

Fenned

"Ruins of a Mastermind"

by Richard Swain

RUINS OF A MASTERMIND

*Place your ear unto the ground and listen for unholy sound
As ghostly creatures frolic deep, an evil secret lays in sleep
Dare not ye venture to the tomb or else face your impending doom
For only fools do ever find the ruins of a mastermind...*

That was the ancient rhyme that all of the students at the University of Essex had come to know. The campus, though still looking very similar with its 1960s architecture, was also very different now in the year 2103. With only so much space available to build out, new developments over the last hundred years had instead been built *up*. Lecture buildings now towered almost as high as the tower blocks themselves, and gave the institution an imposing presence on the Colchester skyline. It also meant that some of the lower levels of the university were now buried to the depths of time, long since underground and long since forgotten. The dark corridors at the heart of Essex were little more than an urban myth now, and would be nigh on impossible for anybody to navigate if they found them.

Penn, however, was not just anybody. Not only did he know that the under-levels of the university really existed, he also knew how to traverse them. Or at least he did a century ago. It probably won't come as a surprise to learn that a lot can change in a hundred years, and as he tunnelled his way down from the surface, the halls of classrooms he once knew now more greatly resembled a series of labyrinthine catacombs.

This wasn't just a nostalgic visit for a trip down memory lane, though. Penn was here on business. Ever since his miraculous encounter with Clara at Christmas, he'd been keen to find out more about the origins of the Rub-a-Duck. How exactly did it work, and where exactly did it come from? These were clearly answers that Penn

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was not going to find out from just wandering around. Not now that Guy was dead, anyway. Luckily, Penn had remembered that there was someone else who had once known about the magical artefact: indeed, someone who had actively sought out its elusive power. This was the Mastermind of which the ancient rhyme did speak, and though he might now be dead – or far removed from this reality, at least – his mysterious legacy hopefully remained intact. It was time to go tomb raiding.

With a *click*, Penn turned on his torch and began making his way through the pitch black tunnel. The narrow corridors were strewn with rubble and dirt, bits of the walls rotting away and ceiling panels caving in from the added weight forcing down from above. The air was cold and still, filled with a dusty must that made Penn feel like he was down the bottom of a mine. A shallow pool of water, presumably leaking from old burst pipes, had seeped in through the cracks and flooded the floor. It was a sorry state, really. A mouldy ‘caution: wet floor’ sign had been placed at one end of the corridor. Fat lot of good that’ll do now, Penn thought.

Each step of his boots causing a gentle splash underfoot, Penn began to walk along in a straight line, being careful not to trip over anything dangerous. He was also keen to stay as quiet as possible – the ground above his head didn’t look entirely secure, and he wouldn’t be surprised if the wrong sort of sound brought it all crumbling down. If that happened, not even his Rub-a-Duck – whether it was real or fake, he couldn’t tell any more – would be able to save him. It hadn’t shown signs of emitting any magical power since that fateful Christmas three months prior.

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Penn continued on. Pointing his torchlight up and down towards the corners, he could see all manner of cobwebs and creepy crawly insects scuttling along. At least he wasn't alone, he thought. Not quite the company he would have preferred, but it was better than nothing.

He wondered if anyone else had ever ventured down into these dingy depths. Surely some brave, drunk, or dim-witted individual must have heard the ancient rhyme and had their curiosity piqued. The legend had to have started somewhere, after all. Would they have found the Mastermind's old lair? Would they have even known what they were looking for? And, more importantly, would they have lived to tell the tale? As far as Penn could tell there were no ghostly creatures frolicking around, but what did the rhyme mean about impending doom? Was that just a twisted bit of poetry to strike fear in the student body, or were there greater forces at work here?

Penn didn't know an awful lot about the Mastermind, in hindsight. He had been a strange and mysterious fellow who gave away very little about himself. Yet, though it had been Guy who was most greatly involved with fighting and undoing the evil genius, it had arguably been Penn who had been closer to him. In a chapter of history now all but erased from memory, Penn had once enrolled on an intensive training course to become one of the Mastermind's henchmen. He was smart but also insular, and he had seen it as an opportunity to spare himself from the loneliness of his existence. Unfortunately, not all had gone to plan – Penn aced the course but was ultimately foiled by a pair of incompetent idiots, whose sheer stupidity had caused Penn to (literally) take his eyes off the prize. Never again would Penn forget the first thing they teach you at henchman training.

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Penn may not have walked away from the training with a proud sense of achievement, but he had learned a lot of useful new lessons. These were mischievous skills that he eventually put to good use, outsmarting Guy and stealing the Rub-a-Duck for his own vengeful purposes. But those days were behind him, and if digging up the past was what it took to bring Guy back, then that is exactly what Penn was willing to do.

Significantly, Penn had also learned during his henchman training that the Mastermind's secret headquarters were located deep below the campus. It was quite a sneaky spot for a hideout really – not only was the Mastermind able to keep out of sight, but he would also have had access to all the research and developments of the university up above. Whether it was radars, robotics, or historical documents, it was an ideal location for hunting down the stuff of legend. How lucky he must have been to have the Rub-a-Duck turn up on his doorstep all the way back in 2011. Penn still didn't really know how it had got there in the first place... but perhaps the answers were closer than he thought.

Turning the corner, Penn approached yet another lengthy corridor. The echo of a dripping tap began to infiltrate his inner ear. *Drip, drip, drip.* Such a simple yet infuriating rhythm. Craving silence, Penn entered the set of toilets to his left – thankfully it was the men's (although he had always been curious to see what the ladies' toilets looked like). The floor was even more flooded in here than outside, with one of the sinks overflowing very slowly but surely. It may only have been filling up a tiny droplet at a time, but over decades even that was enough to cause the basin to burst its sides. Wading his way through and outstretching his arm, Penn turned off the tap – only to

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have it come away completely in his hand. The screw must have rusted and come loose over the century. On the upside, the running water had stopped, so there would be no more annoying dripping for the rest of all eternity.

Rolling up the sleeve of his overcoat, Penn reached down into the murky water and pulled out the plug in the sink. With a guttural gurgle, the overflow began to subside, sucked into the ageing pipes in a fit of coughs and splutters. Penn shook his hand dry before rolling his sleeve back down. Looking forward, he saw himself in the mirror, his hoodie up to keep his face hidden and protected. Water sloshing all around his shins, he turned around and headed back towards the corridor, passing the broken remains of a ceramic urinal that floated by.

Yearning for the warmth of the surface, Penn carried on down the narrow strait. He thought he must be getting closer now, surely... when, suddenly, there was an eerie screech from behind a set of double doors to his right. It took Penn completely by surprise and he stumbled back in shock, knocking his back on the time-worn wall. He could almost feel the brickwork beginning to disintegrate with the impact. He pushed himself up and aimed his torch directly at the double doors. The sound had come from one of the university's many PC Labs. Penn remembered that it used to be impossible to get into one of these rooms around assignment deadline time. He doubted he'd have such difficulty now... but was something already in there waiting for him?

As quietly as he could, Penn creaked open the door and stepped inside. At face value, the room layout looked exactly as he had remembered it – but if these had been the facilities he had seen on the Open Day, well, he might have reconsidered his application. The majority of the

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It took Penn a while – partly to calm his nerves and partly to make it through the obstacle course of desolation that waited around every corner – but eventually he found what he was looking for: the ruinous lair of the Mastermind!

For a place that had become such a fabled locale, it really wasn't all that spectacular. Just far enough out of the way of the rest of the university's rooms, it would have looked just like any other lecturer's office to the naked eye. Even Penn had to do a double take to check he was in the right place, it had been so long since he last saw it. But, if nothing else, the conspicuous looking padlock on the door made it all too obvious to spot.

Penn turned the lock round in his hand and saw that he needed to line up three parts of a code to unlock it. Unlike any normal padlock though, this one was made up of letters rather than numbers. With 26 options for each choice, the possible number of combinations was infinitely huge. Penn, however, undid it in a matter of seconds.

I-M-M.

Deciphering the code was easy. With an ego as big as the Mastermind's, there could only have been one solution: his own initials. What they stood for though was yet another age-old mystery that Penn had never unravelled. Slowly, he crept inside the office and took in his surroundings. Compared to the rest of the underground remains, this room had survived relatively unscathed. Nothing looked too obviously damaged, and if it weren't for the contemporary changes in interior design, it probably would have passed as a useable office for a 22nd Century lecturer. No doubt that was due to the Mastermind reinforcing his hideout with special materials

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and equipment – which, as far as Penn was concerned, was a good thing. The easier it was for him to find things in here, the better.

Penn sat down in the Mastermind's armchair and started sorting through the papers on his desk. Unsurprisingly, there were plenty of newspaper clippings and academic reports on strange activity in the local area. There were even a few blueprints for gadgets that the Mastermind must have built to help him track down these extraordinary sources of power. But there was nothing specifically related to the Rub-a-Duck.

Penn continued to rifle through anything and everything that was out on show, finding little of interest aside from a DVD of *X-Men: Days of Future Past* and a cassette tape of elocution lessons read by Alan Rickman. This was one Mastermind who really wasn't subtle in his inspirations. After a few minutes of frantic and increasingly frustrated searching, Penn had turned through all of the Mastermind's immediate possessions and was still left none the wiser.

All hope was not yet lost though. At the back of the room there was a closet: a whole new Aladdin's cave of potential discoveries! Penn swung open the door and was amazed to find that its contents were remarkably ordinary. A clothes rail was adorned with identical looking red hoodies, and the rest was filled with empty cardboard boxes and reams of white paper.

But, there at the very bottom of the closet, hidden away behind some old plastic sacks... a wooden chest! Maybe the truth Penn had been seeking was hidden in plain sight all along.

Penn dragged it out and carefully lifted it onto the desk with a thud. Whatever was in here, it was pretty heavy.

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With one hand on each of the chest's golden clasps, Penn took a firm grip and prepared himself for what might be inside.

'Everyone has a few skeletons in their closet,' Penn whispered dramatically, as if to be posthumously addressing the Mastermind. '...and now it's time to unearth yours!'

With a satisfying *snap!*, the clasps shot free and Penn threw the top of the chest open with boyish excitement.

It's fair to say though that he didn't expect to find what he did.

'Alwight my dear friend darlin!'

'About time someone opened that box! It's proper *filth* in there!'

Penn wasn't sure what dumbfounded him more – the thick and depressingly familiar Essex accents, or the fact that the chest somehow contained two talking skulls. He was almost paralysed with bewilderment.

'Hey, look!' noticed the skull on the left, which had more of a Basildon twang in its voice compared with the Dagenham dialect of the skull on the right. 'Isn't that...?'

'Yeah, it's that git again isn't it!' agreed its partner.

It all came flooding back. Even stripped of their bodies, their skin, their entire physical presence: these two idiots were as recognisable as ever.

'Oh good lord...' moaned Penn.

'Oi, aren't you pleased to see us?' asked the skull on the left. Penn was pretty sure the Mastermind had imaginatively labelled this one Henchman #1.

'Don't you just love a familiar face!' remarked the equally imaginatively named Henchman #2.

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‘I really haven’t missed you two,’ Penn groaned, ‘...but how on earth are you even *alive?!?*’

The two skulls swivelled round to look into each other’s empty eye sockets.

‘Beats us!’ they eventually declared, after a moment of thoughtful silence.

‘Weren’t you two banished to another dimension, like the Mastermind?’

‘Well, yeah, we were at first... but then all of a sudden... we weren’t,’ explained Henchman #1. ‘The timelines all sort of shifted around us and we ended up back where we started... and then you enslaved us! Don’t you remember?’

‘Yeah, and then we helped that Guy bloke to take you down!’ added Henchman #2.

‘I struggle to forget’ grimaced Penn, remembering the events of his downfall back in 2013. ‘But that still doesn’t explain why you’re here now, as skulls!’

‘Well, Guy reset the timeline again, and... boom! Here we were!’

‘Hmm. I guess all the space-time disruption we caused with the duck must have done it,’ deduced Penn. ‘I was trapped in another dimension, impervious to the effects of temporal distortion... Guy was safely sent back to the past by the genie... and you two... well, you’d have just been left stranded and caught up in the middle of it all! As time snapped itself back into place, it wouldn’t have known whether you were supposed to exist again or not... which means...’

Something quite terrible hit Penn in that instant.

‘You... you must both be existing on two separate planes! Your bodies... well, what’s left of them... they’re

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here, old and rotting away. But your brains... they must be in another world entirely!

‘Oi! Cheeky!’ Henchman #2 took that as an insult.

‘No, no... I mean, though your physical state will weather and decay, your minds will live on indefinitely – the two must still be linked through time, and as long as one exists, so must the other. Otherwise you’d both be dead right now!’

‘He’s got a point, I reckon,’ quipped Henchman #2. The skull nodded in place.

‘So what do we do?’ asked Henchman #1.

‘Yeah, we’re about as buggered as the Greek economy, mate!’ Henchman #2 added.

‘I dunno, this is all such a mess,’ confessed Penn, ‘but if you two help me now, maybe I can set everything straight and get you back to normal!’

‘And if we refuse?’

‘Well, then you’re both being donated as props to the Royal Shakespeare Company!’ threatened Penn.

‘Hey, I reckon I’d be quite good in Hamlet!’ said Henchman #1 quite proudly.

‘Nah mate,’ corrected Henchman #2, ‘we’d make a great Romeo and Juliet! A romance for the ages!’

Penn sighed.

‘Are you quite finished...?’

The two skulls quietened down.

‘Look,’ started Penn, ‘I’m trying to find out more about the Rub-a-Duck. If I can figure out how to make it work again, I can wish this all away, and...’

‘Jeez, that bloody duck again! Will you ever let that thing go?’ laughed Henchman #2.

‘Just answer me!’ said Penn, slamming a fist down on the desk.

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‘Alright, alright, keep your wig on,’ said Henchman #1. ‘If the boss had anything on that duck of yours, it’ll be on his computer. But I’m sure you’ve already looked at that, right?’

Penn looked sheepish. For an intelligent man, he certainly missed the obvious sometimes.

‘Erm...’

‘No wonder we beat you at Henchman Training!’ joked Henchman #2. ‘Always looking at the wrong things, you are!’

Penn begrudgingly booted up the computer on the desk. Unlike the cracked and broken units in the PC Lab, this one sprang to life in a second. It wasn’t long though until the security system kicked in to slow things down.

Password required.

Clue: Something you love.

Penn typed in the obvious possibilities, like ‘Mastermind’ and ‘IMM’. No such luck. What could it possibly be...?

‘Any ideas?’ asked Penn. ‘You knew him better than I did!’

The two skulls mumbled between themselves.

‘Nah, not sure mate. The only thing that mummy’s boy ever loved aside from himself was... well, nothing!’

Penn smiled. He’d cracked it now. He and the Mastermind were more alike than he had realised. As a clever and lonely person too, he knew exactly what the Mastermind must have loved, and what the answer to this riddle must be.

He typed on the keyboard.

M-O-T-H-E-R.

With a triumphant click of the Enter button, the screen lit up with a database full of research and

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discoveries. Penn's eyes darted to and fro as he absorbed all of the astounding information. The Mastermind had been a bit of a bumbling buffoon at times, but Penn had to admit it, he knew his stuff. Still nothing about the Rub-a-Duck though. It must be here somewhere...

Penn scrolled through and searched. Eventually, he found it: voila! A small folder buried deep within the framework of the system: 'rubaduck'. He moved the mouse over it and clicked...

Restricted access. Enter unique identification number and codename.

'Okay, now I'm stumped...' lamented Penn. He'd struck gold, but it was still beyond his reach. So near yet so far. It was just one puzzle after another with this place.

'Henchmen, do you know this?'

The two skulls shook despondently.

'Okay, let's think about this logically... his codename, well that's probably Mastermind, isn't it? No one would actually have that as a proper surname, not unless they had some incredibly mean-spirited ancestors. But the unique identification number? That could be anything...!'

Penn ran his fingers through his hair, stressed out by this final hurdle. The answer must be staring him in the face, somewhere in this room. He just needed to find it.

He panned his gaze around, but nothing jumped out. There were barely any numbers at all in this room, thinking about it. Lots of letters, but very few numbers.

Penn looked again at pop-up on the screen. Then he thought back to the padlock on the door. And then it all suddenly made sense.

'Eureka!' he shouted.

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‘What?! What is it boss man?!’ asked Henchman #2, keen to know the answer.

‘No one would have a padlock made up of letters, that’s just madness – the Mastermind may have been quirky, but this... this is a trick! Think about it: how would a person so obsessed with ancient culture conceal a number in plain sight?’

‘Erm... can I phone a friend?’ asked Henchman #1, still as oblivious as before.

‘Roman numerals! No wonder we never knew what the Mastermind’s initials stood for, because they never stood for anything! His name isn’t I.M. – it’s his ID number: 1.1000!’

Penn typed in the numbers and, much to his delight, the folder opened up before his eyes. Just as promised, was a cavalcade of information about the Rub-a-Duck. At last!

‘I’d better back this up, just in case...’ Penn realised, whipping out a USB stick from his pocket and proceeding to copy over the files. While the little green progress bar ticked away one percent at a time, Penn read what he could in the background. Though he didn’t take a lot in straight away, there was one word that kept popping up that caught his attention in the most frightful way:

Reichhart.

He’d heard that word before. Everyone had. Wasn’t that the name of...?

He didn’t have time to reach the end of his epiphany. Clearly he had tried to copy over something a bit too top secret, because the computer had started to go into lockdown and an alarm started sounding at the most ear-piercing volume.

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Which, in the Mastermind's office, wasn't a problem. But out in the perilous tunnels where the slightest tremor could send the whole place caving in...

'Bugger!' Penn spat. 'This will have to do!'

He quickly grabbed the USB and hoped that he'd managed to save something worthwhile from all of this. He could already hear the quaking of rubble coming loose in the corridor. Time was not on his side.

Jumping up, Penn made for the exit.

'Hey! What about us?'

Penn screeched to a halt. The henchmen! He didn't particularly like them, but his conscience started to kick in. Morally he should try to save them. It's what Guy would have done. But if he did, he'd be weighed down by the chest, and he might get caught up in the debris. On the flipside, if he just left now and his hypothesis about their minds and their bodies was right, they'd survive the ruin – but they'd be trapped in the depths of the earth, buried with no hope of ever being found again. Was it a risk worth taking...?

Penn took a deep breath. He'd made his decision.

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As the last of the tunnel collapsed in on itself, Penn crawled back out onto the surface. He was shaken and he was dirty, but he was safe. No one would ever be finding the ruins of the Mastermind again now. He just hoped it had all been worth it. A huge part of his past was now buried forever.

For better or worse, the henchmen had not shared that grim fate. Penn, exhausted, fell to the grassy ground

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next to the chest he had lugged all the way up. The chest opened of its own accord.

‘Cheers for the save, boss man,’ thanked Henchman #2. ‘Maybe you’re not as much of a git as we thought!’

Penn forced a smile. Maybe he’d come to regret his decision, but at least he’d done the right thing.

He patted his inside pocket to check that the USB stick was still there. Phew! With any luck, this would finally give Penn the answers that he needed.

Feeling a bit more positive again, Penn turned back to the two henchmen’s skulls.

‘Now then,’ he grinned, ‘what am I going to do with you two?’

Not even waiting for an answer, he slammed the chest shut and started dragging it along behind him. He could just about hear the muffled shouting of the henchmen from inside the wooden box.

‘Silence,’ he mused, walking heroically towards the orange of the setting sun before him. ‘I don’t think I’ll ever appreciate it quite so much again...!’

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