

What Boys Dream Of

Gabina was a Czechoslovakian porn model whom Martin was deeply in love with. He owned six pictures of her, occupying the central pages of a magazine that he had bought for a very large sum off someone in his school. This, however, is not the story of Gabina. It is the story of the strange object that Martin discovered in the secret hiding place where the magazine with Gabina was kept.

The secret compartment existed behind one of the drawers under his bed and he had thought that he was the only person who knew about it. When one day he discovered a large, strange item sitting on top of his stash of personal treasures he went into a state of shock. Who had put it there? Had his mother or somebody else discovered the hiding place? For three days he lived in terror and did not dare open the drawer to reveal the compartment. Yet nobody behaved strangely or made any comments so he decided to reinvestigate. He peered into the small alcove and after a lot of hesitation reached in with sweaty hands to remove the offending item. He locked his room and placed it onto his desk for closer examination.

It was a box, about the shape and size of a briefcase. It was black, seamless, and very heavy. He spent some time scrutinising it from all angles, trying to find some kind of opening. Eventually he gave up and just stared at it in exasperation. That was when it happened. A message suddenly appeared on its side, in glowing letters. It said HELLO MARTIN. Martin was paralysed. For many moments he was indecisive as to whether he should dash out of his room, throw the box out of his window, or what. However, as there appeared to be no danger, he settled for staying and seeing what would happen next. The message magically changed. Now it said DO NOT BE ALARMED, and then, THERE IS NO DANGER. Martin's apprehensions gave way to gradual excitement. This was certainly getting interesting. He turned the box on its side so that he could see the messages more clearly. It now perched on his desk like a television. He sat back on his chair and saw that a block of text had replaced the message. Slowly he began to read; as he reached the bottom it smoothly scrolled on without his intervention. He read and read and read for two-and-a-half hours. Sometimes there were pictures, diagrams and even short videos. His only movement was the opening of his mouth, which then proceeded to stay open.

Martin learnt that he was one of thousands of people across the globe who was now in possession of a box like this one. He learnt that it was not just a "box", it was an automated training console (whatever that was), known as an ATC. Everybody who owned an ATC, which was only a tiny percentage of the world's population, had been selected for particular outstanding qualities. The world's population had been screened for many months before these selections had been made, and now those that had been chosen had a very demanding and difficult time ahead of them. At this point Martin's heart was beating so fast that he forced himself to stare at the ceiling until he calmed down.

Eventually he returned his gaze to the screen, which had not changed during the intervening time. The box began to tell him about a history, the history of another galaxy. He was told about a race of beings which had set out to colonise their galaxy, with an utter disregard for anything else in it. He learnt that they built massive machines, bigger than the moon. These machines were entirely robotic and were programmed to look for resources: planets, moons and asteroids. Each machine collected enough metals and other elements until it could totally replicate itself. Then there were two machines, each looking for more resources...and so it carried on. These self-reproducing robots had almost destroyed a whole galaxy, multiplying and multiplying, over a long time. But then others had begun to fight back. Wars and battles had raged over thousands of years and the robots had finally been driven back, in fact they were now almost entirely destroyed. Then something very unexpected had happened: one of the huge spacecrafts had suddenly appeared in a totally different galaxy, one very far away from where they had originated. This Galaxy was the one that, amongst others, contained the planet Earth. In fact, this spacecraft had materialised very close to the Solar System. Because this area contained no immediate military resources, it had been decided that the natives should be trained and provided with weapons to fight for themselves. It was a very risky procedure with no guarantee of success, however, because of the importance of destroying these mechanical beings before a new infestation was started, the decision had been made. Martin was one of those who had been chosen to represent Earth in this battle; in total four other local life forms were also involved.

At this stage the narrative paused. Martin stared at the empty screen expectantly. After a while two words appeared and stayed. They were FIGHT? and DEFECT? He frowned. It was strange to call it "defect" instead of, say, "don't fight" or maybe "decline". But this only occupied him momentarily, he knew what he would do. For a brief second he wondered how the box wanted him to respond, then, with a slightly shaking

finger, he reached for the first word and touched it lightly. Both words disappeared and the box appeared to shut down. Martin somehow knew that there would be no more messages today. His face flushed with excitement, he stowed it away safely.

The next morning, after a night with little sleep, he was up very early and set the box up. Immediately a small drawer in its side open and three black balls, the size of marbles, rolled out. They were sticky. The box began flashing up instructions. It explained that these balls were sensors that would detect the approach of another person. Martin should attach them somewhere so that he could be warned in advance if someone was about to come into his room whilst he was being “trained”. He gathered them up and stuck one above his door –outside his room, another one on the outside of his window frame (even though he lived on the first floor) and the last, after a moment’s thought, in a niche halfway up the stairs.

The box told him that because of his small size and his quick reactions, he had been selected to fight as a pilot on the front line. Martin learned that their primary weapon would be a one-man spacecraft which, when translated into human speech, was called a Jini. Two thousand Jinis were momentarily being constructed in orbit around the earth and would be delivered to their pilots within a month. However, *six thousand* pilots were being trained which meant that only a third of them would ever fly –the best third obviously. At this point Martin was shown a picture of a Jini and it was quite simply the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. It looked like a black raindrop with fins –very simple, very striking. Martin made a solemn promise to himself that he would try everything to become a real pilot.

Another drawer in the side of the box opened and a book fell out of it. Silently the opening shut again and left no sign on the surface to show that it had ever existed. Martin peered at the book suspiciously and made no effort to touch it. It looked like a very normal book, the kind that somebody of Martin’s age was likely to read, dog-eared and slightly grubby. Another drawer in the box opened and Martin was astonished to see a pair of glasses drop out, identical to those he was wearing at the moment. PUT THEM ON, the box flashed up. He did so reluctantly. They seemed to make no difference at all; as far as he could tell they were an exact copy of his real glasses. Then he saw the book which had just moments before also come out of the box –it appeared to be glowing very faintly. Martin picked it up hesitantly and opened it. The pages were covered with glowing text and diagrams. Martin took the glasses off and the writing and pictures disappeared, to be replaced by the normal print on the page. It was obvious that the book contained a secret “second” book, which could only be read with the special glasses. The box informed him that this book was part of a five part series. The series comprised a course which would teach him most of the most important facts, in as short a time as possible. Each book would be released in sequence after completion of the previous one. Overall the course covered technical information on the Jini –it contained diagrams of the cockpit layout and of all the controls and their related functions; as well as celestial mechanics and physics; it contained descriptions of standard attack formations, evasive manoeuvres, and general flying techniques. Finally it had a short lesson on the communications code that would be used between the four allied but alien species. The box told him that he had to learn *everything*.

So Martin began to study. His books never left him at any time during his waking hours; he reckoned that he was reading for about five hours a day. Initially the people around him did not notice, as he had been quite a keen reader anyway. Then his friends began to make remarks as well as his parents. Nothing serious, just why wasn’t he playing football anymore during lunch break and why had he lost all interest for television. Martin decided to do half of all his studying at night and this way, even though it was difficult, he managed to divert any further suspicion.

Almost exactly three weeks after he had first discovered the box did he finish the fifth and final book. He was confident that he knew everything back to front. The box informed him that he would have to take a test before the last stage of the training began. The box changed shape so that it looked vaguely like a computer monitor with attached keyboard. It was, in fact, quite an amazing display watching the box morph like a block of soft butter into its new shape, but Martin was by now quite immune to surprises of any kind. Questions were displayed on the monitor and Martin entered the answers via the keyboard, a procedure which took almost two hours. After it was over the box paused for a few moments, whilst presumably assessing Martin’s responses, then it simply displayed the message PASSED. Martin made a great effort to hide his relief and simultaneous elation, even though he was not sure if the box could actually *see* him.

That evening the final and most important phase of his training began. It was late and his parents had already gone to bed when Martin placed the box in the middle of his floor, as it had instructed him. Slowly the box began to unfold itself and this time Martin was genuinely astounded. The process of “unfolding” carried on and on and its volume increased and increased. How so much could have fitted into such a small space was a totally mystery to Martin. Eventually it had finished and the object on Martin’s floor now had the

approximate size of a telephone box lying on its side. A hatch opened to reveal the interior, which was lit by countless glowing buttons, displays and dials. The whole thing was humming like a fridge. Warily Martin climbed inside and positioned himself on the seat, which was constructed to perfectly accommodate him. The whole thing was a precise replica of a Jini's cockpit, and it could simulate everything that a pilot would experience in a real Jini, apart from g-forces (which apparently would have been too impractical). Martin had known that this was part of the training, and he knew the precise location and function of every control, button, lever and dial. Yet his hands were still shaking when he reached for the joysticks and the hatch purred shut above his head.

First of all he learnt how to land and take off –a relatively simple procedure. Then he was placed in a succession of increasingly complex mazes as he got to grips with the handling of his new craft. The quality of the simulation was unlike anything he had ever experienced before. The whole cockpit vibrated and hummed whilst he was “airborne”, a feature of his flight which increased whenever his speed grew or he flew sharp corners and manoeuvres. He wondered if the whole thing was shaking, and whether his parents could hear it. The quality of the view beyond the windows was better than television, and it took some self-control to convince himself that this was not simply the best computer game ever, but something more serious.

The simulation lasted for two hours (even though it seemed like twenty minutes), and then Martin was released back into the mundane world of his bedroom. The box collapsed itself and he stowed it away. He was so exhilarated that it took almost another two hours to get to sleep.

The next evening weapons were incorporated into the training. First he had to shoot at stationary targets, then moving ones, which increasingly mimicked the behaviour of the numerous robotic drones guarding the alien spaceship. The simulations carried on for a week, becoming ever more complex and lifelike. Martin understandably underwent big changes, which were noticed by all those around him. He had become thoroughly addicted to his nightly flight training, and would become restless hours before it was due to begin. A sensational happening, however, diverted the worries of his fellows. The Jinis, which had been constructed in orbit over the last month, were completed and took up positions all over the world, close to their destined pilots. By this time Martin had learnt that he had indeed been selected to fly, and therefore one of the sleek craft had arrived for him and was hovering above the town square. In fact, there were two Jinis for Martin's town, meaning that somewhere in the local area was another pilot who had also been secretly training over the past month.

The arrival of these spaceships threw the world into chaos, seeing as most of the planet did not know what they were for or where they had come from. Thankfully it was decided by the World's leaders that the best strategy concerning them was to observe and wait, as they appeared to be non-hostile.

Two days later, an announcement was made on every television and radio channel, in every known language, concerning the Jinis and their origin. It was information that Martin and everyone else in possession of a box like his had known for weeks. The announcement illustrated the threat facing the Earth. It went on to explain that the Jinis were designed to be flown by human pilots, who had been secretly trained. As well as the pilots, a large number of other people had been trained to run a support network, which would monitor the proceedings from Earth. The announcement finished by saying that in two days the combined assault would be launched.

Martin's parents could have guessed that something was up with him, considering his state, however, they were so agitated themselves that they remained oblivious to their son's destiny. They finally discovered, as did everyone else, two days later. A fleet of police cars pulled up outside their house and an army colonel burst in. He breathlessly informed them that the name of their son had suddenly appeared emblazoned on one of the alien craft. Martin's mother immediately fainted whilst his father merely became very pale. He took Martin firmly by the arm and told him to put his coat on, then he escorted him to the front car and got in beside him. They drove to the town centre where a very big crowd had already gathered. The motorcade slowly wound its way through the mass of people, who seemed completely mad, either with fear or excitement or both. They reached the town square where a small area had been cleared under the Jinis. Martin saw that the spaceships were now hovering merely ten feet above the ground, and that ladders had been put up against their sides. He saw his name in massive white letters on the side of one of them and realised that this was going to be the greatest moment of his life. He looked across at his father, who was pointedly staring out of the window, so that his face was not visible. Martin knew that he was crying.

They reached the cleared area and the crowd grew silent. Martin was helped out of the car with a great deal of fuss and then turned to face a thousand expectant eyes. He could hear himself breathing, so complete was the silence. He saw many emotions on their faces: fear, hope, awe, admiration and, something that pleased

him immensely, envy. Suddenly a girl broke away from the crowd and ran towards him. For a moment it looked like she wanted to embrace him but she stopped short before him, slightly awkwardly, unsure of what to do. Martin recognised her instantly: it was a girl from his school. They had never known each other personally, much to his regret, but he found her very attractive and had always admired her from a distance, in eternal hope. Now she was standing before him and looked like she wanted to fall at his feet.

“Please...please be careful. I’m so frightened.” She muttered, her eyes on the floor. Then she broke into a smile, “My name’s Gabina by the way”.

Martin smiled back. He knew that he had to say nothing. She mouthed two words, *good luck*, and then ran back into the crowd. Martin felt like he would float away. Without any further hesitation he walked to his customised Jini and began to ascend the ladder. At the top, whilst waiting for the hatch to open, he turned to face the crowd. He saw that a camera crew had arrived and was filming him. From the distance a strange sound began. It grew and infected the people before it, like a massive wave that crashed towards him. It was a deafening cheer, which seemed to fill every corner of his being. Martin’s knees seemed to turn weak and for a moment he wondered whether he might fall off the ladder in front of the whole crowd.. This surely was one of the greatest feelings in the world. He waved quickly to his father and then climbed into the craft. The ladder was removed and the hatch closed above him. There was a deep grumble and a shaking as the Jini’s brand new engines ignited.

Martin clasped the joysticks with firm hands and, with a sudden impulsive burst, jammed them both forward to maximum acceleration. Immediately he understood the meaning of g-force; he felt like his brain was being flattened against the back of his skull. This was something that had definitely been missing from the simulations. He touched the controls to the left and immediately the Jini carved off into a steep curve. Now his brain wanted to leak out of his ear-hole. The Jini was making a blur out of the world. *This* was the best feeling in the world.

Then, quite suddenly, something went wrong. Martin knew enough about the Jini to know that there was a *very* serious problem. Everything was shaking, and there was a strange alien sound. The sound grew louder, the cockpit began to fade, and the sound grew louder still. It was a familiar sound, it sounded like....like...
.his mother!!!

The woman entered the kitchen in her dressing gown and kissed her husband who was already seated at the table, reading the paper. She walked over to the fridge and began to chuckle.

“You’d better watch out for Martin. He seemed in a foul mood when I woke him just now...”