they all quietened down. Pinky watched for a while from Kip's pocket, happy to stay out of the way.

'Mowl,' said Kip, 'you really are full of surprises. I had no idea you were so good with cubs.'

'How did you make them?' asked Timmi. 'Is there like … a man GENI somewhere?'

'RUDE!' yelled Leela.

GENI smiled at Leela and then Timmi.

'It's not rude to be curious. I am free to be female, male, or anyone I want to be. And I don't need someone else to make my own family.'

'Can a Strange Supercomputer have a family?' asked Leela.

'Family comes in many forms,' GENI replied.

What Leela had forgotten was that technically GENI already had a family – her counterparts scattered through the multiverse. When GENI and Kip had called for help from the other worlds, her Myriad brothers and sisters had answered. And she had been so sad to see them leave again.

Kip thought about the worn-out flat that he and his dad, Theo, called home. The way the pipes creaked when Theo Bramley took an early shower. Their kung-fu movie nights, climbing Saturdays and baking Sundays.

He looked at GENI. 'I get why you would want a family here with you.'

Timmi watched the cubs and sighed happily. 'Will they eventually turn into a mega-intelligent energy field, like you? Or will they just keep growing into great big cyclopses?'

'These bodies are made for young minds, where they can be safe and learn. When they are old enough, they will shed their cub shapes and take on new forms. I made other children, before you came to the school. When they came of age, I taught them to fashion new bodies from Touchlight and Strange Elements.'

'Where are they?' asked Albert. 'I've never seen them around? Or have I?'

'They left to explore the worlds outside of Quicksmiths and I do not know where they are. Their messages stopped coming. Perhaps they have found a way to the Myriads. Or the Strange Archipelago, or the Within. Perhaps even the Etheric Deep.'

'They might just be busy,' Leela said. 'Exploring can be hard work.'

GENI picked up a cub. 'Although I made my children strong and capable, able to survive, I still worry for them.

Being alone is difficult once you have been together.'

'Oh, GENI!' said Timmi. 'I'm sorry to hear you haven't heard from them, but you're not alone.'

'Thank you,' GENI replied, passing the purring cub to Timmi. 'As I said, there are different types of family. You are all my family at Quicksmiths. For that I am very grateful. And speaking of Quicksmiths family, our patient is eager to see you.'

Strange Reality Drive

GENI gestured at the shell cottage and a doorway opened.

'Welcome to my house,' she said.

'Does it have a *hard drive*? And *mouseholes* for the *mouse*?' Albert winked extravagantly, followed immediately by a wink of the other eye, so they were both shut.

'I see you have made a joke about computers,' said GENI. 'That is very funny.'

'Oh, zouch!' said Leela.

Albert opened an eye, raising one eyebrow.

Leela smirked. 'Zing plus ouch.'

'I'm worried I'm going to stand on one of your cubs,' said Kip. 'Everywhere I step they seem to be trying to dive underneath my feet.'

'They are very hardy,' said GENI. 'You needn't worry.'

The bouncing cubs streamed in all directions. Some began to wander off inside the shell-house. One fell on

its back and couldn't get up on its spring again. The mowl waddled over importantly and carefully pushed it upright.

'This way,' said GENI.

The walls inside the cottage were pearly pink and lilac – just like the inner surface of the mussel shells Kip had collected with his mum and sister when they lived at the old house by the sea. A spotless corridor looped back on itself, burrowing into the house's interior. They turned corner after corner, until Kip had no idea which way was left or right anymore, what was big and what was small, or what was here and what was there.

'You know how brains are kind of all wrinkled in on themselves,' said Timmi. 'That's how this feels.'

'You're right in a sense,' said GENI, 'although I do not have a brain in the same way you do. We have entered inside my Strange Reality Drive. I created my home by folding space.'

Kip had heard of the Strange Reality Drive before now, but this was the first time he'd been inside. Naturally, it was just as surprising and special as all the other things found behind the many doors of Quicksmiths.

'Is Incognita OK?' asked Timmi.

'She's fine, although she suffered a lot of damage,' said GENI, gently. 'Her wounds from the battle of the ziggurat were serious. And when Pythagoras Grittleshank then attacked her here at Quicksmiths, she nearly died. The

replacement of the Strange Elements in her blood alone took many months.'

GENI's words pulled a memory of that day forcefully to the front of Kip's mind: a spray of small wheels spilling out from Incognita's severed neck, glinting in the midsummer sunshine. That act of violence would haunt him forever.

'I still ask myself how they let Thag into Quicksmiths,' said Albert.

'And Gorvak,' said Leela.

'The Grittleshanks are powerful,' said GENI. 'And cunning. On past occasions, they seemed to be an ally to us. But taking Eartha's Ark of Ideas exposed their true character.'

Quicksmiths, GENI, the professors, all the centuries of knowledge, the great and good miracles coaxed out of the vastness of Strange Energy – they all seemed to shine that much brighter next to the long shadow of the Grittleshank Collective.

'Before we enter, you should know – we haven't quite finished putting Incognita back together. She will never be exactly the same again. But there is no need to be concerned. For the most part she is fixed, and her personality code is unchanged.'

GENI touched a section of the chalky wall and it dissolved into an open doorway. It led to a bedroom with a wine-red carpet and furniture carved with a buttercup

design. Shutters were thrown back from the window and fresh air breezed into the room, whipping dappled sunshine in with it. Kip had the sense that they were somewhere else altogether, or perhaps that a piece of somewhere else had been brought here.

'It's Eartha's house!' said Timmi. 'I'm sure of it.'

'That's right,' said GENI. 'A patient gets better quicker when they feel at home.'

Sat upright on a high-backed chair was Incognita's motionless body, missing its head. The cubs flowed into the room first and tumbled over towards her. Her skin – so finely woven from hair-thin chains it was almost like fabric – was brighter in patches where it had been repaired. Behind the glass pane in her torso a spherical heart rolled on the spot, turning one way, then another. It looked like a blue night light, with bumpy cogs that grew and shrank randomly across its surface. Tiny wheels danced around the android's heart to some internal symphony.

Not far from the body, Incognita's head rested on a low table. Her hand was detached from her right arm and was crouched by a small pot, also on the table. The hand dipped one finger into the pot, raised itself up on two mechanical matchstick legs and daubed metallic paste onto the head's brow.

'Hello little cubs,' said the head.

'Gran-gran!' the cubs trunk-squeaked.

Some of them bounced up onto Incognita's knees, fighting each other for the best place, and falling back into the herd now and then with a squeal.

As the humans followed into the room, the eyes turned and the silver weave of the android's face creased into an expression of delight.

'Kip! Timmi! My dear travelling companions!'

'We were so worried, Incognita!' said Timmi. 'It's been five months!'

'How're you doing?' Kip asked.

'Please do not worry. I have had a good doctor,' said the android's head, eyes swivelling to GENI. 'Oh there are some aches and pains, and my heart is a little tired. Some of my knowledge has been lost, too. But I am well built. My strength comes from more than just the sum of my limbs and organs.'

'If I give you a hug,' asked Timmi, 'will you feel it?'

'I am not sure,' said Incognita's head. 'Shall we try?'

Timmi approached the high-backed chair, put her arms around the shoulders of the android's perfectly still body, and squeezed. Incognita's feet twitched off the ground.

'I declare this experiment a success,' said the head. Its eyes swivelled to take in the rest of the visitors. 'And you must be Leela and Albert. I've heard many stories about you.'

'Same here,' said Leela. 'You're pretty famous at

Quicksmiths now.'

'The peacock eyespots in your hair are very pleasing, Leela,' said Incognita's head. 'And Albert, I believe you have chosen your socks most wisely.'

Albert smirked at Kip, and Kip grinned.

'Thanks for looking after our friends, out there in the weirdyverse,' said Albert.

'We looked after each other,' said the head.

'Well, we tried,' said Kip. 'But we didn't do a very good job of looking after you.'

'Nonsense!' said Incognita's head. 'We made an excellent team.'

The disconnected hand picked up a peering device and began inspecting Incognita's ear canal.

'Looks like your hand is back to its usual self?' said Timmi.

'It has been helping to fix me,' said Incognita. 'Many years ago, when Eartha began to dream I might exist, she made my hand first. They built me together.'

'This was very useful for us,' GENI added. 'As the hand remembered everything, it was able to guide us in the surgery.'

Pausing in its work, the hand jumped off the table and came running over, stretching its fingers out in welcome.

Albert tried to shake the hand and ended up shaking one finger instead. Leela did the same.

'Good old hand,' said Kip.

Pinky poked her head sleepily out of Kip's coat pocket and chirruped affectionately. Incognita had saved her life, and it was a kindness neither she nor Kip would ever forget. She put her paws on the edging of the pocket, but the herd of cubs was too boisterous for her. After a few hypnotising blinks in Kip's direction, he transported her in the safe canoe of his cupped hands to say a quick, whiskery hello to Incognita. Keeping her high above the cubs, he put her safely back in his camp-bed pocket.

'Is the surgery nearly finished?' he asked.

'It will not be long now,' said Incognita. 'But I could not wait.'

The body leaned forward and picked up its own head, turning it to look directly at Kip. Incognita's eyes gleamed like polished museum coins.

'I have something for you from Eartha.'

Secret sight

Albert, who was trying to build a pyramid out of constantly churning cub-bricks, stopped and gasped.

Incognita's head looked over at her hand, which seemed to understand and tottered back to the body. It climbed up to the chainmail knee, accidentally knocking off a couple of cubs, crawled across the leg, and made its way over to its twin hand, which was still attached to Incognita's left arm. With deliberate taps, the fingers of the right hand pressed at a panel on the left wrist.

Creeeeaak.

The left hand hinged back. The cubs stared, fascinated, as the wrist opened wider, like a silvery snake's jaw. Something came sliding up from inside the hollow arm.

Incognita's right hand reached into the space and plucked out a light-coloured scroll. The hand scuttled back to Kip, holding it up, and he took the offering. The canvas of the scroll felt rough and thick, slightly powdery to the touch.

Leela bounced about like one of the cubs. 'Tell us what it is before I *explode*!'

Kip unrolled the small scroll.

'It's a painting,' he said.

The doe-brown velvet of Eartha's long tunic seemed so realistic that Kip gently touched the canvas to check if the paint felt fleecy. Scarlet tights clung to her legs and the buckled black shoes she wore were covered in specks of mud.

'Look what she's got,' he murmured.

Eartha's hand held the extended Futurescope. All four of its telescopic sections caught the warming flush of a fire that flickered somewhere out of sight.

Kip held the scroll out so the others could see it, and Albert took a step back.

'I'm suspicious of Eartha paintings,' he said. 'They have a sneaky habit of sucking you in. Do we need to pack our energy grappling hooks and adventure bags first?'

The thrill of solving the first of Eartha's riddles would stay with Kip forever. His muscles still remembered the unexpected lurch as the painting in the portrait gallery had pulled him into its extra-dimensional world. But it was just as hard to forget what he had seen there. A fright-night face pushing through the mirror; the strange bark-like leather of its skin; the staring mismatched eyes; the mantis claw reaching out to him. A Prowler. They had seen it since – here and in the Myriads. And they weren't the first. Prowlers had been appearing at Quicksmiths since before Kip and Albert had arrived. No one knew what they were. No one knew what they wanted.

Kip looked around the sunny room, at the rolling cubs and the mowl skipping after them.

A Prowler wouldn't dare come into GENI's house, he said to himself.

He stared at the rectangle of canvas in his hand, expecting the unexpected. But the rectangle stayed rectangular, and the canvas remained canvas.

'For once,' Kip said eventually. 'I think this is exactly what it seems to be. Just a picture of Eartha.'

He lifted up the oil painting so they could all see better. Leela stepped aside from a sudden stampede of cubs and when she turned back, she began to flap her hands about, stumbling over her words in excitement.

'Look, there's some backing! Writey words! I mean there's some writing on the back.'

Kip turned the canvas around. Four short lines were inked in a familiar script.

'Eartha's handwriting,' he breathed.

With the lens
At the Futurescope's end
Find the light
That gives secret sight

A moment hung on the last moment.

'I'm going to be Captain Obvious here,' said Albert, 'but you realise this is another…'

All four of them finished his sentence, as if reciting a mystical incantation, '…riddle!'

A small flame flickered in the pit of Kip's stomach. He'd known it wouldn't be long before Eartha got in touch again.