

# SANDRA & THE SAUCER OF DOOM

by John Linwood Grant

## PART THE ONETH

A night sky, a low sky, the darkness threaded with cloud and a spattering of rain. After powering its way across billions of miles, starlight gave in and waited. There would be a better night to twinkle.

The visitors had chosen well. They came with the cloud cover and with stealth, their craft shielded from the most sophisticated devices known, cloaked from an ignorant planet.

They knew that they could not possibly be seen by humanity.

“Something up there,” said Mr Bubbles.

Sandra glanced round at her pony. She had been watching the edge of the moors for activity, scanning sedge and cotton-grass through her father's binoculars. The tinted lenses made your eyes go funny after a while.

“Sorry, what did you say, boy?”

The pony kicked a pebble.

“Something up there. Metal thingy. In the sky”

“Oh.” She considered this information. “The RAF on night manoeuvres again?”

It seemed unlikely. After the incident over the crags last March, pilots had been given strict instructions not to fly in this area. There was still considerable doubt as to why one of the Tornados from Staxton Wold had come back with more wings than it had when it set out.

“No. Weird shape.”

Mr Bubbles tossed back his long black head and sniffed the wet air. They'd patrolled this section for hours and nothing especially malign had been found. It was high time he was back in his nice warm barn.

“Go home.”

Sandra agreed.

Packing the binoculars into her school satchel, she scrambled up onto the pony, ignoring his mutter about passengers, and they made their way back to the farmhouse. It was an easy trot, using the upper part of the old mining road and then down by Hanged Man's Lane.

“Landed now.” The pony sniffed again.

Sandra hesitated. It was a school night, and she had double mathematics in the morning.

“We'll look tomorrow,” she decided.

“Good.”

A suitable orbit had been hard to find, given the clutter of satellites and metallic junk surrounding the planet. The father-ship had elected to scan the fourth planet, particularly some historical remains inside an unusually large volcanic protrusion. One small shuttle had peeled from the father-ship's underside as it passed the third planet. Find a lightly populated area, they were told. Observe and report.

Sr, the impulser for the shuttle, flowed slowly across the console. Te and Yr, his probe-buds, lay quiet in their containers. There were anomalies in the magnetic field, but this seemed a suitable observation point - small settlements only, good cover, very low air traffic. Very low.

Was there a reason for that? Sr checked the console again, puzzled by the minor fluctuations in every reading. He soothed the drive, but with no parent-form to consult, he would have to decide.

They would land, close to that vegetation. Trees, he believed they were called. Te or Yr would know. The buds had received RNA updates in preparation for scouting. An impulser was... an impulser. What more could be said?

The cloak was intact; the drive slumbering. Sr woke the others and slid gratefully into his own container. Nutrition oozed from the walls, and he settled down for his overdue dinner.

Breakfast at the farmhouse was a simple meal. Sandra's mother was frequently sober at that time of day and a few slices of gammon, fried in cornflakes and topped with apricot jam, was all she could manage. Sandra didn't complain - she was thankful that the home-made yoghurt had finally died and been laid to rest.

"There was a message," said her mother, kicking the table and making the teacups rattle. One of the sheep was exploring under the table, occasionally banging its head and bleating, which made conversation difficult.

Sandra wiped jam from her chin.

"Mmmm?"

"You don't need to worry about your maths homework, dear. There's been another accident with the school howitzer. Something to do with inventories."

"Incendiaries, mother. I told them that the Third Form wasn't safe with those things."

Her mother frowned at the sheep, which was chewing the tablecloth.

"Never mind, dear. There are less Third Formers now, so I'm sure that it will work out fine."

No school today. Probably less physical school altogether, in fact, if the howitzer had been involved. A whole day with her prize-winning pony Mr Bubbles – grooming him, plaiting his mane, maybe sharpening his horseshoes...

Then she remembered the weirdly shaped metal thing that the pony had mentioned. She supposed that she should investigate it. Since father had left to do unspeakable things in foreign parts, it had been up to her and Mr Bubbles to protect the village. Grimdyke moors, the crags, the brooding presence of Whateley Wood on the edge of the village – it was a stupid place to live, really, but it was home.

Mr Bubbles was already up and about, slamming his hooves into an old enamel bath for practice. The bath was losing.

"Hello, boy," she called.

The pony paused.

"Bored."

"We could go and see what that was last night?"

"S'pose."

Sandra tied back her hair, and zipped up her flak jacket. For a moment she wondered about going to the gun-cabinet, but decided against it. The day was clear and bright, and she felt cheery.

Beyond the farmhouse lay the oddly-folded landscape of the Yorkshire Wolds. Sandra looked south briefly, checking that the village was intact. It was all there, from the twisted, mind-numbing spire of St Botolph's church to the Girl Guides hut, a sandbagged building on the far side of the village.

It was possible that Whateley Wood had moved nearer during the night, but that was normal for a Tuesday. By the end of the week the wood would have slouched its way a few hundred feet to the north. No-one knew why.

The two of them turned onto Sod's Luck Lane, which skirted the upper edge of the woods - most of the time. As usual, a badger was being sick somewhere in the bushes.

"So where do you think this object came down?" asked Sandra.

"Cooper's Field."

She sighed. Marshgrass, ankle-breaking tussocks and an especially thorny species of gorse. She hated having to cross Cooper's Field. Legend had it that a skilled cooper once set up his trade there, relying on the woods to supply timber for his intricately fashioned barrels. Not long after, he died. It wasn't much of a legend, really.

They trudged along the northwest edge of the trees, watching out for unusual activity. Here and there the bluebells had been trampled by huge misshapen feet, and in one pretty, sunlit clearing, something had created a sculpture of bones, mostly femurs. It resembled an extremely large spider in the act of mounting an ash tree for reproductive purposes.

"Nothing odd here," said Sandra.

Only when the trees gathered in knots and started muttering did Sandra reach for the shotgun. Or when the nightjacks appeared, but no-one in their right mind would go deep enough in the woods to disturb them.

The two probe-buds, Te and Yr, were uneasy. They had been fed with suitable knowledge on the father-ship, and prepared for exploration of this planet. But there was something peculiar about this area.

<That tree moved>

Yr flowed with derision. <Trees are sessile, vegetative.>

Te eased a photosensitive patch of protoplasm to one side, then the other.

<Up your vacuole. It moved. And there are things...>

<Mammalian inhabitants. Seed eaters, small predators.>

Te slid over a log, sampling lichen as he went. He was not convinced. They had agreed to start with the dense cover near the human habitations, and then ease their way nearer the buildings to observe. Te was no longer thrilled about this approach. Sr had talked of magnetic fluctuations picked up by the ship. Te's own plasm itched. There were unexpected sounds in these woods, low murmurings which seemed... wrong.

<We should catalogue the fauna,> said Yr. <See if it's typical of temperate woodland.>

<You mean likes those eyes staring from behind the bushes?>

Yr shifted his receptors. There were definitely eyes, peering through the briars that lay across their path. Thick, spiked arches hid whatever owned those eyes.

<Interesting.> Yr refreshed some of his mitochondria, sought a match in his knowledge for the creatures hiding from them. Nothing quite fitted. What had three eyes, an indeterminate number of legs and gave off a sharp, pungent odour?

<I wonder if- >

Then the nightjacks pounced.

Mr Bubbles lifted his long muzzle and drew in the scents of pasture and woodland.

"Around here."

Sandra couldn't see anything that looked like a flying vessel. The Wolds did have unusual visitors, of course. Scholars, after many years of academic debate, had pinned down the key characteristics of the area and tried to express them in precise terms. 'It's a bit weird up there,' was the consensus.

"Weather balloon, wonky helicopter, a very large goose caught up in tinfoil?" she suggested.

"Bollocks," said Mr Bubbles.

She went back to poking around under gorse bushes. Old Aggie's combine harvester was on the edge of the field, left there the previous week in case the wheat ripened early. As it was only May, this seemed unlikely, but Old Aggie also collected potatoes in the shape of Queen Victoria, so no-one bothered about it.

The day was overcast. Another hour and she was going home for her tea. Mother was making Fish a l'Orange, which was so unpleasant that they always had a nice big round of cheese and pickle sandwiches instead.

Clank.

Sandra turned to see the pony tentatively kicking thin air.

Clank, clank.

"Got it," said Mr Bubbles.

"I can't see anything."

“Will soon.”

He slammed one heavy hoof into the nothing, and was rewarded by a shriek. The air shimmered, and a slightly dented object appeared. It was the size of Mr Pearson's SUV – before the villagers had decided that they didn't like SUVs and had removed its panels to make chicken runs – and gleamed dully in the afternoon light.

“Gosh,” said Sandra. “It looks like one of those alien scoutships in Mary's 'Bumper Book of Boy's Unlikely Stories'. The ones which carry up to three occupants and have minimal armament.”

“And thin walls,” added the pony, lifting a hoof again.

Part of the spaceship opened with a whine, exposing what Sandra assumed was at least one occupant. It looked very like one of Mother's experimental blancmanges – agitated and about two foot across. It was the colour of wet cardboard.

<Please, no more.>

Mr Bubble's hoof paused in mid-kick.

“Did it say something?” asked Mary.

“Said it gives up.” The pony sniffed the blancmange.

“Sorry.” The alien flowed further out, almost touching the pasture. “English, yes? I've only been injected with three languages.”

Now that she looked more closely, Sandra could see a small part of the thing's surface vibrating in time to the words.

“English is fine. Are you, erm, having problems?”

“Only with the dents in the walls of my ship. Does your animal have to do that?”

Mr Bubbles gave an irritated cough.

“He's not 'my' animal, he's a...” Sandra looked at the pony. A wild black mane (those plaits had come out again), a dark, thick coat and eyes which had perhaps a little too much crimson, primordial anger in them. Even Father had failed to work out exactly what Mr Bubbles was. But he ate turnips and liked winning rosettes at the local shows, so the family had left it at that.

“He's a friend,” she managed to finish. “We sort of look after things around here.”

The blancmange wobbled.

“We've landed in the wrong place, haven't we?”

“Where did you want to land?”

“No, I mean, this place. It's... wrong.”

“Ah.” Sandra smiled. “You're in the Wolds. You should have tried the South of England. Nothing much happens down there.”

Mr Bubbles spat and wandered off to forage. Cooper's Field was not without its herby charms, if you could find the right part.

Alien and girl considered each other. As far as Sandra could tell, anyway.

“I am Sr. An impulser, mostly,” he said.

“Right. I'm Sandra – a schoolgirl, mostly.” She nodded to the pony. “That's Mr Bubbles. Did you need directions? We don't really have any leaders around here, so I can't do much about that. I could take you to see the vicar.”

“Does he speak for your species?”

“He doesn't even speak for his wife.”

After a confused explanation of what an impulser was (as far as Sandra could tell, it was a cross between a pilot and someone who could make machinery work), the alien wobbled in a tentative way.

“Um. I have two buds missing. In the woods. I don't suppose that you've seen them?” A darker patch shifted in the direction of the pony. “Or trodden in them?”

People lost in the woods were Sandra's speciality. Aliens shouldn't be any different. But Cooper's Field was on the more questionable side of the woods...

“Which way did they go?”

Sr extended a gooey pointer. “Towards those tall trees.”

Oh dear, thought Sandra. He meant the hemlock trees. That wasn't good.

“Do they, I mean, are they like you, these buds?”

He quivered agreement. “They're the same size, a bit darker. They're probe-buds, Yr and Te, meant to scout and record. Quite harmless.”

Unlike Whateley Wood. Sandra whistled to her pony.

“Stay here, Mr Sr. Don't leave your ship, whatever you see or hear.”

“What are you going to do, please?”

“We,” said Sandra, setting her jaw in her best imitation of a plucky, confident schoolgirl who had all the answers, “Are going to organise a search. Immediately.”

Yr had been eaten. Three times. It wasn't an experience he wanted to keep in his cell-memory and cherish. The three-eyed yowling things, disappointed with their gastronomic experiments, were now harrying the two scouts, dragging them deeper into the trees. Larger eyes could be seen in the gloom there, and shapes which did not conform to either the bud's database or their knowledge of geometry.

<Do something!> he vibrated to his companion.

Te, who had only just reformed after being clawed open, gave a whimper.

<What? I'm a probe-bud, damn it, Yr, not a violator!>

They continued to moan and argue as the nightjacks forced them on. Ancient madresses were stirring in the deep woods, and other children of mild insanity were becoming interested.

It was inevitable that Sandra turn to the Girl Guides for help. Only they had the numbers and the feral nature required to go into the wilder parts of Whateley Wood. The Womens' Institute made regular pilgrimages to the Moonstone, but she could think of no adults who would happily trot further in than that.

Adelaide Cleggins, the oldest guide, was away, probably trying to buy more Brasso in the nearest town to feed her habit. Sandra reluctantly negotiated rates with the girls she could find.

The process was complicated. Mary-Sue Perkins, who had been brought up to believe that she was American, insisted on doing everything in dollars and cents. Given that Mary-Sue also had a peculiar Virginia drawl, Sandra turned in frustration to Emily Pethwick, a nine-year old with remarkable freckles.

“An' then she tooks the bus, and she says...”

“I know where Adelaide's gone, Emily. I'm asking if you'll help. Two bottles of Old Suzy and anything you can make off any, erm, remains.”

“An' then she...” Emily paused. “An' a bag of aniseed balls?”

“Yes.”

The small girl ululated in a manner known only to the Girl Guides of the village and certain Armenian hill-folk. They soon had nine disreputable guides in various stages of uniform available for the search.

“Now, this may be dangerous...” Sandra decided to cut herself short. This was the guides. A thin girl at the back was already sharpening a hunting knife on the metal cleats of her boots.

Six o'clock already, and still overcast. She couldn't leave those poor aliens alone in the woods all night. It might cause an interstellar incident.

Or make them think that Earth wasn't a friendly place...

**TO BE CONTINUED**