

THE PERFECT CYBERNAUT

by Keith Gooch

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In an abandoned warehouse in the dockyard area of East London a strange figure appeared out of the limelight. Desperately trying to remain unnoticed, the man flitted from shadow to shadow to maintain his cover.

Finally he reached his destination and, with a few hard kicks against the door, forced his way into the premises he desired: a shabby, desolate building whose only inhabitants over the last few years had been the vermin that crawled from the nearby rubbish tip and the occasional tramp.

Climbing the half-rotted stairs he finally reached the level he required and, heaving hard against the door facing him, he pushed it open.

To his apparent delight the room contained exactly what he wanted. He lay beside the packing cases that filled the room and, although exhausted from his efforts, he laughed, and laughed, and laughed.

"At last I have the means of revenge! John Steed - beware!"

Several weeks passed from that cold August night, and in the time between, unbeknown to many of the dockside electronic companies that had sprung up on the nearby industrial estate, certain valuable pieces of intricate technical hardware had started mysteriously to disappear. If these companies had kept a proper inventory of their stock, or paid more attention to the neighbouring environment, it would not have been difficult to discover where the hardware had disappeared to. Almost overnight, London's newly-expanding silicon estate had a new member to its fold: Armstrong Cybernetics.

A very mysterious company indeed, thought some people who had actually stopped to take in the fact that a once-abandoned warehouse was now back in business. Hardly anyone saw any of the staff of this new company, although one person had said he thought he had seen a van taking someone in there once. Even less was seen of the mysterious Mr Armstrong, who had presumably started this new business from scratch.

Like all curiosities it attracted rumours from the ridiculous to the sublime, but the antics of the owners of the premises did nothing to dispel these rumours; if anything, they only fuelled them.

On the main floor of his newly redeveloped warehouse, the owner of the premises was hard at work on his creations.

"Let those ignorant fools mock me - I'll have the last laugh yet!" he muttered to himself.

On the workbench in front of him lay what looked like a naked woman - except that it wasn't. He took out an intricate welding device from his bags of tools and, with a few deft movements, began to separate the female's head from her shoulders.

As already stated, this was no ordinary woman. This was a cybernetic creation, a perfect robotic replica of the female form. She was not the only mannequin on the premises: another female and a male robot lay on adjoining tables awaiting the final touches to their circuitry.

"John Steed, my stepfather and his brother and others have perished at your hands because you didn't share their dream, but this time victory will be mine, and revenge will be so sweet. I, Jonathan Armstrong, promise you that."

The man continued working at his three creations for several hours until they were complete, then replaced their limbs and temples and placed

them ever-so-gently on separate tables. Then, with connecting cables tapped into the industrial estate's power supply, he allowed the life-blood of electricity to flow into his creations' bodies.

Sam Wolosenki had, for most of his life, lived with the rest of his down and out friends in the squalor of London's inner city decay, making a home wherever and whenever he could. Armstrong Cybernetics had recently opened up a new lifeline for Sam, and he regularly spent his nights sheltering in the warmth of one of the company's outhouses.

This night, for no explainable reason, Sam felt the urge to approach the main warehouse, a building he had up to now kept well away from in case his little hidey-hole was located. With some newfound courage dispensed from the cheap bottle of wine he had just finished he made his way across to the warehouse. Using two conveniently-placed dustbins as steps he stood upon them and peered through the windows to see what was inside. What he was to see was to give him the fright of his life.

Directly opposite the window, Armstrong was working on the female cybernaut, linking it to the mains generator. Life was now pouring into his creation. Sam gazed at the half-dressed female body on the warehouse table with amazement. As far as he could see, this was a very attractive young lady indeed. What was going on? he wondered. A bit of hanky-panky, no doubt, he surmised.

Suddenly the cybernaut rose from the table and, clumsily at first, walked towards the door of the warehouse, towards the outside, and towards Sam. Worried, Armstrong chased after his creation, shouting, "What's wrong? What is it? Come back!"

The cybernaut opened the door and exited the building, turning to face the startled Sam.

"Honest, Missus, I didn't see anything, honest - you can rely on me, honest Sam, I won't say a word about what was going on in there - ask anyone, I'm known for my discretion ...". His voice rose in panic as the creature came closer and closer towards him. Then suddenly the female raised her arm and, with a sickening, thwacking sound, dispersed any trace of life from Sam's body with a savage blow to his neck.

Armstrong looked at the crumpled body of Sam and cheered exuberantly. "Well done, my beauty. Now for John Steed!"

"Hello, Purdey, nice of you to pop round," said Steed as he opened the decanter. "Care for a drink while you're here?"

"Thanks, Steed," the glamorous woman replied. "What I popped round to see you about was this - " And, brandishing an envelope in front of Steed's nose, she continued, "I received an invitation to a party."

Steed looked bemused.

"But a pretty girl like you must get invited to a party every week. Why the importance of this one?" he asked, almost mockingly.

"Simple," said Purdey. "I don't know the person who sent me the invitation. At that moment Mike Gambit entered the room.

"Hello Steed, hello Purdey. You'll never guess what I got invited to ..."

"A party, and you don't know who sent it to you," interrupted Purdey.

"Yes, but how did you know?" asked Gambit, rather hurt.

It was Steed who replied. "Simple, Mike. We've all got the same invitation to a party to be held at the Mount Vernon Hotel on Wednesday at 8.00, dress formal." He added, "Obviously somebody wants the three of us at the same location at the same time on Wednesday evening for some purpose. The question is - what?"

"Well, there's only one way to find out," said Purdey.

"Turn up at the Mount Vernon Hotel at eight on Wednesday and find out," Mike Gambit interrupted.

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That Wednesday the three Avengers did as they had arranged and turned up at the hotel. Steed escorted Purdey to the function; Gambit escorted what he claimed was his second cousin from Doncaster, a rather attractive, if somewhat well-endowed, blonde girl called Liza, obviously as an attempt to get Purdey jealous.

"Well, if we're going to find out who wants us here, now's as good a time as any," said Steed cheerfully, as he accepted a glass of champagne for Purdey.

Then the host came forward through the crowd and introduced himself.

"Hello, I'm ... er ... Brian Armstrong, and you must be John Steed. Delighted to meet you - and this must be the delightful Miss Purdey. I'm sorry, I don't know your other name - ?"

"Just Purdey will do fine, thank you Mr Armstrong. Do you mind telling me why you invited us to this marvellous party?"

"Come now, Purdey," chided Steed. "How bad-mannered to turn a gracious invitation like this into something sinister!"

Gambit, who was now in earshot, and Purdey both gave Steed a look of indignation. Just what was he up to now?

"Not at all, Mr Steed. I don't mind explaining to the delightful Miss Purdey why I invited you here. She was right to be inquisitive - I do have an ulterior motive for inviting you here."

Steed, as always, remained the cool and proper gentleman he was; although Purdey and Gambit both gave an upwards look as if to say 'I told you so', Steed took this revelation in his stride.

"You see, Mr Steed, I know that you are a member of the British branch of the Friends of Botavia Society, and that you fought in that country's civil war when you were younger. I have here three young members of a Botavian Educational Exchange mission - they are here to learn more English at first hand and also to find out how business practices are run here in the developed world. I was hoping that your party would look after them whilst they were over here, h'm?"

"Where are these three then, Mr Armstrong? I, for one, would be delighted to meet them. I haven't been to Botavia for several years; I'd be delighted to find out what's been going on over there since I last visited the place," replied Steed politely.

"May I say I am delighted, Mr Steed? Let me introduce the three young people."

With that, two young women and a man stepped forward.

"This, Mr Steed, is Bitania Welter, this is Maria Balvana and this young gentleman is Christopher Balkavar."

They all exchanged formalities with Steed, Purdey, Gambit and the mysterious Mr Armstrong.

"Perhaps you would like to discuss matters more privately whilst I attend to the rest of the guests? There is an antechamber through the door at the end of the room where you can chat in a quieter and more relaxing atmosphere. I'll leave you to it to get better acquainted." And with that Mr Armstrong took his leave.

Had Sam, the dosser, been present at this function he might have been able to give Steed and Co a warning that all was not as it seemed.

Steed approached the first of the three visitors.

"Would you like a drink of Scotch? Terribly bad for you, but I love it all the same."

Bitania stared at him for a few seconds as if she was looking through him, then, slowly and slurredly as if she had been imbibing Scotch already, she said, "Scotch is bad for you, yet you love it. This does not make sense - illogical - does not compute - " And with that she fell to the ground as if poleaxed from behind. Purdey rushed forward to see if she could help, but Steed shouted to her to beware as the one who had been introduced to them as Christopher let loose with a devastating blow which

just missed Purdey's head. The cracking sound it made as it flashed through the air was all-too-familiar to all three of them: they had all heard it before, Steed in particular several times.

Gambit shouted to Purdey, "Cybernauts!" but she was already aware of the fact.

The two cybernauts rounded on Steed and Purdey and advanced towards them, lashing out as they did so.

Steed and Purdey seemed to be retreating further and further back into a corner and certain doom. Suddenly Mike Gambit appeared behind the two cybernauts and, taking the cap from the Scotch bottle that Steed had been pouring from earlier, proceeded to tip the contents over the heads of the two cybernauts.

Distracted from their attack on Steed and Purdey the two menacing robots turned to face Gambit. Slowly they advanced upon him - then suddenly, for no apparent reason, the two robots stopped motionless in their tracks, apparently seized up, arms in mid-strike position. It was Purdey who ventured near them first. She pushed the one known as Christopher with her forefinger. The cybernaut tumbled over and fell to the floor.

"Ah, sweet nectar of the glens! I did warn them that you were bad for them," said Steed, almost lovingly, to the empty whisky bottle.

"Tell me, Steed," asked Purdey, curiously, "how did you know that these three weren't what they seemed to be?"

"Simple, my girl," replied Steed. "In case you hadn't noticed, it's a trifle stuffy in here tonight, and I noticed that of all the guests that had arrived before us these three were the only ones who didn't show any sign of perspiration. Strange when you regard what type of climate Botavia has."

Purdey and Gambit laughed, impressed, and Purdey giggled, "Steed, you're a marvel!"

"A wonder of science," added Gambit, hysterically.

"I wouldn't say that," said Steed modestly. "But it makes you wonder why people try to invent mind-boggling things like these three when there are people like me about."

The three burst into fits of hysterical laughter.

"Shouldn't someone do something about Armstrong?" asked Gambit painfully, through a burst of laughter.

"Why not let him finish his party first before we do anything?" said Steed. "After all, he did leave us this lovely magnum of champagne, and I should hate to see it be wasted - wouldn't you?"

Purdey and Gambit looked at him once more, and then promptly burst into another fit of hysterical laughter.

Going boldly where none have before,
James T Kirk never knows what's in store;
Klingons thirsty for blood;
Tribbles, Horta or Mudd,
Or a private and small little war

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