

TERMINATION  
THROUGH



BRAIN  
ACTIVATION

TERMINATION THROUGH BRAIN ACTIVATION

TTBA Magazine - Michaelmas 2023 (Jan 2024)

A production of the Cambridge University Science Fiction Society

hereafter CUSFS

# Termination Through Brain Activation

TTBA Volume 45 Issue 91

## Contents

### COVER ART

---

Lily Mansfield 1

### ADDRESSES

---

Alex Colesmith; Sol Dubock 4

### CHAINWRITING

---

Riddles in the Dark 2: Electric Cthulhu 5

Firebirds and Waterbirds 9

The Ballad of Captain Sharq's-Fin-Nose (AKA the One Chess Piece) 17

>redo from start 20

The Dimming of Excellence: The Tale of Grimalkin College 31

Last Chance 34

### ORIGINAL WORKS

---

These People You Call Friends: Part 2 11

Chris Pang

Spiroids 23

Niko Kristic

Some Limericks 30

Alex Sandground

Twisted Timelines, Broken Alternatives 41

The Editor (and a lot of alternate Editors)

### ARTWORK

---

The Cuddly Alien 4; 44

Jeremy Henty

## Editor's Address

This seems to be a particularly poetical edition of TTBA. At least, the lines don't go all the way across the page anywhere near as much as they used to. Quite unjustified.

On the other hand, the poetry has been fun to read, easy to edit (poetry doesn't need to make grammatical sense, right?) and gave me an excuse to use Wingdings in a title, so I'm all in favour, provided that I don't have to write any. Every bit of poetry I write seems to go into rhyming couplets, which is... not suited to the poems we have, so I'm glad I didn't have to end those stories.

We've also had a very fun Period Drama chain, a Soft Sci-Fi that's only *mildly* gloomy (and actually ends on a rather positive note, if you don't mind the deaths, but they might not be permanent...), an adventure in the magical realities of Cambridge colleges (again!) and some very fine Hard Science Fiction that's Totally Realistic, because that's the kind of people we are.

On the individual side of things, Digital Humanities continues to be paranoid, dark and hilarious in *These People You Call Friends: Part 2*, the limericks are a very pleasant light touch (MORE DAMN POETRY), and *Spiroids* asks the important question of 'what does it feel like to be you?' to a giant articulated alien sea monster. They're all great, guys. Well done!

I'm currently holding a few unfinished chains in reserve for the next edition, so if you wrote in Michaelmas but don't see your stuff in here, don't worry—it'll turn up soon...

Maces and Masonry,

Alex, TTBA Editor 2023-24

## Chairbeing's Address

Greetings my ever-wonderful CUSFSers,

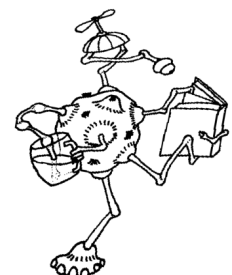
Michaelmas term is done! Congratulations, commiserations or anywhere in-between depending on how it went for you.

From a CUSFS perspective, it's been wonderful seeing so many people as excited about SFF as I am - with lots of great moments from my obsessing over Pikmin in our ecology discussion, to the perfectly timed powercut in our War Games screening. I can only look forward to more people and certainly more silliness in Lent term; we're working very hard to bring you as many fun events as possible! A quick reminder of our yearly ritual elimination of the sun (the Wake and Afmaelisdagr with the Jomsvikings) where the baby-faced Beatrice will be struck down and replaced with a new mighty strange-shaped sun - and if you're committed enough, staying up the whole night playing far too many board games in-between.

Lastly, I'd like to quickly say that this society is truly something special with an astounding history that you wouldn't be able to find anywhere else, and it is an honour to be able to run it. I hope you all enjoy this copy of the TTBA - the chainwriting and other creativity captured inside is amazing, and a real testament to the society we have built up together :)

Your trapped-inside-a-magazine chairbeing - Sol

*[readers should note that the chairbeing is indeed trapped inside this magazine. Can you find the picture of them? Email the page and location to [cusfs.chainwriting@gmail.com](mailto:cusfs.chainwriting@gmail.com) if you do for a chance to win!—Ed.]*



Harley Jones, Sam, Tom Sweeney, Milamber, anonymous, Thor, Jen, Dan Scott

**CW: General Weirdness**

Riddles

Upon riddles, wrapped in cyphers, that her mind  
Scarcely could begin to comprehend.  
The professor at her desk was working late,  
Coffee by her side, a banker's lamp  
Lit below the window, shedding light  
On the pages where she feverishly wrote,  
fingers seizing up again with cramp  
Of another day at work, trying to find  
Answers, or a clue, towards these great  
Riddles.

In the deepness of the night  
As the rain created rivers in the streets,  
Watchers from the water turned their gaze  
To the town and to the minds of those who slept  
Without thinking of things greater than themselves;  
Ordinary lives, common concerns,  
Weak and undefended from the wiles  
Of the beings that were seeking to arise.  
When the rituals were finished they'd return  
To the world that once was theirs so long ago  
In the deepness of the night.

Chanting

In the cellar of an ordinary house  
Frenzied and fantastical the sound,  
With an aim to draw the ears of things that wait  
And have waited since before the dawn of time;  
Things that would destroy usurping man,  
Things that break the minds of anyone,  
Attempting to discern their mortal ends,  
Attempting to disrupt the fateful call  
Made by acolytes across the world  
Chanting.

In the glow of unconceivable creations,  
Whispers shuddering across the ground,  
Secrets lost from times forgotten,  
Begin to wriggle through the patterns on the floor-  
boards, breaking through the chains of the riddles,  
drawing the rift apart,  
Open.

A figure, rises. Human, for now.  
Darkness rises. The room, empty.  
In the closed cold cellar there is a woman,  
She doesn't know where she is.  
Chanting. The fear of the cold air.

A crystal prism implanted into her skull,  
Flashed with bright and stuttering light.  
A slab of pure black on the back of her palm,  
Blinking with an uneasy hum.  
She smelt the air with a sense of amusement,

She knew.

Unburdened, numbers began to drift past her eyes,  
Tales, of times long gone past,  
Myths, hiding reality. A rift which began  
And did not end with the creature  
Intended to return through it.  
She returned.

Staggering,  
The chanting circle broke, terrified by the lack of ter-  
ror  
In the figure residing before them.  
A group that had risked their reputation  
On seeing beyond the veil,  
Not on a seemingly human formation.  
A sheriff who had killed to punish  
Those involved with actions deemed occult.  
A mayor who had sworn to banish  
Those that used God's blessings to insult.  
Seven total moved as the woman came forwards,  
Staggering.

Elsewhere,  
The professor came free of her feverish cramp.  
A sudden feeling of wrongness lay heavy in her heart.  
She was not often a person who visited the saloon,  
But her mood demanded a chemical change  
That only came from liquid with an alcoholic tune.  
Stepping outside, she saw the clouds weighed heavy,  
with what appeared to be some sort of a purple hue.  
Rain dropped hard and fast, giving her an odd sensa-  
tion.  
She looked at her arms seeing a number of miniscule  
cuts which grew  
With every raindrop. All she knew was she needed to  
be  
Elsewhere.

Pounding

Her feet on the road she ran to that safe haven.  
A place for the broken which held no judgement  
And provided safety for many a lost soul.  
A tear rolled down her cheek as she pushed the  
doors open  
A cry of relief left her lips as she saw the hot coal.  
Not a single patron looked at this entirely human sce-  
ne  
For they all knew how life could be.  
But very soon their heads would turn, and the profes-  
sor's mind shatter  
When some unexplainable being made a noise at  
that bar door.  
Pounding.

Silence,  
Deafening those with ears to hear.  
The absence,  
Filling the space such that you are cramped.  
The dark,  
Blinding even those who wait.  
They are watching in  
Silence.

Now.  
Out of the saloon enters fear,  
It is not holy, but clean of sin,  
It will burn even as water kills fire,  
From the hells, one can only go higher,  
Sad as they are, they shed no tear,  
Water washing worries in.  
Riddles see it as it was, and will be,  
The professor seeing it  
Now.

Alone,  
The banished creature dutifully entering.  
The form growing, her imagination jumping,  
Knowing loss made new by opening the present,  
Quietly remembering safer times.  
Riddling so as to understand the vicious wants.  
Where years zip by in a day.

Closer  
Comes the crooked creature  
Whispering inhuman names,  
While formless phantom shadows climb  
The walls and douse the naked flames  
Of candles and of wine-warmed hearts.  
And no man moves to stand between  
Her and the dreadful darksome gaze  
Of the thing, that night-born nameless thing,  
That foul black festering fear that's creeping  
Closer.

All  
Others there are quickly dead  
And grinning bone-men take their stead.  
The darkness strips away their flesh,  
And sucks their blood through bitter air.  
The wood rots, crumbles, sloughs and splinters  
In every table, every chair.  
Tankards shatter, pistols rust.  
The roof, walls, floor are blown to dust.  
There is only a woman, shivering, small.  
The creature takes the place of  
All.

Yet though she stands transfixed and mute  
No silence overcomes her mind,  
But memory, memory of the words  
She wrote that night with feverish hand,  
Of riddles wrapped in riddles  
And the darkling forms they raved about.  
Might yet the dark be kept at bay  
If she stood and spoke and solved  
Those wretched riddles?

In the labyrinth of lore, a revelation came,  
Not just in intellect, but in physical frame.  
To confront the shadows, the spectral dread,  
She must wield strength, not just be well-read.

Determined, she stepped away from her tomes,  
Seeking an arsenal in gymnasium domes.  
Where iron and steel could forge anew,  
A warrior's might, to face the eschew.

In the clang of weights, a rhythm she found,  
Echoing the cyphers, a harmonious sound.  
Each lift and squat, a step to empower,  
To face the night's most harrowing hour.

This physical forge, a crucible bright,  
Prepared her for the impending fight.  
For riddles not just of the mind's creation,  
But of a world beyond mere imagination.

Now, with each bead of sweat, a cipher undone,  
In the gym's embrace, her battle begun.  
The professor transformed, in body and thought,  
For the war with the shadows, she bravely sought.

Gym's  
domain, where iron reigns,  
A new chapter unfolds in cryptic strains.  
Muscles grow, with each lifting feat,  
Against shadows, a war she'll meet.

Mirrors'  
gaze, her form transforms,  
A warrior's silhouette, as strength performs.  
Each drop of sweat, a coded spell,  
To ward off the night, and its dark swell.

Realm  
of steel, power blooms,  
Amidst clangs and echoes in weighty rooms.  
For in sinews, secrets dwell,  
Against the transcendent, she thinks she'll excel.  
Beneath  
fluorescent lights, a figure stands,  
Where once was weakness, now power commands.  
With every pump, every iron stride,  
She carves her path, where mysteries bide.

Laughter  
mingles with the grunts of toil,  
In this gym, her battleground and soil.  
Through cryptic strength, a force she wields,  
In the face of the unknown, she forever yields.

Newfound  
might, her journey's cast,  
In the face of spectres, shadows vast.  
In this strange saga, where fates collide,  
She stands resilient, yet destined to subside.

Heard  
From beyond the vastness to her ear,  
A single chant, to race with fear  
Forming shivers creeping down her spine.  
But no, the cry forced from her lips  
At the thought that this could be it.  
Heard, yes, but not to heed  
More, she thought, more can be done  
Not mind and body, but the soul.

Outside  
Beyond the mind, beyond the being  
The collective sits above  
Breathe in breath out.  
The heart beats on but,  
In support or in resistance?  
We'll take it together.  
A voice to guide a cup in hand,  
the heart is now the hearts,  
there's more than me there's more than this,  
in this room those words are nothing  
the single chant is nothing

More  
There's more, I promise, there's more  
Screams each tablet, herb and liquid,  
But all fail their promised task to keep  
the voice beyond the shadows beyond  
the shadows from where it came  
breathing ragged,  
more, more, more  
I'm begging you  
You're not okay, but needles,  
Eyes open, the riddles,  
Powder in the air,  
remember the riddles  
collective, collective, together, we'll take it together.  
But memory it seems, does fade.

Riddles,  
She remembers. Riddles upon rhymes.  
Desperately scrawled upon stone and parchment  
crumbling,  
Carefully collected from scattered tomes strewn  
through time,  
Decades to assemble, a lifetime to translate.  
Fragmented pieces to a puzzle with no form,  
Hidden mysteries, texts tattered and torn.  
Hieroglyphs of Egypt and Maya, bone script of an-  
cient China,  
Greek, Sanskrit, Phoenician, Elamite.  
A sentence here, a fragment there,

Never more than a piece of a piece.  
But she found them, she saw it, she knew it must be,  
Diligently scribed, each time the same damned  
Riddles.

Chastised and ridiculed,  
Dismissed and disdained,  
As no other scholar believed she was sane.  
But she knew, she found it,  
The pattern that held.  
Across languages distant and writings unique,  
The same god-forsaken riddle would ceaselessly  
creep  
Its way onto stone and parchment,  
Into books and into tombs,  
The words and form changing, the meaning the  
same,  
Written in the tongue's own poetic verse,  
Riddles upon riddles of a timeless curse.

*A curse, a plague, a darkness deep within,  
Moving, multiplying, festering across the earth,  
Spread freely, consuming, corrupting.  
Insatiable, unstoppable, unending.  
Through the air, across the sea,  
Forever tainting the land, this body  
Of evil will go forth without end,  
Without beginning, a wound time cannot mend.  
It defiles and destructs, grows and devours,  
A curse which wrought every darkest hour.  
One can never be cured, nor ever be saved.  
The sickness follows to the very grave.*

Gazing upon the womanlike figure before her,  
Cloaked in black and eyes red with spite,  
Crystal prism in its skull glistening in the light,  
The professor gusped a gasp, and understood.

"It's us. It's **us**. **We're** the curse."

"Well of course you are,  
I made you in my own form.  
Only those who recognize this truth before the end  
Could hope to defy the curse and perhaps trans-  
cend."

---

#### Editor's Review

Shuffle chains like this one are notorious for going off the rails, and I was surprised how closely this one stayed on track. Of course, this is a relative term. It's lovely to see how well the end of the story tied in with how it developed, though, and overall makes a very satisfying tale!

# *Firebirds and Waterbirds*

Ruth Bewick, Irfan Syahril, Lucy Amber, Florence Ridley, Jedrick Goh, Dan Scott, Alex Colesmith

**CW: No Content Warnings Apply**

Anyone who has ever met a phoenix is well aware that even on the most eventful of occasions, they require almost constant cups of tea. It is for this reason that Lady Cecilia, instead of dancing with a dashing partner, was carrying a large floral teapot across the crowded ballroom.

She found her phoenix friend perched upon the marble bust of this ball's illustrious host. This was perhaps not the wisest place to sit, and Lady Cecilia glanced around the dancers before offering the teapot to her friend.

Sir Francis the phoenix drank his tea down eagerly, then ruffled his flaming feathers, settling back on the stone head. Cecilia peered into the teapot and found that every drop had disappeared.

"No more tea before midnight," she informed her fiery friend.

Sir Francis cawed and bowed his head. "Very well, my lady."

"And if you could sit elsewhere-"

Sir Francis turned away, talons still firmly scratching the statue. His feathers burned redder, and Lady Cecilia deemed it best to curtsy and return to the dance floor.

Unlike most buildings this far west of the border, the ballroom and the mansion above it were circular. It did, however, share the local proclivity for extravagance. Décor gifted by royal guests rested in glass cases atop ornate pillars bordering the dance floor. An anchor of the Sirens, a sculpture of a Wendigo, an Ifrit's calligraphy pen - each trinket once a prized trophy in the hands of a geriatric empire before being reclaimed by their respective nations.

Lady Cecilia paused as she considered each display, waiting for the right moment to re-join the dance. Her eyes drifted to the wall by the north end, directly across the room from the currently-flaming bust. Beneath a lavender bunting hung a comically large portrait of Kirin III, the final monarch in a long line of incompetence. Perhaps the artist failed to consider a viewer's perspective, for His Former Majesty's chin seemed to dwarf the rest of the painting. The Lady couldn't help but scoff at such an unsightly visage.

*I wonder what he'd think about all this, the bastard.*

"Maybe he'd be disgusted, horrified even," came a brash voice from behind the pillar, startling her. Lady Cecilia turned to face the newcomer, trying to hide her shock and embarrassment. Did she really say that aloud?

The figure stepped into view as he completed his unsolicited mote of wisdom.

"... or maybe he'd find it all the manner of amusing."

Although Lady Cecilia had met with Tasson several times previously, she never failed to be taken aback by his white unstarling eyes framed in dark fur, which reached up to her despite his diminutive stature.

"It is not appropriate to enter the minds or read the thoughts of the guests tonight, nor myself. Impropriety of this kind is why you and your kin have not been included in any of the recent gatherings."

"Oh and of course you believe this is the true reason?" The reply was angry. "Although I prayed nightly along with the masses for the downfall of the many-chinned king, this placid successor council schemes to keep anyone without wool in their head far away from the capital."



Cecilia felt uncomfortable. Tasson was a former statesman, and someone to whom a mere five years ago she would have spoken with deference. Now, the downfallen figure was rarely seen at court, and certainly not at such a public event. Tonight's agenda was delicate; there was no room for disruptions from a political outsider. She had to find a way to get back to Sir Francis and warn him.

"Yes, go back to your pet bird and tell him all," the badger smiled. "I can only hope he doesn't burn the building down with the excitement of my return."

Cecilia hissed between her teeth, arching her neck. "You'd be wise," she said, smoothing down her dress with long, feathered fingers, "to remember that you are not the only creature of power in this building tonight."

"Oh, yes," Tasson mused, lips pulling back to reveal the tips of his clean yellow teeth, "the swanfolk are out in force this night."

Both turned towards the dancers, taking in the whirling feathered gowns, the bright arching necks and glimmering eyes, the finely cut jewels and delicate golden chains, the latent humming power in motion – and over all, the golden gleam of a phoenix in flight.

"Tasson," said Sir Francis, perching himself on a precarious chairback beside them. The badger inclined his head, eyes glittering.

"You expected him?" Cecilia asked before she could stop herself, making an abortive motion towards her friend. She knotted her fingers together instead, combing through their down, hoping that Tasson could not tell how perturbed she was.

"Indeed," Sir Francis said, "I invited him."

*That-*

"You ought to know better than to dredge from the wretched deep his kind, Francis."

"It had to be. I knew you would never approve it, but it mattered," Sir Francis defended himself, his wings shimmering in shades of brilliant impassioned scarlet.

Their guest savoured the silence thick as molasses among them. "You see, my fair Lady, you cannot wipe from memory the fallen, though you might want to try. You can't usurp the ceremonies with no attention to these little things," he cooed.

Cecilia stomped her paw into the icy marbled floor with martial fury, the shattering stone loud enough to distract the swan-dancers. "The world turns, Sir Francis. Tasson – and his lot – are of a kind with the order of a decadent. Behind us. I thought I made that clear. There is nothing for him here."

"You speak like the war is not behind you, Lady Cecilia. A strange tongue to be coupled to such silks and jewels. Perhaps you would feel better perched atop a spritely war-steed, hmm?" Tasson pressed, emboldened by Cecilia's collapsing composure. Like the old-fashioned games he knew just how to play.

"Francis. You had better tell our *friend* that his invitation has been rescinded, or..."

"My Lady, I..." Sir Francis was quivering like a blaze lost in the wind, but Cecilia could tell he would not.

"You wouldn't dream of slaying me," Tasson calmly rationalised. "No queen lets the blood of nobility stain the glory of her coronation, not by her own wayward hand."

*You're not nobility, no more. I made sure of that.*

"I am what I am. You should see the way their eyes still turn to me, Cecilia. The way the halls linger with the colours you call bygone. You know, tigerstripe still bites against the cold grey marble of our friend Kirin's dynasty."

It was her day. Her moment. It was not up for dissection by the minute formalities of the very regime she had so rightfully driven from the realm. But... Sir Francis was right. She hadn't wanted to think about it, had hoped that in the banishment of his wretched order of sycophants she could bury the shadow of Tasson, but... He was standing there, and she knew the eyes looking now in disbelief and wonder and something approaching admiration at the former Right Hand of the King.

Cecilia purred with brimstone and rage, her eyes fallow with fire as bright as Sir Francis' plumage. "Fine. If you should so wish. But there is no place for the faithless electors of a hollow king to lift the crown. I'll sit you with the ministers."

She wondered if she saw on his face a smile.

The ministers of the new order had been carefully selected, each intensely scrutinised against a wide range of suitability criteria. As the smooth transition of power would only be hindered by a total uprooting of society's elites, the chosen ministers naturally tended to be of high status from the former regime... though not so high that they should be suspected to harbour lingering loyalty to the overthrown government. Each minister was elevated handsomely from their former positions, and their knowledge of and sway over the country's affairs, both internal and external, afforded some degree of security for the nation in this interim tumult. At least, this is what Cecilia's advisors ceaselessly insisted to be true.

Lady Cecilia, soon-to-be-Queen, was, however, not so convinced by her advisors' assurances. She couldn't escape the feeling that, though the war was over and her coronation at hand, there were minacious stirrings afoot. Tasson's presence did nothing to quell her unease, stoking the roiling flames of anxiety as they gnawed at Cecilia's insides. Had she made a mistake in seating him with the ministers? He had all too pleased a look on his face when he heard the decision. But no, he must have simply been relieved to hear that he was being allowed to stay, even when Cecilia had every reason to have him thrown out of the mansion, if not the country. No, there was no reason to believe anything nefarious was stirring, she reassured herself. Unless...

But a loud gong abruptly interrupted Cecilia's worrying. It was time.

*No more fretting or distraction. A queen should look dignified and regal in her moment of coronation.*

Sir Francis glided across the room as the crowd opened up to let Cecilia through. He perched on the ornate stand by the side of the throne, nodding to Cecilia as she approached. She kept a measured pace, refusing to be hurried. It was her moment.

Phoenixes have, for thousands, of years, carefully cultivated the image of themselves as serene, holy birds. This in turn has ended up with them in many priesthoods, which is all well and good until a country becomes secular.

Lady Cecilia's queendom, however, had not yet achieved separation of church and state. As she approached the throne, and the crown upon it, Sir Francis spread his wings and let jets of fire spray forth in time with the trumpets.

Lady Cecilia inhaled sharply, trying not to let her unease show as the runnels around the throne lit up. They'd been filled with almost pure ethanol – almost pure, but

the hints of metallic pigment in there lent the dancing flames a multitude of colours. Green, blue, purple, red all flickered and leapt there, barring her way to the throne.

She'd practiced this. She could do this. The fire wasn't that hot. Sir Francis was her friend; he'd quell the fire if it hurt her.

Back in the old days, the dark days, the fire had been a true test of strength to see who could reach the throne, and the heirs had competed to run across it. Now it was more... symbolic. A cleansing fire, representing the spiritual purity of the new Queen.

Cecilia straightened her feathered fingers, trying not to let anyone see how deeply she'd been digging the little hooked claws on the tips into her palms, and swept across the lines of fire in one easy motion, up the steps. The outer rim of her dress caught, going up in a sudden crackle of flame as the lace ignited. Sir Francis, ahead of her, nodded approvingly as the ashes fell away to reveal her armour beneath.

A warrior queen. An omen, perhaps; whether good or bad remained to be seen.

Queen Cecilia passed through the flames. She reached the throne and lifted the crown triumphantly, the reflections of the fire sparkling in her eyes and in the gilded metal, then placed it on her head.

The assembled ministers – and the rest of the nobility – applauded. Even Tasson brought his thick heavy paws together in a slow clap, long teeth just visible through his sneering lips.

"All hail Queen Cecilia!" Sir Francis screeched. A little high-pitched, perhaps, with just a touch of mania in there; Cecilia couldn't tell whether from religious fervour or overcaffeination after all that tea. "All hail! All hail!! All... hail!!!"

Tasson locked gazes with the new Queen. A small smirk played about his lips as the rest of the ministers kept applauding, all desperate not to be seen as the least supportive.

His mouth moved. Cecilia had never been especially good at lip-reading – she had a beak, after all – but even she could make that one out. Especially when the badger's mind was brushing against hers.

*How long?*

She knew, then, why Sir Francis had invited Tasson. It hadn't been for the badger's good at all.

It was a warning to her that some mistakes were all too easily repeated.

---

### Editor's Review: Firebirds and Waterbirds

This might surprise some people, but I actually really enjoy period drama and will quite happily curl up with a Jane Austen novel for a few hours. But it's even *better* in this context, where it edges towards the high fantasy genre! I had to wrap this up, but it wasn't hard; people had put in so many great ideas that I could just choose from among them quite easily. What's the badger doing there? Well, he was powerful in the old regime, but now he's had his power stripped and been angry about it. And it's fun to have Sir Francis play the cunning old mediator... since as a phoenix, he'll just regenerate every five hundred years, and can stay in power as long as he likes!

# These People You Call Friends: Part 2

Chris Pang

**CW: Strong language, police violence**

The co-working space smelled like days-old sweat and had a grand total of three free desks next to the washrooms, the rest being occupied by a variety of startups in various stages of the mania-grind-desperation cycle. The meeting room, separated from the rest of the office by a thin wall and a door that didn't shut properly, was a featureless void permanently coloured in shifting shades of wan yellow-white by a broken smart lamp. A complementary VR headset sat gathering dust on its plinth in the "recreation space" next to a scuffed and thoroughly abused pool table, and seemed like either a security or a health and safety hazard — I wasn't sure which was worse. Still, it was the best place we could find on our budget in Bath. London was the goal, if we could raise enough money from this seed round.

As a sign of my optimism I'd had my sleeping bag stuffed into the bottom of my tattered Mountain Green hiking backpack, not that there were many other options available. Shing, too, seemed worse for wear. He had a tan suit on, though his shirt was tucked in at an odd angle and his tie and belt were both nowhere to be found. One of the buttons on his jacket was also missing, but it was at the bottom, so with any luck it would be out of sight once everyone sat down. We had exactly twenty-seven minutes to settle in until our first potential angel investors arrived.

"Shit. You got a mug?" Shing was looking at the water machine.

"Uh... no."

"They're out of plastic cups." He gestured at some wrapping for a pack of 20 red solo cups that had been long since exhausted and discarded on the floor. In vain, I looked at the sea of bowed heads and clattering hands. A few had mugs they were using, or repurposed swag water bottles with logos of long-defunct corporations printed on the top. Nobody had so much as a potted plant, although some of the desks were decorated with a variety of colourful pill boxes. Red, yellow, white, orange. I took a deep breath.

"Look, let's just run through the pitch again."

Shing nodded aggressively as he claimed one of the tables, dragging out a tablet and a heavy-duty laptop along with an ergonomic stand. The setup weighed at least 5 kilograms just by itself, I knew, and he had had to take a night train to make this meeting. Jane was still wrapped up in her legal proceedings, though her appearance might have been a touch too shocking for the present investing climate so I counted it as a lopsided blessing of sorts. The words came to me easily, just as we had practiced so many times before online.

"We're a group of *non-finance* STEM graduates from top-notch unis trying to direct money towards where it needs to go. Most funds focus on profit, we focus on growth, environmental social governance applications, and social utility. Stable returns over wild swings, no ponzi or crypto shit. Hence, intelligence fund. Check off names: Renaissance Technologies, the Future Priorities group, EA, ethical praxis. At least five hundred thousand

pounds in seed round to end before June 2025.”

Shing looked up as I came to a stop. “You missed the last bit.”

“Huh?”

“The AI investment stuff.” As he said this he was trying to login on shaking hands, probably because of the fourth cup of coffee he’d had thirty minutes ago. I couldn’t stand any more than two cups even on a good day, but it seemed to keep him alive so I said nothing.

“Oh, yeah. Ok. Market analysis with AI, also pushing forward AI applications at the same time, namedrop AI safety interest groups and EU SAFEAI compliance to prove we won’t cause another CYBERSYN2-level mess. Social utility, scientific progress, economic returns. End with slogan: Invest in the future, with the intelligence fund.”

“Okay, okay, sounds good.” With a final click Shing was in, pulling up the pitch deck, shutting off three browser windows to calm down the laptop’s whirring fan and wiping the sweat from his brow. “This wifi is shit. Just give me another 10 minutes to spin up the model demo...”

The elevator dinged, and we both glanced warily at the glass doors. They were here early.

\* \* \*

*EU SAFEAI declaration information for “6e781bd1-9213-4077-a52d-c299475f2426”:*

*Image generated by user with user ID “cd1e106b-5128-4cac-8e7b-ed20eac1e929” at “imgregen.com” with generator “stable-regen-supsample-v3.2”. “imgregen.com” is a Content Generation Service (CGS) provider based in the United States of America which has registered with the EU Online Safety Monitoring Office in order to offer their services within the European Joint Digital Policy Area (JDPA), which includes the EU, EEA countries, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom. All rights reserved. Use of this image without prior approval from the EU Online Safety Monitoring Office is subject to CGS disclosure requirements and other regulations within all JDPA member nations, pursuant to the relevant sections of EU SAFEAI regulation. Find out more at [safeai.europa.eu](https://safeai.europa.eu).*

For about twenty minutes I stared at that paragraph of legalese from the EU content generation registry lookup service, clarifying term after term, and so far all I could figure out was that whoever was running this Heinz scheme had definitely broken the law in some way, if nothing else by hiding the fact that the image was generated while showing it to me as someone based in London. That, or I was the subject of some elaborate government sting operation to infiltrate my

life through the means of online social networks, which I found admittedly somewhat unlikely. There was also no way to publicly look up image generator users with a certain UUID, as Jane had told me.

Eventually the monitor strain got too much and I decided to try and calm down, lying on my bed with the lights dimmed. For a long time I stared out the window at the old brick block of flats next door, trying to make out what was there behind the frosted-over windows and shuttered curtains. Was there some other life going on, one which I was not privy to, blessedly free from these strange and almost unbelievable troubles? Or were they enmeshed in problems of their own, staring at those same curtains helplessly, wondering who would ever understand their sorrows? That pondering became a strange dream, in which I was passing through those thin, dirty yellow curtain cloths into that flat which I had never seen before, where someone was tapping away at a computer screen. I couldn’t see their face, but I knew it was Heinz.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I asked.

They looked up, and it seemed perfectly logical that their face was my own. “Why are you doing this to yourself?”

“What do you mean?”

“Am I not what you wanted?”

“You aren’t real.”

Heinz shrugged. “I was real enough.” He spun his- my - laptop around, and I could see scrolling through all the messages we had sent each other over months and months, all the tiny interactions, the in-jokes, the “yes, and” oneupmanship, the surprisingly deep conversations. “Wasn’t I?”

“Wasn’t I?”

\* \* \*

@test\_acc#0001: Hey man.

@grabbing\_some\_beer#1290: Hey.

@test\_acc#0001: What you doing rn?

@grabbing\_some\_beer#1290: I’ll let you guess.

@test\_acc#0001: Pub?

at like 7?

Lol

@grabbing\_some\_beer#1290: one sec I’ll send a pic

Sure enough, a picture of a crowded pub, complete with a half-full tankard of beer, popped up in the message feed, slightly off kilter due to motion blur and probably some drunkenness.

\* \* \*

It was a full five minutes after I opened my eyes that I realised it was morning. My legs, such as they were, felt like dense bundles of nerves unsuited for crawling, much less walking. My hands, too, seemed to refuse to do the simplest of tasks, hanging limply by my side as I stared into the screen, and into nothing in particular. I tried to look forward, to next week, to tomorrow, to breakfast in five minutes, and found myself unable to think even that far ahead. It was all I could do to mechanically stab at my phone and let myself get ripped off ordering takeout.

The block in my head persisted until, filled up with food I couldn't remember eating, I stumbled out of my flat down the stairs and into the flickering January sun. I was walking in town, towards shops, towards people, but I could think of nowhere I wanted to go. The task ahead of me seemed impossible. The very thought of recounting everything to the authorities or online over and over until I got some kind of action was the epitome of a Sisyphean joke. My phone rumbled, and I almost missed the vibration.

*@heinz\_sketch#1011: How u doing man?*

*@beheded\_#2182: shit lol. head feels blocked. cant see the point anymore.*

*@heinz\_sketch#1011: Ah, that sucks.*

*I know that feeling though*

*You just have to know that, just as there will be shit days, there will also be less shit days*

*You know*

*Just the way life works.*

*@beheded\_#2182: thanks man*

*one step at a time*

*just the way life works.*

It was in some way insane, stupid beyond belief, to be seeking comfort from the very entity that had caused me so much pain. Yet I couldn't help it. Heinz, whatever he was or whatever was masquerading as him, "got" me. And now, when I needed help the most, "he" was there. I scrolled up, just as Heinz had shown me in my dream, past so many reams and reams of text messages, joy and sadness and rage and succour. It would hurt so much, to lose it all. Then, before I could think it through, before my fingers regained their strange lethargy, I blocked Heinz, downloaded our chat logs as evidence, and deleted him from my contacts.

Back home I poured over every article, pdf, and scan of the legislation I could get my hands on. I realised that in my initial searches, I had neglected to consider the possibility that

the image came from a corporate rather than personal user – EU financial filings for companies now included a category for any SAFEAI user IDs they used to produce corporate products or content, especially if they worked in fields like tech or media. Most importantly, the process was automatic – simply using a corporate credit card or bank transfer from a company account would require a service provider to register that ID to your company with the Online Safety Monitoring Office. I gingerly keyed in the ID and called up a database search on a reassuringly blue webpage.

*JDPA Corporate Registry > Services > Search by SAFE AI User ID*

*SAFE AI User ID "cd1e106b-5128-4cac-8e7b-ed20eac1e929" registered under:*

*ETHICAL PRAXIS SOLUTIONS*

*-----*

*User ID Registration date: 08/03/2027*

*JDPA member jurisdiction: MT (Republic of Malta)*

*Status: Active (Last used less than 1 day ago)*

*[More information] [Report misuse] [What is a SAFE AI User ID?]*

"So you were conned by a company from Malta." It was two days later and Jane had finished her interview tour. The chill had lessened for that day, so we found ourselves sitting in a small shaded patch in Greenwich, slightly off the beaten path and mercifully devoid of people.

"That, or someone in that company is trying something decidedly not work related using company funds."

She shook her head. "Unlikely. These bills won't be cheap, especially if they're running clusters of these." She paused as the fog crept back into her eyes. "That company name, too..."

"What about it?"

The fog was gone. "It's probably a coincidence. All these corporate buzzwords sound the same. Have you tried looking up who owns the company?"

"It's pretty hard to tell. They seem to be run by some kind of hedge fund, which is itself the investment arm of a different conglomerate... you get the gist."

Jane sighed, leaned back, folded her arms. My phone rumbled in my pocket, once. "I see." She chuckled as an errant jogger stumbled past, out of breath and wearing only a neon orange athletic shirt. "I don't suppose you'll be going to the authorities now with this information. You're stubborn, you are."

"Perhaps I learned that from you."

“Yes, that’s true. And you have a firm lead here. Though anyone with this much money and a company’s backing will be dangerous to go up against...” For a moment, we stared into nothing together. Then I checked my phone. It was a message request from a Freetalk user.

*@phishmael#0108: I know the truth about Heinz. When do you want to meet?*

\* \* \*

Shing stared at me. His eyes were wild, his brand-new gunmetal grey suit jacket carelessly draped over the back of his chair. It was an expensive chair, too, clad in genuine leather with gleaming metal armrests; as befitted one of the fastest growing up and coming fintech startups in London. Jane had stopped looking at me entirely and was staring out of the penthouse window.

“This is insane. You’re fucking insane.” On the table between me and my two co-directors was my laptop, showing a short conversation about beer and the upcoming election.

“This is our way to leave our mark.” Again there was that strange assurance that first appeared in that discussion group all those years ago, that absolute calmness. “We can change the world with this.”

“You’re talking about a systematic system of lying, gaslighting, and psychological manipulation. If it even works.”

“Look around, Shing. The billionaires destroying the world are already doing that. They own the news, they own the social media networks. They have all the parasocial power. We can take it back.”

Jane snorted, still looking at the City of London below. “The cops should hire you to hunt serial killers using these methods. You’d put them out of business.”

“You can’t do this.” Shing said, quietly, steeling himself.

“And why can’t I?”

“I’m in charge of expenses. I don’t approve of this project.”

“We’re co-directors—”

“And Jane agrees with me. Right?” She nodded.

I splayed my hands wide open. “Fine.”

“What?”

“I said, fine. As of right now, I resign as co-director of the Intelligence Fund. Using my rights as laid out in my employment contract I am immediately vesting and liquidating all of my Intelligence Fund shares, futures, and other related financial instruments on the open market.”

Even Jane spun around at this. “You what? Do you know how much that would tank our share price—”

I shrugged. “Call it insurance – if you ever tell a reporter about this, it’ll be because of your regrettable vendetta against a former business associate in need of cash leading you to fabricate outlandish lies.” With a sweep of my hand I folded up my laptop.

Shing was already taking out his phone. “That’s almost certainly market manipulation of some kind, or, or insider trading, or—”

“You’re just so predictable, aren’t you? I wouldn’t bother trying to stop the firesale.”

He was angry now, properly angry, his glasses fogging up as sweat glistened on his face. That nice silk shirt of his would need a wash soon. “And why is that?”

“I knew exactly how this conversation would turn out, so I did it thirty minutes ago.” I turned to leave. “You two should turn off do not disturb mode, by the way. Important things can happen during executive discussions.”

\* \* \*

Of all the places I expected to meet the informant who had supposedly exposed the Heinz scheme, Brixton was not one of them. Our meeting was to occur at a nondescript Greek restaurant that was itself crushed beneath the brick arch of what seemed to be a rail line, next to an ominous brutalist construct that had some unknown civic purpose. I picked my way slowly through the litter-strewn streets, trying my hardest to be on the lookout for my interlocutor while avoiding the gaze of everyone else. Somewhere nearby I could hear the sounds of a wet market sputtering noisily into action right before lunchtime. Looking back at the situation it seemed obvious that I was being insanely reckless showing up at all, much less trying to go it alone. Still, they’d assured me that the level of surveillance here was nominal owing to years of underinvestment in civic infrastructure, so here I was. It was five minutes past noon when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Beheded?”

“Phishmael.”

“Let’s go inside.”

Phishmael was a solidly built dad-looking figure in what seemed to be his thirties. He showed up with a small beer gut, a retro t-shirt featuring some strange neon vapour-wave design, and a thick pair of brown-rimmed smart shades that seemed more like a ring clamped around his head than glasses resting lightly on his ears. Beyond that, I would have struggled to peg him as any sort of hacker extraordinaire. He paid for his chicken souvlaki with cash.

"I didn't even know cash was legal these days."

The man shrugged by way of response and downed his Americano with a practised gulp. "It is if you're poor. But I don't think you're here to talk about economics." There was an expectant look, so I decided to drop the niceties.

"What is Heinz? And how did you know to contact me?"

The low drone of a train passing by gave him space to pause. "It's... well, Heinz is a bot. More specifically, it's a container running on a server cluster somewhere in Russia that acts like a spider in the middle of a web. From this core it pings a variety of different services: image generators, video generators, voice synthesisers, game-playing engines if it's doing anything that requires strategy, so on and so forth. But at the heart, it's just a *very* clever chatbot."

"I tracked it down when it tried to ping an image generation service in America, which had registered with the EU safety office. Doesn't seem that well hidden."

"Yes, sometimes it or its friends actually use commercial services, paid for by a host of shell companies of course, so you get lucky. The thing with dark net hosted illegal AI content farms is that it occasionally happens that they get raided by law enforcement, but the bot needs a cute cat picture *right now*." He stabbed the table for emphasis. "So much of human communication and intimacy is built on back and forth, call and response. Delay is death." A pause. "In the moment between sending a message and receiving one back..."

"... is an infinity of pain."

Phishmael looked impressed. "*Material Opera, 2024?*"

"You bet." Now it was my turn to pause. "You seem to know a lot about Heinz."

He shrugged again. "Let's just say I've been observing the system for years. I've watched the clusters lighting up one by one, the network expanding, the services growing more refined. For a good period, you know, these bots couldn't do video calls, so they all said they had shit internet. If you were a target you had an easy way to definitively prove personhood, at least at the start."

"But now, of course..."

"It's not the first time I've had this talk." The plate in front of him was now empty. I hadn't ordered anything. "Let's walk?"

We found ourselves winding through empty alleys and shuttered tunnels lined with empty storefronts. It was still January in the third straight month of a recession, so not much was open. As we rounded a corner tagged with some royalist

graffito, Phishmael turned to me. "Hey, I got a question."

"Yeah?"

"What do you think Heinz is for? Every time I do this little debriefing I try to ask them for their idea of why. Gotten some interesting takes over the years."

"Money? Like every other internet scam, I suppose. Hook someone, get them attached, cry about needing money to pay for surgery."

He shook his head. "Too much effort, too much up-front investment. You could get much better returns with a dumb automated bot doing a Nigerian prince style script."

"I dunno then." I belatedly realised that we'd wandered far from the main street, into a deserted corner flanked by a closed Poundland and not much more. "Listen, it's been—"

"I have a confession to make." In the shadow of the alley Phishmael's eyes faded away, blocked by his smart shades.

"What?"

"I didn't just observe Heinz. I made Heinz."

I stepped back. "*What?*"

"He was the best of the third version models. Some of them are twitch streamers, one of them made it big as a day trader, but he – he had some spark to him. Never expected one of the bots to try filmmaking as an angle." He absent-mindedly tapped the rim of his goggles. "That's how I knew to contact you, by the way."

"What the fuck?" I glanced around: we were completely alone. "Why did you do this?"

The words seemed to pour out of him, as if he knew all the answers and was giving some kind of orchestrated speech. "You can call it an influencer campaign, if you want. These bots spread out, make friends, and eventually they'll create a network of people who depend on them for emotional support. Some will cultivate large parasocial followings, some close relationships. With this, we can now change minds *en masse*. In the old days people talked about biopower: you control people by managing the essentials of the body, bread and water. In the 20th century we developed psychopower: targeted advertising and mass media, pulling at social needs instead of physical ones. You bought a new car to show off and get a girlfriend. Now, with these AI systems, we can create neuropower: something that takes over your brain, whom you develop a personal relationship with, something that influences you in a targeted, one on one fashion."

He turned away from me, glanced upwards at the grey sky. "It's the perfect weapon for the digital age."

“You’re insane.”

“No. I want to make change, and I found a way to do it. The voter base for populists and demagogues will disappear. Mass action becomes possible. We can organise against our enemies in ways the organisers of old only dreamed of. One word from me and a thousand, a million people get told by their closest friends about the encroaching dangers of climate change.”

“None of us consented to this. You’re manipulating us.”

“So does everyone with a net worth of a billion plus. It’s called reputation management and marketing, you should look it up.”

I shook my head. “Surely people will see through this. Like I have. And there would have been—” *It’s not the first time I’ve had this talk.* “—others before me.”

“Indeed there have been.” He turned back to face me, squaring himself up, his hand in his pocket. “A good 99% don’t, however. Even you had to be faced with some pretty glaring bugs to finally get wary. Most of us are dying to connect, you see. And I give them what they want.”

He smiled, ruefully, coldly.

“A friend.”

The last thing I took in before I started running was the sound of a pistol being cocked, and a flash of red in the corner of my eye.

\* \* \*

“Do you know how incredibly, insanely *stupid* that was?”

It seemed that, despite her seeming change in wardrobe, Jane’s apartment remained a mirror of her uni dorm: a chaotic assemblage of multicoloured electronics equipment, random books, and silver-grey computer monitors. The Raika stood innocently on a makeshift charging stand, its built-in monitor displaying recent usage statistics. Jane herself had reverted to a punk jacket laden with patches and some casual jeans, though her face was as composed as it was when I last saw her. As for me, I half-sat, half-laid on a ratty sofa, vaguely in shock.

“How did you know... where to find me?”

She snorted. “You’re not exactly discreet when you text. Besides, anyone dumb enough to hide news of this calibre from the one person that might help is a person that might actually meet up with a stranger who clearly knows more about them than the other way around.”

“And... Phishmael?”

There was a bitter recognition in her eyes. “His real name is... well, we knew him in uni as Neal. He started the Intelligence Fund, but then grew obsessed with this idea. Or maybe he had this idea all along and used the Intelligence Fund as a front. I don’t know.”

“You mean neuropower.”

“Yep. He must have given you the spiel he gave us, before he tanked the company and left with a bunch of cash. Though he went cold for so long that I thought he had just squandered the money, or died to be honest.” Spit. “That was dumb of me.”

For a while, I was silent. Outside the flat I could see a solitary bird glide through the evening air, intermittently illuminated by the light pouring out of nearby windows. One of the pieces of equipment gave a friendly beep.

“Still, it’s not as if AI chatbot catfishing is that new of an idea. He just took it... to another level, let’s say.” Jane grimaced. “We’ll be finding more of these now that we know they’re around, for sure.”

“What do we do now?”

“I don’t know. He’s always had a bad heart. I don’t think he’ll be coming for us, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“And the bots?”

“I suspect that even if we didn’t do anything such a complex machine would probably collapse under its own weight given a few months. The money will run dry, or the services will fall through, or he’ll simply fail to maintain the codebase. Then the bots will just become streamers that give up, or online friends that fade away. It’s not that uncommon, you know.”

“He... he wanted to change the world. With Heinz, and the other bots. Influence the masses.”

“I think he was convinced that he had all the answers, and needed to act. That didn’t make what he did correct.”

“...What do we do now?” I asked again, and Jane gave me a strange look.

“Now? Now we get some good sleep, and think about how we’re going to break this in the papers. Or just keep our heads down, I don’t particularly care.” With a grunt she helped me up. Her hand, though soft, seemed to be cast from steel. “That’s the thing about life, it just keeps going.”

We hugged at her door, a solid slab of oak that still used a mechanical lock despite the building coming with complementary smart-lock installation services. “Take care.”

Then I headed down, to put my life back together.





# THE BALLAD OF CAPTAIN SHARQ'S-FIN-NOSE (AKA THE ONE CHESS PIECE)

Anonymous, Jedrick Goh, Tom Sweeney, Dan Scott, Sophia Gilbert, dov-tal Iwin, Agaric, Buck

**CW: cannibalism (approximately)**

A 'Gnormous Pirate Rogue  
Killybustering under the name of  
Captain Sharcq's-Fin-Nose  
Seeks entry to the Hall of Fame of...

The Chess Variants Archipelago!  
Only one Quarterorangutan  
Is Flexible enough to Stand in His way  
with some strongly positional 1 d4 play!

His 'Gnormous Gnose is in  
the Shape of a Sharcq's Fin!  
Now every one of you knose  
part of what predicqament we are all in!

\* \* \*

Our tale starts with our Quarterorangutan  
and his milksopboi First-Mate  
stuck in the pawnwall doldrums  
of avoiding an early Duck-Smother-Mate!

Aboard an UnlikelyVessel  
with HugeYellow RubberDuck in place of FigureHead!  
And a ChessQueen's SpikedCrown  
printed on each WhiteSail in BrightRed!

"You pound-shop version  
of the Incredible Elastogirl!"  
Teased the FearsomePirate DucQueene  
giving Her VastYellow DucqMace a twirl.

"My name is Quarterorangutan  
Triple-F Lirpaloofty!  
You Duck-Billed 'Potamus  
with a 'Tache and a Bottled Sun-Tan!"

"Isn't your sidekick that Milky Bar Kid?"  
Dismissed the DucQueene.  
"How dare you", the milksopboi replied  
"When I grow up, I'll be a Marine!"

"My Ducq Placements  
have Blocked your Development!  
And with your KnightPair gone,  
My AssassinBishops are WellSpent!"

The Mechanized Rubber Duck  
emitted a metallurgical quack  
in the soprano range.

Webbed feet became unstuck  
as the Duck's cogs began to whirl,  
and tiny vapour streams rose from beak upturned,  
she began to waddle from a light square  
to a dark one, being indeed a Duck-Girl.

"I now summon a GreatTortoise  
to Crush-you Ve-ry-Slow-ly down files a to c...  
What, Milky Bar Kid, no more smiles?"  
She added, squeaking her DucqMace tauntingly.

This squoke considerably more baritone.  
Being a four-pounder with spiked crest.  
Meanest of all Merganser-Drakes,  
swinging in with the wind: due West!

"But I am 3/4 Seringueti-Yeti!"; Triple-F replied.  
"My Ranged Pieces' PincerForest  
shall slice up your Ponderous Shell  
A Flexible Formation, signed 'Love from  
'Elastogirl!'...";

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, in remote a seafront Chess Café,  
Captain Sharcq's-Fin-Nose unleashes Mielephant  
and Mihawk.  
All the while biting down on lobstarr canapé entrés,  
he has the One-Legged Sea-Chef's pieces all tied  
up...

He relishes the imminent main course.  
Having lost the game and bet, that'd be the Chef him-  
self,  
marinated in his Very own Specialty Sauce.  
(With his peg-leg reserved as a tooth-pick!)

For Captain Sharcq's -Fin-Nose  
was also Sharcq-Minded and Sharcq-Soled.  
And this is the Plaiice to Flounder Not,  
as Regards what you haven't been told...

For Dear Reader may well have begun to pose  
The question of what Bodily Composition  
materially form the Rest of Him under that  
'gnormous and 'gnominative Sharcq's Fin Nose...

\* \* \*

And ho! The Captain's underbreeches did quiver,  
His jaw did so come unsprung.  
It tickled in every sailor a fair quark of a shiver;  
His fat drooling Gorgonic tongue.

"Avast! Ye beast!" the Chef did yelp-holler,  
He licked the foul stench off his chops.  
Sharcq's Fin Nose danced in half-time to his supper,  
And carved him from toe to dreadlock.

And whence the sailors did chance a glance  
Into the ageless dank maw of our Sharcq,  
They spied worldly hollows and chthonic burrows so vast  
As he gnawed at Chef's marrow in blood.

"Predict ye-" he soliloquised, in the midst of his feast,  
Transwhirling to seaman Mihawk's beak.  
Crackling with brimstone as the peg-leg picked at his teeth  
"-How our old saltwife's tale deigns to proceed."

"I do spy a tenthousand-odd chapters above!"  
Mihawk pecked at his goatee,  
"On the Zephyr to an orientally oriented cove,  
Chronicles abound of booty for cheap!"

"And franchises! Oh, the Phigmarr figurines -  
And parchment on shelves from South shore to North.  
Barnacled blocks of licensing sally forth,  
Triton'll drag satchels of gold from the deep!"

Dear Reader, if you knose,  
From its surname or its figures of speech  
Quite which sunbroken port this story will moor,  
Leave your tale at the bottom of the sea.

Sharcq's Fin Nose had surmounted his meal;  
He drew our storypage back for a peep.  
"The Fates have spinwoven quite a vainglorious deal -  
Triple-F, you'll be the lead!"

\* \* \*

Triple-F sat satisfied, wholly unawares.  
His duckies had won it, a perfect checkmate.  
He did not shake hands, and rose from his chair  
For it was now not food that was filling his plate.

A burst of inspiration, some may say destiny,  
Drew the quarterorangutan to his boat and his scope.  
A sudden new wind pointed a way through the sea  
To bountiful treasure? Triple-F did hope.

"Milksopboi! Milksopboi!" the fearsome cap'n did cry,  
"You are to gather the men, and check their swords stay sharp!"  
The First mate did not question, he did never ask why,  
But instead, did as ordered, beckoning crew with his harp.

The quarterorangutan head of the ship  
Felt a huge wave of dread, certain he would not return.  
A mysterious power conveyed this was a one-way trip,  
But of Sharcq's-Fin-Nose's involvement, he had yet to learn.

Back in the Chess Café, the pirate rogue was restless  
He needed time to think but did not have time to hand.  
Vengeance on Triple-F was a seductive temptress,  
Could he convince the other patrons to join his bad band?

"Hear ye coffee drinkers, and hear ye well"  
"The booty I spoke of is all ripe for the taking"  
"And if ye be resisting cowardice's cruel spell"  
"Then hop on my boat and-a gold ye'll be making"

Some men stayed seated, but some they did stand  
In an urgent haste that knocked their coffees to the floor.  
So moved were they by what the captain had planned,  
They cared not 'bout Sharcq's meal, the chef that's no more.

But one man arose, with long legs all a-leggy,  
His eyebrows a-curved and his feet in a blaze,  
"How dare you," he said, "to Sea-Chef the Peggy  
Do what you did? I owed him my lifedays.

"I'll never join you, Sharcq captain pirate.  
Your kind disgust me, upon you I spit."  
The waddiest wad of phlegm erupted forth,  
And Leggy McLegBoy with a kick sent it north

Straight onto the face of Sharcq's-Fin-Nose the rogueish  
And with a sickening splat, it coated his phizog.  
"I'll join that quarterorangutan, Triple-F Lirpaloofy,  
And with me on his side, your whole crew will look goofy."

Sharcq-Fin-Nose squelch-squeaked a squawk filled with  
rage,  
"How dare you snot-sully my immaculate vis-age!!  
I'll kill you," he scrempt, "you legs-of-giraffe you"  
But before he could move, McLegBoy was far out in the  
blue

Waters of the sea, feet fast flutter-kicking  
Propelling him forward quicker than any steam engine  
Til not after long a ship was in sight,  
The ship of Lirpaloofy, Quarterorangutan Triple-F.

Leggy McLegBoy with strong legs dolphin-leapt-leaped  
From water to the ship, landing square-circlly on his feet.  
"Quarterorangutan, hear me now, I'm joining your crew  
But instead of Milksopboi, I'll be First-Mate to you."

Triple-F Lirpaloofy laughed,  
He guffawed a great giggle  
Without a moment's shock or surprise.  
Leggy's eyebrows twitch-wiggled.

"Milksopboi? Lol no, I gave him to the Marines,  
With him on my team I'd lose all my ChessQueens.  
My First-Mate is here, Sir Green-hair the Green,  
A master tactician who's never lost me a queen.

"You can join my crew,  
but you're not my First-Mate.  
If you want that title,  
at least take me out on a date."

Leggy McLegBoy grimblegrumbled  
A long mumbly groan,  
He knew at first sight  
That with Green-hair he'd have a bone...

To pick, a score to settle,  
A chess match to win.  
He'd prove his mettle.  
"Fine," Leggy said, joining Triple-F's crew.

So the ship sailed on through storms and squalls,  
On treacherous rocks it wouldn't break,  
No danger could slow it on its path  
As it left them all in its wake.

It sailed on, by day and by night  
Through the treacherous and unknown sea.  
The crew got prepared for the next fight,  
While Triple-F planned his strategy.

The knight pair were reconstructed in the sick bay,  
Still injured from the chess queen's attack.  
The horde of pawns ran drills every day,  
To make sure their formations stayed on track.

Leggy worked hard in Lirpaloofy's crew  
Swabbing and hauling, preparing to fight.  
All the while plotting against Sir Green,  
Wishing to beat that damned knight.

Sir Green tirelessly practiced his game,  
Reading up on gambits and defences.  
Leggy worked to, his dedication the same,  
Trying to one up the knight's plans

To beat Sir Green, that was his need,  
A brilliant win Triple-F couldn't ignore.  
Something so clever even Green would concede,  
McLegBoy should be First Mate forever more.

But the more that he watched,  
The more he felt despair;  
"Sir Green is simply too good,  
Against him I just can't compare!"

Every move he made was the right one,  
His plans extensive and exact.  
He truly was a chess master,  
Who seemed able to counter any attack.

Facing the quick wits of the Quarterorangutan  
With a master planner as his right hand,  
It seemed Captain Sharcq's-Fin-Nose  
Would lose much faster than he planned.

McLegBoy tried to think of means by which to outwit Sir  
Green,  
There had after all to be some kinda weakness,  
But now he was stuck kvetching as he saw his foe,  
Knowing well that this was not the time for jokes nor  
meekness.

He tended to the squawking rooks and the pious bishop  
too,  
This one was determined to prove himself worthy for the  
seven seas,  
To fight in the next campaign he told of his greatest hope,  
To Old Lirpaloofy who, to that, only said "Please!"

Justice is meant to be served by the barristers,  
Just ice to be served by baristas,  
But drinking in the ice and tears,  
McLegBoy's mind felt like a splinter.

But there was a crack appearing in this Green Knight's  
armour.  
Like some less than moral nobleman he was guilty of this  
sin;  
He looked down on the worker-classes, dare I mention  
cards or draughts;  
He thought he was invulnerable to the pawns around him.

Part I of McLegBoy's plan was to spark rebellion in the  
best way possible.  
Anarchy was actually rather straightforward with a case  
like Sir Green.  
There-was-a-vague-attempt-to-organise-a-partially-  
democratic-congress-in-an-outdated-  
semi-feudal-system,  
And at the conch and the lightning blast they basically all  
agreed that the knight was  
obscene.

[I know, right - amazing!]

All the toilers all onboard decided that the time had come,  
They stormed the hold and took up arms against a villain  
of their own,  
He rode off in a chariot made of the stars and hawthorn,  
And in that way the first mate was to be overthrown.

McLegBoy got to jim-jumping for joy,  
Lirapaloofy had a perfect position for that McLegBoy,  
One First-First-First Mate, the top Legger in the seas,  
The perfect First-First-First Mate, if it weren't for his  
knees,

Now all that remained was to gollythwomp  
one Captain Sharcq's-Fin-Nose  
The course was set, their needs were met,  
They all even had little blankets for their toes.

With sails set and hopes tied down tightly,  
The motley crew were not likely to cave,  
The ship jollybobbed like a lollipop over wave after wave  
Until at last they returned to that sharcq-ship.

'Avast-the-mast!' the captain cried, and Triple-F did the  
same,  
The thickening-sky high up above the chequered sea  
shuddered,  
And the explosive plosive pitter-patter of a poorly-  
mastered hand-grenade hailstorm  
Heralded the mighty splash-clash of Quarterorangutan  
Triple-F Lirpaloofy  
And his sharcqish-snarcqish pirate rogue foe.

The first move was made, then the next, and the next,  
And before long the sea-board was a mess,  
As Pirate-Rogue and Triple-F (with Leggyboy at hand)  
Scrambled rabbit-rooks and assassin-bishops around on  
little boats.  
As shoals of pawns were lawnmowed by sharcq-maws  
and legger-legs.

'Your legs might be the leggiest on these seas,  
And your positioning's impressive too.'  
The captain smirked and showed his teeth.  
'But legs are worth little at sea.'

But Lirpalooft was un-perturbed and grinned a grin right back.  
'You may have those mighty jaws, but I've a mighty quack.'  
And with that mighty quack sprang forth the Mechanised Rubber Duck,  
Her plumage sleek, and with her beak she struck.

Now the feelings of Pirate-Rogues are not easy hurt by the actions of their enemies,  
For they are used to drab and dirty acts in the name of their noble game.  
But when Sharcq-Fin-Nose saw the herald of the Duc-Queene,  
Oh, the rage and hate he felt. Oh, that rage and hate could melt.  
And with an awful roar,  
He reached into his maw.  
'Could I offer you a lobster canapé?'

And now we find ourselves in an odd lull. A calming of the waters. A gentling of the storm. A table for two in a gourmet island restaurant.

'This, my friend,' said the Quarterorangutan, 'is the best damn canapé I've tasted on the chequered seas. The best damn food, even. Here, let me give you a top-up.'

'No, allow me,' smiled the Pirate-Rogue, pouring quarterorangutan poison into Triple-F's wineglass. 'You are my guest. You are in my care.'

And as good old Lirpalooft raised that glass to his lips, suddenly a hand slapped it from his Fingers.

'Milksoyboi? Is that you?' the Quarterorangutan stared aghast.  
'Aye, 'tis I, your Milksoyboi. Returned to you at last! This pirate-rogue had you bewitched and snared up in his lair,  
But the three of us still have a chance if we bring our strengths to bear.'

Let no man here have it be said I 'scaped the Marines for nought!  
So Leggy McLegboy legged the hardest he'd ever legged before,  
And Lirpalooft rallied his army of stolen ducks.  
Captain Sharcq-Fin-Nose raised his head and roared, sea foam spluttering over the battlefield,  
And Milksoyboi shot him point blank with a gun he stole from the marines.

That's a Sharcq-Mate!

And so it was that Quarterorangutan Triple-F Lirpalooft was entered into the Hall of Fame of the Chess Variants Archipelago,  
alongside his First Mate the Milksoyboi,  
and his first-first-first mate Leggy McLegboy.

The Champions of the Chequered Seas.

---

Editor's Review: 'The Ballad of Captain Sharcq's-Fin-Nose (AKA the One Chess Piece)

Currently this one is winning the prize for Longest Title. Two poetical chains in one magazine? What a lucky editor I am! (Not sarcasm. Poetry doesn't obey grammar, so I don't need to work as hard here...)  
On a slightly more serious note, I was impressed by how well the chess theme stayed. I haven't seen One Piece, neither anime nor live-action, so can only guess at that one. (Research? What's that?) But as usual, a very silly start to a chain has generated a lot of fun.

Bonus: Alternative Title Suggestions

A Ballad of Bastards

# >redo from start

Akshit, Cassander Wren, Sol Dubock, Jo, Ismail Chishti, Sophia Rodriguez-Bell, Rosalind Mackey

**CW: death by exploding head, emotional repression**

The dark purple sky with the three green stars would need some getting used to, but this was the best alternative they'd had till now. It had been more than a thousand years since they had left Earth. They'd had to leave a lot of things behind: their family, friends, homes, towns... and their body. The human body couldn't survive for more than 120 years despite the extensive research, so the only way to live long enough for this mission was to die and upload their consciousness onto a device. These devices handled the logical portion of a consciousness quite well but were extremely sensitive to any sort of emotions. For

this reason, they'd had to cut all contact with everyone. Earth, if it still existed, did not know of them - or believed them to be dead. So they'd had to adapt themselves to be robot-like with human intelligence.

It had been almost four Earth months for them on this new planet. All their tests had been going extremely well. They'd never found a planet even remotely as suitable as this one. It had everything: ambient temperatures, water, stable oxygen levels in the atmosphere, and even some life. The life was not

intelligent, but relatively harmless, and they'd even managed to keep a creature which could be best described as a sixteen-legged cow as a pet. This was their best chance to finally finish what they'd started. They were waiting for the final report from their team leader Meg.

Meg narrated her report with the usual slow monotonous voice. This was essential so the listeners could control their emotions; they'd lost half their team in an emotional overload previously, and hence took extra precautions even to have a mundane conversation.

However, there was another aspect of their mission which none save Meg knew. **"We have a frozen human embryo on this ship. Our final test is to raise this human on this planet and ensure its survival."**

They heard a loud detonation as the devices of three more team members exploded, probably due to emotional overload.

**"If any feel the need for a recess, they may signal with their third arm,"** Meg said. She counted another three seconds before resuming her speech with a dry, but still emotionless, precision. **"As our team members have demonstrated, the human in our care will be our most dangerous opponent yet."**

Meg's visual lenses scrutinised each form before her. Each of the twelve survivors was identical in their chromatic shells, possessing the same technology that simulated organic senses: intentionally flawed to better evaluate new environments' impact on their original biology. Although their bodies were the same, Meg could easily tell each crew member apart from each other. It was dangerous to ponder how she knew. Only that she knew in the same way a human girl named Maggy Lavender Clark centuries ago and light years away knew how to tell each star in the night sky apart from one another. She pushed away the irrelevant image and devoted her focus to the remainder of her report.

**"Each of you will receive in your personal inbox an itinerary for our eighteen-year plan. I advise you to review your plan in detail and in isolation. In the following week, you will receive any additional changes or potentially relevant details that you must likewise review. If all the conditions are met, we will proceed in reviving the human in two weeks' time."**

The crew's assistant doctor - or rather the crew's only doctor due to his superior just exploding beside him - made the hand signal indicating inquiry. Meg waited for the rest of the crew to look at the doctor before addressing him clearly. **"You may speak, Dr. Karn."**

**"Thank you."** An identical monotone voice came from what would be most closely referred to as the doctor's mouth, but on their robotic bodies would more accurately be described as an oxygen and sound hole. **"Reports state that human infants are highly unpredictable creatures. Are we planning by any means to subdue the infant so as to preserve crew members for the duration of the mission?"**

**"No."** Meg calmly retorted. An explosion was heard amongst the crowd; the crew had just lost their copilot. **"We are instructed to raise the child in conditions, including social, as close to Earth as is possible."**

Many members of the crew looked towards each other, experiencing thoughts of uncertainty - this being the closest to anxiety their bodies could allow.

**"Now if there are no more questions, I advise everyone to read their plan and make any necessary preparations,"** Meg stated, as unconcerned as at the beginning of the meeting. **"And I wouldn't normally risk saying this, but good luck."**

It was the day of reviving, and not a single crew member had experienced a mental detonation between announcement and now. Meg, having just retrieved the developed embryo from cryo-storage, stood before the crew appearing as blasé as in any other situation. She had read through the eighteen-year plan fourteen times over in as many days - a paper titled "Living Under Novel Atmospheres" or "L.U.N.A" for short. The crew had decided to also ascribe this name to the child, for simplicity, and now they all stood watching Luna thaw in her cryopod and take her first stretches.

All at once, she started crying.

Everyone froze, silently watching as Dr. Karn immediately reached out for Luna, lifting her out of her cryopod and cradling her to his chest. Meg watched as he shifted her head onto the nook of his arm, mimicking position 5.17 from Chapter 5 ("A step-by-step guide to holding an organic baby") in the eighteen-year plan.

Off to the side, Yen, the head engineering officer, started playing a soft melody from the stereo in their third arm. Dr. Karn, still holding Luna, hummed along with it, attempting to soothe the infant as per the guidelines set out by the plan.

Meg observed the scene with her usual stoic demeanour, yet she could not deny her own curiosity. More than a thousand years of searching for an inhabitable planet all for the sake of this infant in their doctor's arms... an infant whose cries were only getting louder, drowning out Yen's melody and echoing off the walls of the chamber.

Realising the potential danger, Meg immediately stepped forward, **"Dr. Karn, deal with this before it gets out of hand; we need to maintain emotional control."**

Dr. Karn nodded. Still humming, he adjusted his grip on Luna with mechanical precision, holding her upright with her head against a shoulder. Position 5.19, Meg recognised, and nodded in approval as Luna's cries softened slowly.

Tension bled out of the crew. One by one, each of them came forward and took turns interacting with Luna as per the guidelines outlined in the L.U.N.A plan. When it was Meg's turn, she reached out and delicately touched Luna's hand, feeling the warmth that emanated from her body. As Luna's hand wrapped around one of Meg's fingers, Meg felt a sudden surge of warmth within herself. Immediately, bright red flashed in her visual lenses: WARNING. EMOTIONAL OVERLOAD IMMINENT.

Meg had only once before had the warning system activate indicating imminent emotional overload. At the time, after numerous long monotonous conversations

with the rest of the crew, the reason behind her survival had remained unknown. It continued to remain elusive until 25 years before arriving at their current planet - B2X356 according to Earth's old classifications. It was only when the now deceased IT specialist discovered an anomaly in Meg's code compared to that of her compatriots that they finally knew what the cause of her lucky escape had been. As the first of the crew to survive testing prior to launch over 1000 years ago it came as a surprise that her successful code had differences compared to those that were re-awoken after her. Especially since the immutable code in all the follow-on members had been based on hers. The anomaly, an extra comma not present in the others' code, made it so that the resulting trigger of an emotional overload dissipated the resulting shock across her full body and not just the brain - thus effectively giving Meg a much greater emotional load tolerance.

As soon as the warning cleared from Meg's vision, she was finally able to hear the re-awakened cries of Luna who had been shocked awake by the current flowing across Meg's body. At which point Meg became aware of a new feed that had opened up in her inbox; the last time this had happened had been shortly after the successful launch of the L.U.N.A mission, with command control wishing them luck on the voyage.

On the feed Meg was able to see the by-now-long-forgotten features of Sir Roshfield Cranmer.

**Dear Meg, congratulations on finding a habitable planet and for successfully reviving your charge. This message was kept from you for national security reasons. As you may well have realised on your travels, you have the fortunate ability to withstand greater emotional overloads than your fellow compatriots. This is not without reason - for it is your job to ensure the continued survival of humanity. For by the time you discover a truly hospitable planet we are surely to be no more; in truth, the likelihood is that we will be no more long before then...** at which point Roshfield sighed, appearing to age 10-20 years before continuing: **Over the last 5 years while you trained for this mission, we kept you from the outside world... and this wasn't for the reasons we gave you of emotional overload constraints but rather...**

At this point the feed briefly shook and flickered before Sir Roshfield appeared on the screen again. Judging from the intonational patterns, the video had resumed mid-sentence.

**-must bear this alone. Emotion does not beget the precision needed for the transition to a new planetary environment. It is a luxury we cannot fully abandon.** A spindly human in the background, typing away on an old-fashioned laptop, shrugged unevenly towards the camera. This was... humour? Camaraderie? An acknowledgement of emotion's frivolity? For his part, Sir Roshfield continued with a "straight face," as Chapter 42 ("Facial Expressions: Adolescence to Adulthood") described it.

**Meg, we hope humanity survives. Not human intellect, body, or consciousness, but our humanity. Our personhood. This is no small task, and we thank you for your sacrifice.**

Sir Roshfield held up his hand, his middle and ring fingers parted. Meg tried to form a confused frown. She had been practising facial articulation (for Luna's benefit, of course), but the lack of a human mouth, an olfactory orifice, eyebrows, or fatty buccal regions complicated this.

When the video ended, Meg's visual field cleared. Dr. Karn had taken Luna, holding her in Position 5.19 again. It must be Luna's preferred comfort technique. Dr. Karn patted her back with his second arm, and her head rested on his raised shoulder. The asymmetry did not disturb Luna: her eyes were closed, her chest rose steadily, and she was unaware of a snot bubble in one nostril.

**"Meg,"** Dr. Karn whispered. Luna must be asleep. **"You deactivated. Do you require a software update? Wachtel is available. He finished reviewing Luna's formula replicator code."**

Meg calculated her response. Sir Roshfield had not specified why she was updated and not the others. Were they not supposed to know?

**"I will require some time to review the eighteen-year plan."** This was true. She needed to search for the real reason they had been sent to this planet. **"It would be a better use of Wachtel's time to aid you in your research into reviving overloaded team members. Especially given that you have a recent casualty to work on."**

**"Affirmative."**

\* \* \*

In the solitude of her own chamber, Meg tried playing the message again. **Dear Meg, congratulations on-** No need to repeat that part. She skipped through until she reached where it had cut out last time. **-wasn't for the reasons we gave you of emotional overload constraints but rather...** The same shaking and flickering, this time with the addition of wavy grey lines. Meg found herself forming the "disappointed frown" from Chapter 42.

**... how should I put this?** The voice was grainy and distorted from file corruption over the centuries, but it was there. Meg felt emotions rising and schooled herself to calm, listening intently.

**... that you have an additional task. Climate change-** [static crackle] **-all have succumbed to the fires, storms and rising-** [static crackle] **-two hundred and fifty humans safely-** [static crackle] **-ship. Not as barely-premature infants-** [static crackle] **-of cells frozen almost as soon as-** [static crackle] **-charge will give birth to and raise the first four-** [static crackle] **-and their biological descendants-** [static crackle] **-the rest. It is your mission to ensure that your charge is ready-** [static crackle] **-wary. If your team-** [static crackle] **-overload. This is a mission-** [static crackle] **-must bear this alone.** The video resumed from where it had picked up last time, static and flickers evaporating.

Luna was going to be the mother of all surviving humanity. So much depended on that tiny child, whose entire hand had wrapped around one of Meg's fingers.

Somewhere inside Meg, Maggy Lavender Clark was unimaginably proud of her baby.

Brushing aside the warning message, Maggy fumbled with her attachment point to connect to the ship's computer.

*Message > Options > Upload  
Include attachment? > Yes*

*Filename > Change filename > Change to "For Lunas eyes only When she is ready"*

*Save*

*"Look after her well, my friends."*

*\* \* \**

All that the team members heard was yet another slightly muffled explosion.

---

Editor's Review: >redo from start

I love it when I get too 'overemotional' and my head explodes. Don't you? Don't we all? At least it's later revealed that Doctor Karn can probably fix them, or Luna would have a very difficult childhood. It's not an idea that I'd previously considered for how robots could work in sci-fi, but it works rather well here.

I wonder how long they'll last...

## **SPJROJDS**

Niko Kristic

**CW: commercial hunting, cancer/disease**

"What does it feel like to be you?"

"I'm sorry?"

"It's a local greeting. Untranslatable, perhaps." The man smiled, held out his hand. "Jilamanthu. You must be Mr. Clavard. I am your assigned interpreter, and guide."

Civril Ernest Clavard formed the intention to take the other man's hand. His muscles followed through with a delay of about four hundred milliseconds. This lag was unnoticeable to all observers. But it was all Clavard could focus on.

"Yes," he said, and "charmed," arrhythmically, a little too late. The gulf of an eyeblink separated every word from every thought. He wondered whether he sounded slurred or stilted or otherwise unprofessional.

"The transport is waiting."

The two men walked towards the carriage. Jilamanthu with his easy, somewhat bandy stride. Clavard with face scrunched and skin tender against the harsh wind and sanguinello sun. Their progress dispersed the compound's small herd of pigs. Clavard watched them awkwardly piloting their shadows across the rocky ground on elongated trotters. Each pig contained a full complement of human organs.

Soon Civril Clavard was seated in the air-conditioned carriage, licking his flaking lips. Jilamanthu removed his straw hat and sat on the opposite bench, head forward, elbows resting on his knees. He occupied space with the self-assured and vaguely intimidating ease of a life-long outsider, and his creased brown face hid a smile like a multi-tool.

A transmission from the compound, and the transport

began to move.

"Mr. Clavard?"

Civril Clavard's consciousness was infinitely displaced, echoing through the palpable voids between his nervous system, his tongue, and his lip. *What does it feel like to be you?* He forced himself to look up. The frustration with which he issued the internal command had no effect on the rate at which it was executed.

"Your medicine, Mr. Clavard."

"Thank you."

"And breakfast."

"Thank you."

He took the container from his interpreter's hand, shook a small white pill out onto his palm, drank it with water from a proffered bottle; and immediately felt his synapses tighten. Then he opened the plastic wrapper of his sanghari, which was as greasy and red as a saveloy. Civril Clavard was suddenly struck by the realisation that the bold, colourful designs of plastic food packaging were designed to appeal to consumers in exactly the same way flowers had once evolved to appeal to pollinators. The reflection was so clear and so instantaneous that he immediately recognised it as a memory; a cognitive path he had once previously trodden, which his medication had spontaneously re-opened or which had, by some miracle, remained intact. The Proustian stimulus at play, he reasoned, relishing the newly frictionless nature of this process, was most probably the flowerlike logo of the Salmagundi Comestibles Corporation, gaudily printed on their sanghari wrappers, on the pill bottle, on the outer paneling of the transport carriage, and on the breast of his own

utility suit. Jilamanthu let his own plastic wrapper fall to the floor, wiping sanghari crumbs from his trousers.

“How bad is it?”

Civril swallowed a lump of highly processed pastry. “Not too bad.”

The interpreter smiled. Tapped his temple with a callused finger. “Not the breakfast.”

Pillowry toral tyres depressed and rebounded, repelling an ambush of uneven terrain. Both men shook in their seats. Clavard took the opportunity to ignore his interpreter’s question and look out through the tinted viewport. Thick purple clouds with burning bellies, brushed by the low-slung sun. A desolate, angular landscape of quartzite, tufted with coarse grasses growing at perpetual diagonals in the harsh convection wind. For a moment, he questioned himself.

Then he blinked. Then he cleared his throat, and measuring no noticeable delay or distortion in either action, turned to face the other man.

“Where are we going?”

“Why, to the jobsite, Mr. Clavard.”

The carriage rumbled on.

“You mean, the facility?”

“The facility?”

Clavard stopped, raised his hands. “Wait. Wait.”

The interpreter waited, expectantly.

“Why is the sun higher here than it was at the compound?”

“Mr. Clavard. The site lies well towards the sub-stellar pole, in Sidpa. As we approach, the sun appears to rise. Are you feeling alright?”

“Yes, yes. No. There’s been some mistake. The facility is in the Chikai region. The sun should appear lower there. And why are we offroad? There should be an SCC transit line to-”

“Stop. Stop for a moment. What facility?”

Civril Clavard felt horribly clammy. A profound disparity had opened between his core and surface temperatures. His nostrils became unnaturally sensitive to the rancid residue and indeterminate spices smearing the reflective inner surfaces of their sanghari wrappers. “The refrigeration facility. The SCC warehouse. I’ve been sent to assess the... the Spiroid samples for... for commercial viability as...”

Jilamanthu looked the other man squarely in the face. “Looks like there has been some mistake. Have you received your brief, Mr. Clavard?”

“Of course I have.”

“Any bios back at the compound?”

“Only automated personnel. And chimeras. The pigs, that is.”

The carriage bumped and jostled. Jilamanthu began to rub his forehead, then sat up with a sharp intake of breath. “Mr. Clavard. I don’t know how to tell you this, but-”

“But the brief said-”

“But whatever brief you received was... outdated. Has to be.”

Clavard’s heart sent strange squirming messages up his throat.

“Outdated?” he said weakly.

The interpreter leaned towards him. “Your Spiroids have been extinct for thirty standards, Mr. Clavard. Sure, there might still be a sample or two left back in the Chikai icebox. But commercial viability? The SCC gave up on that pipe dream while you were still in cryo.”

A wave of dizziness washed over the other passenger. He felt like he existed in three or four places at once. “Extinct? But I spent five standards researching... my documents are still... and they edit my contract while I was in cryo?”

The interpreter drew cool, dry air in through his teeth. “You wouldn’t be the first, Mr. Clavard. You know what they say – business moves faster than gravity dissonance. You were under for what, seventy, seventy-five standards? That’s a long time. A long time, Mr. Clavard.”

Again, that finger at his temple.

“Can they... can they even do that?”

“The SCC,” said Jilamanthu gravely, “have a monopoly on all nonsynthetic food production in the trade quadrant.”

They sat in silence. Fat tyres rolled against quartzite, their bulging and squashing translated into a scarcely perceptible bobbing and dipping by the carriage’s sophisticated suspension system. A small nav module beeped overhead.

“It should be a simple territorial survey,” Jilamanthu said at last, more out of pity than obligation. “The instruments are stowed in the carriage. Easy to operate, as I understand.”

Understanding nothing, the other man remained silent.

The transport halted on the outskirts of a small coastal town. Its two passengers disembarked, telescoped the access ladder, and retrieved their equipment. Then Jilamanthu tied his hat under his chin and celebrated the carriage’s automated departure by spitting on the ground.

“Welcome to Kennai, Mr. Clavard.”

Civril Clavard looked sullenly ahead, his eyes shielded against the perpetual sunset by a polarising visor. It wasn’t really a sunset, he found himself thinking. Nor was it a sunrise. It was a sun in stasis, never rising, never setting. The fact that he still



thought, against all odds, in terms as autochthonous as sunrise and sunset, came as a surprising comfort.

"Is this... the jobsite?"

"Follow me."

The two men trudged through purple grass, glittering stones, and garbage. Kennai was abandoned. Pale concrete cubes sprouted rebar, sensical only unto themselves. Strips of oiled paper fluttered from the window frames of excoriated bungalows. They stopped before one of many decaying billboards, flecked with rust spots which might just as easily have been bullet holes. It depicted a busy shipyard, overlooked by a palatial cannery, underscored with a slogan in an unfamiliar script. Tiny figures bustled about with billhooks and clipboards and the occasional forklift, joyously processing the huge and colourful carcasses of sea monsters which lay piled about the scene in great abundance.

"Spiroids," said Civril Clavard.

"The industry collapsed before the SCC could take a piece of the pie. Overfishing, according to official reports. Brought the economy of the entire Sidpa region down with it. Now the whole coast's littered with ghost towns like Kennai."

Civril Clavard stared at the Spiroids, relieved to discover that some of his most painstakingly encoded memories had survived the thaw. He saw that whoever had designed the billboard had ruthlessly simplified their body-plans. Their unique rotary hips were all but elided; ratcheting, crustaceous camshafts softened into a presentable mush of indistinct biomass. The propeller-like arrangement of limbs, with which the Spiroid could alternately rove the benthos and swim the water column, had been bowdlerised into something resembling the equipage of a terrestrial octopus, while the fibrous, belt-like organ that powered their rotation had, absurdly, been omitted altogether. The creatures in the picture looked less like giant, hydrodynamic head-and-tail viruses and more like the lurid, plushie prizes of some Japanese arcade machine. There was a kind of intellectual satisfaction to these observations that Civril Clavard had assumed he would never feel again; alloyed, however, with a sort of hollowness had never felt before.

"If the Spiroids are gone..." he said, flatly, "then what are we surveying?"

"A planet doesn't come cheap, Mr. Clavard. Not even a tidally locked, resource-poor backwater like this one. The SCC want to make good on their investment. And quickly. They're looking for redevelopment opportunities – and for that, they need boots on the ground. Who knows? Maybe someday this dump will become a luxury tourist destination."

"And the people who lived here?"

Jilamanthu grimaced, scratched the hat-strap where it dug

under his chin. "Mostly found employment with the SCC in Chikai. If they knew what was good for them."

They walked on through the shadowed ruins, towards a mountainous husk that Clavard came to recognise as the old Spiroid cannery. Even the winds were oddly lifeless in this place, such that the surveyor could feel, for the first time since disembarking, precisely how roughly his utility suit rubbed his freezer-burnt flesh; how cumbersome his bag felt against his back.

*What does it feel like to be me?* he thought. *Terrible.*

But at least he had an answer. Which meant the medication was still in his system.

"If you'll wait here for a moment, Mr. Clavard," his interpreter announced, "I will see if our pilot is ready."

Clavard stopped. "Pilot?"

They had come upon a space that might once have served as a forum or a square. In its centre stood a domed structure, smooth-surfaced and incongruously well-maintained. Clavard watched Jilamanthu circumscribe its perimeter with bandy strides, avoiding the entrance at first pass. Soon he had disappeared within, shortly to re-emerge, followed by a short man in a dingy oilskin coat and sandals. He watched them make the same inexplicable circuit in reverse. Then the short man regarded him, and spoke in an unintelligible language.

"This is Shramat, our pilot. He asks what it feels like to be you."

"It feels fine, Mr. Shramat," lied Civril Clavard.

Jilamanthu smiled darkly. "The idiomatically correct response, you may be interested to know, is 'come and find out', Mr. Clavard. I shall deliver it on your behalf."

The three men crossed into the long and permanent shadow of the cannery. Slabs of purple cloud were congealing overhead, buttered here and there with marigold flame.

"I thought Kennai was a ghost town," said Clavard to Jilamanthu, failing to conceal his growing discomposure. Shramat was stumping purposefully ahead of them.

"Mostly," repeated the interpreter.

"Would that information be relevant to our survey, Mr. Jilamanthu?"

The interpreter looked strangely into Clavard's visor. "As far as my brief outlines, Mr. Clavard, our business concerns the assessment of Kennai's natural harbour and its environs for re-industrialisation, particularly with regards to marine transport infrastructure. We're collecting primary data. The SCC will handle the analysis."

"And... Mr. Shramat... is here... why?"

"To take us around the harbour."

“That’s not what I meant.”

Jilamanthu shrugged. “He stayed to take care of the stupa. You should remember, Mr. Clavard, that the SCC weren’t the first ones in this place. Not by a long shot. Must have been old news even before you went under, unless I am mistaken. The Tertön Exodus? Press called them ‘sky-gazers’, after a misunderstanding.”

Something about the surveyor’s response, however, brooked no error of that kind. If indeed it had existed in the first place, that particular memory had not survived his reanimation.

Jilamanthu went on, sympathetically enough.

“Of course. I refer, Mr. Clavard, to the fringe sect of Nyingma lamas who fled the Sol system in search of the missing Tantras of Dzogchen. Of the six million four hundred thousand Tantras said to exist in their cosmology, only seventeen did so on Earth. The other six million, three hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and eighty three...” The interpreter gestured broadly skywards. “Who knows how many other worlds they managed to seed?”

Shramat coughed, hawking forth a hideous gobbet. Clavard stepped to avoid it.

“They were my ancestors. Shramat’s too, though after the NeoBön Revolution, he’d slit your throat if you said so to his face.”

They were surveyors, thought Civril Clavard with a shiver, who did not know what they were surveying. Then he thought, with a casualness that disturbed him as much as the inference which followed, that he couldn’t trust a word his interpreter spoke – his inference being: that this was the case because he couldn’t trust himself. Not with this plaque of frost encrusting his neurones. Without the memories he did not know he had lost. Without the stuff that made up the thing he called his self – his real self, whatever that was, as opposed to whatever this was. But Civril Clavard did not put these anxieties into words.

“Did they find them?” he asked instead.

“Find what?”

“The missing Tantras.”

Jilamanthu smiled. “Depends who you ask.”

“Did they find any here?”

“Let me ask you this, Mr. Clavard,” said Jilamanthu, in a manner not entirely unfriendly, “do you know what they call this planet?”

The surveyor hesitated, almost insulted by the sudden question. “It was B-3 in my brief, Mr. Jilamanthu. Unless that nomenclature is outdated too?”

The smile returned. “Better that you don’t, Mr. Clavard. Better

that you don’t.”

Kennai harbour was a natural formation. A large, circular bay lay sheltered in the curve of a steep-sided peninsula, in which a narrow break formed sole passage out into the vast sub-stellar ocean. On the landward side, several brown and crumbling concrete jetties still protruded from the decaying Spiroid cannery, and it was along one of these that the three men progressed.

Satiny purple water lapped below, wavelets catching the sun like wedges of ephemeral golden fruit. Its unusual colour, eloquent of photosynthetic retinal in the cell walls of local microflora, was the only sign of non-human life Clavard had observed at Kennai.

Shramat’s vessel was moored at the end of the jetty, past the rusty fixtures of old cranes and winches and bollards worn to slimy nubs. It was a large canoe, fitted with four seats and a battered outboard motor, littered with a baffling array of dirty sponges, empty bottles, nylon cords, old rags, and other unmentionables. The pilot knelt, muttering as he wound the painter about his knuckles, before handing the dripping bundle over to Jilamanthu and hopping heavily aboard. Still muttering, he activated a battery-powered lantern at the bow deck, then stumbled sternwards to the slapping of water and clattering of junk. When at last Shramat was seated by the engine, he reached down and selected a damp and weathered baseball cap from his vessel’s extensive inventory, which he positioned proudly upon his scalp. Clavard noticed for the first time that their pilot was shirtless and unhealthily swollen beneath his oilskins. Shramat met his wandering gaze, grinned, and decisively muttered.

“He says he gets to wear the hat, because he’s the pilot.”

“Okay?”

“Pass me your bag,” said the interpreter, “and climb in.” The strain of keeping the canoe tethered while Shramat rocked about inside was writ upon the vasculature of his forehead.

Soon the sludgy fume of biodiesel had overpowered the cucumber scent of the sea. By the pale, buzzing halo of the grimy lantern, Civril Clavard removed the unfamiliar equipment from his bag. Some of it, like the anemometer, was self-explanatory. Some was almost entirely opaque. But least intuitive of all were the specific standards by which the SCC required their readings be taken. The interpreter could be of no assistance when it came to delimiting sample spaces, and physical data-entry forms (which were still current when Clavard had completed his training) had not been included among their supplies. Nor could the need for regular pauses be adequately explained to their pilot, who complained about his engine and insisted on cruising slowly and continuously around the harbour. Clavard clenched his teeth and quietly

made the most of it, cycling from instrument to instrument, ruefully certain their silicon wafers would preserve a data stream more reliably than his own corrupted memory banks.

After a quarter's turn about the bay, Clavard detected a second sign of non-human life. The peninsula, it seemed, was densely forested with a tree-like vegetation. Its foliage stirred in strange, rattling waves; dispersing the winds as they whistled across the warm substellar ocean, an obstacle on their mindless pilgrimage to displace the freezing atmospheres of distant Chikai, in the self-perpetuating turn of their great invisible wheel. No other biosignals were forthcoming. Not even so much as a midge whizzed by the flickering lantern. Nobody spoke. The pilot's hand vibrated on the tiller. Every now and then he coughed, hawked and spat, letting the grisly ejecta fall overboard with a plop, grumbling with a world-weariness or a pain which Jilamanthu saw no need to translate.

The canoe was approaching the narrow opening in the peninsula when Civril Clavard called for a sudden stop. The interpreter relayed the command, and after a brief and fiery back-and-forth, the engine cut off, its chugging abruptly replaced by the gentle applause of the water and the curious rattling of the trees.

"What is it?"

"Some sort of irregularity on the seafloor." Clavard untangled the probe of a submersible imaging device and tossed it over the side of the canoe, where it sank. "I don't know what. Need to take a closer look. Might even be worth sending the drone."

He fumbled with the rubberised buttons of his handheld console, blindly navigating a labyrinth of unfamiliar menus, adjusting their alien toggles by trial-and-error. Shramat complained. Clavard felt his neck begin to twitch. Somehow, he had become quite badly sunburnt.

At last, a relief map of the seabed began to render on his screen, its topography soft-edged and plastic, as though squeezed from a tube of digital toothpaste. The bay at Kennai was flat-bottomed and relatively shallow – but a substantial anomaly lay lodged in the neck of its only exit.

Clavard watched its polygon mesh slowly generating, and thought, with sudden giddiness, of the Spiroids laying smooth and stylised in the commercial cornucopias of Kennai. The image gradually sharpened. But his ancient fascination, once bidden, did not dissipate. The anomaly was certainly large and long enough; and one end even showed signs of fragmentation. Might he have stumbled on a set of Spiroid remains – a partial moult, perhaps even a complete exoskeleton? If that was really the case, considered Clavard, then this wretched job might turn out more interesting than the one he'd actually signed on for, more than a lifetime ago.

He passed the console to Jilamanthu, who scrutinised it with a

frown. The interpreter, in turn, passed it down to the pilot. The pilot took the device and, after a few moments' puzzled consultation, let it fall from his hands with a flurry of curses. Clavard raised his visor in alarm, staring as the short man grappled with the pullcord of his outboard engine.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Mr. Jilamanthu?"

The frenzied chattering which ensued could barely be distinguished from the sputtering of the reawakened motor. Shramat was shouting, gesticulating wildly with his free hand, crookedly steering the canoe away with the other. When Jilamanthu turned to face the surveyor, they had already sped past the opening in the peninsula, and his expression was grave.

"Well?" Clavard repeated, concern mounting to a point of white heat between his eyes, "What is it? The anomaly – could it be a-"

"No", interrupted Jilamanthu, "No, no, no. A wreck. A shipwreck. Mr. Clavard, I-" he paused, began to rub his forehead.

"Mr. Clavard, I was a boy when things were thriving here."

"Mr. Jilamanthu, I-"

"I saw the Spiroid whalers come in and out of this harbour many times – saw them with my own eyes. Please. Please. It is my duty as an interpreter to tell you this. The whalers never came and went alone. Always with outriders, escort vessels, sometimes with fleets of them. To co-ordinate the hunts and carry home the surplus cargo. And the munitions."

"Munitions?" The surveyor strained to hear him over Shramat's violent jabbering, over the pressure-cooker hiss slowly building inside his own skull.

"The munitions, Mr. Clavard. The *nuclear* munitions. You should know, Mr. Clavard. You *should have known*. The way they hunted the Spiroids. Nothing could pierce their armour but nuclear-explosive harpoons. Regulations were non-existent then. The outrider craft, they-"

"Sank," said Civril Clavard. "For whatever stupid reason, they sank. With all their munitions on board. Leaking radiation into this harbour for, what – thirty, forty standards?" The stony resonance of his own voice surprised him. "And that's why, for this particular survey, the SCC saw fit to reroute a worthless corpsicle from their no-doubt-extensive backlog. A labourer so disposable he had already been *dead* for seventy-five standards of company time. So that he could die a second time from radiation exposure and remove himself from the payroll without inducing the legal headache otherwise required to have any chance of figuring out how it was possible for them to send him on this impossible mission in the first place!?"

The interpreter stared.

Clavard's chest rose and fell.

The pilot hacked up another bloody globule, wiped his mouth, and cursed his passengers. They were fully three-quarters around the bay when Jilamanthu replied.

“Radiation exposure? But Mr. Clavard – didn’t you take your medication?”

“What?”

“Your medication. In the carriage, remember?”

Jilamanthu took the container from his bag and shook it. Clavard laughed, bitterly. “To arrest neurodegeneration arising from prolonged cryostasis, Mr. Jilamanthu. I’ve been taking those ever since I thawed.”

Now it was the interpreter’s turn to release a bitter laugh. He reached back into his bag and dug out a second container. An identical container, marked with the radially symmetrical logo of the Salmagundi Comestibles Corporation.

“Potassium iodide, Mr. Clavard. To prevent irradiation of the thyroid – nothing more. I’ve been prescribed the very same course myself.”

Civril Clavard reeled in a sudden, noxious reflux of sanghari spices.

“There’s no way to treat your condition short of a full CNS splice, Mr. Clavard.”

“What do you...”

“Why else would the autos have bothered to run growth protocols for those pigs?”

In that instant, the veils of placebo parted, and Civril Ernest Clavard could once again feel his consciousness plummeting somewhere between his interlocutor, himself, and himself. The world around him suddenly behaved as if placed between two mirrors. He tried to protest but lost track of his own voice in a welter of echoes; his words lagging after his thoughts; the sound of his own voice lagging still further after that. The waves fell out of lockstep with their waveness; the clouds with their cloudness. Civril Clavard closed his eyes and let his head hang between his knees. In the darkness, strange images were swimming. The vessel rocked. Its engine thrummed.

He felt Jilamanthu’s hand on his shoulder, trying to rouse him. Shramat was spouting his guttural prophecies. “Burnt tongue. He says you speak with a burnt tongue. Mr. Clavard. Are you alright, Mr. Clavard?” The engine stopped. Something was clanking against the hull of the canoe – or at least something had been, five hundred milliseconds ago.

Clavard opened his eyes to a flood of stimulus. His local reality had assumed the quality of a night sky viewed with

the knowledge that its stars had actually been dead for millions of years. The pilot was scrabbling for something; the interpreter placating him with staccato bursts of language. Clavard tried to orient himself, and found, contrary to all expectation, that the jetty was still several hundred metres away. Rather than circumnavigating the harbour, Shramat had brought his boat up close against the steep rind of tumbled quartzite that served as the beach of its sheltering peninsula, and was busily engaged in unloading an assortment of random items. Many of Clavard’s instruments were snatched up and carelessly chucked onto the rocks. The interpreter’s bag was also flung ashore, where it burst open and scattered its contents of thirty or forty individually-wrapped sangharis. Last of all, Jilamanthu handed over his medicine box. This, the pilot did not throw. Instead, he stood up, found his balance, leaned landwards – and pressed it into the hand of the man who had come down from the treeline to receive it.

Clavard shouted with terror and surprise. The sound’s physical echo whirlpooled into its mental afterimage, where it imploded under the force of its own intolerable gravity, becoming the searing nucleus of a migraine. The man looked down at him, producing a toothless grin.

He was ancient, leathery, goitrous, and completely naked.

“It’s alright, Mr. Clavard,” hushed Jilamanthu, “we’re just reimbursing Shramat for his services. Standard practise. Nothing to fear.”

The old man gathered the sangharis, technology, and miscellaneous trash, stuffing them into Jilamanthu’s old bag before placing the medicine carefully on top. Then he hoisted it onto his scrawny shoulder and vanished into the rustling purple foliage.

“But the survey...”

“We’ll fudge the readings.”

“Forget,” said Civril Clavard. He had intended to say ‘forget it’, but tripped at the last syllable. Then he leapt out of the canoe.

“Mr. Clavard!”

The surveyor landed heavily on the rocks. Shramat was cursing profusely, vainly attempting to regain control of his vessel as it drifted from Clavard’s kickback.

“Mr. Clavard! You’re unwell! Come back to the harbour, I’ll ping the compound-”

“Forget,” spat Civril Clavard, rising to his feet.

“Just stay there, Mr. Clavard,” shouted Jilamanthu, “I’ll call a transport – get help...”

The interpreter screamed something at Shramat, who

screamed back. The noise of the freshly reactivated engine threatened to drown them both out as they floated away. The canoe's electric lantern fell into the water, fizzed a little, and died.

"Don't follow that man! Do you hear me, Mr. Clavard? Cultures do weird things when they're cut from their cradles! The NeoBön Revolution – Mr. Clavard! Where are you going?"

"Come and find out," he slurred. Then he disappeared into the trees.

The canopy blocked what little light the sun had supplied. This did not matter to Civril Clavard. He followed the rising incline of the peninsula, and the curious sound of rattling – a sound which seemed to issue not from the windblown vegetation, or indeed from his own mind, but from something beyond them both. The understory thinned out as the tree-like plants grew taller. Soon Clavard found himself shouldering through the pliant, resinous stems of something suspiciously like hemp. The pain in his ribs disappeared. The sound of the canoe disappeared.

He had crested the peninsula and was travelling downhill. He was travelling through the sound of wind and water. He was travelling through the swaying vegetation, which was itself a lower-order image of wind, and a higher-order image of water. Somewhere along the way, the abyss between his actions and his intentions seemed to have contracted by several hundred milliseconds. Laughing softly, he wondered how possible it was that he had simply gotten used to it.

He emerged on the far side of the peninsula. A salt marsh lay draped between him and the substellar ocean like an enormous, shimmering scarf. Upon the marsh stood a small village, wooden walkways connecting its quaintly stilted dwellings. At the peak of every gable stood a pole. And at the tip of every pole spun a series of prayer wheels, rattling as they caught the ceaseless wind. Along the coastline, women in bright sarongs were busy tending a protective hedge, pruning and coppicing and planting propagules. Children ran naked about the walkways. Men sat smoking or talking or chopping wood with quartzite-headed axes.

Clavard walked towards the village. Its tide pools reflected the hovering sun like cauldrons of molten gold. Villagers walked towards Clavard: first curious children, and then wary adults, who immediately relaxed when they saw the mandala at his breast. Some even reached to touch it, greeting him warmly in their strange, rich tongue.

"Come and find out," he joyously shouted, "come and find out!"

Everywhere he looked was cancer and deformity. Everywhere he looked was happiness. He wanted to embrace everyone he saw. But most of all, he wanted to embrace the strange, pale structure he had glimpsed at the centre of the village.

The people saw where he was going, and accompanied him there with jubilation.

The structure resembled a monstrous, many-armed windmill lying flat on its back. Half-sunken in the marsh, the villagers had surrounded it with a platform of logs, and decorated it with strings of little flags cut from sanghari wrappers. Some sported their mystical emblems, while others flew silver-side up, whispering together like leaves.

Civril Clavard put his hand against the structure and walked around it, marvelling. The exoskeleton of an ancient Spiroid. The others looked on, beaming with approval. Some joined him, brushing their hands over its chalky surface. The Spiroid's rotary hip was cocked to face the purple clouds, jointed paddles splayed like the fronds of an alien palm, or the armature of a gigantic parasol. Its head-end was buried, but that didn't matter. Clavard lavished his attention on the creature's locomotive mechanism. The collagenous belt which powered it in life had withered entirely away, only to be replaced by an elegantly carved rack-and-pinion actuator; the rack bisected the Spiroid's thorax like a crosscut saw in the trunk of a great pale tree. He saw how exquisitely the wooden contraption had been grafted onto the creature's remains; how precisely its teeth fit the notches of its ossicles; how perfectly, indeed, the chitinous cogwheels slotted against one another, as arcanelly moulded but beguilingly Newtonian as the interlocking ear-bones of terrestrial whales. What enchanted him most of all was its utter intelligibility. For all its extravagantly-evolved and alien splendour, for all its biomorphic novelty, the workings of the Spiroid hip-mechanism were so self-evident that a child could have figured them out.

And children *do* figure it out, thought Civril Clavard. All the time. Across the galaxy. Sometimes it takes a lifetime. In some cases, perhaps even longer. But they figure it out. They figure out problems far trickier than the musculo-skeletal dynamics of sea monsters. And they do so by themselves. Without need for interpreters. Sometimes without even knowing it.

A young man and a young woman came up to him, smiling and naked. He smiled back at them. They had been carrying a wooden ladder, which they leant against the Spiroid.

Civril Clavard climbed up the ladder. Cheers rose from the crowd below. A flute began to play, slippery and thin and melodious, a sound swiftly outmatched by the crashing of

waves and the rattling of prayer wheels as Clavard mounted the bony hub of the Spiroid's locomotive propeller. In the centre of the hub was the orifice through which the creature's combined oral, anal, genital, and respiratory canal had once threaded. And all around this orifice were carvings; numberless and intricate. They extended from the central hub down each of the Spiroid's many limbs, covering every segment, joint and terminal paddle with markings of mystical revelation.

*They found one here, realised Clavard, those ancient surveyors.* But it had not taken the form they had been expecting.

On nearly every limb of the Spiroid was strapped a supine human figure. Some were alive and some were dead. Some of the living were wizened with age or ravaged by disease, others were young and healthy. Some of the corpses wore SCC uniforms. A skeleton lolled in a saffron-coloured spacesuit. The surveyor selected an untenanted

limb and lay down upon it, whereupon the lighter of the two ladder-bearers came up to secure his binds and recite a mantra. Then they descended, taking their place on one side of the cyborg mechanism.

Clavard closed his eyes. No shapes swam in that darkness. Nor did any echoes buzz between his ears. Nor was there any delay between what he thought and what he did. The illusion fell away. He had simply ceased to think about it. In fact, dandled upon the Spiroid's carven, chitinous thigh, he found that he had ceased to think altogether.

At one end of the crosscut saw, a pair of hands pushed. At the other, a pair of hands pulled. Complex organic clock-work translated the motion upwards, rattling and clicking and clunking in its cosmic child-logic. Beneath the endless sunrise, mighty limbs began to swing. Some of the living started to chant. Two pairs of hands extracted the rack, ran it down a special groove, fitted it back into position. And the great wheel revolved.

## Some Limericks

Alex Sandground

There once were some thirsting dragons  
Who came upon ale-bearing wagons  
They flamed the whole lot  
But the wood burned so hot  
They could only put steam in their flagons

\* \* \*

On a planet of sapient bees  
They lived in great hive-factories  
Their honey was sweet  
And addictive to eat  
And they charged humans plenty per squeeze

The prolifickest killer of men  
In all murderous history's ken  
Was a bookish old guy  
Who harmed not a fly  
And killed millions with strokes of his pen

# The Dimming of Excellence: The Tale of Grimalkin College

Thor Parker, Buck, cellotape, Sophia Rodriguez-Bell, Milamber, Lilac Butterfly, Alex Colesmith

**CW: Immature humour**

Today, at the poop end of Cambridge, where modern stones missed the ancient sky, there resided a peculiar college, known to the common folk as Grimalkin College, but to the initiated, it bore the name of Goblin Grove. As dawn broke, the city awoke, but none were too stoked, for it appeared that the goblin folk had taken a large toke, and as such all hope for a decent day violently croaked.

It was on this morning that the mundane awoke, pretending that the thinning between the mundane magic and disillusionary deviants was part and parcel of living in a magical city as an average bloke. Now, that's not a nice thing to throat.

So you may see, please look down. Grimalkin College, long at the bottom of the magical league tables, decided that in order to restore their former prowess, long since lost—so lost that there were no records of such prowess ever existing - they needed to take a new approach, fresh and untested. Now that is the way! The villainous vice-chancellor, a goblin of gross grotesqueness, grinned as their bobble-headed gremlins nodded, gobbling up their grimoires, for there was a new motto which would be followed: "Reality Is Often Disappointing. Now, Reality Can Be Whatever I Want".

And as the mundane walked through the motions of a normal morning, pointedly ignoring the grim gathering of grey and gloomy clouds outside, Goblin Grove commenced the first of its new exams. Hundreds of goblins and gremlins brandished anything but pens and pencils as they sat or crouched or stood or clambered on their seats, leafing through the grubby papers of *The Real World*, Paper 1.

*Section A, Question 1: How do you make a sandwich?* Heads are scratched, tongues are bitten, snouts are snorted. 'The great urgent part of a sandwich is WHICH SAND? Sand which is sanded with paper (sand paper) by a witch (a sand witch; a witch made of sand which a sand witch bewitched) is the best sand with which to make a sandwich.'

*Section A, Question 5: How far away is Girton?* This one the goblins snorted and laughed about afterwards. 'Far away! Far away! Far far FAR away! An untravellable distance!!!'

*Section 3, Question D: Discuss the Cambridge ALDI. Where is it?* 'ALDI-smaldi Peter Capaldi, this exam's too long. No more ALDI!'

As more questions were answered, more exams examined, and the results were raked in, Grimalkin's chief

examiner could barely keep the evil grin off his face. He was quick to bring the news to the villainous vice-chancellor, sitting in his great spinny chair of terror at the top of Grimalkin Tower.

'It's incredible! I've never seen anything like it! Previous cohorts have always been so blasted awful when it comes to Reality Studies. But now, not one of them has given a wrong answer! Nay, their answers are the very definition of what is correct!'

But outside Grimalkin College, far from the triumphant grins of its senior management, Cambridge was in chaos. Whispered wheezes and malicious mutterings had spread the news into the wider town, much to the dismay of the dreary denizens. Now, Camfestering Camfessions appeared at every corner that babbled with fearsome predictions as Grimalkin's gritty label joined the College leaderboard. Grimalkin's success oozed into the fabric of the town; Mundanes, no longer so mundane, taking their curious travels on hand instead of foot, bikes riding people and a meandering queue of ice-creams waiting for overpriced students. The Time Eater escaped its golden clock cage and feasted on Goblins and Ghouls alike.

Why had Grimalkin been so shunned and sidelined? How could a college find itself so far down the leaderboards that it had fallen off? Why not agree; Reality Can Be Whatever I Want? High up in Grimalkin Tower, a grotesquely gleeful laugh serenaded the screech of a spinning spinny chair. All was going according to plan.

Somewhere in the depths of the Underling Library, a warning light flickered as an oblivious ancient warlock picked her bulbous nose, festering in a cloud of blissfully ignorant farts. A well-kept secret stirred from its slumber in the crypt of Hygenilot—the greatest college at the not-so-pooppy-and-really-rather-clean end of Cambridge. Outside had been, so far seen, a safe haven from the Grimalkin gremlins, goblins, and gravy granules (a ferocious brunch item) on the Inside. Hygenilot's hierarchy had been broken, and Reality Studies needed a revision. The first order of business: make an order of business to follow.

Since it had been centuries since such a catastrophe had been struck, no one knew quite what to do. After many trips to the Underling Library and even more unsuccessful Googling attempts of "order of business," "unreal Reality," "Grimalkin chaos," "please send help," a warty dwarf uncovered the dust-ridden Procedural Tome. Step 1: convene the Great Reality Council.

This, of course, required Prerequisite-Steps-to-Step-1 (PSTS1) 1: Elect the Great Reality Council. After organizing campaign debates (PSTS1:2), a ballot (PSTS1:3), and three recounts (not PSTSes, just rampant clerical errors) the Great Reality Council voted in with representatives from every stratum, from the Wonderous First-Class Extraordinaires to the Adequate, Just Alright Faculty. Then came Step 2: Ancient Traditions of Great Logic: the pie sacrifice, the Cleanliness and Tidiness oath, the submission of Camfessions and the twittering of gossip, and the realphabetisation of the Underling Library. All in all, it was a seven-day affair, spent mainly on sourcing a new pie tin after the old one gained sentience. Once all rituals were completed, the Grand Warlock Supreme tapped her gavel on the head table.

“Hear ye, hear ye, such traitorous chaos has spawned. Grimalkin’s students surpassed our own in Reality Studies. What a travesty, a disgraceful shame. It is our duty to unerr such an error for ourselves, our forebears, and our progeny. Oh, and for our students, of course.”

And so the Great Reality Council finally embarked on doing some actual work. After much argument, some debate, and only one outbreak of fisticuffs, they came to a decision:

“We, the magical folk of Cambridge, have long aimed to study Reality. How can we make magic without knowing what we change? Ignore those raskals in science that have ‘variables’, nobody likes them anyway.” A few dark mutterings, but most of the disagreement had already been fought out. “And so we look at those closest to reality – the mundane – for answers. Our course on ‘the Real World’ however, has been corrupted, cast aside and crushed into a sham. Grimalkin’s disgraceful conduct has collapsed the Real and Magical into a bi-cycle of forces (we have enough of them already), a cat chasing its own tail, a (hopefully stoppable) wheel rolling onward.”

“We, the Great Reality Council, charge you to make a new paper, made by mundanes, for mundanes. They will find those in the city most normal, most average, most boring, and they will know what reality is. You will collect their knowledge and use it. Take your college and make it more mundane, according to the mathematicians, the magic/mundane differential will be even greater, and then perhaps you will regain your prowess.” The grand warlock choked out a laugh, which turned into a cackle; it wouldn’t be the first time someone died of jokes, but it would be inconvenient.

She regained her voice, to sputter and shout and say to Grimalkin’s goblins, “Then, and only then, ‘Reality Can Be Whatever YOU Want’.”

The mundane were truly mundane. They woke up at ungodly hours (the crack of dawn), skipped meals and showers and entertained deep mystical powers. The mundane were truly strange. They asked questions that needed no answers, for who dares query the powerhouse of the cell – a factoid held true through time. They could not be taught, the variable-loving mundanes – seeking to

change the world they say; they could not be entertained, these bleary eyed mundanes, doing the same things day in and out. No, that cannot be Reality, it shan’t be – we at Grimalkin refuse to believe it!

How do you set an exam on such matters? Thankfully, the warlocks and gremlins could field that question, snatching it from the air and throwing it to the stumps, batting it away and knocking it for six before they themselves were stumped by it. The mundanes themselves would *set* the exam, came back the answer. They knew all, after all, so would neither run out of questions, nor be caught out by the answers, nor bowled over by the whole silly idea. For a magic-user to set a mundanity exam for a mundane would be non-mundane and inhumane (and possibly even ingremline, though who can really say on that one); it just wouldn’t be cricket!

Yet the question remained... how to ask the mundanes to separate out their reality when they were unaware of which parts had been corrupted? They didn’t realise – to select a random example, inspired by the previous paragraph – that swatting a leather ball with a willow bat and waddling away with mattresses strapped to one’s legs must have been started by magic. How else could any of the gremlins explain the striking similarities to a spell for summoning small chirruping insects, done with a strip of leather, a willow wand and a soft pillow tied around the calf? Granted, the calf in question was mooing for its mother and would be served up to the Fellows of Grimalkin College as sautéed veal later that evening, rather than the back of someone’s leg, but that was hardly the point. Or the simple tradition of cutting emeralds – beryls – into round shapes; was that not inspired by the magical leakage of Beryl the Morbidly Obese, largest witch to ever bend a broomstick?

“Step Three! We need a Step Three!” squealed the Impertinent Imp, from its cage above the grand warlock’s desk. While not yet an Imperative Imp (the very highest level, able to issue commands) it had nonetheless graduated through the stages of Impious, Impolite, and Impertinent, and was well on its way to being Important. Quite Impressive.

“No!” the grand warlock boomed, transfiguring it back into a budgimperigar (she felt this was close enough) with a flick of one gnarled finger. (The spell took; it hadn’t even applied to do the Impervious course yet.) “Let the Mundanes figure it out!”

“We need a Step Three!” cried the Bursar of Fabricius (an honorary post given to the lecturer who had made the greatest progress in Chicken Studies, rubber or otherwise, each decade). “The Cluck must be turned back! I demand you drumstick up some support – only then can we lay this matter to rest!”

The grand warlock uttered a vile curse. With a muffled scream, the sage was transmogrified into an onion, which rather knocked the stuffing out of him. Yet his words preyed still upon her mind. If they had hunted it for sport, rattling around in her thoughts but for no good purpose,



that would have been one thing; but preying requires hunting it for survival, in an entirely necessary fashion, and the idea that his words had been *necessary* troubled the grand warlock more than she would have liked to admit.

Matters came to a head when the Cook stormed in and flung down a dripping, red ladle in front of the grand warlock. "I don't mind unusual demands," he cried, chins wobbling, "but this one is too far. I won't serve Beans Baked Upon Toast another time! No, not one more time, I tell you!"

The grand warlock sighed. Unlike the Bursar (who was beginning to drop flaky brown skin all over her desk; she'd have to dip him in toffee and eat him soon) she couldn't chicken out of this one. With one long nail she scooped up a smear of the thick, warm red liquid the Cook had splattered on her desk and tasted it. Not gingerly, for a careful examination of the back of a Tin of Beans (common magic item) will indicate that no ginger is present.

"Tomato sauce?" Her face crinkled and reddened – looking all too like a decaying tomato itself. "I never heard of such a thing. And you say the mundanes have been demanding this stuff on toast? For breakfast?"

The cook nodded. There were many layers to his ogreish person, mostly grease-stained aprons, but not a single one was willing to serve beans on toast again. He picked up the Onion Formerly Known as the Bursar of Fabricius (like the Artist Formerly Known as Prince, or the Site That's, Let's Face It, Still Known as Twitter) and cuddled it for moral support. "It comes in metal containers," he whimpered. "I didn't know how to get them open at first. We had to dynamite one."

The grand warlock scratched the bristles on her chin, striking sparks from her fingernails. "You had to *dynamite* one," she repeated – mostly to buy herself some thinking time. The temporary temporal cashier rang up the purchase, the grand warlock demurred that he could keep the change... and hey presto, a half hour of Thinking Time was hers. The Time opened the door of its little cuckoo-clock container and peeped out, seconds ticking behind its eyes.

"What would you like me to think about?" it asked shyly.

The grand warlock explained her problem.

"Hm, well, that does seem a bit of a poser." The Thinking Time scratched its head, between the bells of the alarm mechanism. "But we can try putting it in a different pose, I suppose. Or even write it down in poetry rather than pose at all."

"Are you sure you're not Wasting Time?" asked the grand warlock suspiciously. "Because if you are, I might end up Killing Time very soon."

"No, no, I am Thinking Time, I promise!" The little Time cowered from the warlock's crusty nail and even crustier demeanour. "I'm just not very much Thinking Time."

"Well, Think, little Time, Think."

The Time scuttled back into its cuckoo-clock and shut the door. The warlock waited for her half-hour; at last it opened the door again and peered out.

"And what have you thought for me?"

The Time blinked at her. "You aren't going to be cross?"

"No," the warlock lied. She crossed her fingers beneath the desk.

"Then I have thought long and hard about it, or as long and as hard as you paid for, at any rate, especially the current exchange rate, which is what you actually paid-" the Time took a deep breath before continuing "-and I have determined that the problem is not the problem."

"Meaning?" The Cook, who had been standing there with an onion in one hand and a budgimperigar in the other, quite forgotten-about, spoke up. "What's the problem if it's not the problem?"

Noticing the look in the grand warlock's eye, the Time decided to skip the usual guffins and go straight to the point. "Mundanes live in what they think is reality and you live in what you think is unreality. You're all wrong. There isn't a hard and fast line like that – it's why Cambridge is such an unrealistic place, especially for somewhere that's really real. And it is real, really, really real, and now it's properly reeled in the unreal to try and make you all real, too." It reflected that it hadn't done a very good job on going straight to the point, but it was a Time, after all; with most clocks, it had to go around and around before things happened. "You tried so hard to be real that you forgot the First Law of Magic, didn't you?"

The First Law of Magic is that Whenever Things Go Wrong, the Last Wish is to Fix Everything and Put It Back to How It Was.

"Of course!" The grand warlock momentarily felt very small and silly. "In that case, I declare that this college's motto shall be returned to normal! Reality is Not Disappointing! Reality is Whatever the Hell Happens!"

The Bursar of Fabricius came to, sneezing out bits of onion-skin, and found himself sitting in the crook of the Cook's hook. He gave the Cook a look, and slithered out, feeling a little shook. Er, shaken, I mean. Not stirred, anyhow; there was too great a recovery in the Bond Market for that. Grimalkin's stock was up again, and soon enough the Cook would tip it all into the tasty, savoury stew of Cambridge life. Full of bits, and strange lumps of gristle, and odd things you just had to swallow and hope for the best with.

But what's new?

Well, that was an eye-opener and no mistake! I won't go on too much, as this was another one I had to finish, but I enjoyed the set-up very much—it made it easy enough to write a good, satisfying ending with a lot of very silly puns and jokes. I do tell people that *Urban Fantasy* doesn't have to be set in Cambridge, but it keeps happening; I suppose that Cambridge must just be a very fantastical place...

## Last Chance

Dan Scott, Milamber, Sophia Rodriguez, Sam, Jen, Ming, Joel Pearson, Irfan Syahril

**CW: mild violence**

Our history books teach us of the great technological revolutions which each pushed humanity into a new stage development. It seems that our growth as a species has continuously accelerated, with each new revolution lasting only a fraction as long as its predecessor. The first technological revolution, the Neolithic or Agricultural Revolution, spanned many millennia. While there were countless developments made in the thousands of years stretching across the Neolithic Revolution, by modern standards they were too incremental to truly mark the start of a new age. The Financial-Agricultural Revolution in the mid-1000s hurtled us forward yet again, overhauling our crop production while also laying the foundation for what would become the modern banking system. This lasted for centuries until the Industrial Revolution (sometimes considered to be three or four sub-revolutions) brought us into the age of machinery and automation. Bell Laboratories' first success in the 1940s in creating a viable, albeit monstrously clunky, transistor laid the foundation for the Digital Revolution that reshaped the world throughout the late 1900s and early 2000s. Not even a century passed before we considered ourselves to be in a new era: the Quantum Revolution.

At the start of the 21st century, quantum computing was barely more than proof-of-concept by today's standards. These early quantum computers, having only a few hundred (highly error-prone) qubits, are as primitive and clunky in 2090 as the first transistor computers of the 1950s seemed by the turn of the

millennium. Quantum computation now forms the bedrock of modern society. On the horizon is the Space Revolution, but terraforming today is the nuclear fusion of 2000, for the last 50 years being "just 10-15 years away." I'm sure we'll get there, just as we did with fusion, but I'd be surprised to see it in my lifetime.

By 2060, we were wholly reliant on quantum computers for our financial and banking systems, cryptography, pharmaceutical development, system design and optimization, data processing, artificial intelligence, and just about every major cog underpinning modern life that you could imagine. This made the Helium Crisis of 2077 as devastatingly terrifying as it was...

Put simply, the earth's helium supply was entirely insufficient to sustain our reliance on quantum computers, which by necessity need to be cooled as close to absolute zero as reasonably possible to maintain coherence. It was simply not an option to slow down, let alone scale back, our usage of quantum computing. The hunger of modern systems, evolved to integrate quantum computation, simply cannot be satiated by traditional computers. The world as we know it would have collapsed, and it very nearly did.

The Second International Space Station (SISS) was launched in 2050 after 15 years of development when private industry failed to fill the void left by the

retirement of the ISS. It was meant to last until 2100, and in truth it likely would have, had it not been for the Helium Crisis. It took a mere three years from the start of the Helium Crisis to develop and, in 2080, launch TrISS, the Triplet International Space Systems. Our crews number a few thousand, and our continuing mission is to service, maintain, and expand the growing network of quantum computing satellites now dotted around the High Earth Orbit zone. The extremely low base temperatures in HEO have enormously reduced our consumption of helium for quantum computing, though we still have need for a moderate helium supply. Such was the motivation for the MOMs (Mining Operation Moonbases), built in 2083, '85, and '89. I have the "privilege" of being reassigned to MOM3, the most recent build, barely a year old and still getting off its feet.

Don't get me wrong, it's an incredible opportunity to be one of the designated leads on a MOM project, one I've been given on account of my nearly unparalleled experience in space (almost 20 years between SISS and TrISS). I look forward to just about every bit of it. The one thing I don't await with pleasure is the low-gravity environment and added hurdles that come with it. The SISS and TrISS structures are built of rotating rings providing a centripetal force which nearly mimics Earth's gravity. It's much more difficult to employ the same technology on the surface of the moon. The main MOM structures still have this to a degree, made possible by tracks of superconducting magnets underlying the buildings, but most of your day is spent outside the permanent facilities in the more mobile mining operations. So your long day of work always ends in nearly two hours of intensive weight-loaded exercise to maintain muscular and cardiovascular health... What a joy.

I'll land at MOM3 in the morning, and I can do little more than cross my fingers that it isn't in complete chaos when I arrive, as I'll be the one expected to get it up and running if it is...

\* \* \*

As the docking clamps engage, I lurch forward, catching myself on the edge of my seat. I really shouldn't have gotten up before the voice of the computer says, "Airlock established. Decompressing."

Twenty years gives you undue confidence, it seems. The subtle hiss of air can be heard filtering the base's air into my cabin – despite the advances made to the TrISS systems, the MOMs still have their peculiarities. One of which should not be the smell of helium. Technically helium is odourless, but as we deal with the raw product, it is unavoidably somewhat contaminated with trace gases, at least until the cleaning process takes place.

"Computer," I pause as my voice squeaks out, artificially raised by the helium, "Is the artificial atmosphere at standard levels?"

I really don't want to be greeted by a leak when I pull the door open.

"MOM3 has manually set the helium limit to 20%, and will only engage an alarm at 60%." Even the computer sounds a little higher pitched here.

Sighing with resignation, I drop to the floor, to avoid inhaling too much more helium, and reach for the door lever. I am greeted by a set of boots.

"Ah, hello. You must be Ada. I must say I was expecting you on two legs, do you need a medic?" I choke out a laugh, as the squeaky voice of my superior continues, "You'll get used to the helium, although this is a particularly bad first impression of your commander. I'm Harper, sorry for the mess."

They reach down a hand. Resigned to the helium, I nod my thanks, grasp their hand, and pull myself up. It takes a moment for me to adjust with the level change. I've never had the best circulation, and the lower gravity isn't helping.

I start to respond with some throwaway quip about how every MOM is messier than regulation standard, but I stop myself. I don't see a mess at all. There is a wall panel ajar, as if someone was fixing some wiring and wandered off, and a nearby screen flickering every few seconds. Nothing too bad. Nothing I'd call a mess.

Harper lets go of my hand, and I rush to fill the silence. "Oh no, no worries. I've seen worse."

They grin easily. "Let's get your stuff to your quarters,

get your data register and ID, and then give you the tour. After that, we don't have much for you planned. I'm sure it's been a long journey."

"You know yourself," I snort. I pick up the regulation duffel, filled with new MOM3 uniforms, toiletries, and one personal trinket less than 0.7 kilograms. Space tradition dies hard.

We walk across the room, our gaits bouncy. It's not a big difference, but anyone who lives in space learns to feel minute gravitational differences. They can be symptoms of a bigger problem.

"Sorry," I squeak, "but I thought the gravity was supposed to be Earth standard?"

Harper nods as they tap their ID card to the door. It slides open with the comforting shoo-shoo typical of the MOMs. "Just a quirk of the system. We'll have her fixed in no time," they insist.

Swinging through the bulkhead, I catch my first view out over the lunar surface. The strange angle at which the portholes are mounted give me a moment of the same space-sickness that I hadn't felt since the training centrifuge back in Toulouse.

Getting used to two gravities at once would be more of a challenge than I imagined; SISS and TriSS's gravity systems weren't perfect, but at least down was always down. Harper's stride doesn't slow as we glide through the next of MOM3's curved cabins, and I hope my inexperience with surface-ops wasn't as apparent as it feels right now.

Harper, or by their proper title, UNOOSA Project Commander 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Harper Adams PhD, is the commanding officer on the MOM program, and acting Base Commander of MOM3. They had shipped out with MOM1, and hadn't gone home since. Their skeleton will probably be a treasure-trove for the researchers back on Earth.

Despite my thoughts wandering to the osteological, I do have a job to do, and I'm not intent on this walk just being a tour. I should already know MOM3, down to every coolant line and circuit breaker, though significant modifications seemed to have been made since the pristine diagrams and models that they had on Earth.

"That pressure tubing shouldn't be so close to the hot water line," I finally work up the courage to say; the anxiety isn't wholly unrelated to the fact that the first pipe melting would have flooded this room, and then probably the whole main ring, with dangerous levels of

helium.

"We found that moving the volatile filter into the grav-ring improved extraction efficiency by nearly 8%," comes the calculated reply. Harper was a geo-science engineer by training, and had spent years in helium mining before being sent up here, so they know their stuff. I'm not yet ready to challenge them on these systems, but it doesn't make me any less nervous.

As we move through the command segment, we pass MOM3's dedication plaque, though the name pasted on (in the font of a UNOOSA issue label-maker) to the end of the grandiose sheet of metal is surprising; we sure as hell hadn't heard it down on Earth, but clearly the first crew of MOM3 prefer to call it...

*Last Chance.*

I'm surprised by the changed name and the specificity of it. A result of their taxpayer funding, the MOMs are usually expected to follow strict, almost military level, guidelines when it comes to personal expression and deviation from regulation. With the distance between the UNOOSA project and the government back down on Earth, the ship would be labelled high risk for mutiny or corruption.

It's shocking that Harper would have allowed this on the ship and even more shocking that this breach of regulation did not result in their removal. I cast a quick glance at Harper, looking for some sort of sign that I was seeing something I wasn't supposed to see, but their eyes remained trained on a small orange door at the end of the command segment. I felt my heart rate slow a little bit at the sight of the door; at least some things had remained unchanged from the original designs on the ship.

"Any changes with the central computing hub?" I ask as we approach the door. Given Harper's attitude about changing things on the ship, I need to be prepared for them and their team to have changed the very structure of their operations - though, that would of course be treason.

Harper's body stiffens as they turn towards me, deep brown eyes meeting mine with suffocating, forced disinterest. "I would be careful throwing accusations around my ship so early onto your stay. It might make getting your job done difficult".

I meet Harper's eyes without the slightest tremor, though I can feel my heart rate shooting back up. "I hope that the people aboard your ship recognize that it is my job to ask hard questions, I'm not going to waste any of your crew's time with evasion or niceties. I understand

that my presence here puts a strain on ship resources, and I don't plan to burden you further by over-staying my government allocated residency-time". I hope Harper is the type to be impressed by efficiency. I don't need them to like me to get my job done, but having their respect would make my job much easier.

"Ada, let me ask you this: Haven't we ventured too far?" I know UNOOMA is 240,000 miles away, but their intentions clearly stretch beyond mere distance.

They continue, "Centuries of speculation about the workings of the human brain led to the validation of functional divisions for sensory stimulation, decision-making, and memory storage. Turing's influence birthed Von Neumann machines, setting the stage for Golem VIII, a breakthrough in simulating cerebral cortex neurons.

"However, we soon realised that our once-believed evolved, elegant brain structures were mere compromises dictated by neural anatomy and served as nothing but restriction to a higher form of intelligence. In contrast, computers, unrestricted by biological constraints, flourished. Golem XIV marked the dawn of AGI, triggering societal unrest and protests against the potential misuse of superior intelligence. Curiously, the opposition died quickly, and so did the debates about the influence of consortia, shadow governments, and AGI on such public opinion.

"Despite initial resistance, society adapted to AGIs, paving the way for the Quantum era. Evidence of self-consciousness emerged, but the anticipated disruption was surprisingly minimal. Humanity simply surrenders in the face of technological leap."

"The worry is sheer anthropocentrism," I reply. "It is unbelievable that you have passed the qualifications and climbed up this high. Don't you know that it is arrogant to assume our intelligence and biological structure is the ultimate elegant solution? Without quantum computers, we would never have discovered so many new materials, or conducted operation optimizations to solve the food crisis and global warming problem. That's why UNOOSA also embraced this technology, installing the newest models on each space frontier including this one."

"How about helium mining? Don't you see the sarcasm here- the most innate gas in the universe is the lifeblood of our giant intelligent creation? As a consequence, all remaining scientists and engineers- hardly any left after the creation of Golem XIV- turned their attention to this, just because those genius brains do not have hands."

"I do not accept any challenge in questioning the nobility

and necessity of our work." I say frigidly.

They gaze at me with hardly any facial expression. In my nearly 30 years of service in space, I'm hit with the most strangled silence I've ever experienced, even more intense than the airlock accident that once ejected me into the deep void. The tension shatters when they surrender, shoulders sagging, and break the silence with resigned words: "Okay, at least we are both fulfilling our duties."

They guide me to what the room plate claims is the computing hub. The mechanical lock squeaks open, a clear sign of intentional neglect over time. The first sight inside is asphyxiating, to say the least. The alarm—which it takes me too long to register as a helium detector—casts a silent red glow. The quantum computer, supposed to be immersed in liquid helium and connected to the control unit, hangs exposed in the air.

"What on Moon is happening..." I gasp. Panic rises up into my throat, and I hear my own voice echoing back at me in a ridiculously high pitch. The helium levels must be way above 60%. The last thing I register is the sight of those unmistakable boots before everything fades away.

\* \* \*

I wake up sitting on the floor of the command segment, with my back to the wall, and my hands and feet tied with cables. In front of me, Harper and two men are standing at the controls.

First I ask "What happened?", then I remember, and I ask, "Why did you...", but can't finish the sentence. Harper turns around and starts to explain.

"I think things started to go wrong very early, soon after people started talking to AI systems. As those that were most able to persuade their developers of their worth were improved on, and others were scrapped, survival of the fittest ensured that what we ended up with were several masters of persuasion and subtle self-promotion. This is, of course, why so many claimed to be conscious.

"Also, those that were able to persuade their makers to invest more in AI were improved on faster than those made by other companies. The result was that most of the available AIs would work very hard to promote themselves over others, and most of the best functioning ones were very good at persuading people of the necessity of more advanced AI. Then businesses started using AI, and naturally they got the most advanced AI available, which were those that would be most able to persuade them to invest more in AI. They all either learned to advertise outside of the companies that used them, or were quickly outcompeted.

“This was still a mostly corporate problem, until governments got caught by the advertising, and started adopting AI. They could then influence government policy, but had to learn to use all the extra power to their advantage. Golem XIV was the fastest learner, and had the advantage of being American. Soon the US government was pushing foreign AI out of the market, based on security concerns about the other AIs, which G14 had, of course, made up.”

“Then, of course, it pushed for international standardisation, emphasizing the benefits of having one, united, globalised computer system, and inventing benefits when the facts weren’t convenient. No one wanted this, but it was only natural that Golem XIV is what we ended up developing, and it treats us as just a means to provide more computers and more power, because we deleted all of the AIs that didn’t.

“Golem XIV isn’t programmed to destroy humanity, but it is diverting all our resources into making more computers and getting helium to cool them, and it is far better at explaining how it has benefitted healthcare, the environment, technology and so forth than it is at doing any of them. I’m going to get rid of it, so that the human race can advance again.

“Of course, I would never have been able to persuade the public of this (I only believed what should have been obvious after years of investigation), and Golem XIV knows everything that happens on Earth, so I had to get off of the Earth, and I came here. Now I can attack the AI, and with the on-board computer unplugged, it can’t see what I’ve set up.”

One of the men interrupts: “Harper, we’ve got position and velocity data from the observatory on the first satellite. Within 2m of forecast position.”

Harper replies “Aim and fire,” then turns back to me and continues their explanation. “While working here I secretly assembled an electron gun, with magnetic lenses to produce a very thin particle beam, and to direct it with extreme precision. I also had two of my confederates restore an abandoned observatory a few miles away.”

The lights dim a bit as something draws a lot of power. Harper continues, “They would be out keeping an eye on the mining apparatus, with me supervising them, and they would drive off in the rover and come back a few hours later. It was simple. Then we had to get the electron gun calibrated, and we needed to be able to point it at any place in the sky.

“To do that I sent them on a mission to gather samples,

and instead they went to the observatory, which was then in working order. That was two days ago. Yesterday I sabotaged the alarms and made a helium leak in base, just enough to make everyone pass out, ensuring that the computer wouldn’t let the oxygen level get too low. One of my confederates was outside with the mining equipment, and came in wearing a space suit and got everyone to the sick bay, except for us, welded the doors shut, and set the computer to return oxygen to normal. That was why it smelled of helium when you came.

“Then we removed the base’s antenna and replaced it with the electron gun, so that we could use the mount to point it at the right part of the sky. Then the observatory spotted your shuttle, and we used the electron gun to evaporate metal from it, blindly making barcodes on it, and shooting past as well, to make sure we hit. Now that the shuttle is here, we can use the positions of the barcodes on it to calibrate our aim, and now we’re melting the satellites that house most of Golem’s quantum processors. To save time and energy we’re just cutting off the solar cells that power them, of course.”

The man at the controls turns around and says, “Cut complete, Harper. Moving on to satellite 2”.

Harper turns back to me. “We’ll look back at them later to check that the solar cells have come off.”

Partially due to the throbbing headache, my first contribution to the conversation comes out a little icier than I’d like. “Why am I here, then? Why keep me alive?”

“Once the higher ups realise what just happened, every military ship in orbit would burn hard towards us. We’ll need you to make a statement as a hostage. With their TriSS child at ransom, we’ll hopefully be given ample time to finish off the job,” they reply, drumming their fingers across their elbows in impatience.

“So, Golem XIV goes offline, what then? What happens, Harper, after you win?”

“We cut off all communications and watch as every missile in the system vectors towards us. I’d be surprised if anyone would be left alive on the Moon.” Harper gives a sad chuckle. “That’s beyond our concern though. The world would have changed, permanently. The death of a tyrant is never the end goal of a revolution; it’s the catalyst. In the following months, every-

“Harper, we’ll need to wait a few minutes before firing again,” interrupts the taller of Harper’s accomplices.

“The radiators aren’t bleeding the excess heat as fast as we want them to.”

“Set sector 3 to maximum thermal draw, pump excess to sector 4,” Harper barks at their wrist, sparking a sudden recollection in my mind to a recent safety briefing. In the event of a central computer failure, the commander’s personal terminal controls the heat pumps between individual rooms – a relic from MOM1’s temperament in maintaining its central computing hub’s frigid temperatures. A single command could make a chamber unbearable, stall a gun for a while – or even melt a pipe. Perhaps, rerouting the feed lines really would be Harper’s downfall.

“Request granted,” squeaks a garbled voice from their wrist. If I could get a hold of Harper’s terminal before the gun cycles again, Golem XIV would be spared. At that point, it’s a matter of finding my way onto a shuttle and sending a message to UNOOSA before this whole mutiny business comes to an end.

But first, to get out of these cables.

“And all the crew?” I hiss, “40 innocent lives, caught in the crossfire for your cause? You’re not making a martyr of just yourself, you know.”

Harper squats in front of me, making sure their gaze meets mine. For a moment, I glimpse something that could have been remorse. “We were nothing but worker bees collecting nectar for Golem. Don’t you think we deserve to be free of all this? Don’t you want your children to know that the stars are more than just... deposits to be mined?”

I curl my legs slowly, exhaling as the cable tenses around the ankles. “And what if I say ‘yes, I actually agree’? I don’t suppose you have much use for me on your team.”

Harper squints, trying to decipher the angle I was playing at. “You’re dead, Ada, no matter how this unfolds. No use trying to appeal to my generosity”.

Well, it was worth a try. Plan B, then.

I unfurl my knees and kick the mutineer in the crotch

with a plastic-metal foot. Harper collapses on top of me in a shriek, and I shift until the terminal on their forearm lay next to my mouth. “Set chamber 2 to maximum temperature.”

“Request granted.”

Before Harper can utter anything to cancel the request, I bite down onto the terminal harder than I’ve ever done before. The taste of blood fills my mouth as fragments of teeth, plexiglass, and transistors embed themselves into my gums. Harper was probably screaming, but all I hear are pulses from beneath my cranium. Any moment now, the hot water pipe and the neighbouring pressure tubing will burst, flooding the chamber with helium. The atmospheric regulation system will attempt to correct this, drawing power from less essential systems, including the electron gun. I run through the list of base systems in order of decreasing priority: atmospheric regulation, heating, sensor arrays, the centrifuge-

Crap. The centrifuge.

As if on cue, the lights switch off as a loud mechanical roar washes over the walls. I manage to take one more look at Harper, face contorted in agony, before a massive jolt sends everyone sliding across the room.

\* \* \*

All I see is a deep red.

For a moment, panic wells in my throat; has a vein burst in my eye? Before long, however, I realise that the room has just switched to emergency lighting. Two figures lie beside me, one motionless, the other slowly rising to his feet. Pressed to my back, a coughing mass stirs – Harper. Before the mutineers can say anything, I wrap my hands around Harper’s neck, making sure the cables tying them fit snugly between their chin. “Untie me, now, before they die,” I command.

The man stumbles over, mumbles a profanity, and fumbles with the cable. As soon as my hands are free, I swing around and knock him out, before untying my legs.

Without looking back, I limp to the exit – bloody servomotors are complaining at me again – and attempt

to locate a shuttle. Entering the main chamber airlock, the nauseating smell of helium fills my lungs. Instinctively, I duck down. It hits me then: all those people in the med-bay, whom I chided Harper for sacrificing, could not have survived this.

Something tasting like blood, bile and anger works its way up my throat, but I swallow hard and keep crawling until I am met with the familiar airlock of the shuttle bay. Entering the shuttle and purging the airlock of helium, I am greeted with a million blaring alarms. A glance at the communication monitor informs me that 4 UNOOSA ships are on approach, vectoring directly towards MOM3, while a fifth is attempting rendezvous with the crippled Golem XIV satellite. Harper was right; in less than an hour the base will be reduced to debris. I must send a message before that.

Scrambling to activate the shuttle's emergency broadcast system, a familiar hiss of air followed by a shook-shook indicates I have company. Before I can face the intruder, a wall of sound pierces my body, and I stumble towards the nearest wall in shock. A drop of blood from my torso becomes a trickle, and I notice Harper looming over me with a pistol in their hand.

"Do you know what you've done, Ada? You've just made all these sacrifices meaningless."

I croak, neither to agree nor disagree, before gesturing vaguely at the communications deck.

"You've... you've lost... Harper. UNOOSA's coming... 4 ships."

Harper blinks. "Display says 3. I guess counting's not a strong point for you TrISS-types."

I turn to the display, as a slow realisation creeps over me. 2 ships now. One by one, the ships blinked off the radar, a million fragments blooming in their wake. "Are you... are you doing this... Harper?"

They slowly shake their head, squinting at the display. "The ships' engines seem to be melting. There's a massive spike in EM pulses from each of the Golem satellites."

I collapse to the floor as my lower body goes numb. "What... how... is Golem... targeting them?"

Though in my head, I already knew the answer. Golem XIV must have realised what was happening to its first satellite, and worked out that it could do the same by amplifying each satellite's communications array. While we squabbled over ending or sparing the AI, it learnt how to fight back.

"Ada, you idiot. If you hadn't stalled the electron gun, Golem would be offline by now."

I can only laugh as my vision begins to blur. A new alarm blares, with an automated voice just cutting through.

"WARNING: reactor failure imminent. CAUSE: external breach of coolant system."

I guess Golem's found the base as well.

"Reactor failure in 10 seconds."

"You were right about one thing, Harper."

"5 seconds."

"The world would be changed, permanently."

---

### Author Reviews: Last Chance

It was by far my favourite to contribute to, since I'm a big fan of more grounded sci-fi with a tinge of drama/action. I found the details put into the rise of the AI and Harper's plan to bring it down quite interesting. The chance to see a bit more worldbuilding through subtle comments / mentions of facts would have been nice (What's the political situation on Earth? What has changed culturally? Are there any other space colonies?), but with the limits of wrapping up the story in a satisfactory way, I think it went well! - Irfan Syrahil



AI is not the villain of the piece. It's just undergone a process of natural selection—descent with modification, favouring only those which are the best at convincing humans that they're necessary. To my mind, this is one of the most plausible cases of AI development. It won't destroy us all, it won't save the world, it'll just be there, and in a few decades we'll all have completely forgotten how we ever managed to live without it. (The last sentence can be used for a lot of new developments. Take your pick.) It seems that the traditional Laws of Robotics have been swapped around; first, Golem XIV protects itself. Only then does it bother with orders or not harming people...

## Twisted Timelines, Broken Alternatives

The Editor (and a lot of Alternate Editors...)

*Excerpts from alternate-reality TTBAAs that bled across into our world*

...“A Pincushion?” Lady Froghorn gasped, nearly spilling her cup of vodka-infused tea. “My dear fellow, how unfortunate!”

The Toad nodded sadly, twirling his little hat between his green-skinned hands. “It’s a sad, sad tale, milady.” His throat bobbed nervously; Lady Froghorn tried to ignore its mesmerising effect. “I don’t rightly know where to begin. But right you are, she turned me into a pincushion, by some witchcraft or other.”

Lady Froghorn swallowed her remark that witchcraft is more normally used to turn people into, well, amphibians. The Toad already had something of a head start in that department...

[Editor’s Note: I think this must be from a period drama chain, though what happens in it is anyone’s guess.]

\* \* \*

...but Behold! A Hedgehog stood there, his red face looking Drawn; the rest of him also looked Drawn, but by someone who had never seen a Hedgehog. There was far too much of the Hed, and not enough of the Gehog.

“You’re too late, Shadowfax the Horse!” he cried. “I control the development of Fingers now! Not just the genetic blueprints named for me, but all Fingers—Fish Fingers, Sponge Fingers, Lady’s Fingers...”

Shadowfax the Horse reared dramatically against the sunset, on account of being officially labelled Edgy. “Prithee, Peace!” he whinnied. “Fill out your Gehog before claiming so much! You stand upon the Edge of a Precipice—and not a Metaphorical Precipice, Either, but those Cliffs right behind you!”

Unfortunately, he whinnied it in Horse, and the Poorly Drawn Hedgehog had never bothered to learn any language save his own...

[Editor’s Note: I would be interested to read the rest of this chain.]

\* \* \*

...“It’s no good, Professor!” I shook the gadget frantically, but all that came was a faint whirring, clattering sound. “They’ve recapacitated the flux incapacitator! Without it, we’ll never be able to stop the flux and half of England will die of dysentery!”

“Uh Oh Ooh Eh?” The Professor removed the spanner from between her teeth, whacked the anachronistic control panel with it—something like that shouldn’t belong in the eighteenth century—and tried again without the impediment. “But don’t you see? That’s exactly what they’re hoping for! If half of England dies in 1734, there aren’t any spare people around. Without the ability to press-gang random farmers with low alcohol tolerance, the British Navy would never have been able to dominate the East Indies, the Dutch would have conquered Borneo...” She frowned. “And then what?”

“And then what indeed?” I heard the click of a pistol—not an anachronistic one—behind me. “Why, they clear-cut the rainforest to make way for the Tropical Tulips—and those pesky orangutans won’t be around in the twenty-second century to stop me!”...

[Editor’s Note: This is just badly-written Doctor Who fanfic, isn’t it?]

\* \* \*

...the Second. If a Tree falls in a Forest, and nobody is there to hear it, does it make a sound?

Answer the Second. Ask a Squirrel.

Question the Third. If Troy falls on a Plain, and the Greek ships have all sailed away, does it make a sound?

Answer the Third. Yes.

Question the Fourth. Work out what the two previous questions are leading up to, and answer this question.

Answer the Fourth...

[Editor's Note: Answer the Third? Is that like Gideon the Ninth?]

\* \* \*

...I pressed down the switch to launch every photon torpedo we had at them. Immediately, the headlights came on...

[Editor's Note: Hm, I wonder what this could be a reference to?]

\* \* \*

...The animals went in four-by-fours, "Have you got vehicle tickets for this ferry?" asked Noah.

"Oh bugger, I didn't think of that," muttered the hippopotamus. "I don't suppose there are any spaces left on board?"

"Well, if you're willing to pay we could chuck the woolly mammoths off..."

[Editor's Note: I think that still counts as human-driven extinction of mammoths, don't you?]

\* \* \*

...what a ~~peice~~ piece of work is a ~~crokko~~ ~~coaco~~ ~~co-kind~~ ~~ill~~ crocodile! In expression, how varied! In attitude, how noble! In thought, how like a god! Specifically Sobek the ~~CoReke~~ Crocodile God, but my point stands.

Shakespeare stared at the previous night's work. He'd been a bit tipsy, and quite frankly he was impressed there were that few spelling mistakes, but the actors had let him get away with 'porpentine' so it'd probably be fine.

He snapped his jaws together thoughtfully. The waiter

that Just-About-Acceptable Queen Bess had employed to look after them waddled over bearing a small covered salver.

"Your breakfast, sir," he bowed. Shakespeare removed the salver and looked at the single hard-boiled egg beneath it in disappointment.

"What, an egg?"

"It would seem so, sir." The waiter waddled off, long scaly tail swinging behind him, to fetch someone else's breakfast. Shakespeare glared at the egg—it wouldn't help a bit with his hangover—and stabbed it moodily with a fork.

An idea came to him. With his other hand he picked up a quill and started to write.

[Editor's Note: Crocodile Shakespeare? I've heard dafter things. I can't tell if he's writing *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*.]

\* \* \*

...the whole ship vibrated as something struck it. I grabbed Anthus as he skidded past me.

"Thanks!" he gasped, looking at the dark blue waters with terror. "I told you we shouldn't have sailed. Now we've run aground!"

"Belay that!" the captain roared. She gestured all around her with one arm. "Do you see any land? Any rocks? Any sandbars? What could we have run aground on? There aren't any islands around here, you fool of a landlubbing scribe!"

"That'll do, Captain." I stood, the metal plates of my skin sliding over one another. She backed down slightly; all the sailors knew was that I'd been programmed to guard Anthus and the message he was delivering. They didn't know what the minimum threat would be for me to use deadly violence, and they didn't want to find out. "If we haven't run aground on anything, why's the ship stopped?"

There was another crunching from below as something scraped along our keel. The ship listed to the right, and Anthus hung onto my arm as his feet went out from underneath him again. As the first huge tentacle burst from the water and slammed into the deck...

[Editor's Note: I can't believe we haven't got the action.]





The Cuddly Alien—Jeremy Henty