

STORIES ANTHOLOGY

BY

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INTRODUCTION

Hello you,

First of all, many thanks for clicking on a link and downloading this book.

The following stories have been plucked from across all four volumes of **Stories** that I wrote either during lockdown in 2021, or the period shortly after which still felt like lockdown (just without the excuses for why I wasn't going outside). They cover all manner of subjects; from cannibal entrepreneurs to washed up actors in the far future. From Satan on his holidays to very bad ways to try and save the rhino. Should you be wondering for any reason then the breakdown is as follows.

The Urn and **Rhino Plastic** feature in *Volume 1: (not the) end of the world*.

A Cold Day in Hell and **Best Before** are from *Volume 2: Good for Nothing*.

Red Meat first appeared in Volume 2, before I got a little carried away with the world I had created and fleshed it out with additional stories in *Volume 4: Blood Red* (spoiler alert; it all ends badly).

Hippo appears in *Volume 3: Regulation Space*, which I have not actually got around to publishing yet, but should be doing so imminently. I got moderately carried away with all the political stuff in *Blood Red* and wanted to get it out in the world before the political landscape changed too dramatically and/or we are all plunged into poverty. If you're reading this from outside the UK (and have no idea what I'm talking about) then I shall summarise things by simply saying it's all a little glum round these parts at the moment.

I hope you enjoy the tales on the following pages. Obviously. It's a very strange writer indeed who wants people to hate their work, but I suppose it takes all sorts. If you do like it then please come back around to www.escapologies.com in the future, to either randomly shout at me or pick up any new stuff that I throw out on there for time to time.

Thanks again, friend.

Neil Baker, May 2022

RED MEAT

Schneider Jameson would claim that he is a good and decent man. Certainly no more vile or wicked than anyone else. And while this might seem like a bold conversational opener, anyone else probably does not have angry men and women gathered at their front gates, inventing chants about them and constructing placards of increasing hostility with which to decry them.

And his legal representation would certainly have you know that, like you or I, Schneider Jameson has never been convicted of cruelty to animals, shady business practices or even shadier unbusinesslike practices. Although, if we're being specific here, not quite in the same way that you or I have never been convicted of such things. In fact, anyone else would probably not need to retain legal counsel to clear up any such misunderstandings from beyond the sharpened points of a pack of threatened lawsuits.

Schneider's pig farm has long been the locus of ill-tempered protestations. Beyond the reinforced gates and past the barbed wire fences there is a veritable sea of humanity, churning and chanting and occasionally firing volleys of vegan sausages over the border, deep into enemy territory. An ocean that has been fed from a variety of rivers. There are the career protestors, the eco warriors and militarised vegetarians, who have gravitated here to the new frontlines of a war that they have been waging for several decades now. And then there are those who would identify themselves as coming from more reasonable stock, who have come to single-handedly save the climate and/or indulge in a spot of recreational outrage.

There are large contingents of Sikhs and Muslims adrift in the mix as well, for reasons that we shall have to come to shortly. And finally, there are even undercover pig farmers mingling in with the enemy. Infiltrating the protests to either soak up the schadenfreude or join their righteous voices with the howls of the masses. Venting their anger at a man who has brought their whole profession into disrepute.

The accusations that wash up on the shore from this frothy breakwater of outrage are many and varied. They overlap and contradict, cancelling each other's frequencies out until it all becomes white noise. Ultimately, however, this whole kerfuffle can be reduced down to one minute and fifty two seconds.

Two days ago Schneider posted a short video on social media, in which he appeared on the floor of his barn with one of his porcine charges. The video was titled "this is how your sausages are made", which happened to also be the only words that Schneider chose to utter as he took the too-trusting pig by the head and slit its jugular with both a sour expression and a butcher's blade. It was remarkable, when looked at in a very specific way, how efficient he has been in managing to incite so many people so quickly into such a raging, piss-boiling fury.

The pig was called Baroness Sulhara Randhawa, which might strike the disinterested observer as a somewhat highfaluting moniker for a humble and otherwise unremarkable swine. It is also a name that entirely coincidentally, if one is to

believe the hastily drafted statement provided by Schneider Jameson's lawyers, just so happens to be shared by the current Minister of State for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

All of this has gone down about as well as one might imagine.

The Sikhs are unhappy at what they perceive, with a fair amount of justification, as a death threat against one of the most prominent members of their community, and the first to hold any political office of appreciable power. The Muslims are aggrieved at the suggestion of halal principles being applied to pigs, although this anger has been undercut somewhat at their confusion of being supported for once by the majority of the English media. The middle England collective are peeved, vexed and – worst of all – disappointed at being reminded of just how their sausages are actually made. A few people are also querying quite why Mr Jameson, a pig farmer, is going around slaughtering his own beasts and taking the jobs of decent, hard-working butchers and abattoir staff everywhere.

If one was chronically predisposed to find a silver lining in any given situation, one could take solace in how united such a seemingly disparate set of peoples have become in screaming for blood and retribution as the result of a single scapegoating.

Or, as the case may be, scape-pigging.

The government themselves are also resolutely under the moon about the whole affair, or so the cabinet claim as they embark on a rolling tour of the news outlets and political pundits. Trying to stifle their joy at having such an uncomplicated, malleable distraction to wax polemic about while trying to twist any of the many topical threads of this story into the weave of their own narrative blankets.

Baroness Randhawa, a little hard to make out from beyond the ring of security protection that has been piled up around her to an only slightly ridiculous degree, has called for calm while not sounding especially calm herself. The Prime Minister has delivered a long and stirring ramble regarding the ineffability of British pride and the inclusive nature of our patriotic spirit, and it is just possible that he misunderstood the subject of the question asked of him.

The upshot of all of this shrill noisemaking is that Baroness Randhawa, with no small of glee, has instructed that an inspector should be despatched to investigate Schneider Jameson's place of business and, without seeking to prejudice this impartial process, shut this horrible little man down. It has not been possible, as has been explained to a now coldly and disturbingly calm Baroness, to arm said inspector.

And he has already arrived at the Jameson facility to begin this firm and thorough nose around, passing through the amassed crowds at the gate like Jesus. Or whatever deistic figurehead is most appropriate to the pancultural mob. And so now, of course, there are claims that Schneider has bribed, blackmailed or otherwise paid off this visiting regulatory inspector, and those sort of allegations are utterly untrue and completely libellous. What has actually happened is that Schneider Jameson has killed him.

Accidentally, it must be added. But this is a large world, and one full of unlikely coincidences and implausible contrivances. Within it is included a sliding scale of accidentalism that can be used to grade culpability. At the close and cosy end of the scale are incidents of trips and falls. Tea spillages and humorous spoonerisms.

Somewhere in the middle there are accidents on the scale of Schneider Jameson

himself. The product of a drunken, unplanned fumble between father Pernicious Jameson and young slopper-outer Marjorie Rumpus. A hideous mistake, according to Pernicious' later (equally drunken) rants, in that he thought he was actually mounting one of his porcine charges. Just another charming incident in the life of a thoroughly charming man.

At the far end of the accidental scale, way past hope or light or reason, is the sort of accident that transpires when two men argue near heavy machinery, and one shoves the other, and then the shoved man rotates around a guard rail and is introduced head first into said machinery. This may seem to be an extremely specific scenario, however it is currently a very apt one.

Schneider Jameson is a squat little troll of a man. Sturdy, if one was being generous with their descriptions. Solid, compact and immovable. His face can seem as if it is set in stone and his expressions can become hard to read. Something that is not helped by covering his face in blood and mulch, and so seeking to camouflage him with the rest of the barnyard floor. Depending on how you classify liquid and pulpy bits, there is nothing left of the inspector. Even less when some of the bolder of Schneider's pigs trot up to begin lapping at all these delicious new puddles.

Oh well, shrugs Schneider, before he squelches off to find a mop.

*

Several days pass without much to show for it, save for an evolutionary leap in the permanence and quality of the protesting going on just outside Schneider Jameson's gates. Some of these people have been shackling themselves to trees and gluing themselves to motorways for decades, meaning they have developed a playbook for this sort of eventuality.

A canvas shanty town has blossomed out like mould from these gates, self-ordering and hierarchical. With the hardened hardliners cemented to the middle ground, radiating out to the part-timers and the idle curious, who are forced to pitch their tents on the fringes. Spirits in general have been high, in spite of the looming threat of a protest song being penned. But thankfully the people with guitars who are unavoidably drawn to such gatherings as this have so far confined themselves to cover versions and reinterpretations of *Wonderwall*.

Interview tents have inserted themselves into this new and smallest of outrage festivals. Justice for those that cannot speak for themselves, say those that have decided to speak at great length and shrill volume for them. Next door to those demanding justice for Matthew Peregrine, who then have to pause and explain that Mr Peregrine is the name of the still missing government inspector. There is even a man dressed as Darth Vader wandering through the nut roast cookouts and moral performatives, lecturing any who fall to his force-like grip about the evils of the British Empire. And even he is tolerated because freedom of speech has become a *cri de coeur* in these parts.

All in all it is quite the day out.

With the exception of some brass-balled slaughterhouse trucks, operating on the principle that twenty tons tends to get right of way, no one has passed through Schneider's gates. The government has been rather preoccupied with one of the Prime

Minister's recent forays into this touchiest of blue touchpaper subjects. Twisting themselves into pretzelled knots attempting to decipher precisely what he might have meant by digging into a sausage butt on the steps of Number 10, while declaring himself a horny-handed son of the soil. Far too busy to turn to the matter of a missing civil servant.

But, inevitably, the machinery of the realm creaks into gear and the police are dispatched to attempt to have a few words with Schneider Jameson on the matter. And then, equally inevitably, there is a misunderstanding with the people of Swineland, as the canvas metropolis has come to be called. Many of the protestors, in particular the more professionally agitated amongst them, have developed a Pavlovian response to seeing the police roll up on their tent flaps. A standoff of miscommunication ensues as the protestors form ranks, donning their piggy masks and strap-on curly tails as they stomp their feet in unison, demonstrating their right to free assembly in a more rural manner than the news helicopters overhead are used to seeing.

A police negotiator attempts to explain the situation, calmly expounding on how the police are, for once, on their side. How they seek merely to move through the crowds and render Schneider Jameson into their custody and maybe enact some of this justice that the protestors are all clamouring for. All of his sterling work is unfortunately drowned out by the oinking.

It takes some time for the situation to be diffused. The riot police have shown up, as part of someone's bright idea to try and de-escalate the situation. And every hail of plastic pork chops sent in their direction sets the porcine peace process back a few hours. But sense does prevail and, a few days later, the long arm of the law finally manages to reach out as far as Schneider Jameson's homestead to knock upon the door.

There is no evidence left by now. Any trace of Matthew Peregrine that was not licked clean has long been sluiced away into the drain in the intervening days. Even Schneider's little piggy accomplices have been shipped off to market. But there are expectations to be met, and real riots to be avoided, and only one way that this house call was ever going to end. So on go the handcuffs and Schneider is led away, even as he calls to his mother over his shoulder, advising her that his exhausted lawyers are on speed-dial.

And then, just as Schneider Jameson is brought outside, and the police begin to parse the problem of moving him through the protestors and off into custody, something remarkable happens.

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It is only four cars that converge on the scene, but that is akin to saying that only two atom bombs were dropped on Japan in the war. They are the unlikeliest of terrorist cells but, given the savagery of their actions and the coordination of their efforts, there seems to be no other label to adequately describe them.

Jeff Staveley; fifty-three, plumber and in possession of a white van and some challenging worldviews. He drives his transit into the heart of Swineland as fast as his spluttering engine will allow. As pretend pig protestors bounce off his windscreen or are pulled to their doom under the vehicle, he is only stopped when a tent wraps itself

around his wheelbase and wrenches an axle loose. He explodes from the rear of the van as it is swamped with protestors, a flurry of wrench strikes with interstitial flashes of arse crack. Screaming about the beauty of the pork before he is subdued via the tried and trusted method of a herd of people kicking him in the nuts until he loses consciousness.

Iqra Mirza; twenty-three, IT software developer and a devout Muslim. Although this last point is open to debate as she handbrake turns her hatchback into the crowd, while she screams out of the open window about how she could not resist the allure of the bacon. She is pulled from the wreckage by the hands of the survivors, who then seem uncertain what to do with her. Caught in indecision by their liberal sensibilities and the cameras rolling in the helicopters overhead, they eventually effect a citizen's arrest by sitting on her head. Almost muffling Iqra's screaming diatribe about why Schneider Jameson is her new prophet.

Olivia Hunstanton; thirty-seven if her Facebook profile is to be trusted. Late forties if one is going by the evidence of their own eyes. Member of the idle rich, owner of a Range Rover which drives up and over Iqra's little runaround to plant itself nose first amidst the scattering masses. Clad in a gilet, hair scraped severely into a war-bun, she exits via the sunroof and takes to battering those around her with a hockey stick. Screeching about how the tenderloin she had the previous evening had brought her to a more complete climax than any wretched man had ever managed. Before she is hauled down from her perch and rendered unconscious through the liberal application of a guitar.

'Big Mean' Dean McQueen; fifty-one, ex-squaddie and self-described taker of no bullshit from any of those foreign types or those traitors squatting in Downing Street. Opts to hurl his bowling ball of a Volvo into the lane of police who are belatedly converging on the carnage. Going for a strike, he must settle for a spare as the car tumbles over his victims and skids, on its roof, into the side of one of the interview tents. He emerges from the smoking wreckage brandishing a shotgun that he begins to discharge at random into the bodies of the dead and dying. Has just enough time to decry those present for trying to stifle the truth of the blessed meat before a couple of tear gas grenades, fired at close range, take most of the front of his face off.

It should go without saying that no one has ever seen anything like this before. But the major news outlets still spend several weeks saying it anyway.

*

Dr Gaunt has no answers.

No one does. But, seeing as he is the chief scientist, responsible for the medical aspects of the investigation, there is perhaps a weight of expectation on his shoulders absent from other pundits and laymen. The doctor and his team have traced the connection between the disparate foursome who enacted the Swineland Massacre, that led to the deaths of twenty six men, women and police officers. The same connection shared by the half dozen too-late martyrs who had been scooped up by a hastily erected police cordon. Another six people wrestled from their cars at the roadside, as they screamed about the beauty of the pork and the saintliness of Schneider Jameson. All of them with nothing in common except that they had eaten produce from Schneider's

farm.

In COBRA appointed microbiological labs Dr Gaunt and his team dissect and distil, fricassee and fillet samples of recovered meat from Schneider's farm and the store shelves that it has found its way onto. Pork products have been impounded, and the piles grow in bonded warehouses while pigs are culled and burned in great Guernican bonfires. Sacrifices made to the next great food scare. All the while Dr Gaunt can find nothing in this reconstituted carbon that can explain it all. No disease, no psychotropics. No alien prions to eat through the brain and at least induce some sense into proceedings. It is just meat. As exciting and as indifferent as all the baseline samples, no matter which scientific angle they seek to attack it from.

In the field, counter terrorism operators work through online search histories and personal affiliations. They shut down the nascent black market in bacon that has been popping up since the shelves were cleared a whole three days ago. And they find nothing either.

In an undisclosed location Schneider Jameson is cajoled and persuaded into revealing his secrets. Not tortured, mind you. Although, after a few bouts with some of the psychological operators that the government has pulled back from more foreign climes, he might come to wish that he had been. But, however much he might wish it to be otherwise, Schneider cannot help them. He sits and sweats in his windowless room, locked away from society and reasonableness, and he has no idea either. Except, perhaps, in seeking to blame Matthew Peregrine for having the temerity to get mulched into his pig packing process. Because what else could it possibly be?

And every day, just when he thinks he can endure no more of this, Dr Gaunt must shuffle into a Whitehall conference room. A glass walled panopticon, packed full of cabinet ministers, committee members and more shadowy forms that call themselves advisors, and he has to tell them all that he has no idea.

Is there anything the good doctor wants to help him in his endeavours, he is asked, in tones that increasingly suggest he is going to get what he needs if things don't turn themselves round in short order. And there is nothing that Dr Gaunt, once favourite pet scientist of the incumbent government due to his handling of the last of the pandemic cycles, can say in response to these queries.

It is unclear at what point Esmerelda Wintercorn becomes entangled in all these myriad efforts, but Dr Gaunt has evidently long since passed the desperation point where seeking input from the witching community seems far-fetched or outlandish.

"Well, it's magic," she says, as she sips a herbal infusion in her New Forest cottage, flanked by a couple of unimpressed security personnel as Dr Gaunt talks to her, off-the-record. "Obviously."

*

Esmerelda takes this magic thing very seriously. From the tips of her green hair down to the sooty, smudgy soles of her bare feet there is not one inch of the woman that does not belong on a pagan message board, espousing the benefits of witch-hazel. She hikes up the flowing sleeves of her tie-dyed kaftan as she sets about rolling a joint, cutting a defiant side-eye at the watching security detail as she listens to the facts of the case.

"Sacrificial magic, mate," she declares, putting the final lick to her construction

and lighting up. “Double sacrificial magic, actually. Once when this Mr Falcon-or-whatever chap got squished, and then again when the pigs who consumed that blood magic smoothie got porkpied themselves. Magic’s a rum old business, Dr Death.”

“Gaunt,” he corrects her, wearily. Wondering, no doubt, if there is any strata of society that is not lining up to give him a hard time. “I’m afraid the scientific infrastructure of this great nation is not really an ardent supporter of sorcery.”

“Course it’s not,” nods Esmerelda, offering the joint to Dr Gaunt purely out of politeness. “That’s the thing about magic, though. Doesn’t really care if you believe in it or not.”

“If it was that easy then why haven’t we been inundated with this sort of balderdash in the past?” asks the doctor, marking for the first use of ‘balderdash’ in the wild for many a long year.

Esmerelda’s cottage is tiny and cramped. The only thing to differentiate it from a hovel is the presentation, and the only reason that she is not referred to as a hoarder is that no one local wants to risk offending the witch. There was not much real estate in her living room before she started filling it with ominous posters, crystals and a library of fantasy novels all revolving around dragons, but she still stands up and paces to the fireplace before she replies. Witchcraft, Esmerelda has come to realise, really is just showbusiness with its tits fully out.

“He’ll be a totem, mate,” she opines, the strings of beads around her wrists and throat jangling as she takes a contemplative toke. “An exemplar. Very rare, they are. A convergence of psychic ley lines drawing together the collective unconscious of a whole community.”

“Right,” nods Dr Gaunt, shooting a suspicious glance at the cup of tea he has been drinking.

“He’ll be the quintessential something-or-other,” continues Esmerelda, shedding her ash on the carpet as she begins to get all excited. “Typifying the beliefs of one set of idiots or the other. When combined with a spot of blood magic, you can end up with an ideological transubstantiation situation. Where you can spread those beliefs to others through the ritualistic consumption of the sacrificial medium. In this case that would be a lovely bacon sarnie.”

“I’m afraid that sounds just a little bit too preposterous for me to take seriously,” grumbles the doctor.

“Yeah? Well, tell that to the Catholics.”

“Ok,” says Dr Gaunt, stretching out that first syllable to near breaking point. Wondering how he’s going to explain this to the Whitehall conference room.

*

Damian Kirkwild does not, as a rule, believe in stupid things. He is quite happy for you or I to do so, though. That is, if one was going to get sniffy about things such as the free market and innovation, rather the whole point of the SmartData company that he created ten years ago. The instrument he now uses to inveigle himself into the confidences of the rich and powerful.

Getting people to believe stupid things has gotten Damian much further than telling them the truth. Although it can be, both morally and logistically, a lot more

difficult. It depends on the colour and the shape of the stupid thing that is to be inserted into the subject. It must be honed and perfected if it is to burrow into a mind and hollow out the true thing that it is designed to replace.

This is why Damian is paid the big bucks. Five million alone for his guidance on the recent “We Can Do Better” campaign, which ushered the incumbent government back into another glorious cycle of control. All by promising nothing and blissfully ignoring the fact that those promising to do better had spent over a decade in power. Proving either that they couldn’t, in fact, do better or that they simply saw no reason to even try.

And that was after jumping ship from a test bed phase working for the opposition. Where his “Mustn’t Grumble” campaign of posters, with those two words superimposed on images of riot police cracking down on protestors with undue force, targeted the more militant and argumentative elements of the party. The one that sparked a surge in less than peaceful protests, leading in turn to a calcification of the laws of free assembly. The riots that gave the opposed all the excuses they will need for the next twenty years to crack down on anything that they take a fancy to.

Or against.

Snakes eating other snakes, who were far too busy eating their own tails. Arguments emboldening counterarguments in an ever-escalating ideological Cold War. Money making money. Damian can barely contain his excitement at the upcoming ‘Past Glories’ meme attack he has planned for social media that will test the bounds of good faith debate and the limits of SmartData’s balance sheet.

What Damian Kirkwild does believe in is winning. And winning can never be stupid.

When Dr Gaunt, in career-breakingly apologetic mode, makes his presentation behind closed doors at Whitehall, Damian does not immediately laugh. While so many of his supposed peers sneer or stare in disbelief as Dr Gaunt sets fire to his reputation with a Black Magic 101 seminar, he instead reviews the data packets and interrogates the control experiment writeups. When Dr Gaunt arrives home - in a soup of guilt, shame and relief - Damian Kirkwild is at his doorstep with a bottle of excruciatingly expensive scotch in one hand, and a binder full of questions in the other.

And, when he has received the answers that he requires, Damian Kirkwild proceeds to go networking.

*

The PM is not going to like this.

This is the common ground that Damian and the ministerial aide agree upon, and so Damian knows that he will be successful. He needs only one such foothold to work from, the tiniest crack of shared perspective into which he can insert his doublespoken crowbar and exert the necessary logical leverage. And it is only the shortest of focus-tested steps from the PM hating something to loving it with all of his calcified heart.

Dr Gaunt’s mistake is that he has too much faith in data, and none at all in the sexiness with which it should be paraded before its prospective customers. Indeed, his mistake is that he does not realise he is selling something in the first place. This plan, Damian has realised, is a pig that needs a hell of a lot of makeup to make it attractive

to the market. But magic has always been about the presentation.

And, before too long at all, he is in the highest office of the land, giving his audio-visual presentation to the man who is, at least notionally, in charge of things. Watching as the PM flails about excitedly in VR, reviewing the footage of the new test cases that Damian has commissioned. Cooing in delight as a socialist test subject chomps down on a sorcerous sausage sandwich and begins frothing at the mouth as he rants about the necessity of cutting universal credit, and removing any and all red tape for entrepreneurial small business farmers. Pulls the headset off in disbelief partway through a young Nigerian woman's polemic, post greedy gammon gobbling, on how all these foreigners are diluting the national identity, and are probably bringing in all manner of strange and dirty diseases with them to boot.

And Damian knows then that his pretty little pig has landed well and truly on all four trotters.

Money is not discussed here. It never is when there is so much of it to be had. Simply grab a handful or two on your way out, dear boy, and get to work. In the aftermath of Damian's bravura turn, there is in fact only one question. Uttered almost as an aside by a ministerial aide, as if he is petitioning the Oracle.

"And what do you suggest we do about the Swineland situation?"

"Oh, that?" The past really is a foreign country to Damian Kirkwild's Empire. A far off place of little importance that he is more than happy to strip mine of its useful content. "Just say that it was all down to foreign pork."

*

"This is not at all what I had in mind."

Precisely who Esmerelda Wintercorn is speaking to is a mystery, as it has been made quite clear that she is not being listened to anymore. She only has clearance to the Jameson blacksite because Dr Gaunt is somehow clinging to some vestiges of power in Whitehall. Now that the capitalist kingmakers have taken control of the rudder it will surely only be a matter of time before the tide returns Esmerelda to her cottage and her kaftans.

To the great delight of SmartData and the government department that has sprung into being to assist them, Schneider Jameson has proved to be just as intellectually malleable as they had hoped. A less charitable estimation would be to label him as stupid, but this would be unfair. The scale and sophistication of the mental ju jitsu that he is being subjected to would overwhelm even the hardest and most stoic-minded of souls.

And, in terms of life goals, Schneider seemed to have achieved most of his. Relocated to a beautiful farm that nestles in the bosom of the Shropshire hills and, more importantly, a military cordon. He no longer has to deal with tiresome people and can tend to his beloved and much abused pigs in peace.

The worst thing that has happened to Schneider Jameson after mulching an agent of the establishment is that he must occasionally sit in a room with men who seem to speak sense on all manner of subjects. And while they might rile him up, he cannot truly say that he disagrees with what they tell him. About why he should be so annoyed over whatever today's topic of discussion might happen to be. Over time he finds he is learning so much about how the world works, who is truly to blame for it, and just who

might be the ones to save it. He thinks this is maybe what prison is like these days, after all those new age millennials got their woke little hands on them.

And every day, as he goes about his business with the pigs, he simply has to think on what has been discussed that day and press a like button if he happens to agree with it.

And then, of course, there is his business with the 'other' pigs. The ones that are listed in the manifest as 'emotional support animals'. The ones that live in the farm rather than on it, accompanying Schneider when he has finished another hard day's pigging, and is resting in the farmhouse, watching his carefully curated television scheduling. The ones that everyone seems to just gloss over when the uninitiated ask their innocent questions and cause the control room to go very quiet.

Sometimes, the old hands say. Sometimes you really don't want to know how the sausage is made.

Esmerelda may have her doubts, but hers is no longer the only voice of the occult that is commenting on affairs. There are men, in suits as sharp as their little goatee beards, who now lurk in the supernatural planning meetings, devising ways to bring magecraft into the twenty first century. Witches have turned into warlocks, with all the threats of progress that this entails.

They have, for instance, got around the whole second sacrifice problem. The one that was tying their marketing and social engineering works to the meat eating tranches of the voter base. Bacteria are animals too, or so these sorcerers have convinced the ineffable currents of the arcane. And the blood and mulch is now fed into great vats full of such things. Siphoned off and bottled in canisters that bear such labels as 'why should we have to honour our existing international agreements' and 'I'm no racist, but...'. Shipped off in the dead of night to be sprayed onto fields of crops and injected into the manufacture and packaging processes of most major food and medicine infrastructures.

Those little aluminium canisters have already bought two by-elections, and safe passage for a dozen bills and amendments that will slowly but effectively chip away at the foundations of the nation. Until they have been rebuilt into a more governable shape. Just one tanker of the stuff will bring the North to heel. Another to embolden the South. And maybe a third to sweep to victory those that demand it in whatever general election they could care to call.

And then it leaks. The details of the setup, that is, not the canisters.

It does not leak far, and a newly pliable media is more than happy to comply with the general D notice that is slapped onto the whole affair by most-definitely-not MI5 agents. Edicts are laid down by grey men who come to haunt the editors offices of Fleet Street and their more digital equivalents. But it leaks far enough for the other political parties to get wind of the matter and, for a while, pointed questions arise from the backbenches and long, knowing looks come to be exchanged in the halls of power. This has the potential to be as big a scandal as Suez. Or maybe even bigger than Suez, as that was a long time ago, and not everyone remembers what that had all been about.

So, an agreement is brokered, and toys are agreed to be shared.

The government will get the cannabis market, of course. This is the PM's pet project, or so he would have you believe. The upcoming legalisation bill will give him access to the hearts, minds and emotions of a whole swath of the electorate who do not

currently shop at the higher end retail outlets or boutique farmers markets.

The opposition will get the European supermarket chains and, if they play nice, then maybe they can have the food banks too. Since that is where the majority of their base tends to find themselves these days.

The Greens will get avocados, and be fucking grateful that they were even invited.

And all of this is not the worst thing in the world. It is no longer 1984. The world has moved on. The idea of an entirely unopposed political edifice is tempting, but no longer feasible. It is in the friction of colliding worldviews and entrenched opinions that real opportunity can be found. It is much easier to operate within the privacy of the hollowed out shell of democracy than it is to build a despotic regime out in the harsh light of day. And, if the tectonic shift of those political plates can be co-ordinated and their movements regulated? Well, then there will be more than enough success and opportunity for everyone. Provided that all the players understand that the word 'everyone' is being used here in accordance with its enlightened, evolved definition. The machinery of power is built such that it does not care who is at the controls. Its operators have always been interchangeable, if they choose to make themselves so.

No one can be sure who leaked the story. And it is surely just coincidence that Damian Kirkwild spends so much of his day smiling as he regards his bank balance. His diary of shadow appointments and consultations tick ever upwards.

But, on a larger scale, Damian's work has only just begun. He is looking for new opportunities and, more specifically, more Schneider Jamesons. This is what he sees as the bottleneck in their otherwise efficient processing technique. SmartData have the infrastructure for mass deployment and their tentacles slid deep within the operations of the nation. But all of this is hamstrung by Schneider Jameson. Having to spend days at a time forming and moulding every idea in the mind of this ever so humble pig-farmer is becoming a drag. Whole harvests have been ruined because he couldn't correctly understand simple things like bigotry and privilege.

Surely Schneider cannot be the only totem out there. A phrase is lodged somewhere in the yawning chasm of Damian's psyche, as resilient and of as dubious provenance as any that his brainchild has inserted into the minds of millions of his cattle.

He remembers reading of a phenomenon of his youth, where milk was still delivered by milkmen, and there were only sunlit uplands, and this was still a glorious country. A landscape of imagined memory. Where the blue tits and robins learned to peck the foil lids of those bottles on the doorstep to get to the creamy goodness beyond. A change that swept the avian population instantly, too fast to be the result of learned behaviour from the more enterprising of birds. A sudden, seemingly telepathic, instance of societal evolution.

Morphic resonance.

And, of course, making one's own totems is even better than trying to find these unicorns out in the wild. What is magic, Damian's tenured wizards are always telling him, if not conspiring with reality to get one's own way?

In his darker moments, if one can fathom the idea of him having thoughts that are of a more midnight hue than those which he already sells to the world, Damian wonders if the PM himself could become a totem. If this process he has devised can become one of distillation. Whether the hatred and love that he has manufactured in

the populace, all pointing towards deifying this figurehead, could turn that figurehead himself into its own convergence of ley lines and bile. Such that, if Damian ground up the floppy-haired loon, a thimbleful of his essence could poison the oceans and turn all the fish into colossal racists who want all those foreign fishermen to go back to the dry land that they came from.

And the PM's people agree with him, if only for reasons of their own. And maybe not about the grinding up part. And not the PM himself, of course. He is far too busy basking in his newfound universal popularity. Enjoying the warm, sticky feeling he experiences when he gets to say something dull-headed and thinly-veiled and, for once, the entire country erupts in riotous applause.

This is why the PM has people to do this sort of thinking for him, and some of them are troubled. The terrorism potential is off the charts, for one thing. Just one wrong thinking totem in the hands of those who do not deserve it could bring the country to ruin. Not everyone is like Damian Kirkwild. Some people just cannot be trusted.

Interfere with the supply chain of artisanal doughnuts and you have an uprising of hipsters and young professionals, all calling for things like adequate mental healthcare and means-based immigration.

One loose batch of haggis and you're suddenly fighting the Battle of Culloden again.

Dose one batch of LSD and, before you know it, you're hip-deep in middle-aged ravers. Gurning around Downing Street while they jabber on, ten-to-the-dozen, about peace, love and understanding.

And, if you really don't want to sleep tonight, just imagine this sort of techno-wizardry in the hands of Johnny Foreigner. Or, worse than that, all those terrorists still lurking under our beds, just beyond the old suitcases and the spiders. Or, even worse than worse than that, just imagine the Americans.

The thing about control, realise the people who wield it, is that it can grow more fragile the more of it there is to be had.

*

For all that Schneider Jameson's new station in life has taught him, there is still much that he does not know.

For example, there is a room beneath his farm land. Several of them. All linked together such that they conspire to form what is more accurately a complex. A warren of tile floors and floor drains that pick a path between sharp, densely-packed machinery.

And Schneider Jameson is not alone in his ignorance on this score. Esmerelda Wintercorn has never seen this place before either, and she should not be here now. And, while she tells herself she is shocked, she knows that this cannot be the case. This is a sordid secret she has always known, and only the method of the executions have eluded her.

The security guard, lightly buzzed on both Esmerelda's homegrown strain of Sativa and the nebulous promise of a quick handjob at the end of proceedings, shows her around the facility. Slipping between the orbits of the skeleton staff operating the midnight shift. He seems as proud as a concentration camp concierge as they thread

the needle through the mechanisms of power. Lost in the ingenuity of the operation, oblivious to the life and colour slowly draining from Esmerelda's face.

On the scale that SmartData are now working on, the torture she sees is entirely necessary. With barely a molecule of saturated bacteria destined to reach each targeted consumer, this first sacrifice must be potent. Every scintilla of pain and power must be wrung from the dissident and refugee souls that hang shackled in agony all around them. Their hopes and dreams, along with more vital organs, are ground down slowly to the thinnest of liquids that traverse the miles of pipes to travel down further still. All the way down to the great vats of bacteria that will drink this pain up, and hold it in reserve to pass on to SmartData's unwitting addicts. These sacrificial souls, kept alive until the last possible moment in order to ensure the greatest potency and purity. All operated, from what seems like a million miles away, by a single press of Schneider Jameson's like button.

One part in a billion. Homeopathic magic.

This is how the sausage is really made.

*

Like all things, protest has evolved in the face of changing environmental circumstances.

Derek is a shaman. Or so he says. He doesn't have any credentials to offer on the subject, so Esmerelda is forced to take him at his slightly shop-soiled word. He does have a crow that he has designated as his familiar, which she supposes must count for something.

Derek also claims to be a totem. And this is something of which there could be said to be more evidence, depending on whether or not you were looking to present it in a court of law. He seems weak to Esmerelda's cynical third eye, as she is so used to the tar black potency of Schneider Jameson's biases and self-congratulation. But Derek has sacrificed carrots and broccoli in the name of his slightly damp beliefs, and fed them to his sorry social circle. And they all seemed to become just that little bit more unhappy about things after eating them.

The people that Derek embodies are not so easily roused to displeasure, and they are dwindling in numbers. Spread thin across the land, and weakened from within, as they are pulled in a variety of directions like a perpetually quartered man. But Derek is all that Esmerelda has managed to rustle up. And, if magic is king in the pastures of presentation, then witchcraft has always tended to dwell among the hedgerows of pragmatism. And a witch, she tells herself, should never doubt her own intuition. It is often all that she has.

The final thing that Derek is, is a vegetarian. And this is something that is making their current conversation just a little tiresome.

"I can't say I'm too chuffed about this whole 'sacrifice' thing," he muses in between sips of his real ale.

His crow pecks at a torn open packet of Wotsits on the table between them, drawing the occasional look of ire from a distant bartender. The pub that they find themselves conspiring in is a small country affair, far from any prying eyes. To date, its owners have not had cause to institute any corvid-based mandates but, based on

Derek's current performance, may soon be rethinking their policies.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you, Derek. That's just how magic works."

"You know, I *am* a shaman," says Derek, running a hand up and down the side of his face, demonstrating the braiding in his beard and the nose-ring. "I am not completely unversed in the secrets of the mystic arts."

"Oh, do fuck off, Derek," sighs Esmerelda, who does not possess arms long enough with which to demonstrate how far up to here she has had it with this whole affair. "You work part-time at a key-cutters in Kidderminster."

"Witch," mutters Derek, in lieu of an actual retort.

"Of course, you could do nothing. You've had enough practice at that, after all. Sit and wait, until they find you. Just like I found you. And let them cart you off to the pig farm, where you'll get no say in the matter. You'll believe what they tell you, and you'll press that button gladly, and get others to believe it too." Esmerelda pauses to fix her victim with the full force of a moderately tipsy, highly annoyed witch's stare. "There's no tofu on the pig farm, Derek."

"I suppose I could say a prayer for their spirit animals," bargains Derek with himself. "My mate Effervescent has some chickens that she's always complaining about."

And it is in this moment that Esmerelda knows that her own presentation has been successful.

"I will need to get you all riled up, of course. Insult you a bit before the ceremonies, to get those powerful bile juices flowing." Esmerelda looks the man up and down, watches the crow nip at his fingers as Derek reaches for a Wotsit. "I can't see that being too much of a problem."

Between the two of them is a small aluminium canister. A sample that has been smuggled out from the farm, and a promise of more to come in this new breed of cultural warfare. Its label is currently blank. Just a space that can be filled with whatever they might desire. Even Derek's familiar friend seems entranced by the empty promise this shiny bauble contains.

"And you can synthesise more of this?" asks Derek, evidently pleased with himself at learning a new word and using it, more or less, correctly. "If my crack teams of social samurai can get this into the supply chains, you can supply us with more?"

"Yes, I believe I can," says Dr Gaunt, who is sat beside Esmerelda and slowly coming to terms with his own, new station of familiarity. "I don't suppose I can have some crisps now, can I?"

"No," says Esmerelda. "You may not."

*

This is how the country looks at six o'clock.

Trade talks with the shifty and underhanded European Union continue, although our infallible leader has threatened to make everyone else leave in a huff if people don't stop being so unreasonable. In the face of lies from our jealous and spurned ex-lovers about empty supermarket shelves and mythical energy shortages, Britain stands strong. After all, spaffed the PM from his new media palace, what was the point in negotiating with people who were so blatantly beneath our station. Those who don't

understand just how much of an honour it was for them to be invited to the table to be patronised in the first place.

Calls for urgent action on the alleged environmental emergency received a boost today. Despite it being hard and boring, the government have now solved the issue by promising to throw a few quid at some company who are going to create a great big dome over these sceptred isles, so we can create our own environment. This new micro-climate, lectured the Energy Minister earlier today, would make us the envy of an already extremely envious world, and finally put a stop to the French sneaking into our sovereign fishing waters to steal all the best wind. Doctor Megan (18, Gloucester, not a real doctor) thinks this is a brilliant idea, and has more to say about this on page 3. And she's got her tits out, so you know she's an expert.

Riots in the North have been successfully quelled, after four nights of violence, looting and the North generally living down to their reputation. This marks the latest success for the new Homeland First policing initiative, and the rioters were easily broken and routed when they began to venture into more affluent areas where all the stuff worth breaking actually is. When asked if they had considered just earning more money, ringleaders and malcontents were notably silent before they were returned to their slums.

Calls for the Watford Gap Wall project to be fast-tracked have only grown louder and more forceful in light of this recent urban unrest. The Palace released some statement or other on the matter in an effort to stifle our constitutional right to vitriol, but honestly, who gives a solitary fuck about what Her Majesty has to say anymore?

Something happened in Ireland, but that's miles away. Probably independence, I reckon. Let them go the same way as Scotland, I say. They'll come skulking back eventually, when they realise how good they had it. Can't please some people, I tell you.

Closer to home, scientists and government officials continue to try and explain the epidemic of hysteria and moral turpitude that threatens to over-run the Home Counties. Men and women from all walks of life have taken to assaulting local supermarket chains to pull fresh produce from the shelves and forcibly insert them into medically non-approved orifices.

No explanation for these actions has been given, beyond perpetrators announcing themselves as "The Crows", and no organisation has claimed responsibilities for these acts of public indecency. One man, Dr Thaddeus Gaunt of Hull, captured on camera using an aubergine with immoral intent, screamed about how this was all a simple mistake stemming from him drinking from the wrong container in the fridge during the middle of the night. Dr Gaunt was a one-time advisor to the government, relating to the Swineland Massacre of last year, but he was neutralised by the newly sanctioned armed response wing of the Tesco-Sainsbury Alliance before he could face further questions. Thankfully the aubergine, following a quick rinse, was able to saved.

Downing Street have advised that there is no need for decent, subservient citizens to start panic buying essential items before they start disappearing up the anuses of a small group of malcontents. And, look, we all like a bum-related joke as much as the next peasant, and calling them fundamentalists is a joke that works on at least three levels, so that's very clever and all. But this is obviously a terrorist atrocity, and it has to stop. I mean, people have to eat those things, and if these reprobates keep

mishandling gourds and tubers in the fruit and veg aisles up and down this sainted land, then we're going to have to go back to importing them from the continent. And do you really want that? Because God alone knows what those dirty buggers get up to with them before they send them across the Channel. Just like all those immigrants before we had the good sense to get the bloody Navy to start machinegunning their grubby little dinghies.

And then you'll be taking money out of the pocket of decent, hard-working farmers, who are already nearly destitute because of reasons that are too complicated to explain here, but are absolutely not our own fault. AND you're undermining the trade talks that our loveable PM is currently trying to beat them all into submission with.

So really, when you look at it like that, these people are traitors. And, I'm not saying that we should bring back hanging or anything. But, *if we did*. **IF** we did, well, then these people wouldn't really have a leg to stand on, would they? Or a marrow to sit on. And it's not a laughing matter, so you can all wipe those soppy grins off your stupid little socialist faces.

It's the NHS that suffers in the end, you know. All those nurses on next to nothing that have to yank a variety of root vegetables out of all those unwashed crevices. Have you been to A&E lately? It looks like the returns counter of a vegan supermarket the morning after the Somme. Let's all give them another bloody good clap to show them that we care, shall we?

In other news, an eccentric young lady has been found dead in her New Forest cottage. Police have yet to comment on the matter, and indeed no longer have an obligation to do so. But it is believed that an Eastern European man has been detained in relation to the events and may face summary verdict in the coming days.

And now, the weather. Which will soon be bloody lovely, all the time.

THE URN

With apologies to Nick Bostrom

1

There is no such thing as a villain.

Before I dropped him into that scorpion pit my favourite philosophy tutor tried to instil in me the benefits of moral relativism. Everyone was the hero of their own story. A twist of perspective was all that was required to come to sympathise with the dictator and empathise with the murderer. Those poor, misunderstood corporations who just wanted to be your friends. Pay no mind to the sweatshops you have misheard about, and the sociopathic knives with which they bisect the market forces. Pay no attention to the swimming pools of money that they accumulate. That, they would have you believe, is just an unintended side effect of their popularity, and have they mentioned just how cool you look in their new running shoes?

False friends and overindulgent mothers. No one, I came to realise, was prepared to be the stern father.

I have to date been incredibly lucky. I say this, not so much as the too-soon orphaned heir to a billion dollar coat-hanger empire, but more as a member of the human race. I arrived, naked and mewling, into this world, fated to die just as any other homo sapiens. True, my beginnings may not have been as humble as yours. Your first cries were unlikely to have resounded off the polished floors and marble walls of the *Palais de Ciel*, echoing out across the majesty of the Alps. Your first steps, I would posit, did not occur within the hermetically sealed, hyper-oxygenated confines of an Ubermensch Rearing Facility, over-seen by a platoon of ambulatory experts. Unless I have caught you on Casual Friday then I am shall go out on a limb and state that your first teachers were not Nobel Laureates, neurolinguistic psy-op practitioners and bold-faced assassins.

Humility prevents me from declaring that I was created to be better than you, however inescapable the evidence for such a statement might seem. For the sake of certain egos, let us instead say that I was brought into this world to be the best of you. Barring some minor genetic tinkering in recent years – born more from a sense of decadent boredom than in service of any true purpose – my flesh is as yours.

Flawed and mortal I was born, and so I will remain. Just like you. Well, perhaps not like *you*. You at the front with your face in a phone and an intellectual curiosity horizon that extends mere inches from the tips of your shoes. You? Not so much. But *you*? The hypothetical gentleman at the back? The one that views me with a cold, discerning eye, ever Sherpa'ed by the spectre of healthy suspicion? Perhaps we might have subjects to discuss. To you I say this. I am here, and so are you, and that stands testament to just how lucky we both are.

I know this may be an unfashionable thing to say, but I am, at heart, a deeply unfashionable - if terribly handsome - man. So much so that I am unafraid to speak this simple truth. For all your lamentations about your perceived injustices, all your

fretting over the tawdry inequalities you have wrought from your misunderstandings of race, colour, creed and religious folklore, you have failed to realise this metaphysical platitude. The fact that you and I remain here, able to have this conversation, proves it beyond doubt.

We have known only success.

If you are so delightfully precious to persist in doubting me then I would invite you to visit your nearest museum and gaze upon the wonders of the fossil record. Do not worry, I shall wait for you. It will not take long. Queues, after all, are something of an artefact of the past. Return to me after gazing on that collection of petrified footnotes, and then we shall have a conversation on the failure of mankind. Humankind, to date, has only had to contend with the power to destroy other species and, at worst, significant but still fractional portions of our own. That, by definition, seems to me to be someone else's problem.

Before he was regrettably, but entirely necessarily, filleted my Ethical Sciences tutor encouraged me to view human progress and invention as a great urn. Within this urn are an infinite number of stones, one of which we remove when we make a discovery or enrich the sum total of knowledge in the world. A stone may be white, indicating that this innovation is purely beneficial and only adds to our accumulated success. More commonly a stone may be grey, a mixture of potential good or ill depending on its application or the disposition of the one who beholds it. What we have yet to draw from the Urn is a black stone. A nugget of knowledge that is antithetical to our very existence. Something of such power or malignancy that it cannot do other than destroy the civilisation that plucked it into being. Such a stone could not be returned to the Urn. The one way nature of knowledge would not allow it. You may pick your preferred metaphor for this as there have been an embarrassment of riches in this regard. I will simply say that in this case Prometheus cannot put the genie back inside Pandora's Box.

It was only by luck, my tutor asserted, that we remain alive. A billion hands dipping into the Urn have, to date, only returned a mountain of grey stones, interspersed with the occasional white marvel. Some of these stones may have appeared to be a darker shade than its peers. Our fingers may have brushed against the black as we rummaged around in the dark, like a child with his fat hand stuck in the sweetie jar. But we were still here.

During my formative years I became obsessed with the notion of these black stones. Sifting through the catalogue of human atrocity that we label as history I sought to find an example of where mankind had tamed his own destruction and, with the force of his intellect, turned away from inevitable annihilation. Nuclear weapons were naturally my first thought, but for all our genocides and Cold War brinkmanship, I came to see that the power of the atom had ultimately brought about nothing so much as a slightly paranoid era of relative peace. Nuclear weaponry, at least for those of you in the front row, is somewhat tiresome and expensive to bring into being. This led them to lie solely within the grip of nation-states and superpowers and, consequently, ensured they would be used only as a threat to tighten that self-same grip. The atom bomb had served as peace for mankind in much the same way that a large, emotionally unstable man with a big stick can serve perfectly adequately as a babysitter.

I looked to more esoteric ideas such as trans-ocean migration and the effect that

this had on the indigenous populations of the Americas, be it North, South or Central. I considered the first tools our species ever rendered and the effect they had upon the Neanderthals. But, once again, my midnight eluded me. These advances I bundled under the heading of *Problems for the Neighbours*, rather than the society that had birthed them.

Plastics, fossil fuels, urban sprawl, the poisoning of the oceans, social media. Even as my lip curled in distaste I found myself forced to admit that we existed in a grayscale, photocopied world that was graded only in varying levels of success. Man could not hope to contend with failure, my tutor lectured me, He was barely prepared for success.

My Ethical Sciences tutor was delicious, might I add. If we somehow manage to get through this thing alive then you must allow me to share some of my recipes with you.

2

When I bestrode the world, like the benevolent and immaculately coiffured gentleman powerhouse of industry that I had become, for a while I myself became enamoured with success. While initially beguiling, my success was inevitable and, as such, could only be fleeting in the sustenance it brought my soul. The lion, after all, does not glory in his kill. It is to be expected. It is simply the natural order of things.

You doubtless think me boastful. Conceited, assuredly. So quick to cast aside that which others have dashed themselves against the rocks of avarice in their pursuit of. But far worse, I would contend, is the sin of false modesty. A complacency to settle for the success provided to you simply because it is coveted by others.

For the longest, darkest time I came to wonder if I was the black stone. I had been fashioned from opulence, and designed to succeed. Turning away from his own not immodest success within the world of garment storage, my father had looked to his progeny to deliver his true measure of success. I do not think that dear papa was a Nazi, but the fact that I cannot provide an absolute denial on the subject probably tells its own story. Like any good parent – or indeed, any good National Socialist – my father wanted only one thing for me; that I would come to rule the world entirely and etch my name into existence as the single most important collection of atoms to ever move within the universe. I would do things that no one else could even contemplate. I would phase through taboos and prohibitions and I would come to think nothing but dangerous, original thoughts.

Whatever I may have come to think of Father as I grew to fill the role history had assigned to me, I certainly cannot fault him for sheer lunatic ambition.

Mother was a slightly more trifling matter. She exists to me only as a collection of questionnaires and daily medical reports as verbose as they are tedious. For all his mundane physiology, simple dumb luck had delivered to Father a genetic jackpot. Bereft of junk genes and any atavistic landmines lurking within his double helix he had set about the task of finding a suitable mate with a clipboard and slightly more scientific review panels than romance novels might have led one to expect. Mother was one of twenty young women who had passed this sterile selection process, who Father then set about gleefully impregnating.

I would dearly love to say that the image I have in my head of Father stalking the

night-time corridors of his Swiss clinic, turkey baster in his hand and moral impropriety in his heart, is a mere invention of my superlative imagination. However, when I was ten it was already an action of little ingenuity to elude my security detail and procure Father's journals. Through reading those volumes I came to understand Father just that little better, and also solidified the epiphany that superior genetic stock is no guarantee against the slings and arrows of utter batshit insanity.

I cannot prove it, but I believe that Father may have had my Mother mulched and then fed to me in my infant years. Father had descended into some rather radical thinking by this point, and was in the thrall of a number of deep thinkers who had bypassed the field of pseudoscience to graze free in the pastures of guerrilla medicine. It seems he may have extrapolated a little from the idea of consuming the placenta to gain nutrients and came to question why one would settle for a mere burger when you had a delicious cow at home. Or in the fridge.

I don't believe that this action, if it did indeed come to pass, adversely affected me and I would contend that my later forays into cannibalism did not find their genesis in any childhood smoothie incidents. Like any adolescent there must be a straining against the rules imposed on one, and if you cannot recognise the kindred flame of youthful rebellion in my actions then I am afraid that I must accuse you of a lack of empathy. Indeed, I would position my dietary supplements as acts of recycling, and would draw your attention to the fact that I never ingested a single tutor until my coursework had been completed and the exams appropriately graded. At which point I would contend that there was nothing further that they could impart to me, and it would have been simply wasteful to leave all those calories walking around the place.

Whichever way the protein shakes were blended what I can say is that Mother was not around much after her initial nine month contract.

3

At the age of nine I undertook the equivalent of a career evaluation.

This was not the first test that I had faced. Outside of my standard curriculum I had already been engaged for a number of years in a form of homework, whereby I was competing with my nineteen step-siblings for both the attention of the clinic staff and my right to a continued existence. Whilst not officially disapproved of this was very definitely an off-syllabus, self-generated activity, and one that was approached with the same furtive excitement as the hi-jinks and hazings found in any normal boarding school.

For a short while I became enamoured with the notion that one could absorb the power of another through the consumption of their brain matter, and set about testing this hypothesis with great vigour and enthusiasm. I can still picture with embarrassing clarity being five years old, discovered by one of the staff cooks in the kitchen in very much the dead of night. As I teetered on a stool to reach the worktop, the look of disappointment in her eyes still haunts me as she found me preparing the capers to accompany the slowly poaching lobes of Subject XII that were simmering away on the hob.

"White wine vinegar", she sighed, with infinite sorrow. "You forgot the white wine vinegar."

It is with no small amount of shame that I recall this incident now. With the benefit of hindsight I have, of course, come to realise that there are much more efficient methods of extracting knowledge from an individual, and I was so incredibly fond of that cook.

Alongside my culinary endeavours I had also taken something of a liking to both chess and recreational manipulation, so I think it is fair to characterise my hobbies by this point as well-rounded and varied.

As the time of the aptitude test loomed over me, the field had been whittled down to just two applicants. Myself and Subject III, a bright, beautiful and moderately homicidal young girl who might have caused some incestuous complications in the mind of adolescent me had she endured to such a stage. As it was, a precocious flair for chemistry - and the combustible applications thereof - soon rendered both Subject III and most of the West Wing non-viable. So it was with a clear head and a happy heart that I entered the exam room that morning.

There was but one question to this test, a single blade with which to cut to the core of my very construction. It is the same question that is posed to us all at some point in our existence, and whether we answer truthfully, deflect it with misdirection or withdraw in terror from even facing it, it is the one that defines us, both individually and as a species.

“What do you want to do with your life?”

Performance evaluations while working under Father were, to coin a phrase, rather cut and dried affairs. The Human Resources division was small, well-armed, and given to interpreting the name of their department in a more calculating manner than at most organisations. Say what you will about Father’s internal business practices but they left little room for interpretation as to whether or not you were performing in line with management’s expectations. Which may have explained the look of terror that spread across my assessor’s face as I regarded the mountainous view from the window and then replied.

“I want to help people.”

As something of a mischievous child I allowed this terror to ferment somewhat into the creases of his face before continuing.

“I think I shall rule the world. Having reviewed the state of things, I think I shall have to. The absolute shenanigans going on is, frankly speaking, something of an embarrassment and you should all be thoroughly ashamed of yourselves. The question I have for you, is why should I?”

The assessor was a man of advancing years. A social psychologist who had been plucked from a cosy eiderdown of tenure and jowly, ruminatory lunchtime arguments over matters that mattered little. He was not constructed in such a way to be able to provide an answer to this question. I doubt he could understand why an answer would even be required, so I continued to stare at the mountains and evaluated myself.

“Will I be a dictator? That strikes me as a tawdry path to blaze. What is the purpose of a dictator? To maintain their power, I contend. To exert dominance over a populace by keeping them in fear, by keeping them weak. That is not an end, that is a means. The dictator finds himself in the same cage of fear within which he holds his subjects. From the moment that he attains power the dictator is doomed, trapped in an echo chamber as he tries to perpetuate that one moment forever. He has no purpose but to

maintain that equilibrium and no way of accomplishing that save for continuing to strip power from those over which he rules. The dictator is a victim of his own success, because his view of success lacks imagination.”

I will admit to a moment of rhetorical flourish at this point as I turned to face my assessor, defiance twinkling in my eye. In my defence, I was ten years old at the time and, besides, my assessor was in no position to comment on the matter.

“So, I think I shall be something else. I think I shall make people strong. I will remove the shackles that hold them down and I shall give them a true freedom. I will do this from the shadows, unseen and unappreciated. I will give them options. I will lift them up to be the best that they can be with no obligations and nothing expected in return. I shall nourish their thoughts and usher in an age where Man is as God.

“And, at the zenith of their power, they will still willingly choose me to lead them. With full knowledge these gods will bow to me. They will acknowledge that for all their dreams of perfection, I am better than them. After all, the measure of a ruler is in the strength of those he rules. They will defer to their better.”

The neuro-toxin I had applied to the armrest of the chair, under cover of the previous night, was seeping through the assessor’s hands and into his bloodstream. It had paralysed him completely by this point and so he was currently unavailable for comment. Instead, I assumed the mantle of his higher self and asked myself how I would achieve my goal.

“I think I shall give the people of this world a test of my own. I will present them with the option for true failure for the first time, and then I shall simply wait for them to ask me to save them.”

The assessor may well have expired by that point in proceedings. My exactitude in dosages was tempered by a general exuberance for poisoning in those days. I do not know what his response might have been to my answer, whether it would have met approval against the limited standards of which he was capable. Even so, I was not worried. The neuro-toxin was susceptible to heat and a quick sauté was enough to ensure that he was fit for consumption.

4

Father died when I was fourteen and please be assured that I do not judge you for the implied questions you may have surrounding his demise. I can only claim honesty in asserting that his death was not at my hands and that I did not recycle him in any manner whatsoever. Not really.

Whilst waiting for my inevitable rise to power Father had taken to extreme fringe medical practices in much the same way as a retired man might take to fishing or woodwork. He expired following one such procedure, during which he completely exsanguinated himself, to be replaced with a fluid of his own concoction. He had believed this mixture to be of improved purity to your common or garden blood, a belief which was true in a purely theoretical sense, provided that one did not factor matters of pressure or heat into the equation. In Father’s defence, he had tested this procedure on a number of laboratory subjects beforehand, and not a single one of them had exploded.

Given the omni-directional nature of his departure Father was cremated, a process

not entirely dissimilar to making an industrial scale crème brulee, and his ashes scattered from the peak of his favourite Alp (which had been purchased a few years previous). It was during this meagrely attended family outing that I may or may not have licked a finger and taken the tiniest of tiny dabs from his urn. Had I done so then I would assert that this would have been strictly for form's sake.

I had not been close to Father for a number of years – roughly fourteen by my reckoning – so few tears were shed and I found myself in possession of all of his effects. This numbered six hundred personal properties, a significantly smaller staff than before I had arrived on the scene, some countless thousand vehicles of varying garishness, and the small matter of one multi-billion dollar, multi-national corporation.

The Company – as my smorgasbord of CEO's insisted on italicising it – had by this point warped far beyond its humble origins as the world's premier coat-hanger innovator. Evolving instead into a profane ouroboros that existed by dint of having money, and made money simply by existing. I was familiar with the gravitational effects of affluence, whereby it has a habit of collapsing in on itself, denser and denser, once a certain wealth event horizon has been crossed. But even I found myself raising an eyebrow as certain balance sheets were unrolled across the boardroom table.

The inner machinations of *The Company* terrified me, not because I did not understand their complex workings, but precisely because I did. One entity had exploded out fractally to become an ever-dividing set of companies owning companies owning companies, seemingly forever. Conservative estimates were that one tenth of world commerce flowed through the interests of *The Company* at some part of its apparently endless journey, and often more than once. Had I been so minded I could have toppled hedge funds before breakfast or instigated regime change as the consequence of a rounding error.

I cannot deny a moment of vanity when I beheld the perverse beauty of Father's gift to me. The taunt that it contained, either by design or simply apparent from my elevated perspective. There was a desire to tear this beast asunder, to shear its poisonous foundations and let it finally implode, inelegantly, into itself. *The Company* had no business existing. Its business was circular, a dictator ruling nothing but itself. And, depending on how you evaluated such things, a few billion people.

A lesser man, one driven by a different measure of success than I sought, might have succumbed. But not I.

Success is not a mountain that one climbs. It is not even - regardless of the protestation of those hawking MLM's and Ponzi schemes – a pyramid. It is, instead, a ziggurat. A set of stairs rising upwards, each step bringing one closer to a truer goal. If wealth, influence or financial domination were to appear on my success ziggurat, they would do so only as that first step. An enabler for the climb to come. The foothills that you surmount which allow you to set a base camp and strike out for your summit. Forgive me, if you can, for I am mixing my metaphors. This is a hazard one must be wary of whilst monologuing.

I set about restructuring *The Company* with a carnivorous zeal, trimming the vast menu of its upper management, divesting myself of the deadweight that existed just to feed itself, until I possessed not an amorphous mass but a set of sculpted tools. I installed new visionaries. These were not brain washed acolytes, nor were they yoked

to my machinery, kept in line by fear of the master's whip. These were men and women that I had simply spoken to, ones who had pledged themselves freely to one of the many honeyed visions of the future which I had dribbled into their eager ears. I shared my new tools amongst these disciples, safe in the knowledge that they would toil to achieve the truths that I had made their dreams whisper to them. They would solve their allocated problems in unique and innovative ways that even I did not yet understand.

They were the ones who would level the playing field. They would remake the world into a prize worthy of my attention. All I would do was watch, unseen by the world at large, as the pieces fell into line. I polished that grey stone until you could see your face in it, if you just believed hard enough.

5

Capitalism was the easiest domino to topple, of course.

Newly divested into various attack wings, *The Company* might no longer exist in any readily identifiable form, but the force behind it had not diminished. That force was Capitalism itself. We simply scuttled our ships and watched as we dragged most of the commercial complexities of the developed world down with us. Targeted stock market manipulation was the first front in my Quiet War. A surgical strike at the venture capitalists and hedge fund monopolies, shorting stocks to drive both them to ruin and their money into the hands of individual retail investors and co-operative investment collectives that we had heavily subsidised. Foreclosing banks, we issued blanket debt forgiveness or simply destroyed debt records where it was more practicable. Trade unions collapsed slowly in on themselves out of disuse as the tectonic plates of power shifted slowly but immutably to a position where workers found themselves able to question just why it was they were having to work fifty hour weeks in the first place. We simply set the money flowing freely once more and let it find its equilibrium. There had always been more than enough to go around, if it was evenly distributed.

Capitalism was a rigged game, skewed inexorably in favour of entities such as *The Company*. It was not prepared for sabotage from those within its own ranks. It was not designed for failure and I feasted quietly on its corpse. I was, naturally, in the Alps when I received the first feelers of news that a new global recession was cresting. I was having an investor friend for dinner, dabbing at the corner of my mouth with a napkin as I took the bracing air on one of my many terraces. I listened to the first tremors of the foreshock of the future, betrayed in the tremorous voices of the newsreaders as they struggled to describe an existential collapse of our way of life that somehow left 99% of those affected better off.

Twenty five years of age, it was at this moment that I knew I had won. Everything that was to follow would simply be everyone racing to catch up with me.

A tide of technological innovation was then released upon the collapsing flanks of the West. Open source software and patent free medical formulations. A hail of suspiciously white stones bludgeoned the old world to death. Solar powered 3D printers manufacturing replacement livers and upgraded tablet PC's out of yesterday's refuse and the plastic that was dredged from the oceans.

The livers, I am sorry to report, never did taste quite right, but that was no matter.

I was cannibalising the rotten carcass of the world I was to inherit and leaving in its place something new that you would not recognise, but might mistake for democracy. I was thirty-eight when I received confirmation of the first homebrew orbital launch. Staring in contemplation at my beloved mountains after some minor complications with preparing the entrees for that evening's dinner party. Licking the last traces of offal from my fingers, I smiled to myself at the news that an Indonesian collective had put their first satellite in place to help them gauge the ongoing effectiveness of their rainforest reinvigoration scheme. We were two years ahead of even my most optimistic schedule.

And as for Socialism? Communism? This was simpler still. Whatever pale imitations of those concepts still remained had long ago been laid bare. Dictators, pure and simple. My great advances might not have directly assaulted the feeble power bases they clung to, but the empowerment of their people had. Information and emancipation flowed through the porous walls they had erected against the reality of the world and they collapsed from within, withering away like vestigial organs until we forgot that we had forgotten them. I was forty-one and re-living my youth when I read the final essay to be published that mentioned the Soviet Experiment, outside of certain niche historical hobby groups who liked to laugh at the follies of the past. In between canapes I remember complimenting the author of the article, who I had had flown over for an intimate tete-a-tete, although he was a little less than coherent in his responses to my flattery. Over-enthusiastic trepanation can do that to even the finest of minds, I'm afraid.

Religion had been the one that I had worried the most over. The most naked manifestation of human irrationality, but irrationality is not the same thing as unpredictability. The surge of enlightenment and the dwindling of inequality and suffering in the world had already done for quite a swathe of the religious flock by this point. Social science teams set to work undermining the faith of those that remained and I must admit to feeling not a little ashamed at the size and viciousness of the sledgehammer that we took to those flimsy walls of faith. The hardest part of this endeavour was to not crush belief utterly in those that still clung to it. Those who wanted to believe should be allowed leave to do so, but I would have them left broken and meek. I could not risk a vocal minority interfering with my great plan, as its moment came round at last.

Holy works were doctored. New New testaments of unquestionable providence and fierce contradiction were conveniently unearthed. Arcane interpretations of scripture were manufactured to the point where, if you cared to do the research, you would have found that pretty much every square foot of the Earth could be your own Holy, promised land. I simply lied to them, and that was something that they were more than accustomed to. And my lies were more pernicious and to greater purpose than they could hope to contend with.

I was forty-five and in my prime when the last Pope told me, and some passing mountain goats, that I was going to hell. God's Priests had been becoming ever more moderate over the years, and I have no desire to seem like a sore winner, so I will say that this seemed out of character for the poor gentleman. He had, after all, only recently been evicted from the Vatican, and I was in the process of giving him a rather

pointed lesson on the hypocrisy of the Transubstantiation myth.

“That may very well be the case, my good man,” I told him affably, choo-choo-training spoonfuls of himself into his mouth, while he struggled against his bonds. “We’ll certainly be seeing soon enough.”

6

When I was forty-six I did two things of note.

Unbeknownst to the cabal of benevolent social terrorists that had built my perfect world for me, I proceeded to have approximately fifty percent of all the sand in the world subjected to a very specific, irreversible and incredibly expensive chemical procedure that altered it in extremely subtle but rather important ways. This endeavour was undertaken by the Black Stone division, a sleeper structure within the remains of The Company, whose personnel, records and infrastructure were then immediately liquidated down to the level where they resembled the very sand which they had just booby-trapped.

Under an electron microscope the adjusted sand could be easily differentiated from what we shall term standard, non-apocalyptic sand. That meant it would have been a trivial task of just a few million years with all humanity working in unison to identify and quarantine the roughly four quintillion grains of Apocalypse Sand which you would then have been wise to store somewhere safe. Safe in the terms we are discussing here can be taken to mean somewhere in the vicinity of Jupiter, provided that you didn’t have a strong sentimental attachment to the idea of Jupiter.

A much easier method of identifying Apocalypse Sand would have been to subject it for an extended period of time to a microwave length of 27.6539565 cm, which could be easily achieved thanks to the schematics for just such a microwave that had been floating around the internet for the previous decade, and could be fabricated from any readily available 3D printer. You would have known if the sand you had was Apocalypse Sand by the way that the world then proceeded to stop existing. This would have been due to the excited sand shedding some subatomic particles. Some of these particles would be what are termed strangelets, and may even extended all the way up to Strange Matter, if these particles happened to be large enough.

One of the current theories on the behaviour of strange matter is that it may react somewhat poorly to regular matter. Possibly to the extent that, on contact, it may spontaneously convert regular matter into more strange matter, beginning a cascade effect. For those of you resistant to implied threats let me clarify and state that this would be a Very Bad Thing to happen to regular matter. The Earth, for example, is composed of regular matter. As are you.

This is all purely theoretical, of course. I would go as far as to say that it is also highly, highly unlikely. You might have to conduct such an experiment hundreds, thousands, maybe millions of times. Or perhaps just the once. Quantum experimentation can be tricky like that. It was also quite fiddly and has been prohibitively expensive for the average citizen to conduct.

Until now.

This was my black stone, a nuclear weapon available at the steepest of discounts. The genie that Prometheus would have a great deal of trouble shoving back into

Pandora's box were it to become even uncommon knowledge to the world at large. Therefore, the second thing I did, was tell people. For brevity's sake I decided to leave out the part where I explained that this was all my doing.

I did this briskly, time being of the essence now that this information had been freed from the safe confines of my head. It brought me no pride to act the pushy salesman, pressuring the market into a quick decision before my special offer was rescinded, but needs must.

Being a billionaire might be a rare thing in this new day and age, and it no longer comes with the same cachet that once accompanied it. Fortunately I have style and, though it pains me to say as much, a certain level of influence. I am still relevant on the world stage and still present in peoples' consciousness. While this is a pleasant way to live in and of itself, it was also by a cold and pragmatic design. I may have kept secret my role in shaping your future but it might possibly have slipped out that I was responsible for the construction of the new sub-orbital transit system that means you can pop out for brunch in a different hemisphere should the mood take you. I might have had ulterior motives for creeping around near the Sahara but, as far as the world was concerned, that was because I was just finishing up the irrigation of the Sudan.

It would traumatise me to be uncouth and self-aggrandising about such matters, but my intelligence networks have been quite clear in their estimation that the world views me as the equivalent of a cool and endearingly old-fashioned uncle. This is exactly where I want to be. It is the easiest thing in the world to be likeable when you are rich. You just have to act somewhat embarrassed by the whole situation.

What I am taking a roundabout route to say is that, without trace of hubris or ego, when I speak the world at least has the courtesy to pretend to listen.

7

They certainly listen when, a few hours following my initial infocast, I sashay up to the World's Representative Council to answer the most hastily drafted subpoena ever drawn up by people in the grip of an existential panic. The WRC is, at best, a stopgap. Hastily erected, it exists in a liminal space for people who are fairly certain they don't want to have a centralised form of government, but are having too much fun with their new found freedoms to sit down and properly work out what they want to replace it with. Representatives are split evenly between the sort of people who enjoy this sort of thing (and are being indulged accordingly) and those who feel they have been elected to the Council through some form of ill-defined clerical error or prank (and are being indulged accordingly).

The dress code is erring on the side of lax, which means I engender no small amount of attention when my jumpjet touches down in the overflow car park and I leap athletically from it, dressed in my finest Saville Row. I have brought only two items with me; a plastic lunchbox emblazoned with an appropriately cute kitten and the legend "Everything Will Be Fine", and an assault rifle. I have brought the former to inject a sense of levity into what may prove to be a slightly trying experience for my audience. It also contains my lunch. I have brought the assault rifle partly to counteract the lunch box should I have overshot on the cuteness levels, but mainly because it's important that people get used to this sort of behaviour from me as quickly as possible.

No one tries to take the assault rifle away from me, which is the sign of a good start, however a security guard does insist on a much regretted look at the contents of the lunchbox.

Security guard aside, these are smart people and I am allowed to get to the heart of the matter in commendably short order. It is true, I tell them, what they have heard about Apocalypse Sand. The science is solid, the danger is real and it is existential. Every single citizen of this enlightened world has the power to potentially end it, on a whim. The knowledge is out in the wilds, the horse has bolted, and we are left crying over spilt milk right by the stable door.

I mix my metaphors terribly for a time, as I know that people will find this endearing.

I tell them that I believe I can help. I am already helping, in fact. You cannot govern the Sand and you cannot police the knowledge effectively, but people are a different matter. *We* are all reasonable people, of course, but we are not *all* reasonable people, if you'll forgive my saying so. I have no desire to run the Sand through the microwave and I know that you similarly are not so inclined. But there are seven billion people crammed onto this planet. Anything less than a 100% certainty that 100% of the population will not microwave the Sand is an unacceptable risk to our existence as a species.

There is no need to thank me, I continue to the silent gallery, but in the time that it has taken me to deliver my offer to mankind, my framework has already neutralised more than fifty million individuals who my algorithms have identified as at risk of doing something very stupid indeed. That may sound impressive but it means that we are just holding on by the skin of our teeth.

The fact that I am here, giving this speech, has meant in the last ten minutes another three million people will have taken it upon themselves to contemplate doing something quite apocalyptically idiotic. As I let this sink in with my audience I take the opportunity to remove a black stone from my pocket and lay it, with great solemnity, on the lectern before me. Too late I realise that I have not explained the significance of the stones, and I am now coming across as eccentric.

The *People's Representative of Like-Minded Dudes and Lady Dudes (or However Dudes Want to Define Themselves, Really)* that are *Hanging Around What Used to Be Called Guam, But We'd Rather Not Get Bogged Down By Labels* is only a moderately powerful force on the Council. They tend to cycle Representatives out on a monthly basis when the current incumbent gets bored or, on more than one occasion, irretrievably lost at sea. Their greatest contributions to the enrichment of the human experience have been exclusively surfing-based, and I have a level of weary affection for them that one might feel towards a beloved pet that is taking too long to become house-trained. Nevertheless, it is the Representative for what I shall elect to just call Guam who has the wherewithal to pose a solitary question, when she asks me what it is that I am demanding.

"I'm not demanding anything," I reply. "Obviously, I could be in charge, going forward. If that is what you all wanted."

"In charge of what?" asks Guam, "The Council? Because, like, that would be kind of a relief, actually."

"I was thinking more in terms of the world," I leave an audience friendly pause here

to accommodate the gasps and the pandering to the cheap seats. “My algorithms are something in the region of 95% accurate and my neutralisation effectiveness is around 99%. As I have stated, these numbers are not good enough, they’re not even close. With access to resources and infrastructure currently outside of my control we can push those numbers up to nice round 100%’s.

“To do so you will need to cede control of those resources to me immediately. I’m sure you’ll agree it will then probably just be easier to let me run everything, with things now being as inter-connected as they are. Honestly, I doubt that you’ll notice any difference. I have a few general suggestions you might want to take under advisement but, by and large, I think we’ll keep ticking along in a tolerable fashion.

“If this is not palatable to you, then I am, of course, more than happy to relinquish my assistance and let greater minds than mine step up to the plate. I will happily close my framework down and retreat back to my quiet, mountain life. I estimate that your own frameworks would operate at around 80% efficiency, although no doubt over time you could certainly nudge them up a tad.

“I suppose those are not the worst odds in the world.

“Also”, I add, as nonchalantly as one can drop such a thing into casual conversation, “I’m quite partial to eating people. Yes, people. No, that’s not a euphemism. Or a metaphor. Yes, *people* people. If you were to look into the science of it all, it actually makes a lot of nutritional sense.

“Mainly, though, I would have to say that I just like the taste.

“I’m not greedy. I was thinking something along the lines of maybe one every couple of weeks. Maybe one a month if the individual was sufficiently...ample. I’ll leave the details up to you. You’re all smart people, like I said, and I’m sure you can come up with some sort of system that’s fair and above board.

“I won’t be hunting people or torturing them or anything of that nature. Spoils the flavour, if nothing else. Of course, if people insisted on being chased across the mountainside, while I stalked them with a high powered crossbow of my own design? Well, I’m sure some arrangements could be made. I’m also quite amenable if an applicant wanted to have a little chat and maybe a drink beforehand. Perhaps even something organised where they get to go sky-diving or have a lovely little holiday first. Like those *Make A Wish* people, but more scheduled. To that end if you wanted to, I don’t know, agree on people in advance and fatten them up for the block, as it were, my people can provide your people with a variety of instructions that I would find really quite touching.

“It’s just, and let’s be crystal clear here for the avoidance of all doubt, I *will* be killing and eating them. The order of those two activities might switch around on occasion because a little spontaneity goes a long way, but I would hate for there to be any false pretences or last minute surprises. If your name goes on that list, you will be getting eaten. If it helps at all, both myself and my kitchen staff can guarantee that you will end up being absolutely delicious.

“Naturally, this is all a decision that I must leave up to you in your great wisdom. Just know that all you have to do is ask.”

It may just be the case that I have miscalculated somewhat.

To start with the positives, I have received a veritable deluge of requests from people requesting that I eat them. A number of the more enthusiastic applicants have taken to mailing samples to me, to the extent that most of the major shipping firms are now refusing to deliver to my residences. Instead I have had to instigate a refrigerated delivery service of my own creation, founded and run by what I shall term 'like-minded' individuals, who seem happy to work for nothing but self-fulfilment and the occasional tip.

Rare is the day I do not take receipt of some juicy titbit or morsel. Some of them are pickled, which in all honesty I don't much care for, but it would be ungracious to decline given the obvious effort they have gone to.

Others attach recipe cards. Those who have not quite grasped the nature of the arrangement sometimes send requests.

This situation did lead to an unfortunate but thankfully short-lived misunderstanding between myself and the WRC, wherein it was unclear whether these unsolicited offerings constituted fulfilment of their contractual obligations or were to be viewed as separate, private transactions. The spectre of a lawsuit took to the ether briefly before the general good humoured awkwardness surrounding the matter soured, and I was forced to remind people that, as the ruler of mankind, there was only a certain level of tomfoolery I would put up with before things stopped being endearing.

Aside from this pothole, the road to the total benevolent domination of mankind has proved pleasantly smooth. I have had to intervene to make corrections only infrequently. Most recently I have had to step in and make my feelings on the proposed space elevators a little more explicit than my initial suggestions might have led people to believe. The lottery that has been instituted by the Council has run into some legal challenges from the army of volunteers all vying for a spot at or on my dinner table, but I have decided not to micro-manage every little complication, and my larder seems to remain full in any event.

It certainly helps that our goals seem so closely aligned, not least because I have spent the last thirty years telling you precisely what your goals are going to be. I will not deny that I experience the odd fugue and moment of low spirits wherein I wonder if maybe it wasn't such a grand idea to release the Apocalypse Sand, given that I was de facto running the world anyway. But one cannot question another man's metric for success and, I would contend, one of the prerequisites for being able to say that you rule the world is that other people are, in fact, aware of the situation. It's just one of the reasons that I turned down that job offer to run the Illuminati.

Besides, every now and again some narcissistic secret agent will lift my spirits by attempting to infiltrate my Alpine complex and assassinate me, possessed of the delusion that this will make even the blindest bit of a difference to our collective plight. I have intimated to a number of the supposedly more covert agencies of the world that if they want to play those sorts of games they can at least have the decency to hollow out a volcano for me, and we will all properly commit to our roles. In the meantime their efforts are at least invigorating the weekly planning meeting for the Implausible Traps Division of newly reassembled *Company*, and I content myself by compiling a relative ranking league for the varied secret services of the world. Mossad ("piquant

and delightfully surprising”) is currently in a shock lead, with MI6 (“unexpectedly bland and stringy”) dutifully bringing up the rear.

Of more immediate concern is the question of enforcement, and upholding my half of our compact. It would be churlish of me to describe any of my remaining three billion children as stupid. Not all of you had the advantages that were afforded to me by my upbringing, so it feels a little like punching down to be grading your intellectual prowess. But some of you possess what I can only label as a challenging attitude to your own mortality.

I had factored in a reasonable proportion of natural wastage in my calculations and arrived at a very comfortable figure of 50%. Roughly half of you, when placed in a room with a big red button marked DO NOT PUSH, would let the team down. Not ideal, but certainly a number that the rest of us could live with. Or, more accurately, without. There are, after all, rather a lot of you, and sometimes it’s not immediately clear just what the purpose of some of you actually is.

We reached that 50% mark within a month of my glorious inauguration and, while that number has now stabilised somewhat, it is still slowly and unrelentingly going up. Or down, depending on your perspective. We have assuredly moved past the terminally curious, the depressed and the edgy contrarians by this point, and it seems like we are now in the midst of a deathdive of collective psychosis.

By all my calculations within the next 12-24 months two things will happen. Firstly, the human element required for neutralising thought crime will become critically under-staffed. Unless I can somehow persuade people to help me out by neutralising themselves I shall run out of people with which to kill other people so that they don’t kill *all* the people. Secondly, and not entirely unrelated to point one, the overall population will enter what my remaining experts have termed a morale spiral. The psychic downer of the vast number of people who have already metaphorically pushed the big red button will weigh so heavily on those sane few that remain that the urge for them to push the button themselves will be inescapable. Essentially they will become worried that they are missing out on oblivion and seek to remedy the situation.

You have, if I may put it so bluntly, made a total buggering mess of things, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for that. I would ask what is wrong with you but, thanks to my algorithms, I already know the answer to that little quandary.

What is wrong with you is that you are not me.

My sin, it seems, will be one of excess generosity. I ascribed my superior qualities to you, and I forgot that a ruler is only as strong as his subjects. I built you up and I put my faith in you, and you have failed me completely. Now when I stare out of my lair I am not seeing my once-beloved mountains, but the moon that lies beyond them.

I’m not building that space elevator just for the hell of it. I shall pack a lunch and some amoebas and I shall try again on that great grey rock in the sky.

A COLD DAY IN HELL

It was a cold day in hell, relatively speaking.

The kingdom of Lucifer had been built upon a lake of sulphur and brimstone, which had been a logistical nightmare to plan around but did, at least, take care of a large proportion of the domain's heating requirements. But hell had expanded in recent epochs. It had built up and out into the void that surrounded the graceless lands and on the edges, where the only neighbour was the frigid expanse of the endless, it could get quite chilly of a morning. No matter how many damned souls you jammed into the boiler.

This was perhaps more a problem for Suhkmetain Al'Hora than for many of the other minor lords and ladies of Pandemonium. For Suki, as she was more often referred to around the office, was a Succubus and her line of work made it difficult to just throw on a cozy jumper, or get a few of her charges to knit a pair of considerate leg-warmers for her hooves. The only heating solution available to Suki on this particular morning was friction-based, and she found it rather too early to be considering those sorts of options.

Draped in nothing but a veil of darkness – and some silk sheets that she had stripped from her vast, rolling bed and were, on closer inspection, in need of a good boil wash – Suki cantered across the confines of her mistress bedroom and cast open the leather drapes. The glass of the window beyond had been fashioned from the melted down shells of broken souls. This was very much in keeping with the ambience that Suki had been aiming for with her carnal pagoda, but was a less ideal construction material than standard, undamned glass. One had to squint to see too far beyond it, and the sights that deigned to pass through it rarely proved to be worth the effort.

All across the landscape there was a war raging. A great complexity of forms that moved against and, more often than not, inside one another. A sea of lost souls who would tear themselves asunder daily, pulled limb from limb and generally decoupling one another, all for her dubious pleasures. And, while there was no sun in hell and everyone who resided there did so in eternal darkness, when the sun that wasn't there set and then rose the following day, any damage inflicted upon and by the participants was undone. This ocean of the damned would find themselves with their rage refreshed and their particulars re-attached. Although often times those particulars were not necessarily their own, for there were a lot of limbs to sort through, and things could get confusing. But there they were, raring to go at it once more.

All of this warring just to gain the favour of the magnificent Succubus, and most of all to ensure that their neighbour did not. And yet none of those hands, whether attached to their original owners or otherwise, would ever be allowed to touch the merest part of Suki's devilish form.

Suki was very proud of this arrangement, and indeed it was mentioned very favourably – or perhaps unfavourably, as such things were often inverted in the underworld – during her last infernal review. So much suffering was being delivered,

and nearly all of it was self-inflicted. Or, at the very least, self-generating. Suki got to put her hooves up and reap the anguish without having to raise a claw to effect it, save for occasionally wandering out onto the balcony of her pagoda and giving everyone a good old wave to encourage them onwards.

Indeed, she thought as she regarded herself in her bedside mirror and prodded her belly with the point of her tail, she was perhaps getting a little comfortable in her idleness. Being an infernal creation Suki had no great squeamishness surrounding the infinite variety of forms and sizes that mortal flesh could assume. And she was confident in her abilities to continue to incite violent arousal among the lecherous peons of the pit, even were she to be carrying a touch of winter weight. But there was a disturbingly large library of mortal thought given over to describing the form of a Succubus – and an even greater one devoted to illustrating it – and Suki was, at heart, a staunch traditionalist.

“You’re such a traditionalist,” chuckled Astaroth, on cue, as they pushed aside a few of the empty husks who had been used up the previous evening, and struggled to find one of the far shores of Suki’s bed.

“Why, thank you,” curtsied Suki, which was something of a process when hooves were involved. “One does try one’s worst.”

Astaroth, a rather impressionistic embodiment of sin and lasciviousness, was a complicated thing to look upon. It was all too easy to get lost during the journey of finding whichever face happened to be speaking at any given time, and have to start over once more. It slouched over to the window, dragging some of its tails and other appendages behind it, and joined Suki to stare out over the warring landscape.

“I think it’s despicable that you adhere to the old regimes of torture and suffering,” smiled a good number of Astaroth’s heads, as one of its innumerable hands patted Suki condescendingly on her shoulder. “Absolutely despicable, my little harlot.”

“Well, it wasn’t easy,” nodded Suki, before her comprehension caught up with her mouth. “Hang on, what?”

“No one’s doing suffering anymore,” a number of Astaroth’s heads shared knowing looks between themselves. One or more of them may have even tittered at each other. “Far too much effort for absolutely no reward at the end of it. You know Belial, over near the Infernal Gore Pit of the Incandescent Transgressors?”

“Belial the Butcher?”

“Yep,” nodded Astaroth in unison with itself. “Hasn’t gutted a damned soul in weeks. I mean, he did strangle a man with his own intestines in the most hilarious fashion the other day, but I’m led to believe that was over a bet, or some such.”

“Well, fuck me,” whispered Suki, for once not really meaning it. “I’m freezing my deconsecrated assets off out here, trying to live down to the bad name of Succubuses everywhere...”

“Succubi,” Astaroth was not a grammar Nazi, but it did keep a few on its staff.

“And what does the Boss have to say about this?” Suki came to rest her knuckles on her immaculately cocked hips, swishing her tail to and fro in a manner that could be seen as petulant. “I imagine he’s overjoyed at such a lack of industriousness.”

“No one knows.” Poisonous drool, that had been eagerly collecting at the corners of some of Astaroth’s mouths, began to dribble down its chins in its excitement. “The Boss hasn’t been seen for weeks. Indeed, the throne, they say, stands vacant.”

“Is that so?” mused Suki, staring enigmatically towards the distant horizon. As was her wont.

*

One of the benefits of Suki’s employed method of eternal punishment was that she could take the odd day off, here and there, without much disruption. All that was required for the continued operation of her great sex war was for her to appear every now and again on her distant balcony and parade up and down for a while, perhaps throwing in the odd wave if the eternal conflict was threatening to peter out. From the distances involved in this activity, Suki was able to strap a pair of horns on one of her house nymphettes and delegate all of her responsibilities.

There was very little for her to pack, as she possessed few clothes and all the scales and horns tended to take care of themselves in terms of skincare ointments and potions. In defiance of the usual Succubian operating procedure she had rooted around in a half-forgotten armoire and donned an old track suit, her top now a trifle torn due to her horns reminding her why nudity had long been the standard.

And then, she was on her way.

The structure of hell had undergone a number of systematic changes during the passage of eternity, mixing up the original distinction of its nine circles into a more homogenous lump. As decreed by the purposefully counter-productive bureaucracy of Hell, new fiefdoms were carved and re-carved out of the topography, according to whoever or whatever was currently in ascendance within the house of the Morningstar. As mankind had grown in complexity, so had the canvas for its shortcomings, and such things had to be accommodated within the indexing of sin that was the whole purpose of Hell. It was no longer enough to simply label a sinner as a usurer and pack him off to the seventh circle for some good old fashioned retribution. New questions had arisen that first required answering. Was he a mere payday loan lender, and therefore eligible for an eternity of constantly gouging out his heart to offer up as penance? All on the promise of a release from his torment that would always dance away from him day-by-day, as he defaulted on his interest payments. Or was he an exhorter of extended car warranties, thereby requiring a much more stringent punishment?

Or perhaps no punishment at all, Suki grumbled to herself as she came to see spine-crushing treadmills standing slack and idle. Moving through blood drowning pools that were like off-season swimming pools. Empty of drownees, drowners and any purpose.

The simple act of moving between these various domains of Pandemonium was safely trapped behind an avalanche of visas and permits, all contingent upon both one another and more phantom application forms, that existed only in some theoretical realm. All of which conspired to form a secret, nomadic tenth circle of damnation, thinly threaded through the more obvious domains.

As a member of middle management Suki was, naturally, above such petty requirements, but she was subject to using the same public transit services as any other damned soul. So, what should have been a trifling matter of a few days travel in towards the great towers and spires and hanging trees of Central Pandemonium, became instead something of an odyssey.

Sitting in bone carriages, pulled along a roadway weaved of raw nerves by a harnessed team of men and women, reconstituted in a more equine form, Suki saw days turn to weeks. Standing by the Sea of Suffering, watching weeks turn to months as she had a picnic. Waiting in vain for even one sex offender to wash up on the high tide, and break themselves on the jagged Shore of Spite. Those weeks became months as she clip-clopped around the empty acres of the holding pens beneath Baphomet's profane Thunderdome, with no clear idea as to how and with what the Symphony of Pain were now stringing their instruments.

Hell had not emptied while Suki had been diligently focused on her own little corner of misery. Indeed, she saw her demon kin mixing freely with what should have been their terrified mortal slaves. Drinking together in one of the many theme pubs that seemed to have erupted into a plague during Suki's absence. Laughing as they shared a communal joke on whichever new social media platform had been dreamt up by the infernal minds of the Dark Tech Skunkworks on any given morning.

All told, it was close to a full, unholy year before a thoroughly dispirited Suki found her way to the heart of the wretched city of Central Pandemonium. Even here the smoke stacks of fiendish industry had fallen still, and the eternal fuel which should have powered these engines had the temerity to be walking around without a care in world or a panicked shit in their pants.

Suki stomped her way up the steps to the Team Hell building, the tallest and most important structure in Central Pandemonium, in the foulest of fine moods. She ignored all the nodded greetings and muttered calls of 'good day' thrown in her direction by these emboldened souls.

*

The Former Accredited Sex Worker of Babylon had been Satan's personal assistant since time immemorial, and had taken well to her role of being as obstructive and infuriating as inhumanly possible. She sat in the antechamber of the Team Hell central offices, safely ensconced behind a huge desk as she tended to her fingernails. The vast plane of mahogany seemingly served no purpose other than to support her propped up high-heeled feet, and cause any visitors to have to shout to gain her dubious attention.

"Where's Satan?" demanded Suki, after having successfully caught Babylon's ear. She had to mime the devil horns for clarity, even though she possessed a perfectly serviceable pair of her own.

"I don't know, up there somewhere," Babylon did not even look up as she went about her important work. She deigned only to point towards the ceiling and waggle that one immaculate finger around in circles. The universally agreed symbol, down here, used to represent the mortal world, up there.

"What the Heaven is he doing up there?" asked Suki, staring up at the ceiling with suspicion. Contrary to popular opinion it was rare for a denizen of the underworld to be galivanting around, top side, as there was precious little for them to do up there. People tended to find their way down to Hell well enough on their own.

"Dunno," shrugged Babylon, deploying her weaponised ignorance. She finished her nails, holding them up before her to admire her fingercraft, before she cracked

open a new bottle of varnish and began the process all over again. “How am I supposed to know what he gets up to?”

“Look,” sighed Suki, lowering her head so that she could gaze at Babylon from beyond a cocked brow and her dainty horns. She had been told in the past that this made her appear exceptionally sultry. “From one whore to another, it’s usually best to only fuck with people who are paying you. Just tell me where he is, so I can be on my way and I won’t have to interfere with all of this important business that you are allegedly doing.”

“Fine,” sighed Babylon, when it became clear that Suki was happy to stare at her, until the trumpet call of Armageddon if necessary. It would be remiss to call this sigh theatrical, when adjectives such as ‘magnificently indolent’ and ‘expansively overdramatic’ were just idly sitting around.

The Former Accredited Sex Worker of Babylon had never been the finest personal assistant in all of the storied histories of Hell. The suspicion was that Satan had only kept her around in a position of minor servitude because he wanted to have her to hand in case there was a snap Apocalypse called, and he needed her to saddle up the seven headed beast and ride out to do whatever Revelatory things might be required of her.

It took a good, long search of the many diaries and notebooks that were piled up behind Babylon that find the one specific volume that contained Satan’s current schedule. Each volume opened released a soft moan from the damned who were trapped within their covers. Their soul purpose being to record the information written within them, and not divulge them without the secret words that they were bound by. Secret words that were not immediately available over the limited bandwidth of Babylon’s operating system.

Suki took a seat while she waited, passing the time by taking up the odd discarded hardcover notebook and hurling it at the head of any wretched once-mortal who made the mistake of passing close to Babylon’s desk. Quite what so many damned souls were doing in the inner workings of Team Hell was something that currently mystified her.

“Here we are,” announced Babylon finally. This process had gone on so long that she had forgotten her initial reticence in the endeavour, and now seemed genuinely excited to have succeeded at a menial task. “He’s getting a drink in someplace called Bar Bados. Must be a new club or something.”

*

Being but a lowly Succubus, Suki had not often come into contact with Satan during the course of her afterlife. But infinity could really add up, and all these micro-encounters strung out over the aeons had built up in her mind a view of the measure of the Devil. In none of these vignettes had the devil ever been playing sunburnt pool with a portly gentleman called Geoff Hefty, beneath the straw awning of a beachside bar as the Caribbean sun beat down and the azure waves lapped at the fine-grained golden sands.

It was Geoff that was sunburnt, it should be noted, rather than the Prince of Darkness. Satan retained his traditional hue of deep crimson but, similar to the ragged wings and the magisterial horns, this was not a new development. Unlike the many-

umbrellaed, coconut-housed cocktail from which he sipped between shots, and the migraine-inducing Bermuda shorts that were the only item of clothing he had deigned to be dressed in.

“Afternoon, Suhkmetain Al’Hora,” said Satan, in his delicious velvety tones, as he stared fixedly at the table before him, planning his next shot. “I shall be with you shortly.”

“You’ve got him, Geoff!” chipped in a pleasant, excessively dense little ball of a woman, who was watching the game from the other side of both a nearby table and several stiff rums.

This was Marjorie Hefty, Geoff’s fair wife and his impromptu cheerleader. Suki’s tail prodded Marjorie’s quivering, ruddy flank with increasing force until the lady turned to her and offered up a wide, guileless smile.

“Hello, o wretched, fleshy cattle child,” Suki introduced herself in standard formal Hellish. “I take it that you are aware that your husband is wagering against the Devil?”

“Yes, but my Geoff’s won a couple of pub tournaments in his time,” Marjorie Hefty bubbled with plump pride. “He’s got a great chance of winning.”

“Most assuredly, my sexual little fleshpot,” agreed Satan, affably, before firing off a bank shot that did the sort of things to the laws of physics that were traditionally more in Suki’s wheelhouse.

Those present watched in silence as the balls began to tumble into their designated pockets, until only Geoff’s remained, unmolested. Marjorie giggled and clapped excitedly as Satan raised his hands in celebration. Even Geoff seemed thoroughly chuffed at the drubbing, and Suki felt herself throw up in her mouth a little. Satan scraped a pile of coins that had been stacked up on one of the cushions of the pool table and dropped them into the pocket of his shorts.

“Are you playing for money?” asked Suki, incredulously.

“Not exactly,” chipped in a forlorn voice from behind Suki, at the bar. “You won’t get any sense out of him at the moment, I’m afraid.”

The Archangel Gabriel had adopted many forms during his service of the ineffable. His more original layout consisted of four faces – none of which were even remotely humanoid – many hooves and several sets of wings to choose from, and it was without a doubt imposing. But it was not designed with an eye for sitting comfortable on a barstool. And that itself was already a far cry from the multi-eyed collection of interlocking gold circles that some of the more excitable scribes had once depicted.

So, for this occasion Gabriel had opted for a traditionally human form, with a set of white, downy wings tucked in close to his back, and a discrete halo that was scarcely discernible in the bright Barbadian sunlight.

His true voice, which would have blasted the sanity from out of any mortal mind that heard it, had been dialled down a notch or two, enabling him to get served at the bar without too much of an issue. He nursed a glass of cranberry juice and looked about as morose as one could imagine a facet of the Divine ever being.

Suki looked from the archangel to out across the distant beach, and decided that she was wearing quite too many clothes. She started to struggle out of her tatty track suit, hoping that her boss happened not to be looking at her as she struggled once more with the horns. Completely inadvertently, but suspiciously accompanied by a coquettish giggle, she happened to present several intimate facets of herself towards

the angel while she wriggled free of her clothes.

"Oh, Good Lord," muttered Gabriel, performing a reflexive sigh of the cross upon himself.

"If you say so," Suki plonked herself down on the stool next to the archangel and, with a series of arcane hand gestures, ordered something strong and stiff from the implacable bartender. "So, what's going on here, Gabe?"

"Well, God's very unhappy with your man over there," Gabriel motioned over his wings towards Satan, who was posing for a series of photos with the Heftys and their assembled friends. "More than usual, I mean. Word has it that you've given up on things somewhat, down there. And here's your Dark Lord, off on his all-inclusive jollies with a couple from Huddersfield. It's most perplexing."

"I thought your lot were supposed to be all omniscient," observed Suki as what purported to be a drink was deposited on the bar before her, and she sought to find a viable entry route to it.

"Hell is absence from the sight of God, I'm afraid," said Gabriel, turning his own glass pensively on the table before him. "Your presence here, however, does imply that we are not hugely off base in our assumptions."

"Beats me, Gabe," grumbled Suki as she dipped low, beneath a phalanx of umbrellas and fruit on sticks, to take an exploratory sip of her beverage. "I only work down there."

"It's really quite simple, Gabriel," said Satan, announcing his sudden presence behind them. "I've decided to retire."

Behind his sunglasses Lucifer Morningstar was beaming a massively dangerous smile, that seemed somehow wider than his wingspan. He continued smiling until Suki and Gabriel took the hint and shuffled their stools apart, allowing Satan to slide a new stool in place between them and sit down. There was, for a moment, a jostle for wingspace between him and Gabriel, but it ended fairly quickly and without resort to any sort of Holy War.

"Are you ready to talk now, Lucifer?" asked Gabriel. "Have you finished cavorting with your damned souls?"

"You're telling me that Geoff Hefty is going to hell?"

Satan hoicked a claw in the direction of the Hefty party's table on the other side of the open plan bar, drawing a distant cry and a wave from Geoff. Satan, Suki and even the archangel Gabriel felt compelled to return the wave, albeit with differing degrees of enthusiasm.

"There's a Club 18-30 beach a few miles in that direction," said Satan, pointing now with a huge leathery wing in the opposite direction, further along the coastline. "If you want to witness some sin, you mucky puppy, you could do a lot worse than check that out. There's probably some vicious bugger over there eating shellfish and wearing man-made fibres, if you really want to get worked up over something. All of it nothing to do with me, I might add."

"You are the temptation," grumbled Gabriel, suggesting that he was, in fact, thinking of a different word with which to describe the Devil.

"I didn't invent hormones, Gabe," said Satan, shrugging his mighty shoulders.

"But the business with the snake..."

"How many times must we have this conversation, Gabriel? I am not the snake."

The snake is not me.” Satan’s hands danced across the bar to demonstrate the concept of two separate things and how they were, in fact, very far away from each other. “We - are - different – beings.”

“Really?” asked Suki, with great surprise, for her education had been more focused on biology than history, and had involved books with far more pictures than words. “Who was the snake then?”

“Just a snake, Suki,” Satan patted Suki on the shoulder, condescendingly, as was his way. “It was a more metaphorical time, back then.”

“Be that as it may, hussy,” interjected Gabriel, the angel ignoring the gesture that Suki threw his way as he turned his attention back to Satan. “You have a designated role in the Great Plan, Lucifer Morningstar. If you stop torturing people down in Hell, then it makes things very difficult for everyone. You can’t just shirk your responsibilities like this.”

Satan did not answer immediately. He stared out from the bar towards the clear, flat sea, and let the sounds of the birds and the waves and the general merriment of those around them flood in to fill the space his silence created. When he did finally speak, Satan’s words were precise and quiet.

“Or what?”

“I’m...sorry, what?” Gabriel’s heavenly visage wrinkled with confusion.

“What happens if I decide that I don’t feel like punishing all the sinners anymore?” Satan pulled a handful of varied and obviously counterfeit cash from his pocket, tossing the crumpled mess at the bartender. “I really don’t see what the big deal is.”

“But you have to!” Gabriel blustered, becoming so agitated that he spilt his cranberry juice all across the top of the bar, and had to apologetically miracle it back into his glass.

“I think you’ll find that me not following orders is how we all ended up with the current status quo,” Satan slapped the unnaturally dry surface of the bar with gusto, indicating that it was time for them to be moving on. “Anyhow, there’s a party in Buenos Aires that I’ve been invited to. And I make a point to always go where I am invited. Shall we be off then, team?”

“We are not yet done here,” declared Gabriel, using a fraction of his proper voice. It turned the sky briefly dark as it shook the Earth, and seemed entirely impossible to disobey.

“Oh, but we are,” said Satan, brightly.

And it was true, for they were not in Barbados anymore. They were now standing in the shabby hallway of an equally shabby apartment that was full of appropriately shabby but increasingly merry Latin American people. There was the sense in the air of a student gathering, one that was slowly building up steam and working up the energy to get completely out of hand.

For once in her unhallowed life Suki felt over-dressed, as she was now clad in a red silk dress that moved and felt as if it was made of liquid. Once her tail had poked a hole through the back of the garment, to swish freely in the close and humid air, it became entirely gorgeous. Satan complimented her in a tuxedo hewn of blackest midnight; the smooth lines of which could trouble the ovaries of any onlooker within fifty paces. Gabriel, by comparison, was still clad in what appeared to be a white sheet.

Satan took Suki’s hand and they drifted through the hallway, into one of the many

rooms full of boisterous Argentinians, gradually allowing themselves to become the centre of attention. Gabriel was drawn to trot along in the wake of these Dark Ones. The archangel, it seemed, was not about to let a little translocational sorcery derail this discussion.

“But you had an agreement with the Lord about this. You lost the War in Heaven so you have to govern in Hell. This is all basic stuff, Morningstar.”

“Show me the contract,” said Satan, who had been distractedly glad-handing the gathering circle of students, but stopped now and pivoted to face Gabriel. “I’m not sure if you know this about me, Gabe, but deals are something of a speciality of mine.”

“God doesn’t sign contracts!” squeaked Gabriel, indignantly.

“Then I shall see you in court, sweetheart.”

“He doesn’t do courts, either,” said Gabriel, approaching the limits of his infinite patience. “He’s the bloody judge of all.”

But Satan had momentarily forgotten about Gabriel, as he turned to Suki and raised his hand. Which she took, for it was impossible for her to do otherwise. The music that was pulsing from a scattering of speakers in the corner of the room was loud and electronic. It did not change as Satan snaked his other arm behind Suki’s back and encouraged her to move in step with him, but through their movements it became more recognisable as to what Satan willed it to be. A tango, it transpired, for Lucifer was – in his own way and on his own terms - also a traditionalist.

“Gabriel, I got thrown out of your little club, and was sent to the basement for my troubles,” said Satan over Suki’s shoulder, as they slid back and forth before the archangel. “If your boss built his little house of cards on the assumption that I was just going to play along forever, then that can hardly be my fault.”

The rhythm and the dark whims of Satan took Suki and him away from Gabriel, parting the watching crowd as they disappeared into a far corner of the room. Leaving the archangel alone with the throng of partially drunk, moderately stoned students, some of whom he had to shoo away as they started to stroke his feathers.

It was at this point that Gabriel realised he was still holding his Caribbean cranberry juice, so he sipped it pensively. Trying to ignore the fact that he was now technically guilty of theft, which was a rather unbecoming thing for the first of the favoured to have caught themselves doing. It was a few minutes before the infernal couple reappeared again from the throng. A long stemmed rose had been black magicked up from somewhere and was now clasped between Satan’s teeth.

“I just don’t understand where all this is coming from, Lucifer,” complained Gabriel as the couple circled him. “We’ve gotten along so well for millennia. What’s changed?”

“Well, that’s an interesting story, actually.” Ventriloquised Satan, around the rose stem. “So, I was talking to Ra the other day...”

“No, you weren’t, you trickster.”

“Yes, I *was*, Gabe,” chided Satan, after transferring the rose – in an extremely personal fashion – into Suki’s mouth. “Big lad, head of a hawk. Kind of chap that it’s hard to mistake for someone else.”

“No, you didn’t! We don’t have many rules...” Gabriel paused as he became aware of the stares that Satan and Suki were casting in his direction as they strutted around and around him. “Okay, we have a healthy number of rules, but one of the important

ones is about the singular nature of our great and mighty Lord.”

“Tell that to the Vikings, mate. Barely a week goes by when I’m not having to stop a drunken Thor from bullying Moloch or Dagon. I’m up to my neck in false idols, down south. So, as I was saying, I was in the Egyptian suburb...”

Satan took this opportunity to dip Suki, which might sound dirty but was just a manoeuvre. Although Satan did seem to find a way to make it mucky anyway, looming over Suki as he held her in his thrall, while she tottered a little on her uncertain hooves. Even though she had no need for it, her breath still caught in her chest for a second.

“We have suburbs?”

A shadow of annoyance passed over the face of Satan as Suki interrupted his theatricalities, which was a sobering thing to witness from a distance of six inches. But the clouds quickly passed as he realised that this was an opportunity to explain something and, most probably, be patronising while doing it.

“They’re a new addition. In the grand scheme of things, at any rate. Didn’t seem right to stick them in the pit and prod them with the pitchforks, just for the sin of being born a few centuries too early.”

“Is that true, Gabe?” Suki asked, when she was brought up for unnecessary air once more and Gabriel, who had been looking very fixedly at the ceiling, met her gaze.

“It’s something of a gentleman’s agreement,” muttered Gabriel as he took to trotting alongside the tangoing couple, pushing through the crowd to keep pace with them. “One which we had all agreed not to mention.”

“But according to you, Gabe, I should be torturing them, shouldn’t I?” Interjected Satan, as he whipped Suki around and away from Gabriel, before dumping her with some grace - but considerably more velocity - onto a sad and sunken sofa. He pirouetted effortlessly as he landed beside her, gesturing for Gabriel to take the final available place at the end.

“There’s also the matter of the possession of Abigail Hummingbird,” grumbled Gabriel as he shuffled into place and tried to change the subject. “We haven’t even got to the worst part yet.”

“What are we all eating by the way?” asked Satan.

For they were now seated among the plush cushions of a softly spoken, black and golden themed Asian restaurant. Opium smoke drifted through the air and a spotless waiter hovered by their low table, seemingly indifferent to their sudden translocation. “I’ll have the deep fried chicks, my good man. Extra crispy and leave the beaks on.”

“Do they have ambrosia?” asked Gabriel, in spite of himself. When it became apparent that there was sadly no ambrosia on the opium den’s menu, he ordered a salad and continued. “As I was saying, it was the whole Abigail Hummingbird situation that first drew our heavenly gaze upon this problem. We are all very concerned.”

“We’re allowed to do possessions,” said Suki, as she surrendered the menu that she found in her hands over to the waiter. “Nothing for me, pitiful wage-slave. Other people are watching my figure. I’ll have a coffee and a pipe, though. Now, do we *all* want opium, or is it just me?”

“None for me, thank you devil spawn,” demurred Gabriel pleasantly, waving away the waiter before he turned to Suki. “You are indeed allowed to ‘do possessions’, as you put it. But there are standards, and there are certain expectations. A spot of levitation, some light vomiting, and all the speaking in tongues you could ever hope for.” He

gestured with a nod of the head across the table to Satan, who was doubled over in the throes of some hellish giggling. “When your man over there was done with Abigail Hummingbird, she had conquered her addictions and gone on to invest her last penny into a sensible but incredibly high yield investment portfolio. She was set for life and the dividends alone have allowed her to set up the franchise of disabled cat shelters that she had always dreamt of.”

“I thought you’d be happy,” was all Satan could manage to say as he tried to regain his composure.

“You’re supposed to be the progenitor of all that is evil in the world.” Gabriel waved his hands around, in some attempt to help prove his point. Opium smoke danced in the thermals. “You can’t go around just giving people what they want. That’s our job!”

“Is it though, Gabe?” asked Suki, scrunching up her nose and unleashing one of her patented little sharp-toothed grins.

They paused for a moment as a server arrived to deposit a small espresso and a large hookah pipe on the table, waiting patiently while he fussed over explaining its workings to Suki, before scuttling off.

“Yes. Well, cosmically speaking. Eventually.” Gabriel felt his argument wind down by inches. “Look, people are not very good at knowing what it is that they should be wanting.”

“Can we all agree that I am the Devil?” Asked Satan, changing tack as he gestured towards Suki’s pipe. She, in turn, made it very clear that he should have ordered his own when he’d had the chance.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to say!” thundered Gabriel.

“And I am to stand in opposition to God Almighty?”

“That is your foolish and doomed purpose, yes.”

“And, if I go around doing good things and being nice to sinners, that sort of undermines the whole religious game, as it were?”

“Yeeeeeeees,” the word escaped from Gabriel like a puncture in a suspicious balloon.

“So, by undermining the Holy Order of things, I am – in point of fact – doing my job, am I not?”

A rather petulant silence descended upon the table. Satan reclined smugly among the cushion and spread his wings wide as he crossed his arms. When he put his mind to it, Satan could conjure up a very smiteable face. Gabriel drummed the table with his delicate fingertips, a look upon his face that suggested that, while he may have been above such mortal flaws as wrath, he did still have access to a flaming sword, and some people might do well to remember that. And, for her part, Suki accepted her role of audience member, sipping contentedly on her coffee while she let the atmosphere foment.

“Might I suggest a timeout?” she finally asked, exhaling a vast, narcotic cloud into the highly charged air between her two companions. “Boss, a word in private, if you’d be so beastly?”

With nary a puff of smoke they were standing on an empty city street, that lay beneath an even covering of snow and, above that, a still and black night. Breath curling in the air, Suki squinted at the buildings and the street signs, deducing that they had translocated to somewhere in the depths of London’s East End.

Satan had wrapped his vast bulk in some breed of black, voluminous fur, his folded wings tenting under the material to cast him in a hunched and beastly form. Suki, by comparison, was still wearing – more or less – her satin dress, and her scales were practically standing on end in the cold.

“I’m so sorry, my little vixen,” purred Satan. “Would you like me to fetch you a coat?”

“No, thank you,” said Suki, who knew all too well the dangers of accepting favours from the Devil. She remained shivering in the frigid London air, wrapping her wings around her arms, which were wrapped, in turn, around herself. “Have you considered lying?”

“What, just in general or...”

“You could say that you’re going to go back to torturing the damned and just, you know, not do it.”

Satan looked at her, aghast. If you were not to know that he was the Prince of Lies and the Lord of Mischief, and were he not an eight foot tall crimson hellbeast, then you might have thought for a second that he was truly shocked. This lasted long enough to be worrying to Suki, before his face melted into a sad and broken smile, and then even that faded.

“I don’t know, spawn of mine,” he said. “What if he finds out? We’re overdue an Apocalypse, as it is. God’s got a wide Old Testament streak to him, sometimes.”

“God has no idea what goes on Hell. Gabe said so himself. Absence of the sight of God, or however it goes. As long as we’re discrete, then He’ll be none the wiser.”

“I don’t know, my filthy little harlot.” Satan stuck his hands in his pockets, kicking idly at the snow underfoot. “There is an element of showmanship to this job.”

“No one goes to heaven anymore, boss,” shrugged Suki. “It’s just God, all of the more boring angels, and a few million of the dullest and most tiresome Americans you could ever hope to meet. Let Him have this one. Judging by how the last few centuries have gone, He probably needs a win.”

There was a look that grew across Satan’s face. One that was most likely due to him thinking sly and devious thoughts, and not at all the result of him soiling his trousers. It marked the birth of an idea, or perhaps the acceptance of one.

“And I could still be awful?” He queried. “If the fancy took me?”

“Down there,” Suki gestured emphatically towards the snowy ground with a full complement of fingers, wings and tail, “you’re the boss.”

“Good,” nodded Satan. “We’ve just broken ground on Paedophile Island, and I am kind of excited to see how that turns out. Great herds of cannibal goblin children sneaking through the long grass, picking off sex offenders one-by-one. All the while, I lead the hunting party and the hounds, driving the survivors into the lake of fire. And then, here’s the best part, we do it all again tomorrow. I am but humble man, Suhkmetain Al’Hora, as I am sure you are aware. But this will be truly my finest work.”

Suki let that moment lie there on the street for a time. Allowing it to settle and disappear beneath the slowly falling snow, before she replied.

“The thing I’ve found with sinners,” she said, drawing the words out slowly. “The really bad ones, I mean. Not the ones who accidentally planted more than one type of seed in a field, or forgot that they shouldn’t sit in the same place as a menstruating woman. Your average sinner? With the exception of Paedophile Island, they tend to

end up punishing themselves a lot better than we ever could.”

“But I could still help? If I had a bad day, and needed to let off some steam?” Satan paused in his musing, winding their conversation back a few beats in his head. “What was that about menstruation, by the way?”

“Leviticus, boss. It’s a trip.”

“You know, it’s never made much sense to me,” began Satan, in the tones of someone who is fast coming to fall in love with the amazing idea that they alone have just had. “I mean, I’m a sinner. They’re all sinners. We’ve got so much in common. Never got why everyone assumed that I would just have at them with the pokers, and what have you.”

“No more possessions, though,” Suki wagged a stern, admonishing finger. Due to aeons of practice, this was something that she was extremely good at. “Not like the Ostrich woman, anyway. Just a spot of crucifix masturbation and pretending that the holy water really hurts. Like the good old days.”

“Ah, my dear Suki,” said the Devil. “You’re such a traditionalist.”

There was a pop and the lingering suspicion of brimstone, and then the street was empty once more. In the absence of God anything might seek to come to pass but, in the absence of Satan, it transpired that their food had arrived. Although they had removed all of the beaks, so he had to send it back to the kitchen.

*

It was another pleasant day in Hell, relatively speaking.

Suki came awake to the soft tones of her masochist alarm clock in the corner of her room, as her diary imp set about hammering on his testicles. Although the amenities of Hell had improved markedly over recent months and the warmth of the lake of fire now powered her underfloor heating, she still wrapped herself in a thick robe as she cantered across the apartment and came to stare out of her panoramic windows.

Beyond the double-glazed, undamned glass of her penthouse apartment the people – and non-people – of Central Pandemonium were going about their business much as they had these past few years. The sounds of suffering still echoed throughout the canyons of the great city, but they had become drowned out, somewhat, by the prosaic noises of countless billion sinners simply existing.

The day held many adventures and atrocities in store for Suki, all to be picked from a menu of opportunity that had been denied her in her past, when she had dwelt on the far shores in her pain pagoda. She had to unalive stream at some point in the day, to tease and appease the armies of victims that still vied in vain for her affection. But, beyond this, the day opened its legs wide for the Succubus.

The endless sex war that she had instigated was still being waged, but now it was being done through the fibres of the new-fangled internet that Suki had persuaded Satan to build, once she had assured him of its villainous potential. It was fought by platoons of keyboard warriors, eviscerating each other only in the message boards, but it was no less vicious for all the lack of actual blood. All of these sinners willing to donate years of servitude and agony to her crypto account, of their own free will. All in the hope that today might finally be the day that she slipped a nipple, live on stream.

Far below even Suki's fallen position, the Lord of Darkness dwelt in shadow. For he had found a wonderful picnic spot in the shade of one the Hanging Trees in Pandemonium's Central Park of Suffering. Much like the other denizens of the pit there was no telling what surprises Hell held in store for Satan, although it would be a sensible sinner who bet on the possibility that at some point he would be saddling up to lead a hunting party across the moors of Paedophile Island. Satan had been very pleased with how his latest passion project had turned out, and indeed he seemed to be on a roll with all of his current engineering works. The Stalking Grounds of the Internet Scammers, the Endless Dental Waiting Room and the Public Toilet Swamp. All of them were coming along nicely. But then so was Moloch's STD Clinic and the Great Satanic Municipal Library.

Hell was turning out to be a real mixed bag these days.

"Hail Satan!" cried a man cheerfully, from the wound down window of a passing taxi.

"Morning, Geoff," nodded Satan in return, before leaning over to his companion. "Have him killed, please."

"Any preference as to how?" asked Babylon, opening a notebook, with a tortured moan, to jot down a reminder.

"Surprise me this time, whore," smiled Satan, indulgently.

The leathery wings of the Legions of the Damned beat overhead, as they sought to round up the stragglers of the Viking hordes, who had descended upon Pandemonium for one of their infrequent nights on the town. As the fires died down and the debris was being cleared away, there was some manner of fabulous parade going off along main street. Ten thousand sets of feet skipped along merrily, on top of all of those good intentions. Satan's old fashioned mind led him to assume that it was the gays again, who had long been a mainstay of Hell and were generally having a much better time of things down here than they had ever been allowed to have up there. But it might have been the Abortionists, the Humanists, or the even the battalions of the Social Justice Warriors.

Just as it may have been the Guild of Narcissists, who rarely needed an excuse to flaunt themselves. Or the much smaller - but far more organised - Society of Dictators, who were always known to put on a good show as part of their schemes to finally gain a seat on the Central Pandemonium City Council.

Perhaps, thought Satan wistfully, it was the Egyptians.

Everywhere through the realm of the damned there was an endless sea of humanity, all of them trying to live their best afterlives. Coming together in acts of selfless charity, just as they went about sabotaging themselves and others for their own ends. The sheer plurality of options that Hell's modernisation offered up for the experience made it hard to tell one from the other. But there was no rush to try and solve any of these great conundrums. All of these sinners had forever to come terms with their situation, and seek to find some equilibrium between their fractious perspectives. All of them with no one to blame but themselves if they turned eternity into nothing more than a treadmill of torture and repentance.

All of them safe from the grace of God.

BEST BEFORE

Once upon a time there was a man named Gabriel De Leon. This wasn't always the case. For the longest time the world had had to make do without Gabriel. Since the dawn of the universe and from the very invention of time itself, existence had persisted without him to witness it.

And, presumably, there would come a day when he would be shuffled off this mortal coil, and the world would continue to trudge on in his absence. Gabriel had been led to believe that this was simply the nature of things. And while it might seem so wasteful from the perspective of an individual – that the splendour of reality stretching across infinite space back from the dawn of time all the way over to the heat death of everything had all been willed into existence just for him to experience for a few decades - there seemed to be very little that one could do about such a state of affairs.

Gabriel was forty years old when his personal AI-ssistant pinged to advise him that in twenty-four hours' time he would be dead. This was a service that he had signed up to, by the way, not some sort of ominous threat or warning. Seeing as this was something that he had paid good money for, the message was delivered to Gabriel in suitably sombre tones. An elegant and subdued font set against a plain black background.

They were sorry to be the bearers of bad news, apologised the Final Friend app. They really were.

*

Gabriel was not married, at least not anymore, and he did not possess the sort of relationship with his ex-wife wherein they were disposed to ring each other up and share such personal information. Indeed, lamented Gabriel, she would undoubtedly be over the moon to hear from him on the topic of his imminent demise.

He had no children, which was perhaps the second reason that he was no longer married. He saw no reason to burden his elderly parents with the news, which was a much nicer way of saying that he did not want to spend his final day on Earth in their cloying embrace, shepherding them through their grief in a strange inversion of how such things should play out.

He didn't, when he sat down to really think about matters, entirely know why he had asked to be informed about his death in advance, if he hadn't planned on sharing it with anyone. He would presumably notice the change in his state of affairs well enough when it came about. The authorities would have been notified to come and collect his remains before they started stinking up his apartment complex too badly, regardless of whether it was posted on social media or not.

I mean, it wasn't as if he could do anything to change matters.

Being an office supply manager by vocation, Gabriel was not up to date with the intricacies and minutiae of time travel. The workings of the Great Machine eluded him, and yet somehow the Great Academic Council had soldiered on in his absence and built the thing anyway.

Time, according to Professor Gustavsson when he made the announcement to the world's press, was a concurrent thing. All of it was happening simultaneously and all of it was unchangeable. Or perhaps it could be changed, but will have been already instantly changed and will have always would have been, which in the final accounting was no different from saying it couldn't be changed after all. Nobody really understood what the Professor was talking about in this part of his speech, possibly up to and including Professor Gustavsson himself. But the gist of the matter was clear, the Council had created a time machine.

Time, to quote a pithier part of the Professor's presentation, all happened at the same time.

The Professor was very proud of that soundbite, and had evidently worked on it for some time. You could tell by the way that he smirked at the cameras when he said it. It certainly went down with the reporters much better than all that other talk about concurrent causality.

The Great Machine had solved all of mankind's problems and answered all of its questions overnight. In point of fact, the Professor went on to say, they hadn't even had to wait until the next morning. From the moment they turned the machine on the Council had been receiving an endless barrage of emails and documents sent from the future answering all the questions that had vexed mankind in the previous span of centuries. New theories of understanding, radical ideas for technologies. All of them dumped into the Academy's inbox, to be weighed and sorted by an increasingly harried intern.

Due to the nature of time, explained the Professor, this was perfectly fine. It simply meant that at some time in the future someone was going to have to knuckle down and churn out a few papers and produce these theories. The very fact that they had been received in the past meant that, at some point in the future, the work to produce them would be done. Although it was unlikely much of that work was going to get done in the near future, as there was far too much celebrating to be done up and down the land in the halls of academia. But again, said the Professor, this was fine. They had a few billion years before such matters became overly pressing.

And then someone had asked if, in the future, could they not just copy the email that had been sent to them in the past instead of actually doing the work themselves. And someone else had chimed in advising that they had watched a film where this sort of thing had happened, and that it was called a paradox, and that such things never ended well. And the Professor had just smiled and said that they had already received an email going into detail about just such an eventuality. But he declined to advise what it had said, and ended the press conference with a request for additional funding for all the work they were going to have to do in the future.

The Great Machine had also meant that an understanding of free will and determinism had been forced to change. Meaning that many philosophers and deep

thinkers – who had spent a not inconsiderable amount of time pondering such things – started talking about how aggrieved they were about the whole affair. Luckily, on the scale of day-to-day activities, nothing much changed at all, which was seen as a good thing provided that one did not think too deeply or excessively philosophically on such matters.

Gabriel De Leon was not, it probably does not need to be stated, much of a deep thinker. He often went days without having a single appreciable thought at all. He was far from alone in such behaviour.

*

Final Friend always sought to match buddies to the best of their abilities. Trying to account for tastes, interests and social dynamics. But often it reduced down to a simple matter of chronological adjacency and convenience.

Final Friend was one of many companies that had sprung into existence in the wake of the unveiling of the Great Machine. Just as the past could not be changed, the immutability of time meant that there was no prohibition against knowing things about the future. While society was changed in a great many ways, an individual's personal timeline was not. Using a dating agency, to give just one example, became a straightforward affair. With the company able to take a quick look through a Temporal Window and respond back to clients with a single name and a phenomenal bill. This was a largely successful process, although there was a significant fraction of their clientele who felt differently. Those who, in their hearts, felt that they had been matched incorrectly but persisted in their allotted relationships because they felt they could not do differently and, in doing so, closed the loops of their own unhappiness. Future Perfect, as the mindset of this new society came to be called, was no guarantee of Future Happiness.

Final Friend specialised in pre-mortem care for those that cared to know the timing of their demise. They were, in essence, an extrapolation of those websites from the time before the Great Machine had solved all problems. The ones that claimed to be able to predict your date of departure with an ominous countdown timer. Except, in this instance, they were ineffably correct.

Details were usually spared, because the people who used such services were often more interested in schedules over agendas. What differentiated Final Friends from other terminal services was that they catered to a specific demographic; those who were fearful (often with good reason) of dying alone.

When Gabriel De Leon received his notification on an otherwise unremarkable autumn evening there was, added to the message being delivered in a solemn and impersonal tone, a hyperlink.

At the other end of that link was Erin Pentecost.

*

Erin Pentecost was not happy about a lot of things, up to and including the looming spectre of her imminent death. She was, to quote her directly, “absolutely bloody livid about the whole thing”. In this way she was handling her death in much the same

manner as she had handled her life.

Erin was eighty three years old, which is by no means a quick run of things, but still fell a little short of the century of experience that the new modern world was going around promising to people. She had outlived two husbands by the time that her own notification came through, and she had no children. And although she was self-described as “livid”, it was very thoughtful of her to announce this to Gabriel De Leon, as it was not immediately apparent when they were first introduced to one another.

She certainly seemed very loud and, for a small woman, seemed to take up a lot more mental real estate when she was present than Gabriel had expected. They met in the Final Friends offices at one of the complexes surrounding the Great Academy, in what was colloquially known as the Terminal Terminal. The first time that Gabriel saw Erin she was swigging from a hip flask as she harangued a receptionist, but it was too late to back out of things now. Within thirty seconds of their introduction the social dynamics of the situation, and the flow of how things were going to be, were made very apparent to Gabriel.

“So, we are going to be friends for the day,” advised Erin, leaving precisely no room for doubt on the subject. She looked Gabriel up and down a few times, and it was not immediately apparent what her initial estimation of him might be. “You’re a bit young to be dying, aren’t you?”

And this was very true. The Final Friend Terminal Terminal of the airport-like structure that surrounded the Great Machine appeared to be the province of the elderly. They were doddering around the spaces of the airy, antiseptic facility with varying degrees of awareness. Of course, there were still deaths by accidents and misadventures, as well as those by poor judgement and self-inflicted circumstance. But such people were, by disposition, less likely to avail themselves of Final Friend’s services. Gabriel was very much an anomaly. And, consumed as his thoughts were on his impending departure, Gabriel was not unaware of how he was being regarded and treated by the professional care workers around him. He seemed to exist in some location triangulated between pity, compassion and freakshow curiosity.

“So, what do you want to do today?” asked Erin as they were shuttled between various administration stations, wasting morsels of what was becoming ever more precious time.

It was a given that they would be using the Great Machine. It was, to put it bluntly, rather the whole point of the whole arrangement. Scheduled death was one of the few opportunities that the average person had to galivant around through time and space. However, despite ruminating on the subject all through the previous evening, Gabriel had not managed to come up with even a single chrono-location that he could stand by as a personal choice for them to visit. Beyond the standard selections of dinosaurs and ancient Egypt, time was as a blank space for Gabriel.

“It’s a good job I’ve got a list then, isn’t it?” said Erin, unfolding and brandishing said list, which was written – in the face of all technological advancement – on some much-folded paper that had been rapidly expanded from her miniscule purse. “A good round dozen of the buggers.”

“Ok,” nodded Gabriel, already a little uncertain on how this day was progressing.

“Right,” said Erin, weighing up her next proposition carefully. “Before we kick off the business of the day, I don’t suppose you fancy a final expedition up this old crypt,

do you? For old time's sake?"

On balance, and once her euphemisms had been explained to him, Gabriel did not suppose that he did. He also did not, in his heart of hearts, really want to go on a jaunt through time with this lady. But there existed, deep within that self-same heart, a sense that he did not want to feel that he was letting people down. Even if he could not specify, exactly, who those people might be, and how he might be disappointing them with how he spent his final hours.

The Great Machine was a colossal iceberg of a thing. Its inner workings and miles of circuitry were hidden deep underground, as was its operational crew of hundreds, possibly thousands. All that peeked above the surface on that pleasant Geneva morning was the Departure Room and the Temporal Portal at the centre of it. A mirrorlike surface, the size and shape of a simple doorway, reflecting back the perspective of any observer.

There was a modest queue for the Machine, as there always was. Alongside the docile snaking of Final Friends there was a separate, slightly more fractious, line up of scientists and sociologists. All of them waiting for their turn to be sent off on their important and esoteric expeditions. But while the latter group seemed to view the former with a sour side-eye, the mood in general was subdued but pleasant. His own cohort, Gabriel observed, was similar in both makeup and temperament to those who could be found waiting to view a particularly popular stately home. With only marginally less knitting.

They were given their shimmer bracelets which would, should they be visiting chrono-locations sufficiently dissimilar from their own, dissuade any observer's eye from inspecting them too closely. These bracelets also contained the remote activators necessary for further jumps onwards after their initial sojourn and, ultimately, their return. They were not, it was made very clear to them, to lose their bracelets under any circumstances.

What they were given precious little of was guidance. Instruction on how they were to act or whether there were any prohibitions on what they were not to do. It did not matter, after all, for any actions they would take in their future had already happened in the past. Or would be happening. Or will always have been having happened.

They were advised, in short, not to worry about matters such as this. Time was resilient and, ultimately, did not care one whit for their actions. So Gabriel and Erin looked at each other, shrugged, and then stepped through the looking glass.

*

Erin Pentecost sat alone in a window booth in the café, where she was busy sipping coffee and having a mohawk.

It was 1984, the other Erin whispered to Gabriel as they sat in a booth on the other side of the café. Gabriel, unburdened by any worries of cholesterol, was indulging in a full Camden breakfast. Merrily dipping his sausage in the yolk of his fried egg and pushing his puck of black pudding around the plate as if he was playing a very slow, very suspicious game of ice hockey.

"Look at me," enthused Erin as she gestured towards her younger self, using her cup of deep dark brown tea as a pointer. "Seventeen, and not a sensible thought in my

head.”

“You were a punk?” asked Gabriel. A little redundantly, given the safety pins and eyeliner and whatnot.

“Post-punk.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Means I was born a few years too late,” answered Erin, replacing her tea cup in its saucer and pushing her chair back from their table as a prelude to rising.

“So, why aren’t we jumping back a few more years so you can experience it?”

But Erin had already left the table, and shuffled over towards her younger self, who looked up from her coffee and inner thoughts to regard this elderly interloper. It was hard to tell, through all of the warpaint, whether there was any spark of recognition in this younger perspective.

“Don’t go home,” older Erin said. “You’re right to think that he’s dangerous. Get a bloody haircut and go to university.”

Younger Erin said nothing, merely stared up at this future phantom, who clicked her fingers to summon Gabriel to her side. Their business here had been completed, it seemed. They ordered a couple of teas to go, and stepped out into the treacle masses of London.

*

1999. It was not quite New Year’s Eve, but there was still a certain feeling in the air.

Gabriel had not lived through any portentous moments in human history. The closest thing he could compare it to was the unveiling of the Great Machine, a pivot point for humanity around which everything had changed. But even that moment had happened only in retrospect. The Machine had been built in secret, or at least without much attention, and had been revealed to no small amount of surprise and confusion. The knowledge that there had been a time *before* the Great Machine only became known after its occurrence.

What was in the air all around Gabriel and Erin now was the thrill of expectation.

It was another autumn day, not so dissimilar to the future that they had left behind that past morning. Some anonymous hotel looking out on an equally anonymous urban industrial landscape, that Erin had to advise Gabriel was actually Berlin.

There were several different types of time, including a personal chronology that was of most interest to both Gabriel and Erin. While the light of day draining from the sky suggested the wind down of another day, according to the clocks on their shimmer bracelets it was just before lunchtime. The last lunch that either of them would get to experience, and they were both keen to make that reservation at a little French place that Erin knew about. The reservation that they were going to have to make either a few hours from now or several decades ago. Depending on how one was looking at such things.

And so these interactions with Erin’s younger selves had picked up the pace somewhat. On their last stop-off, Erin hadn’t even broken her trajectory. Stomping into, through and then out of a conference room briefing, pausing only to call across the table at her younger self. Advising her to call her sister every once in a while, because life was short but large. And so easy to lose track of those that she cared for

within it. And, by then, the glass door had already been swinging closed between them.

Slightly-more-contemporaneous Erin Pentecost was thirty two, and had evolved into a well put together, serious looking woman. One lost amidst the sterile sameness of hotels and conference rooms. Beltways and business lounges that had all blurred into one ubiquitous Purgatory. Sat with what she would contend was her first gin of the evening, alone when judged against any metric that you might care to mention.

Older Erin leant over the bar to pour herself a shot, before tossing the bottle towards Gabriel and slapping some undefined currency down for the agog barman.

“Leave your job, young lady. It’s making you miserable, and this is all it will ever have to offer you.” A sweeping hand gesture encompassed everything from the view through the window to the affronted bartender staring at them. “Marry David before you let the distance between the two of you grow too big. Happy New Millennium, by the way.”

And then on to the next one.

Forty-seven now, and Erin rolled her eyes when she spied her own ghost of Christmas future cantering into view across the restaurant as she dined alone. Wedding ring in place, but its purpose reduced down to the marker of a memory.

“Oh, I don’t want anything,” older Erin dismissed herself with a waved hand full of pastry. “It’s just we were a bit peckish, and I distinctly remember these Danish’s as being the best I’d ever had. Maybe remember to smile once in a while. Carry on, carry on.”

Fifty-three and given over to the grey by now. Alone, as she always seemed to be for these visitations. Sat on the bonnet of her electric car, as it fizzled and clicked down to uselessness along the shore of some Italian lake.

Erin and Gabriel appeared from behind some convenient bushes, causing her younger self to drop her travel mug of coffee into her lap and introduce some choice Anglo-Saxon cursing to the rolling Provencian landscape.

“One day soon you’ll meet a man and fall in love again,” announced Erin, before she had even finished closing the distance between themselves. “He’ll catch your eye because he looks so much like my young companion here. And you’ll think how important he must be to me because he has been at my side for all of our life. And that thought will allow you to be happy again. For a time.”

“Like David?” asked only-comparatively-younger Erin, with no small amount of venom, as she dabbed at her damp lap with an ineffectual tissue. “Because that lasted a whole fourteen months before the aneurism.”

“Yes, my dear. But what a year it was.”

And with that Erin kissed her own wrinkled forehead, and they were off once more.

Finally, as their personal clocks struck four, Erin was now sixty-four and sat in the spare bedroom of their little house with the sound of subdued company trickling in from downstairs.

Her little house, now.

The man who looked like Gabriel had gone down into the ground alongside David, and the wake was also winding down by slow degrees. What could no longer in good faith be called young Erin was turning over in her bony little hands a promotional data tablet for the Final Friend organisation. Wondering, after having had two husbands snatched from her with little to no warning, if it would make sense to have some

advance notice for herself. Wondering how much time she would need to put her affairs in order. And what affairs she might still possess, disarrayed or otherwise.

As with any good service there were options. Degrees of forewarning that a client could choose from, but twenty four hours seemed more than adequate. Gabriel waited on the landing, having decided that one phantom from the future-past would probably be enough in such circumstances. Not wanting to show that face of his, on this of all days.

And so Erin sat alone with herself. And there were, for once, no words needed. Her presence was answer enough. A reminder from times yet to come that life would, if only for a while, continue past this point.

“Would you stay with me?” asked the grieving Erin, with eyes that were dry only because they had no more tears to give. “Just for a little while. We shouldn’t be alone.”

“Of course,” said the Erin, who already knew how this went. “I have always been here for us.”

*

They sat down in the woods to take a breather from all the breakneck advice giving. These were like no woods that Gabriel had ever experienced, most likely because these trees were located some one hundred and fifty million years away from the common age. Firmly within the realm of the dinosaurs.

Erin was busy laying a tartan blanket on a flat rock that poked up through the dense foliage underfoot. Setting out an array of the finest narcotics that they had purchased from the future. And this was the actual *future* future, from way past their own departure point, so it was a given that this was going to be some good stuff. Gabriel had thought about counselling against this course of action on moral grounds but, on reflection and looking at their personal chronology, there didn’t seem to be much point. Perhaps they should have gone to Egypt, or Rome, or even the viewing gallery at the end of time as the final star burned out and even the Great Machine could reach no further. There were any number of temporal tourist traps necklaced along the path of time’s arrow to choose from, but getting high with the dinosaurs seemed just as good an option as any.

“How could you possibly know?” asked Gabriel, who was becoming more perplexed as the synthetic Bliss took effect. “You haven’t lived a life where you made the opposite decisions. So you have no way of knowing if the advice you gave yourself was for the best.”

“Ah well,” smiled Erin, “that’s the trick of it, you see. I already knew at the time what I should be doing. All of these moments were all my own decisions. My own free will. I’ve just been here for some positive reinforcement.”

This, it seemed to Gabriel, was what a life lived without regrets might look like.

“Right then,” harrumphed Erin, finally. “I suppose it’s time we were getting high and getting off. Going home to die, or however this works.”

There was a sadness in Gabriel. A deep well that he had long been aware of, but one that he was only now coming to appreciate in its depth and scope. A realisation of a life of no regrets, but only because it had been bereft of any choices made. A life without highlights or lowlights, such that there were no landmarks to orientate

around. No moments of connection between his past and future selves.

“Would you, by any chance,” he found himself saying, “still be up for a bit of a tumble? For old time’s sake?”

And it was not the finest episode of Gabriel’s tiny little life, but it was also far from the worst. All told it was ten minutes that neither of them were getting back again, but that was true of every ten minutes that the both of them had ever experienced. There had grown to be an intimacy between the two that made such things easier, one that came to feel like this was a debt owed to their past selves. An inescapable by-product of being witness to a life, and all the chances and choices that had defined it. Even if there was no such thing as chance, and choice was only something that seemed possible on reflection.

And, if nothing else, it was a lot better than sitting in awkward silence.

Getting naked in the woods was an invigorating experience, even without factoring in the prospect of being devoured by a passing *Allosaurus*. Getting naked in the woods in the rain was even better. As the Bliss flowed through his system, and Gabriel took to dancing amongst the undergrowth, his cares fell away from him. And for a moment he felt a sense that, stripped of the cares of a life not lived, that this was his true and free self.

But that, he supposed, was Class AAA narcotics for you.

They wandered for a time between the trees and the ferns, swatting away dragonflies the size of moderate nightmares and enjoying the suppressive sound and feel of rain on foliage. They spied lumbering giants on occasion through gaps in the trees, and they came to feel like insects moving through a world not built for them. Small and insignificant but, in this feeling, freed from any concerns of a greater purpose. Gabriel even scampered up a hillock and howled at the slowly rising, far too large moon, stopping only when his cries were answered in the gloom by a deeper, more impressive roar.

“Is that it, then?” asked Erin as they sat on a giant fallen tree trunk and grudgingly began to dress themselves once more for civilised company.

“I don’t know. Would you like to see the future?” asked Gabriel, who did not want such a thing himself, but perhaps wanted it more than simply returning to oblivion. “The proper future, I mean. Not just the part of it inhabited by drug dealers.”

“No, I don’t think so.” Erin sighed, at great length. “If it’s good then I’ll only feel like we’re missing out. And if it’s bad, well, then it will all just seem a bit of a waste. I think we’ve had our time. I have never believed in anything beyond this life, but I think there can be value in facing the end of it with dignity.”

Which was a fine thing to say, regardless of the level of synthetic neurological agents coursing through her bloodstream.

“I have to say that I was not looking forward to today,” confessed Gabriel as he snapped his shimmer bracelet back onto his wrist. “But, in the end, it’s been rather pleasant. I’m glad I could be here for you. It’s nice not to be alone for the end.”

“Yes, dear,” nodded Erin Pentecost as she ran a small hand across the contours of a face that she had known and relied on all her life. “I suppose it’s not been a bad life, all in all.”

And Gabriel De Leon could only agree. It was just a shame that the life in question was not his own.

*

There was, and always had been in case people were considering getting litigious about it, the very real possibility that use of the Great Machine could end in total molecular disintegration. It was the smallest of chances, almost as small as the fine print with which such an eventuality was included on all of the contractual paperwork. But it existed nonetheless, which meant that, at the scales that humanity and the Great Machine operated on, it was inevitably going to happen to someone.

Why not Gabriel De Leon and Erin Pentecost?

And, as the Temporal Portal shredded them down beyond the molecular level, there was something that occurred. It was not a moment, because this was outside of and far beyond time. So let us instead term it an instance. Their energy smeared across the face of existence, connecting them from the dinosaurs to the quantum processor to the last vibration of the last particle before the heat death of the universe. An immortal electron that was every electron, moving through and beside itself until every particle could say that it was never truly alone. A single thing making endless friends with itself.

An instance of an instant that encompassed the entirety of everything that would ever be.

It was not, Gabriel and Erin would have supposed if there remained anything with which to do the supposing, such a bad way to go.

HIPPO

“You’re too late!” declares the vile Baron Sapiens. “No one can stop me now. Not even the great Moral Guardian! The genetic code of your pathetic people is mine now.”

Moral Guardian struggles against the robot guards that hold him, but those mechanised bastards hold his limbs so tight that not even his mighty pseudopods can wriggle free. His eye narrows with righteous indignation as he beholds the dastardly Baron, in the centre of his lavish control room, fiddling with dials and gauges. A mad cackle bubbling up through his foe’s accursed human lips, so used to gloating and lying. The Baron slams his ridiculous monkey fist down on a red button with a fury, causing the control panel to wobble alarmingly, which is most unusual for such a solid looking construction.

“You’re a monster, Sapiens!” The robots may be unnaturally strong but they cannot stop Moral Guardian rising up to the full extent of his pentapodic glory. “You shall never subjugate the proud spirit of my fellow Leulutian comrades! They will stand strong in solidarity with their great People’s Representative and they will crush your schemes with the power of their collective belief!”

“But with my Mesmer Cannon I will fill their head with lies and human weakness,” the Baron turns from his evil instrumentation to sneer at the noble Moral Guardian. “They will crumble from the inside as my machine whispers to them about the insidious lure of democracy.”

And, at this use of that accursed word, Moral Guardian find the strength of his people within himself and casts off his robot captors, who tumble around him perhaps a little more theatrically than one might have expected. He surges up the stairs that lead to the raised command throne of Baron Sapien’s control room, the sturdy trunks of his pseudopods slapping on the floating marble steps. There is fear in the gimlet eyes of the Baron, as he beholds the saviour of the Leulutian people rising towards him. But he still moves towards the Guardian, to engage him in hand-to-tentacle combat. And there is even more fear when, a few steps down, the Baron steps on the immaculate black velvet lining of his cloak and trips over, sending him end over end down the stairs, past Moral Guardian, to finish up in a pile on the floor.

“Cut!” screeches the Director, and they all break for lunch.

*

Douglas sits in the back of his car and tries his best to listen to his agent as she explains to him, not for the first time, why everyone hates him. But time has not been kind to Douglas Mandelbrot Jr. It has ignored him and passed him by. And while this has been good news for his skincare regime, it does mean that for most of his ninety two years he has never had to understand the way of things. Surrounded by opulence, and bulletproof glass, Douglas is often kept at great and allegedly safe distance from these people that hate him so vigorously. And so it has become easy to persuade himself that they must be mistaken.

Douglas is a hoot, after all. Just ask any of the vetted and approved visitors that have been allowed to meet him over the years.

The car streaks across the shimmering haze of the Glorious Desert of the Attamakarian Martyrs, flanked by security support vehicles that scan the far horizon for any signs of fans lying in wait with rocket launchers. Their destination is the utilitarian bulk of Temporary City 17, known colloquially as the Collaborators Compound, although any citizen unwise enough to use this epithet out loud tends to do so just the once. Like the occasional over-exuberant attackers who sometimes try to storm the Compound's walls, such people invariably come to find themselves as guests of the Leulutian People's Representative Re-Education Facilities where, over time and by degrees, they come to realise the errors of their ways.

But such animosity is a generalised thing, symptomatic of the Leulutian people's views of anything beyond the borders of their own, and how it cannot be trusted. It does not explain the special, hated place in one of their hearts that they have reserved for Douglas Mandelbrot Jr. The reason that his armed security detail is so competent and comprehensive, and also the reason that, seen purely in terms of his bank balance, times have never been better.

The Leulutians are a proud people, or so they often tell themselves because to say such things can seemingly turn their many hardships into a badge of honour. They have overcome much adversity throughout the hundred thousand years or so of their species memory. The planet of Quatrain has always been a harsh mistress. Full to the brim with a variety of predators, all eager to impart their own lessons on the subject of natural selection on any wretched soul weak enough to fall into their clutches. A few millennia of languishing in the relegation zone of the food chain proved sermon enough for the Leulutians to group together and ascend to the position of league champions. Pooling their collective might in a concerted effort to achieve the goal of not being eaten in the future.

They have been successful in this regard, at a local level. Sheer weight of numbers and the ability to follow orders very specifically, and without question, has put them on top of the Quatrain heap, but it is a big old universe out there. Numbers don't count for much in the face of a pan-species cosmic society, and the Leulutian's natural predisposition, honed to a sharp and tiresome point by all the centuries of being nibbled on, is not particularly endearing.

Humanity was, ultimately, to blame for the great war that followed the Leulutian arrival on the cosmic stage. Which had to be the truth because the Peoples' Representative said this was the case, and they had previously been very clear on the fact that, through the will of their great species, they were never wrong. The war had raged across the heavens, and down the odd gravity well, until the accursed humans were defeated along with any other species who sought to get involved. The Leulutians were, naturally, triumphant and simply chose to remain on Quatrain because it was their birth right. And who would want to go anywhere else when paradise was right here all along. And the human race obviously still persisted, even though the Leulutians had provably wiped them off the face of existence. And if you don't believe me then just check the certified news channels who will tell you the self-evident and unbiased truth of it all. And, to be honest citizen, all of these questions were beginning to sound a little bit like disloyalty. Are we going to have to get a Union Agent involved here?

I thought not.

And, while this great victory lives on eternal in the heart of every proud Leulutian, it never hurts to be reminded of one's superiority. There was a great and patriotic opportunity for any enterprising Leulutian film-maker, to fill the entertainment void

with a couple of Standard hours of everyone communally hating humanity. These movies however, require villains. People willing to betray their species and the limits of good taste for a nice, regular payday. Someone happy to be hated by the Leulutian people by design, and the rest of the universe as a side effect of the review process.

Enter Douglas Mandelbrot Jr, of the once great Mandelbrot acting dynasty.

“People don’t hate me,” says Douglas to his agent as they pass through the checkpoint gates of the Collaborators Compound. To say that the tone he employs is patronising would do a disservice to the idea of understatement. “They hate the characters that I play.”

“No, Douglas,” replies his agent, who is more than happy to be patronised provided that those 20%’s keep on coming. “I’m pretty sure it’s you.”

*

And people do hate Douglas.

Some of them are honest about it, such as the entire Leulutian populace, who differ only in the level of verve (and size of calibre) with which they communicate their ire with every new release that hits their screens. Others try to mask the contempt they hold in their hearts. Such as his agent. Or the entertainment critics, who try and couch their lambasting of his work in terms of the craft, rather than the blatant racism and sheer lack of quality on display. Or even his Leulutian handlers; the only real touchpoint that Douglas has with the Leulutians, and whose only role is to swallow down the bile they feel in his presence and to keep him in a state at least proximate to happiness.

And then there are those, like the drunken Talikki at the embassy bar, who might not even realise yet just how much they hate Douglas Mandelbrot Jr. Sometimes it just takes a little time, and a lot of alcohol, for him to work his charms.

Douglas has always been a sucker for a Talikki, which beyond being a speciest joke happens to be true. Because what ageing pervert would not have his head turned by a mono-gendered race of partially aquatic, many-tentacled sex ladies, whose chief export happens to be professional naughtiness?

Whoever the Talikki sat at the bar might be, she is a fine example of the genus. A purple vision in a gold dress so far above the class baseline of this establishment that attention cannot help but gravitate towards her. The bars of the Collaborators Compound usually cater to the specialists and middle managers of the sort of bottom feeder companies that still deign to do business with the Leulutians. Who, of course, have no need of doing business with the larger universe but, due to their benevolent nature, will infrequently take pity on some of the smaller, less established companies of the cosmos. Seeing as the Talikki have little to offer the galactic community beyond good-natured sex-working, it is unclear precisely what young Cacophony might be doing here.

She simpers at first contact, which cannot help but arrest Douglas’s attention, because how long has it been since he has been simpered at? She is also becoming increasingly drunk, as evidenced by the way in which her mantle of pseudopods starts to creep around the hem of her dress. And the subtle manner of how she laughs like a foghorn at the slightest provocation.

“Oooh, you are being the biggest of entertaining stars,” Cacophony giggles, with the slippery grasp of universal English common to her kind.

“Star of stage and screen, my dear,” announces Douglas, as one of them leads the other on the drunken, staggering path to his residential penthouse suite. “Seventy

years, man and boy, I tell you. From Shakespeare to the Etolingian epics. Fifteen Pompey awards, in my prime.”

“Shutting up now, please be of you,” she whispers from the confines of his manly arms as he lowers his rugged face to meet hers, and an errant tentacle snakes out to push the door shut.

*

Douglas is unclear as to quite what has happened. His love-making routine is a well-honed, largely automated protocol by this stage in his life, which is useful as these sort of situations only seem to occur when all parties are blind drunk.

First there is the kissing, which is all present and correct. There is also the cuddling, which Douglas has to admit is a lot more all-encompassing with the addition of so many pseudopods. The re-positioning phase is conducted with only minor dings and dents, and ends – as per standard – upon the bed. Stage four is undressing which, once again, is a lot more thrilling and surprising with all of these extra appendages lending a hand (or tentacle). The Talikki, Douglas has to admit, really do have this sex thing down pat.

‘Do not be alarmed, Mr Mandelbrot. Please continue to stimulate my primary erogenous zones. At least I assume that is what you are attempting to do.’

The voice in his head is a new development.

“What the –” He manages to exclaim before Cacophony uses some tentacles to force his face into her ample muffling zone.

“Ohhh, my goodingness!” she bellows, as she holds him tight and casts a discerning eye around the bedroom. “I shall be having so much of the good humpings, and that is to be of the littlest doubtings!”

‘Shut up, man! This room is no doubt bugged. Just keep doing whatever it is you think you’re doing to me, and listen.’

“Yes, m’lady,” gasps Douglas as he struggles, rather pleasantly, for air.

‘My name is Operator Cacophony Marshmallow. If you laugh at my name then I will be forced to kill you. I am with the Terran Task Force charged with effecting a beneficial social recalibration of the Leulutian Collective.’

“Marshmallow?”

“Now is being the time for the sitting of the face. Yes, no?”

There is a brief moment of very fluid re-arrangement and Cacophony comes to kneel upon, among other things, the bed. She rests her hands on her hips as steels herself for her next great sacrifice in the name of galactic peace, an idle tentacle scratching her chin.

“Ohh, ohh, ohh. That such a silvery tongued thespianic is to be spelunking of my secret-est lady cave. But such shamings that it is meaning you will be shutting of the fuck up for many happiest sex minutes.”

She wiggles a little to ensure her message is understood through her very tactically placed thighs. A soft gurgle indicates that Douglas Mandelbrot Jr is, for the time being, willing to submit to the practices of intergalactic spycraft.

‘To answer some of the questions you no doubt have. Yes, I am Talikki. Yes, I work for a human interest group. That is what we in the trade call “espionage”. I am communicating to you via a receiver I have just implanted in the roof of your mouth that is interfacing directly with your cranial neural net. This will allow us to have a direct, secure channel for communications. I come to you with an offer, Mr

Mandelbrot.'

Douglas raises a hand, with a solitary thumbs up, in the vague direction of the heavens.

"Yes," agrees Operator Cacophony, out loud. "Very yes! Now it is becoming the time of the mounting and much sweaty intercourses. Hooray, and suchlikes."

'If, at any time in the next thirty seconds to a minute, you attempt to actually put that thing inside of me you can rest assured that you will not be getting it back again. Now listen to me very carefully.'

*

Douglas Mandelbrot Jr is not stupid, although this does often have to be pointed out.

He is aware that he lives in a cage. It is gilded and lined with all the trappings of success and fame that he was once accustomed to for a brief time in his youth. A reminder of that little window of life when the stars and the parts aligned, and all their light was cast in his direction. Love and hatred, adulation and infamy. All of these things, Douglas has found, can come to look alike when squinting at them from under the focus of the universe's spotlight.

The bars of this cage are made from many things. They are hewn from the beliefs of the Leulutian Collective, and the xenophobia that is used to shape them. They are forged from the amnesiac whims of a galactic audience, slowly forgetting him such that they dwindled in tune with his diminishing box office. Placed around him like a trap that has patiently lain in wait for him all his life.

But between the bars there is still space, and through these spaces that light can still filter through. And, while it is nothing like the memory of light that lives on in Douglas's head, it is nonetheless light. Cast into the life of a man who fears nothing more than the dark he feels encroaching on him as the years tick by.

And, let me tell you citizen, this is becoming suspiciously tiresome. Who would bemoan a weak, fleshy man – entering the final act of his pitifully singular life – the chance to pantomime his way through a remembrance of his past glories? Why would you seek to deny the hard-working Leulutian Collective a few hours of educational escapism? Drawn together. United in something that is greater than themselves and subsumes their own petty, individual problems. And what could be more beautiful than that? I'm starting to wonder about you, citizen. I really am.

All of which is to say that Douglas Mandelbrot Jr is not initially as receptive to Operator Cacophony's offer as she might have hoped.

*

Moral Guardian VII: Mammalian Threat Level – Democracy! wraps following a record-breaking twenty three day shooting schedule, without further incident. Some of this is due to the fact that Douglas has now mastered using stairs while wearing his cape. Greater efficiencies have also been made from placing cue cards in Kershall's failing eyeline, and getting him a new prescription lens for his giant yellow eye. Kershall (properly known as Collective Distraction Worker #7,435) has been playing Moral Guardian for over six Standard years now, which is almost half a Leulutian lifetime, and the strain is beginning to show. There are plans for another five Moral Guardian features, Douglas knows, but he fears that some recasting may soon become necessary for such a legacy to continue.

Half a dozen motion pictures and Douglas can count on the ambulatory pseudopods of one Leulutian (which is five, by the way) the number of times that Kershall has approached him out of character and off the shooting lot. He doesn't blame Kershall for this, he can only imagine the pressures that the Leulutian thespian is under. It is easy to be the villain, after all, unburdened by the hopes and dreams of an entire planet and its people.

Douglas has always found Kershall to be very much of the method school of acting, and has assumed that the Leulutian despises him as much as their fictional alter egos do. And yet, when the dour wrap party concludes it is Kershall that Douglas sees when he turns away from the self-congratulatory circle chant that always signifies the end of these affairs, eager for one more bombing run of the catering table. The Leulutian looks shifty, which is some impressive physical acting for a being that usually resembles a tree trunk, as he draws Douglas away from any observers and into his spartan trailer.

A trailer about half the size of Douglas' own, the thespian notes with either joy or pity. He finds it hard to differentiate between the two sometimes.

Kershall is seeking professional advice, it soon becomes apparent. The Leulutian's love affair with cinema and the arts is long and storied – provided those stories have been vetted and approved by the Ministry of Ineffable Correctives – but they do not have much experience at the industry side of things. As he takes the script that Kershall would have him peruse he feels a moment of vertigo as he realises how old, in all manner of subjects, he must appear to this strange colleague. Douglas has always viewed scripts as nothing more than a series of suggestions from the uninformed. He narrows his eyes and flicks through the document, not bothering to even skim read it. He is instead counting lines and words, totting up potential screentime and translating that into remuneration packages and bargaining power.

"You're being offered this Mandrogonn role I would hope," says Douglas as he hands the voluminous script back to Kershall.

"Naturally it is an honour to be called by my People for such," rumbles Kershall, although there is little trace of this alleged honour in his glum tones. "To temporarily deceive my People into believing I am the great hero of the Battle of Tagitorn, where we so thoroughly routed your kind is a gift I am most unworthy of, oh debased and unclean singular worm. This will be the crowning glory of my life of service."

"Quite. He's got twice as many lines as any other bugger, that's for sure," nods Douglas, by now so thoroughly accustomed to the standard Leulutian terminology for all other races that he cannot be said to truly notice it anymore. "How much have they offered you?"

Kershall's huge, platelike eye, which has been narrowing for most of this conversation, narrows further still as he slowly comprehends Douglas.

"You misunderstand, pitiful fleshy beast," he says at length. "That is the role that I have been allotted and the role that I will therefore play. I simply seek any advice that you might have for how best to convey the glory of Mandrogonn's typical and entirely representational being. For such ridiculous ape-scum I have always found your professional deception talents to be thoroughly adequate."

You see? Whispers the voice in Douglas's head that has dogged him for several days now. The insidious, rather seductive voice of Operator Cacophony Marshmallow. *Even their supposed heroes and leaders are nothing but slaves to the machinery of their authoritarian government. Machinery that you grease with your acts of collaboration.*

"Oh, do shut up," sighs Douglas, who yet to master some of the finer points of

espionage. The most pertinent of which is to sub-vocalise when responding to the voices in his head.

“How dare you, decadent contractual slut!” bellows Kershall, waving some of his trunk-like tentacles in rage and making a show – but with no real effort – of rising from his seating hammock.

Douglas takes this as his cue to exit, stage left.

*

As a traitor to his species and – at least on paper – a friend of the Leulutian cause, Douglas Mandelbrot is extended many privileges by the Leulutian Collective that would usually be denied to a member of the Lesser Species.

There are his suites at the Collaborators Compound, naturally, where he attempts to avoid both the voice in his head and that of his agent, who is trying to get him to agree to close out on the contracts for the upcoming *Moral Guardian VIII – XII* films. There are the room service arrangements which, never uncouth enough to be spoken out loud, will allow for the procurement of anything or anyone that he desires to be delivered, post haste, to his well-appointed cell.

And then in the following days he is allowed, whether he wants it or not, to be indulged in an aerial tour of Freedom City One, the grand capital of Quatrain and jewel of the Leulutian Collective. This tour is guided, of course, for a fragile and misinformed mind such as Douglas’ could not hope to correctly understand its majesty without expert instruction. And so there are two passengers with Douglas in the back of the sky-car as it glides over the desert. Its tinted windows and proudly displayed government insignia keep it safe from any excessive fans of the Collective who might have set up camp on the bluffs over-looking the compound.

One of Douglas’s companions is Leulutian and, although all Leulutians look inescapably alike to Douglas, this specimen possesses a bearing that suggests there will be a test following this tour, citizen. There is no prize for passing it, save perhaps the fact that you will have avoided failing it.

The other passenger is human. A terrifyingly well put together young lady of sleek lines and various blacks; from hair to clothes to eyes. Those eyes in particular look like dangerous, ever-calculating things.

Sativa Von Archimedes, Operator Cacophony purrs, as if auditioning for the next *Moral Guardian* feature. *The nemesis of freedom. This bitch right here sold out her race. Hell, she sold out all of god-damn civilised space for a little taste of power. Nothing more than the bauble of the Leulutians, trotted out like a house-broken trophy. Sound familiar at all?*

“Pleasure to meet you,” purrs Douglas himself, extending a hand towards *Sativa*, only for it to be scrutinised with distaste before he withdraws it.

She seems lovely, internalises Douglas, who at least has not totally wasted the last few wasted days in his hotel room.

The car dips low over the cityscape of Freedom City One, as the metropolis creeps up on them from out of the desert. This is the showroom of the Leulutian people. The frosted topping of architectural wonders and self-aggrandising monuments, and the only part of the Leulutian cake that most outsiders will ever get a taste of. This is a place for trade summits and diplomatic arguments. This is the Quatrain that the Leulutians would present for the scrutiny of a universe that they proclaim to despise.

There are few of the People present to spoil the view, and those there are have been

dutifully drilled and immaculately coiffed. Inasmuch as one can pimp out a creature that looks like a squat tree trunk, these Leulutians are the showroom models, untrammelled and unweathered by the strains of real life. Douglas knows this, on some level at least. In spite of what his agent might have to say on the matter, he is not a stupid man. But he can be stupefyingly disinterested if he puts his mind to it.

Sativa takes a delicate sip from a champagne flute and indicates a monument through the sky-car window. It is a huge black marble rendition of a Leulutian worker rearing up into the sky which, on closer inspection, seems to be comprised of hundreds of smaller, similar figures, subdividing down into fractal complexity.

“The Collective’s monument to Worker Mandrogonn,” Sativa smiles at Douglas, daring him with those cold, discerning eyes that have never looked more dangerous. “The hero of the Battle of Tagitorn, as you are no doubt aware. Nothing more than an exemplar of Leulutian spirit, naturally. But a powerful one, to be sure. Fought the imperialist human fleets in the skies overhead to protect their way of life. Leaving the human forces broken and defeated, to be subjugated by the mighty Collective armada.”

Good Lord, she believes that, doesn’t she? Douglas keeps his placid external face in place as he shrinks inwardly, aghast.

Most likely, sighs Cacophony in his inner ear. Probably makes her day-to-day so much easier to just go with it.

But it’s patently untrue! Douglas knows what he sounds like. A naïve, petulant teenager. But he cannot help himself. The illogic of the statements presented to him will allow no other response. *She came here from Senate Space, what, five years ago? She knows that that’s not true.*

The Collective does not need truth, Douglas. There is something of the predator in Operator Cacophony’s response. A patient one that has waited for the right moment to strike. *History is a much more powerful force. History moves inside the brain, where it cannot be controlled. So it must first be shaped before it is told. It needs heroes and villains. And it must make sense on an emotional level, because it will live on only in the emotions of the People. She’s going to ask you something in a moment, Douglas. She’s going to ask you to help write their history for them.*

And, as the sky-car winds around the monument again and again, and Sativa Von Archimedes constructs a shared version of history, and their Leulutian handler watches impassively for any cracks to appear in the edifice of their belief, eventually that moment arrives.

It will be several months before production on *Moral Guardian VIII* will begin to ramp up, Sativa observes as she leans forward to hand Douglas yet another glass of specifically imported champagne, a calculated hand coming to rest, by chance, on his knee. There is a script doing the rounds at the moment, though. A great and worthy project, dear citizen, regarding an all too true episode of recent galactic history. Serious, important work to fuel the zeitgeist, dear citizen. Who could turn such an offer down? And why?

“What an opportunity,” breathes Sativa. “The People are so enamoured with the silver screen. And how they love love love to hate that dastardly Baron Sapiens. Surely that means the rumours regarding the Baron bowing out for good at the end of the next feature simply cannot be true. No, no, you mustn’t tell me if you know, what with me being such a fan.” She pauses, makes sure that the gauge of the trap that she has erected around Douglas is readily apparent to him. “But a chance to play a real villain? An historically accurate epic, starring your long time opposite number. I have heard that dear Kershall, ohh that wonderful being! That exemplar for the species! How

excited he is to be doing his part for the Collective unconscious. How thrilled he would be to take this great step forward with such a trusted and valued collaborator. How marvellous.....”

She continues on like this for some time.

*

The script is a long one. Even when he was flicking through it previously he thought it was lengthy, but as Douglas gets into the meat of actually reading the fucking thing, it feels long beyond measure.

Leulutians have never been averse to run times that tick ever upwards to the heavens, which Douglas cannot help but find unusual for a lifeform that tend to only stick around a decade or so at best. *Moral Guardian VII*, for example stretches out to nearly four Standard hours, thanks largely to prodigious use of slow motion and some lingering extreme close-ups on Kershall’s determined and increasingly myopic eyeball. *Heroes of Tagitorn*, going on page count of the script alone, threatens to be some seven or eight hours long, and will presumably stretch out to infinity once one factors in the heroic posturing and sweeping nebulae tracking shots.

That is because it is an escape, Cacophony tells him in a quiet moment as he hides at the premiere of *Moral Guardian VII*. He has shown his face to the crowds for the suggested five minutes, only to be shuttled off by gruff security forces when his continued presence threatens to generate a riot from what are, technically speaking, his fans. Cinema has always been an escape, he is told after retreating up a more practical fire escape to dangle his forlorn legs over the lip of the roof of the theatre. From any number of things. Glassy eyes rapt to glassy screens. The cinema, Cacophony tries to persuade him, has always been a solitary experience. For all the post-event discussion and fan camaraderie, for that small span of time in that darkened hall, the world is sent away and a new, personal reality constructed.

This is why cinema is so important to the Leulutians, Cacophony continues as Douglas sips meditatively from his constant companion hip flask, staring down at the spot-lights that sweep the otherwise darkened skyline, and the polished troops that line the thoroughfares. For the People this is a moment’s respite from the over-bearing pressure and presence of the Collective. And for the Collective itself, it is a direct line into the minds of the people. A secret tunnel past the battlements of the consciousness, where they may speak directly if they are discrete and allegorical enough.

It is not like the newer cortical media delivery systems. The Actual Reality rigs and the Transcorporeal Social Mists that surround and overwhelm the viewer, to the point that the correct terminology becomes “the experienter”. Here the individual is subsumed. Eradicated temporarily so that they can no longer be spoken to, as the viewpoint of an author is similarly removed. There is just a blob of sensory input that the audience gets to escape scot-free from when the lights come up, and the headsets and BCI ports are removed.

Cacophony is so wrapped up in her spiel that she has not noticed the solitary tear that tracks a course around the wrinkled contours of Douglas’s face.

“Fine,” says Douglas ultimately, speaking more to the flat black of night that pushes down on the hazy sediment of the city, rather than Cacophony. “If it shuts you up, then fine. Now, what am I to do?”

*

Rear Admiral Balien Faversham probably has a rich inner ocean of existence. A vast hunting ground for the diligent thespian to prowl about in and spear fish some real character work. Beyond the reefs of his very public role in commanding the orbital bombardment of Quatraine, Douglas Mandelbrot senses in the Rear Admiral hidden depths of dreams, aspirations and human foibles.

None of this is apparent from the shooting script of *Heroes of Tagitorn*.

One of the benefits of working within the Leulutian film industry is that research has always been optional. Douglas used to transact in nuance. From the stage to the screen it was once his job to find complications. To reach beyond the page and the author and to fight the corner of his character. And while there has not been an overabundance of nuance with regards to Baron Sapiens - beyond perhaps the question of exactly what style of moustache he would be twirling in any given instalment - there is even less on offer with the role of the Rear Admiral. There are pages and pages of dialogue; full of frothy xenophobia, questionable human exceptionalism and ample opportunities to whip up some weapons grade audience hatred.

It gives Douglas a migraine just skimming through the pages. This will be one premiere that he will definitely need to avoid, unless he wants to set up permanent camp at the top of another fire escape.

Of all the pages and all the bile that he must spill, there are four speeches or monologues that Douglas is instructed by the little voice in his head to focus on.

As he sits beside his agent while she negotiates their back end deal and improved security arrangements, he runs through the Rear Admiral's broadcast to the Leulutian diplomatic delegation following their illegal expansion into their neighbouring systems. The very declaration of the war that would come to define the Leulutian species, filtered through their bias to become a proclamation of hatred from an uncaring universe.

He observes the Leulutian crew, squelching around the back lot as they begin to construct the sets and props for the upcoming epic, as in the back of his mind he receives notes on how to play the second gloating monologue. The one that the Rear Admiral delivers to his bathroom mirror in the wake of the human fleet's first devastating push into local space. An extrapolation of the Workers Collective staring into their own mirror, giving birth to a caricature of their own hatred and fear, and then placing the blame elsewhere.

While he sits in rehearsals and dodges impromptu objects hurled at him by his highly strung director, he is receiving more targeted (and certainly more accurate) direction in his inner ear regarding the Rear Admiral's pivotal scene. The moment when the assembled masses of the Leulutian forces manage to push back their aggressors through the local Mass Ejector Relay, evicting them from the system with a final, desperate show of force. A special moment in time. A sliver of history, swollen and pregnant with portents, where Mandrogonn took the opportunity to explain to the Admiral the fundamental differences between the ideologies of their (dis)arrayed forces.

And finally, as he sits in a virtual booth, being beamed into an actor's workshop episode where his replies cannot be discerned over the jeers of the audience, what he is truly thinking about is the final scene of the movie. The swan song diatribe of this constructed version of Rear Admiral Balien Faversham, delivered to the broken and despondent Senate forces as they marinate in their defeat. The promise they make between themselves that they will dwell in their hatred and jealousy forever. That they

will turn their cosmic attention towards seeking to undermine the faith and validity of the Leulutian People.

Every one of these speeches is simple on the page. Wafer-thin and paper-deep. The sort of role that he would have sneered down his nose at not so very long ago. Just another Baron Sapiens, dressed up in pomp and seriousness. His real performance will be a subliminal thing. A combination of intonation, incantation and gesticulation designed to trip the neurological triggers of his Leulutian audience.

Neuro-linguistic psyop guerrilla warfare, Cacophony explains with a relish, knowing full well that these words will bounce off Douglas' comprehension without troubling it too greatly.

Somehow these takes will all make the final edit. They will survive the multiple takes and the will of producers and directors, to travel unmolested across the cutting room floor. And in post they will be married together with booby-trapped colour grading processes and spliced in single frames engineered to induce hypnogogic menticide.

And of course Douglas doesn't understand any of this, because who does understand psychobabble of this magnitude? Beyond the fact that he will be, in the most unexciting and tedious way possible, a spy. Just more words to tell him that he will not be acting in these scenes, Douglas comes to realise. He will simply be a puppet.

No change there, then.

*

Douglas has not been in orbit for nearly five Standard years.

It is not until he is up here in the black that he has the perspective to see how constrained his life has become in recent years. The finest of threads linking movie sets to hotel bars and backlots to brothels. So slender that the web of his existence cannot be seen from such a distance as this. No trace he can find that he has ever been.

Heroes of Tagitorn is the biggest film production in Leulutian history. First multi-continental project. First to be shot in space. First for everything. A self-generating behemoth that seems to will other companies and industries into being to fill the gaps that it uncovers. But space itself is a fairly big thing. Something that cannot help but dwarf even the mightiest of entertainment titans.

When the big, thrilling and factually dubious battles play out between the human and Leulutian fleets it is conducted using a drone swarm of hobbyist miniatures. Indistinguishable from the real warships of history when viewed against the black, but slightly embarrassing when someone knocks the flagship of the Leulutian armada off a table and breaks it in half.

Douglas sits by himself at a viewing port as the Second Unit film the major set piece battle scene. A swarm of gnats buzzing a mere stone's throw from where he sits, fizzing and popping as the human contingent are torn apart by the will of the Leulutians and the tactical cunning of Collective War-Maker Mandrogonn. A pivot point in history that is barely discernible from the nothingness of space at the scale on which Douglas is observing.

Is this how it happened? He asks of Operator Cacophony. *Was it really like this?*

Yes, he hears the shrug implied in her tone. *No? Perhaps. It depends on who is asking, Douglas.*

That is not helpful, Marshmallow.

No, agrees Cacophony, it isn't, is it? Why does it matter to you, though? If I told

you that this little re-enactment is blow-for-blow accurate, what would that do for you? It is true for them, just as it is a joke to us, and everything in between for everyone else. This all happened in the past, Douglas. We've all taken what we needed from the moment and moved on. I would suggest you do the same.

He sees Sativa Von Archimedes several times within the maelstrom of shooting. She pops up at inopportune and surprising moments. Surfacing in the corners of his eyeline during those pivotal scenes. Disappearing before breaking the waves days later as he is being sewn into his costume by a sour-eyed Leulutian seamstress, who manages to jab him with her needles too often to be mere accident.

She smiles and is pleasant. Sativa that is, not the seamstress, who seems positively gleeful to be committing her own Battle of Tagitorn on his own weakened human flanks. Sativa circulates with that glacial undercurrent of malice and then, when she is certain she has terrified him appropriately, she is gone in an irregular, trepidatious heartbeat. For a while he considers asking her if she would like a position as his new agent.

She persists even when shooting wraps, and the Leulutians begin the slow process of dismantling the project and bringing it back down the gravity well. When even Kershall has wound down from the role that will surely earn him the plaudits that have eluded him during a lifetime of being the Moral Guardian, Sativa remains in the shadows. Haunting the production offices much like Douglas, who has nowhere else to be, does.

Moving with her Leulutian handler, drifting with impunity in and out of editing rooms and production meetings and rough cut assembly viewings. "Human Expert Liaison" reads the job description next to her name on the meeting minutes, although Douglas doubts as to what experience of humanity she might legitimately possess.

One day, when he is drinking with some of the janitorial staff who have momentarily forgotten to hate him (thanks to the hip flask he is passing around) he sees her for the last time. Sativa smiles at Douglas as she leaves the editing suite, and it is of a different breed than the ones that he is used to from her. It has a touch of conspiracy about it, but she is gone before he can think to do anything about it.

Her Leulutian shadow smiles as well, inasmuch as such a thing is possible.

*

When Douglas Mandelbrot Jr was young there was still such a thing as theatre. It was weak and pallid, already in its death throes. Clinging to what remained of the upper classes, which viewed its rarity as its value, just they did with any other commodity. But to Douglas it was the most beautiful thing that he had ever thought to behold. And when he outgrew the theatre or, more precisely, when it shrunk to such a size that it could no longer accommodate him, there was then cinema.

And even cinema was dying. What need was there for an authored voice in a galaxy of sensory experiences? A sea of entertainment where the observer becomes the hero and tells themselves their own saga. What could be more redundant than the actor in such an age? As old and archaic as Douglas knows himself to be, he knows that he has been born a century too late.

There was never going to be anything beyond cinema for Douglas. He has always known this. Why else would he have run as far as to the arms of the enemy, ever watchful citizen? Did you think the pleasure of your Collective company was so alluring that it would catch him forever in the gravity well of your hatred? Did you think that

your little propaganda machine of a film industry was enough to sustain a titan who has gobbled down awards and acclaim and gotten used to the taste? That he would stick around for yet another grand premiere where those who would number themselves his fans chant at the night sky for his execution?

All these thoughts rattle around the lonely landscape of Douglas' head as he takes the one overnight bag that he has been instructed to bring with him and hoists it into the back of the shuttle. But he cannot bring himself to hate the Leulutians like everyone else seems to. Certainly not enough to make this midnight departure from the Collaborators Compound easy for him. At least here he has been noticed. At least here he has found a place to be, however thin and ephemeral and endangered the threads that bind him to this land might be. Even death threats, when they are shouted in enough numbers and with enough passion, can sound like cheering.

There is no Cacophony to greet him and ferry him back to the bosom of what has now decided to be civilised space. Not even a Sativa Von Archimedes with whom he can unknowingly conspire and validate that all of his experience of the last six weeks is true and actually occurred. Even his agent has travelled on ahead, merrily counting her 20% of his Judas fee as she departs under pretence of some family funeral or other.

The Leulutian empire will not fall due to the release of *Heroes of Tagitorn*, any more than it did in the wake of the true historical event. Whatever that event might prove to have been. As his latest masterpiece premieres across the desert and beneath this same darkened, uncaring sky, it will not presage the end of the Leulutian Workers Collective or usher in an explosion of curated democratic freedoms. It will just be another brick pried from the wall that the Leulutians have erected to keep what the consensus have determined is reality at bay. From its locus will radiate out ripples of discontent and doubt to dribble a temporary poison into the mind of the viewer. They may be reinforced by further acts and grow into something of worth or note. Just as they may die down into nothing more than a moment's doubt and a slight headache. An encroachment on the last safe space that the Leulutian Collective still possess.

The Battle of Tagitorn will rage on, unchecked and unnoticed, as long as it is expedient for it to do so. Perhaps Operator Cacophony Marshmallow and her kind want it that way. There is nothing better for galactic peace than an ever-smouldering, easily manageable cold war. One where neither side has reason to push for victory.

Everyone, Douglas supposes, needs a hobby.

He wonders if this will be enough. Whether the memories he has accrued can sustain a decade or two of affluent obscurity, sprawled out beside some pool on a paradise planet, where he will have no purpose other than to act as an artifact of the past. Whether he will be remembered as a traitor to humanity, a titan of a bygone age or simply an increasingly pudgy phantom with similarly increasing delusions of grandeur. Whether he will be remembered at all.

But it is too late now. The great wheel turns, the moment passes and becomes nothing but history. And he can do nothing other than take what he needs from it in the hope that it will be enough to build a future.

The shuttle lifts off, whisper-quiet as it shrinks away into the night that surrounds Quatraine and defines its limits. All too soon it is as if he was never there in the first place.

RHINO PLASTIC

‘Will 3D-printing fake rhino horns stop poaching?’

Vox, 18th October 2021

It started, as these things often do, with only the best of intentions. We never meant for all of this to turn out how it did, but it is a fool who wishes for the best with this world, and then just sits back and trusts in the process. We live in enlightened times, on the leading edge of history. Wiser than any of our mammal forebears, a little sliver compared to all that have gone before. Having built ourselves upon the accumulation of their past successes and failures.

We should know better.

And that is a lie, of course. For we do not all live in enlightened times. Some of us do know better, and do not see that as a prohibition to action. And some of us may believe that we do know better, but may be answering a different question to the one that we think we might have asked. This is not the place for a discussion on moral relativism, or for pondering on the propensity for mankind to play down to its lowest common denominator. Now, it seems, it is more the time to try and explain why - for a man who is arguably the most successful businessman of the last twenty years - my current abode is halfway up a tree in the jungle, and why I have been forced to declare war on the People's Republic of China.

*

Let us start with simple matters. Basic facts that are universal truths, beyond the need for further discussion. From such an uncontroversial base we can then build our tale, and see what common ground might be reached.

The trade in rhinoceros horn is an evil thing. Not just for the pain and suffering it inflicts on both an endangered species and a patchwork of economies and people, but because this pain is so needless. Without any medical benefit and merely a holdover of long since discredited medicine and vested criminal interests.

And already we have failed in our task, for we have fallen to the sin of generalisation and Western privilege. Should you be tempted to balk at these terms, then please feel free to do so, as it is probably still one of the inalienable rights that you have not yet bartered away for a quiet life. But before you roll your overly defensive eyes, please talk to a Congolese poacher, who has watched his family farmland turn to dust, and is ready to go toe to toe with para-militarised game wardens to make ends meet. Maybe sit down and have a coffee with a dirt poor Vietnamese trafficker, born into the trade and tied to it through threats and circumstance, and tell him all about the plurality of options he has available to him.

The world is not as we might want it to be, because the world is just an accretion disc. Built up from the rubbish that spins around all of our combined thoughts and deeds and morals. The world cannot be as we would want it to be until we all agree on

precisely what it might be that we all want, and we all stop pulling in a multitude of contrary directions. To change the world you must change the heart of man. Or, at least, the hearts of those who thought differently – and wrongly – from your own self-evidently correct position.

In short, you have to stop people thinking wrong things.

We decided not to approach the problems of the world via this interminable avenue. We elected not to bog our progress down in the weeds of inclusionary discourse, where we pretended that every viewpoint was valid and every opinion was synonymous with objective truth.

We sought instead to crash the system.

People wanted rhino horn. They always had, and it appeared that not even the most perilously plotted guilt trip or punitive punishment was going to dent such demand. And, morally speaking, there was nothing wrong with this. The market is amoral and immune to such concerns.

Now, rhino horn did not work, of course. With the exception of some Chinese scientists, who were willing to barter professional standing in order to defend their maladapted cultural heritage – or who, perhaps, had no desire to have their options straitened by a contrary government – there was no one of any medical standing who would be willing to go on the record and suggest that we might want to rethink our stances on rhino horn or tiger balls. But there were an endless array of treatments and medicinal alternatives that did not work, or worked entirely by accident, or worked only with the same efficacy as a placebo. So there was nothing morally wrong with that, either.

The problem, in as much as certain people were ever going to admit that there was one, was in the supply chain. The poison was in the source. It was the logistics that were immoral, and it was here that the wars had been fought. The approach taken was just the War on Drugs Redux. Disrupt the supply chain to make it difficult and unpleasant for the poachers and wholesalers. Shrink the market so the profit margins withered in turn.

All of it had met with about as much success as the Narco Wars which they aped. Every seizure made, and every poacher taken behind a Baobab tree and executed, just drove up the price of the remaining product that was still making it to market. Every attempt to corral the market into an ethically acceptable paddock fell on deaf ears, or became mired in accusations of Imperialist indoctrination or Western squeamishness.

No one had looked at the situation in terms of strict Capitalism before. Devoid of all the hand-wringing and cultural argy-bargy, this was just a market. And prohibition has never been able to control a market. You disrupt a system by innovating. You do it by introducing a better product.

And, of course, I lie again, because some people had proposed just such a thing. It was just that they had failed. All those ethically minded sandal monkeys that thought they could keep pace with the demands of the market with their sustainably sourced rhino horn. A well intentioned drop in the ocean.

To defeat superstition we turned, as mankind has always done, to science and technology. If the market was flooded then prices would collapse as the immutable laws of supply and demand played themselves out. And while we did not have the means to grow a few hundred thousand rhinoceroses to order, what we did have to

hand was a great big bucket of innovation.

With the aid of organic 3D protein printers we could produce an endless supply of constructed keratin that was physically identical to the real deal. And look and feel was important here, because it was all that we needed. This knock-off product would hold no restorative or medicinal properties but, as luck would have it, neither did genuine rhino horn. It is very easy to make a copy of something if that something is a fake in the first place.

If we had stopped there, then maybe things would have turned out fine. But we thought further out than that, beyond such shallow and cautious reefs. We paddled out into the deep waters of the unknown because we were both such altruistic souls. What if we could synthesise an imposter rhino horn that was not fake? 3D printed, indistinguishable from the real thing, infused with whatever pharmaceutical compounds our consumers could demand.

For the Chinese market we would load it up with paracetamol to cure headaches and anti-emetics for those who swore by its efficacy for vomiting and nausea. Want to use it for a hangover remedy? Well, then we just dumped a ton of electrolytes in there. For those that persisted in the belief of its aphrodisiac properties, we bought a container load of Viagra to crush up and add to the mix.

By the time that we were done, our product was something like magic. Selling for a fraction of the price of the real thing, bringing aid and relief to a vast market that had closed itself off from more conventional medicine.

That sounded like a great and noble thing to us all at Hope Horn Ltd.

It really did.

*

There are pros and cons to operating on the black market.

Regulation is a lot more streamlined, which certainly saves time in getting your goods out there, but dissatisfied customers and disgruntled competition are, on average, more likely to gut you and hang you from a meat hook. Taxation does not exist in any meaningful way, but the logistics of money laundering will make your head swim. Most of the people that you have to surround yourself with would stab you in the back in a heartbeat, and then steal the wallet from your pocket while you lay bleeding out, but that is to be expected anywhere there is money to be made.

By far the greatest obstacle to a pair of white British boys lost in South Africa, operating out of a barn on a tatty stretch of farmland in a rundown district of the Cape Peninsula, was getting our product to market in the first place.

My name is not Kenosha Jones, but it's the only one you'll be getting from me. My partner's name, similarly, is not Jimmy Madagascar. We never existed and Hope Horn Ltd is just a rhetorical device I use to encompass all manner of entrepreneurial malfeasance that we were destined to commit over most of the continents of the Earth. There are lots of things I am about to explain to you that were not real and did not happen, but that doesn't mean that what follows will not be the truth.

And what is true is that Jimmy and I had, between us, wasted a pair of perfectly good degrees in economics and some form of mechanical engineering that always seemed to escape my comprehension whenever Jimmy got over-excited and tried to

explain it to me. We were working out of garages (sometimes our own, but more often not) hawking all manner of Jimmy's technical services, while I was wasting friends money in the stock market and calling that an investment concern.

These were simple times and, looking back on them now, I'd even go so far as to call them happy. You get to be stupid when you're young, and we were just running down our good will balance, safe in the knowledge that the next great workshopped idea we came up with would be the one to turn all of our troubles around. Barely had two Rand to rub together and, when we did, never could seem to get them to reproduce. But that was fine, because the money didn't seem real back then. The world itself seemed a little suspect, truth be told.

This was all occurring against the backdrop of the burgeoning Biotech 2.0 bubble, just before it subsumed to its ultimate fate of being gobbled up by the larger tech giants. Healthcare services were where the smart money was at. Every college dropout with some CRISPR software and a bio-printer was just a pinch of seed money away from curing cancer or re-arranging your genes to give you truly monstrous genitalia. There was nothing clever or innovative with the tech we were using, our USP was the lateral footwork we put in to find an unexploited market.

I don't know if you're aware of this, but bleeding edge medicine is really quite hard. For all the available software sorcery you still need a roomful of white coated, seriously faced clever people, with a herd of docile test cases and a few years to tinker with them. All things that we did not have to hand at the time. Quackery seemed a lot easier – and cheaper - to get into.

Which led us back to the problem of how to launch our little brainwave into a market that we did not understand. One that was populated by people who, in our fevered imagination, would fillet us with machetes as soon as look at us. More than any other retail sector it seemed that the black market was constructed, however hard it may be for us good legal citizens to imagine, upon a platform of trust and honour. Maybe more of the former than the latter, and maybe distrust was a more appropriate word. Loaded with suspicion that was warranted, and a paranoia that was no such thing seeing as it was an accurate appreciation of the world these people lived in.

But still, the question remained of who was going to be buying our rhino horn.

A man who doesn't exist and isn't called Rhodesian Rick, and hadn't spent twenty years doing dodgy things on the savanna, definitely didn't agree to meet us in a sweaty little bar in an armpit town wedged in between the bicep of Namibia and the torso of Botswana.

Africa is a big place and one of significant opportunity for those of sufficient moral pliability. From my safe little suburban existence down at the tip of the continent, I have a theory that Africa is the beta test lab of the world. A workshop where concerns, both foreign and domestic, were hard at work testing the boundaries of avarice and acceptability. From Somalian piracy to Congolese blood diamonds, all via the routes of religious genocide and political butchery. From a garage in S'Frica, back past the colonial iterations and the slavery testbeds, all the way to the tribal carnage of prehistory, Africa has only ever been the world in sharp focus. A proud history of people stepping outside the rules just to fuck each other up and over.

All of this was in a theoretical day's work for Rick. A man of advancing years, although they had worked to varnish and harden him, rather than soften any of those

edges. For someone who had been selling portions of his soul to the highest bidder for most of his life, he seemed to have remarkably little to show for this slow rolling auction.

He was also my uncle and, a little surprisingly, we had a lot in common. He hated my father, was indifferent towards me, but he sure did love money.

We also had some significant differences.

I, for example, did not keep a weapons locker in the back of my hatchback, the contents of which could affect a regime change in a moderately sized principality. Uncle Rick had been pruned from the rest of my family tree owing to his propensity for gravitating towards easily-attained but dubiously sourced cash. As well as his penchant for acts of casual, ill-considered violence. Although he was no longer welcome at family barbeques, if I knew anyone who would be in a position to guide us through the treacherous waters of the endangered species trade, then it would be dear old ostracised Uncle Rick.

It's not that I expected him to just take a pinch of our product, rub it on his gums and declare it to be of the utmost purity. But I was still surprised when he demanded to see the lab (as our current garage was then called) and started talking about genetic markers and identifiers. When he took a sample to package up and send off to an some independent Singapore lab setup, neither me nor Jimmy knew what to say. But crime has always been a business, and in many ways it has always raced ahead of the more legal tranches of the sector.

When the results came back, they were all labelled *Ceratotherium Simum*. White rhino. They showed us that we had both a viable product and a new business partner. Uncle Rick was going to take us to the big leagues, whether we wanted it or not.

*

It has settled down a bit in recent years, but back in the times that we are discussing here, there was a lot of frothy excitement over cryptocurrency and its untraceable allure. Free yourself from the banks and the markets, siren-sang a proliferation of start-up companies, come and join the currency of the future.

This, of course, was simply not true. The very innovation at the heart of crypto – the sacred majesty of the blockchain – was its inviolable and unchangeable nature. With just a few pieces of information you could trace any single transaction from tip to tail, making a mockery of the ideas of anonymity and money laundering as you tracked it along the chain.

We are aware of that now, of course. I can remember well the day that Jimmy and I learnt this valuable lesson. It was the day after Uncle Rick suddenly disappeared with a set of packed bags and all of our contingency funds, running for the hills like a scalded cat.

It was the day that we met Jorge.

*

I would dearly love to say that Jorge, like so many players in our sad little tale, was not real. But I have been in far too many rooms with the man and he was always, without

fail and to his eternal detriment, the real and truest thing that could be imagined.

Besides, he's dead now, so he can afford to be real.

We had been making money hand over fist for nearly a year by this point. Huge, vast sums when viewed against our personal circumstances, but surely just a drop in the big bucket that was the endangered animals trade. There had been talk of a shelf-life for this little business venture. Either a sum earned or an amount of time and luck expended, before we would fold a winning hand and walk away while we still had legs to do the walking. There was maybe some notion left in us of doing a noble thing. Ideas of helping comrade Zu get over his headache, or assisting Mr Li in getting the firmest wood for many a long year. But the only thing that rubs off on a person quicker than crime is money. And we were splashing around in a lot of both.

We were operating out of a Pretorian industrial estate by this point. A world away from the sharper end of the business that was handled exclusively by Uncle Rick, for the princely sum of half our income stream. Poaching is a grim and deadly business, with ample opportunity for death and dismemberment at every link in the chain, but it had not yet spread to our little neck of the woods. So it existed in some nebulous potential state that was ideal, because it could so easily be ignored.

We had become sloppy, in short.

Jorge was many things, none of which were pleasant, but he was not sloppy.

Reliability is a rare and valuable thing in any prohibited market, and poaching perhaps more than most. Your average rhino horn weighs anywhere between 1.5 and 2.5 kilograms, depending on whether it was hacksawed off of a black or white rhino. Although they are considerate enough to have two of them each, so that's a bonus. Market value fluctuated massively but, when we were out there making our paper, we could get about fifty thousand dollars a kilo on the wholesale market. Even with our premium, pure product we were still pricing our competition out of the market. We were the young bucks, moving fast and breaking shit. Dancing round the old guard as we played with them.

Overheads and logistics were maybe a few grand a kilo, and Uncle Rick was taking fifty percent of the remainder, largely because he had an entirely accurate appreciation of just how terrified we were of both him and the whole business. But, before you cry too much about our poor plight, both Jimmy and I were still pulling down well over half a million dollars a month. That's not bad for conservation work, I would contend.

We were having to ration our production to avoid flooding the market too badly and attracting the wrong kind of attention to ourselves. But that quota was being inched up month on month, as we refined our excuses and told ourselves that this had been the plan all along. Glut the market, sate the demand, and then drive those prices all the way down to crash the whole economy. Only, maybe we'd do that next month. Or the one after that. This whole sorry business had been going on for centuries anyway, so what was the rush here?

And that's how we got caught. We got greedy and lazy, and we gave Jorge enough time to trace our operations and all of that money back to our little doublewide unit, where we sat on our tatty sofas and watched the rows of printers chunter away. A couple of black Range Rovers, tinted windows and all, rolled up soundlessly to the rolled up shutters of our mighty empire, and serious looking men in serious suits carrying some utterly humourless artillery piled out. Jimmy and I came to realise two

things almost instantly, but still somehow too late.

One, we were never going to see Uncle Rick ever again.

Two, we were fucked.

*

Jorge was always very polite with me.

What with him being the head of a multinational criminal endeavour, and me being a wide eyed twenty something kid who had once been bullied by a teenage girl, it was very easy for him to be unfailingly pleasant. To say that we were no threat to him does not convey the scale of the gulf that existed between us. He viewed us with as much compassion and empathy as the furniture he sat on and, as long as we served the purpose assigned to us, he would have no cause to truly notice us. And we definitely did not want him to notice us any further than he had already been forced to.

Because this was not entirely true. We had taken a great chunk of his income away from him. Sought to collapse an entire arm of his business, after suitably lining our pockets for our selflessness. Jorge had a whole catalogue of terrible things that he could do to various aspects of your body and that of those you loved. And he had done most of them to either competitors or members of his own organisation who had failed the internal performance review. There was absolutely no reason for Jorge not to grind us up and feed us to the hyenas.

Except that Jorge was a businessman, and the best businessmen saw change and competition as mere opportunities waiting to happen. Jorge was just like us, he didn't want people going out into the bush on uncertain missions to fight military forces. Coming home with a few kilos of profit and substantial losses. Whose families he had to provide for if he wanted to keep this workforce of poachers on his side. Jorge didn't care about the plight of nature, but that didn't mean he wanted to be out there, killing it. It was inefficient, if nothing else.

We offered him a way out of this bind. A way to grow his empire safely, and crowd out all the rival interests. In return, he offered us the continued use of our limbs. Negotiations were short.

After we were bundled into a smuggler's prop plane and flown across Africa we found ourselves at one of Jorge's many ranches in one of the many countries that he operated in. Watching his butchers chop up a few people and feed them to the crocodiles, creating the least subtle metaphorical backdrop for a conversation that you could imagine.

Jorge wanted to know how we did what we did. How we were able to bring so much rhino horn to market with such consistency and why our product seemed to actually work when measured against even the modest goals set of it, when all others had failed so reliably. And so we told him, and then we showed him, and then we handed over the bespoke files and the recipes.

And all the inventors and small businessmen out there will be screaming about how stupid we were to give away our leverage so easily. Which is absolutely correct, and a very easy thing to say when it's not your feet being dangled over the crocodile pit as a potential appetiser.

Jorge just laughed and accused us of lacking vision. I would say that this was most

wounding thing he could have done to us, but there is footage lurking in the recesses of the internet of Jorge peeling off a man's face and then making him eat it. So I shall modify my middle class outrage a little and just say that it hurt my feelings a little when he said this.

Jorge had a better idea about how such an opportunity could be best exploited and maximised. Jorge's idea was more.

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Before we knew it, Madagascar Jimmy and I were relocated to some Zimbabwean compound, so that we could focus on our craft. This was a guard post and barbed wire fence sort of affair, seemingly staffed by every poacher and African paramilitary that we had just put out of business. Despite having run an international black market scam I had never felt that my world was blessed with especially wide horizons, and here things became positively claustrophobic. Our lives shrunk down to a collection of prefab huts where we worked, slept and ate under the gaze of unfriendly eyes that made no show of hiding their animosity.

It was not immediately clear to me why Jimmy and I were not just shot in the head and buried under the nearest bush, but - after seeing how this lot managed their wi-fi - I began to get something of an idea. There are many ways in which Africa is a powerhouse of advancing and emerging technologies, but running a simple Linux-based bio-print server farm did not seem to be one of them.

And we were easier to scare and manipulate than the local population. Unlike them, Jimmy and I still clung to the idea that we had something left to lose.

Sitting at the little command desk, surrounded by a battery of printer pods running day and night, we cranked up production to ludicrous levels. A few hundred kilos a month, then a thousand, and then new pods had to go on order to keep up our quotas.

I was not allowed to see them at the time, but I read them all later. All the articles and investigations on the subject by the (de)moralising, enlightened Western press. Expose pieces that highlighted the evident disparity in the supply spike for rhino horn, versus how many of the poor bastards were still haunting their old stomping grounds. It was so obviously shenanigans, but precisely no one gave a shit.

Because demand was demand, and the sort of people that Jorge was selling to existed in a different world to those that were judging them. China. Vietnam. All of these places that we supplied. They were not going to let thousands of years of hedge magic and old wives' tales be superseded by all of this logic and clear thinking. Especially when it was all so affordable now.

A few people even put together the pieces and worked out what we were doing, for all the good that did them. Some even tried to get in on the con, setting up their own manufacturing pipelines to try and muscle in on the action. But Jorge, as probably does not need explaining, was not a man given to sharing his toys.

Even as the prices crashed, the market refused to tank. We had a proven product, and such low operational costs at this sort of scale that Jorge was still making money, hand over bloodied fist, as the price went into freefall.

The natural endgame for any market, when exposed to the raw force of Capitalism and removed from any mitigating measures, is always monopoly.

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Things continued in this vein for years. Time had become unimportant to Jimmy and I, for time suggests change, and Jorge had made it patently clear to us that change was no longer a fixture on our dance cards. We were in our right place now, at peace with the universe, and we would never again have to suffer the indignity of a change in our fortunes.

And it was maybe not as unpleasant as I am leading you to think. We had amenities and entertainment, which is a term that I am absolutely using in a euphemistic manner, for we were young men stationed out just past the U-bend of nowhere. Eventually we were granted access to the internet and the larger world that persisted in our absence, and this was free and open access. Limited only by a watchful bodyguard whose panoptical glare I could feel boring through the back of my head. There were few occasions when we were threatened with being beaten, and even fewer when those threats were followed through on.

Every now and again there would, I'm afraid to say, be instances of actual torture. Jorge would visit every few weeks and be his usual expansive self. He would clap one of those huge ham hands on my shoulder and laugh with us as he recounted all the people he had unwrapped and disassembled since we had last caught up. Then, invariably, he would ask Jimmy and I if, surrounded by so many men, we had turned gay yet. And the laughter would then stop and he would be staring intently at us from a distance measured in caught breaths and we would realise, too late, that he was asking a serious question. Which would be homophobia if he did not also hate such great, inclusive swaths of the general population that to not hate the gays would somehow make him discriminatory.

Sometimes there was another man with Jorge on these visits. A tiny little man who looked Korean but always announced himself as something nebulous in the People's Republic of China. He would inspect our printers and our file structures, and one occasion, he even lined myself and Jimmy up and inspected us as well. Such a giggly little goblin, although his brand of humour seemed personal and opaque and incredibly dangerous. He would ask us questions, pushing at the limits of the technology and what could be done with it. It was never clear what precisely he was after and whether our answers pleased him, but the fact that when he left we remained in possession of all our internal organs suggested we had scraped a pass for each impromptu examination.

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It is not easy to tell when the last rhino died, because they were quite ill-tempered beasts and not disposed to fill out census forms. Despite the best efforts of conservation groups and breeding programmes, no one saw a black rhino after 2030. Their white cousins lasted a few years longer in embattled protected reserves, but they went softly away as well, followed closely behind by their Indian brethren. And then there were none, and we had failed when judged against that long ago pipedream of ours.

We had miscalculated in the final run of things, had Jimmy and I. For the rhino horn trade was not like other businesses. We had figured that the concerned parties would wind up their operations in the face of overwhelming competition and plummeting prices. That a closed economy built around a limited resource could not hope to compete when a new methodology rolled into town, and just shut up shop.

We had not appreciated that their chosen trade was not chosen at all, it was the end result of lives lived with their options whittled down to nothing. These sad, forgotten people drove the rhino to extinction for a handful of pennies as they tried to keep up with the new corporate player on the field. Ground them to dust as they ran after the gravy train that we had ploughed straight through their business model.

Jorge's horn trade continued, in spite of the absence of any verifiable rhinoceroses. A Western lie, our Chinese benefactors said, and theirs was such a society that to say it was enough to make it real.

And, by this time, we had diversified. Jimmy and I had been upgraded from our Zimbabwean armpit compound to a staggeringly white and modern laboratory setup deep in the moist crotch of Hong Kong. Surrounded by China's best impersonation of decadent Capitalism, our continued existence never failed to baffle us. Jimmy and I remained as totems for the operation. Western good luck charms for Jorge and little Mr Giggles to bring their party friends around to poke and prod at.

We were set to work synthesising tiger penises and shark fins. Chinese alligators, musk deer and sun bear. Our unknown benefactors appeared to have found a list of endangered species and mistaken it for a menu. Could we just knock up some water buffalo horn, came down the word from on high. Fill it up with some anti-fever medication, while we were at it. In came an order for a few hundred elephant feet, packed to the cell walls with antibiotics to help treat the hernias of the Asian subcontinent.

Over time our server farm became a digital Noah's Ark, a genetic library of all these creatures that were fast becoming the stuff of half-forgotten legend, but still able to turn a profit on the medicinal black market. Infusing them all with whatever remedies and enhancements that our paymasters saw as necessary.

Slowly, new requirements crept in to the orders. Rhino horn with a touch of fluorine. Twenty gallons of musk laced with scopolamine, to help make large portions of the citizenry a little more compliant. All for their own good. Another batch of alligator organs, but this time dosed up with methylphenidate because obedience levels in certain demographics were not all that they could be.

Whatever arm of the People's Party governed and guided our activities had finally wised up to the possibility space our products opened up. Black markets were deniable, their regulatory standards were non-existent. Our market base was broad and pervasive, with tendrils that spread deep into every aspect of society. We could get the grand message of the Party out to even the most resistant elements and those that still opposed them.

We helped them reach deep into the cultural memory of their people, and our products became attack vectors.

We often got packages delivered to site.

The lab had never been busier, and there was an entire covert haulage industry springing up around the little crevice that we occupied in the back streets of Hong Kong. I lost count of the number of packages I signed in and out across the span of an average day. From tiny packets of specialised pharmaceuticals all the way up to two ton pallets of organic printer thread. This particular delivery, however, I remember extremely well. Because very few of the packages that we received contained human heads.

It was not immediately apparent who the head might once have belonged to, as the skin had been removed and, as was later determined, balled up and then wedged between the jaws. And, shortly after I had broken the seals and gazed in wonder at this lump of protein, we had other things on our minds as the bombs went off and the lab was pitched into emergency red lighting.

It was Jorge, of course. Beheaded and skinned by parties with both a sense of irony and a strong stomach. A personal gift for yours truly. Hunkered under my desk as the terrorists raged through the facility, I had not felt so special since the last time I was kidnapped.

Jimmy and I were old hands at being hostilely taken over and redistributed to new office space, like so much airfreight. So we were not immediately concerned when the bags went onto our heads and we were bundled into a succession of cars and planes to be whisked out of the People's Republic and to places unknown. Somewhere close and tropical, was all we could discern from the sweat pooling in our hoods and the mosquitos buzzing around our bundled bodies.

Our little world was expanded again.

*

The jungle.

It was unclear which one we might be situated in, but the thing about the jungle is that, when you're in it, macro-geography becomes the least of your worries. Although we have synthesised a great variety of fauna that call such places home, I have never liked the jungle. I don't begrudge its existence, it's just that something about it offends my suburban sensibilities. But we had spent the best part of a decade haunting places that we hated, so it was hard to work up too much outrage at this turn of events.

I knew, of course, of the Horns of Justice. A militant congregation of direct action lunatics who claimed to be fighting for the rights of those who had not yet developed opposable thumbs, let alone the ability to fight for their own rights. This wildlife militia had been emboldened in recent years by the accelerated extinction of a number of already tenuous species, all snuffed out to feed the growing and suddenly efficacious medicinal black market.

So, yes. I knew all about the Horns of Justice. And, unfortunately, it seemed that they, in turn, knew all about me.

Benedict did not lead the Horns. I very much doubt anyone in sandals has ever successfully led an armed revolution of any stripe, no matter how many assault rifles they sling over their shoulder to counteract the tie dye and hemp. But Benedict did head up the Yangtze River Dolphin cell of the Horns of Justice, the one tasked with

bringing the Asian black markets to their knees.

Benedict did not like me much at all, but that had become par for the course with all my prospective business partners of late. As we squatted in the jungle, surrounded by locally hired militia not so dissimilar from all my earlier babysitters, Benedict came to explain to me where I had gone so very wrong.

The operation that we had been whisked away from would continue in our absence. Mr Giggles would no doubt dry his eyes and find some new good luck charms to spearhead his concern. All of our recipes and IP's were safe on those socialist servers, and nary a beat would be skipped. Our absence stopped nothing, but our presence in the jungle afforded the Horns new opportunities. Which just a pinch of credibly deniable seed money from some of the finest Western alphabet agencies, Benedict was seeking to insert himself into the black market, much as we had done.

You don't collapse a market by innovating within it, Benedict explained to Jimmy and I as he gave us the tour of the facility. Showed us the banks of stolen protein printers that were scattered between the trees and beneath the camouflaged awnings. You collapse a market by breaking trust with your customers, said Benedict as we poked our heads into the caves where the barrels of hallucinogenic compounds were stacked deep into the dark. He took us down into the maze of tunnels dug beneath the jungle floor and he showed us the sealed cannisters of arsenic and fentanyl.

The best way to kill a market, Benedict smiled as he laid a hand on my shoulder, was to kill your customers.

