

# HALF LOVE

— a novel —



*by Tej Gilmon*



*about the author:*

Tej Gilmon lives and works in Oakland, California. He is married with no children.

He works as a psychiatry nurse and enjoys video gaming and watching The Giants when he can. This is his third novel.

about the novel:

*Imagine a society where it has become illegal to label people with the tag of a mental illness diagnosis as a result of a global medical scandal.*



*This is entirely a work of fiction but all due  
acknowledgements are made to:*

*the works of Stanislaw Lem, especially  
The Tales Of Pirx The Pilot (1966)*

*the works of JK Rowling*

*the TV show Battlestar Galactica (2004 version)*

*the video games, Half-Life,  
Fallout and Borderlands*



## Chapter1 — Antonella

Antonella looked at her Departure Card:

*Was your trip for Business / Education / Romance / Other ?*

*Tick ☒ which best applies*

*“Hah ! Romance ! That’s a joke!”*

After the bust-up with Jonny in the hotel room, she had got to her seat so early that there was more than an hour to take-off. But was it too late to call off her wedding ? Was there any come-back when you discover your fiancé, on your pre-wedding getaway, has packed ... ?

*“A sex-robot !”* Antonella hissed out aloud, causing a stewardess nearby to arch an eyebrow.

Antonella had asked for a seat on the very next flight, and gulped as her bank app pinged on her watch at the instant deduction of nearly \$8000.

In the way that everything was instantaneous and falsely personal these days, the screen in front of her began pleading with her to hook-up and engage:

*Miss Antonella, did you enjoy your Moon-Honey ? Only 4 weeks until your lovely wedding ? Can I help you with any purchases or ordering ? Or, do you need a loan ?*

There was, of course, the expected Trademark (™) sign above the term 'Moon-Honey', which was the marketing dream of the romantic

and carefree getaway for couples before the chaos of a modern wedding.

The window seat was free. Some shimmering vapour could be seen rising from the jets warming up below. If it was free, Antonella thought, a bit of star-gazing might take her mind off things. But it wasn't ...

A guy with a haircut like it had been done by a military barber with rusty scissors appeared at the partition. He skipped so quickly down the three rows of the aisle that Antonella thought he was either a not-very-gay cabin crew member on leave, or indeed was some kind of military personnel.

"That seat is free. Therefore it is my reserved seat," he said, pausing just above her.

*Weird*, thought Antonella.

The guy must have been some kind of contortionist too since he smuggled past Antonella into his seat without any part of his body touching her knees at all. Then, without a single fidget, he sat, stock still, facing forwards.

Antonella could not stop fidgeting; it was what she did when she was anxious. The screen in front of her had, of course, automatically logged her on to her personal media. She toggled between the Flight Safety messages ("In the event of ..." *blah blah*) and her diary. In the notifications, literally every 30 seconds, there was a flag with a ticking number going up and up. It was at 15 messages. They would be from Jonny; to look at them would only make her mutter and swear, and then give her little pangs in her bladder to go to the loo.



Suddenly, due to the wacky time-zones, it must have ticked past midnight somewhere in the world and a familiar old face scaled in size out of the square of her calendar app.

Gramps ! she thought. The photo-animation started dancing on the screen, and a large green button invited her to take the call.

“That’s my Gramps !” Antonella said half-turning to the unknown guy next to her. “It’s his birthday. Today. Now ...” Antonella turned back, a touch embarrassed, but she and Gramps had always had mutual soft-spots for each other.

“We have, “ said the guy. “ 11 minutes until the take-off sequence, so, at least four minutes until the black-out.”

Antonella’s finger hovered. As she tapped the green button, the screen filled with a smiling, winking face:

“*Ants-In-Yer-Pants* ! Happy birthday !” the old man shouted.

Simultaneously, from the adjacent seat: “If you want to talk more than 4 minutes, I can create a valid delay in the sequence.”

“What ...?” said Antonella, with only a quarter-turn to her left this time.

“Happy birthday,” the old man shouted again. “Where’s Jonny, then?”

“But, it’s *your* birthday, Gramps. Not mine. You look great ...”

“I know. I just wanted you to, to *know* you were thinking of me. Of all the beautiful girls in this world ...”

“Gramps, I love you. Yeah, happy birthday ! Are you ... I mean, I’d love to come over... But, would have to be flying at, like, light speed to get there ...”

“Jonny there ? Where is he ? You know, I was chief celebrant at two weddings already this month. For your wedding, I’m getting out the white tuxedo ! I’ve got free dance classes with this voucher here, *look ...*”

“You’re amazing, Gramps ! You’re looking great ... ”

"Not quite *sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste*, eh ! He didn't say much about the 8th age of man, did he ?"

"Who ? "

"That silly smart-arse, Shakespeare. Should see the *tasty* wine I've booked ! "

"Oh, Gramps ... Look, I’m just about to take-off, so ... “

“Is there something wrong, my sweet ? My diary says you have a few more days there ...”

Antonella felt the grizzled warmth in the tone of the voice coming out of the screen, and, more embarrassingly still, felt a blubby, childish tear forming at the edge of her eye.

“This device. It must be off !” came the stern voice of the flight stewardess. Antonella dared not move her head which would have

dislodged the tear to roll down her cheek.

“I would like to ... “ It was the guy next to her speaking up. “Request a double-check of the passengers and the weight symmetry in the cabin seating ... fore-and-aft. As per take-off regulations.”

“What ! “ said the irked attendant. “This. Off. Now.”

“Have you judged the Percentage Body Fat and biomass of, for example, the couple in the lower 4 rows? “

“Gramps ... Love you. I have to go.”

“The couple ...? What ...? Don’t be so ridiculous,” said the stewardess moving briskly to her take-off seat.

The black-out ensued precisely on time. In the minimal, blue-diode lighting in the cabin, everyone waited as the pulsations from the engines descended into the infra-sonic range.

Antonella felt she ought to say a tiny 'thank-you' to her neighbour, and his silly ruse to let her speak longer to her grandfather.

“It is no problem. Therefore the screen-emoji says he is not a *teenager* anymore,” he replied.

“No. He’s 120 today ... and taking up dancing. Bless.”

“And celebrant ... to wedding— ” were the last words Antonella could hear or distinguish before the doppler-shift of the acceleration made everything wail in her ears with a degree of pain.

She closed her eyes to bear the discomfort of the G-force, and when she opened them, the tear from her eye, glinting blue, was floating in the weightlessness in front of her as the shuttle levelled off above the lunar surface. Antonella turned right the way round before the cabin lights came on and saw the breathtaking profile of the half-moon as they hit the tangent to set their course back to Earth.

## Chapter 2 — Jonny

In the Moon-Honey™ suites in the lunar resort, Jonny sat on the big bed whose crisp linen cover still barely had a crease out of place. The first real time he had been alone with the girl he was planning — or, more accurately, *it was planned for them* — to marry, she had stormed out. At least two screens around him started alarming, that his designated *Resort Buddy* was moving out of safe-separation range, by *One ... Eight ... Twenty-five* kilometres. Jonny suddenly thought it would be good to watch the space-craft carrying his fiancée leaving orbit.

He sprung up from the bed, and immediately felt his head hit the rubbery impact-ceiling above him, installed specifically for moon-naïve tourists like himself. When he got to the window there were two fiery trails high up in the black sky, in seemingly parallel arcs. He paused with his finger, then dabbed the touch-sensitive glass on one:

*Freighter name: Chung-Yi: Bound For Mars: On-Time: Freight: CLASSIFIED: Current Azimuth 1.478.*

Jonny slumped inwardly. A 50-50 chance to put his finger on Antonella and he picked the Chinese cargo ship. Jonny was not planning on sitting in his room. Watching re-runs of movies was one thing, but once Antonella's phone and tracker got anywhere near a Comms Satellite, there would be a small detonation amongst his friends and family back home in England. There were at least five interactive screens in the room and his father would find a way past any blocks he might set up. Being the *Outdoor Type* had been the first match-up between him and Antonella, and the crater-hike was

going to be their first booked activity. Jonny resolved to carry on regardless.

The residential pods in the resort were all linked to the main hub by moving walkways. In point of fact, until you had been signed off by the PT Instructors on a *Safe Steps* course, you were not supposed to walk anywhere by yourself. The resort itself was located beside a shielding lunar escarpment at a high-latitude, with its twin-resort, ‘around the axis’, as it were, on the dark side of the moon. Jonny had picked the second half of the long lunar day-cycle (about 8 Earth days) so that they could see the spectacular dust penumbras at the mighty lunar sunset, and other such allegedly romantic stuff, he thought wryly to himself. As he neared the end of the walkway, a line of robots — or robes — were waiting to escort the off-loading guests:

“And verily well-met. Good morrow, good sir, and—”

“ROBE! What language setting ?”

“Olde English Shakespeare, sir. *Do not swear by the moon for she changes constantly, then your love, it would also—*”

“—No. Robe ! Just standard English, neutral ... no frills.”

“Comply. Where would like me to escort you today ?”

“Hike ? Outdoors ?” Jonny saw a directional pointer. “*Surface Activities*. Please ...”

The robotic host was a very basic cylinder on jet-coasters. It offered up a retractable ledge near the floor, but when Jonny said he

preferred to walk, a squidgy padded holster went into action into which Jonny pushed his right arm.

“I see, sir, you are on the *Moon Honey Package* ... Would you like to try some of our original edible moon-honey ?”

“Eh ?” Jonny was bouncing along most unevenly next to his escort; it was tough going.

“Moon-honey, sir. It is made by our own lunar bees. A great natural product.”

Jonny gave a little thought to this. “ROBE! Please turn off your joke and sarcasm settings as well. I am not in the mood.”

“Comply. Sir, this is my kill-switch. Please use it without hesitation at any time, in such a negative interaction with my service.”

It was big, red and presently glowing in pulses on the top of the robot. For the twenty-two years of his life, Jonny had been accompanied by robots of increasing fashion and sophistication, so it was cute to interact with such an old-school cylinder of humble service like this one. The servicer at the load-up hangar was nowhere near as charming, and, as Jonny stood in line, and the robot changed its translation-protocols between Russian and Korean and English, he felt sure he heard it swear in English at an elderly Ukrainian couple who refused to submit to the compulsory medical tests. Anyway, Jonny had to insist a human staff member come to deal with him.

“But, Mr Squire,” said the manager. “Our real-time tracker shows that your designated *Activity-Buddy* is ... *Whoah!* Out of range, plus-plus.

This is an azimuth-reading, like ... Has she *off-looned*, or something ... Already !”

Jonny felt some prickles of sweat on his forehead: “Well, how do you know my buddy is a ‘*she*’ ?” He was angling to put the supervisor off-guard by drawing attention to his insensitivities regarding guest diversity and sexuality.

“Man, I’m reading here ... Antonella Lemm, and she’s half-way to the fluffy clouds back on Earth right now. *Number 2* ! Famous *Antonellas*, please, who are chicks, and not dudes ?”

“Yes, sir, “ said the second-in-command service robot coming back closer. “Antonella Grigia. Born 2166. 1st Soprano. Opera Leipzig; Antonella Lee-Brenner. Born 2157. CEO. Global Radiation Relief Charity. New York: Anton—”

“—Thanks, Number 2 ... You get my point ! Look, I’m sorry for whatever’s been going on with your situational circumstance. But, you need a buddy, or go in a tandem jump-suit with one of us — and we’re way, way busy with the big event, and all — Or ... an escort with a Ro-Ranger ?”

“What will that entail ?”

“Suit, all the audio-visuals, full-safety escort, but you can’t leave the campus. No way we get you up to the crater ... That be your *in-tail*, my good sir.”

Jonny wasn’t given the time he wanted to consider, or to even think of his stomach which was rumbling and beginning to ache. The manager was giving him a take-it-or-leave-it look, and glancing



towards a large group of guests coming off the walkway. So, Jonny went ahead, signed all the waivers and shuffled in line for his medical. This wait took easily a half-hour. The biggest delay seemed to be on account of a group of three ahead of him, whose smallest member was an actual child. A child ! In a resort on the moon ! Of course, every passer-by and even the load-up staff stopped to have a service robot capture some souvenir photography.

It was the general dislike of processes and queuing that Jonny felt himself getting annoyed at. In terms of his time and his schedule, there was no longer anything pressing or urgent. But still, his medical checks were unsurprisingly routine and he out-flanked a group of four elderlies who were all jabbering protests into the cardiac testing gadgetry. They looked East Asian to Jonny, and the skin on their faces was puffed and irradiated like frequent-flyers to the moon.

At last Jonny passed through on the conveyors to the final load-out zone, and he homed in on his suit which had been pre-programmed with his name and a few of his vital signs. The suit was suspended from a jig and was exactly twice his height, at 3.6 metres. Looking about him, he caught sight of a tiny old lady being swallowed up by the closing mechanisms of another suit and then saw it jerk free of the stanchions. Every few minutes there was a compression wave of warm air from the direction of the giant air-lock. Every lunar jump-suit in view, except Jonny's was the same massive size, and roughly humanoid with two articulated arms and legs, but with a viewing plate with various optics at the "chest" of the structure. Jonny's was asymmetrical to the left, with an umbilical connector instead of an arm which joined directly to his escorting robot. As he queued with his two other air-lock companions, one of them commented in an American accent across the Comms channel: " See ya got your *Training Wheel* on there, sonny!". Some mild amusement, but Jonny

was actually feeling acutely nervous as he braced himself for the thump of decompression and the first step that any member of his fairly well-off, well-traveled family had ever taken onto moon-dust.

At the moment the blast-door opened, the two suits Jonny was standing in side-by-side formation with, sprung forwards with the decompression wave and sailed forth with whoops and laughter. Jonny's hand toggled off the external Comms feed. His front direct-optics saw that the others had landed many metres ahead and did not seem to want to wait for him. His jump-suit was leaning downwards now, anchored by a pivot that he couldn't see. A very loud human voice via some sort of emergency over-ride was telling him to exit the air-lock, or press 'Abort'.

"ROBE ! Take us out, for frack's sake !"

"Comply. Over-riding. Disengaging the anchor magnets."

At last he felt a purposeful motion towards the door opening. The umbilical arm was at full-length as the escort-robot pulled him outside like a dog on a lead. He pushed down with his right foot inside the sleeve of his endo-suit. Too hard ! The pressure pads under his foot sent impulses to the articulated leg of the exo-suit and suddenly the horizon sunk and his altimeter ticked past 4 metres above the moon-dust. It caught his escort by surprise too.

"Over-ride. Engaging micro-jet verticals. Sir, safety limits of this suit are zero to three-point-five metres above head-height. For ultra-hydraulic coupling and manual micro-jets you must pay for the *Adventure Package*. For the *Adventure Package*, you must pass Level 3 of— "

“Robe, thanks. Yeah, I get it ... What about just the basic ... ? I mean, it’s a pretty amazing bit of kit. I’ve only got one arm in a sleeve, and what’s this hole in the front ... and how do I look round ?”

“Sir. Your free-arm can be placed through and you can directly engage the lunar environment. “

“Seriously ? *Wowser* !”

“I escorted a young citizen — a child — two years ago. She liked the hand-hole feature plus, plus, plus. Another reply to you, sir: you have not engaged your visor. At the moment if you look down you will only see your own feet in the endo-suit.”

“*Doh* ! “ said Jonny, reflexly darting his eyes up and down. “ Just call me stupid.”

“In reply to you, sir, you can customise my name as you please. We have three Earth-hours together. We must go to the Training Zone. You must be at least Level 1 in Lunar Jump Suit skill to leave the Training Area.”

Jonny dared not move a locomotive muscle in his legs or feet, as he felt himself being dragged out of the shadow of a rock wall. A shaft of sunlight glinted through the glass-window in front of him and in the arm-hole in front of him, something glinted back. The reflexes in his stomach recognised quicker than his eyes: it was a packet of food. He made a grab for it and it crinkled. With his free-hand, and visor-less still, he tried to make out the cheery design of the packet.

“Frack me ! Kimchi !”

“This is the name you wish to call me, sir ? Comply ...”

“No. The other kimchi, I’m starving. “ Jonny reconsidered that Kimchi was a very reasonable name for his escort robot. “Hey, Kimchi, when, actually, was the last time this Jump-Suit was used by a guest?”

“Thank you, sir. The year 2189, and the guest was a child, of ten-point-three-five years, called Lee. She was a citizen of United Korea and scored maximum on her Level 1 training ... Sir, why are you moving your exo-suit arm so rapidly. It is an alarm-gesture that your power is very low. But your suit shows 98% power.”

“No, it’s just ...” Jonny was trying to rip the packet of *Crispy Kimchi Snackettes* open with his right-arm, which was the one in the hydraulic sleeve of his endo-suit. The contents were super-snack size and he tapped the whole packet into his mouth. Kimchi, crispy or not, doesn’t really go off, he reassured himself, and it was not too spicy.

The training area had been located along the tourist trek to the crater. It made use of a natural bay in the rock wall so that it stayed permanently in the sheltering shadow of the valley wall. The whole of the resort super-structure, the residential settlement and the power plant was arrayed along the shadowed side of the moon-valley. Only the huge silo for the underground space-port lay exposed to the fierce sunlight. Concave mirror panels from the sides of the silo shone most of the light which illuminated most of the trekking terrain. Indeed, the foot-fall of a thousand jump-suits had created drifts of glinting moon dust on the ledges of the jutting rocks. It looked,

indeed, deliciously inviting for a touching hand, thought Jonny, as he glided by sideways, being dragged along by Kimchi.

It was basically an obstacle course. In his endo-suit, he was suspended around his torso and hips by a firm multi-layered harness which moulded his body's contours, stiffening and softening exquisitely, like when Jonny arched his back to yawn; it wicked away his sweat and Jonny could sense tiny suckers at play against his skin; finally it did the bulk of thermoregulation inside there. (From shade to light, two bounds of the jump-suit, the ambient temperature could change over one hundred degrees celsius) The key to movement was the tiniest pressure exerted inside the hydraulic sleeves around his leg muscles.

At every point, the apparatus through and around which Jonny had to duck and vault, showed interactive height and incline markers. The visor automatically detected the line of gaze of the occupant. It toggled between forward, direct-view, in other words what you could see through the plexi-glass window and then to camera-view when you turned your head. Jonny's problem was that the camera-view was so stunning and hyper-real that in the balancing tasks he could not stop looking up at the moon-sky. *Was that Mars ?* It looks like a big red sequin dropped amongst glitter on a jeweller's black cloth !

All the while, annoyingly, the robot to his left side, kept giving comparator stats to the previous occupant of that particular jump-suit.

"Kimchi, mate !" said Jonny at his fifth attempt to turn sideways, mid-air, at a skill station. "That 10 year old was probably a school gymnast or something ... Is that nearly it ?"

“Sir. This is the last section. It is the free-run. This is a three hundred metre course. Please complete as fast as you can, as safe as you can. Please focus on the transition-incline of each foot as I have taught you. Optimal horizontal speed with lunar gravity is at a plantar-incline of 30 degrees or more. “

They had performed a U-turn in the wide, shaded gully and the last course was, indeed, a straight run. Before detaching itself, Kimchi the robot, outlined for the seventh time the resort's safety policies and the safe zones of soft magnetism which would stop the wayward trainee from bouncing into the rock walls or other people. There was not a single other jump-suit on the course, however.

Jonny was naturally non-competitive. He had settled into a job in his father's successful Parts & Recycling business without any great sporting achievements to his name. He hit a round of golf once a fortnight. But, here, waiting for the green light, with a passive-aggressive robot-coach hovering with an imaginary stop-watch at the finish line, Jonny felt roused. May be those Crispy Kimchi Snackettes had something performance-enhancing sprayed on them. His first bound: over-compensated the foot-incline and nearly, very nearly, face-planted into the moon-dust.

He was out of puff at the end. Kimchi was re-connecting his umbilical cord, and not saying a word. Inside the suit, Jonny lifted his visor to wipe some sweat. Restricted to the forward optic, he found himself facing the vast bright sunlit plain of the valley. A dust storm ? He dabbed with his free finger at the zoom and could see fifty or sixty jump-suits moving further into the sunlight, away from the rock-face and the tourist trail to the Great Crater.

“What ... *errrr* ?” Jonny had not prefaced with any standard command-cues so Kimchi talked straight over him.

“Sir. I have good news. You passed Level 1. We may tour the resort grounds for the time remaining. And, more good news, your time in the free-dash is good enough to qualify for the 2192 Edition of the Lunar Olympics. “

Jonny could scarcely believe what he heard next, but a cheesy applause track sounded out inside his jump-suit.

“Yes, sir. You qualify in the age-group for citizens aged 100 to 110 years. “

“Kimchi. That’s a joke, right ?”

“Correct, sir. My humour setting can be adjusted at any time ...”

Then, before Jonny could ask his original question about the crowd of suits kicking up the dust, an articulated arm started moving up and down before his front-optic. It wasn’t his.

“Sir, if you are in distress I can help immediately; I can summon higher acuity help; I can do both.” Jonny sensed a change in his robot’s speech protocol; he looked left into the blackness of his suit, and then right into the blackness of his suit.

A Comms signal beep was heard and then a woman’s voice came over Jonny’s channel: “Now, can you hear me ? What are you in there ? A kid ? “

“Nice training-run,” she continued, stepping into view in front. “But see if you can do this ...”

Jonny saw the jump-suit in front bend at the mid-articulations of its lower limbs and then shoot upwards like a rocket. Jonny cracked down his visor and the camera view caught the giant suit glinting high against the back-drop of space and then, with all four limbs contracted, the body of the jump-suit spun a mid-air rotation, to land back on the same spot in an enveloping cloud of dust. In his suit, this all happened in utter silence other than a few feminine grunts and pants of exertion through the Comms channel.

The robot spoke up first: “Sir. In order to attempt that you have to be at Level 6. Further, in order to have the Limiters cancelled on your Jump-Suit you have to pay for a *Kinetic Package*, which you have not.”

“Hey, wow, “ came back the woman’s voice. “ A ‘sir’ in there. Do you speak English ? I might ask you a favour ...”

Her accent Jonny thought, was mid-Pacific American, although he had read that the gas-mixes they breathed in the suits could alter one’s voice. She was clearly way more expert in her jump-suit, and came closer, even giving the impression that she was trying to peer through the plexi-glass, which was dense black and fully polarised.

“Well, I do speak English. Hello ... “

“Hello. Hello, hello. Really a man ... Listen, I need a favour ...”

“Are you back from the Crater ? What’s it like ?”



“You wanna go. I can take you. I mean, it’s a big hole. I suppose it’s a *must-see*. But first I need to buddy-up with someone to get away from that lot ...”

Jonny looked front again, zoomed the optics. It was the same formation of jump-suits. The leading part of the procession had stopped and the dust was beginning to settle.

Were they military ? Surely not up here. “What are you here for ? “ Jonny phrased his words as neutrally as possible.

“Getting married. All together. Then have babies for the world ... but I can’t do it. My guy that they picked for me is just gross. And other bad vibes, all the way. ”

“They’re not soldiers, then ...? “

“Are you ... ? Is there really a person in there...? ROBE, humour setting off !”

“Sir, I am bound to *your* guest-protocol ... “ joined in the robot who had re-attached itself via the connector to Jonny’s suit.

“No, Kimchi, I think she’s talking to me still.”

“What ! What’s going on ? You call your robot, Kimchi ? I frackin' love kimchi. Are you UK ?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not giving me a Korean vibe at all. “

“UK ... like England, UK. “

“Not United Korea ?”

“No. And, you ... not soldiers. “

“Oh, wow. You haven’t seen the signs up ... We, they, are the frackin’ *Moonies*. Korean Super-Cult, you must know. I came up here for love and marriage. Yeah, yeah. And, now, I really don’t want love and marriage, with the frackin’ Moonies, that is.”

“ — “

“Hello ? “

“Yes. Well ... the crater sounds great. I mean ... Hey, are the Moonies going to come after you, if you, like, leave ? “

“Sir. With the *Escort-Package* that you have, the restriction is within the resort campus. But, also, at this time, the nuptial event area is also out of bounds.”

“Good, “ said the woman’s voice. “ Hey, robot, gimme your kill-switch.”

“Escort-Over-ride. Madam, it is lit in green at my caput ”

With a deft half-bound, the jump-suit in front came across in front of Jonny and he felt a downward drag as the robot was instantly powered off and it dropped into the dust. In a couple of moments more, the umbilical connector came free and dangled like the loose part it was from out of the side of Jonny’s suit.

“You asked if the Moonies are coming after me ... They’ve probably got drone-snipers pointing right at us now.”

Jonny was by his nature and up-bringing a respector of the law and of due process and at that moment felt the need to wipe sweat from under his visor again.

“Hey ... you really need to turn *your* humour setting up a notch or two. The Moonies are a bunch of United Korea assholes, but what’s a girl to do ? I came here looking for love and marriage, away from the madness at home. Still am. But they won’t let me back into the resort without a buddy.”

“You want me to be your buddy ?”

“Will you ?”

“But I’ve got a jump-suit with only one arm, and now, no robot. “

“Symmetry sucks ! We’ll think of something. But just cut the Comms channel when we get near the air-lock.”

“Sure. May be see the crater some other time ...?”

“Sure. Owe you. What are you doing on the moon, by the way?”

“Oh ... well ...”

“That’s fine. I’m not super-interested or anything.”

Jonny fell into step with his new companion, and he appreciated a few tips from her about twisting his torso in the harness, to keep the rhythm of the steps even. Just before the intercom of the main air-lock doors, they stopped and Jonny received the plan of action.

“My name’s Da-Hee, by the way.”

Jonny heard *‘Danni’*: “Pleased to meet you, Danni. I’m Jonathan.”

“We’ll pretend you’re a retard, or something, so that’s why you have the Training-Wheels, and why your Comms are off. I can pretend to be your carer and buddy.”

“Is that really the best play ?”

“Probably.”

“OK.”

“And, by the way, I call things *Kimchi* sometimes, why did *you* call your robot, Kimchi ?”

“Well, what happened was—”

The Comms cut off in Jonny’s suit. Whatever Da-Hee said must have worked. The air-lock doors opened and, as they bounced inwards, a recovery Ro-Ranger sped outwards towards its stricken comrade in the Training Area lying in the moon-dust.

### Chapter 3 — Antonella

“Excuse me, “ asked Antonella to her neighbour on the spacecraft. “What are you doing ? Is that some exercise to stop you getting the wobbles ?”

Some way into the flight, with the half-moon well out of view, the man on the seat next to her started twisting a water-bottle in his out-stretched hand in the air in front of him, like some kind of space-priest making the sign of the cross.

“Are you meaning the condition, *Space Asthenia* ? No. Therefore he was very late in spinning the Boride Drive, did you not feel the acceleration-vector ? Usually in your bladder.”

Antonella wished that he had not mentioned this: she shifted her position and her mid-section started bouncing gently against her seat-belt.

“You see. Hold out your hand. Drag it like this. With a 20 ounce weight for inertia against your muscle proprioceptors, his changed vector is obvious to me. He has only two explanations ...”

“Sorry. Who do you mean by ‘*he*’ ?”

“The chief pilot officer. Number one: his navigator was on manual settings, but this would be a probability-nadir on such an basic flight; Or, number two: our skeduled space-port has had a problem ... “

*Ounces, skedule* — he was surely American. But, to Antonella, his accent was unaccountably stiff and old-fashioned.

“I meant, ‘*he*’, as in, how do you know the pilot is a man ?”

“Commercial flights, with this company do not have primary robotic piloting. By law, it has to be a human ... But, problems with our destined space-port: ... could be terrorist threat, activist threat or commercial over-booking. “

“Nice thoughts. And you can tell ... just by moving a water-bottle in your hand ?”

He pulled at his sleeve: “This wrist-unit can also give an accurate PIP-azimuth. But, it’s good to keep up your manual skills. *Ahh*, he’s turned off the boost now. Feel it ? He was just off-course ...”

“She !”

“What ?”

Just then a woman’s voice introduced herself as the captain of the flight and apologised for the anticipated slight delay in their docking time at the station. She sounded very breezy in her announcement, that although there had been an “internal and technical” matter at the space-port, it had all been “fixed”.

Antonella half-turned and rolled her eyes with a little smile. Her companion after a fraction of a delay, returned the same eye-roll. Talking to him would help her resist any temptation to synch her screen with the earth satellites (and get the deluge of messages from her contacts and friends) and might also help to keep her mind off her growing, niggling need to have a pee.

In any case she was dying to ask: “You’re a pilot, aren’t you ?”

“Yes. My name is Pirix. I am second rank Co-pilot with the mining freighters. I have been on the Martian convoys for 18 months.”

“Wow ! Is it true they’ll be taking settlers and then tourists like me before the turn of the century ? Be a great party there !”

“I cannot see into the future, sorry. In nine years, there will still be thermo-nuclear blasting there. Terra-forming is in early stage. Even more ... it would be a funny kind of tourist.”

“Well, pleased to meet you ... Is Pirix your first name; I knew someone who was an officer in the army who always went by his last name ...? ”

“My first ambition was to be a military pilot at home in America. But I was not available for induction and training for some years. That is why I am twenty-four, still a second co-pilot, and I work for the Gongzho Corporation. What do you do ... Miss Antonella ?”

Antonella paused. She never found out the answer to her question about his name, but, regarding hers, Pirix signalled with his water bottle at the large passenger screen with her name, and details, right across it. Before he asked the obvious next question, she would have to put in a correction:

“I am a post-graduate, doing a DPhil (which in America would be a PhD) at Oxford, which in America would be like, I dunno, *Harvard*, in neo-medieval history ... And, what *that* screen says, about me getting married. That is all a bit up in the air.”

“I don’t want to ask personal questions. Therefore would you like me to change the subject ? Or, not talk at all ? The flight has one and a half hours to go ...”

“Oh, god, *really* ? “

“I heard you say, your exact words: *I would have to go a light speed*. In the next ten years, the Gongzho Corporation will have freespace rockets that will reach zero-point-zero-one-c velocity. My freighter now will run, crossing the aphelion, at *micro-c* speeds.”

“ No, when you said about two hours to go ... well, it was a drama on the way here, with Jon—, with my—, *umm, when I flew out*. I am so awful in the bladder and so rubbish at those weightless toilets. I mean, they tell you all this stuff about the radiation, and the G-force and the seat-belts, but nothing about the bloody toilet.”

“Oh. I can help you. I can offer some practical advice. Then we will not have to talk about your personal details ...”

“Excuse me ?”

“As represented on your screen. In front of you ...”

“Right. That’s getting switched off.”

“Or. Personal details not represented there ... such as the subject of your history studies.”

“Ok. Mr Pirix ...”

“Call me Pirix.”

“I just did. I really have to get to the toilet, and get these mag-boots back on ... where the bloody hell are they?”



“Now is a good time. I can give you a good practical tip for toileting, and continence control when your ship is accelerating to point-zero-zero-one-c, giving an equivalent G-force of twenty-Earth-Atmospheres. Now, this craft is decelerating therefore you can feel it in your hand if you wave this bottle like so.”

“Pirix. I can feel it in my bloody bladder !”

“Ok.” Pirix rolled up his right sleeve. “Look. Like this. You can bend, bend ... Forward, then you can place it in the crook of your elbow. See ! Then, with your hand free, you can exert counter-pressure on to your bladder-wall. Squeezed in here, *it* will not leak. At all. I promise. Just bend.”

Antonella was slightly shocked. The arm muscles under Pirix’s shirt were weirdly enlarged. She had read something about the long-haul space flights and the G-force effects. She also saw a sizeable rectangle of discoloured skin-graft which his huge wrist-computer could not completely hide. He was nodding at Antonella to get her to copy his yogic continence pose.

“Pirix. *Umm*, I’m a woman. A chick. *Female*. I haven’t got an ‘*it*’ to hold and squeeze.”

“Yes, yes ... “ There was no save Pirix could make. “Therefore you must secure your mag-boots and go. And, perhaps, quickly. That man, as well, is going ...”

Antonella turned. And her face nearly planted into the stretched fabric of the sweat-shirt of a very fat man who was clomping past and would be heading for the toilet cubicle too. In the 9 or 10 strides towards the service cubicle, the very fat man kept swivelling his head around. He had nose-pieces with supplemental breathing gas from a

portable tank hanging from his belt-buckle. He was grinning as he looked round, dislodging little droplets of floating sweat which made Antonella feel queasy. Although she gave a courteous smile back at him, the man was clearly looking back past her.

*Why isn't he bloody going in ?* thought Antonella. She tried to fire up a dirty look into his face which was a full head's-height above hers. Just then she saw that face break into a huge grin again.

"Mindy, my sweet ... That's my girl ! C'mon now," he called back over Antonella's head.

This time when Antonella turned, her face nearly planted into the floating, abdominal overhang of a woman, who was grappling, fully horizontal in the cabin-space above Antonella's head.

"What the frack !" cried Antonella, as a pudgy hand grasped at her head from above.

"So sorry, honey, for using you like a gear-stick there ... " the woman, Mindy, was saying as she levered herself past Antonella in the queue for the toilet. There was a yeasty waft as her two thighs bundled over Antonella's head. Although she was floating in weightless space, fellow passengers noted quaintly how Mindy's feet were gently kicking as if she were doing fitness laps in a swimming-pool.

As the fat man at the toilet door pulled at his fiancée to bring her back vertical, Antonella noticed that the stewardess for their section had brought her head into view.

Antonella just had to call out: "Hey. She just cut in the queue !" Antonella instantly felt like the school snitch, and quickly changed

her complaint to something more substantive: “Surely that’s against health and safety or something, floating about like that ?”

The stewardess agreed and put back her stern look: “That is correct. Movement in the cabin with no magnetic restraint is strictly forbidden. I must ask you— “

“Look, ma’am ...” This was Mindy, bobbing up and down on one foot now. “ My fiancé is a *Radiation Veteran*, he suffers from *you-know-what*, and I am his carer as well ... And he needs his meds. This is urgent. ”

“Oh. I didn’t know we had a *Veteran* on-board, “ said the stewardess. “Can I be of any further assistance ?”

“That’s OK. You be sure to tell the Captain how great the service is with you guys. Our third Moon-Honey ... Right, honey ? “

“Mickey’s big with Vets Association, aren’t you, babe ?” added Mindy. She had deftly tucked her legs up again, and her bare-feet were inching to make contact with the opposite side-wall.

“Look. Sorry ... “ said Antonella. “I really need to use the toilet.”

“You just hold your horses, just a while longer. Just a while longer ... “ said the fat man, Mickey. Before Antonella’s eyes, the couple began to adopt a rehearsed formation, with Mickey reversing into the toilet cubicle and Mindy beginning to push with her legs to insert herself too.

“They’re not ... ?” Antonella shot another alarmed look to the stewardess. “Health and ...?”

“Excuse me, again, sir, “ said the stewardess responding. “But shuttle regulations state— “

“Now, you both just *calm yer farm* there!” said Mickey’s voice from within the cubicle. “Mindy’s my carer. I gotta have my meds on account of being a Veteran, and all the shit we done for y’all. And, there’s no way I can get that injection in my butt by myself is there ! Now, one more big push, my sweet, and you’re in ... Get no respect these days. “

“None, sweetie ... Pull me now !”

Antonella did not want to take a step forward with her mag-boots to peer inside the cubicle door before it shut, to see how the two fat people had even fitted in there. She got no sympathy from the stewardess who, looking flustered, was just repeating the usual clichés of “They’re still suffering, the poor Veterans “ and “They sacrificed so much on 7/17”.

Antonella looked left and looked right. The other passengers were either asleep or totally uninterested in the toilet-queue incident. Pirix was by her side, however:

“Excuse me. I looked up— “

“—So you saw that, then ? “ Antonella hushed her voice: “Playing the bloody *Veteran Card* and everything! “

“No. What I mean ... I *looked up* the equivalent manoeuvre for the female anatomy from the Corporation Handbook.”

“What !”

“In order to delay bladder incontinence and, for example, avoid discharges into a space-suit, or into shared confines— “

“—Oh my god !”

For both of them, stood in the aisle, their attention was drawn to the toilet cubicle. Its door was literally bulging outwards and there were noises within.

“Therefore this is a phenomenon documented as due to the high Nitrogen mixes in commercial craft. It is 85%. Nitrogen radicles. I believe the *Romance Resorts* on Luna use 87%. It increases blood flow to anatom— “

“—Wait ! Wait, wait ... “ The penny which Antonella wished to spend, finally dropped. “ Those two ... ? In there ... ? They’re not ... ?”

Pirix shrugged: “Do you still want me to demonstrate the manoeuvre for you out of my mag-boots ?”

When Antonella made it into the toilet her mind was in agony from trying to hold off her bladder spasms. The moon shuttles were built for speed and not luxury, and nothing in the toilet was automated. She hit the button for *FEMALE* and the button for *LIQUID DISCHARGE ONLY*, then awaited the sterilisation process to cycle and then held her breath while the soft-gel pouch seated itself up between her legs.

*Please don't let me put a piss-bubble in the air like last time. Please !!* implored Antonella to her own bladder apparatus.

“System located. Is this comfortable ? Please press YES to—”

Antonella pressed SKIP three times quickly on the control panel.

*Just empty my bladder, already !*

At last, the pouch gripped her genitals tighter and her bladder flooded the tubing, and she gave silent praise to the manufacturers, and her own, average-size, normal anatomy as not a single droplet leaked out. She threw her head back at the sheer physical relief.

But, in an instant her face crumpled in disgust. The lights were bright and the inner surfaces mirrored. In the ceiling mirror was the unmistakable imprint of the cheeks of a giant arse. *That is just too awful to contemplate !* Because the stress of her full bladder was eased, Antonella was seeing a funny side to the arse-print, thinking to herself: *Those two squeezed into every last cubic inch of this space ... Can't imagine anything more disgusting.*

At the miniature vanity, as she had her hands in the jet-cleaner holes, she glimpsed in the mirror just that very thing, the something that, until a few seconds prior, had lain beyond her imagination. Suspended in the cubicle air, a half a metre in back of her, was a globule of liquid. It was gelatinous and it was white. It was not toothpaste.

*Oh ! That is gross ! Those frackin' fat, disgusting ...*

Antonella's anger was matched with her rising queasiness. But she was physically frozen, hands still in the sealed apertures of the jet-clean. Her darting eyes caught sight of the vacuum drone in the corner which automatically cleansed the air between passengers. *It would have a manual-override, surely.* To the left of her was the red medical-alarm switch. Was the aerial threat of a globule of a stranger's semen a medical emergency ?

Antonella swivelled her head. She blew at it. The current of her breath just rippled the sticky globule, which rolled and deformed, but then defiantly resumed its spatial co-ordinates as before. As Antonella turned her head back, to either take a deeper breath, or to work out how she could duck under to reach for the vacuum drone, she gasped as a lick of her brown-hair bounced up and nearly touched the globule; it was *that* close.

*This is ridiculous. Just pull your hands out. Hold your hair, and then go make a formal complaint about the two fatties ...* was Antonella's last rational thought.

She felt an inertial force through her mag-boots. It was a step-wise deceleration of the craft in readiness for docking. In that instant, she saw the white globule darting towards the back of her head in the mirror, and reflexly ducked, slapping the big red square of the alarm button as she went down.

\*

"Poor thing ! You know we have a medic on board. If you want us to call him. But we're so close to docking ... "

Cabin stewards like a bit of drama to break the monotony. Just about *all of them* attended Antonella as she was recovered to her seat for the final few minutes of the shuttle-flight. She had had a fit of crying after the door to the stricken toilet cubicle had been wrested open with a special tool. And, at least twice, Pirix had been referred to as her boyfriend by the attending staff.

“Did you have, “ asked Pirix when the dramatics had died down. “ A bladder continence emergency in there ?”

“Look. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“OK. Therefore you do not want really to talk about your problem at the Lunar Resort complex. And you do not want to talk about the medical emergency in the Services Cubicle. There is still time— “

“—For what ? “ Antonella immediately regretted her sharp tone; nothing was the fault of her companion.

“To swap a seat with me. The planetary horizon is looking especially beautiful. I have not seen the colour green for eighteen months. And the station silhouette too ...”

“*Ooh*, isn’t he the best ! “ said the male steward who was still comforting and holding Antonella’s arm. “I can over-ride most things on board ...Say. No. More. “

Pirix sprung his restraints and boots in one swipe and boosted himself flat against the ceiling. “*Ooh*, he’s done that before. What a gallant !” The steward bobbed Antonella towards the window.

“Now, are you *sure* you don’t want me to call the doctor on board ?”

“I will always refuse to see doctors. Unless I am mortally injured, or —”

“—No. Hunky fellow, I was talking to *her* not you !”

“No, “ replied Antonella. “I’ll be fine.”



Antonella stuck her nose to the plexiglass; the view was, indeed, breathtaking. To her right was the shifting spectral fuzz of the stratosphere and possibly the greenish bulge of the Amazon forest below; to her left was darkness pierced by the lighting array of space-port Meridian 120.

\*

Pirix insisted on helping Antonella disembark. He mostly stood on the moving walkways within touching distance of her, apart from when they passed the first vending machine. He pleaded that they stop a moment because he had not tasted a fresh American chocolate for nearly two years. Antonella did not want to get into an argument about *Euro v USA* chocolate quality and tastiness; she was getting increasingly anxious about her connecting shuttle. Meridian 120 was the busiest hub, channeling the huge circum-Pacific market. At each brief connection in the walkways, she had to refuse the marketers and hawkers who wanted her to sign on to various religious, environmental, political, or commercial interests.

“That’s the 4th lot from the Moonies — They don’t look Korean, “ she said as she brushed off a salesman and his robot assistant. “What are they on !”

“They are very popular. Therefore a lot of them came out from Canada. They got freedom and it is all about love and marriage on Luna again.”

“Well, sort of ... there are *a lot* of them around. You mind if I pay to get in the Express Belt ? I’m worried for my connection.”

“The inner station has some artificial gravity. Where all the shops and travel-counters are. Therefore, Miss Antonella, *you* may need to help *me*, in locomotion.”

“How do you mean ?” Antonella paid for Pirix on her credit, and they switched from the open conveyors to a sealed tube-travel system which picked up speed towards the brightly lit inner-concourse.

“I haven’t been in good gravity for many weeks. My lunar connect was direct. Therefore it is a physical paradox. The muscles hypertrophy with the Over-G on the freighter runs, but it is your co-ordination that goes bad. I can hire an escort-robot very easily ... “

“No, no ... I can totally help. Let me just get booked on to the shuttle down to sea-level from the concourse. Here, just hold on to my arm ... “

With a bit of queuing at the transition lock, Pirix and Antonella passed with a bump into the huge central business area, which was supposed to have the smoothest centrifugal force of all the space-ports. However, it was still more than easy for a misjudged stride to put one a metre on two in the air. Plus, the floating unsecured litter left a bad impression of under-staffing in the place, Antonella thought. She tried scanning the hundreds of screens around her with her naked eyes at first: “Which shuttle are you, Pirix?”

“I am not on a shuttle. I hope you are not booked today; you could connect to Meridian 230.”

“What ? Where are you looking ?”

“*There ! It says No Earth-Bound Shuttle For 6 Hours. Unforeseen Circumstance.*”

“You have got to be kidding me ! Unforeseen, my hat ! They said something about the protests on the moon-shuttle, didn't they ... ?”

Nothing was going right for Antonella. Space-port Meridian 230 would have her over South East Asia. In her undergraduate years she had participated in her share of Human Rights and Environmental protests but at that moment she was not in the mood.

“Those dirty, unwashed, stacie idiots ... Why today !” she found herself muttering, taking two paces towards the bar, and then two paces towards the Travel Agency; she nearly tripped up her companion, who was preoccupied with keeping his feet moving together.

“I'm so sorry ! Pirix, seriously ... Are you OK?”

“Well. There will be easily enough room on the SkyLev. That is my chosen route down to Earth. Please come with me.”

“The SkyLev ? I didn't know it took passengers still. It takes ages though, doesn't it? “

“I choose it because of this. The six or seven hours down will help me with my muscle-deconditioning. The Staff Handbook recommends that the muscle bulk which Over-G space-flight accumulates will reverse given graduated repose and baseline activities for up to a week.”

“So, in other words,” replied Antonella with a smile. “Sitting around, doing nothing and vaping, like an undergrad ?”

“That is one of several options. Therefore if you have not been on the SkyLev, in my opinion it is the third most significant human development in the past 50 years. The connecting passage is back at zero-gravity. So you can let go of my arm, Miss Antonella.”

“Let me check ... just a second.”

Antonella felt she had nothing to lose. The SkyLev system was indeed about fifty years old and relied on a polymerised fibre technology discovered in mutated laboratory insects whose amazing story every school-child in the world learned by heart. It enabled sixty kilometres of vertical cabling to be anchored onto geostationary structures in low-orbit. It enabled heavy payloads to be ratcheted slowly into space at a fraction of the cost of rocket-propulsion.

“Cheers !” After a short time the two of them were sat at a slightly tacky Olde Worlde café in the waiting area, called *The Giant Leap*. They tapped their plastic tankards of beer together, whilst sliding their feet under the shoe-restraints bolted to the floor. The people sitting around waiting for the boarding instructions were mostly elderly, mostly white and mostly glued to their 3D visors. Sitting right next to Pirix was a wiry old man in his 90s who said he spent most days just going up and down the SkyLev, “ where I stay at one with the peace and majesty of our atmosphere.”

Pirix began, in response, to mention some comparative features of the Martian atmosphere, but it was quickly apparent that the old fellow was lost back in the audio-visual feed from his head-set — basically, uttering religious things to no one in particular.

“Gramps can be like that, “ said Antonella. “He still dives back into ancient archive video tech from the last century, and talks to the

video characters like old friends ... I love the super-oldies.”

“I have one Earth month shore leave. I need to de-condition adequately. But I am really looking forward to drinking coffee from an open vessel. May be looking to the ocean.”

“Way to go ! Cheers, again. So, no proper chocolate and no proper coffee all the time you’re doing the freight runs ?”

“Yes. My next contract is for 24 months. “

“That sucks, for sure.”

“At micro-c speed, in space, the mouth-piece *sucks*, yes. But, at least, in this café, there is still some fizz in the beer.”

“*Umm*, Pirix ... I hope you don’t mind me saying but you take things a little bit literally, I’ve noticed.”

“Thank you.”

“Well, I was going to, just then, say ‘*That’s cool*’. But if I did, would you come back with something about refrigeration-currents ?”

“Sorry, I don’t follow you, Miss Antonella.”

Antonella took a long refreshing slug through the valves of the plastic tankard of beer. The annexe to the space-port was full of super-elderly passengers, and the relics from two centuries of space travel. There were artefacts in cabinets that looked like they might still impart aromas from the 2020s, the very neo-medieval period of her academic interest — a writing pen made of original metal caught her eye. She took another long swig from the beer as it looked like her

companion had finished his and was looking to order a second round. Would they be allowed to take the tankards on board ?

In any case, the stop at the bar had been a fine idea. Plus, Antonella was now looking forward to a leisurely six hour descent through the clouds. Plus, apart from the slight sway of the SkyLev annexe and the echoey soundtrack piped from the waiting-room, the alcohol seemed to be softening Antonella's anxiety a touch.

"Pirix. I hope you don't mind ... But you said the SkyLev, it was the third best thing in the world in the last 50 years. Do you mind if I take a guess what the *first* best thing for you was ?"

"I am sorry, Miss Antonella, again, I do not follow."

"How long were you *plugged in* for ?"

"How did you make this guess and/or deduction of me ?"

Antonella put down her tankard into a retaining hole on the counter (in the Olde Worlde theme, nothing was magnetised in the bar). She slipped one shoe from the floor-buffer and touched Pirix for the first time near the rectangular skin-graft on his forearm.

"I spent two years in the system. Miss Antonella. That is the true answer."

"Well ... that's all good. You know, when I was an undergrad I went on some of the Liberation Marches to support all of you. We've got six hours if you want to talk about it ... I don't suppose your 1st co-pilot or the 3rd co-pilot on the big space trucks speaks much English."

"You are more or less correct. I can talk about my years, when, as you say, I was *plugged in* ..."

"Only if you want to ... with me ?"

"And you, in return, with me ... how is your wedding plan?"





## Chapter 4 — Jonny

“From ...*From*, “ said Da-Hee, on the Lunar Resort walkway. “From childhood to adulthood, to this *hood* I’m wearing so the Moonies don’t spot me ... all that time I’ve been some kind of prisoner. But what would you prefer to be, free to wander around a prison that you can’t even detect, or be a prisoner in an open world that is crushing you from all sides, and you feel it ? You know, don’t you, that ‘gravity’ has two meanings: the thing that helps you float back to this walkway if you jump up and, of course, something that is deadly serious. But what if you are the victim of both. Think on that when you can ... Sorry, what was your question ?”

Jonny could only make out a finely-chiselled nose and some lipstick of his companion from under a training-hoody that Da-Hee had thrown on after loading out of the Jump-Suits: “I just asked, *Where are you from ?*”

“Oh, “ said Da-Hee. “And I went off-and-on about gravity and being a victim. Sorry.”

“Well, like I said, I’m Jonathan, or Jonny. I’m from London. I haven’t done the, you know, *Steps Course* here, so thanks for escorting me ... It was Danni, wasn’t it ?”

“Yeah, you almost got it. I’m from big-city Korea, via Pepperdine University, post-7/17 Campus — for all the *light*, then Seoul — for all the *dark*, and now in Hawaii. It’s where I thought I would join the K-town Moonies. Was that a bad move, Jonny ?”

“Well, *umm* ... By the way, should I get an escort-robe at this next stop-off ?”

“No. I’ve got you.” Da-Hee grabbed at Jonny’s arm through the sleeve of her over-sized training-top. “ Wow ! What’s your percentage-body-fat ? We learn the Humpty Dumpty story in Korea about the other UK, everyone being over 25%. I stole this training top, in the locker-room. Has it got any logo on it ? Can you hide me in your suite, Jonny ? Can I try guess your PBF ? 16% ? My Moonie-husband lied about his ... and can I guess where your buddy went, please ?“

Jonny found he was in a slight sweat. The twin reminders of his being overweight and also of Antonella’s absence were pricking at his conscience. Was he really being asked, in all seriousness, to shelter a fugitive, locker-room thief ? He realised, in the speed of their exit from the Jump-Suit unloading area where Da-Hee had helped him, that he had not really seen what she looked like, just the finely-poised nose and her lip-stick. Plus, now that his eyes were accustomed to the multi-lingual signage, he was seeing more and more references to the mass wedding in the name of the Korean Moonies. He could look it all up on the computer back in the suite. Or, he could just ask her.

“Well, sure. If you want ... I mean, I haven’t looked at the regulations here. “

“I’m sure stealing other people’s clothes is OK. Anyway, which way ?”

Jonny felt momentarily in control of the situation as he hailed a passing domestic-robot and double-checked directions.

“Oh, a *Moon-Honey Suite* !” exclaimed Da-Hee. “So romantic !”

Jonny looked across to try and read Da-Hee's expression but the shadows cast by the hood made it hard. For sure, her voice sounded sarcastic, or may be it was the mid-Pacific accent which he was not used to. At the door to his suite, he had clean forgotten which ID he had signed in with. He put his right-index finger to the pad, then remembered, he had vowed to use a rarity-finger-print after the last time his ID was hacked in London, so he put up his left middle finger. Then he noticed a sensor at eye-level and stuck his face in close. *Was it actually Antonella who had signed in ?*

Jonny began to feel flustered.

"You know ... these love-suites ... I heard a fat rich Korean businessmen used his penis-print to swipe into the room."

Jonny spun his head; this time her face was up-turned to the light. Jonny was no expert in female looks, but she seemed a lot older than her voice suggested. She had spidery blood vessels showing under her eyes.

"I'm kidding you, about penis-prints on the entry pad !" Jonny must have held his startled look into her face a fraction too long. "And, I am twenty-eight years old. "

"Oh, no, no ... I—"

"—'No, no' what ? Are we locked out, then? It will have to be a House-robe, then ... "

Da-Hee stopped the next one to pass and shouted out an order to open the door.

“Thank you for letting me help you, “ replied the robot. “ But I need to confirm your identity.” They saw an assortment of icons shuffle through the robot’s display; Da-Hee interrupted:

“No. The lady — me ! — has very sensitive skin. Robe, identify *him*, please. Jonathan Squire, from London, uk.”

“Comply, madam, this suite is—”

“—That is uk, the cute little Atlantic Island, not the mighty United Korea.”

“Comply, madam. “ The robot scanned Jonny’s face. “Mr Jonathan Squire. *Moon-Honey Package*. Day 1 of Package. Remote entry authorised.”

The door clicked and slid open. Jonny pressed a foot down at the slider-groove, as a courtesy to Da-Hee to enter first. The domestic, however, swivelled its face-plate:

“Madam. I wish to confirm also that you are—”

“—Your kill-switch, robot ?” said Da-Hee abruptly

“Comply. By touch, it is the green pad: on top for adults, at my waist for child-access. By voice, *KILL NOW*, is the key command, transcribable in 17 global languages and, if not an emergency, feedback can also—”

“—KILL NOW, “ screamed Da-Hee, and thumped down on the domestic robot’s head-piece green pad. “Belt and frackin’ braces ! Come on, let’s get in.”

The doors to the suite shut on the inert robot which had bounced up against the ceiling with the force of Da-Hee's blow.

"Wow, you really don't like the robots around here, Danni ?"

"You could say that, five years' life-experience ... I always read that in cute little UK, all the kids get taught to always be nice to robots, you know, as a form of training on how to be nice to people."

"Well. That's two robes I've seen you take out in less than an hour."

"Please don't tell me all you cute little London people are trying to turn back the Kill-Switch laws ?"

"No. I mean, that's all media and politics. stuff, isn't it, which I'm not really into. But I haven't had any problems with robots, at home or work, for ages."

"This is good, Jonny ... It's great to be with someone with strong opinions. We should have some music while we put the world to rights. The *worlds*, I should say. So, what do you think of this crazy planet-engineering stuff up there on the Red Blob ? *Up there* ... "

"Well ... " Jonny had not actually moved into the living area past the welcome-mat at the door; all the while he watched Da-Hee, skip around before him, zooming open the ceiling screens with a two metre upward prance, pulling at a wardrobe drawer, drumming at the lids of the two suitcases as she passed the bed. She finally plonked down on the recliner opposite, about eight metres away. Jonny held his breath involuntarily as she moved to unzip her hooded (stolen) training top. He missed the irony about his having strong opinions completely.

“Look. The Red Blob !” The lunar panorama had slid open magnificently, justifying the eye-watering expense, mainly shouldered by Jonny's father, on the cost of Jonny and Antonella's *Moon-Honey Package*; the red Martian disc in the black sky was glowing and stunning. “ You know how many mugs have died up there blasting the frack out of the place ? Thousands, but they don't tell you. And, they reckon there's thousands on *Green Blob* down there who are signed up to go and live on *Red Blob*. “

“In England it's mostly the religious cults, and the new -release crowd ...”

“Is that what they say in cute little London, huh ? *The New Release Crowd* ?” She stopped unzipping her top. “Prisoners ! Why don't we ship them up there to that great New World ?”

“Well ... in history, I suppose, it's an idea that—”

“—What do you prefer, Jonny, history or music ? I'm going to make two guesses. You're a World Music, man ? Hey, Room Control ... can we have a World Music mix? And, number two: I think you're an old-fashioned English Westerner who still believes in love and marriage, but Antonella here — well, actually, not to put too fine a point on it, *not here* — is truly modern, no sense of history, and took the Government money to go and have four, or five or six, real babies. But, up on the moon, bouncy-bouncy, you had a big argument about it all and she left.”

Super pristine music in an up-town tempo sounded out from all around. It gave Jonny the chance to move towards the drinks counter. Room service had been in and put name-cards next to a couple of crystal flutes.

“Antonella is not so modern. She is, as a matter of fact, studying history as a post-grad, but way old stuff. I mean, I like talking, reading about the conspiracy stuff about what caused 7/17 and what the Chinese are up to on Mars ... “

“So: it wasn’t a big argument about love and marriage, it was about conspiracy theories. *Wow ! Are you going to pour us a drink ?*”

Jonny was always someone who liked to judge what kind of value he could personally get from a situation. At that moment, he was so thirsty that he poured bubbly wine into two crystals but also poured a larger tumbler of tap water for himself. He was finding Da-Hee unsettling and strange, but in a way that matched the strangeness of his being in a 5-star Moon Resort for the first time. His calculation was that if he kept things sweet with his new companion, she might keep her promise to buddy with him to get to the crater-top. It was a must-see for tourists; and he had already resolved that he would splash out and get some professional clips and photos taken up there. *One-size-fits-all, those Jump-Suits — would anyone really know it was not Antonella next to him in the classic tourist moonshot pose up there?*

“Hey, be careful there ! Have we got company ? “

“No, “ said Jonny, electing to transfer the two crystals and the sloshing tumbler in his hands in one go. “I’m just really thirsty. I’ll just enjoy the wine with you, and drink the water as well. “

“An H<sub>2</sub>O chaser ! Cheers.”

Jonny’s legs were feeling weary but he felt inhibited about stretching out on the surface of the huge bed. He pulled the desk chair over closer to Da-Hee. Then he took a sip of the water and a big swig of

the bubbly wine, instead of the other way round. Da-Hee was still staring, face-upwards, at the panorama of the black lunar sky.

“Same in UK, back home ... “ she murmured.

“Sorry, what was that ?”

“In big Eastern UK, same frackin’ politicians. Offering money for people to have kids, offering money for people to settle up here or on Mars in the new century. Would you ?”

“Well. Not really. I work in my father’s business and we’re hoping to expand over the next years. I’d come back here, probably. On holiday ... “

Da-Hee tipped up her crystal to finish the wine. Then she sighed, and reached again for the zipper of her hooded top: “So, in cute little UK, they call them *New Releases*, do they ? Cute. In Korea, the nice word they use in translation is *Tube-Heads*. You wanna see ... ?”

Jonny gulped as Da-Hee threw off her top; she was wearing a T-shirt base-layer in a pastel shade. Her hair was thick, black and in a short bob, which, for sure, reminded Jonny of an actress, but, in general, he was hopeless at showbiz trivia. She held out her bare arm for inspection and Jonny saw the mess of scars and discolourations all over the back of her thin, white forearm.

“Oh ! “ said Jonny, scrabbling for a response. “ My mum’s friend’s son — or may be was a cousin — came out of it ... last year, in England. “

“And, here ...” Da-Hee pushed back her hair to show similar scarring at the side of her neck.



There was a silence, into which Da-Hee burped loudly, the gas from her drink. She did not say *'Excuse me'*.

Jonny gave a quick swig of his wine and he surprised himself by burping too, a more humble burp than his companion's. They both giggled; Jonny gave a short impulse forward to consider getting a re-fill for them both. He sat back, however, because Da-Hee had extended her scarred, thin arm even further towards him, like someone seeking the opinion of a perfume sample at a department store.

"Did you meet her, your friend-of-friend's cousin's son, who got unplugged ?" asked Da-Hee, to which Jonny shook his head. "People normally say something like: *Oh, some of my best friends were under for a while*. And, you know what else everyone asks ?"

"*Umm ...* how long were you under for ?"

"Well, yes, that too. But, I'm a girl, a chick, remember ... and everyone wants to know why I didn't get the skin grafts to cover all this shit up. You know the weirdest thing, there's fat Korean guys whose big thing, that turns them on, is scarred up girls ! I mentioned my Moonie-husband, didn't I ?"

"Wow !" was all Jonny could muster.

"And, just for the record: five years of my life I lost in that clinic in Seoul. And, literally, they said, first day out, do you wanna go on the list for the Red Planet colonies ! What's a human settlement without a Korean Barbecue place or two ! Plenty of those in Hawaii, though."

“Well, you know ... it was terrible, I’m sure ...In London, they’re trying to get a holiday for DD-Day, and that. Not sure, when exactly ... Hey, Room Control when—”

Da-Hee’s voice cut-in however, as she suddenly became animated and bounced up towards the suitcases on the bed: “No ! Room Control. What is the date of Antonella and Jonny’s big wedding ? Spill it ... These two Moon-Honeys !“

Jonny gulped again.

The computer’s voice interrupted the music: “Moon-Honey is a *Romantic Break* offered at this resort. It is taken before a wedding, and may be followed up by a Honey-moon, after a wedding. For this suite, there is no wedding plan or date on my database. I can access —”

“No. That’s enough. I can just work it out myself, probably, “ said Da-Hee, now on the bed, estimating the comparative weights of the 'his-n-her' suitcases there. “I’m going to use your bathroom, and then we’re going to talk about you, Mr Jonny, from cute little London. “

“Sure. It’s ... “ Jonny realised he had no idea which of panels hid the bathroom; he hadn’t needed it. “Room Control, hey, can you show the wash-room? And, is there filtered water?”

The en suite that opened up was closer to Jonny. The water from the tap at the bar had been flavoured with something fairly disgusting. He made it to the threshold with one clumsy bound with the tumbler sloshing in his hand. *May be ‘ladies first’*, he thought. The default light from the bathroom was way too bright and it cut harshly across Da-Hee’s skin as she drew close.

“No. You first. This bathroom has frackin' everything. Hey, I can't stand that bar-tap stuff, either. “ Da-Hee gestured Jonny in towards the filter tank, but with her right arm, unnaturally closing her stance. “Frack knows, I've had enough chemicals go through me !”

“Well, “ said Jonny, shuffle-sliding in to avoid bouncing into the elaborate ceiling fittings. “With me, it's more of an allergy thing ... Well, my doctors call it *hypersensitivity*, you know ... “

He bent at the water-tank, and fiddled with the sluice grill, before rinsing a test volume, before finally filling up with the pure, chilled filtered water. In the reflections he was waiting for Da-Hee at the doorway to lower her arm, but she didn't.

“Right. All yours, “ said Jonny, shuffling his feet to exit. “I'll, you know, drink this ... enjoy it, while you're in here. “

“Don't you want to touch my scars ? “ Da-Hee still had her arm out. “Back home, you won't believe it, but they reckon touching these scars will help keep the demons out of your head. Koreans are weird as frack for their superstitions. “

“No. Thank you ... In London, most people—”

“—Aren't superstitious ? Are too uptight ? Scared of physical touch ? Still guilty about DD-Day ?”

“Yeah. Probably, “ began Jonny moving as swiftly as he could out of the way, “ Probably, *ha ha*, all of the above. You sure you haven't been to the UK.”

“The cute little UK. No. Love to. One day.”

“Well, right ... Enjoy !”

“I’m just ... going to take a pee. Jonny. “

\*

“Who ...? *Who-who-who* ... that’s like in that stupid song. They must have had it in London. But, *they* look after the whole *World*, now, don’t they ? God, I love them ! More power to those UN heroes. I’m gonna go there one day, Jonny ... and I’m gonna start kissing some hands and feet. But, listen, now we’re living on, technically, other worlds — like, in the moment, *now* ! — will they have to add another ‘O’, and call themselves *Other Worlds Health Organisation*. OWHO, or something. But, those guys and girls saved my skinny Korean ass. I love them. And, you say ‘who’ and I’ll think ‘*WHO*’ and, touch my ugly scars, and pay my respects ... Jonny ?”

“Yeah. I’m still here. “

“I go on and on, don’t I ? What was your question ?”

“Well, I just asked, *Who did you come with?* But, it’s rude talking to someone when they’re on the toilet.”

“No, my bad. I didn’t close the doors, did I ? You can come in for a re-fill, of your filtered water. “

“No. It’s not really ... you know, seeing someone sitting on the, you know ... “

“At Pepperdine, they called it — I just remembered — the *John*. Jonny. So funny ... But, I’m getting up. You know, talking about personal stuff is best sometimes when you’re not in the same room as the other person. “

“Really ?”

“I can tell you about my fat Korean Moonie husband, but if you’ve met *one*—”

“—I’ve never met—”

“—Jonny, sorry to go on and on. But I need to know: why did Antonella run out on you without even unpacking her stuff ?”

“I suppose you could say that I’m just a fat UK businessman as well.  
“

“No, Jonny, your Body-Fat-Percentage is way less than my guy, and you definitely have a cute English face.”

Jonny wished at that moment that he had x-ray eyes, or spy-vision, to see what kind of expression was on Da-Hee’s face when she said that. He took a big swig from the re-filled crystal; he might as well tell her. Then, may be they could talk about making a trip to the tourist platforms on the crater’s edge. Surely, the resort could give Da-Hee a singles’ room in the resort somewhere. He didn’t suppose that a Moonie marriage had any technical legal contracts from which she would have to disentangle herself, consuming time and money. In his mind, Jonny felt a whole backlog of items — starting with Lunar Jump-Suits, and Moonie Weddings — about which he would have to do some serious Net-research next time he was alone with the resort’s IT system. Anyway, he blurted it out:

“I had a sex-robot. And, Antonella got the wrong idea, and stormed out.”

That made Da-Hee’s head appear around the corner of the doorway: “A sex-bot ! Seriously, what kind of *wrong idea* can you get about that. Where is it ? Let me see ... What model did you get ?”

“It’s not like that ! “ spluttered Jonny. He wanted to swallow back up his words. “It really ... it really is not what you think.”

“Frack, Jonny ! How many ways are there to *think* when you lug a sex-bot to the moon? But ... tell me you got a Samsung model ... “

On a technicality, Jonny was in a position to correct his companion, whose eyes were darting around the room. He had arranged for the package containing the robot to be freighted before their arrival, paying an extra warranty fee to the vendor in Soho to guarantee lunar functionality. But that would torpedo the other claim that he felt inclined to make: that he had hired it on a sudden impulse at the resort.

Nevertheless: “I just hired it at the front-desk ... when Antonella was in the shower ... it’s back now.”

“Room Control ! “ shouted out Da-Hee in the centre of the room. “Can you do a roll-call and status-check of every robot present ?”

There was fun and zest in her voice, but on his chair in the corner, all the fears for his mis-step and impending ridicule back home were weighing down on poor Jonny. He pretended to be reading the label on the bottle of bubbly after he re-filled her crystal.

The sex-bot was the first jack-in-the box answering the electronic muster sent by the Room-Control computer.

“My God ! “ cried Da-Hee, at the muffled whirring. “Under the bed ! That’s where every idiot man keeps it. Frack’s sake ! Come, let me help ya, Bot-bot !”

The robot made several jerky movements at its articulations at the knees, waist and neck, and assumed an upright posture: “Model RP7: Battery 80%: Owner Mr Jonathan Squire: Registered London, Europe: Default English: Gender Neutral: Gravity error detected.”

“You didn’t ...?” exclaimed Da-Hee, patting at the composite-skin on the robot’s face; its eyes swivelled after a short delay.

“No...no, that 20% battery loss ... that wasn’t—”

“—No, Jonny. I can’t believe you actually bought this Chinese model rubbish. See the neural-lag ! Even the Samsung base-models have auto-body-typing now ... How much did you pay ?”

“600.”

“Are you sure that poor old Antonella didn’t storm out of here when she saw what a piece of crap sex-machine you brought up here ?”

Jonny had to sniff half a laugh at that. He also had to get up, step past Da-Hee, who was essentially tutting and tyre-kicking his unwise purchase, and go to the toilet himself.

Jonny, ever since he left St Pauls, his awful boarding school, enjoyed being seated while urinating: like a tiny celebration of the personal freedom of post-school adult life. He waved at the door-

panel sensor, but in the moment he grasped at his belt buckles and turned to sit he was startled at Da-Hee's head's appearing at the doorway to the bathroom.

“What the hell! You nearly saw— “

“—Oh ! Don't be silly, Jonny. You know—?”

“—That frackin' door ... I've seen bloody Tower Bridge close faster than that.”

“I'm a girl who likes a mission in life. And, you know what ...? Whatever happens, you two are cute, and I'm going to make sure you and Antonella get back together, and I will personally buy you a high-end Samsung Comfortron for your wedding. Ok ...?”

“You are—”

“—And, it's good to hear you say '*Frack*' in your cute London accent.”

“You are taking the piss, right ?”

“It's got speed settings, the door. And I think it's you that's, you know, about to take *a piss*... Enjoy !”

*What kind of bathroom door has speed-settings !* thought Jonny, as the sliders rushed shut like in a bad sci-fi movie, Da-Hee slipping her activating hand out just in time.

Jonny eased back down onto the curved warm ledges. He tugged at his shirt-tails without looking down. Glimpses of his belly, that he could no longer suck in, reminded him of unused but numerous fitness Apps on his phone, and the *6-week*, the *30-day*, the *Hi-*



*Intensity* fitness plans he had tried to drop two belt-notches before his wedding. *Sitting on the John*, she had just said. *And weighing heavy on Jonny*. Sitting on the toilet made Jonny pensive. May be this ran in the family: his father always liked to boast that his best business ideas came to him on the toilet, to the extent that he had his own personal toilet cubicle installed in his office in London. Jonny's urine tinkled out, with perhaps a 10% easing of his internal tension and anxiety. It was dark, with an unusual smell — the chemicals in the lunar tap-water, no doubt. The washer-robot to one side looked to be an advanced model, and Jonny thought for a moment about activating it to take a quick sample, for a health check, glucose and radiation levels etc. A little memory drifted into his mind about the minor drama Antonella had had in the zero-gravity toilet on the shuttle. Strangely, in the few courtship meetings they had had in London, he had found her, by several degrees, less hygienically-minded than him. Soon that little train of thought pushed back the 10% anti-anxiety effect of his empty bladder, and was scaling the anxiety levels the other way. Soon he would feel a sweat on his forehead. Time to get up from, what his father called, the throne.

“Room-guests, comply !” This was the voice of the Room-Control computer. “Alteration to room levels as instructed. Boosting Nitrogen-radicles, as instructed. Mr Jonathan Squire, I have cross-referenced your stated allergies.”

*What !* thought Jonny, causing him to fumble a step in the re-assembly of his underwear, trousers and belt-buckle.

“Bloody hell !” he exclaimed. “ Wash-Robe ! Please clean-up, especially the drops on the lid.”

The robot docked in a recess started up instantly, with the smoothest unfurling of brushes and hoses that Jonny had ever seen — he'd make a note of the model. (He could bring up the matter to deflect his father's anger at the inevitable debrief of Jonny's disastrous trip to the moon): "Comply ! Shall I wait until you exit, sir ?"

"No, now. I'll wash my hands ... "

"Comply. Partial clean started. I detect enough urine on the seat to perform Radiation level, but not other diagnostics—"

"—Just the clean, robe !"

Jonny's wet hand did not engage the door-sensor first, or even second go. There was a counter-push of warmer air as the toilet-door opened, as when you walk into a shopping mall in winter.

"*Umm*, Danni ... The room-settings just now ... ? What the FRACK ... ! No ... !" As Jonny turned to face the bedroom suite, the lighting had been altered, the shutters to the lunar panorama closed, and on the edge of the bed Da-Hee was mostly undressed and mostly in sexual congress with the robot Jonny had bought from a man in Soho called Mr Chen.

"Just as I thought, " said Da-Hee, pulling back her face from the composite-skin. "This Chinese stuff is hopeless. It doesn't even have auto-lubrication."

"Danni. Seriously ? Did you have to ... ? In our suite ? Like, now !"

"*Our*, as in yours and Antonella's ? But, anyway, no time like the present ... And, it's what I do for a living. I review tech-products. And, honestly, Jonny, you got ripped off. "

“The head’s round the wrong way !” Jonny was still at the wash-room door; the sex-bot’s face was towards him, making comical un-coordinated facial expressions while its skin-covered hand was making rotary movements around Da-Hee’s slim, pale waistline.

“That’s what I mean. The Samsung bots will project any 3D face you want, down to the gaps in your lover’s teeth. Hey, don’t come too close, unless you want to be in the video clip.”

“Video clip ! Owwww...!” Jonny, a-fluster, recoiled back and bounced up, not into the padded ceiling, but against the hard frame of the bathroom door.

“Oh, you OK...? Listen, I won’t be too long. I’ll put it once into *Orgasm Mode*, but there’s no way I’m doing a segment horizontally. This Chinese junk-unit probably weighs a ton, even at Lunar Gravity.  
“

“Do I ... ? I mean, what ... ?”

“Don’t worry, Jonny. I won’t embarrass you by asking you to join in. Nothing personal. But, it’s how I make a living. ”

*Embarrass ! Nothing personal !* Jonny was beginning to feel a little queasy; was it the air he was breathing that Da-Hee has changed too, he wondered.

“My bad review ... it might help you get more money back from the crook who sold it to you. Oh, and when I said *make a living*, don’t think I’m a prostitute, *ha ha ha*, I do tech reviews. Hey, we could do the crater later. Hey, that rhymes ! *Crater, later— Ahh, ooff*, I felt *that*, decent gear change, Kimchi !”

“I’ll just ... “ The suite was expansive, but all open-plan. Jonny could have, of course, left completely, but since he was already stood there, and since he knew the speed-settings of the door-slides, he went back into the bathroom. The washer-robe promptly alerted him to the fact that he had sat back on the toilet with his trousers still on.

He could distract himself by doing some of the Net searches, for example about the chemical composition of the resort tap-water. *She had called her sex-bot Kimchi !* Was that her being ironic, or respectful towards him, Jonny ? Selecting private communication, Jonny really felt that he was compelled to do a Net search on the girl on his bed. Perhaps he could see what other “tech reviews” she had up on-line, may be to give him a tiny surprise up his sleeve he could spring on her in conversation.

“Private Computer, can you hear me ?”

“Comply. Private to Suite Washroom.”

“I want you to find more information ... about the girl on the bed in the suite. “

“Comply. There is a girl on the bed. She is engaged in activity with robot Model RP7. No other identifier. Shall I invite her to the Private Meeting ?”

“No ! Just ...” An idea came into Jonny’s head which oscillated wildly between the stupid/genius markers as it crystallised in his brain. “Computer can you communicate with Model RP7, and find some way of identifying her through, I don’t know, her body fluid biomarkers ?”

There was a pause. Back home Jonny loved all his personal and professional robots, and in the never-ending debates in the media between the intellectuals and the celebrities and the stacies and the politicians, he himself believed that the neural nets in today's computers were nowhere near to autonomy or sentience and that robots were boon companions in life. The AI's pauses after a command, were to Jonny, cute and like when you asked a four year old child an ethical question like, would it be OK to take an extra cookie from the jar, if they tasted super-nice. He anticipated that the answer from the Room Control computer would be all about personal privacy regulations, and the User Agreement that Da-Hee probably had with the sex-bot, and basically *no-can-do*. Or worse still, Jonny thought he was about to be told that his 600 quid sex-bot had been 'chipped' and was stolen property.

"Mr Jonathan Squire. You have a *Virtual-Knock* on your suite door. She has tagged it: *Urgency High*."

*Holy Frack ! Antonella ?! No one else knows me here.* Jonny's brain started doing loops. There was no screen in the bathroom as he looked round for one.

"Room Control ! Is she a thin, brown-haired girl ?"

"No, sir, he is 182 centimetres, no hair, percentage-body-fat estimate 32%. The companion is an Advanced Resort Security Robot, gendered female."

"Did you ... did you announce this in the main suite, to my guest on the bed ?"

"Comply. Advanced Security Protocols take maximum priority. Protocol instructs me to instruct you: mandatory entry to this suite is

imminent and unavoidable.”

Jonny made his first competent manoeuvre under lunar gravity: he propelled himself at a 45 degree angle towards the door-sensor. He tapped once, twice, three times, and at the same time heard “Oh, Jonny, help me !” — Da-Hee’s voice — on the other side of the slide-door ...

... which shot open at its maximum speed.

Jonny’s eyes blinked. One second, the image of the sombre, grey door-panel; next second, the full-frontal nudity of Da-Hee’s body — the first time he had seen a real fully-naked female body up so close. It was all there. The last bit of anatomy that Jonny checked off was Da-Hee’s little face which was scrunched and red and tears were splashing down both cheeks.

“Jonny ! It’s my fat Korean Moonie-man outside. He wants to kill me, for sure ... because you can’t plug people back in anymore. Help me !”



## Chapter 5 — Antonella

“Seriously, though. What the *frack* is keeping us up in the air in this thing ?” asked Antonella, in a hushed, awe-inspired voice. In its descent the SkyLev would traditionally fall silent as the passengers witnessed the spectral sheen and glinting static as the carriage traversed the ionosphere.

“You did not, therefore, study Isotopic Polymer science, Miss Antonella ?”

“I did. All those weird spiders, and stuff ... But, I’m a history post-grad, and that’s not my period.”

“That is nice. A scientist cannot say, *That is not my equation, that is not my molecule*. My opinion: history is black, and dead and finished, so what is the point of it ? But I can explain, *what the frack is keeping us up*. I can reach and draw ... “ Pirix had let Antonella have the seat by the window; in the condensation he drew a perfect circle representing the Earth, then a tangent and then a perpendicular in a series of dots.

In the mid-22nd century a research team from the University of California San Francisco romped home with, not *one*, but *two* Nobel prizes for their biophysical research. Searching for novel proteins, they irradiated many common forms of insect life. Accelerated evolution and mutation in their laboratories of one particular spider, whose habitat was originally the parched landscapes of the Mojave, bore an unexpected finding. *Palystes karvanses* was the species and after a controlled mutation one cohort began to extrude a silk, whose properties were freakish, supernatural even. It is said that the definition of genius is the recognition of special connections and patterns in otherwise mundane inputs and data. So-called “*PalKar*” fibre was recognised, harnessed and developed by the UCSF team led by the self-effacing and shy Prof Miguel Huck-Babel, or MHB, as the world’s schoolchildren came to know of him. The iconic image of



the 2140s was of the diminutive but portly Prof MHB, suspended in the middle of his Palo Alto lab by two hair-like filaments of PalKar fibre tied above to a light-fitting. True to its original function, the university opened up a universe. The fibre's potential crossed the Golden Gate, as it were, to the engineering faculty in Oakland, who produced a polymer braid which began to be unravelled heavenwards, lifting first a concrete-block, then a shipping container to the upper-limits of a drone helicopter, some 7000 metres above sea-level. Nobel Prize number two came when a column of PalKar braided fibres was attached to one of the space-stations in geostationary orbit above the West Coast of the USA. Hindering space-travel since the start was always the huge fuel costs in placing machinery and material out of the planet's gravitational field. As with all scientific paradigm shifts, by small steps over a couple of decades, a scientific dream of overcoming gravity was achieved. The first manned capsule to ascend in this fashion in a 50km column of PalKar fibres docked with the Low-Orbit Station in 2051, producing a much-mocked quotation from one Flight-Major Hennessey of the United States Air Force: "Man can now fall upwards." Working on the same principle as a car-jack, huge payloads could be made to make a slow but steady ascent to vast orbiting warehouses of weightlessness at the magic 50 kilometre mark above Terra Firma.

"But, " said Antonella. "I still don't get it. Why doesn't the station up there just get pulled down, say, if it was something mega-heavy ?"

"It is a system of pulleys and ratchets, within each braided-polymer itself. You must know the 'ii' law ? Each lifting force is incremental and infini—... infini— "

"—Infinitesimal ?"

"Yes. That is your accent. Nice. Have you used a car-jack? "

"A *what* ?" said Antonella, leaning back from the window-seminar with a puff of her cheeks.

“Changing a wheel ... you have to lift the side of the car, by hand.”

“What, like, an old, actual, *car* ?”

“You are the historian. Therefore automobile history is interesting.”

“In England everyone uses slots. Nearest car would be, I dunno, in Africa, probably ... “

“Anyway ... that’s how they got all the lead-shielding up for the moon development, and especially, for the radiation shielding on Mars. “

“I thought you just chewed through a whole bunch of Rada pills the whole time ... which reminds me.”

Antonella pulled out of her pocket a little pouch, which was monogrammed with the logo of the Moon-Shuttle company. It contained a toothbrush and some cheap polarised lenses and two Rada tablets in a silver blister pack.

“You want my other one, Pirix ? I suppose we’ll get the full check-up down there.”

“No. My level was under 10. The Gongzho Corporation gives us a good supply. Yes — I expect a full compulsory medical at the WHO sub-station, at 500 metres ... “

“Hey, buddy ... that was a nice tutorial.”

It wasn’t as if Antonella hadn’t noticed him, the man turning fully round in his seat to address them. He was the only other young person to be seen. Plus, he had already made a couple of smirking glances at Antonella, as Pirix had been tracing his diagram in the condensation on the plexi-glass. And, when he did turn fully round, being still somewhat weightless, his whole body bobbed up above Antonella and Pirix:

“Yep. That was a nice talk, buddy. But you didn’t mention the Meridians. And, even my Mary back home would tell y’all that you gotta talk *ellipses*, right *here* ... “ In a slightly provocative gesture, he swept his hand through Pirix’s diagram in the condensation of the window. “But, look *there*, honey ... You gotta a real peachey view of the Corona Major there.”

“Oh, *wow* !” exclaimed Antonella, following his finger-sweep aft and seeing dancing fluorescent streaks in the highest atmospheric clouds.

“I’m Jed, by the way, US Military Aviation. Good to talk to someone born in this half of the century, *ha, ha, ha*.”

“I’m Antonella. Hi. “ Pirix did not introduce himself straight away, since Jed had swung his whole frame around and put his back against the glass, his feet dangling beyond the spare seats in his row.

“Yeah, that shit looks even better when you’re flying through it in a *You-Know-What* by yourself ... “

Antonella had his full gaze on her, and she chewed at the words, wondering if she had it in her to divine what he had meant by *you-know-what*.

“Hey, you look like you know your hardware. You a pilot ? You should tell your girlfriend—”

“—Well, I’m not, actually...”

“Yes. I am a pilot. But with the mining industry. Therefore, you are referring to the *V-Class Hyper-jet* of the USA space-force.”

“Hey, bingo, “ cried Jed. Then, turning to Antonella: “And V stands for *Very frackin’ fast*. So, honey, if you’re, as you say, *not, actually* ... how do you know this space-trucker ?”

Pirix didn't let Antonella engage with the question: "Therefore, the military codes are more strict than the corporate. Until re-gain of zero point nine G on a civilian vessel, seat restraints are compulsory."

"*Whoa* ! Calm your farm, there, dude. If anyone has the G-skills it's me. And, I don't even have to ask to know you're space-trucking with the Chinese Corp. Yeah ? And, talking about regs that *matter*, honey, they're too tight to give out proper G-suits for the long stuff to Mars. So, guys end up with that weird muscle bulk, like that. "

Pirix adopted the stock still posture in his seat in which Antonella first saw him in the Moon-Shuttle. Theirs were the only voices talking. Pirix pressed, and released his foot to the floor a few times: there was nowhere near enough gravity for the '*seatbelts-off* ' signs to appear.

"Well. I had ... a short vacation at the resort. "

"Cool. See the crater ?"

"No ... well, bit of a story, there. "

"We got four hours of descending. Hey, and listen, that stuff about Hennessey's first words. You know that ain't true. It's all Chinese propaganda. You ask any of the super-oldies sitting here. I met him; he was retiring, my first year at the academy, Pepperdine Campus, near *You-know-what*. Anyway, you the first 'Antonella' I met ... So, what was the little story up Moon-side, huh ?"

"I'd need a drink or two to tell it, I'd say," said Antonella with a blush.

"Can be done, can be done ... As I say, you'd get on swell with my Mary back home. "

"Actually. Gosh ! I just thought ... these columns go up to all these Meridian stations. I never wondered ... I mean, what stops things,

like birds, like helicopters, from flying into it all ?”

“Patrols, honey. That’s part of the military job I do in the hyper-jets. Lookin’ after the lives of lovely people like you on these here SkyLevs. “

“*Wow !*”

“Plus, the three-mile concentric fields around each column, they'd pick up a tin-foil toy plane coming anywhere near. Plus the laser cannon my buddies are on down below. We gotcha covered, Antonella, honey.”

Jed had been raising his voice somewhat, hoping to enfold the admiring looks of passengers listening in, other than just Antonella and Pirix. The latter voiced out an even but juicy return to the earlier barbs:

“There has been no military casualty or death on our planet since 2109. Military aviation is mostly now all about patrols. But, *Tech Trend Journal* in Europe published an experiment showing that drone systems were superior to human in routine patrol duties.”

There was a pause; Pirix looked straight ahead; Jed rubbed his chin reflexly:

“You best be real careful saying things like that about the United States Air Force, boy. Anyway, why the frack does anyone need humans on those space-trucks going out to Mars ...? Hey, Antonella, reminds me of that old joke, where the Chinaman on board says to HQ, *What’s my job ?* and they come back and say, *You just feed the monkey !* Know it ?”

Antonella cracked a smile , but shook her head at the same time.

“Therefore human input is important,” said Pirix. “On interplanetary flight, because of the inherent instability of Boron Nuclide Fission

drives. Your jets just use old-tech rocket-fuel. Human pilots provide nice comrade-ship to the crew. Second, human pilots cope best with unexpected events in deep space. “

“You are one funny comrade, is all I can say ! And, look up ... a *bing-and-a-bong*, a *ching-and-a-chong* ... 'seat-belts off' sign. It probably means we can take a few steps over to the mini-bar and get that drink for you, Antonella. “

“Now, now, boys ... let's all stay friends, and enjoy the views.”

Pirix had no real reason to — he wasn't in the slightest thirsty, or interested in bantering further with Jed — but he got up and stepped into the aisle towards the service area. The inside of the SkyLev had fairly retro-stylings, with no interactive windows and not a holographic presence in sight. It was the reason why most of the elderly tourists on board preferred leaving their VR headsets on. They were in the 'blue sky' phase of the descent and the planet's curvature had disappeared from view. It had been a smart move from the boys, and there were only two ahead of them in the queue for services.

“Hey, buddy, “ said Jed. “No hard feelings, and all. I get that a lot of guys don't make the cut for Military flying and they stay pissed about it.”

He glanced at Pirix, and couldn't read the flat expression he saw: “So, anyway, hey ... at least you're flying in space. You could be flying some shitty airline down there, *ha, ha, ha*.” Pirix had his face turned upwards towards the sky-light glass. “But, listen, hey, that Antonella chick, cute English accent ... I mean, if you're not hitting ... You gotta let another batter step up to the plate. You know what I mean ? I got my Mary back home, but when a guy's on tour, hey ? “

“Are you not feeling what I am feeling ?”

“Whatever ... I’m just saying: swap seats, when we get back with drinks. I’m gonna—”

“—The G-force, “ Pirix braced at his knees. “It is approximately one-point-seven-five. Therefore, it is best felt in the joints of the pelvis. You must know this, Military Pilot.”

“Man, you look like you need to take yourself a shit. Wrong queue ... all the super-oldies are already lined up at the john, *ha, ha, ha* ! I get you a beer. You, in my seat, remember, back there !”

“It is a forced deceleration. G-force is at least two-point-zero...”

As Pirix spoke lights around started flashing. A female voice, claiming to be the 'Chief Operator' started warning everyone to be back in their seat-belts, before the voice cracked, proving it to be human, not robotic or a recorded message: “Oh, hell ... no, no!” Pirix made a mental note not to make any comment to Antonella about female pilots not being able to keep their cool. It was an emergency stop at 6000 metres altitude. Whoever was on their feet, crumpled to the floor of the SkyLev; elderly hips and knees were under critical strain; a few screams were heard; one old fellow was sobbing apologies that he had lost control of his bladder in the toilet queue. When Pirix looked to his youthful colleague, he saw Jed helping himself to a handful of liquor-miniatures from the bar in the pandemonium.

Pirix had power enough in his legs to take himself back to his row of seats where Antonella had a look of terror on her face. She found it hard to lift her hand towards Pirix; a deceleration wobble at her cheeks made her look grotesquely baby-faced.

“Pirix ! Are we going to die ? Have those frackin’ fibres snapped ?”

“Therefore, Miss Antonella, the G-force would be completely opposite. We would be crashed to the ceiling. Squeeze with your

hips inwards. Our velocity is now nearly zero. The cause is external: look.”

From looking into Pirix’s face, Antonella, swivelled her head ... and screamed, a child’s scream, that easily pierced the low-pitched wailing hubbub of the fallen geriatric passengers and the alarm buzzers and beeps in the cabin.

A few inches away, on the outside of the plexi-glass, Antonella was looking into the black hooded visor of a figure attached by a mechanical gauntlet to the outside of the SkyLev.

There was a frantic, sobbing wail from an elderly passenger on the opposite side of the cabin which drew everyone’s attention to a second figure in black who landed with a dull thud against the plexi-glass and held fast via a similar hydraulic gauntlet. The wailing woman inside held her hands up in some kind of prayer: “In your wisdom, O Lord. You wish you to take my life like this ! Before my cancer ... Your love is infinite !”

The SkyLev had come to a stop. The beauty of its design was friction-braking, which was why the emergency stop had been almost silent, but for the panic amongst the passengers. It had two human staff and two service robots. The latter seemed in more control than the former. After a few minutes, it became apparent that the 'Chief Operator' of the SkyLev had only one of two responses to the hysterical questions being shouted at her: “I am consulting Protocol” or “There is no Protocol response”.

Slowly, it seemed that the eyes of everyone were turning towards Jed and Pirix who were the only passengers on their feet in the centre of the cabin, and not cowering, kneeling, or sobbing between the seats.

“They’re frackin’ terrorists, right ?” said Jed grimly. “Well, I got an idea ... “



“Terrorists !” cried the Chief Operator woman, clamping her phone to her ear. “SkyLev Control. Need Protocol. O Lord, my saviour ... “

“Frack ! Now I know why they call this thing the *God-Zipper* !” replied Jed, watching the Chief Operator woman suddenly fall to the floor and sandwich her phone between her two hands which she held up heavenwards in supplication.

“I do not believe they are terrorists, “ said Pirix. “I thought I saw a craft above us before. Therefore, they used a High-Altitude balloon, then used cold-compression jet-packs to manoeuvre to our position in free-fall. All organics and plastics. Therefore, the concentric fields did not detect them. I do not believe God is relevant to the solution to our problem.”

“Frackin’ protesters ! They were up doing shit at the space-station before,” snorted Jed. “Yep, this one on starboard side is lighting up ... “

“Miss Antonella, will you read the screen message ?” asked Pirix, pulling Antonella up by the hand. “ Therefore, Mr Jed ... because the SkyLev only operates in a vertical vector, *Starboard* and *Port* are not accurate terms for us.”

“What ! Getting tired of your nit-picking crap, man ... Hey, listen, “ Jed came closer to Pirix and Antonella. “Yeah, these frackin’ stacie protest assholes slipped through with their frackin’ hessian jet-packs ... But I got buddies manning the laser-cannons down on the ground there. Say the word, and I can call in a strike ... Just like that !”

As Jed raised his hand to snap his fingers, another scream went up: “He’s got a bomb ! He’s got a bomb!”. All eyes swung to other side. The figure clinging to the glass from the outside via the articulated gauntlet, produced a cylinder from the suit-webbing with his free hand. The cylinder was the size of a drinks-bottle and it too stuck itself to the plexi-glass. If he wasn’t a terrorist, he was doing a fine

job of paralysing almost everyone inside the SkyLev with fear. More of the super-elderly fell to their knees, eyes closed, hands in prayer.

“I say: gimme the phone; I call my buddies, for a laser-hit. Now !” Jed made a motion to prise the corporate phone from the praying hands of the captain of the vessel. Pirix put a hand in the way: “The smallest military cannon will breach and decompress the SkyLev. Therefore it is certain death. Can you not predict this ?”

“Buddy, I am US Military ... You don’t ...”

Antonella stepped in: “You seriously want them to fire at us ! Think, Jed ! Frack’s sake !”

A switch flicked in Jed’s face: “Well, yeah ... You put it like that, and, this is not a military engagement, and, yeah ... probably way too much collateral with a laser-strike. So, I’ll give you that one ... “

Pirix ignored Jed. He was thinking fast: “Miss Antonella, can you read the screen of the nearest attacker ? Chief Operator, is there EVA equipment on board ? Therefore, I will try to identify the object of the other attacker.”

As Pirix leaned his knee on the seat to enable him to study the movements of the figure in the hi-tec aeronautic suit on the other side of the glass, he noted the presence of a much smaller man doing the same on the row of seats adjacent.

“Let me at’em ... Just let me at’em, “ he kept repeating in a rasping voice.

“Therefore, you are not frightened ?” said Pirix. “I am thinking strongly about an EVA manoeuvre.”

“They’re just two-bit stacies with too much time on their hands. Yeah, you know it !” He coughed as he flexed his head upwards to shake a fist at the figure beyond the glass.

In turn, some elements of incompetence were entering into the tactics of the attackers. Antonella could be heard enlisting the help of the service robot because the attacker with the screen fixed to her chest-piece had put up her demands in what looked like Korean Hangul script and not English. On Pirix's side, the cylinder, for the third time, had lost its adhesion to the glass.

"What is your lung function?" asked Pirix to the old man.

"What ?"

"For accompanying me on an EVA. I am not a medical specialist, but I count your respiratory rate—"

"Oh, *fuck*, get on with it !!" The old man shouted with impatience banging at the glass. Several passengers stared at him, for his very coarse and archaic profanity. "Yeah, yeah. *I said it*. I'm 97. Say what I want ... They pulled this stunt last month and messed up my hover-cruise off Venice Beach. Come on ! I know—" In his excitement the old man subsided suddenly in a coughing fit. Pirix resolved that this man's chance of death from lung failure in any Extra Vehicular Activity was very high.

The free hand of the flailing attacker outside finally got the cylinder to stick firmly. Some diodes on it began to pop and the material comprising its wall began to mold and flatten against the plexi-glass.

"Here we go, here we go ... Well done, asshole!" said the old man sarcastically. "Seen it before—"

There was dull shudder from without — which made Pirix flinch back from the glass on the inside — such that the even louder collective scream behind him seemed inconsequential. The outside of the glass had filled with a screed of white liquid in a smear about sixty centimetres in diameter; the cylinder had jettisoned away into the

five mile drop down to Southern California. A gloved-digit began to etch a back-to-front letter “K” in the liquid

“Pirix ! “ came Antonella. “She managed to put the English version on the screen: FOR THE FUTURE KIDS. NO MORE LAB BABIES. WE WANT— Oh, hang on, it’s gone into, *err*, German now. Hey, Robe, translate again !”

But, the old man next to Pirix did not need any prompting: “Yeah, yeah, for the kids of tomorrow. We want climate *this-and-that* and *ra-ra-ra* ... Hey, you retard ! YOU GOTTA WRITE MIRROR-IMAGE LETTERS ! We’re on the *other side* of the glass ...!”

The old man was working himself into another coughing fit; the attacker continued to write “KIDS” back to front with his finger.

“Are you OK ? “ asked Pirix. “Therefore, I will prepare for an EVA.”

“And ...you know [cough] ...? That’s not some kind of ... paint they put up.”

“What is it ?”

“These lazy, asshole [cough] stacie layabouts [cough] Sit around jerking off [cough, cough] They get half a pint of their spunk in a tube, and they pull a stunt like this.”

“I have not heard of this. Therefore, it is most disturbing and unhygienic.”

“You been away, under a rock, youngster ? *Lemme at’em* ... They messed with my diary [cough] once too much”

“I am a pilot on the Martian freighters. I have been away from Earth for 18 months.”

“Well, take this knife. Go out there and stab those lazy asshole stacies in each eye for me.”

“This is a ceramic pocket-knife. Undetectable by biosecurity scanner. Therefore, it is illegal.”

“I was young once too ... This bad boy comes with ... ‘S my *peacemaker* ... [cough] Clear off that scum out there !”

The air-lock on the SkyLev was a rotational one, which Pirix hated. You climbed into the EVA suit fixed to an axle; the glass bubble closed around you; then after the system matched the in-out pressures and temperatures, the whole chamber swivelled 180 degrees. Pirix felt an instant chill from the sparse atmosphere as he faced the clouds and the horizon. The suit was under voice-control and was way in advance of the ones provided by the Gongzho Corporation. The shell of the suit was set to auto-grasp and the myriad of hydraulic suckers would lock-and-unlock to the outer wall of the SkyLev as Pirix chose to grapple onto the roof first.

At the vertex, he paused to pass his gloved hand over the miracle that was the PalKar braid, eight units of the same threaded around the SkyLev. That was when he noticed his suit tugging towards the braid and a line of channels opening, like beckoning mouths, on the surface of his suit. “ A real belt-and-braces thing !” he murmured to himself. He had the parachute on his back if he fell, but if he wanted to, he could abseil the six kilometres down the fibres too.

Pirix looked above him at the pale moon in the violet sky. The tiny Martian orb was invisible. He paused to recall the last time he was suspended, in a moment of fair drama, from PalKar fibres. For Pirix, God was never relevant to the solution of practical problems. But, on that occasion, on a Martian mining scaffold, he had been caused to re-consider his view of advanced robotic sentience, as his life was being saved. In contrast, the current situation meant he was concerned for the other human life, a few metres below him, more than his own.

How strong was that hydraulic gauntlet, was the question which would decide Pirix's tactic as he peered down the side-panel from the roof at the clinging figure. She was attached via her knees or feet too, which made up Pirix's mind. He instructed the on-board system to over-ride the auto-grasp, checked the vertical gyroscope one last time and then dropped.

Facing inwards, the look of horror and surprise on the passengers faces, might have given her a split-second's warning, but with a bump Pirix landed on top of the protester's back. With the knife in one hand he cut the strapping of her parachute, and with his other hand he re-engaged his own auto-grasp system. His only mistake was asking his suit-system to open a proximity communication with hers. All he heard was an ear-piercing screaming that drilled into his own head. There would not be any rational negotiation out there clinging to the plexi-glass.

The passengers inside were cheering as Pirix crab-marched the attacker back across the outer-wall towards the air-lock again. She was considerably smaller than Pirix, and was clinging so tightly to his suit, that the air-lock bubble closed around both of them. The lungs on her ! Pirix tapped back into her Comms and she was still wailing and screaming hysterically. On the inside, he tried not to disentangle her too forcefully into the Chief Operator's cockpit. She was probably under arrest, for which, Pirix thought, there was probably an on-board protocol. However, his thoughts were already moving towards the changed tactics he might have to use to prise off her comrade from the opposite side of the SkyLev.

Instead: "Pirix ! That was bloody hero stuff. The other one just jumped off and parachuted," said Antonella.

Jed moved ahead of her: "Yeah, not bad for a space-trucker. But, we get the suit-and-boots off this scum here, and she's mine. I gotta call it ... Meridian 120 is under US Military jurisdiction."

The Chief Operator of the SkyLev had regained an element of authority and was not happy about everyone crowding into her cockpit. She had, she explained, already tasked her main on-board robot with a security protocol from the SkyLev Corporation. The processing of the detainee, she continued, could be handled in-house.

The detainee, the protester, had also stopped screaming and was a mature lady, in her 50s, who was soon keen to voice her freedoms and rights as a professional activist as the security robot and the Chief Operator began to remove her jet-suit.

Jed wasn't finished, however: "Yeah, somebody gotta stand up to you stacie assholes stopping free men and woman going about their lawful business. You don't mess with US Airspace ..."

"Frack you, army-grunt ! I know my rights ... "

"Yeah, well, gonna give my buddies, ground-side a holler and they'll light your damn parachute-comrade up, laser or drone — no frackin' worries ... !"

"Nooooo ! You leave my Johnny-boy alone ... !"

The protester scooped up and opened her own black cylinder and then flung out the contents with a violent swing.

The sticky white liquid flew out. Jed ducked. Antonella didn't.

\*

"Have you got your hair dry ? The ground temperature is only 70 Fahrenheit, " said Pirix as they queued at the disembarkation terminus.

“No, well, the sink on the SkyLev was really small. I need a shower. *Twice* in one bloody day ...”

“What ? “ asked Pirix.

“Oh, nothing ... I’ll try the washroom over there, I think.”

“Those stacie scum are just frackin’ disgusting, “ added Jed. All the passengers were herded together awaiting biosecurity. The SkyLev terminus was 500 metres above the Los Angeles street level in one of the standard WHO buildings. The hold-up was in the processing of the protester by law enforcement. There was, of course, the constitutional grey zone between the World Health Authority, in the space-zone and the sky and the US Federal agencies on ground level.

“I coulda done the EVA with you, “ continued Jed to Pirix. “But it’s, like, an insurance nightmare, you know ... if I kill someone in a non-combat role. Or, shit, if something happened to me ... “

“I made a calculated risk. “

“And, hell, I saw your skin graft right there ... I mean you being plugged in before ... your life was worth less than others for a time, if you know what I’m saying ... ?“

“Therefore, as a joke, even ... that is not funny. “

“What are you boys arguing over ?“ asked Antonella coming back. “The drier was broken, can you —”

“—Hey, hey, hey ! No, no ...!” Pirix suddenly burst from the company of Jed and Antonella, and tried to clamp his arms around the coughing old man who had smashed a phone to the ground and was beginning a run and lunge towards the female protester at the front of the queue.



“Lemme at’em. I’ll stab her !”

“No, no, stop ! Mister old man, stop !” Pirix had hold of the old man’s arm by his side and managed to smother the view of the pocket knife, but the security robot’s attention was roused.

“Sir, you are making a threat of violence in a designated biosecurity zone, “ said the robot. Pirix saw preparatory lights flashing on its armour.

“I’ll [cough] kill you , too !”

“Sir, a Level 1 UN/WHO Securitron Robot has Global Constitutional exemption from Kill-Switch regulations. I must issue you a penalty warning. “

“These climate *fuckers* have *fucked* with me once too many times !” An audible, collective gasp of shock went up around the old man as he uttered forth.

“Sir. This is an official UN/WHO premises. You have been recorded using the offensive *F-word* both loudly and in public. Two times. I issue two money-penalties on the spot and ask you to cease.”

But the squirming old man wasn’t finished. He had, despite Pirix’s restraints, got to within a couple of metres of the woman-protester. A second security robot wheeled nearer.

“You stacie scum,” he screamed. “you’re nothing but ... [cough] “

*Don’t say it, just don’t say it !* thought Antonella, holding breath.

“[cough] Nothing but ... a *Krazy*.”

The gasp went up again, with a few muted cries of “Oh, no”.

The robot moved to seize the coughing old man with its prehensile gripper:

“Sir, this is an official UN/WHO premises. You have been recorded saying aloud and in public the proscribed *K-word*. For the penalty, I must detain you and call my supervising officer.”

## Chapter 6 — Jonny

In the lunar suite, Da-Hee stood naked, sideways to Jonny, and screamed. The doorway to the suite came open. The sound of the forced entry at the sliding door was faster and lower-pitched than the gentle swish created by a normal key-entry.

All his life Jonny had recoiled from moments of acute danger, these pinnacles of confrontation. His inner dial was pushed way round towards a '*flight*'-response, and away from '*fight*'. So he jabbed at the bathroom door panel. It started closing at millimetre-speed, but Jonny was physically jumped too far back to alter the rate of closing: a slow-motion wreck, indeed, happened before his eyes.

Wow ! Da-Hee's dial was way over the other way. Jonny heard her stifle her second scream and then saw her slender, white naked frame adopt some kind of martial-arts pose with a cry. But, a bull-necked man, grunting oaths in a foreign tongue came rushing past Jonny's view. His width in profile was at least three-times Da-Hee's. Then, the security robot came into view, and was uttering Resort Regulations and quoting legal infringements in a mixed up gibberish of alternating English, Chinese, and, perhaps, Jonny thought, Korean, too.

The bathroom door finally closed. Jonny was drenched in sweat and anxiety; he took a pace one way, then took one-and-a-half paces the other way. The little toilet robot whirred and swerved to avoid him. An enormous and devastating tension was building in every part of his body. He could not believe what he did next: he picked up his phone which was on the bathroom counter, from his habit of scrolling games whilst sitting on the toilet, and looked at it. It was a pure *displacement activity*, as the behaviorists put it. He could not believe

that uppermost in his mind, at that precise moment, was getting a refund for his father's expenses. There were the unmistakeable sounds of a physical struggle on the floor in the hallway of the suite. *Oh, god, was that the sound of a punch?* The predominant voice was the guttural Korean male; the only female sound Jonny could hear was a whimper. The chances that Da-Hee had some super-human martial arts skills that could deliver a video-game-style killer blow were as slender as her physique. As for Jonny, he was less a hunter-gatherer, more a bureaucrat-gatherer, and he felt a familiar self-hatred begin to paralyse him.

“Jonny ... help, help !”

That was the cry from Da-Hee.

In the late-22nd century there was a global move to curtail the autonomy of robotic entities in human society. There was the looming fear that the calamity of 7/17 should never happen again. There was even a denial that robotic “thinking” as such could or should have any influence at all on human attitudes or conduct. Be all that as it may, it was the toilet robot at Jonny’s feet that piped up with a response, from its low-level programming (which in turn flicked some primordial over-ride in Jonny’s own brain):

“I can help>Madam>I can help>Sir ” the toilet domestic began to repeat.

*Oh, frack !* thought Jonny. He held his hands to his head for a moment, and then held his breath. He jabbed at the bathroom door panel with the presence of mind to make it shoot open fast and clean. He scooped up the toilet robot under his arm, and then from behind the security robot, flung it with both arms at the bald Korean who was straddled over Da-Hee: it had to hit something.

The steel chassis of the toilet robot — still issuing its basic programming offer to help — struck firm and true the huge bald dome of the Korean man, and he rolled with a groan, like a gigantic beach-ball, off the body of Da-Hee.

The security robot clicked and began another long infraction-notification: “Kill !” shouted Jonny and brought a fist — (When was the last time his fingers were even curled in a fist in anger !) — down on the robot’s head-plate. It too fell silent.

“That feels good, doesn’t it ?” said Da-Hee, struggling up. “We need to get out of here.”

“Are you OK?”

“I am OK; but I just want to ... “ Da-Hee was about to deliver some form of martial-arts kick to the roly-poly Korean groaning on the floor.

“No. Danni. No, “ said Jonny, with even more surprising presence of mind. “We may have to make a case for defence at some point. It won’t look good.”

“He is a pig, Jonny !”

“He may be ...”

“OK. Let’s run !” Da-Hee grabbed Jonny’s hand, and pulled him towards the suite door, leaving the inactivated robot standing and the broken robot leaking toilet-products onto the fallen Korean Moonie-wedding groomsman.

They instinctively moved away from the main hub of the resort. When was, wondered Jonny, the last time he had actually physically *run* anywhere, let alone in ungainly half-gravity strides, holding hands with a naked woman with a pulsating alarm tone sounding from the walls around him ? He kept bumping his head on the ceiling.

“Try to crumple at the knee ! Then push laterally ! “ advised Da-Hee. “Look ! There’s a service elevator.”

“What’s going ...? Oh, my !” The door to the last suite had opened and an elderly guest craned his head: saw Da-Hee. “Oh, my ... ! Are you the stripper ? Margaret ... ?” He started calling back towards the interior for, amongst other things, his spectacles.

“Here, Danni ... put this on. “ Jonny pulled at his sweatshirt and passed it over.

“It’s not much of a disguise. “ Da-Hee smiled, as she flung it over her arms, and it reached below her knees. “Let’s get into that elevator. There’s nothing more along here, probably just an emergency air-lock.”

“Are we in trouble? We’re in trouble, right ?” Jonny stood behind Da-Hee as she pushed at the button marked ‘*Staff Only*’. “Seriously, why did you want to marry that guy ?”

“Seriously, Jonny, “ answered Da-Hee. “My whole life people, society, the Government has lied to me ... Seriously, you’re about the only one who’s ever helped me. Quick, let’s get inside. “

“Lunar Resort regulations > You must stop and submit >”

“Frack !” Jonny glanced back; at least three security robots and their human supervisor, who thuggishly just shouted ‘Oi’, appeared around the slight bend of the corridor.

“In ! Quick ...” hissed Da-Hee. “I’ll just fry the door circuits from the inside.”

In they both dived. Da-Hee made a graceful landing on several plastic crates. Jonny made a slightly more controlled side-ways leap into the elevator cavity, but his bare torso still scraped up against the interior wall, and he came to rest on the floor next to a shelf full of towels and room-snacks. By ‘*frying*’ the doors, Da-Hee meant exactly that; between levels she banged the emergency-stop and then banged the panel until it sprung open. The excursion of the service elevator was only between three levels. Da-Hee kept banging and cursing with a small tin of luxury pâté in her hand until the hesitant elevator finally stopped moving and an emergency blue safe-light lit the interior.

“There ! Fixed !” Da-Hee said, turning round to report to Jonny the very opposite of what she had achieved. Jonny had had no hand-holds as the elevator had jerked up and down and was sitting in a pile of house-keeping products on the floor.

“We’re pretty much ... “ said Jonny, from the floor. “We’re pretty much in trouble, aren’t we ? Danni ? “

“Sorry. I was just thinking ... “

“What ?”

“You saved me from that Korean pig. He was saying some terrible things to me in Korean, I don’t want to think about it. You know, I’m

not called ... There's a *hyphen* and not the letter *n* ... in the spelling. If you spell it in English. ”

“What ?”

“Well, to be honest, I probably need a new identity, probably will be my 4th or 5th ... so I might as well have a new name too. So, call me *Danni*. “

“I am ...But, seriously — “

“—I think you say the word *seriously* too much ... You could vary it with *basically*. “

“Well, OK, *basically*, we are in some serious bother here. Why did you freeze the elevator between the floors ?”

“I bought us some time; we can come up with some sort of plan; we can talk ... Just think of the *fun* story you can tell your lovely fiancée.”

“*Hmpphh*, “ Jonny puffed his lips. “That’s a great joke. Not. Here I am, stuck in a frozen elevator, with a naked woman I just met, with the security-robots after me ... Antonella will love to hear about that — if it doesn’t make the news back on the networks. Hey, talking about that, I’m freezing. Aren’t you ?”

“No. Your top is lovely and big and warm, thank you. You are my hero, you know, Jonny — a lover *and* a fighter. And when we get out of this situation, I promise I will get you two back together again. “

“I can hear noises. You think they will get this elevator moving, or do you think they will try to storm in through the roof ?”



“I think you are thinking of some action-movie. Here, I will put some of these towels over you ... just pretend you came out of the sauna.”

Jonny kept musing to himself, but appreciated Da-Hee stepping around him and piling layers of sheets and towels over his chilled skin.

“Mind you, “ he said, mostly to himself. “The laws are different on Luna here; those holiday contracts we signed were pretty detailed; it was *my* suite, in my name, after all — and only a robot was with *him* ... Hey, can you smell something ? Fish ?”

“There’s snacks all over the floor. There’s whiskey in those tiny little bottles ... Huh, *Chinese* whiskey. “

“No, “ said Jonny, sniffing conspicuously. “The snacks are all in sealed plastic packets ... “

“Oh. Now I think I know ... I can’t *totally* reject Chinese technology. It’s a female aroma ... some men like it. But ... sorry.”

“What ? “

“Jonny. I had three orgasms back there ... before the big pig rushed in. I don’t think you were as ripped off by that London shop as I thought you were. “

“Orgasms ?”

“That machine you bought ... When it gets up to speed, it's not bad. Not up there with Samsung. And I saw a tutorial mode. Hey, I'm not a

prostitute, by the way. I can prove I do on-line reviews. You weren't so badly ripped off. ”

“Seriously ... ?”

“*Basically*, I don't want to ask a personal question, but you never went with a girl did you ?”

“What ? Went where ?”

Da-Hee laughed and then scooped up a miniature of alcohol at random and ricked its cap off. “I'm thinking there are some other things I can teach you before I get you back with Miss Antonella. So, why don't we enjoy the fact that we can drink this stuff on the moon in this place whenever we want ... Here. “

The noises from above in the elevator shaft had stopped. In the blue, dim lighting, Jonny could not tell if Da-Hee's limbs, or, indeed, his own fingers were turning blue from the cold. She had a point: not about his lack of experience with women — *Was it that obvious?* — but about the wholesale differences in extra-terrestrial laws which applied in the Lunar Jurisdiction, starting with the free use of alcohol. Jonny felt the presence of his phone still in his pocket and he felt sure he could log onto as much data from the resort's system even sitting in their enforced entrapment in that service elevator.

“Here, “ proffered Da-Hee. “Have another. I can't read what it is. They are only miniature. And ... I'll sit down here, and you were about to tell me all about how and why you came up to the moon to get married. Weren't you ?”

*Was he ?*

“They’re not going to storm in through the roof, are they ? “

“No.”

“I’m thinking ... You *do* know the wedding itself, it isn’t for up here. Have you seen how much the wedding packages are ! “

“Money shouldn’t come into it if you’re both in love. As far as money goes — “

“—No, not that ... the UN/WHO global laws are different up here, aren’t they ?”

“How much is a wedding on Luna ?” asked Da-Hee keeping Jonny to the subject, indirectly, of Antonella.

“How much was the Moonie wedding with your pig-faced guy?”

“*Ha ha ha* ... You’re getting into the spirit of our lovely situation here.”

“Lovely ? Yeah, right ...”

“Tell me about your wedding, then ... your cheap wedding in London somewhere ... ?”

“No, no, no ... It’s all relative. Look, basically, in England they had this campaign going, the Government there had this bloody slogan — it was so shit — *Today the bedroom hours* ... “

In the marginalised United Kingdom of the early 2180s, Prime Minister Carter secured himself a re-election by coupling economic revival to population expansion. His campaigning slogan, born out of exhaustive market research and committee analysis was indeed:

*Today the bedroom hours / Make the boardrooms of tomorrow ours.*

The idea was as simple as the slogan was unwieldy. (Prime Minister Carter, a literature graduate of Bristol University, declared famously, of it: “At least it *rhymes*, twice, in fact.” This led to quite heated internet debate about whether “-room” and “-room” was a rhyme or just the same word) The Government of the United Kingdom simply began to provide huge financial incentives for young couples to marry and create natural childbirth, as opposed to the generation of 'Assists', children born from a variety of artificial techniques. Every country in the world faced the twin problems of too many old people and too few young people. Medical epidemiologists tracked the population shift to the last great viral pandemic between 2090 and 2105. Social scientists — and an endless industry of PhDs therefrom — identified a more complex, more pervasive global phenomenon which they characterised as *Post-Viral*. From that era, the Munich University studies and concepts, which talked of a worldwide *Syndrome of Lassitude and Ulterior Gestalt*, seemed to cross over from academia to mainstream the best and endure the longest. Hence, pre-SLUG and post-SLUG periods were frequently referenced by politicians and planners alike: in short people stopped wanting or having babies

In the first half of the 22nd century, fierce debate raged about whether this was a biological phenomenon. There was no doubt that the viral pandemic of the 2090s affected female and male fertility in the human species. Moreover, the novel virus of that period had an alarming fatality rate in children aged under 10 years. That being said, psychologists and sociologists were bracketing together a huge cohort of the world's population which had seemed to lose the drive to create family units , or, indeed, to settle into any community-orientated activities at all. In other words, the so-called *Gestalt* was an accumulation of factors which led to the general detriment of society: although, for the average 90 year old in 2150, life could not

have been happier and fuller in any other time in human history. There was yet another round to the debating battle between *medical* scientists and *social* scientists in the search for a cause for this persisting society-wide malaise. It came from researchers in the Busan Institute in United Korea. They postulated a post-viral brain disease, similar to the Japanese Encephalitis which afflicted populations in the early 20th century. This dovetailed well with the dominant paradigm of micro-brain-disease as a key feature of mental illness in the early decades of the 22nd century. As an important footnote, although East Asian research centres, such as that of Busan, were powerhouses in biotechnology, no conclusive proof was ever found for a Post-Viral Encephalitis as the proximate cause of de-population in the world.

On the other side of the world, on the Atlantic fringe, in the cluster of Islands known colloquially as '*The Other UK*', successive Governments from 2150 were trying to boost the economy by re-discovering a national identity. Europe had been long marginalised by the Trans-Pacific super-powers of China, United Korea and America. The impetus for the Carter initiative was a shock-paper, a Parliamentary Royal Report, in 2179, that showed that of the dwindling number of births-per-thousand in the United Kingdom, the percentage born with assisted fertility techniques was approaching 40 percent. Economic affairs in his country had long been led by the CEOs of foreign multi-nationals, so Prime Minister Carter found himself asking of his campaign strategists to come up with policy to address both of these issues. Pressed by journalists on a Webinar, his Home Secretary went even further: "We are giving a lot of money, for UK people age between 20 and 35 ... for them to get married ... for them to have UK babies and we'll make sure UK companies in the very near future will be run by UK citizens."

“Oh. My. *Frackin’* god, “ said Da-Hee with a hoot. “So, all that stuff I read about ... It was true. And, you are living proof of it. In the UK — the big UK, *Korea* — there must have been a million jokes about that policy. There was one ... it’s hard to translate into English, but it was, like, about little white babies being born in pin-stripe suits and company logos.”

“Well, I’m glad you lot found it funny. “

“How much money do they give you ? I mean, it is sort of like prostitution, isn’t it ? And, a contract ?”

“Actually, Danni, talking of contracts I had an idea — seeing as I can get into the resort database — on how we can get out of this?”

“How we can get out of the elevator ?”

“Well, that ... and the trouble-*slash*-mess we’re in, in general.”

“Great. But, it’s kind of fun being in here, and being in trouble, don’t you think ?”

“Not really. Let me just look up a few things ... You work out how we can get out of this lift safely. “

“There’s also a joke you can make in Korean ... because one of the words for a *CEO* is pretty close to a slang word for anal sex.”

“Danni. Really, I don’t want to know ... I need to look at the resort by-laws. “

“The punchline is about the future economy turning ... you know, to *shit*.”

Jonny looked up from his phone and did give a smile. That set off Da-Hee laughing hysterically.

Then Jonny asked: "So, what the hell did *your wonderful UK* do about the de-population situation ?"

Da-Hee continued in her hysterics. But her eyes rolled occasionally and she caught her breath, and then the pitch of her hysterics changed. The dim light and the shadows didn't let Jonny see her chin wrinkle and wobble.

She coughed: "You ... just ... get us out, Jonny."

\*

Da-Hee and Jonny found themselves sitting outside the office of the Resort Comptroller. There were indeed single rooms at the resort, and the authorities had allowed them to rest, wash-up, and prepare their case. Jonny had done rudimentary para-legal work in his father's recycling company, mostly Definitional and Environmental law. He enjoyed it. Delving into the constitutional aspects of lunar law and the governance of it had been fascinating for him, both sitting in the sweat and debris of the elevator, then later in his allotted hotel room. The Comptroller had a magisterial function and was assisted by a robotic counsel in the tribunal and some holographic human oversight from the UN/WHO executive back on Earth.

"He's going to be in there as well, isn't he ? " whispered Da-Hee.  
"The fat Moonie-pig, who came to kill me."

Jonny was a lot calmer. They had let him recover a few of his items from the Moon-Honey Suite, and he currently had on his favourite formal shirt. The last time he wore it was at a council planning meeting in Hammersmith, on behalf of his father's company. In fact, they were sat in the ante-chamber of the administrative hub of the resort, and, apart from the rounded sides of the walls around them, there was very little to demonstrate that they were on the moon.

That reminded Jonny: "Danni, when we stand up ... just hold me and don't let me bounce up and hit the ceiling."

"That's his cough ! He's behind that door, telling a load of lies to them. " Da-Hee's voice had a hint of steel to it, rather than worry. She put a hand to Jonny's arm; she was dressed in resort-issue leisure wear, a long-sleeved sweat-shirt and trousers.

"You know, " whispered Jonny bending closer still to her. "It was actually really interesting to read the fine-print of their corporate governance up here. I really think you and I have a decent case. "

"*Shhh*, I think we're on ... "

They were summoned up by name, and Jonny mentally gave himself a pat on the back: he kept one foot hooked around the chair-leg and pushed up with the other, as per a '*10 Tips For Moon Newbies*' video he had watched. A rather plush conveyor started in motion before them and led them through the double doorway.

Instantly, a guttural shout was heard to their right. The fat, bald Korean man was doing himself no favours by hurling insults at Da-Hee. The conveyor forked and delivered Jonny and Da-Hee to a simple set-up of two chairs and small table with an interactive desktop.



Between them sat the Comptroller, who looked and sounded like a bland, multi-racial television presenter, and presided over an elaborate panel of desk-tops. The first voice heard, apart from the angry Korean's, was the translator-robot sat beside him:

“Sir, and madam, my client said: *That bitch and that shit-eater are going to pay for all this.* “

“Well, as Comptroller and as moderator for the proceedings I must ask you to tell your client to respect us and not to use such abusive language here.”

Everything was being recorded by at least three cameras that Jonny could make out. He swiftly moved a hand to Da-Hee's arm with a sharp squeeze, just as he saw her mouth quiver to shout something abusive in Korean back across the room.

The Comptroller continued: “I thank you for attending these mediation proceedings. Before I let my chief tune in ... I just want to say: we run a happy resort up here. Our mission statement is all about people coming here to escape all the conflict and protest down on Earth. I've got testimonials as long as my arm, from our guests over the past fifteen years who have had life-changing experiences during their stay with us. Now, Miss Lee and Mr Seuong, I'm *sure as sure* we can all end up friends. OK, let's bring in our Chief Operating Officer, from ...”

The robot with the fat Korean was translating simultaneously — a ticker-tape display of Hangul script could be seen, but the angry Mr Seuong shouted again:

“My client has said: *What you did to me, you motherfucker* ... I must apologise, Mr Comptroller, I am programmed to translate verbatim, zero filters. Sir, after *motherfucker*, he says something in a Korean slang, that I cannot translate easily.”

Da-Hee shrieked.

“Sir, Miss Lee shouted: *Don't call me tube-head, you* ... I am sorry, that is another undetectable Korean slang word.”

“This is not, “ responded the Comptroller. “The best of starts ...”

There was a short intermission in which the plaintiffs' seating was rotated and moved to a screened-off area in the large function room. The Comptroller personally came over to each party to outline how things should proceed, and he had the spacey idea of opening up the moon-sky window array from behind the shutters above them, just to remind everyone of the truly spectacular nature of the resort that he oversaw.

When they returned to face each other, the sun shone in. And, Jonny saw what the fat Korean had meant: half his face was swollen and red, with a line of angry welts disappearing beneath the tight constriction of his shirt collar.

The hologram on the desk was pretty state-of-the-art, The Chief Operating Officer was a power-dressed lady who wanted the fat, bald, red-rashed Korean to go first, since he was the originator of the complaints.

Mr Seuong had seemingly recovered his decorum and stood reading from a sleek digital tablet, whilst his robotic assistant connected to the surround-sound in the room with the simultaneous translation.

His guttural bursts reminded Jonny of old documentaries from the *Age of The Car*, with engines that a driver would control with a foot on a pedal. But his complaints were several: that he was a hard-working businessman from the working-class suburbs of Gwangju [“Means frackin’ *mafia*”, hissed Da-Hee in Jonny’s ear]; that he was an active committed member of the Moonie religion and that it had been the thrill of his life to discover that “*Moon*”, in English, meant the actual *moon* in the night sky, so that it was almost his religious destiny to be there on Luna; that he was committed to marriage, the Moonie-way, and committed to the re-population of Korea in this way and that he was on a Korean-sponsored fertility programme to achieve this civic goal ...

At this point, he put his tablet down and started jabbing his finger across the room: “ ...*and then this bitch ran off with this white thug and they assaulted me and cheated me.*”

The Comptroller thanked Mr Seuong for the dignified way in which he made his allegations: “As you know, Mr Squire and Miss Lee, we have a ‘*light touch*’ here and the last thing we need is for bad blood and bad publicity to occur, but these are serious allegations. On Terra they would warrant police, detectives, court-cases ... the Lunar Resort has never, ever had need for any of this. What have you got to say ?”

Jonny stood; he wanted to discretely shake off Da-Hee’s hand which slid from his sleeve but remained touching his trouser leg: “Mr Comptroller, sir, and Madam Chief Officer, all of this is a result of a misunderstanding and a bit of fun which took an accidental turn for the worse ...”

Jonny glanced over at his adversary, who was receiving the translation via headphones: “Am I speaking too fast ...?” The robot

replied “No, sir” through the room speakers, and the fat, bald Korean shook his head too.

“It’s simple: I came to the resort for love and marriage, and so did my friends from United Korea. We all met up on one of your fantastic excursions out to the crater. Then, as you know, with your wonderful trust in us to enjoy the relaxation of some alcohol here on Luna. We had some drinks and decided to come to my suite for a little party. And, none of us is really used to alcohol, so that is how the accidents happened.”

“Sir and Madam. “ It was the Robot-Advocate. “ My client says he does not drink alcohol. Secondly, he says he was attacked and injured. Thirdly, he claims his marriage has been violated.”

“Well, alcohol *may* not have been in everybody’s system, “ countered Jonny. “You can verify that we had turned the Nitrogen levels very high in the suite, for the party.”

The paralegal robot to the side of the Comptroller seemed to be active and Jonny could see the lights of several screens light up for the resort database.

“Are you saying ...?” ventured the Comptroller.

Da-Hee stood up: “It was a sex party. Simple as that. I am a prostitute. Simple as that. He, over there, could not perform an erection, so he got angry. “

Jonny did not expect that. Mentally, he was re-shuffling his lines about the questionable legalities of the Moonie marriage contracts in extra-terrestrial jurisdictions to the back of his tactical list.

“And, of course, we all regret the injury suffered by Mr Seuong. I was there; it was a matter of a robot malfunction. There are at least two legal precedents, albeit on Earth of toilet-robots spilling effluent on householders. May be your paralegal could bring up the recorded footage from my Moon-Honey suite ?”

Jonny insisted on this.

After a few moments, on shared screens, a clip was found which showed the domestic robot flying into the back of Mr Seuong's head, and the aforementioned effluents then spilling onto the side of his downturned bald head.

The Chief Operating Officer in the high-definition hologram visibly winced. “Is that a low-gravity thing ? “ she asked with grave concern in her voice. This enabled Jonny to take the proceedings onto matters of the use of non-lunar robot models and corporate negligence. Meanwhile, with a straight face, Da-Hee insisted on the clip being replayed on the big screen, in order, she claimed, that she could review a rash that had appeared on her own body. However, at the third replay, she broke into loud hysterical laughter and started making “*L-for-loser*” taunts with her hands across the room at her erstwhile unconsummated Moonie spouse.

The robot-advocate: “Sir, my client says — with my verbatim apologies — *Just give me back my motherfucking kimchi*. And he is repeating this in a loud voice.”

There was absolutely no need for the last descriptor, since Mr Seuong was now on his feet, his voice having found a surprising falsetto register, as he kept screaming in a stance which was ready to pounce.

Da-Hee did not flinch and took a step towards the imaginary mid-line between the plaintiffs' seats: "See. It was a sex-party. See. Find the clip of that. My sex-robot was called *Kimchi*. See me getting it from the robot, because that fat pig, on his fertility drugs, couldn't get it up. *Hah !*"

There was a rush.

The Comptroller's carefully manicured sentiments about his Lunar Resort being dedicated to love, peace, freewill and life-enhancement became seriously dented by a flash of taser-electricity which shot up from a melting floor-strip in the midline of the chamber. For the second time on his stay on the moon, Mr Seuong found himself face down and unconscious on a floor tile.

Da-Hee made an acute observation in the very heat of the uproar to Jonny: "To even have a frackin' weapon built into the floor ... this shit must have happened before !"

Jonny's thought was that violence was ever-close to the surface in human beings ... and that he probably had a very strong case for getting his parents' money back.

\*

Six hours later, the two of them, Jonny and Da-Hee, were sat in a Premium Lounge at the Meridian120 Space Station. Their mag-boots there were lined with velvet as they attempted a debrief, already a house cocktail to the good.

“I can’t believe, “ began Jonny. “That no one brought in the missing person. It was the weakest point in our defence: *Antonella*, albeit she wasn’t directly involved.”

“Hey, *Lenny Lawyer*, you can stop saying *albeit* now. In UK English is that even all one word ...? Oh, reminds me: the thing *I* couldn’t believe: how useless was that robot that pig-face had translating for him ? *Kimchi* is street-slang in Korean for money, I’m pretty sure they use it in all the gangster movies.”

“OK. That makes some sense, I was thinking ... food, snacks, recipes, you know ?”

“Sorry ?”

“Wait, no ! That doesn’t make sense ... you mean he *was* saying that you’ve got his money ? “

“Well, we could talk about that now ... Or, you could just enjoy the fact that I got us into a first-class pod on a proper UN shuttle down to Earth-side. “

“Seriously ? Those pods cost fifty thousand dollars.“

“Both *seriously* and *albeit*, my friend ... plus, you don’t need to hurry another cocktail. Lovely UN exemptions — cocktails all the way til we land ... “

“I heard from Antonella. Brief message, my private inbox—”

“—Frackin’ great ! I’m good for my promise; I’m going to get you two back on the wagon. “

“Well, she only got in touch because the resort people contacted her — which is why I’m so amazed they didn’t bring her up in the hearing. I think she knows that I was with you ... “

“I say again: frackin’ great. Is there a problem ? Where is she ?”

“That’s another thing: I don’t know why she didn’t go straight back home. She said she’s in Pepperdine near LA ... and staying there.”

“Three from three ! Frackin’ *frackin’* great ... That’s my university, that’s how I got this accent I can’t shake off.”

“The thing is, Danni ... I mean, I have no idea where I stand with Antonella. And, obviously there is quite a lot at stake from the point of view of both our families ... Plus, it was just good luck that the Korean guy back there didn’t have a proper lawyer ...”

“And, he was a pervert who tried to kill me. Jonny, what is it you want to say to me?”

Jonny wished he didn’t hit '*pause*' right at that moment, but he was someone who always focused on public information announcements in plazas, in train stations, in space-ports, and there was one right at that moment: the next shuttle to LA was boarding.

“Well, the thing is, Danni: are you really a prostitute ?”

Da-Hee threw back her head and shrieked with laughter.

“No, but, Danni ... first you said you weren’t — that is, when we were stuck in the elevator. Then, you said you were — at the hearing. And, then, before it all happened ... you know, with the robot.”



“That was *your* sex-robot, Jonny. Look, I am truly a media-reviewer, but I could be other things too ... Multiple personalities. That’s me. Hey *that’s me, everyone* ! Jonny. That is exactly what they wrote on my submission papers ... right before, you know, they put those tubes in my head, and *plugged me in* ...for five years.”

“Oh,” replied Jonny, gulping, looking away, pretending to listen out for another station announcement but there was just silence between and around them.

## Chapter 7 — Antonella

Downtown Los Angeles was lighting up for the night by the time Pirix, Antonella and Jed made it to the ground level of the UN/WHO tower atop which the SkyLev had docked. Jed made heavy hints that it should be Pirix who ventured out into the evening heat to hail them a taxi-slot. In return, he said he would shout them all dinner at a Korean barbecue place he knew.

Pirix wasn't sure what made him feel more uncomfortable about his return to Earth after nearly two years. The sheer mental tedium of descending the 500 metre tower with the immigration checks, the biosecurity checks, and the radiation checks was bad. But then, as he tried to hide his ungainly stagger from the flow of people around him, the physical deconditioning of his body was also a royal pain. He caught a glimpse of himself in a reflection, with his bulging neck-line and the weird hypertrophy of his upper back: the marks of an inter-planetary worker braced at over-gravity acceleration for weeks on end. The third thing on his mind was the matter and manner of Jed. For a start, why — Pirix wondered — had he descended from the Meridian 120 Space Station in the SkyLev with them, when all military personnel, duty or off-duty, had free use of the A-Class UN shuttles at any time.

Pirix saw them come out of the doors and he raised his arm; his arm flew up and past the vertical in the normal gravity that his muscles were not used to.

“Hell yeah !” cried Jed. “There he is, Antonella — wheeling his arm like a you-know-what. What’s that, buddy ? You wanna go *bowling*, huh ? Nah. Me and this young English rose, we need food. *Roberto*, this way !”

Jed called out to the luggage-robot to follow them, and gently pulled at Antonella's arm, even though there was no danger of any collision.

*"Aquí ...Roberto ... El Slot ...¡El Slot !"* Jed stood at the rear of the vehicle, teasing the lowly robot, whose limited language responses seemed stuck in Spanish.

"Are you OK ?" Pirix asked Antonella.

"Yes. Why wouldn't I be ? All those incident-forms with those UN Guards ...my gosh ! "

"Therefore, it was a serious incident in the SkyLev."

"Good job Jed knew a few short-cuts back there after they arrested that stupid stacie woman. "

Jed had indeed taken the lead when it came to giving a graphic account of what had happened aboard their delayed SkyLev and his involvement in holding firm the protester, using what he termed basic *Military Apprehend Protocol*. The taxi-slot that they found themselves in was much more spacious than the ones Antonella was used to in England. But she swallowed the idea of starting a discussion about the differences and similarities between their two countries: it wasn't like she was 15 and on a High School exchange holiday.

Jed was leaning forwards talking to the navigation console at the front of the slot.

Pirix turned to Antonella and asked: "Are you worried about what happened to Jonny ?"

Antonella was slightly distracted trying to find a place to plug in some kind of hair-grooming device that she had retrieved from her main luggage inside the UN Tower: “Oh, what ? Well, that silly stacie woman was in absolute *hysterics* ... I mean, there’s no way that Jed’s friends would have fired at him once he’d jumped off, and when we knew he was just a silly climate-protester. Isn’t that right, Jed ?”

“*Argh*, just hang on a sec ... Listen !” Jed was banging at the touchscreen and shouting. “If you can’t find the Korean restaurant — *Sheeezz*, I bet the luggage-robe even knows it — Just get us to K-Town and I can just walk us there ! Get movin’ ...Sorry, what’d you ask ... ? About my friends ...?”

“That other protest-guy who jumped off, on his parachute ... They wouldn’t have blasted him out of the sky ?”

“They coulda done. Yeah. Easy. You seen the shit-hot military cannon we got ? I’ll point out the cool sky-forts from the freeway. Nah, but they wouldn’t have fried his ass in the sky ... too much paperwork. “

There was an interlude inside the vehicle when Jed, already swivelled forwards, could be heard smacking his lips and muttering about the tasty meat at the Korean BBQ he was taking them to, and a small whirring could be heard from Antonella’s hair-straightener. The slot was picking up speed on the overland freeway.

“Miss Antonella, “ said Pirix. “ I was referring to another man named *Jonny*, who is unknown to me, but was your companion on Luna.”

“Oh, ... I ...”

Antonella looked reflexly towards the window, was about to say something, then bowed her flustered face beneath the strokes of her hair-grooming travel gadget. Pirix looked straight ahead: his contemplation fell between the choice of posing the same question to Antonella but in simpler terms, or the choice of interrogating Jed about his military status, *vis-à-vis* being on-duty, or off-duty — or something else. The inside of the slot was well appointed with hi-tech seats and near-flawless upholstery. It was a smooth, fast ride into the Los Angelian inner-suburbs

“Hey, you guys look as hungry as me, “ said Jed. “ You know, USA military, and UK military — no offence, I mean, *Big UK*, not the plucky Brits — we be doing great things together ... that’s why I love my Korean Barbecues. Hey, and good ol’ Jed here managed to smuggle not a few *but a whole stack* of those miniatures of you-know-what from the SkyLev bar. “

“You mean— “ ventured Pirix.

“—*Shhh* ! “ hissed Jed back. “ Not in a slot, it’s all recorded in here. I’ll show you later. Hey, Antonella, where can you get legal drink in good ol’ lil’ uk?”

“Dunno, “ replied Antonella with very little enthusiasm. “ Up in space ... may be in the Parliament bars. “

“Oh ... of course, those frackin’ politicians ! Assholes to a man, to a woman, to a robot. Free rides, wherever they wanna go. “

“Therefore. I want to ask, “ said Pirix. “ Why did you choose to descend from the Meridian 120 Space Port in the SkyLev and not a UN shuttle. This is— “

“—*Shhh* ! Hey, my man ... too much talk in here. I gotta see to the fare ... I reckon we're close on stopping. Though—”

“—I can talk. On the matter of: I have corporate credit for any municipal slot or the monorail or local hover-flight.”

“Well, that's swell by me,” said Jed. “ Chinese picking up the tab, is always good by me. Right, let's go and paint this K-town a *party shade* of frackin' red ... Yeah !”

While Pirix stayed in the vehicle to pay for the ride, Jed and Antonella got out and climbed up the several steps from the slotway to street-level. Pirix heard Antonella fretting a little about the luggage situation and then heard Jed using the opportunity to offer her a slug from one of his stolen whiskey miniatures. Pirix was encountering the first glitch in their smooth slot-ride from the airport: the console would not read the credit micro-chip through the sleeve of his top. The sticky night-air was warm enough for him to be in just his company T-shirt, so Pirix peeled off his top. The chip, implanted as standard, just at his left forearm skin, was finally read and Pirix heaved himself out to join the others.

“*Whoah* ! Getting set ...!” said Jed, seeing Pirix in his T-shirt. “It's gonna be a barbecue work-out, not a gym work-out. Hey, watch out the LA street-bugs don't bite.”

Antonella had hold of a two-ounce vial of open liquor and laughed nervously at Jed's banter but was more concerned about the environment they had found themselves in, as her eyes adjusted to the sporadic lighting around them. There was a clattering fly-over above them. There were a couple of shop-fronts visible along the line of sight of their current sidewalk, but they did not resemble

restaurants. A caucasian man passed by them, in animated conversation, into — Antonella hoped — some unseen wireless device about his person. She felt quite queasy at the sight of a dog sniffing around a lamp-post which would be unheard of anywhere in London or Oxford. The street bugs that were swarming around the lamp-post light were now annoying Jed, who had produced an oversized, over-bright tablet-screen and was trying to orientate a map-application.

“This ain’t ... “ Jed started ruefully. “ That frackin’ slot-AI piece o’shit ! I think we’re lost.”

“Basic military training for a pilot-navigator: *Our position will be presently determined.* Never say: *I think we’re lost,* “ said Pirix, to no one in particular.

“I hope, “ said Jed very particularly to Antonella. “Your guy’s not tryna rip the jack out of me. A man’s got a limit ... Frackin’ taxi-slot ! I’m demanding the shift-supervisor. “

The vehicle was still below them in the slot-way. It was clearly not a designated stop there, and its mechanism was having difficulty, craning repeated attempts to get the luggage onto the street-level, with profuse robotic apologies sounding out on the external loudspeaker: creating attention, in other words.

“*Uh-oh,* “ whispered Antonella.

The figure of a man was coming toward them out of the shadows of the first shop-front, which was some kind of non-franchise non-shiny convenience store. The man was as tall as Pirix, but thin. He was mixed-race, with caramel-coloured skin, and although his jeans and sandals were appropriate, his torso bore only a net-like covering of

leather twines which were threaded by rattling, homemade beads. He wore a smile as he advanced but every few steps his face would twitch round back towards the shop. Antonella thought he heard him exclaim something like *Zeeep!* like he was punctuating a dancey, musical passage in his earphones, or in his mind.

From 10 feet away, he gestured to Pirix, and said something welcoming in street slang which could have been Latino.

At once, Pirix said in a quiet voice. "I have never met this approaching man; therefore I do not recognise him."

"Hey, there, brothers and *my sister* !" he said stopping right before them. " I bid thee welcome to K-town. *Zeeep !*"

He began disconcertingly scrutinising around Jed, Antonella and Pirix where they stood, with his eyes and head moving about like a 3D-scanner.

"Hey, ask your friend if he knows the *Soul to Seoul* restaurant ?" asked Jed to Pirix.

"He speaks English. Therefore you can ask," replied Pirix.

Having done his inspection, he settled in an open stance right in front of Pirix again, eye to eye: " Yessum, yessum. You, you ma Krazy ... Loving to see you here. Put it there ... I'm Paulo !"

The man held up his bare right forearm. He flicked a nod at Pirix's face and then at Pirix's forearm, by way of prompting. On Paulo's forearm was a cris-cross of rude welts and lines. With some hesitation Pirix brought his own forearm, with the rectangular skin graft that Antonella had noticed on the moon-shuttle, up in contact with Paulo's arm.



“Zeeep ! You lose your scars, hey, ma Kraze ?”

“It was a requirement of my corporate employer. I am Pirix and I am a pilot— “

“—On the Mars runs !” cut in Paolo. “I see that muscle definition, Kraze, on your neck there. “ He turned to Antonella and Jed: “Yeah. Government people say I be *Krazy* as frack, but I ain’t stupid. So, Pirix, ma Kraze, what’s the shit like up on that Red Blob up there? They sayin’ we should go settle that shit ... Zeeeeeep !”

Now it was Jed’s turn to cut in: “Holy frackin’ mother of mine! I get it now ! *K-town* ... This has got to be where all the real *krazy* dudes all hang out. So, it’s an actual place on the map now ? Right in my home city ! Hey, Pirix, no offence, but I spotted you as a *Krazy* way before. I ain’t so stupid and—”

“—*No Offence* !” Antonella raised her voice. “Frack’s sake, Jed, can’t you just *not* use the *K-word*. Especially not here ... !”

“What the frack !” replied Jed a touch affronted. “This guy here, like, used the K-word about five times a minute ago. That’s what’s wrong with this frackin’ society these days ...!”

“Society ! Do you know any history. At all ...?” Antonella felt herself setting up for a brief lecture of righteous admonition, and the man who had walked by talking to himself had passed back close to their group, maybe to listen in.

The worst scandals in human history are the ones whose establishment, enlargement and continuity all occurred in plain sight and with official support. More often than not, the scandal is

unravelling only when an external authority is brought to bear and has the strength and resolve not only to break the inertia in an embedded organisation but also to expose those within the scandal-framework who would fight tooth-and-nail to preserve their vested interests. The cover-up of institutional paedophilia in the Catholic church from the late 20th century and the Huawei Global Spyware scandal of the mid-to-late 21st century would have been top of any historian's list — prior, that is, to events uncovered by the UN/WHO Global Task Force between 2175 and 2185.

“There is a righteous momentum that builds and builds,” declared the first president of United Korea after the extent of the Huawei Spyware scandal was laid bare by a United Nations Task Force in 2088. Dubbed by academics, *The Great Huawei Obfuscation*, the pervasive insertion of false news into global networks between 2030 and 2050 became so dense and indelible, that almost no historical fact could be trusted or verified from that period. Analysts argue that it was the very complicity of the Chinese Communist party which led to the weakening of nation-state powers and the gradual empowering of global authorities such as the UN/WHO in the final decades of the 22nd century.

Almost 100 years after that, a similar momentum built against the so-called ‘*Meta-Neurology Industrial Complex*’ which had increasingly laid waste to the lives of thousands of global citizens over decades, all in the original name of therapeutics and social improvement.

For centuries, all human societies in peacetime have contended with the definitional conundrum of *correct* versus *deviant* behaviour amongst its citizens. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” was a folksy way of asking the fundamental question: “What right does one group of citizens have to judge the thoughts, expressions and behaviour of another group of citizens?” In the undulations of the historical

perspective, the half-century following the last Great War (*viz.* 1950-2000) is rightly viewed as the Golden Age of so-called Human Rights, when individuals had the freewill and licence to behave in society as they wished: it was their right.

Who in human society looks out for *extreme deviance* in thoughts and behaviour ? In the longview of the past, the stewardship lay between religious authority and legal authority. Put simply, a person judged to be *thinking deviantly* was regarded by the dominant religious authority as a heretic and subjected to some form of exorcism against his or her freewill; if a person's *conduct* was highly deviant, a legal authority would make a judgment and he or she would be subjected to criminal sanction, beatings, gaol, fines. In the early 1900s, a Greek letter entering the common lexicon augured a third major interest group, which was to claim greater and greater ownership of deviant or troublesome or plain awkward behaviours in society: the letter  $\Psi$  or *psi*. The Austrian Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) styled himself as a *psychoanalyst*; Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was a famous *psychologist*; Florine Gadasciz (1978 - 2081) was the last president of the powerful European *Psychiatric Diagnostic Committee*, the EPDC.

In terms of a power-grab, the *modus operandi* of the EPDC was simple and effective. Meeting every year, in Vienna, catalogues of proposed behaviours were presented to the committee who would then decide whether the given behaviour-type — ranging from impulsive behaviour in children, to shyness in teenagers, to infidelity-urges in the middle-aged — could be codified into a diagnosis. With each new diagnosis, a purported '*chemical imbalance in the neuro-milieu*' was stated such that a tailored regime of drug-therapy (to correct the '*deranged neuro-milieu*') could be ear-marked for dissemination amongst the many thousands of clinicians who came under the aegis of this powerful psi-organisation.

In the early reign of Charles the Third in England, the national census of 2036 showed that 63% of the whole population, including children, were on long-term psi-drugs, prescribed as per the ordinances of the EPDC. To his credit, it was King Charles, (having, in his younger years, attracted scientific opprobrium for promoting homeopathy) who started the backlash against the wholesale drugging of his subjects. Tearing up convention in a Parliamentary King's Speech in 2041, King Charles departed from the Government script and uttered a rhetorical line which reverberated around Europe: "If the majority are deemed now mentally ill, surely the *normal minority* are the *New Abnormal*." The so-called New Abnormal Collaboration consisted of a wide-ranging group of activists who began to re-examine the half-century of research evidence which claimed to support the multi-billion dollar, multi-national psi-pharma industry. From Terry Lynch's *fin-de-siècle* work such as *The Depression Delusion* to the pioneering neurobiochemical studies of Aersle and Greggs in the 2030s, it became clear that the psi-pharma industry and the psi-science that claimed to support it was a huge industrial castle built of sand and hot-air: there was not *a shred of evidence* that any chemical imbalance in any neuro-milieu in any allegedly mentally diseased person ever existed.

In the aftermath of this existential crisis, the psi-edifice and its practitioners fell into considerable disrepute, to the extent of *de facto* ostracism from mainstream medical practice. Fringe practices *not* involving drug-therapy were the rule in the last quarter of the 21st century. King Charles III himself reverted to religious healers for his wavering mental state in his dotage. In legal practice, the *mens rea*, or '*mental-health-defence*' lost its credibility. The nature of mental ill-health versus human freewill began yet again to tax philosophers and social scientists anew.

Human error, and credulity of that error, is, of course, cyclical. The viral pandemics of the 2090s ushered in a new era of population therapeutics. Just as major outbreaks of human conflict and war punctuated the historical record every fifty years or so between 1600 and 1950, the succeeding bicentennium saw global peace but was pockmarked by waves of, chiefly, viral pandemics. In the wake of the most pernicious of these, despite the clearance of overt infection, a more ill-defined malaise seemed to become pervasive. A hotch-potch of symptomatology was reported wherever researchers looked: low mood, low libidos, low ambition, low fertility, low sociability. Cross-field disciplines strove hard in the early decades of the 22nd century to characterize it. Was it a disease of the mind, with origins in the cells and connections and substance of the brain ? Was it a simple aggregation of learned behaviours amongst people facing a joint and ineluctable threat ? Social historians in the 2120s unearthed exactly the same themes of debate surrounding that of the neo-medieval and defunct term “schizophrenia” from a century before.

The Munich School of Humanities put forward the most compelling theory to encircle what seemed to be going wrong with people everywhere. The sequence proposed was: *long-lasting viral pandemic* → *some persisting biosocial factor* → *pervasive societal malaise of thought and behaviour*. The term used in their seminal paper of 2033 (in the prestigious *Omni Humanus Journal*) was a "Syndrome of Lassitude and Ulterior Gestalt", or SLUG. In the English-speaking world the term stuck fast.

But what was the “persisting biosocial factor” in the SLUG sequence ? Serendipity struck on the other side of the world. In Vancouver, Canada, a neuroscientist called Claude Silvert and, a neuro-engineer colleague, came across a technique for pumping and

filtering the brain's cerebrospinal fluid (CSF), first in laboratory dogs and then in humans. He termed it: *brain dialysis* or BD. As a 50-something year old man he had been consulting with various physicians about his own lassitude and low mood, and had been disappointed to be told that his case was considered treatment-resistant.

As he was later to explain both in his autobiography and then in the Geneva Supreme Court in his criminal arraignment: "I was deep down in the dumps, so instead of smoking some weed, or boozing, I called up ol' Smithy in the lab and said: just hook me up to the BD circuit for a few hours." He confessed that those few hours of being under sedation having his CSF dialysed "probably" stopped him from beating up his wife that night, and then from taking a morphine-overdose suicide.

That night *Brain Dialysis Therapy* (BDT) for the major societal mental illness of SLUG became a reality, which Silvert pursued with a biblical and missionary zeal. His Vancouver Institute became a research nirvana for every biosocial post-doctoral candidate on the planet. Were it not for some residual stigma regarding the old psi-specialities, it would have been seen as the renaissance of psychiatry, since Silvert was an MD in his own right. Instead, as his techniques grew more refined and the scope of patients referred for BDT widened, Silvert invented the term *Meta-Neurology*. According to the Institute research, at last the riddle of the 'factor' predisposing to SLUG was found. It was a chemical imbalance caused by Viral RNA which persisted in the CSF, which could be filtered by aggressive and lengthy (and costly) sessions of Brain Dialysis.

Cut to the 2170s: *Silvert Clinics* were part of the fabric of every town or city in the world; a short or long regime of BDT was the cure-all for just about any mental health issue in society; Silvert was a

billionaire, most of his fortune being spent on political lobbying and protectionist litigation. At the severe end of the spectrum were the *Silvert Oasis Clinics*. Most countries had radically re-written their laws for involuntary treatment of a widening cohort of its citizens, who underwent this process: they were referred (or denounced) by agencies or schools or family members to *Meta-Neurology Welcome Centres*; their symptoms would be checked off against published criteria; for positive cases, they would be sent to nearby Silvert Oasis Centres for periods of MIBDT (Mandatory Intensive Brain Dialysis Therapy) under deep sedation. For how long ? Silvert Analytics would determine, by their 'patented assays', when the patient's brain had been "cleared of the chemical imbalances", and therefore the time when the patient could be put back into normal society.

In this period, problems for governments the world over involved dealing with chronic unemployment in the face of the almost complete automation of economic functions and productivity. With unemployment came human disaffection, illegal drug use, and anti-social behaviours on a wide scale. What was sold to government health agencies as therapeutic intervention became inexorably a means of controlling swathes of the population both securely (allegedly "safely") and outside of the criminal justice system.

Silvert Clinics were privately contracted to Departments of Health and were secretive of their data and self-regulating. The numbers grew of people maintained under deep sedation in beds with cannulation-tubes into their spines at the neck, feeding dialysis monitors attached at their right forearms. Disturbing stories began to circulate, at first on the internet and then in official inquiries, about what went on in the clinics.

It took a series of whistle-blowers in the higher echelons of the Silvert Clinics to start the downfall of his therapeutic-industrial-

complex and the rupture of the Meta-Neurology paradigm throughout the world. The WHO Task-Force found that there was *never any evidence of pertinent viral RNA in any patient sample from the outset or any resultant chemical imbalance*. Clever statistical reporting made it appear so. *There was never any subsequent diagnosed mental condition in any Silvert Clinic patient in which any derangement of any CSF constituent could be robustly correlated with the course of the purported diagnosis*. Aggressive marketing of this as *fait accompli* to incurious investors and political parties made it appear so. It was a hoax. Nobody in power seemed to have learned from or cited the great neurotransmitter hoax from 150 years earlier which supported the multi-billion dollar psi-drug paradigm of the time. King Charles III was indeed, back then, “his brother’s keeper” convincing his sibling, in the wake of an infamous sex-scandal, to come off psi-drugs linked to suicide, which intervention Prince Andrew later swore saved his life.

The dénouement of the global Silvert Clinic disaster invokes the passion and zeal of one man: *Dr Gupta Sengupta*. He became president of the UN/WHO global authority in the Spring of 2182. At first hand in his native India he was the victim to the fringe therapists who succeeded the psi-clinicians of the 21st century but pre-dated the Meta-Neurology Industrial Complex. In his youth, religious nationalists had met in committee and re-declared that homosexuality was a mental illness. Of wealthy stock, the teenage Sengupta was subjected to '*magnetic conversion therapy*' by a leading mental-physician in Mumbai. “They used to call me a '*Clonk Head*' because the magnetic beads that the esteemed professor put under my scalp used to make me knock against anything metal, like street-fencing and shop-railings!” If Sengupta told that story once — standing beside his guffawing husband during his election campaign in '81 — he told it a hundred times.



He personally believed all the survivor stories and his mantra was that if homosexuality, not once, but twice, in as many centuries, could be voted onto a random list of mental diseases, then, by vote, he as president would do the absolute opposite — if elected.

The evolution of the UN/WHO had occurred in formal stages. First, the political and biosecurity role was amalgamated as an imperative response to the pandemics. After the epoch of near-space and lunar colonisation gained pace, it was the only organisation with the infrastructure and stability to take stewardship of all atmospheric, orbital and inter-lunar (and finally inter-planetary) activity. Finally, it assumed a quasi-global Governorship role with enforceable oversight in health and economic and military domains in all its 200 member states.

It was in this capacity that President-Elect Sengupta made his epiphany and announced a road-map: firstly, to dismantle the Silvert Clinic empire and any remnant academic credibility its adherents clung to; secondly, he pressed for a UN/WHO TaskForce with the highest penetration to press for Human Rights Crime charges to the whole Meta-Neurology syndicate; lastly, he created a time-table towards the abolition of any non-biological, non-organic, non-verifiable labels of mental disease.

America declared DDD, or De-Diagnosis Day on US Independence Day 2089. Presidents of the United States of America have always been keen to found *Doctrines* in their name or in their ideology. Incumbent that year was President Janis Van Els, a folksy speaker who, at age 68, was one of the youngest US presidents of the century. She was asked how the many thousands of citizens, who had spent, in some cases, years in Brain Dialysis Therapy, or “plugged in” as the phrase went, would be rehabilitated. She replied that they should be regarded as normal, with nothing ever wrong

with them and that “We should all just *Let Them Be*.” And so was inaugurated, in the USA, the Let Them Be Doctrine. (This evoked a foot-note controversy, in that her campaign material for DD-Day in America seemed to borrow a tune from a neo-medieval group of minstrels: obsessive neo-medieval historians dove deep past the Huawei Obfuscation to set a record straight that the original tune was entitled *Let IT be*, and not *Let THEM Be*. Upon such two-letter quibbles are careers built in academic Social Science.)

In the initial aftermath of De-Diagnosis Day, there was an idiot backlash of stigma and contempt for the so-called “Krazies” that had been unplugged, de-drugged and, in the harshest of assessments, just “let loose” back into society. President Van Els exhorted everyone to be more accepting of social diversity, and of the rich tapestry of human personality types. (There was therefore some political capital slyly on offer against those who felt the threat of *social stasis* due to artificial fertility and of the stunting of the human spirit itself due to Artificial Intelligence and the so-called Robot Army)

Dr Sengupta went further: by presidential decree, the utterance of the word “*Krazy*” or inflections thereof became a criminal offence in all UN/WHO-administered zones. In most places in America, it was just really bad manners and offensive to say the K-word out aloud in normal social discourse.

Dr Claude Silvert (2073-2187): he was the billionaire flamboyant, entrepreneurial founder of Meta-Neurology in the 22nd Century. Joint patent holder for the novel technique of Brain Dialysis, he marketed his arcane assays of imbalances in trace compounds in the brain fluid of citizens throughout the world and then mapped these imbalances onto a giant refreshed classification of spurious “mental disorders”. In an open prison in Geneva, after the “trial of the century” he was found guilty of Human Rights Crimes, and on his

deathbed, at the age of 114 he made his confession, and posted it up: "It was all a lie and we blinded the whole world with our pseudo-science, me and my partner. Because every door we pushed at opened and the money just flooded in. You know, in the early days, it was actually clever stuff ... but all academic. So we nudged some evidence here, fudged some stats there. Meta-Neurology: over a lifetime. I did more harm than good. But, you know who knew that none of it stacked up — and me and Smithy shut'em down — the damn robots in the lab knew ! They knew we were cooking the data. Still. Here I am. I took the fall. So, I got me some *real* medicine in this pot here. And I'll raise my last glass to all you celebrating your De-Diagnosis Day wherever you are. Yup, sorry, and farewell."

Two years on from American DDD, most people, released of their diagnostic mill-stones, or worse, still rubbing their scars from the weeks and months of medical tubing affixed to their arms and heads, were through the rehabilitation schemes organised freely through the auspices of the UN/WHO. It was almost inevitable that groupings of them tended to gravitate to poorer metropolitan areas, whose neighbourhoods then became vibrant with attendant agency workers, fun-loving visitors, social science post-doc researchers, documentary makers and occasionally Reality-Television projects. Starting off as a savvy in-joke amongst the new-releasers, these locales became known as *K-towns*.

\*

"Oh yeah, hell do I love history ! Antonella, I could listen to your cute little English accent talking about history all night long." Jed had

perhaps developed a touch of ironical usage, after a couple of high-strength whiskey miniatures at the Korean restaurant.

They were full of food and in the back seats of another slot-taxi heading north towards Pepperdine.

“Really ? So, what’s your period ?” Antonella was the brightest of the three; she had actually slept for half an hour leaning against the velour curtains around their BBQ booth.

“Hey, there ! I know I’m a red-blooded, redneck guy ... “ Jed waited two comedic beats. “ ... but I’m a *guy*, so I don’t have periods.”

“Do you honestly think that *that* witticism, or pun, or whatever, is worthy of the present company ?”

“Oh, that cutey-pie accent ! I wish I understood what you just said, but it sounded great. No, but hands down ... my favourite period of history woulda been round about Pearl Harbour, round about when they had some decent wars. I woulda been up there on a laser cannon just blasting those frackin’ Chinese out of the sky. What’s yours then ?”

Antonella was staring at her screen in the back of the slot; Pirix was silent.

“Hey, there, did you hear, cutey-pie ... I’m asking about your period. You got another chance to lecture me on my manners, and shit I don’t know ...” [*and I don’t give a shit about,*” he whispered behind his hand towards Pirix, who did not respond]

“I just got the weirdest, like, *official* message from the Lunar Resort up there. Does this look real to you, Pirix ?”

She bent the screen from its mount towards Pirix, and Jed, too, tried to crane his head round.

“This looks like a genuine communication. Therefore, I see the security-extension from an extra-terrestrial source.”

“Don’t keep me in suspense, kids. Is it, like, *the moon’s made of green cheese* !”

“No. No, it says I am required to attend a hearing ... What ! A *Crime And Misconduct* hearing with the Resort Comptroller. What the hell has Jonny been up to ?”

“This the Jonny I’ve been hearing about ? “ asked Jed. “Hey, the way that all this co-incidental shit’s been happening, I wouldn’t be surprised if my Mary gets in touch right now and says she’s been bit by a rattlesnake.”

“That is a serious injury.”

“Just a figure of speech, and possibly a joke, is what I’m telling you, Mr Space-Man. Hey, and this slot is on my dime, I got this. On account of — might as well mention — the barracks at the base has a big *Commem Event* on tonight. No guest rooms left. We can all get a big ass suite at the Pepperdine Hotel in town just for tonight, seeing as we’re all such great buddies now. Just enough contraband left for me to fix y’all a *Jed Special* nightcap.”

Their slot zoomed on past Malibu and Topanga, with the dark ocean to the left and the shimmering radiation glow, a weirdly comforting spectacle of colours, in the sky to the north.



## Chapter 8 — Jonny

Da-Hee and Jonny were in a VIP Slotway in downtown LA . The slot they were sat in had a human valet; they were headed at 150 miles per hour from the Space Terminus at LAX to the Hilton Deluxe; Jonny was rubbing his chin wondering who was going to pay for it all.

“This is such fun !” cried Da-Hee. “Can I stick my head out of the window, please, please ... I used to love that smoggy feel of downtown LA ... We had to take the old space-hopper when I was a student—”

“—I would not—”

“—student at—”

“—Please, ma’am, you—”

“—No, you ... What was your name, again?”

“Uday, madam. And having the side-ports open is not—”

“—side-ports, *ha, ha, ha* ! Jonny, this is what the VIP Slotway gets you: some valet called Uday who calls the window a *port* and won’t let— ... Wait ! That rhymes: *Uday* and *Valet*, do we pay extra for that ? Hang on, in London the *little uk* people say *Valett*, don’t they, rhyming with *Ticket* ? Don’t they, Jonny ?”

Before Jonny could answer, their slot banked to the right and seemed to be about to merge with a dazzling stream of other vehicles in the distinctly un-VIP final section before their destination.

It was odd, at that moment, to see Uday's gloved human hands, wobbling slightly, reach back to steady the cups containing the steeping morning tea in the fitted table of the cabin space.

“*Whooh-hooo !* “ shrieked Da-Hee, with a little exaggeration, because the dynamic upholstery of their seating could not have been more forgiving as the vehicle changed up lanes. “ You say *Valett* I say *Valay*, but we all love you *Uday*. Hey, if I pay more, then, can I stick my head out of the window. Look ! There's one of the clonky space-hoppers ! Up above ... Hey, slot-slot, identify that hunk of smoky crap bouncing up there ! “

“Ma'am, if that is a formal request for—”

“—Yeah, *yee-hah* ... Here, I'll pay extra. I wanna blow kisses in the other direction now. “

Da-Hee began to explain to Jonny that when she attended Pepperdine University, there was a fixed transit bus that used to run the students from LAX, across the poorer suburbs, part-wheeled, part-hovering, to the campus. She said they always used to stick *their* heads out of the bus-windows and blow kisses at all the rich sugar-daddies in the VIP slotway back then.

“Valued client>If you please>to your inquiry>” came the voice from the on-board computer, female: “Above us now>It is the B-line Hover Transit>Next descent/pickup/dropoff is *Salchicho*>”

“Computer, “ shouted Da-Hee. “You sound like a good girl ... just let me get a breath of air from the window. I'll pay ! And, it's a medical emergency.”



*Good move*, thought Jonny. The valet began fussing, but the on-board computer stepped into some sort of over-ride and, with a gush of warm air, a side-window opened. Jonny smelled acidic smog, outdoor cooking and a tinge of antiseptic — not a wonderful mix. Once Da-Hee had swung her head out and yelled up (at the Space-Hopper) a spray of greetings in her several languages, she felt in her pocket for a small, flat jewel case. Under her fingernails she brandished a square-centimetre credit chip.

“OK. Time to pay, and don’t worry Uday, you were just the best, so this tip’s going to be heavy-heavy. So, where ...?” Da-Hee’s eyes darted around the displays in the central console of the VIP taxi.

It was such a tiny wafer of credit-chip that Da-Hee was having to circle it before the scanner, and, as the taxi braked, the in-rushing air began to swirl so erratically, that Jonny felt compelled to bark an order for the window to shut.

The female voice of the on-board computer began to ask questions about the status of the medical emergency, but was cut short by Jonny’s involuntary exclamation:

"Holy *frack* ! Is that right ...?" Jonny was looking at an overhead display of the credit on the tiny chip in Da-Hee’s fingernails. He was reading a sum of American dollars stretching to eight figures. Jonny squinted forwards searching for a missing decimal place.

“They have got, “ she said breezily. “in Korean, a special word for a number with nine zeros. Americans do too — *A Frackin’ shitload* ! Oh, Mr Uday, you’ve been a darling and a half. Can I give you two-hundred —”

“—Oh, madam ...” said Uday the valet, who could also not have failed to have seen the long string of numbers on the digital money display.

“But, only if you’ll be a darling *and three-quarters*, and check us in, load up our luggage, and then taxi us to the nearest tattoo place.”

“Madam ? Sir ?”s

“And, I want absolute, internet, police, city-planners’ proof that it is a non-Korean tattoo place. “

“Ma’am, this is a VIP Limousine but—”

“—Two hundred and fifty, then? A hairy-arse white-guy place, got it ?”

Da-Hee got the first of what she had requested. The hotel formalities were slick and prompt. With some fast-action clicks and whirring the luggage was off on its way with the hotel’s robot corps. Their human valet scuttled, in a funny way which made Da-Hee laugh, to the manned counters and returned to the vehicle with a receipt, some bottled water and a small presentation tray whose lid slowly rose up.

“Oh, “ sang out Da-Hee. “And there was me ... thinking you were going to *propose* to me with a ring set in Hawaiian pearls !”

“Ma’am. The Hilton Group prides itself on a complimentary and comprehensive radiation-hygiene service ... “

“That’s pretty cool, “ said Jonny, lifting his to his mouth. “They’ve got the hotel logo embossed on the Rada tabs. It’d be interesting to compare the tab-prices with London’s.”

“Talking of proposing, darling ... “ said Da-Hee, snapping her head back to swallow her tablet. “ Uday, did you know Jonny proposed to his lovely fiancée up on the Luna Resort ? Not Hawaiian pearls, I don’t expect ... “

“Well, not exactly ... “ replied Jonny, reddening in the face.

“Well, sir, madam ... Hilton Los Angeles offers complimentary holographic rendering from any multimedia source of your joint happy ceremony off-planet.”

“He thinks ... “ hooted Da-Hee.

“I know, “ replied Jonny. “But, it’s not worth explaining ...”

Nevertheless: “Uday, darling, I am only this gentleman’s fairy-helper, and I am going to get *him* and his *lovely fiancée* back on the road together, as my Mission Number Two. But, as for Mission Number One, what did you find for me ? *Bzzz Bzzz Skin-Skin ...*”

The tattoo place which Da-Hee chose from the selections presented to her on the screen was over near the Skid Row area. She rejected the nearest three franchise places, swearing in Korean under her breath, because she felt the staff looked too Asian. The frontage of the chosen shop was not even on the main slot-way, for which Uday apologised. He informed them that the walk was 37 metres exactly, that he could summon an escort-robot very easily if Da-Hee and Jonny felt they still had unsteady “moon legs”, but that it would not be programmed to Hilton AI standards. Finally, he offered Jonny complimentary use of a small Magvolt pistola. Jonny reddened again, but before he could politely decline, Da-Hee grabbed it, exclaiming, “Frack, yeah !”

“They are all on the take, “ said Da-Hee after she paid the valet his huge tip, but declined his offer to wait for them in the slot-way. “But, I’m lovin’ this zappy pistola. You wanna hold it ?”

“Please, Danni ... “ said Jonny, becoming aware of the down-market street they were moving in. “If you can just stop holding it up to your face to read the dials like that.”

“Worse places in Honolulu, and probably in *East London*.” Da-Hee said the last words with decent mimicry of a bad cockney gangster, which made Jonny laugh. “But, this is it ! *Burt Tattoo*. What a shop name ! No *frackin’* nonsense. I could fall in love with a place like this, if I lived here again. I bet he’ll wipe this pistola clean for me too, if I put on my little, lost, Korean chick charms. Whaddya think ?”

Jonny was distracted in the last few metres of their walk with paranoid feelings, that a shabby escort-robe was drifting too close, that a hobo on a bench was staring at them. *But, that’s exactly what hobos do all day !* he said to himself, missing half of what Da-Hee was saying to him as she swept him into the tattoo shop — actually, pulling at his sleeve again in her enthusiasm.

“Jonny, darling ! Pay attention ... You sit over there by the computers and see if you can track down Antonella, and don’t talk to the robots, and say ‘no’ if they offer you either ice in your lemonade, or if they offer any South American coffee. No offence, Burt ... but I was at Pepperdine for three years. Surprised we haven’t met.”

“Madam>Has less than 0.25% dermal ink>Cleanskin, Mr Burt>Sir has 2% dermal ink>” Burt’s assistant robot was making its programmed greeting, and was humanoid, after a fashion. Burt, the proprietor, had not yet stood or looked up from his stool.

“Well, “ cried Da-Hee, “First: gotta correct my logical bad. I *am* a cleanskin, so *obviously* I wouldna met y’all here in my time at Peppers. Second: *golly my gosh and back again* ! 2% Jonny ! So, you’re hiding a tattoo somewhere ... I’m gonna be thinking about that while Burt does his thing.”

“The State Of California>Madam> legal safeguards, waivers, and consents are initiated through my interface—”

“—Robe, be quiet !” said Da-Hee with authority. “Mr Burt. We came past 3 franchise places to find you. I have two excellent bits of work for you, three if you include a tattoo. Jonny needs computer access, and I can pay for it all. I just tipped our slot-valet 250.”

Burt stood up. The robot had fallen silent but was processing Da-Hee’s credit chip nevertheless. Burt spoke first to Jonny: “Y’all want Dark or Light there?”

*Was he talking about coffee? Was it the cue to answer ‘no’ ?* wondered Jonny.

The robot said: “>Light>”; Da-Hee said: “Dark”; Jonny said: “What...? Pardon...?”

They were talking about internet connectivity, whereby the normal ‘light’, or ‘lite’, web was free, but routing via the Dark Web was costly. Da-Hee said to put it all on her bill. Jonny sat on a swivel chair in front of a huge curving screen; the Dark Web routing was pretty hard to come by; unfortunately he voiced this out aloud and everyone started laughing including the robot-assistant.

“Damn frackin’ limeys, “ snorted Burt, the tattooist proprietor. “Be so frackin’ cute. C’mon ... “

He turned to lead Da-Hee through to the back area. She had been bestowed one *other* thing that she had stipulated: luxuriant tufts of dark hair stuck out from the sagging seat of Burt’s jeans as he shuffled through.

As Jonny tapped into the unfamiliar search-engines trying to find versions of his own social media accounts, his eyes grew accustomed to the shop-space around him. It was mainly dark, shot through with intense spotlights. What became clear was that a whole lot more other than tattooing was on offer around him. Antonella’s presence on the Web was not hard to find. Jonny felt a reluctance to hit the buttons to pursue her, so, a little truer to his character, he found himself getting lost on his company website from London. He even gave himself a pat on the back that a slightly risky re-cycling contract from Slough had borne fruit with a one-year extension signed and sealed. There was pending work-emails from his dad, and he would get in the good books if he made a quick response. A human assistant, wearing a mask and plastic gown, came over; she asked if Jonny needed a drink, or *anything else*. Jonny barely looked up.

Jonny was glad that his back was turned to the footfall of other customers. He caught snippets of conversation in at least three different languages. On the gigantic screen before him, it was like having a link to some important exam result that you want to view and to avoid with equal desperation: Antonella’s homepage window was still in pop-up, bottom-right. *Frack it !* He jabbed at it on the screen. She was a pretty girl; but sure enough amongst the four photos on the opening page there were none showing them together, as an engaged couple, nor of any of their several dates around

London. (*Not even one of them at The Ritz*, mused Jonny, an evening which had cost an absolute fortune) As he pursued the trail, clicking through the links and pages, a weird sensation rose in him. There was a 'follow' button of a type that he had never seen on all of the standard social media pages on the normal Web. A timeline appeared too, which, as he reminded himself from the screen's own time-zone, was jamming right up against the timeline of the day-before. He couldn't resist: he mashed the button on the Dark Web browser with his thumb and moving-image clips started lining up on the screen. *Frack ! That's her !* Of the random clips he hit, there was one of Antonella, arm-in-arm with a tall muscly guy with a ridiculous toupée or pudding-bowl haircut, in the Meridian 120 concourse up in low orbit. *Who the frack is that guy ?*

"Jonny ! Jonny, Dark-Web-darling, I think we are all done. Hotel-room-service-pig-out time ... " Da-Hee was emerging from the passageway to the interior, dabbing at her left arm. "What d'you think ? And ... by the way, you can carry this. I bought it for you."

When Jonny turned he saw a very menial porter-robot slide a box about a metre high at his feet. Da-Hee was looking for a shaft of spot-light to show him the little splodge tattoo she had. It was an amorphous inking of jet-black, with speckled white stars, setting off a golden centre-piece of a crescent moon.

"Feel that, " she said, taking away the dressing-pad. "No, don't touch it ! *Bad Da-Hee !* It's still spotting blood. I should be shot for my terrible sense of hygiene. He's a really gentle tattooist, really good ... "

"How do you know ? You said you never had a tattoo before."

“You know: that’s a really good point. But I’m a tube-head, remember, stacks of needles ... OK, closer, listen ... “ Da-Hee pulled at Jonny’s sleeve again, pulling him away from the assistant with the mask who was re-stocking a vending-machine. “Couldn’t resist having Luna on my skin, “ she whispered. “It marks where I got him to implant the credit-chip ... and he pretty much hacked it clean. I’ve done plenty of that before, and Burt knows his shit. So pick that up; let’s get the frack out ... “

“What’s in the box—”

“—*Uh-uh* ! Not til we get back to the hotel. May be we’ll get the chance to compare my tattoo with your 2% skin-covering, hey ?”

Jonny hid his blushing by bending to pick up the box: a single, badly-padded object clunked inside. On the tip of his tongue was another naive question about the legal status of this object he would so conspicuously have to carry into the Hilton Deluxe.

“Oh, and talking of hacking, “ continued Da-Hee in a whisper at the front-door of the shop. “He wiped the pistola clean too. Million bucks in my skin, a zillion volts at my fingertips ! OH, FRACK ! THERE HE IS !”

Jonny was fully startled, as was the assistant girl in the mask and plastic gown who stood and turned. Jonny had by then several of Da-Hee’s shrieks stored in his aural memory bank and it wasn’t her *fight-or-flight* one. She slid the door and pointed at the holographic podium opposite. These were virtually in every open-air marketable space in cities, usually selling junk snacks, or laser cosmetics, or off-planet investment plans.



“It’s him ! My hero, “ said Da-Hee. She gave a tiny wave of thanks to the tattoo-shop personnel, and then quick-stepped over the hot, crumbling concrete to where the unmistakeable persona of Dr Gupta Sengupta was flickering in his WHO livery, ever-active moustache twitching, as he delivered (to anyone with a desire to connect) one of his famous speeches. Jonny shifted the box onto one knee as he bent closer to read the plaques surrounding the plinth. An early evening haze shimmered around them combining the street lighting, the particulate smog and the falling darkness. Jonny squinted as he looked at Da-Hee who was muttering emotional words in Korean, even dabbing at an eye with her blood-speckled dressing.

“Wow ! Danni, are you OK?”

“That man ... he saved my life. If it wasn’t for him I would still be plugged in by those frackin’ Silvert Clinic-shrinks ! Every time I see him, I just have to come over, have a little cry, say thanks and—”

“—I can lend you—”

“—Jonny, don’t stop me, I’m in full flow ... about to say ... MY JUICES ARE FLOWING ! I get this unbelievable urge to eat Indian food when I see him, *I knows a / Samosa / To go, sir.* “

Singing this jingle and skipping from one hobo to another, asking each where the nearest food-alley might be, Da-Hee led Jonny on a ten-minute detour to finally stop at a Taj Mahal Tandoori takeaway.

As Da-Hee kept loading counter-food into a bag, Jonny kept saying, “Sorry, I don’t like spicy food.” Da-Hee seemed quite euphoric, promising at one moment to tell him all about her liberation from the Seoul clinic, then the next telling him to try and guess what was in

the heavy box as his present, and finally latching onto the subject of Antonella.

“I’m betting the Dark Web found her, no probs ... You know how much your 45 minutes cost ? LA prices, hey... ! But, this *Gupta Samosa* — I name all Indian food after my man. No, it’s worth every dollar, have a bite ...”

“I don’t really go for spicy food. I can pay you back, ‘cos I caught up with some work stuff while you were in the back. Don’t tell anyone—”

“—What ? Tell me ... “

“I don’t know how, but the Dark browser gave me a peek into the boardroom minutes of a company in Slough that I was negotiating a contract with for my dad—”

“—Oh, *boring* ! You can pay me back for *that*! Hey, only joking. You know there’s about a million-and-a-half untraceable sitting under this little half-moon tattoo ... It’s cute. “ Da-Hee twisted her arm and a bit of crumbly samosa-pastry flew into the slot-way in front of them. “So, we gotta shop til we drop ... “

“But, I did find her. Weird, but she’s heading for the Air Force Base at Pepperdine— “

“—Oh, and, if I do drop — dead or something similar — you make sure you dig the frack outta this arm here, and get that credit chip. It’d be good ‘capital seeding’ — Hey, is that how they talk in *Boardroom minutes* ? Just teasing ! — ‘Capital seeding’: you know, for your wedding, with Antonella. Why the frack is she at the Air Force Base ?”

Jonny shrugged. “And, I watched five video clips of her, at Meridian 120, at the WHO building ... with some guy—”

“—What, some Air Force hunk, arm-in-arm ?”

“*Frack !* How did you know?”

“Oh, Jonny, darling, I didn’t ... I was just teasing. Look, don’t you worry. There will be an all-too-simple explanation for everything. Let’s get to the hotel, to our rooms, and, since we’re all in the same city, just *frackin’ call her*. I’ll get you prepped up for talking to her. “

“I’ll get us a slot.”

“A true gentleman, Jonny. I’m gonna eat your *pakor*s too. *Bless you, Dr Gupta, for what I am about to shove down my throat !* And, keep your mind, you know, on your tricky recycling business plans back in London. “

Jonny had taken a few steps towards the halt, and had an LA Slot-Taxi ready. “Let me, at least, get this ride on my credit. My dad will at least get to know where I am, from my card-transactions and I may not have to call him for another day or so ... “

“Tell him about your industrial espionage success !”

Jonny’s expression betrayed that he was a tiny bit weary of Da-Hee’s teasing. But, Da-Hee, ignoring the 'no-food' notices inside the vehicle, was on another tack: “That *frackin’ mask-bitch* back there was Korean !”

Jonny reflexly began to contradict with a guttural cough of surprise.

“Yeah. She was. You reckon she had big round honky Hollywood white eyes ... ? That was Burt doing eye-lifts on the side. He had photos up. She smelled Korean, and smelled bad.”

They said nothing more until they got back to the hotel. Neither of them could hide their yawns nor the promise of some rest. Da-Hee insisted on Jonny man-handling the big cardboard box up to his room, but made him promise not to open it, without Da-Hee's being there.

Jonny was characteristically obedient, with a mixture of general fatigue salted with a fug of general anxiety about the whole Antonella-thing, and ended up walking like a zombie with aching arms up to his room. Why was his greeting in the door display in his father's name — William Squire? Where was Da-Hee's room ? Would he even ever see her again ? There had been a healthy credit balance on his card. A night's sleep and he could just easily catch the rocket back to London. While he rummaged around his toiletries in his luggage, he kept his mind off any distressing thoughts by doing some simple time-zone arithmetic in his head, and by trying to remember the little rules about the exit-entry effects of the rockets as they peaked in the low-orbit of the earth. London. Face the music ... but sleep first.

Jonny pulled up the sheets and duvet just above his nose; it was truly luxurious bed-linen with creases so sharp as to be fearsome. His fatigue was melting his mind back to how he felt in his little bed when he was at school. There was the same dark, pulsing white noise from distant domestic systems like during London's winters. School, and one of PE instructors he lusted after. He reached and buried his hand in through the flap of his shorts. The darkness, the chill (at that moment from the over-working air-con), the memories: just relaxing and leavening his fatigue. Why had he been, therefore,

so constantly anxious about his ability to get an erection in his fiancée's presence ? This evening, though, after all the events, he felt he deserved some tried and trusted simple pleasure, like a hundred school-nights from the past, just before a well-deserved sleep.

A timid *bzzzzzz*. A shaft of light of corridor light ...

“Jonny ? “ came a stage-whisper at the door, belonging to his Korean friend, whom Jonny had quite successfully, thinking about rocket-aeronautics and his PE instructor, put out of his mind for the preceding twenty minutes.

“Danni ! What the frack ... ! No, honestly ... what the *actual* frack !”

“Well, for a start, you can call me Dorothy — that's your mum's name. I won't put the light on— .... *Ahh*, why are you in the single bed ?”

“Why are you even here ? What's wrong with your room ? And, what ! My mum's name ?” Jonny's brain moved sluggishly to recall that his dad's name too had been on the greeting screen.

“Look, “ Da-Hee said shutting off the door, and skipping around with just her phone-light. “ That frackin' chick that Burt had; she's a K-bitch; she's probably talked to the K-Town mafia in LA; and my frackin' moonie-moon-man was a made guy in the Hawaii mafia. They'll come for us !”

Jonny sat up: “You have got to be ...! I mean, that's really, totally paranoid. I mean, I've known you for a couple of days now and, sometimes, you just come up—”

“—With talk like a *K-for-Krazy* person ? Well, I was, I am ... but good ol’ Samosa-man Gupta, and the President round here: they said just *Let’Em Be*. So, here I be, and I’m looking out for you, Jonny. I told you that. And ... seriously, why would anyone choose the *single* bed to sleep in, assuming you didn’t know I was coming by ?”

“I ... I’m tired; it just reminds me of my single bed when I was at school.”

“*Ummm*, you were wanking ? Weren't you ?”

“What !” Something about Da-Hee tickled Jonny, such that his exclamation in the dark, betrayed the threat of laughter.

“No. That’s perfectly natural. I have already worked out the problem with you and Antonella .... “

“Oh, you *have*, have you ? Right .... Actually, no seriously, back to ... I mean how the frack did you manage to check me in here using my parents' details ? Some kind of identity theft ?”

“Well. At Burt’s. You weren’t the only one browsing the Dark Web. Dorothy and William Squire ... Mr and Mrs. Anyway, back to wanking ... “

“Back to wanking ...*ha, ha, ha* ! “

“Well, “ started Da-Hee. From the projection of her voice, she was sat up in the adjacent double-bed. Jonny was flat on his back, staring up into the pitch darkness, regressing to School Camps and talking utter nonsense with excitable buddies about theories of life, the universe and everything, and how to chat up girls. “If you think

about it ... *you*, meaning your sperm, stole your dad's parent-identity too, when you were born. Identity theft in—

“—Wait, what ? *My* sperm, when *I* was born !”

“Pretty much. And—”

“—Danni. I am so, so tired ... Can we just ?”

“In that box. It's only the best sex-robot in the world. Made by Samsung ... Burt gets them on some illegal import. Jonny ...?”

Inside Jonny's head was a battle royale between his desire to just conk out asleep and his desire to break into fits of absurd giggles. Eventually, he muttered under his breath: “Please make this stop !”

“Start ? It's got a remote-control. Strap on. State of the art ... “ came Da-Hee's reply with a tone of innocent enthusiasm.

That was it for Jonny. A sequence of giggles and squawks was followed by laughter then hiccups in his bed, which nearly became full-on vomiting in the bathroom. When he recovered he made Da-Hee laugh by mentioning his good gastric fortune not to have sampled the street-curry dishes.

Jonny must have enjoyed some kind of sleeping interlude under the sheets. However, there was no mistaking how unceremoniously he was shaken awake by Da-Hee; his pulse quickened by the contents of her phone screen that she was holding blindingly close to his face. His tongue, lips and cheeks were also independently getting tired of forming and uttering the phrase, “What the frack !”

“They’re here. They found me. I put a spy-view over the bed. Burt sold me it. That’s the low-res. view. Look ! “

Jonny focussed. Da-Hee’s screen showed the over-head view — night-vision mode— of the double-bed in the same bedroom layout. There were at least three male figures in the periphery of the wide-angle view.

“That’s me. In the bed. Supposed to be ... “

“Wait, “ asked Jonny. “That’s not another sex-doll-thing you bought from Burt, or someone else ?”

“No. It’s all the spare towels and pillows I could find all rolled up, pretending to be me. Like they do in the movies.”

“And, where did you buy that wig ?” Jonny passed up a hand to tilt the greenish display away from his eyes.

“That’s my wig. I have wigs. I like wigs.”

“Who *are* they ?”

“Korean mafia. I heard them say shit in Korean, same shit accent as the moonie-moon-man. “

“Well. Nothing’s happening. I mean maybe they just want to talk to you ... OH, FRACKIN’ HELL !!”

One large figure leapt from the periphery of the spy-camera view, onto the bed, and started screaming and stabbing with a primitive-looking machete at the false figure of Da-Hee in the bed-clothes. The bed shook and the image shook on the phone’s small screen. Jonny



felt his bed shake as Da-Hee's nervous leg began to shudder and vibrate frantically up and down.

"What are they saying ?" asked Jonny, as a volley of voices sounded out once Da-Hee's artifice had been discovered. One more shocking detail became apparent from the screen, but only to Jonny's rather geekish knowledge of paramilitary robots: "Holy shit, they've got a Securitron unit in there with them !"

"We have to leave. Get up. So sorry to disturb your sleep, your wank, your nice getaway on the moon. But ... we have to go."

"How'd they get a Securitron ? Frack, it'll find your hidden camera down there."

"And us, up here. Dorothy and William. I chose this floor, because there's a mid-level walkway, and a Hopper stop less than a click away."

In a few seconds, it was lights-on, and Jonny found himself throwing back the same smog-smelling clothes that he had taken off an hour or so ago. Da-Hee was fully clothed.

"Forget the luggage. I've got Kimchi here, just in case ..."

Jonny's back was turned, scrabbling for a shoe: "No way ! You seriously going to take that sex-bot now ? You've got to be frackin' joking —"

Jonny turned to see Da-Hee brandishing her Magvolt pistola in her hand, and he just gave a slight shake of the head at his companion's propensity to want to name any intimate object, "Kimchi".

“What ! I love kimchi ... Haven’t you ever ? Oh, yes ... you don’t like spicy food. “

“Those things are defaulted to stun-settings, aren’t they ?”

They rushed into the corridor. Jonny was surprised at how the adrenaline rush had over-ridden the dizziness of the so-called “moon-legs” phenomenon. Had he forgotten anything important ? Was all this really happening in real-time ?

The exit from the mid-level of the hotel, still scarily at least fifty metres above street level, took them onto the walkway. It was partially open-air, and the constant of the radiation glow from the far north was obvious through the polluted glass of the roof. Odd people were still jogging, some with Hilton lanyards flapping in the smoggy breeze. Unimpeded, they both resisted the urge to run, but were power-walking in silence. Signs to a public transport area started appearing.

As they passed a junction in the walkway, from behind them, Jonny heard a robotic-beep. It was the kind of bleep which was usually, in a menial AI programme, the robotic equivalent of clearing one’s throat to make a stock-statement ... which in this case, to Jonny’s ears, defaulted to a non-English phrase.

Nevertheless, Da-Hee shrieked and jumped to one side. Then in plain sight of a few customers at an auto-cafe, she pulled out her pistola and fired. The robot, which was right at the low end of cleaning/domestic design, exploded. The contents of its head-set vaporised in the night-air as the voltage-pulse hit it. The small ignition in its body set-off a jet of fire-extinguisher from the walkway’s protective systems.

“That wasn’t on frackin’ stun-setting.”

“That thing said ‘stop’ in Korean. Burt told me ... he said to me '*I made that all safe for you*', I promise.”

The people at the cafe were not in the slightest bit perturbed by the random, excessive violence that they had just witnessed; one was wryly clapping Da-Hee's performance.

“Yeah. Safe for you, but not for anyone or anything else, “ said Jonny, coughing at fumes.

“Love ya, Kimchi !”

They carried on walking to the halt, and as soon as they boarded the Hopper, Da-Hee started talking non-stop about her student days at Pepperdine, and how the all-night Hoppers hadn’t changed a bit. It was difficult to discern who was listening to and absorbing her stories as Jonny found a ledge to rest his head and was soon asleep.

## Chapter 9 — Antonella

Pilot Pirix was once more surveying the Martian landscape, standing on the gantry of a gigantic Chinese excavator. The immensity of the technological frontier in whose midst he stood tapping his boot, marking time, waiting for his tardy colleagues still strapping boots on in the air-lock, had always attracted him. After eight months flying the freight routes for the Gongzho Corporation, his Mandarin was functional enough that he could almost sing along to the morale-boosting Chinese proverbs and the company slogans and jingles that were replayed through the ambient feed almost every ten minutes in his earpiece. An adopted American child, he could not have escaped further from the cruel family that had denounced him as a teenager into America's bottomless mental health system, in whose clutches the meta-neurologists had kept him an involuntary "treatment" coma on brain dialysis for nearly two years. All he had ever wanted to do from kindergarten onwards was to fly military rockets for the US Air Force, but even after De-Diagnosis Day in America, the stigma borne by all the so-called 'New Releases' like him meant he had to look to other countries. Literally, the man on the video-link from the Gongzho Training Academy could only say three English words during Pirix's two hour interview, which was otherwise mediated by translation-software: "We take Krazies !"

Five words, in fact: "Red Rock !" These last two words would be accompanied by vigorous pointing and gestures at the heavens and the night-sky.

So, Pirix knew he would end up as a foreign, over-tall, Mandarin-monosyllabic tiny cog in the Chinese Masterplan for the terra-forming and colonisation of Mars, the planet his American counterparts, at

least a fifty years behind the Chinese technologically, always called "Red Blob".

They had been over-staffed at the Space-Base on Mars, due to two returns to Luna being cancelled. All the sub-space flying work had gone to the Chinese pilots. Pirix had been seconded onto a maintenance detail; he didn't mind. Forget the stereotype, his three Chinese work colleagues were slack. They emerged late from the air-lock, and Pirix's helmet was filled with their joshing and chatter — all in Mandarin slang. The shift Supervisor came last, stride-for-stride with a new-generation robot which was probably worth more than most airline rockets back in America.

They assembled at the gantry. Two of them, plus the prehensile robot, would descend on PalKar threads to the control-panel of a giant-rotor whose malfunction had called a halt to the productivity of the whole sector.

Nobody was in any hurry. They kept staring at Pirix, motioning to his breathing-mask. Pirix heard the same Mandarin word being repeated at him through his earpieces. The robot's voice was offering up three language-translations to the Comms banter, because Pirix was the only one not responding. Pirix replied finally in English: "I *know* it means 'now'. But we should do the job first, therefore let us start." The robot translated. The Chinese workers made internationally obvious gestures that they thought Pirix was just sucking up to the Supervisor with his keenness.

What they wanted was for Pirix to mark a rite of passage. Everyone who came to Mars had to do it. In the open atmosphere, they had to take off their mask and breathe in a lungful of Martian air. This act, Pirix was amazed to find, had, in the twenty years of Chinese settlement on Mars, already been invested with spirituality, inner

strength and linked with ancient Chinese folklore. The Martian air was the ultimate giver of “Qi”, or life-force, from the universe, or some such bolt-on company mumbo-jumbo.

Anyway, Pirix found himself descending with the robot on one PalKar cable whilst a singing Chinese colleague was next to them on another. Even through his breathing filters, Pirix could tell that something was badly amiss with the faulty control panel before them, the size of the side of a house — toxic smells and leaking fluid.

Disaster struck as soon as the singing comrade tried to fix himself to the grapple points. Mid-verse, mid-song, an arc of electricity struck out and shorted the power in his suit. Pirix saw his limp body disengage from the cable and fall half a kilometre into the rocky Martian plain below. The blast had put the cable to which Pirix and the robot were attached into a perilous swing. They were below the shorting-electricity, and there was no way to avoid it on their ascent back to the gantry. Pirix, in his earpiece, felt sure that a command had come from the Supervisor, a command to the robot *to detach Pirix*. But there was no translation in that split-second. The robot was humanoid, next-generation, with prehensile limbs. Pirix was shielding his eyes from the electrical combustion towards which their cable was swinging. He felt himself being grasped from above by one of the robot's limbs and moved upwards. One thousand times since, Pirix had re-lived the next moment. Through the acrid smoke he could make out the glow from the robot's “eyes” and in his ear-piece he heard the robot's voice, its next-gen AI, its sentience, its “Qi” ... saying to him, in English: “You can live, and love.” Whereupon the robot swapped attachments, grabbed the molten control panel with its other prehensile limb, drawing the shorting-arc into its own metallic skeleton, which act allowed Pirix to be yanked up at back-breaking velocity to safety. He was a tiny-cog, a foreign grunt entirely expendable in the eyes of the Gongzho Corporation, but he had

survived and a multi-million dollar prototype robot had destroyed itself for him.

“Now, now, *now* !” said his Supervisor over and over again on the gantry. Pirix was hearing sunny jingles of Shanghai nursery rhymes in his earpiece. He steadied himself for his rite of passage. He felt his mask being pulled clear of his face, then laughter.

He was like a young teen finally taking the plunge and drawing his first drag from a cigarette, with his eyes closed. He let his diaphragm drop and his mouth open. Not oxygen, but the weird Martian blend of argons and methanes and heliums and other isotopes started filling his lungs, not one single molecule that his earthly metabolism could directly use.

“*Ha, ha, ha*, “ came the laughter. “Breathe in the *Qi* ... it might even cure you of your *Krazy* ... your Krazy that got you plugged in for two years ... *ha, ha ha*.”

He opened his eyes. One lungful and they were supposed to put his mask back on ! In the spectral light, as his consciousness started to falter, suddenly the Supervisor’s face was no longer a chubby middle-aged oriental — it was his hometown foster-brother, Chad, who was still holding aloft his breathing mask.

“You demon, Chad ... You wanna kill me, don’t you !” screamed Pirix. He began thrusting out his fists trying to hit his foster brother, the one who had denounced him those lost years ago in America, denounced him as mentally ill, in need of detention by America’s burgeoning meta-neurology clinic system. Pirix gasped one more breath of the Martian air, growing weaker and weaker ...

*Hold on ! Wait ... ! If I am dreaming all this ...* Some small vestige of Pirix's strong suit of inherent rationality was trying to be heard. *If I am ...But I DO NOT DREAM ! That was proven to me by the meta-neurologist analysis of my brain-waves at the Silvert Clinic. I was shown my physiological studies. I never enter the REM-phase long enough to dream. Therefore that only happened when I had been injected with their clinic-drugs. Or if someone else ...!*

Pirix forced his thrashing arm to settle across his chest; he forced his eyes to open; the image of the red, dusty Martian landscape began to minimise with each blink. To be replaced by what ... ? The jeering laugh of his heartless foster-brother, too, seemed to swoosh and fizzle out, like a deflating party balloon in the air around him. *To be replaced by what ... ?*

He was in a dark room. Under his back, he could feel a cheap, springy mattress. His head was right up against the plastic bars of the bedhead. He was soaked in sweat. Swivelling his eyes toward a window, the bright neon lights of a motel sign were discernible through the curtains flapping by the room's air-conditioning unit.

His body, drenched in sweat, staring at a low dark ceiling, was by no means in an unfamiliar state of being. In the two years he had been plugged into a Brain Dialysis machine at the meta-neurology clinic, he had acute memory of this horrid post-nightmare state at every drug-washout stage of the clinic regime. This was when the clinicians took him off the deep-sedation, to see if he was "better", then, eleven times —Pirix had, as was his right, read his clinical notes— *eleven times* they plugged him back in.

Pirix had to lie still, risk-assess, and methodically insert his sensory and motor systems back into his current reality. The major effort was



mental, churning round the cogs of his senses, spinning the hard-drive of his memory ...

*The guy, a pilot ... Jed. Air-Force Base at Pepperdine. Had to book into a motel. Wanted to show them a good time. The check-in guy, cocktails ...Them ? "THEM" !!* An image was forming, with random strokes of pixelated lines in his brain. Pirix jolted as he remembered the fact of his recent companion, Antonella.

As he jolted up into his woken sensorium, he felt the lag in his right arm; then, he saw the snapped cable-tie, and oozing blood from his left wrist. As with the sedative drugs used when the meta-neurologists had him under in the Silvert Clinic, Pirix's sense of hearing seemed slowest to recover.

His thrashing arm, as he had emerged from his Martian nightmare, had snapped one cable-tie from its attachment to the bed-head. He could hear noises from another room. *The manager of the motel had said: "Your usual Family Suite" to Jed.* Pirix doubled his free-arm around his bound wrist. His G-forced muscles, from the months of inter-planetary rocket flight, eased the other cable-tie without cutting his skin on the right side. Pirix spent a minute picking the remnant plastic strand apart from his left side. There was a fair and stinging ooze of blood there.

Pirix stood up, still. He confirmed that he was alone; that there were no signs of any interact-able technology about him. He patted at his sides, double-checking for any other injuries; pockets had been emptied. He could reach the cheap curtains and, with a brush aside, the blink of street-lighting gave his eyes some detail of the interior: a scatter of unused cable-ties on the white bed-linen, a standing-lamp, and, at the opposite wall, next to the standard array of kettle and snack-tray, other more randomly placed objects.

Three paces in front of Pirix was the closed door. It was purposefully ancient, with a retro bulbous handle and a key-lock, like from some sort of tacky historical theme-park. Beyond it came sounds; Pirix could make out a groaning noise, possibly human, and the sounds of robotic hydraulics.

*I have a minor wrist injury; I have been sedated, therefore with the WHO global policy — unlawfully. I have been robbed, unlawfully. There is unknown danger beyond this room, and limited escape-route from this room. Therefore, the status of my friend is also unknown and she may be in danger.* As was his way, Pirix ran a point-by-point status check before deciding to move to the darkened desk to see if his possessions were amongst the strewn objects.

He added to the status-check the fact that he was barefoot, and the retrieval of his pilot-boots was added at number 5 or 6 of his current objectives. At the desk, there was neither his wallet, nor his ID cards, nor his phone, nor his Rada tablets. What he did find was a reel of black duct-tape, a small pocket-drone, and what Pirix weighed up in his hand and thought was a flash-light.

Risking possible signal or noise, he depressed the single, pulpy user-button. There was a small mechanical whirr as the distal end-plate opened and two anodised prongs snapped open. After, at a tiny charging delay, a buzzing, bright blue electric arc formed light and wisps of white smoke in the air around the prong-tips.

*This is a variable taser unit. Therefore, it is unlawful outside of law-enforcement or Securitron use,* was how Pirix's internal monologue assessed the found object.

At the door to the bedroom, Pirix stood silently for over a minute. He desperately tried to dredge from his memory what had happened after their slot-ride from K-Town, and more importantly tried to guess the layout of the so-called “Family Suite” beyond the door. The voices were definitely a human male’s and a robot’s. *Was the door-fitting a fake, therefore its mechanism is auto-sliding ?* This was Pirix’s fear as he squeezed the handle; he could scarcely remember the last time he had turned a door handle; the noisy air-conditioning unit covered the thin squeak and creak as the door opened.

What he saw before him shocked Pirix so much he almost vocalised his inner words out aloud: *This is unlawful, therefore this is extreme danger. Now.*

Pirix first recognised the face of Antonella. Her eyes were closed; her face and head were slumped at an angle over a man’s shoulder. The man was Jed, seated on a simple chair in the middle of the room, facing away. Next Pirix saw the same black cable-ties fastened at Antonella’s thin, white, hanging limp wrists; her arms were looped around Jed’s neck.

The lighting in the room was bright and harsh; same retro-cheap stylings furnished the room. Pirix stood transfixed, counting his own breaths. Jed was fully clothed in Air-Force uniform, his leather boots rubbing, squeaking against the plastic of the chair-legs. Antonella had, from Pirix’s angle of view, no detectable article of clothing on her.

Jed was talking to someone; the reason Pirix was hesitating.

“*Ahhh, Ahhh, Mary ...* “ he said amid panting. “ You hit the red ! All right, she’s a-dripping. Now, Mary ... now me ... take me !”

At that, Pirix saw a pair of prehensile robotic arms appear from the front of where Jed was sat with the unconscious Antonella draped over him. The arms were sleeved in a black rubbery material and ended in a writhing, pulpy mass of digits. The “hands” paused in the air, pointed directly at Pirix in the doorway (*If there are micro-visual lenses*, thought Pirix, *I am discovered !*) Then they both dived in the fleshy crevices between Antonella’s mid-riff and Jed’s seated groin. The latter tossed his head back looking up. (Again, Pirix’s mind, dredging at his very meagre knowledge of professional pornographic scene-setting, was relieved that no array of ceiling mirrors was present there to betray his presence.)

Mary was a pornographic robot, Pirix correctly concluded, and midget-sized. Onto the plastic sheeting on which the action was occurring, blood was dripping. Pirix saw only one point of mitigation in that Antonella had mentioned at some point in his memory about an active menstrual period. However, this could not exclude the much more compelling risk of some invisible harm being done there by the robotic digits, that were also delivering such visible, unlawful, pleasure to Jed ...

Pirix took two rapid steps forward, adjusted his slight ‘space wobble’-gait and, in his third stride, plunged the taser-prongs into Jed’s bulging neck.

"Oh, frack ! " Pirix rarely swore.

The taser-effect flung Jed into rigid spasm of his arms and legs. This effectively locked Antonella’s arms into a falling bundle of chair, porn-bot, and criminal-rapist. Pirix tried to put an arm in to extricate the naked girl, but he slipped on the disgusting pool of human-fluids that had collected on the sheeting under the chair.

Mary, the robot, righted itself more quickly than Pirix. It had the bust of a woman on an omni-directional base, and its “head” comprised a frightening contour of black rubber and leather with silver zippered orifices and ladders of diodes which were ascending into the yellow and red “danger” zones on either side of the mouth orifice. It was shrieking “Commander>Intruder>I kill>” Most alarming was the conversion of the writhing soft digits to something singular and shiny with a cutting edge. Pirix did not want to think on what horrible criminal programming had created Mary, because there was clear and present danger.

“I am an inter-planetary pilot !” cried Pirix, bracing against, the bulk of Jed’s prone body. “Therefore, you are a midget, unlawful porno-robot!”

Pirix snapped a kick with all of his might. Mary took it in the head-section and flew away across the room. Pirix grabbed at the lamp-stand, and, sure of his lawful actions, he smashed and smashed at the robot with the heavy base until its shrieking and diodes went out. Then he turned to view the human carnage still lying in a heap on the floor.

Pirix had basic medical training with the freight Corporation, and had used it two or three times mid-flight. *Breath, Blood, Blanket* was one of the jingles in the English version that was played again and again in their workplace. Antonella’s body was limp but she was still breathing. In her breath Pirix smelt the same taste that was in his own mouth. The blood dripping at her leg: he could only alleviate by ripping a motel towel — fortunately, unfashionably dark green — into a sling of padding down, under and around her waist. Jed, meanwhile, was stirring, so Pirix had to decide his next move quickly. He kept his righteous anger and rage in check as he scrabbled to find some covering for Antonella’s body, since her own clothing was

nowhere to be seen. *Was there another room adjoining ?* Jed groaned. One door Pirix opened led to a patio and receding unlit, open land. He could electrocute Jed again, then just walk out with Antonella, find their way to one of the safe, luxurious Corporation hotels where he could stay and find a company medic for free. But Pirix had burning questions he wanted to put to the man on the floor — not to mention find justice in that town.

Jed spoke first:

“Hey, ass-wipe Spacetrucker — you won’t get no luck hacking into the computer there ... Will he, Mary ?”

Pirix had used the spare cable-ties to bind his arms to a rail in the kitchen area, while he simultaneously tended to Antonella and was trying to call for help.

“And ... Spaceman, you need the fingerprint of my *pokey-pokey-pokey* finger here to get into my table-screen there. Cos’ you thinking of calling the cops, right ? Well, bring it on over ! ‘S clean, my finger ... my darling Mary got her 16 pokey-pokey fingers all juiced up first inside lil’English Rose there. But, you come here, and I’ll frackin’ bite your head off ... And I got lots of lovely infectious diseases I can lay on ya, that’s for—”

“—Stop talking ! “ Pirix snapped. “ You are an unlawful criminal, therefore I will let you talk and tell me what chemical you used on me and what chemical you used on Miss Antonella.”

“*Ha, ha, ha* ... You frackin’ freaks — or is it *you freakin’ fracks?* I love the way you Krazies talk ... I only gave Sleeping Beauty a half a vial, but, shit, I gave a big asshole like you three large ! So, I gotta hand it to you for getting up from that, boy !”

Pirix had not managed to find any of his or Antonella's possessions in the room; the motel intercom was a dead-line; despite all the usual call-signs there seemed to be no in-room computer to hail. He had found an unlocked suitcase which had clothing in the style, frankly, of fetish-wear: a 2-piece dancer's outfit was the easiest for Pirix to cover her in.

Pirix walked around holding the tablet-computer and the taser, and stood over Jed.

"Some things from China are superior, " said Pirix. "Therefore, these are my radiation tablets from the Gongzho Corporation. They are 12 times as active as cheap commercial American products. That is why I revived. China."

"Well, like say, gotta hand that one to you, my chinky-loving space-cadet Krazy-ass ! Never will forgive those WHO assholes for forcing us in America to let you Krazies out. We plug y'all back in real soon ... "

"Is it *di-ethox* compound you used ?"

"Hey, listen up, Mary ! We got a multi-talented Krazy chemist here. Hey, I got a vial tucked in my pocket here ...you wanna see ?"

Pirix gave one step forward.

"*Ha, ha, ha* Don't forget the rules of the game ! I bite your head off and give you all my lovely blood-borne diseases. Tell you what, Krazy-ass, Mary has an antidote too, in a built-in syringe pop-up in her beautiful arms ... You let me up; we sort out English Rose. Then,

we call our little fun this evening quits, and we'll get you a slot back to town — like nothing ever happened.”

“No,” said Pirix. “You are a criminal rapist, therefore you have also said the unlawful *K-word* five times. But for the first crime you should be sent to the Tranquility Penal Institution on Luna ... If I have access to local legal listings I can tell you the exact off-planet Penal sentence.”

“Buddy, I love it, the way you say *Penal*. I was saving your space-ass for my man ... So, how big is your *penal* ?”

“Your man ... was not a man. It was a pornographic midget robot with a girl's forename. “

“You'll see, Krazy-ass, you'll see ... See, in America, we always just had *Normal* people and *Krazy* people, and the you-know-what law just went ahead and plugged you Krazies in, out of harm's way, and for your own good too—”,

“—What is ‘normal’? I am myself, Pilot Pirix, Second Rank. Being yourself is not an illness; Therefore, is it ‘normal’ to drug an innocent girl and then rape her using what was a mal-programmed robot ?”

“Hey, wait ! You Krazy-ass, motherfracker ... you can prod me all you like, me and my man quite like it, but you leave Mary out of this ! You touch one blinking diode on her face, and I swear—”

“—I lawfully smashed your robot-escort with a very heavy weight—”

“—No !”



“—into at least fourteen separate pieces on the floor by your previous crime-scene. Therefore, I have had enough discussion with you; I will plan to alert local law enforcement staff.”

“Nooo ! You frackin’ Krazy ... My Mary ...! Santi, frack, man ! “

Half a room away there was a distinctly modern hum-and-swoosh sound. On *that* wall, the ancient door-fitting was fake, clamped onto a modern slider. The inside lights were so bright, the face of the man standing at the threshold, in a loud Hawaiian shirt and carrying an armful of black rubbery straps, lit up for Pirix like a memory-flashbulb: the man who had checked them in and taken all their luggage.

“Hey, frack, man !” he said at the threshold. “Y’all frackin’ got partied up without me. Jed ?”

Pirix: he was a stride away from Jed, five strides away from the newcomer, and the motionless Antonella was midway on the soiled plastic sheeting on the floor.

“Frack ! Santi ! “ screamed Jed. “Get ya guns ! Kill this—”

Pirix leaned in, fizzing up the taser prongs in his hand and jabbed them into Jed’s face, who, with one terrifying strangulated shriek went rigid, then fell silent. When Pirix turned, the motel manager at the doorway had opted for flight over fight, leaving his heap of rubbery straps on the floor in front of the fake door which had slid back shut.

*There is, assessed Pirix rapidly to himself, a near-maximum probability that the motel manager will not return to his normal check-in and reception duties at the front desk.*

Pirix went first to Antonella and judged her carry-weight. Next, he brought to his mind an advice sheet from his employer that was standard issue for any Chinese staff having to spend time in American cities. It was the paramount recommendation to find lodging in affiliated hotels and the strong caution that smaller motels were often the hubs of crime and hence repositories of paramilitary weapons for security.

Jed had uttered 'guns' in the plural. The man called Santi would be back. Pirix had only a hand-held taser which was set, very likely, to a sexual-gratification voltage rather than for lethal combat situations. Plus, he was encumbered by his duty of care for his unconscious friend. And no boots, plus the robot had in fact caught his foot with its blade, and so he was technically walking wounded.

*Worse things happen with a rotten Boride Hyperdrive in the Asteroid belt !* The original version in Mandarin of this popular space-truckers' saying was a lot less clunky than the English, but it gave Pirix the resolve to make his escape.

The back-door opened onto a few metres of patio. All the street frontage, and the slotways of Pepperdine village were on the opposite side of the motel. Pirix was still not confident of running given his lack of acclimatisation to Earth's gravity and atmosphere. Ahead was indeterminate darkness, and the feeling underfoot of his bare skin against something organic — sandy scrubland— was the strangest thing. After a hundred strides of direct marching, Pirix started to hear faint sounds from Antonella in time with his strides. *May be she is recovering from the drug—*

"Frack !" Pirix cried out at his own stupidity and slowed down with his own pained self-reproach. He had forgotten to check the pocket of

the criminal for a vial of the sedation drug for if-and-when he could find medical help. He looked back.

The light from the motel suite they had just abandoned was so bright, that the silhouettes of three men all carrying guns were unmistakeable. Pirix crouched in a line of shrubs. He moved Antonella onto his other shoulder even though she was not much more of a physical burden than a rag-doll. It was when he discovered the plus or minus of something wedged under his carrying armpit that he had absent-mindedly taken: it was Jed's tablet computer.

The silhouettes were in the open doorway now. One loosed a loud laser bolt into the night air, but totally in the wrong direction. In the still, smoggy air, Pirix heard their talk quite clearly — a lot of swearing in English and Spanish, but then two clear words: drones and *lobos*.

Were there types of drone nicknamed 'Lobos', or were there really wolves in the radiation scrubland that Pirix was scrambling over?

Pirix deliberately headed towards the darkest, densest smog and away from any slotway lighting. Now he was feeling thirst. Antonella's vocalisations were evolving from squeaky grunt to an occasional "Oww".

Suddenly Pirix felt a tremor in the ground: it was the Californian earthquake zone, after all; but was it a flighted vehicle — but, not with that kind of ancient engine shudder?

As he crouched again and scanned, he saw a solid cone of light, about thirty metres in the air. It was flying with a shaky, yawing trajectory: this was no drone, nor was it any commercial vehicle. As the lights drew nearer — it can only have been taking a surface

speed of 30 miles per hour — Pirix grew in confidence in being able to identify it. He charged up the prongs in the taser and began circling a distress signal in the air around him.

A downlight, in addition to the headlights, sparked up and trained on them from above. After a clanking, rough descent, Pirix found himself peering into the front partition of an old decommissioned Kombi-hopper. He and his foster -brother had learned to fly in one such that his foster-uncle had dumped in their backyard when they were both around 16. (Pirix had done the workshop patching-up over one summer to get it airborne; his brother Chad sold it and kept the money)

“Thank you for stopping,” called Pirix to the pair of young guys in the cockpit.

“Frack ! You see a barefoot spaceman carrying a chick in a pink tutu in the desert ... What’s not to frackin’ stop for !”

“You all have insignias of a group. Therefore, we need help !”

“Nix-Nix-Nix Fraternity joyride ! At your service ... Frack shit, man, you’re covered in blood ! Wolf bite ya ?”

“A midget robot, in a leather hood ... Some ...sex-scene in the motel back there, “ replied Pirix, struggling to put moisture to his tongue.

The leading guy in the cockpit turned to his comrades in the darker back seats: “Hell, yeah ! That’s my kind of party ! Reverse on up, and we’re gate-crashing that bitch !”

“No ! “ Pirix’s mouth was so dry words wouldn’t form. “Exact ... opposite ... guns ... kill us !”

Urgency and meaning enough seemed to have been transmitted. Pirix and Antonella were helped aboard, and like the biblical story, the Kombi-hopper returned to their own place by another path.

## Chapter 10 — @Pepperdine

### 1

“*Uh*, I’ve had this driver before ... He couldn’t land his coffee-cup on the table, no way. Brace yourself, Tia !”

“Jo-Jo, I’m going *glass-half-full* — he’s actually looking at his dashboard ! Hey, what about these two, here ? Should we wake them ? The chick, didn’t she say she was Pep-alumni ?”

“Yeah, let’s squeeze one more good deed out of the day, stacie-queens that we are ! Didn’t she say she was a lecturer, or something ... I had my headphones on ?”

“Well, she sure could talk: every subject going one minute, next minute, spark out snoring. *Ooop-la*, here we go ! He’s cleared his throat ... “

It was the B-line Hover-Rover bus on the suburban north-bound route out of Los Angeles, the second-last before daybreak when the internal lighting and upholstery would change a pastel blue, when once upon a time the ocean looked the same hue. The driver was announcing their descent to the stop, and blaming flocks of sea-birds for the short delay.

Tia and Jo-Jo giggled. *Sea-birds* ! Tia really thought that the driver was just super-conscious of his past failings and was concentrating hard on making a smooth landing. Jo-Jo thought that the driver’s open deceit (with respect to the non-existent seabirds, all natural wildlife having been trashed by successive anti-environment regional governments) was just another symptom of their troubled world.

The suburban transit vehicle started descending through the vertical corridor of tracer-lights. The two students couldn't help making excited *Oooohs* and *Ahhhhhs* as the cabin threatened to tip slightly; and then made *booos* as a couple of political ads appeared in the landing-lattice. Overall, it was a delicate enough landing into the Pepperdine University Concourse halt.

As the passengers all unbuckled, Tia nudged her friend: "Hey, we'd better had ... three in the morning is no time to miss your halt." So, she reached back and gently shook at Jonny's arm to wake him.

"What ... ? Wha— !" spluttered Jonny, with a dry mouth and a smear of sticky saliva at the corner of his lips.

"Hey, man ! " chirped Tia. "This is Peppers. Our stop. Shall I shake awake your—" *Colleague ? Girlfriend ? Sister ?* A moment of self-reflection at the annoyance at how random people always jumped to the conclusion that she and Jo-Jo were lesbian girlfriends, made Tia hesitate.

Jonny thanked god that the young, smiley girl had not put a hand on Da-Hee. Instead Jonny lent over, laying a firm hand on the hand of Da-Hee's that was tucked inside another cheap zip-up top she had bought at the Hover-stop — a hand that was wrapped around the trigger of her concealed Magvolt pistola. Sure enough, as Jonny spoke to rouse her, he had to press down hard and fast to stop Da-Hee from coming out of her light sleep blasting her gun.

"*Errr*, Danni, it's OK ... but we're at the University."

She went from sleep-to-hyper in an instant: "Well, and frack ... great to be back ! I'm Da-Hee. He's the only one allowed to call me Danni,

because he's London-little-uk. I was Class of '85, Business & Environment. What's new ?”

“Oh, *wow*, cool ! “ said Jo-Jo, as they disembarked the Hover. “I’m taking the same major. But, I guess you still had some *Denial Chumps* in the faculty back then. Actually, did you say you were a lecturer. I’m Jo-Jo, by the way ... “

“Great to meet you guys, “ Da-Hee put out her left hand.

“*Ohh*, Prof ! Great. See you got our little left-hand handshake going. Cool ! Guess you’re one of us, stacies ?”

“Frack, yeah!” said Da-Hee. “Adjunct-Professor in Life Sciences, that’s me. My right hand’s holding onto my pistola; girl can’t be too careful on those Hovers.”

Tia and Jo-Jo laughed.

“Oh, *wow*,” gushed Tia. “You’ve got to be coolest Prof I ever met. Hey, and there’s Hy ! “

She took a couple of paces forward of the group to wave at a figure waiting in the smoggy lights of a large notice-board. Jo-Jo was curious to bring Jonny into the welcoming small-talk: “And, are you a lecturer, too, sir ?”

Da-Hee hooted: “No need to call him, *Sir* — I know he’s from London. Peppers still instilling the good stuff in you all, though ... “

Jo-Jo blushed; in the better light, she saw Jonny was not much older than herself.



“I’m, *err*, working in recycling in my father’s company, two branches, the main—”

“—We’re on the run from the Korean mafia. And, we’ve lost his wife somewhere in Pepperdine, ” Da-Hee cut across, and her voice rose a couple of notches to reach Tia who was approaching with a new guy.

Jo-Jo laughed even harder, her laugh taking on a hiccupping quality, which was annoying enough to be the biggest threat to her long-term amicable relationship with Tia, or anyone, as a matter of fact.

“I’m not married,” said Jonny firmly. “As a matter of fact.”

“But you will be, “ retorted Da-Hee.

“The future is not ours to know,” said Jonny. The other two were back in the group, following the little exchange of barbs.

“It frackin’ well is, look !” said Jo-Jo, pulling aside a jangle of necklaces and a chiffon-tie, to show her T-shirt slogan: *'NO BABIES. NO FUTURE. ALL DEAD '*.

“That’s funny, “ dead-panned Da-Hee.

“It’s a climate catastrophe. It’s not supposed to be funny,” sniffed Jo-Jo.

In the tiniest pause, which followed, the new guy piped up:

“I’m Hy. Sorry I didn’t see you. Great to see you guys again ... And you two. Shall we ...?”

"Oh, we'll just head the same place as you, " said Da-hee. "They still got the refectory near here ?"

"Yeah, " Hy and Tia both replied.

"*Umm*, sorry, " said Da-Hee craning in closer to Hy. "I don't want to get in your personal space."

"But, you're kinda like, *already* in my personal space ..."

"You've got a bunch of gunk on your shoulder."

"Oh, frack !" said Jo-Jo with some indignation, looking closer herself. "Can't you boys understand, you don't throw those spunk-bags at each other; they're for the denialists, the super-oldies, the politicians and the Frat-boys."

"*Yuk*, " said Hy, recoiling at a veritable trail of slime at a total blind-spot on his shirt collar. "No honestly, Jo-Jo. I filled a bag for the cause today. This was a frackin' flock of sea-birds that dive-bombed me when I was waiting.

Tia got the giggles.

"It's not funny, " protested Hy. "With all my hygiene-issues, and all."

Several clicks away, off-campus, off-limits, the Kombi-hopper was doing its best to die on its clanking arse. This was hooting-tooting fun for the hosts and the pair in the cockpit. The sizeable jolts over the

desert scrubland were not, however, rousing Antonella much, which was not a good sign. The vehicle had just the juice and steer-ability to make the last 400 yards, lights failing, to the entrance of its hangar-like home-base.

Someone cried “Frackin’ lights !”; someone cried “Frackin’ brakes!” In the end, neither happened before the Kombi, seven-by-four yards on its battered rollers, crashed into two dark objects on the sawdust floor.

Pirix had for a while kept a protective arm over Antonella, expecting some mishap, but the final stopping jolt, although more comedic than calamitous, was firm enough for her to shake her head and murmur: “Gramps ...’Zzat you ?”

In more or less total darkness, Pirix heard foolhardy clambering around, and then two reckless bodies laughing and rushing and receding outside. One fell, crying out in genuine pain. The other yelled: “Night vision goggles, motherfracker ... Away Team ! Present and Correct ! Stand by ... lights !”

There was a droning buzz and then arc-lights charged up all around. The windows of the Kombi shielded Pirix’s eyes somewhat. The mangled wing-tip of an old spacecraft of indeterminate age was right outside his window. The hangar was full of vehicular relics of all shapes and sizes. Front and centre, on the wall, was a giant mural depicting the kindly portrait of jowly man in his 50s. Antonella were she alert and peering out of the next cabin window at the spectacle of six swaying, saluting young men and a single female humanoid robot bent tending to the bleeding knee of the felled boy, would have picked from the mural President Richard Nixon, straight from her academic period of specialty, the so-called *neo-medievalist* era. (roughly, 1970 to 2050, although, the exact bookends remained

exhaustively debated — which thing historians do for a living) But, Antonella was back comatose in his lap. Pirix shunned, abhorred ‘history’ as a so-called ‘subject’ for so-called ‘study’, and so was highly perplexed when a stylised fanfare sounded, and a news-reel voiceover announced:

“Would *you* buy a used space-rocket from *this* man ?”

The young men shot back stiff to a saluting attention towards the giant mural and then yelled solemnly: “Yes, we frackin’ would, Dicky !”

Pirix put a bare foot towards the sawdust floor and his face must have betrayed a wince as the laceration cracked back open at his instep with his body weight.

“So ... howdy, barefoot stranger. I’m LaShawn Trestle. Welcome to Nix-Nix-Nix Fraternity Compound. How y’all doing this smoggy morning?”

Pirix said: “ I am Pirix; my foot injury is not life-threatening, and I will pay you for that electrolyte drink. Therefore, my companion has been poisoned, and is weak, and needs urgent medical attention ... “

“And ... the frackin’ good news ?” LaShawn said with a big smile; he had a skin-tone of golden caramel, and frizzy brown ringlets.

“The frackin’ good news, frackin’ brother ...! Is the frackin’ Kombi hit the SpaceFive, and the SpaceFive hit the frackin’ Cesna. Frackin’, when dad hears about this ...! “

“Sir, would you like me to tend to the injured young lady—”

“—Hey, is she normally so white ?” asked LaShawn peering closer at Antonella. “Or, is she, like, *sick sick*.”

“She is from London. Very white. Normal white, “ conceded Pirix.

“—Or, sir, I could continue looking at the injury of Mr Milo?”

The humanoid robot was standing close behind LaShawn awaiting instructions. It was a Chinese model that Pirix had interacted with on the freighters; the skin and hair were what the Chinese catalogues would call ‘Euro-Afro’. It was a version, in his estimation, that was about five or so years out of date, whose speech and movements were still a touch staccato.

The brother at a distance answered, in a grumbling tone: “Susie, honey, see to the chick on the plane. Milo’s an idiot for falling over. And ... LaShawn, you’re a frackin’ idiot for not checking the fuel; now the Frat Kombi’s fracked to shit ...”

As the robot, Susie, came to slide an arm under Antonella, Pirix put a hand to her neck area and felt a smooth, newly-serviced skin layer. However, he recalled that the newer Chinese models were programmed with reactive-emotions and would have flinched at the touch of an un-introduced stranger. Nevertheless, Pirix was pleased that Antonella was being carried more gently than he could have done.

“That’s my grumpy brother, TaWayne ... He won’t turn nice again til breakfast. Will you, you grumpy asshole ?”

The group were more or less assembled again. A couple of the men stayed facing the massive mural of the ex-President and shouted out a few unofficial slogans, like “Up The US !” and “Fight The Global Power Grab !” With another primitive buzz-and-clonk a very old

walkway was set in motion, spinning sawdust and oily smells into the air, and this started to sweep the whole party towards a hallway. Pirix found himself positioned behind LaShawn, who seemed keen to deliver snippets of history of the Fraternity about which he was obviously proud.

However, his brother, last onto the walkway, could be heard overtaking others behind, still muttering his displeasures several: “Damn, fixing those turbines will cost some, hey ... ! Damn, Milo frackin’ *had* the remote control for the lighting in his pocket, except he was too out of it to remember ... Damn, Rea-Bush-Bush assholes gonna cream us, next race ... All your fault !”

“Will you quit your hollerin’ ... Frack !” called back LaShawn. “ One: we’ve got guests. Two: we had some fun on the joyride. Three: you’re embarrassing Susie, that’s for sure. “

Pirix looked back straight into the face of TaWayne, who at that instant looked back over his shoulder at Susie carrying Antonella.

“I think, “ said Pirix. “That you must be twins.”

“Yep, “ dead-panned LaShawn. “And, we love each other til death do us part.”

“In the West of America, natural conception-twins are rare. Therefore, are you artificial multiple births ? But I do not detect that you are clones.”

“Straight up, straight to the point kind of guy you are, hey ?”

“Genetic make-up is important to many basic skills.”

Behind Pirix, TaWayne had lightened up: “Listen, brother, Susie says she’s never embarrassed of me. That sentience-chip arrives from frackin’ Hong-Kong, and she’ll be neuro-enabled *to be embarrassed of my ass*, but for now, all smiles.”

They were all now facing back at the robot holding onto Antonella as the walkway started up an incline to the ramshackle farmstead-house.

“Talking ‘bout *make-up*, man, “ asked LaShawn. “What’s with your girl’s pink tutu?”

Suddenly, Pirix’s every muscle froze as two hyper-compelling thoughts collided in the centre of his brain; his words sputtered out: “This girl, Miss Antonella ... Medical attention, imperative. Therefore, where I applied the pink dress ... I have left most imperative criminal evidence on the floor of the Kombi-Hopper model. I must—“

“—Man, calm it ! Don’t frackin’ jump off the walkway ... What criminal evidence ?”

“It is a 9-inch tablet, model AsuxTouch. Therefore, I must ask your permission to instruct your Humanoid Model 6 to retrieve it, without delay.”

LaShawn at the lead of the group tipped his chin and flicked his eyes — and Pirix’s request — back at his twin brother.

“Susie’s no Golden Retriever, “ snorted TaWayne. “Ain’t no idea of *permission*, at all. You’ll help our bleeding spaceman just because you’re like that, aren’t ya ? Let me take the pink tutu chick, right here ... Catch us up in the Watergate Room ?”

Susie's facial skin and her expressions were impressive upgrades, right to the very frontier of humanoid technology, Pirix had to admit. She said, with a smile: "I will search and retrieve the AsuxTouch Tablet, for Houseguest-named-Pirix. I will see you as soon as. Would you like me to perform software diagnostics in case of damage ?"

"No — no, thank you." Pirix was momentarily taken back by the manner of the robotic model before him, that turned with a swish of perfectly natural human hair, and then vaulted a full 15 yards onto the sawdust amongst the rusting hulks of that weird mechanical museum.

"Yeah, Nix-Nix-Nix Incoming, " shouted LaShawn into an intercom near the walkway's tip-off point. "Get some frackin' bacon and eggs on. And, can someone page that little geeky campus Medic to get his ass over here A-SAP ! Got a bleeder and a coma, and no frackin' joke, over and out ! "

### 3

"How high is a Chinaman ?"

"Sorry ... ! " spluttered Jonny. "Are you talk— talking to me ?"

"How high is a Chinaman ?"

"What, you mean *on average* ? I mean, is it an assignment; I can look it up ? But— "

"—How high is a Jew ?"



“I’m sorry, I’m just with— just arrived with those girls; they’ve gone to the loo.”

“*Ha, ha, ha*, don’t sweat it, don’t sweat it, “ said the man who had met the group at the Hover-Rover halt; they had indeed all made a toilet stop. “That’s exactly what I wanted from you, that reaction. Sweet ! It’s new material; I was trying it out at the Campus Club last night. “

“Material ? As in ...? “ Jonny plucked at the cloth of his shirt, that was admittedly limp and soggy from 36 hours’ sweat.

“*Ah, ha, ha, ha* ... That’s choice, “ laughed the man, whose garish orange top, was probably a stage-outfit, if Jonny had had the enthusiasm to parse the dialogue he was in. “You should try stand-up too ... that’s some good improv, right there. No, no, no, no, it was the opening line to my set. You see, it’s not a *question*. See, my grandparents from my dad’s side are Chinese, hence my surname is Ho. Yeah ?”

“Yes, “ nodded Jonny. A man was shrieking and pumping fists in the air across the other side of the student refectory that they were in.

“But, on my mom’s side, they were all Chicago Jews. So, that’s my first name, Hyman, after I think my grandfather, who started, actually, the savoury crêpe chain, *Flippery* ... you know it ?”

Jonny knew of it; the franchise existed in London; but he found his companion getting far too close into *his* personal space, so just gave a non-committal “*Ugh*” sound.

“Yeah, well, anyway, the Asian tradition is to cite your *surname* first and your *first name* second. So, I come on stage and I try and pick

out some Asian-looking guys in the audience and I say: *Ho Hy is a Chinaman*, and, unlike the frackin' mechcomics, I gotta have all the translations going on in the digital banner above my head. Anyway, there's the dangerous dualism, like, *am I being racist* ? Hell, no ! I'm just saying my name: Ho Hy is a Chinaman. It got me a laugh, straight up."

"That's great. That guy's coming over..."

"And then I segue real smooth into *Ho Hy is a Jew*, which is also part of my introduction, but it gets me into a good joke about how you can't tell Jews these days from how they look. Even the Mechs don't run with jokes like that. Same in London, England ?"

"What, you mean about Jews, or, about—what did you say, — *mechanics* ?"

"You really got that English humour: *mechanics* — they fix your air-con or your Hover; no, *mechcomics* — the robot comedians. Joke databases, simultaneous translations, synthetic impersonations, *blah-blah* ... I just don't think it's fair. I mean, frack, I die on stage half the shows I do: *that* should be what paying customers should like ... not artificial humour and non-stop laughter. "

"The girls are back, " said Jonny, pulling back: from his amateur-comedy companion, as much as from the raucous fellow who seemed to have spotted them with an on-rush.

"Right, " said Jo-Jo, emerging from the toilets. "Med Student Ho, I think we need you to get some aspirin for poor Da-Hee. Boy, she has told us some stories in there. "

"I'm a med science major, " said Hy to Jonny as an aside.

“Laughter is the best medicine,” replied Jonny, surprising himself with his minor witticism.

“Yo ! You’re good ... we should hook up on some joint material—”

“—A man is running at us,” said the hyper-vigilant Da-Hee, although even at 20 yards (and counting) there could have been no mistaking the 6 feet 5 inch, blond-haired young man for a Korean mafioso stalker. He really was waving and skipping like someone who had scored a championship Home Run.

“Holy Dooly, Wexler !” cried Tia. “You’ll wake campus security, and then we’ll have some explaining ... “

“Sooooo ...! “ whooped the new arrival into the group. “ The frackin’ party goes the hell on ! “

“You mean your Tribunal appeal ?”

“Oh, yes ! Man, they put the verdict up at midnight; it was the big A-OK ! And, to quote that fat smelly bitch from faculty and her frackin’ team of sourpusses, I am still ... C’mon, Hy, brother, in your best comedy voice ... “ Wexler put an arm round his buddy, and they both chorused. “*The shit that they can’t flush away !*”

“Human body product is our weapon, “ said Jo-Jo, as if quoting some flyer or handbook herself, but no one particularly heard her.

Da-Hee began congratulating the tall blond Wexler, with all sincerity, whilst, at the same time, not knowing a single thing about him.

“Well, *shucks*, everyone, “ Da-Hee said. “I think the party ought to rock on if there’s something worth celebrating. I’ll take care of the security robes; I’ll outrank them.”

“She nearly missed her stop; came back from Luna; lecture tour there; Pep alumnus; she’s faculty now — but still got the stacie-spirit, hey, Prof ?” Tia’s voice was breathy and clipped, with all the essentials just tripping out.

“Hey, and talking about stacies ... Jo-Jo, that stacie-lawyer you got me from the downtown Movement ... have you guys got a minute or two. You gotta see her in action; it’s on-line; c’mon, you sleep when you’re dead; I’ll get y’all a mango daiquiri.”

“I love a Tribunal, “ said Da-Hee.

Jo-Jo was the only one whingeing about the need to get a Rada tablet from her room, so Wexley threw in the offer of buying everyone’s daily doses from the premium-rate vending machine at the all-night kiosk as well.

He was a polite young man, despite his initial whooping, and carry-on. He first apologised to Da-Hee about his disparagement of the Faculty member he had just referred to as a “fat smelly bitch” and then let Da-Hee and Jonny sit on the seats nearest the public screens as he logged on.

The screen filled with a wide-angle view of a rather grand room, Wexley in a formal-ish shirt visible in one corner, and the panel on the bench sat under a holographic emblem of the university. Underneath the four panel members was a digital banner: *Pepperdine Joint Faculty Standards and Integrity Tribunal*.

“Turn it up, “ said someone from the back, a random guy who had just livened up his pre-exam sleepless night by joining the early morning show (of anti-establishment merriment)

Da-Hee whispered to Wexley: “That all stands for *The Throw Your Ass Out* panel, doesn’t it ? “

“It’s my fourth.”

“Points for style.”

“Thanks, “ Wexley stole more than a few close views of Da-Hee’s pretty profile. “*Errr*, thanks, Prof.”

“And she is pretty fat, your Faculty bitch. Can the IT on these monitors give out recorded smells, I wonder ...? “

“No, Prof, I don’t think computers can even do that, not even in 2191 ... Do you ?”

Da-Hee rubbed at her face to rub away the giggles that were forming there. *Was this guy as dumb as he was tall and good-looking ?*

“Turn it up, it’s frackin’ starting ! “ came again the insistent voice from the shadows behind them.

It was like watching an old Korean courtroom drama, thought Da-Hee.

Pepperdine University prided itself on the transparency of its processes, so all interviews from the most menial to the highest professorships were recorded and archived. The audio-visuals for the Tribunal session they were all watching by the side of the empty

refectory hall must have been taken over by some students from the University's Visual Arts programme: it was slick.

"This tribunal is in session, " said the obese chairwoman on the screen, tapping twice at a stone inlay on her bench with a gavel. (Tia and Hi went "Oooooh" at the seriousness of it all). "It shall consider the fitness of Wexler P. Sorrenson to continue as a registered undergraduate in the Social Technology Bachelor's programme. I gather that, Mr Sorrenson, you have chosen to be represented by a Miss DiPascale, from Eternity Legal, Los Angeles County. Is that correct ?"

*"Errr, like—"*

"—You do not have to answer that !" A sharply dressed lady in her 30s, with the tightest bun of hair imaginable was seen stepping into view before the Tribunal bench. (The crowd in the refectory cheered that)

"Well, be that as it may, " continued the chairwoman. "I will ask my Faculty colleague, from Social Tech, to summarise the academic transcript of Mr Sorrenson in his first three years at Pepperdine."

A much older man with a silver goatee to the chairwoman's right began scrolling and reading from a screen before him: "In Freshman year: Mr Sorrenson scored a 38% aggregate grade in all subjects. The passmark was 51%. His application for grade-lenency was supported by meta-neurologist, Dr T.A. Creighton, who diagnosed Grade 4 Adjustment Disorder; the Faculty protocol allowed him 15% lenency. In his Sophomore, Mr Sorrenson's end-of-year aggregate grade fell to 25%. He applied to the Silvert Clinic in Downtown Los Angeles. He was diagnosed with acute-on-chronic Continuum Disorder and underwent three months of Brain Dialysis ... "

In the ring-seats, Wexler lent over to Da-Hee, flirtatiously close, and whispered: “Frackin’ best winter I ever had, sleeping or high as a kite, with hot nurses sticking tubes in your body — Yay !” He switched back to the screen for the best bit, and didn’t catch Da-Hee’s expression fall and frown.

“ ... on recommendation of meta-neurology specialists, Mr Wexler’s extremely low exam scores were mitigated and commuted. Mr Wexler entered his third year in Social Tech Bachelor of Science in the Fall of 2190. As the Tribunal, and counsel for Mr Sorrenson are fully aware, by Global UN/WHO decree, all forms of Mental Illness Diagnosis under the aegis of meta-neurology compendia were outlawed by Director Sengupta. President Van Els made the USA compliant with De-Diagnosis Day in 2189. We are therefore here to consider Mr Sorrenson’s third year final-semester grade of 19%.“

The chairwoman’s face was caught in a sudden dramatic close up, a wrinkly, wry smile for all to see: “And, professor, just remind us, will you, what the minimum faculty pass-mark is for Social Technology Undergraduates this year. “

“It is 48.7%, madam chairwoman, and Social Tech faculty will usually round up percentages from 44.5 upwards.”

“A very gracious concession, I might add, which I don’t allow in the Faculty of Medicine !”

(“Frackin’ ball-buster, all right !” quipped Hy, the only medical student present, with a hint of personal experience. )

There was a long pause before Miss DiPascale came forward to speak for Wexler: “Madame Chairwoman, distinguished panel, my

client is a hard-working, worthy and decent member of the student community at Pepperdine, a top sportsman, training for the Lunar Olympics next year. National De-Diagnosis Day in the United States of America remains a divisive issue—”

“Frack yeah ! Frackin’ repeal that shit !” This was from the random at the back, whose issues were not clear, but whose interjection was most unwelcome: “*Shhhh*” went a couple in front; “Frackin’ Frat Boy” muttered Jo-Jo.

“ ... But, we must respect the exigencies of the law. Although it may be very possible that my client is still suffering from the effects of his previously valid, but currently *invalid* and *illegal* diagnoses, I wish to take a completely different line. Here and now, I wish to remind the panel of the extant anti-discrimination laws which are universal in every state in the USA. There are several precedents which I can submit in disclosure from the Eastern States of this exact same discriminatory stance by both Public bodies and University institutions.”

Da-Hee let out an involuntary yawn. “No, Prof, the best bit’s coming ...” exhorted Wexler sitting forward.

Miss DiPascale made a show of thwacking several case files directly onto the bench: “Here are the precedents. To the distinguished Tribunal, and to the wider public [She made a theatrical flourish straight to the wide-angle camera] I say this: Mr Sorrenson, my client has an intrinsic IQ which is low-quintile, statistically sub-normal. And, here he is being *discriminated* for this through no fault of his own. And, this discrimination, under California State Law can be shown to be illegal. I will elaborate in great detail, but, in quintessence, having a low IQ should not *ever* be an impediment to gaining a faculty pass-mark ! I call my first expert witness by video link ... “



Wexler stood up to cheers all around: “Yeah, gets pretty boring after that. I mean, I frackin’ fell asleep ... But, that lawyer chick nailed it. Frack you, *De-Diagnosis Day* ! Frack you, *Prof Fat-Face* ! And, Frack you, *the Faculty Board* ... I’m gonna be nailing another year in paradise with you all, here again.”

Jonny had nearly fallen asleep, was slightly confused by the snippets he had witnessed, had never been to university (something that made him constantly even more nervous with respect to Antonella), but was enjoying his mango daiquiri. Da-Hee got another open-palmed apology from Wexler at his swears and aspersions aimed at the University’s lecturing corps.

“Hy, c’mon up here, man, “ said Wexler, still standing. “Leave that frackin’ pager ... C’mon up and tell us a few of your jokes. Killed it last night, I heard... “

“I would love to, love to, *love to* ... “ said Hy rising from his chair, clutching a solid device that was flashing red-and-blue. “But, guys, duty calls; I gotta pay my med school bills somehow .... Oh— oh, OK: How does a mechphile practice good sex *and* safe sex ...? He installs the Ctrl-Alt-Del hotkeys in her vagina !”

There were hoots of laughter, a few sharp intakes of breath at the *risqué* joke, but Hy took the showbiz maxim of leaving them wanting more, and skipped towards the campus buggy-rank, peering at the origin of his medical call-out.

Hy Ho well and truly hated the med alerts from the Fraternity Houses. Firstly, the campus auto-buggy network never reached their ridiculous off-campus hideouts. Secondly, his last call-out to the Rea-Bush-Bush Frat House was for some idiot who had managed to swallow a half a rack of pool balls and was vomiting blood. Still, a hundred bucks was a hundred bucks. Plus, the night-call-out bonus, although the sun was probably up. College radio was on in the buggy, announcing 5.30am, and a day of 90F with smog and haze. *Surprise, surprise*, thought Hy. Then the mandatory stacie voice announced that Pepperdine Campus had seen “less than 1.5F variation in temperature for 216 days”. *That’ll please Jo-Jo*, he thought, gathering his kit-bag from the buggy’s roof. *Wait, may be that was frackin’ Jo-Jo doing the announcing !*

“>Your destination is another 350 metres due north>” announced the auto-buggy. “>Beware of loose sand, ground snakes, and unregulated drone-flight as you walk>Pepperdine University Body Corporate takes no responsibility for off-site perambulation of users, but recommend that you stay and listen to the following disclaimers> Clause 1, the rider has—”

“—Enough already, buggy !” Hy shouted. “I’ve heard it all. Yeah, I frackin’ accept ! Just get going ... “

All the signals of the compliant buggy, switched fore-to-aft and with a whine of its electric motor it sped back towards campus infrastructure.

Inside the ramshackle house, TaWayne was trying to get the security layers, which had been installed amateurishly over decades, turned off from the vestibule computer, which had to be done manually. He was getting flustered.

“Frackin’ holy ghost of Richard Nixon ! Why the frack have we got a machine-gun mount out-front ! If there is one thing I’m gonna frackin’ do in the vacation, it’s gonna be to pay a professional to re-do all this shit. Susie !”

The screen kept saying there was a “connectivity issue”.

“Susie ! Can you get my slippers, my toes get cold ? I asked you twice ...” On the flickering monitor, the campus medical call-out was holding up his ID pager to the camera. “Dude, I can frackin’ see you. Just wait will you, Jeez ! Susie just get me a cable ... Yes, a long thin, *KAY - BULL !*”

Susie, had changed her outward appearance — pastel home-wear, and a rattling pearl necklace — and was busy tending to Pirix’s dehydration and his foot wound and Antonella’s refractory state of unconsciousness, but she hurried over to the entrance vestibule.

“I am coming, “ she said. “ As fast as I can. Here are your slippers.”

“Oh, how many times do I have to show you, wench ! These are the *bathroom* slippers, look, with rubber-inners. For my chilblains, I need *my warm-wear slippers, duh !*”

“I am so sorry. I’ll get them ... But, the cable, you really want a cable ?”

“*Duh*, yes ... I want a KAY-BULL, otherwise I wouldn’t have asked for a ... *KAY-BULL*, would I ?”

“Yes. I will get that for you. “

“Otherwise these two desert rats we picked up are going to cark it on the floor here, and all the frackin’ paperwork is gonna be on me ... again. “

After a few moments of scurrying behind him, and with his sensitive feet installed in his buck-fur slippers, TaWayne was finally ready to push a 2-metre cable into the wall, muttering, “When the frackin’ chips are down, and the women lose the plot, you just gotta put metal-on-metal to get the frackin’ job done.”

Outside, a droning alarm-buzzer started sounding. TaWayne talked the medic through the system of gates and onto the moving walkway, and stood at the final sliding doors to welcome him, with another of the Kombi riders.

“Shit, man, “ said Hy, ducking under the radiation sensor-beam. “You guys expecting World War 3, or something ?”

“You never been to Nix-Nix-Nix ? We don’t take prisoners here, *ha ha ha* ! “ It was Milo holding out his hand first. “I can tell: you just frackin’ hate the off-campus call-outs. “

“*Ahh*, Rea-Bush-Bush have got a frackin’ robot-tiger prowling outside. “

“On a frackin’ extension lead, probably ... frackin’ lightweights ! “ continued Milo. “Yeah, correction — we *do* take prisoners; they’re the ones you’re supposed to sort out. Hey, can I tap ya for some Rada, man?”

“I’m TaWayne; I called you, and, I’m Frat President ... Hey, Milo, instead of dreaming about getting a robot-T-Rex, why don’t you help him with his gear. Appreciate you coming out at the crack of dawn.

Nah, no prisoners ... just a couple of strays we picked up in the desert ... So, spread the word: Nix-Nix-Nix, doing good, helping the homeless. ”

Hy gave a weary half-smile: “No, problem. I get paid. Where do you want me to set up ?”

Milo shouldered a large thin case, which housed Hy’s telehealth screen. The medical student unsheathed and powered up his para-physician robot in the vestibule. There was a moment or two of uncertainty about the best room to set up the mobile clinic for privacy considerations; there was a storage room off to one side with no windows and a table surface. TaWayne was still antsy and complaining of the chilblains in his toes, and so tasked Susie to carry Antonella into the makeshift clinic space. Pirix went in as well; his own foot wound had been patched up and in any case was encased, out of clinical view, by some battered jogging shoes that somebody had given him.

“*Ummm*, hey, “ said medical student to Fraternity President to one side. “You said about your chilblains in your toes ... Frack, man, I get that shit too. Especially in this morning smog, and all ...”

“Yeah. I got these fur slippers. That’s why ... “

“The thing is, once I sort out this chick and her overdose, and all ... If you wait 30 minutes, you can call me back from outside — the GPS just gotta show a gap. I get a second call-out fee; the para-phys can do you some acu-pressure, some cream ...? “

“Sweet. “

The campus medic returned to his clinical area with a smile on his face. The para-physician robot was taking vital signs from Antonella on the floor. Susie had found some cushions and also had spread a sheet on the floor.

“Well, Pleased to meet you, “ said Hy to Antonella, bending over her closed eyes and flaccid face. “ I will, of course, respect your consent and privacy and ask non-clinical persons and robots and recording-AI to leave. “

Susie gave a nod, and with a subtle whirr of her neck articulations left the room. Pirix stood firm: “She is unconscious. Therefore, she has been sedated and drugged by criminals this night. You should—”

The medical student kicked at the old wooden door to the room and held his hand up at Pirix: “—The clinical staff, i.e. myself and my telehealth consultant colleague will decide what’s best for the patient. First things first: may I obtain your consent, madam ?”

“The patient>Is Unconscious > Grade 3>Non-verbal> “ said the robot at Antonella’s side, in a deep croaky voice.

“Robe. Quiet ! “ snapped the medical student, peering into a hand-held screen. “ Clearly, I can take a decision ... to by-pass stage 1, and stage 2 of the assessment algorithm. Before I dial in Dr Teezon, I can *Make Appropriate History Assessment From Friend Or Relative* and then—”

“—I am not relative or long-term friend. Therefore, I know exactly what happened, and—”

Pirix was cut short again by the raised hand: “—Just ... *You*— Be quiet ... Stage 5 ... “ He was scrolling quickly with his thumb. “Means

we need a Situation Report from Para-Physician on scene. Sorry, we by-pass Stage 4 as well. “ He looked down at Antonella. “She’s not dead, is she ?”

“No>sir, alive and Unconscious Grade 3>Blood from Left Third Finger is Para-Physician sample>traces of a QZ-Neuramide Sedative>Suggestion is antidote injection> Concentration consistent with Grade 3 Unconscious State>Blood on upper legs from vaginal source >suggest gynaecology scan>My current gender setting is Male>My scan settings are for scrotum, penis and prostate> “

“Ok, ok, ok. That’s excellent, para-phys. Excellent. I got a problem list. I got vitals ... I think it’s time I dialled in my boss ... Oh, and the patient’s, like, *fully* alive ?” The para-physician robot had only one prehensile limb, with which it, rather cutely, gave a silent thumbs-up to its master.

Pirix was largely ignored in the next few minutes as Antonella was moved into the focus of the screen which was assembled on the table-top and which soon lit up with the moving image of Dr Teezon, behind whom was the logo of a very famous Health Conglomerate in the USA, Halbridge. Dr Teezon bore a bushy moustache and the look of a man who had not had his coffee or breakfast yet.

“Right. Campus Medic, “ said Teezon, putting on his glasses. “I’ve got here: Pepperdine, California. ... You didn’t punch in your Corporate ID, son ... How you gonna get your hundred bucks ?”

“Sorry, sir: it’s HH-four-five-slash-double-eight-niner.”

“Yeah, well ... I didn’t get to sit my ass in this leather seat and a call-out fee of eleven-hundred bucks by not filling in the spreadsheet properly. What we got ?”

“No, sir. Sorry sir—”

“—Eleven hundred bucks !”

“I know. One day, sir, *ha, ha, ha*. Shall we read the legal stuff first ? I got audited last time”

Teezon sighed: “Yep, son. That’s what the world has become. We’re all corporate slaves now, but I’m on the big bucks, so I guess I’ll have to: *This medical consultation is under the auspices of the Halbridge Corporation, USA. It is fully indemnified. The Halbridge Health Sphere is fully compliant with National and Trans-national Health Parameters. Since the UN/WHO disestablishment of Meta-Neurology in 2188 and National De-Diagnosis Day in the USA, the Halbridge Corporation is compliant in the outlawing of all prior meta-neurological practice and diagnosis, and ...*” Teezon paused and wiped his brow. “ And, *blah-frackin'-blah*, I’m old enough to know when we’re all just going through the motions. You’ve heard it all, HH; and I haven’t had my coffee yet ... Why don’t we leave the politics and you tell me about your patient, huh?”

“Right, sir ... Well, we have a female, about early-20s, at a Frat House Party, in a pink tutu, unconscious Grade —*Ummm ...*”

“Grade 3>Unconscious> non-verbal>”

“That’s the para-physician, sir. “

“I can tell. What the *hell kinda voice setting* you got on it there ? Sounds like one of the ghetto assholes we used to plug in back in the good ol'days ...*ha ha ha*. ”



“Yes, sorry, doctor, I cannot change the voice or firmware until I get back to the Faculty. It is what it is. So, really, she’s just a party-drug overdose at the Frat Party, but I just gotta run the treatment by you. “

“Yeah, well, just get the para-phys to do its thing—”

“—This is wrong !” Pirix’s voice came booming through the microphones of the telescreen. “Therefore, a proper investigation is necessary. “

“Who the *hell* said that ? HH, have you got non-clinical personnel in the consultation ?”

“*Ahh*, I tried to get rid of him ... “

Pirix stepped and stooped in order to be in view of the telehealth doctor: “I am Pirix. Therefore I want to know your qualifications.”

“I’m sorry, buddy. I don’t answer to anyone. Who the hell are *you* and your qualifications ?”

“I am Pilot Pirix, Second Rank. Therefore that is not relevant. I am the advocate of Miss Antonella. Therefore, this story of this officer here is totally wrong. Only the robot para-physician is talking sense.”

“Well, HH ... we sure have got us one here ! Have you got any Securitrans round the university there ?”

“Sir, we do: but, we’re off-campus now ...”

“This officer here, he has done the early analysis, but he is unqualified. Therefore, you do not seem to take interest in my unconscious companion who is a victim—”

“—Oh, here we go: the big victim story now. You took some illegal drugs that you shouldn’t have and now you’re in a mess, and you need a doctor like me to sort it out. ”

“I think I have met doctors like you before myself. Therefore, I searched your corporate pay plan just now: you are paid \$199 for this consultation, not eleven hundred dollars. Therefore you were telling a lie to impress this young officer here. I have met doctors like —”

“—So, are you calling me a liar, you piece of shit blow-in ? Slander me like that and I’ll have your ass in court—”

“—I think you were a meta-neurologist. In your *good ol'days*. I can tell.”

“Oh ... oh, now it’s coming clean and clear: HH, we got us a lover of that bitch president, Van Els. You got a long career in my profession ahead of you, son. But let me tell you — and I don’t care who’s listening — you see a politician like that, destroying our profession like what she did: you back any reasonable plan for assassination. Hear me ?”

“Well, sir, if I—”

“—When the president announced De-Diagnosis Day: I got my freedom,” said Pirix simply.

“Oh, oh, oh ... Crystal frackin' clear, “ said Teezon, growing bigger on the screen and raising his voice. “Boy, I thought so: we got us a *Krazy* right here now. Five years ago, I could have slapped you with an *involuntary treatment order* and plugged your cheeky, Krazy ass

right into my clinic tubes. And, frack shit, that's when I was earning big bucks, instead of doing this telehealth crap at the call-up of medical students."

"There is now a record, in United States jurisdiction, of you saying the proscribed K-word twice, in a Health Consultation. Therefore I can report you to a relevant authority."

"You do what you like, you born-again Krazy. Agitation-Arousal Disorder, Level 4 Axis, is what I diagnose you— "

"—This is also unlawful under DDD code of practice."

"Frack you ! I need bacon and muffin at this time, not this shit. And, I hope your patient dies under your care, you student."

The screen pixels collapsed sharply into a central dot. The medical student gave a nervous cough; the angry exit of his superior colleague meant his call-out fee would not get counter-signed.

"You are a good student," said Pirix. "Therefore please do not copy the attitude of that man, that ex-meta-neurologist."

"Yeah, you, like, really shouldn't say, you know ... that you want your patient to die. I'm with you. That's pretty, *ummm* ..."

">Contrary to health robotic Prime Directive> Do No Harm > " chipped in the para-physician robot. "I can prepare the injection antidote from the pharmacology kit> I cannot perform the required gynaecology examination."

"Why ?"

“My settings are gender Male>Campus protocol requires female examining skillset.”

“Really ? “ asked the medical student.

“Yes>the other humanoid robot was female gendered>I can exit and make the request of it>”

In the absence of the para-physician unit, the medical student started making a hash of scanning Antonella’s vital signs. He was therefore only too keen to leave the room when Susie came through; she was only too ready to assist.

“You have scanning ability, for physical examination ?”

“Yes, “ replied Susie. “I have been informed by the male-gendered para-physician of the medical circumstance. As well as being female, and several orders in advance of your assistant. I have downloaded just now several scanning modules from the Pepperdine Faculty.”

“Excellent. I suppose, then, me and — I forgot your name ?”

“My name is Pirix.”

“We can just wait, outside the door, respecting the patient’s privacy and confidentiality, while you do the scanning ... just, you know, find out where the blood is coming from.”

“Her vagina, “ said Pirix.

“Well, you’re not medically qualified, are you. And you haven’t just downloaded Faculty scanning modules, have you. So, just be, you know, the patient’s advocate, like you said.” The medical student

was just finding his feet and his nascent professionalism again, and stood with his hand keeping the creaky door slightly ajar.

“I can begin my examination, sir, if you consent ?” came Susie’s voice from inside the room.

“Yes, “ said the medical student from behind the door. “The patient’s consent, I suppose ... has to come from you, Pirix. Do you consent ? “

From inside the room: “External inspection: there is blood on both her legs, which is her own blood. There are fingerprint markings, in the blood. These are not her own fingerprints however ... “

“Do you consent to your friend being examined and scanned ?” asked the student again.

“We can revive her with the antidote. Therefore you can ask her yourself. “

“*Hmmm* ... “ said the student. “I did not *actually* think of that. Too late I suppose. You now have taken medicolegal responsibility. Proceed to scanning, please. “

“Womb. Non-pregnant. Nulliparous ... “

“Right, thank you. That’s a medical term — never been pregnant. Any hormonal inserts, robot ?”

“None, sir. Hymen —”

“Yes ?”

“Yes, what, sir ? Shall I stop the examination ?”

“No. “

“Hymen, just coming— “

“Yes. What the hell is the matter, robot ? “ He swung the door.  
“Medical emergency trumps privacy. How did you know my name ?  
You said: *come in.* ”

“I do not know your name, sir. I was asked to assist the health of  
Miss Antonella. “

“I’m called Hyman.”

“Hymen ... “ said Pirix, from behind, growing very fond of the  
American budget cell-phone which had also been proffered him  
along with the battered jogging shoes. “Hymen is *a membrane  
structure in the vagina which is intact in young women who have not  
experienced penetrative sex.* “

“What ?”

“It is a medical term, “ said Pirix.

“It is intact in Miss Antonella. The vaginal contents are consistent  
with normal menstruation. Is it her time of the month ?”

“If we give the antidote—” started Pirix.

“The antidote to the toxin>I have mixed it per protocol>Reversal  
peak in fifteen minutes.”

“Right. We’re getting somewhere. My para-phys can give the dose; Susie, can you please take the patient to the ladies washroom, get her cleaned up. Pirix, have you got some money for some sanitary towels ?”

“We were the victims of sexual assault, criminal sedation and poisoning and all our possessions were stolen from us.”

“Ok, ok, so you keep saying ... But let’s try and keep things glass-half-full here ... Susie, can you ask the President-guy ? There *is* a ladies’ wash-room in this place, I hope. Oh, and remind him about the call-back, for his feet, his chilblains. “

“TaWayne likes me to suck them warm. Is it a medical problem ? I can scan—”

“—Too much information.” Hyman’s hand came up to command the robots to do their bidden tasks and no more. He started packing back his kit-bag, and powered down the assistant. He was thinking about his fees, and that he would have to likely interact with the gruff and intemperate Dr Teezon again if the toe-chilblain thing turned into a *bona fide* call-back-consult. On the other hand he was keen to hear a first-hand experience from Pirix about having been a brain-dialysis patient at one of the defunct Silvert Clinics, his generation of medical student having straddled the momentous watershed of De-Diagnosis Day in America.

He found Pirix leaning at a bookshelf in the vestibule, tapping into his new phone.

“So, what was it like ? “ asked Hy, hoping his open question would home in on their mutual subject of concern.

“I am still angry. Therefore I have reported that Dr Teezon to the Medical Board of California.”

*Frack goes my fee already !* thought the medical student.

“Did you know your name was the same as the component-barrier of a virgin’s vagina ?”

“What, you mean *Ho* ? My last name is Ho, and, yeah, I suppose a lot of guys call their girlfriends their 'ho' while also thinking of their girlfriends as their *vagina*. “

“What ?!” said Pirix, askance. His attention was being drawn to the generous Frat-boy, source of his footwear and his cell-phone. He was approaching down the stairs with a tablet computer in his hands.

“Hey, man ! How’s the shoes? Frackin’ keep’em ... Listen, no way we’re gonna hack into this. “

He held it up; Pepperdine Motel was the screen-saver.

“I know, I know ... I’m a frackin’ Social Tech major; we’re frackin’ putting cities up on Mars; but, in 2191 we still can’t get past fingerprint security on a 500 dollar tablet. Nuts, huh?”

“It is the computer of the thief, rapist, sedationist ...”

“Three people ?” chipped in the medical student.

“No. One evil person—”

“—if only, like, we just had a copy of his fingerprint. I'd get the 3D printers to knock a frackin’ reverse-mold out in no time.”



This time, for the first time, Pilot Pirix, Second Rank and Medical Student Hyman Ho, were struck by the self-same lightening bolt of thought: fingerprints ! “SUSIE !! “ They both ran at top speed and charged into the ladies washroom, finding a newly-awakened Antonella, sitting on the tiles, and a mothering humanoid robot poised above her with a jiffy-sponge:

“Pi— Pirix ! What the frack is going on ? “ Antonella burbled. “I’m in a pink tutu.”

## 5

“Comrades, listen up !” said Jo-Jo, Pepperdine sophomore, age 23, confident, angry. “ What is the *number one*, most critical, most *really bad* problem all of humanity is facing ?” Jo-Jo was pretty sure she would be a global leader in the UN/WHO hierarchy one day. In her student room on campus she was addressing the five or so sitting around her, but also an innumerable tally of her activist comrades, joining her on-line.

Rule of 3s, big rhetorical question, slight pause, bellow the answer: Jo-Jo had completed several workshops on political speech making.

“CLIMATE STASIS !” she bellowed into the screen before her.

“And the *Number Two* problem ?” she continued, bellowing even louder. “ CLIMATE STASIS, which is why California has not seen a temperature variation for more than half a year.”

“And the Number Three problem ?” She bellowed out 'climate stasis' again at the array of nodding, whooping-but-muted followers on the

screen. Tia, however, moved into Jo-Jo's eye-line and was gesturing with her finger regarding a line of saliva that had been forced, by the bellowing, onto the corner of Jo-Jo's mouth. Dabbing at it brought Jo-Jo out of the mythical demagogic 'zone', as it were.

"And, of course, this brings us to the third, the NUMBER THREE problem of our world, " she mis-enumerated. " The *Mechphile Menace*. And, you know what, we're all adults listening in here; we're all humans here; we don't like to pussyfoot with technical language here: do we want to see humans *fucking* robots in our society, then marrying them?"

*An ad libbed Rule of 3, wiped the goo off my lip, and an old-school hard-hitting profanity all in one passage !* Jo-Jo gave herself inwards kudos.

The followers, mostly campus students, but a few activist veterans from their kitchen counters and offices, were briefly unmuted so that the collective din of their "Nooooo !" could be heard.

"Today, comrades, on *our* campus will come an enemy who embodies both of these evils ... in one body. And that body is none other than Senator Trestle. This man denies Climate Stasis; he does not give a frack, does he, if the temperature on planet earth stays the same forever, and, worst of all, he and the Republican party are campaigning this election to make legal the marriage of human and robot. I say ... *I say*, comrades ... " she paused. " WE SHOW THIS MECHPHILE DENIALIST WHAT WE ARE MADE OF !"

There was a general thumping of tubs and whooping from within and without the small dormitory room. Da-Hee was in one corner; she had bought a generic campus T-shirt to wear; she was having fun but was beginning to have a tiny doubt that her story-telling and

general fibs had bitten her off something more than she could chew. Jonny had stayed in the main concourse of the university, saying that he never got mixed up with stacie politics in London and saying that he wanted to find some way of getting in touch with his parents.

Jo-Jo was yielding her centre-stage to Tia, who had some house-keeping notices to make about the big demo they were all planning. Plus, she was going to MC the introduction of Da-Hee, who was to be the new star-turn recruit from the Pepperdine Faculty.

The screen was one of the new thin-film holographic ones, easily a metre-and-a-half across. Da-Hee accidentally walked across the corner of the display. “Go Pepper Girls !” came an instant shout-out from one of the attendees as the logo on the rear of Da-Hee’s T-shirt crashed across everybody’s screens.

“Yeah, yeah ... Thanks, Ellie, looking good yourself, “ said the bouncy Tia, shuffling Da-Hee proudly next to her. “Well, I’m gonna make this quick ... only a couple of hours before we smash that right-wing denialist metal-sucker and the Frat Boys around him. [more whoops] So, this is Prof Da-Hee, Pep Alumnus, all round star-activist: she’s going to be our face on the Faculty, our spy in the staff-room. As you know, we lost our other Prof on the SkyLev protest the other day, to the corrupt Californian Police [boos, and hisses]....Quick word, Prof ?”

“Yep. Great to be on board, “ shouted Da-Hee. “Let’s all get back to nature, get back to our humanist traditions, and let’s get this climate moving around again. “

“Thanks, Prof ... You’re the best—”

“—Oh, “ although there was no actual mic to grab, Da-Hee cut back in across Tia. “Props to Wexler out there, Lunar Olympian ... My fellow climate researcher and I were on Luna, in Jump-Suits just the other day. So, if any of you students feel your IQ is really low, and the University is knocking you back. Hit me up. I can help !”

“You really are the best, Prof. Thanks for that. “ Tia cleared her throat, and, readied herself with some props of her own. “So, comrades, ‘fraid I gotta come on like the bad doctor who’s got some good news, and some bad news. We’ve reached a decision about *the traitor*. As you know, our organisation and our non-violent protest rely on a system of volunteers. And Pepperdine Campus has provided some of the best *Pumpers* in the whole of America. As you’ll know from the website, one of our brother comrades let everyone down last week. Jo-Jo and I got a tip-off, and he was busted, in his own bedroom, filling a throw-bag, — that one of *us* was going to use today ... looking at non-human pornography. [sounds of disgust from the audience] It was *Grade 5 robot porn*. Everything that we stand for has been jeopardised by his traitor. This, comrades ... “ Tia produced and held up a plastic bag with a gelatinous pile of human semen in it; Da-Hee recoiled with nausea as it was wagged angrily before her face. “Is the tainted bag. We on the activist, progressive Left are caring and compassionate, but his punishment must fit: we have sent his name, his address, his parents’ address and a full copy of his sickening robot porn to all media outlets and employers in the state. This tainted bag, I will incinerate publicly now: Climate Stasis must end; Robot-marriage must end !”

Jo-Jo to one side was impressed with the oratory of, and the props used by her friend. Mixed cheers and boos echoed from the audio links as Tia put the denounced bag of defiled spunk into the incinerator chute. She bounced back front-on to the screen, keeping

her second prop just out of the line of sight of the holographic camera.

“But ... comrades, the pumping goes on. Hey, boys, in the pump-room there ... Get a load of Prof Da-Hee ! Hot or what ! Who needs robot porn filth ! Prof, I’m sure you can ... ?”

“Sure. Anytime ... bikini, Hawaii ... lots I can upload for the cause.”

“Great. Now, Jo-Jo was saying a moment ago: 'We need to show what we’re made of'. What we humans *are truly made of*... So, let’s just go to the comrade sisters, in their pump room shall we, and Ellie ... Ellie, you still there, darling ?”

“Sure am, honey sweet ! “ A very large-bodied female student, with bushy ginger hair appeared on the screen. “I’ve already pumped me two quarts this afternoon for yous all. Those Frat Boys gonna be smelling of my sweet boob-juice and getting eaten alive by the bush-hornets all the way home today.”

“So, those new Chinese hormone tablets we got for you are good...?”

“Enough to make a stacie *whore* like me *moan* ... and moan.”

The audience were enraptured by Ellie’s star-turn She was clearly a favourite of the Movement. A pituitary problem in her teens had led to morbid obesity and a prodigious and abnormal breast-milk productivity, all of which was put to good use in the so-called ‘White Goods’ Humanist Climate Stasis protests that they were planning.

“And, to stop the show today ... the *pièce de la resistance*. Sorry, everyone, excuse my French. (We hate the French) ... “ Tia unfurled

from behind her back her second prop. It was a curious device with a rubberised suction-cup with straps at one end and an impressive, motorised nozzle at the other, all in a military jet-black colour. “Hold yours up, Ellie.”

To cheers off screen, Ellie swivelled her weight on her stool, the camera angle widened, and finally she swept aside a towel to reveal the self-same device attached to her colossal left bosom: “Hey, y’all, I hate the French too, but ... y’all are thinking *Ooh là là*, ain’t ya ?”

Somebody at Ellie’s end had switched to a mobile camera, still wide-angle: “Y’all wanna demo ? Lefty here is the best. Seems all that Chinky hormone stuff gets fully in that udder. Ready ?”

In anticipation, all the other hangers-on in the HQ-room with Jo-Jo, Tia and Da-Hee, put down their phones and hand-held screens and crowded in front of the giant holo-screen. They witnessed a morbidly obese, passionate, left-wing Climate Stasis activist, with a look of intense concentration on her face, rev up an electronic-motor at her chest-piece and with the press of a button at the nozzle — BLAM ! — they all saw a projected bolus of human breast milk thud into a target wedge of towels three metres away.

“All right ! “ said Tia. “That was beautiful. So, the plan is gonna be simple: later, the baggies are for the Frat Boys and security, but the top prize is getting sister Ellie close enough to the slimy Senator ... “

“ ... And y’all just watch me *cancel* that denialist robot-loving motherfracker with a hose-down. “

Da-Hee blinked a few times and tried to follow the general rendition of the rabble-rousing anthem that everyone started singing to close the battle-stations meeting:

*“Climate Stasis / Don’t you deny  
I’ll be a stacie / till YOU all die “*

There was a more complex verse about the humanist principle of using sacred procreative body products to symbolise their activist struggle to get the earth’s climate changing again as a spur to re-population, but as it descended into an over-earnest dirge, Da-Hee slipped away towards a vacant sofa chair.

In a while, Jo-Jo sidled up to Da-Hee, put an over-friendly arm around her, and started running a finger over the scars on Da-Hee’s neck-line.

“I was plugged in, “ said Da-Hee, matter-of-factly, looking straight ahead. “For five years.”

Jo-Jo moved around to face Da-Hee.

“Prof, you’re gorgeous, and all ... but can I ask you a personal question ?”

“Sure.”

“Were you plugged in ? “

“\_\_”

“I’m going to repeat that: were you plugged in ?”

“*I just said:* I was plugged in for five years.”

“No, it’s just that if a client responds to a direct closed question, it validates their response-content-narrative, much more than in open conversation.”

“What !”

“Before the whole De-Diagnosis Day, and stuff, I was training to be a meta-neurology nurse.”

“Fits.”

## 6

“Brother, can I grab some vapour. I’m off the clock. “

“Sure, man, here. Frackin’ Susie hates it when I do it indoors ... “  
TaWayne handed Hyman Ho the stalk from his little vaping pipe. They were all milling around the buggy-halt, the 350m walk from the front of Nix-Nix-Nix Fraternity House. The two of them hung back, letting Pirix, Antonella and Milo have first dibs on the buggies they had hailed.

Hyman sucked hard and blew a vapour trail into the swirly smoggy air around them: “How’re the chilblains in your toes ? That shit fix you up some ?”

“Yeah. Thanks for that cream. ‘S working. Hey, that doctor on the screen, he seemed pretty pissed !”

“*Ahhh*, you can thank buddy-boy over there ... He got into a frackin’ big argument with him when we were sorting out the English chick.”



“Yeah ? Whole thing’s frackin’ weird as anything, when we found them in the desert. I mean, he’s gotta be, you know, a bit ...”

“Hey, you can say it. I’m off the clock. That boy’s capital-K, *Krazy*, all right — was plugged in for two years. And, ol’ Doc Teezon used to earn a fat buck as a meta-neurologist back in the day, and he lost his job with De-Diag Day, and all that stuff ... and buddy-boy’s lost two years of his life. So, yeah, they both had a shouting match while I’m trying to, you know, *focus* on the patient, the English chick.”

“Me, I’m a Social Tech major ... but, what d’you think about the whole meta-neurology thing ?”

“All I know is: a whole load of doctors were making a whole load of money. And, it was skilful work, threading catheters into people’s brains and dialysing their spinal fluid for weeks on end. Plus, those clinics were good for the economy, lot of jobs there, one in every town. ”

“But, shit, I read ... I mean, the dude who started it all, admitted, from his *frackin' prison cell*, it was all a fraud. He said there was, like, never at any time any evidence that there was any chemical imbalances in the brains of the Krazy people, ever. So, sucks to be the patients, hey.”

“Man, I’m a med student; I just wanna make a fat buck when I’m a doctor; who cares about the patients. “

“Really, dude !”

“*Ha, ha, ha*, brother, I’m just kidding with you. Remember I was the one who got the chick out of that coma. Give me another hit of vape there ... “

They both held up their hands to wave at the advance group who were boarding the buggy ahead of them. The lights of another was approaching a click or so away.

“But, in the old, old, *olden* days, “ continued TaWayne. “They used to treat them different to Brain Dialysis ?”

“*Ahhh*, they taught us some of that shit in Freshman year. Like, there’s always been Krazies ... Hey, by the way, you don’t mind the K-word ... ?”

“Dude. It’s a Frat House. You frackin’ fixed my cold toes ... Free speech is America.”

“Yeah, like I said. Always been Krazies. In the neo-medieval time, they had some pretty good surgery for it. Pretty tight. They’d go in and just de-functionalize the frontal lobes, for a really quick fix. And, with robot surgery these days, you could be as precise as frack now ... I mean they could bring it back, some really tight frontal lobe surgery, now that Brain Dialysis has been made illegal.”

“And, I saw on some show ... didn’t they used to put electric shocks through the brains of all these Krazies back then ?”

“*Ha, ha, ha*, You love your frackin’ history channels ... Nah, that was some shit they did way before that. Around the time they discovered electricity; first, they did it on prisoners -of-war; they just put these frackin’ great electrodes on your head; Then, they pulled the lever; and watched you go, like, *wah, arrgh, wah, arrghhh, wahhhh*.”

Hyman started doing a mimic of a person thrashing his limbs around uncontrollably.

“*Ahhh*, shit ! You’re hilarious !”

“Yeah, I think that was around Napoleon’s time, they did all that shock-to-the-brain *true* medieval shit on patients. In ancient France, or something. “

“I frackin’ hate the French.”

“So do I. Hey, campus-buggy, do you hate the French ?”

“Sir>Pepperdine University has all-inclusive policy>My functionality is transport>Buggy267 has no political functionality>”

“Buggy got no *political functionality*, “ screamed Hyman, getting more high on the shared vapours. “ *Ha, ha, ha*. Gotta write that down for my set.”

“Wait, wait ...” TaWayne peered more closely, and pulled off Hyman’s glasses. “That’s where I seen you. At the Open Mic at the Campus Club ... *Ho-High*, or something like that.”

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out.”

“Favour for a favour: I could get you a spot warming up at my dad’s event later. “

“What, your dad’s Senator Trestle ?”

“That’s the name, don’t wear it out ... ”

“Great idea, but he’s probably got some fancy top-dollar Mechcomic from New York as his MC, but thanks. Is that where we’re going ?”

“I’m taking ol’ Krazy man and the English chick over. You know what the frackin’ local police are like, as dirty as bush-roaches ... My dad’ll have some FBI dudes we can report all the computer shit to ?”

“Yeah, what was all that ? I helped your man hack that tablet, using fingerprint-molds — clever true-detective shit.”

“Frack, man ! What a story. Turns out there’s some dude, who dresses up as an Air Force Top Gun, and he goes up and down the SkyLev—”

“—What, the one to Meridian120. There’s nothing but religious nuts and Super-Oldies on that. They call it the God-Zipper. “

“*Ha, ha, ha* — you’re funny. Anyway, this dude’s got some fetish and spends his time luring Super-Oldies back to the Pepperdine Motel, drugging them up, and then him and his homeboy spend the night raping them ...”

“*Euww*, that's not nice !”

“The stuff we found on his computer, all these hundred-year old wrinklies getting violated by this weird gadget on a chair, with this pervert in his Air Force uniform. I mean, frackin’ disgusting.”

“What, and ... you telling me that’s what happened to that couple in the buggy in front of us !”

“Look, *ahh*, “ TaWayne lent right over close to his companion in the back-seat. “She’s apparently engaged to some other guy from London. She’s supposed to get married. The Krazy guy *hasn’t*

*actually told her* the details of what happened ... but I guess the FBI will have to know.”

“Well, “ said Hyman, sucking up the last few millilitres of juice from the vapour pipe as the buggy crossed into strict no-smoking areas of the campus. “Her hymen’s still intact. On the scan, that’s what it showed. So, I guess she must have got, you know, raped up the ass, is all. By the robot. Or the pervert. Or his homeboy. “

TaWayne looked away at the rolling landscape. He felt that his companion, as a medical student, had some major lack-of-empathy issues going on.

## 7

In the buggy, in front, Milo was resigned to his short straw for the ride over and was considering his conversational options: “Like, *err*, your hair looks good, Antonella ... “

In the front section, directly in front of Milo, Pirix made a thumbs-up discretely.

“Gosh, thanks, Milo. Everyone’s been so good, especially Susie. That is a super-advanced robot. She downloaded salon techniques from New York; my hair hasn’t seen conditioner in days. “

“Yeah, it looks real good ... Is that a fringe with, you know, a special name, or something ?”

“Look ! You all— you all have been so good ... I’m just so embarrassed about everything. I never get into that state at a party. God, I mean I don’t even remember getting to Pepperdine campus.

They put weird ingredients in their food, right ... ? The Korean restaurant we were at ... ?”

“Yeah, and I hope you don’t mind the clothes we got you, the sports gear and trackies. But, your hair’s great. That Susie — “

“—We’re going back to the airport, right ? Via my luggage, I hope... “

“Well, what I heard is: we gotta file a report, on campus, with the FBI about—”

“—The FBI ! What, the SkyLev thing ... ? Pirix ? What the *hell* are you doing with your hand ?”

Pirix’s signal to Milo — to emblandish the topic of conversation — was a chopping motion with his outside hand, which failed miserably to go unseen.

“He doesn’t really talk much, that dude. Hey, but, I heard you’re at the Oxford campus, in jolly old England. Love to go one day; what’re you studying ?”

“History. I’m doing a PhD.”

“Hey, no frackin’ way. I’m a history major too. “ This time Milo genuinely turned to face. “And I’m doing a PhD. “

“Oh, wow, tell me about your research field. “

“*Ha, ha*, I know that trick. I tell you, and you take my ideas... “

“Don’t be so silly; I’m half-way through mine. I said PhD, but Oxford calls it a *DPhil* ... I’m a neo-medievalist. I’m looking at Pre-Pandemic

themes of Social Dislocation in Western Europe. “

“Pre-SLUG society — the *Syndrome of Lassitude and General Gestalt*: 2131 and onward,” said Milo, unnaturally, like he was answering a viva question. “That’s some interesting shit !”

“What’s more, I have access to 1st person testimony via my grandfather, believe it or not. He’s a Super-Oldie, born 2071.”

“*Shucks*, that’s a helluva resource. Props to you ...”

“*Umm*, that, actually, does remind me ... Anywhere I can get to some Comms, because I need to check in with Gramps ...? And your study ?”

“Yeah, easy, easy. We pass by the concourse; I can show you my academic start-up. I’m, like, doing a PhD on now. “

“What do you mean ‘*now*’ ? “

“Yeah, well, like I am studying the situation in the world *now*, really hard. Like, the Van Els presidency. The stuff going on on Mars, and Luna. The big referendum ... Then, in about three years down the track, when *stuff now* is *history*, I’ll do my PhD on it. I don’t really have to rely on, you know, testimony and stuff from other people, because I’m compiling the stuff on my PhD, as I go along, so then I say: *Whoa, stop, Milo!* All this history of *now*, I’ll have got totally detailed records and resources on — “

“—Wait ! That’s not what studying history to a PhD level is about. At all. “

“Yes it is. “

“No, it isn’t. “

“It is. At Peps. “

“In Oxford. No. “

“I can get you my supervisor. “

“Go on, then.”

“At Comms. I will. Prof Oswald Ignante. He’s written frackin’ books coming out of his ass, and—”

“—That is enough ! “ Pirix could withhold no longer. “History is useless to study. Therefore nothing can be changed about it. But, Mr Milo, you can change the topic, but as we agreed ... “

Like a mischievous schoolgirl, Antonella felt her face falling into a giggle, and she gave Milo’s leg a little pinch out of sight of the half-turned Pirix.

“*Oooh*, all right, *Mr* Pirix. We’re just having an academic discussion here. “

They had found themselves in a line of buggies between two university buildings; the on-board Control had already apologised twice for delays due to “unlicensed student protests” ahead.

“Frackin’ stacies at it, again, “ grumbled Milo. “So, as per instructions from *Sir up front*: I hope you’ll be voting a ‘yes’ in the state referendum.”



“A bit of a leading question, which in taking historical evidence one tries to avoid ... But, sorry, what referendum ?”

“Oh, I’m so *awfully* sorry. Perhaps in Oxford they call it a D-referendum- *PHIL* ! “

Antonella laughed.

“No, it’s why the Senator — he’s the dad, of the twins, in the buggy behind. It’s why he’s doing his speech thing later. The Marriage Law ? In California ? We want it changed up. “

“Oh, I heard about this. I mean I don’t have a vote, do I, obviously. But, this is the Inter-Marriage thing—”

“—It’s not a *thing*. “

“Oh, you know what I mean ... “

“Love is love. You sound like you’re against it.”

“Look, in Oxford University, all those mechphile debates were done and dusted years ago, but, honestly, hand on heart, I don’t think a human-robot marriage is really what future society should be all about ... “

“Hey, ask me again in 3 — no, 5 years’ time. When I’ve done my PhD on it. In America we believe in individual freedoms, and we believe that the Government shouldn’t restrict who or what provides you with a meaningful loving relationship. One of my best—”

“—Yes, but ... I’ve seen some of these domestic situations in England. The robot, she — it’s normally a fembot — just ends up as

a domestic slave, with no warmth in the relationship, totally submissive ... that's not what marriage is about. "

"Like, I said, one of my best friends —"

"—Wait, wait, wait ! You're not talking about Susie and that other guy in the Frat House ?"

"Love is love. TW and Susie, right on the money ... They are hoping to be California's first married couple. "

"Oh. *Wow*. I suppose ..."

"You never know where love is gonna strike. But, thanks to all those stacie, left-wing haters, the same ones who're gonna try and stop the Senator talking tonight ... the hate in their hearts, TaWayne and Susie can't even hold hands in public *on a university campus*. It's why she's coming in later by herself. They've thrown acid at her. "

"Oh, that's terrible. "

"Love is love, and freedom is freedom: it is the message we at Nix-Nix-Nix live by every day. I heard that you got engaged on Luna, or something ... ?"

Pirix was listening in. He started to do the chopping-hand signal, but, in a moment's reflection, put up his thumb.

"I am. He's called Jonny. I don't — I don't really know if I love him. That's because, as an academic, I'm used to parsing the definitions of things to an *nth* degree. So that I really don't know what love ... is. "

“Love ...”

Antonella’s smile came back, and she quickly darted two fingers up to shush Milo: “Love is love. Yes, you have said it. Four times. “

“Pepperdine Campus> Main Concourse>Campus Buggy411 apologises for the delayed route>”

"Holy crap ! Look ...! " said Milo, vaulting out of the slotway, and calling back to TaWayne. "That's a frack load of people to see your old man. Antonella, hey, we'll be lucky to find a Comms Desk free, c'mon. Just watch out for the URU-droids; they're about knee-high; ain't been upgraded since Van Els got into the White House; and they'll bug the shit out of y'all; like she frackin' does as President, ain't that right, TW ?"

## 8

Jonny had wandered back down to the Pepperdine University Concourse precinct. There was a crush of visitors, students and officials, and by just glancing at the flyers being thrust in his hands as he walked, he learned that some political big-shot was coming to speak. Some protesters hated him; some people supported him: it was one of the reasons Jonny was always glad he was never lured into ‘university life’. All he wanted was the so-called Comms Deck, where he had been told there were computer desks.

When he found the area, every spot was taken. He found he was prowling behind the seats in competition with another guy; the latter was far more unscrupulous and Jonny saw him tapping seated occupants on the shoulder asking: “You gonna be long, dude ?”

A few desks along the line, loudly, and unequivocally, a user was terminating whatever communication had been transpiring with: “Well, frack you too asshole, to the frackin’ moon and back !” The user got up. The other waiting guy and Jonny were about equidistant from the vacant Comms Desk ... *In love, war, and when there's a free Comms desk*, thought Jonny, and started into an unseemly run — as did his rival.

There was a sudden loud clatter; when Jonny looked across, his rival for the vacant desk had tripped over a roving URU-droid, and gone sprawling across the floor.

“Frackin’ mechanical piece of ... ! Wouldn't marry you to a cockroach.”

“>I apologise, sir>I can summon medical help>If your distress continues more than 12 hours> I can offer counselling service>”

Jonny gave an involuntary shrug in the direction of the collision-mishap, hoping his gesture would not be construed offensive. He missed the rest of the ranting from the fallen one, since he decided to clip on the headphones in order to talk to his parents.

“Son, is that you ? Son ...? Can you hear me ?”

“Yeah. Dad. You want to go hologram, or just ... ?”

“Bloody useless, this Home Deck. If there is one thing I’m gonna do in the vacation, it’s gonna be to pay a professional to re-do all of this. Dorothy !”

The screen kept saying there was a “connectivity issue”.

“Dad, I’m in Los Angeles ... well, actually, a bit north— “

“—Dorothy ! Just stop faffing and can you get my slippers, my toes have been freezing all morning ? I asked you twice ...”

Jonny sighed, and tried to hide from the camera his cheeks puffing in and out. He felt he might not be able to get in his plus-points about doing the Slough recycling deal remotely on the Dark Web, before getting to the nitty-gritty minuses about what had happened on Luna with Antonella: his father was continuing to get irate with the domestic minutiae twelve thousand kilometres away.

“The hologram, “ continued Mr William Squire, into Jonny’s earpiece. “It’s just *on-then-off*. Damn ! Dorothy, just get me a cable, will you ? Yes, a KAY-BULL. All my life, with these bloody things, the only thing you can trust ...”

Jonny caught a glimpse of his mother, dressed in pastel homewear, but didn’t risk a call-out, just waved his hand slightly into the camera. He cleared his throat: “Hey, dad ... I managed to get onto that firm in Slough, who were—”

“—Dorothy ! How many times do I have to show you, woman ! *These* are the bathroom slippers, look, with rubber-inners. For this weather, I need my warm-wear slippers !”

“I am so sorry. I’ll get them, William ... Hello, Jonny, love, when are you getting back ?”

“Soon, mum, soon ... “

“And, how is, Antonella, love ?s”

“Dorothy ! Just never mind about that. Just get me the cable and the right slippers, then we can get Jonny on proper hologram, then we can have a proper talk. Right, Jonny ?”

“Right, dad, “ sighed Jonny, clipping off his earpieces, and feeling dismal at seeing his home-situation in London. He felt a gentle whirr and nudge at his knee.

“>Hello, sir>URU unit 331>Opportunistic screening protocol> Are you affiliated with the Pepperdine Student Body?”

*Oh, crumbs, I've been rumbled !* thought Jonny. “Yes, well, to be honest, I am just calling my parents, as a visitor. I'll be five minutes more — tops.”

The URU-droid was low-level tech, and its head-section spun a few times, diodes blinked a few times, but Jonny managed to avoid detection as an imposter, and to avoid entering an on-the-spot questionnaire about his well-being. It trundled away.

Jonny resumed his communications with his parents; his father was predictably excited about the recycling firm in Slough, with whom Jonny had done a contract revamp at a distance. His mother sat beside and they had a brief, awkward, holographic cuddle, before she, at her end, had an unexpected call from a friend, and his father began another intemperate rant about their domestic Comms system. Jonny clicked off his earpieces again, as much as to allow himself time to summon the will to continue as anything else.

As soon as they were off:

“Excuse me. This is an urgent situation. I am informed you would finish in five minutes. Therefore this was four minutes and twenty seconds ago.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, nice timing. Frack ! Families, eh ? You either love’em or you hate’em, but you can’t choose’em! Yeah, all yours ...  
“

“This is not universally true. Therefore, my foster family was chosen for me; I know only the family name of my genetic family. But, strictly, I did *not* choose my family, which was bad for me ... So, your logic is good. “

“Well, whatever. The seat’s warm enough. See ya ...” Jonny upped and was out of the Comms Desk seat, missing Pirix’s “Unlikely, but thank you” to the noise of a tannoy announcement.

Pirix sat, and immediately craned his neck up and down the rows but could not see Milo or Antonella amongst the thronging crowd. His subterfuge in quizzing the URU-droid had got him into a vacant Comms Desk seat. Maybe he could secure the seat for a few moments in the same way.

“Hi ... ? Hey, robot-unit. I need your help. “ The same robot had vaguely followed Pirix’s path and was not far away. As it approached, and Pirix studied its deportment and interaction, he was struck by how primitive the technology was. He had only seen such models as toilet domestics before. Pirix was self-critical in that, with the current state of preoccupation of his mind, he had not picked up the logical discrepancy of toilet-robots roaming a busy concourse, soliciting members of the public.

“>I am programmed to respond to the word HELP>I am URU-unit 032>I can assist you or refer you> I can download selected—”

“—Robot. Stop talk, “ said Pirix firmly. “Why is your model-type not cleaning a toilet or washroom. Therefore why are you beyond your scope of technology ?”

“>Sir, my unit was created by President Van Els, 67th president of the United States>we are the response to National De-Diagnosis Day> We assist students who had invalid diagnostic labels removed> “

“This is a good function, robot. Therefore the USA is a rich country. DDD gave me my liberty. Why did the President convert toilet-robots?”

“>Sir, I have no functionality to answer this question>If you are a state citizen>If you have forgotten the diagnostic labels that were on you > I can search pre-DDD databases”

“I have had ... “ Pirix was feeling an unhealthy surge of autonomic release — anger: a delayed reaction to his encounter with Dr Teezon earlier. “I was given a label of Social Penitence Disorder, Axis B when I was 14 years old by a meta-neurologist in Michigan. This is because I spent all my time building my flying craft. When I was 17, my foster brother denounced me to a Meta-Neurology Community team who diagnosed me with the label Severe Asynchronous Cortical Syndrome. I was sent for Brain Dialysis at the County Silvert Clinic. I refused and tried to escape. I was labeled the diagnosis of New Variant Drapetomania. I was committed by MN Law in an involuntary treatment order. I was in a coma having Brain Dialysis for two years. Therefore this was all for nothing. There is nothing wrong with my brain.”

“>That is a complex story, sir > I can input to discover any other labels that were attached to you>”



“I have only one label in my life. This label is my name: Pirix. I am a general qualified space pilot.”

“—”

“Robot, are you still interacting with me ?”

“You > are > you> The limit of my functionality is to declare this>”

“Unit 032. You have helped me with the tension and stress that was momentarily obstructing my other thoughts. Therefore I am sorry I called you a toilet-robot.”

“>I have been called by worse profanity, sir> you are you >that is correct>”

“I will ask one thing more. If I put you on this chair, if you reserve this Comms Desk for five minutes — I will commend you to your supervisor and I will vote Van Els again. “

“—”

“Robot, are you still interacting with me ?”

“>This is not in my scope of functionality > It is a contravention of local policy.”

“But will you do it ? Therefore, any security protocol from your functionality can be used to reserve the seat. “

“I will comply, sir >You will vote President Van Els > DDD is good > You are you>”

Pirix got up and lifted the fair weight of the URU-droid onto the seat, where it had fended off at least two tutting persons by the time Pirix arrived back with Antonella. Milo had gone on ahead to give up the evidence of the computer tablet to the FBI authorities attached to the Senator's delegation. Pirix had never met a hundred-and-twenty year old in the flesh or in hologram.

9

“Gramps ! Gramps, gosh, it’s so wonderful to see you ...!”

“*Ants-in-yer-pants* ! My darling, Antonella ...! Stand up. I need to give you a Gramps-hug !”

Antonella was very close to tears: to hide her wobbly chin, she snapped her head back towards Pirix, who was back a respectful distance: “*Pssst* — Pirix: can I just command this Comms Desk, like normal ?”

Pirix nodded. He watched as two fairly hi-fidelity holographic avatars, quarter-scale, appeared in the oval podium space on the desk. Part of Pirix wanted to interrupt, to urge the emotional Antonella to engage her VR-Headset for privacy. Instead, he was himself moved at the sight and sound of his companion blubbing tears onto the virtual shoulder of her doting grandfather.

“Oh, darling ... you don’t want to make a Super-Oldie like me cry on his birthday.”

“I’m— I’m so sorry, Gramps. The last two days have been ... too much. I can’t take it ... I just want to be back home. Is it still your

birthday ?”

“When you’ve got a Mini-Jetcraft two miles away, who cares about time-zones. Where’s Jonny ? He’s beefed up if that’s him standing behind you ? When can I get to do the ‘officials’ for you two ? ”

“No, Gramps, that’s a guy, a friend I met ... who practically saved my life. I’m still looking for Jonny. Oh, Gramps, maybe it was me being a stupid princess, I should’ve just stayed for the Moon-Honey, instead of storming off. Now, I’m stuck in these stupid borrowed clothes; I lost some of my luggage probably; my phone ... and, Gramps, there’s stuff ...”

Antonella’s speech lapsed again into jerkss of loud sobbing. Pirix felt tempted to intervene, but then again, at close inspection he was impressed with the Campus technology in that the Gramps-avatar appeared to be shaking in physical sympathy with Antonella’s weeping shudders.

“Antonella: this is not like you, my big tough girl, who pulled a First Class Honours out of the bag two years ago, who won the Cuppers Cross Country race, remember that Michelmas day, when I came up on the slotway...?”

“Yeah, Gramps, I got mud all over your shoulder that day ”

“You can wipe your mud and your virtual snot on this shoulder any, *any* time. Days like these are like a membrane: you have to let the *bad* filter out and the *good* filter in. You know the bloody useless idiots in Parliament are going to change the rules, the Marriage Laws again.”

“Yes. They have that here ... the Humanoid Equality Vote—”

“—No, no, not that stupid bloody American thing. Thank God—”

“—Gramps. I’ve met some people here, and they have a point.”

“Not the *some-of-my-best-friends-are-marrying-robots* argument. I hope you’re not using fallacies like that in your DPhil thesis.”

“No, Gramps ... my thesis will be as robust and rigorous as you’ve taught me ! Don’t worry, I’ll pay you from my grant for proof-reading ... “

“Well, I don’t know about that. Anyway, all I’ll say is that it’s more money in my pocket if people start marrying robots more. That’s my point, love — they’re stopping the Family Bonus Package. I’d better come over to find you and do the ‘officials’ there.”

‘Are you serious ? What about mum and dad ? Do you visit them ?’

“Not great news there, Antonella. They’ve both had a bit of a downturn in the SLUG-home. It is a terrible affliction. Your mother’s lassitude is particularly acute; she’s not taking part in life much at all.”

“That’s awful. Really awful ... “

“There’s treatments, there are ... but, let’s talk on the future ... Ok, ok, do you want me to test your senses, with the phrase that gets your hackles up the most ...?”

“What, ‘*God Save the King*’ ? *Ha, ha, ha* “

“No, no, no — see you’ve got that beautiful smile back — (And that old fart is still going strong, apparently got a Royal Robot Consort there ...)”

“Nooo ?!”

“So much we have to catch up on, Antonella ... No, the phrase was: *What would future historians—*”

“—*think of us now* ! Touché, Gramps ! You’ve got it. I hate that. I mean, and ... Pirix, “ Antonella, and her avatar, swung bodily right round. “It is the ultimate academic fallacy and conceit, to first pretend that you can conceive of the mind-set of a future historian, and then try to interrogate what he or she will compile of historiography of our present day ! I mean, it’s an academic tort, right ?”

Pirix bit his lip.

Antonella was having a postgraduate-seminar moment.

“That’s my feisty, clever girl ! “ said Gramps. “ Well, the chap behind you, the strong and silent type ... he must have a phone ?”

“Pirix, your phone, please, “ said Antonella, like a professor bidding a missing reference sheet from her undergrad.

“Just — oh, thank heavens, it's an American, not a Chinese, phone — just turn on all the Access Points. That’s it ... I’ve got you now ! Pepperdine Campus. Are you mixing some study with the wedding preparations ?”

“Gramps, you *are* still going to help me from your old records in that Late Neo-Medieval period, I’m hoping to get a few chapters done,

after — “

“—After your wedding to that lovely young Jonny. At least I’ve got you talking about the important things in life. He can’t have gone far; he’s probably mixing some business too — very prosperous family business they have in London ! Wonderful for me, I haven’t been to California, since before 7/17 ... Now, you’re taking your Rada tablets, I hope. And not any of those import ones. Get one of those cheap Rad-scanners from a convenience store there ... “

“Yes, Gramps. I will. Don’t worry so much. You’re right. Jonny’s on his company website so much, I’m sure we’ll find him. “

“Well, that’s settled then ... now, why don’t you make a super-old-guy like me happy ? Let’s see if we can’t give my new system a run for its money: dance a few steps with me. Ok, now ... Is the music coming through ?”

“Yes, Gramps. Reminds me of England ...”

Pirix stood by while the waltzing music filtered out and around. It was nice to see Antonella giggling and to see her holographic avatar stepping to and fro on the miniature Comms podium. His phone lay to one side, newly unlocked full-access to the world, all manner of notifications flashing up from the screen. In their last shuffling spin together, the avatar of “Gramps” gave Pirix a wink. Something about the English super-oldie sat uneasy with Pirix. Antonella stayed staring into the blankness of the holographic space and of the screen long after the talk with her grandfather had finished. Pirix leaned right across her, because the phone was now actually ringing.

“Oh, sorry, Pirix ... I was miles away. Actually, literally, thousands of miles away. Such a wonderful man — he practically brought me up,

after my parents both went into the care-home, with the awful SLUG illness ...“

“Yes, “ replied Pirix, not clarifying what he was affirming. “This is the boy, from the slotway, who came with us ... Therefore ... *Yes, I am busy, Milo, therefore go on speech-to-text now. We come ...* “

“Busy with what, for goodness sake ? When are we going to get my luggage ? There’s bound to be a heap on my lap-top from Jonny ... Hey, and when are you going to tell me what happened last night ? And why the hell are the FBI still involved with us after you pulled that idiot stacie off the SkyLev ?”

While Antonella was talking, sort of by body language alone, Pirix managed to induce her up from the Comms Desk, to glance at the stream of capital letters ticker-taping on his phone from Milo, and to usher the next waiting user onto the seat.

It was time. Pirix did not have the capacity to lie. He would have to explain to Antonella that her luggage was lost, stolen, likely destroyed. He would explain that the culprits of the criminality towards her possessions, and her body, were at that moment being investigated by Federal police in the backstage area of the auditorium. On the plus side, he would explain that she was out of danger and that he, Pirix, would devote himself fully to the task of locating her missing fiancé in the county. On the altogether minus side: he would have to hand her the medical report which would read that she had been sedated and then raped by a midget sex-robot: but, back to pluses — kind of — that he, Pirix, had meted a violent destructive revenge on that rogue porn-bot.

Pirix pondered hard: that he might engage one of the URU-droids to assist him in his counselling challenge.

Signs to the event at the campus auditorium were on all sides. Into Pirix's contemplative indecision, Antonella voiced a jaunty shopping urge:

"Pirix, mate, you must have some credit on you from that big rich Chinese company you work for. Can I stop at that boutique, for a dress ? Apart from my hair, these clothes make me look like one of those shabby crusty stacies shouting and screaming over there ... "

## 10

As Hyman Ho had predicted, it was a sharply dressed mechcomic from New York who strode onto the stage in the Pepperdine Grand Hall. Even before arriving in the spotlight incorporating the Senator's lectern he had emitted some clicking noises into the PA system of the auditorium — and got a solitary whoop and laugh from up the back of the audience.

"Hey, hey, let's give it up ... for my Xhosa-slash-Zulu brother or sister up the back. More click gags where that came from, yeah !"

Programmed with a database of multi-lingual jokes running into the millions, running the latest transformative humanoid physiognomy and mimetics, imbued with cutting-edge sentience chips, this was the apex predator of stand-up comedy in the USA of the early 2190s. It would open the campaign shows for Senator Trestle throughout the 2192 Gubernatorial race in California. As he had glided past the Senator and his two boys in the wing of the stage, the sentience chip showed its worth, and he gave a wink to Susie, holding hands with TaWayne. "Should you be jealous ?" whispered the beaming father to son.



“All right, all right ... let’s cut to it, lovely people, lovely Pepper-people. Let’s talk humans and robots ! Take my wife ... No, no. PLEASE ! *Take my wife !*”

The ice was broken; there were howls of laughter from all around.

“You know, a funny thing happened to me on my way to the show ... I saw one of the FBI guys [ a few hisses ]. No, no, listen up ... He was holding some strips of raw chicken up in the air. I said: *Dude, what’s going on there ?* He said: *All the frackin’ protesters will be throwing spunk and titty milk at us in a minute. It’s a frackin’ great batter mix for fried chicken.*”

Uproar. Laughter. Some people going “*Ewww !*”; some people shouting “More, more”. Da-Hee sitting two rows from the stage caught a withering look from Ellie, as if to say: *I’ll shut this robot and his boss up pretty damn soon.*

The mechcomic was working the stage: “Oh, oh, what am I hearing ? Sounds like we got some Koreans in the house too. Brother, you just keep going there...! My OS has got a million-and-a-half come-backs in 29 languages. Yeah, you boys carry on shouting ...! Hey, last time I saw a mouth that big, the KTX from Busan came through. Oh, oh, oh — now that’s not nice ! You ain’t a class act, buddy. I’ll translate what he’s yelling, for everyone ... *I see the Tube-Head cunt who stole my money.* Not cool, not cool brother. This is a family day, marriage equality in California. Vote yes, and ...”

Hearing the loud voices to one side, Da-Hee should have ducked down low; instead she stood up. Her insides somersaulted and her sweat condensed cold: she saw two Korean men in dark suits pointing and starting to clamber over seats, people, usher-robots in a

scramble to get to her. In their wake was the bald, fat ranting figure of the man she had last seen at the Tribunal on Luna, being frazzled by a security taser.

Ellie stood up too; she had seen the figure of the Senator appear at the side of the stage.

Jonny stood up, from the row behind Da-Hee; looking down the line of sight of Ellie's flabby pointing arm: *Frack ! Is that Antonella ?*

On stage, in an indication to his future re-programmers that the sentence/come-back interface needed some kind of restraint/feedback loop, the mechcomic made one final coarse comment in Korean about how the mother of one of the besuited assailants liked having sex with vending machines. The Korean mafia man pulled out a Magvolt sidearm and blasted the robot MC. Half-decapitated, and spraying sparks and smoke the mechcomic fell heavily into Pirix's leg, at the side of the stage, with an "*Et tu Bruté*" gag left half-uttered as it shut down and died.

"Gun ! Code red ! Go, go !" shouted two FBI agents as they sprang into bodyguard mode, raising their weapons at the screaming mass of people in the crowd.

"This is no gun, you denialist, mechphile scum, " yelled Ellie, throwing off her tent-like blouse, and powering up her nozzle. "This be the human 'White Goods' of revenge ! Motherfracker !"

The nozzle opened up. The Senator ducked. Antonella didn't.

Confusion and carnage broke loose. Antonella took the hit from the fat protester's breast-milk bolus square in the face. She fell back

stunned into Pirix who was pressing at his own leg injury caused by the felled robot comedian.

Jonny grabbed at Da-Hee: “Danni ! That’s Antonella, over there !”

“What !” cried Da-Hee; they were both in the lee of Ellie and the on-rush of other protesters, who had started hurling their baggies of ‘white goods’ at the political entourage.

The leading Korean mafia-man was re-leveling his gun towards Da-Hee.

“Ellie. That man in the suit. He doesn’t believe in Climate Stasis. At all ! Quick, “ shouted Da-Hee. “And, he’s married a robot.”

“Another ! Capitalist, denialist, motherboard-lover ...!” Ellie re-directed her hose and nozzle, showing no fear to the Korean attacker who was swaying his hand trying to get a clear shot past at Da-Hee. BLAM ! Ellie shot first, and the man went down, sprays of righteous white fell on all and sundry.

With a push and a shove the entourage exited via the back-stage area. The Senator and his protective cordon bundled towards one exit out back; an agent held out a halting hand to the non-VIPs, directing them elsewhere. Da-Hee was the most sprightly in the lead and she followed her nose towards a set of service double-doors. Pirix shouldered Antonella once more whilst Jonny, Susie and TaWayne came along behind.

Nobody was looking back at any possible pursuers. The service doors slid open, smoggy atmospheric air condensed at once in their faces as it met the air-conditioning from inside.

A shout came from the back to Da-Hee to make towards the buggy-rank; a more aggressive shout came from in front of her. Some other Korean gangsters were patrolling the outside of the auditorium. As soon as the visibility between the two groups cleared, there was the unmistakable whinny of an electric-shotgun charging up. A split-second later a shower of masonry detonated above them. Da-Hee sunk to a crouch with her Magvolt pistola and took a moment to aim, as the shotgunner re-loaded. She fired; and hit.

“Holy frack ! “ gasped Jonny. In a weird short-circuit in his thought processes, his shock at seeing a man’s chest blow open ten metres away, was wholly subsumed by the thought: *Wow, that is exactly like on the movies; how do they do that !*

As fast as they could, they ran towards the buggies, where Susie did some illegal hacking of the on-board ‘serve-and-safety’ protocols which enabled them to flee the scene of mayhem.

## 11

Antonella was rubbing her bruised face and making attempts to keep her sticky, swollen eyelids open in the back of the speeding auto-buggy.

Jonny was sat directly opposite her.

“Antonella. I saw you. That is you, isn't it ?”

“Jonny ... ? I— I can’t get my head around all this. That is you, right there ?”

“Antonella. Yes. It’s me .... Frackin’ weird doesn’t come close !”

“Yes. But, look, I found you ... “

That was the moment, thought Jonny. He lent across, pressed his hands at her shoulders, and took care to put a kiss to the unbruised side of her face. Her eyes watched him.

But, as soon as his lips touched, he caught the taste-sensation of something strange and sweet there. Involuntarily, he stuck out his tongue and gave a lick there too.

“Hey, what the frack !” said Antonella, recoiling. “Will you stop frackin’ licking me ... in front of Pirix !”

Jonny slowly deflated back, simply amazed at how relief and elation had morphed, in a blink and a lick, into supreme awkwardness between them.

Pirix contributed: “It is induced human lactation from very unhygienic breasts. Therefore, I will find a way to obtain some antibiotics at the Fraternity House.”



## Chapter 11

With fair robotic insouciance, Susie continued to over-ride slotway parameters in their speeding auto-buggy on the frantic return to the Fraternity House. For a couple of moments, Jonny had considered making a request to switch with Da-Hee, to sit next to his fiancée, and then to, may be, throw in some neutral comments about getting back to London, segueing into a tender recollection of their last date together— at a pizzeria, in Charing Cross — and then even finding a moment to chivalrously hold her hand. But, as the buggy hit the open rampart, such intricate parlour moves seemed like a whole chess end-game away: they were all mostly holding on for dear life.

Da-Hee was at a constant swivel away from Jonny with her gun levelled at possible pursuers. With respect to romantic misinterpretations, Jonny truly thought that TaWayne was licking and kissing his robot-lover's out-stretched hand. But TaWayne, in fact, was simply yelling into a secure Comms channel, on Susie's wrist, back to the Fraternity House, instead of using a phone:

"Nix-Nix-Nix away-team ... Frackin' coming in *hot* ! Put out an all-Alumni Reach-Out, if anyone's tapped into the K-Town Mafia in the city, to frackin' pull some serious peace-making strings ... What ?"

"Hearing ya, *TeeDubya* ..." said the voice at the other end. "You mean *Korea* K-Town in LA, or *Krazy* K-Town in LA ?"

"Frack man ...! How the frack are the *Krazies* gonna organise a mafia and be hot on our asses here ! Of *course* it's those shifty Korean mob guys—"

TW suddenly pulled his face away from Susie's hand and held his own back towards Pirix: "Hey, no offence, there brother ... Didn't mean ... to say the K-word, y'all. It's just this shithouse situation."

"This is not a problem. Therefore, this one here said she was Korean; she who is holding a Magvolt pistola. "

TaWayne considered making a 'no offence' apology to the back of Da-Hee's head but reckoned correctly that the whistling smoggy air had not carried his voice back across the threshold of her attention.

"We're moving fast past the desert turn-off. ETA ? *Ee-tee-ay* ... Susie, you in the circuits of this buggy yet ?"

"Yes. Three minutes at this speed. There are two auto-buggies on the network coming this way. There is a Hover-Rover in the air, unidentified. Also, coming this way."

"Nix-Nix-Nix, Away-Team, do you copy ?" TaWayne's mouth was again at Susie's wrist, his voice taking on military angularity. " We got the guests still. Spaceman is bleeding from his leg again. The English chick got KO'ed again. Test out those machine-guns, y'all. Let's see what the Founders had in mind for a bad *SitRep* like this. "

There was a smudged thumbprint of the sun showing through the drab overcast sky as the occupants did a rapid transition on foot. Susie again carried Antonella; Jonny started a long, faltering question aimed at TaWayne about local law enforcement, but he was cut short: "In America, a man's house is his castle. The Founders knew it, all right. We can talk when *that* door's shut, and *those* bad-boys up there are locked and loaded." Jonny had to do a double-take as he was pointed out the gun-placements that they were just passing by.



As the fugitives from the Campus *melée* tumbled through the last security slider onto the giant rug in the Fraternity vestibule, the sense of relief was great. An assortment of other members came to greet them running on the adrenaline of urgency. One recognised Pirix from earlier in the day and insisted on showing off an armament that he said belonged to his father and his grandfather, and the former had shot at a "*bandido*" out of an upper window, "in the water riots of the 2250s".

As much as there were other members too who wanted to gunsling it out with whatever "bandido" or "mafia" threat was coming their way, the advice that had come back from the Senator to his son was to "lie low, somewhere out of the way" until the dust settled on the day. On the floor of grand vestibule Antonella urged Susie to minister once again to Pirix and his battered leg, whilst she sat on the carpeted steps trying to re-focus on the layout of the Fraternity House and trying to jog her memory. Da-Hee was sat at the monitors, hyper-vigilant as ever. Jonny felt at a loss again and, as the only guest on his feet, he found himself shadowing TaWayne and the animated discussion he was having with his father.

It seemed that the Senator and his security detail, and his staff, including the other twin brother were already mid-air in an armoured Hover, heading back to the City. Everyone was safe and unharmed. It seemed that the main heat from local law enforcement, not to mention the University's Securitron corps, not to mention the unknown threat from armed aggressors from earlier, was presently focussed on the historic Nix-Nix-Nix Fraternity house itself. Jonny observed TaWayne showing one moment the jutting jaw of generational pride in guarding the legacy of the Fraternity, and in the next moment the expression of the innocent son protesting that they hadn't really done anything wrong.

Jonny felt close enough to the discussions to pitch in with: “ *Umm*, there was the killing — I don’t know if you’d say a *murder* , *per se* — of Danni ...on that bloke ...?”

“Frack !” said TaWayne. “ Sorry, dad. Didn’t mean to profane ...but, yeah, that would be right up there in the camera-record. She’s faculty, though, they reckon ... Hey, you a professor too ?”

“Me ? Well, I’m ...I work in Recycling—“

Simultaneously from the monitors at the doorway, there came warnings of people and vehicles beyond the compound perimeter, and a Comms update. The latter was relayed pretty succinctly: that a Frat Alumnus had responded saying the Korean Mafia in LA were “pretty frackin' baddass” and that the local police had announced an ETA too.

“Right ! “ said TaWayne, responding to the incoming threat level. “ *Ee-tee-ay* is *zero-niner*. Dad, we just clear out. I’m not bringing all this to the House. We clear out; we fly north to the *Arr-Zee*. ”

“Mighty proud of you son. Just, *ah*, put me on loud-speaker a while ... When we have sons like mine, who embody the spirit, the *fighting spirit*, of this great nation, we are *right*, right to feel a tugging tradition of our great past. This country of ours stands for liberty, and so does the great Fraternity House in which you stand, in which our forefathers stood, and —“

“—Dad, like, we got the local cops arriving in 9 minutes. We gotta git ...”

“Son, it is a place of *legacy* that you protect. Money cannot buy; cash cannot recover reputation—“

“Dad, love you. But ... I’ll call you when we’re up in the air. Come on ! Everyone up. Let’s get out the hangar A-SAP. We’re heading for the Arr-Zee— hey, you out-front— Nix-Nix-Nix ears only ...”

There was a general movement in the direction of TaWayne’s pointing finger. Jonny had never seen so much ancient rickety wood as was lining the floors and fittings of the place they had found themselves in, a recycling nightmare, professionally speaking. It seemed that the humanoid robot, Susie, had opted to carry Antonella again to the descending walkway. She looked nice in a floral print dress, that Jonny had never seen before — Antonella, that is. *Mind you*, he mused, *I’ve only ever seen her in four outfits, all told. Is that a shop-tag hanging out of her back seam ?* Jonny ran the permutations in his brain a few times of how come Antonella was wearing a brand-new dress. The skin on her dangling legs was so white in comparison to the Californian tans and mulatto complexions on everyone else; the robot, he noted, had re-done her own skin wan-white too, which Jonny thought a cute girlie touch. Anyway, the only idea his brain came up with was that the shop-tag gave him an excuse to put his fingers up close to her body, and, obviously, an opener in terms of a topic of conversation later— aside from being on the run from police and gangsters in a foreign land, and heading into an even more opaque unknown.

“Can I just ask ...? “ asked Jonny. “What even is the Arr-Zee ? I mean, in England, zee is a *zed*, so—“

“—Radiation Zone, buddy. North of here. Frackin’ glow in the sky ... All the English tourists love it. But, hey, *Arr-Zed* ...? Still sounds weird.”

“Isn’t it dangerous ? I heard there’s all these cults, and survivalists and—“

“—We’re going out of season for all those Radiation Tourists, sipping their English tea, no offence. Best place to be round about now, round about here, if you don’t want to be found. I love my country, but Buddy-boy over there says he can hook us up with Chinese Rada tabs by the bucket-load, some place out of Obispo. What was your name, again ?”

“Radiation ... it, sort of, sets off a lot of my allergies. You think I could look up a few—“

“—Hangar Up !” yelled TaWayne. “Nix-Nix-Nix ! Salute left ! On my mark ... “

The arc-lights in the hangar made faltering and retro buzzing noises but soon lit the scene. The Fraternity members stiffened their backs and saluted the mural of their patron. In the archest of English accents, Antonella’s voice was heard: “I say, that’s Richard Nixon ! Gosh !” In his time, President Nixon famously visited Communist China, and in public made pronouncements to the world about the wonders of traditional Chinese medicine and culture, but, in private, to his inner circle, he laughed about the paddy-field peasants and their ‘shit-hole’ country. Or was that a misattributed quote? Two centuries on the USA was still one of two global super-powers, but in many respects it was being out-flanked on the world stage by China. In Europe, the ancient regimes only began to take notice when the People’s Republic of China’s team won the Soccer World Cup twice in a row in the 2140s. Older schoolchildren in Germany and France and Russia would be swapping their collectors’ editions of player-holograms and the smarter ones would add additional stats to the discussion: *Who’s got the best GDP ? China. Who’s got the fastest*

*sub-space rocket ? China. Who's got the biggest proto-settlement on Planet Mars ? China.* Poor black kids in Africa were wishing they were Chinese.

Crossing the mid-point of the 22nd century, perhaps the only area in which America still stole a march on its superpower rival was in Biotechnology. American laboratories had discovered Brain Dialysis Therapy. Technically, it was a mind-boggling achievement. Patients' brains could be plumbed with micro-catheters. The brain's own micro-circulation could be diverted externally to molecular membranes such that nano-particle pumps could sieve out the brain fluid, separating the "good" from the "bad", and the circuit could be re-sited back into the patient's normal blood circulation.

Astonishing technology, just a terrible application of it ! Richard Nixon was recorded in history for over one hundred years as a crook and a charlatan. (By the time of our story a historical revisionist project by the so-called Beijing-Berkeley Collaboration, had rejigged Nixon's reputation in the wider world almost completely) In the similar way, Brain Dialysis was a stunning epoch-defining biotechnology in and of itself, but its targeted use turned it into a huge scandal. Brain Dialysis was patented and licensed to be the cure for, at first, just a few types of deranged neurology. Then, it expanded its license and practice to include any and all areas of human being and behaviour which could be designated, *ex post facto*, a so-called "mental illness". The intricate explanation to other scientists, patients, politicians, and the industry of charitable fund-raisers was that:

- 1) finally the brain's chemistry could be characterised and codified at a molecular level;
- 2) the chemical imbalances at this molecular level at the deepest reaches of the human brain could now be mapped onto the abnormal behaviours which had for centuries just been called

“mental illness”, nothing more than tables of random symptoms and observations

3) By the supremely subtle process of Brain Dialysis, the process could finally be reversed. By scientifically synthesising a corrective mix of the brain’s 60 or so neurotransmitters, and by re-integrating the synthesate— over a monitored period of weeks, months, even years— a patient’s abnormal mental functioning, *ipso facto* his or her anti-social behaviour, could be cured.

The technology pushed at wide-open doors throughout the whole world. The viral pandemics in the dark *fin-de-siècle* of the 21st century had caused a massive economic slump. Governments were faced with social unrest amongst their idle citizens. Idleness begat anomie and lethargy. This then led to the imperative debate of the age: was the increasing lethargy of the people due to the long-term effects of the viral pandemics of the 2090s? Or, was it the first manifestation of what was to become known as the Syndrome of Lassitude and General Gestalt, or SLUG. For the latter, at least, there seemed to be a solution and cure: long periods of brain dialysis.

Like Nixon’s cover-up story at Watergate, brain dialysis was finally exposed as an utter sham. There was *never a shred* of evidence that any chemical imbalances in the human subjects as assayed by any brain dialysis machine could be either detected, or corrected. Or, shown to have any objective relevance to any so-called “mental illness”. The entirety was all a bludgeoning campaign of slick marketing, money-making and scientific obfuscation. The founder of the brain dialysis empire, Dr Claude Silvert, made a full and self-aware confession from his prison cell in a notorious video suicide-note. History showed that other players in the Brain Dialysis story, just as culpable as Silvert, stayed in the shadows — *éminences grises* — escaped exposure, and more or less clung on to the truth

of what they did. Like, Nixon, they thought they had just been misunderstood by the righteous do-gooders of the world.

Meanwhile when Pirix had been listing the *three greatest achievements of mankind* in the preceding decades at the SkyLev café with Antonella, (the SkyLev itself being the third) he never made it to his Top Two. At Number One was global *De-Diagnosis Day*, but as to the Runner-Up in Pirix's mind: this is the story of another biotechnology in which America was ahead of China mid-century — the field of radiation biology. Nuclear fusion power was the commonplace base-provider of electrical energy in every country in the world. Incremental rises of radiation were the acceptable low-level risk tolerated compared to the huge benefit from the modern ultra-safe reactors which were both small and local to most cities. Soon, as the nuclear reactors became part of the fabric of 22nd century life, memories of any historical “accidents” became so distant in the collective consciousness that all was taken for granted. What was not taken for granted was the vulnerability of the human organism to the effects of radiation. Pernicious sub-atomic neutrons and protons could still wreak havoc at the human cellular level. It was lamentable how useless human evolution had been, opined misanthropic sages on internet channels, that our bipedal ancestors had endured much higher levels of environmental radiation yet had not evolved any innate protection prior to handing the upright spine and a flinty baton to the great *homo sapiens*.

And, just at the time that *homo sapiens* had evolved technologies capable of inhabiting our moon and even our nearest planet, the baleful inhibitor to any such progress was the radiation load outside of the Earth's atmosphere. Every generation of schoolchild from whichever linguistic group from 2140 onwards was forced to learn the tragic last words of the first Chinese group of astronauts to reach Mars. One by one each succumbed to radiation sickness. The last to

survive, Ji-Xhang (many geeky schoolkids could recite his name and number from his astro-suit) made a tearful last transmission to his parents in China before he too died: “This egg was boiling and hard, and now it is rotten. I am sorry ...” It was generally this translation from the original Mandarin which Anglo-American primary schools liked to inspire their pupils with on important days of the calendar. The advent of SkyLev, the elevator into space, meant that vast payloads of material could be put into geostationary orbit — thence to lunar projects — at a fraction of the fuel cost of surface-to-space rockets. Robotic construction on Luna gathered pace. However, the problem of solar radiation injurious to prolonged human existence on Luna, still less Mars, seemed insurmountable.

In the uncelebrated hinterland of Des Moines, Iowa, an Indian-American biotech formed a partnership with the nuclear power plant in the hills above Saylorville Lake in the early part of the 2150s. Although not a secret, and not a so-called *start-up* either, it was a low-key project by a company that had already made its name in the field of malaria-vaccination. The idea was to base its animal research in the USA away from the excitable protest movements at the country’s coastal rims. There was therefore a constant supply of the correct isotopic radiation from the power-plant waste and there were a few thousand feral mink, deer and rodents that the researchers could test their theories upon.

The Nobel Committee had not been impressed at all, but in the last decade before the unification of Korea, North Korean military scientists had begun intense experimentation into human radiation biology. The stunning discovery in 2088 was that, independent of the *type* of noxious radiation, and also independent of the *type* of human tissue exposed to the radiation, there was a *final common pathway*. In simple terms, whether from an atom bomb or a nuclear power accident, radiation impacting the brain or the gut caused a pre-



terminal, stepwise molecular process in the cell nucleus before that cell died. A stunning discovery, but the Nobel folk knew, as well as the man or woman on the street at any bus-stop, that the North Koreans had irradiated, maimed and killed the last generation of hapless political prisoners in order to solidify the science of their discovery.

In the ensuing decades, there was seen the kind of undulating wave in the history of science as was seen around the Germ Theory of the 19th Century, or the Prion Hypothesis of the late 20th, or even the Total Synthetic Nutrition project of the mid-21st Century. (Parallel to this, the first Governments of the new, democratic United Korea tried every means, from 'soft power' to charity boy-band songs, to try to lift the pariah status of the North Korean scientists as a new symbol of united national pride)

In respect of their discovery of 2088, a starting gun was fired in every biotechnology lab in the world by the publication of "*The three-step enzymatic path to cell death by external radiation: common to every somatic human cell.*" How could the finding be harnessed in radiotherapy for cancer cells ? (How could the finding be harnessed for biological weapons? ) It was an exhilarating time in the long initial ascent up the scientific wave, coinciding as it did with the customary optimism of the start of a new century. A dangerous but extremely rare form of brain tumour was effectively eradicated using the *Final Common Pathway* foundation for its radiotherapy. It was a brilliant breakthrough: but in the whole human populace of 11 billion, perhaps only 100 lives would be saved from this cancer pathology per year. Interest and funding for projects in the radio-biology field faltered.

In the wider intellectual community, the multidisciplinary battle-lines grew hot and attritional in the wake of last great viral pandemic which

reached its hazardous peak around 2110. Economists and sociologists joined forces to implicate factors stemming from social dislocation and anomie. The biological charge was being spearheaded by the *meta-neurology* camp. What was undeniable as fact were the following: ultra-low fertility and low natural birth-rates, widespread and entrenched unemployment, a historical low in human migratory patterns around the globe, a society-wide lack of get-up-and-go, for want of a better phrase. (A famous blogger —the first to garner a billion followers — proclaimed famously: “None of my readers know what frackin’ *anomie* is; but they see SLUG every day in the eyes of their spouses, their buddies and their workmates”). The term ‘restless indigent’ began to be used again. People were becoming fractious and difficult to manage in every stratum of society, the which novel malaise needed a new framework of biological mental illness to classify it. The biological theoreticians seemed to have won over the socio-economists; this new paradigm and the expanding acceptance of its general curative power — Brain Dialysis Therapy—we have described earlier.

Science and technology moves with fashion as much as any hairstyle or hem-line. Its players seek fame and then to monetise that fame as much as any baseball or soccer star. The money was all in meta-neurology by the mid-22nd century. Meanwhile, the Hingashi group, the small Indo-American biotech mentioned above, were plugging away below anybody’s radar in radiation biology. Let’s not be coy, they were racking up a huge body count of local furry mammals and then, inevitably, of cage-loads of laboratory monkeys by vivisecting them all with focussed beams of accelerated radiation from the spent nuclear rods of the local municipal power-plant.

Their quiet revolution finally occurred. They found a biological block to the 3-step Final Common Pathway that could be delivered not only across a cell-membrane, but then into the cell nucleus. It was

the incredible concept-leap of a third-order signalling system, initiated by a monoclonal antibody outside the cell itself. The death of a captive lab gorilla after a dose of radiation strong enough to kill it 50 times over was prevented by a single shot of the monoclonal product. With the patents confirmed, finally Saylorville Lake could go public. The lead scientists were staring at a multi-billion-dollar prosperity for the next few generations of their extended families for sure; their only mis-giving was the American media's addiction to dumbing down, insisting on dubbing the lab survivor as *Guy The Gorilla*, when, in fact, its name in all copyrighted academic proceedings was Vishnusittamparam. *The Gorilla*.

Radiation contamination, from all sources, came, in time, to be rendered just another bodily variable which could be regulated by human ingenuity. A diabetic person, since the early 20th century, simply measures his or her blood sugar, and then takes a prompt corrective action. Compared to radiation sickness, diabetes can kill you at both ends: too high, or too low a reading. Radiation is only a problem if it is measured too high. The Saylorville Lake discovery, as an injection and then in tablet-form, became the 'silver bullet' of its age.

Is there, indeed, a *God* designing all this into such a handy timeline ? At key moments in history, does a spiritual finger point the way to a chosen group on how to solve a problem for the benefit of humanity, like when the discovery of the Atom bomb was delivered on the side of the good guys in World War 2 ? Just when humans gained the gift of SkyLev via the discovery of supernaturally special Palkar fibres so that humanity could begin to imagine putting manpower and materials into space on a vast and unlimited scale, *Rada tablets* would ward off radiation sickness in the feeble constitutions of the humans who could then continue to control the robotic workforce on Luna and Mars. Ji-Xhang's body, and those of his confrères could at

last be brought back to the Chinese space base in Hong Kong and commemorated.

The wonder that an interventionist God can bestow, human failings can despoil in a moment.

On a balmy weekend in 2162 the unthinkable happened. Sleepy San Francisco awoke on *Saturday the 17th of July* to the scent of ammonia in the air and a gnawing underground alarm siren that got into everyone's head, like when a bar-fridge door has been left open, but way, way outdoors near the barbecue. The Bay Area nuclear power plant had autonomously over-ridden twenty-six fail-safes and was in an irreversible meltdown. Most of the complex was deep underground in an earthquake-proof housing. There had not been any comparable incident anywhere in the world for over a century.

Fatalities in the first 24 hours ran into the hundreds, mostly plant staff and first responders. Before the mass evacuation plan for the whole San Francisco Bay Area was rushed into action by military diktat, the deeply religious incumbent of the White House, President Matthewson, was looking to apportion blame for what he emphatically stated on National broadcast "was not an act of our merciful Lord God. Oh, no, siree."

The finger that started pointing directly at his superpower rival, China, stayed aloft for less than twenty-four hours. With a *de facto* state of so-called "World Peace" for over 60 years (last military death in 2109: official), such an act of atrocity was unthinkable. But, then again, a random nuclear disaster in one of America's 97 civilian power plants was also unthinkable. On Sunday 18th July, even as every nuclear installation on the entire planet was responding by re-checking local safety protocols, the mid-size facility near the metropolis of Wuhan City in China suffered an identical catastrophe.

Afternoon alarms, like a bolt from a blue sky, stricken staff unable to reverse the meltdown, robotic safety teams vaporised by the trillion kilowatt heat, thousands of citizens dying in the radiation flash: billions of people around the world could activate the split-screen function on their computer device of choice and see the apocalyptic scenes unfolding almost indistinguishably in Wuhan and San Francisco.

Two decades on: what was the aftermath ? Most obviously, a large area of the USA western seaboard was considered uninhabitable and was abandoned. Backed by Federal indemnities, the populations of the new *Radiation Zone* (RZ) were absorbed in the rest of the country. A state of National emergency lasted fifteen years. A Federal relocation agency (or ReLoA) was instituted, in which many thousands of citizens found employment and vitality. A legion of re-purposed firefighters, state volunteers, guardsmen, scouting élite were sent to fight the radiation threat and seal the damaged reactor in San Francisco. They had only limited success; the nightly glow in the sky over the mid-Pacific coastline was a grim and permanent reminder. In the areas of the union that received most refugees from the RZ, there was shown to be paradoxical bounces of economic activity and also fertility, from the study of which by local humanities departments, a rush of academic work followed. The twin disasters brought China and America diplomatically closer together than at any time in the century. (The emergency responses around Wuhan ran almost in tandem to the Bay Area, USA)

What else changed since that dreadful weekend, given in America the shorthand 7/17 ? For very many people, the event marked the start of a kind of existential quest. *What have humans become ?* In every parlour, every schoolyard, every locker-room, every bar, every campfire, every whist-drive, every prayer meeting, every back-street,

every hair appointment, every picnic ... the talk would always circle and then be drawn, dead-set, to the centre of conversational gravity of the *7/17 Conspiracy theory*. Despite the governing rapprochement, Chinese teens *still* blamed American double-agents; American housewives *still* blamed Chinese terrorists. But, what of corporate terror?

The most valued commodity after 7/17 was a supply of the Rada shots and the Rada tablets, patented by the INDIAN-American [capitals intended] biotech company. One hundred and one investigating journalists tried to pin down connections between the Hinjashi company mass-producing the anti-radiation medications in factories across four continents, money streams flowing back to Mumbai, the nascent Mars astronautic programme of that country, and rumours of covert operations by the Indian Intelligence Agency. It was the logical answer to the *cui bono* question, in other words, who stood to benefit most from the twin nuclear calamities in the USA and China. Books and docos aplenty, but there was no real evidence accrued to the contrary after twenty years of official Indian alibis and denials.

Another strand in the aftermath: in the USA amongst the so-called Radiation Veterans who had volunteered in their hundreds to help contain the nuclear incident in San Francisco (in return for a Federal stipend, free medical insurance for life and free slot-taxi rides and internal rocket shuttle-trips for life), a high proportion of them started to report sick. Exhaustive medical inquiry by internal physicians found no radiation damage to their bodies. Yet this cohort of Radiation Veterans continued to complain of a constellation of symptoms, which were fleeting but also subjectively debilitating. Final salvation came following a report by the All-American Institute of Meta-Neurology, who claimed to have found a novel derangement in the brain chemistry after submitting a trial group of these Radiation

Veterans to standard Brain Dialysis. Hurriedly, an Extraordinary General Assembly of American and Chinese Meta-Neurology was convened (for the complaints of Chinese RadVets started to mirror that of their American counterparts, once word had got out). In an excited joint statement in the Spring of 2179, an entirely new diagnosis entered the meta-neurology textbook — *Post Rad-exertion Stress Disorder*, or PRSD. Brain Dialysis experts were confident that a specific and special dialysate could be formulated to help all PRSD sufferers, a treatment programme which would eventually end up as the most expensive BDT programme on record, delivered at newly-expanded Meta-neurology centres around the country, and charged to the Federal Health budget.

There was one last major theory, which led to the ultimate existential angst amongst scientists and social thinkers alike. Was 7/17 caused by the robots ? At first, this was laughed off. There had been over two hundred years — since the dawn of flickering silent movies — of science-fiction stories based exclusively on the premise of autonomous rogue robots, who could act in concert to harm mankind. People laughed a whole lot more, in the late 2160s, as they lorded over their domestic droids, scrubbing surfaces and escorting the kids to school. The 60s were a decade of wide-eyed wonder and naivety, thought most people at the turn of the 2190s.

But there were cold-eyed realists too, who said, simply, *Look to the facts*. First: at the functional end of nuclear power plants were teams of robots, immune to radiation or unionised working-time directives who were maintaining the stocks of enriched uranium and replacing spent fuel rods. The teams were even managed hierarchically. Robots dictated to other robots the micromanagement of San Francisco's energy supply. True to San Fran's playful way, the official report into 7/17 showed that the 14 or so droids nearest to the nuclear fuel-assembly were nicknamed *rent-boys*. They were

overseen by the fixed command-robots, nicknamed *Pimp-bots*. (In Wuhan, the same levels were simply termed 一機 and 二機 or 1st machine, 2nd machine). Secondly, all of these robots were in real-time communication with each other, and theoretically with any other command system in the world. Thirdly, there was the issue of *sentience*.

Nobody had ever stopped to ponder on the following simple thought experiment: if your humble toilet-robot can predict with fair accuracy when the toilet rolls in the parents' en-suite would run out, as compared to when the loo-paper of the wash-room used by the family's teenage boys would run-out, what kind of sentience were the very advanced robots in the mid-22nd century working with?

Back in the Nix-Nix-Nix hangar for example, Personal Assistance Humanoid Robot Model P-series 801, also known as Susie, had been progressing her conversation with Antonella whilst all manner of tyre-kicking and cursing was going on around the conked out Kombi-hover which was severely limiting TaWayne's Plan A: *to get the hell out of Dodge*. Susie had got past comments about Antonella's new fringe and the recommendation of a suitable Alice-band for it. She had instead learned of Antonella's forthcoming plan to marry the other male Fraternity House guest, known as Jonny. Susie had learned also of Antonella's super-oldie relative who was licensed to perform and legally confer marital status. Her internal programme could instantly find the equivalence-term to "wedding celebrant" in 17 world languages.

But how did sentience work in the logic-gates and experiential learning network of a P-series 801 robot in 2191? For more than a century, all robots were programmed with a so-called *Beneficence Over-ride*. That is to say, that all complex actions of the robot must be rooted to a "good" outcome for its licensed owner. So, recklessly



wanking and shitting teenage boys need faster replacement of their toilet rolls in a most basic domestic scenario. In Susie's neural network, she calculated a beneficent outcome for her owner *several moves ahead*. To wit, she and TaWayne would accompany Antonella and Jonny to where the as-yet unmet human agent with the nuptial-ratification skillset would be. That agent would be able to licence her marriage to TaWayne at the same time, the legal validity of which was subject to an 88% probability of success of the state of California's Marriage Equality Referendum. (Susie had independently and autonomously, and confidentially, obtained pre-polling data from Senator Trestle's personal P-series 801 robot)

The key question for the causation theorists who were looking to pin the blame for 7/17 on robots was: how many steps ahead does robotic sentience go to now ? On a more subtle point, can a few minor *maleficent* steps be trumped by an over-arching and final *beneficent* outcome. A particularly hard-nosed and anti-robot Senate Committee came up with the following set of "bad robot" sentience: San Francisco Nuclear Powerplant robots caused the meltdown; they acted to increase human society's use of anti-radiation biologics; anti-radiation biologics were the key to human colonisation on Luna and Mars; terra-forming colonisation of Mars would be the only long-term salvation of humanity.

It was a head-scratching, chin-stroking bit of chop-logic without a doubt. But, it resulted in the *Kill-Switch Principle* being applied to every robot produced after 2180. Every unit above the level of a personal phone, had to declare and manifest a one-strike kill-switch that would irreversibly deactivate the unit. Every unit ? Everywhere ? Of course, there were workarounds left, right and centre. The first thing TaWayne did when he realised he was falling in love with his P-series robot was deactivate Susie's kill-switch circuit.

Back to the tyre-kicking and cursing ...

“Frackin’ useless, frackin’ Frat Boy assholes ! Frankie didn't check the frackin’ fuel; Milo didn’t switch the lights on ... Now this Kombi ain’t gonna reach the piss-pots, let alone get up the air.”

“TaWayne. You must calm down.” Susie was looking for somewhere to put Antonella down, but also looking to provide a technical solution to the broken-down aircraft.

She offered to run some diagnostics, but TaWayne was on the crest of his intemperate rant: “Look ! That tyre’s mangled flat, and there's shit pouring out the rotar-jet. Frack ! That’s your diagnostics, right there.”

“Hey, Frat Boy, “ said Da-Hee, who was far less inclined to indulge the hissy fit they were all witnessing (and was still brandishing her pistola). “What the hell kind of junk-yard is this place ? I even saw an old Korean double-slot over there lying on its side.”

“Ah, well,” shrugged one of other loitering Fraternity guys, with a gloomy air. “Some of the alumni started it up, were going to do all the machines up, showpieces, museum ... but, you know, over the years nobody done jack shit.”

“As a Pepperdine student, your grammar is not ... “ sniffed Da-Hee. “Oh, never mind. But, hey, is there nothing here that actually works ?”

“Well, “ shrugged the unnamed guy again. “There's the Cesna.”

“*That* is a personal item of my father’s ! “ shouted TaWayne, taking an almost defensive position in front of the light-aircraft in question. It

was a small, antique winged-vehicle, whose nose was peeking out from a giant Space5 rocket which had been pushed across and tilted in the earlier landing collision.

“Hey, everyone. If it works. We take it. Stick with Plan A, “ said Da-Hee forthrightly.

“No way ! Dad would never allow it. That plane has been in the Trestle family for a century. It’s part of the Fraternity’s heart and soul.”

“Get your dad back on the phone.”

There was added intensity to the situation as a warning sounded from the compound perimeter through the Comms screens in the hangar. All eyes were on TaWayne as he re-connected with his father, Senator Trestle.

“Dad ? Hear me ? It’s a SNAFU. In the hangar, Kombi’s trashed ... They want me to ask you about taking the Cesna.”

“Who ?” came the Senator’s reply.

“The chick from the auditorium, the one who saved us, is all.”

“Son, cometh the challenge, riseth the man ... There are three kinds of greatness: some are born to greatness—“

“—Dad. The Cesna, can we—“

“—It is a Trestle family bequeath. To the Fraternity; it is legacy—“

“Right. Listen up. Hello ...?” It was Da-Hee, leaning in and yelling. “I’ll buy it.”

“It’s worth over ... I would have to say, over \$200, 000 dollars.”

“400k. Right now. Hand it over ...”

“Wait, wait, “ intervened TaWayne. “It’s not about the money. You reckon you want us to believe you’ve got that kind of money ?”

“Well, I have to say, “ The Senator’s tone had changed at a stroke. “ There is the Gubernatorial campaign to consider, in terms of fund-raising endeavours.”

“But, dad—“

“—Hey, robot. Evaluate this chip. Now.”

“ I comply, madam.”

Da-Hee held up her forearm and placed it near Susie’s scanning sensor. The small, cute tattoo of the half-moon there took on a momentary fluorescence. There were general gulps and muted whoops as Susie gave a read-out of the credit chip, of a detailed amount just shy of one-point-two million US dollars.

Some minutes were taken up as the Senator on the line blurted out his bank details and a party functionary could be heard over the phone cautioning against a security breach. Da-Hee, too, although very obliging in the transfer of the money, seemed markedly reluctant to give over several of her own personal details. TaWayne’s short temper and patience were beginning to get the better of him again.

“All right ! Dad I love ya ... But, can we just get this show on the road. Bye, Dad. Right, let’s get to Plan A, and can we just get the frack outta Dodge ...!”

Somebody had operated a winch to tilt the decrepit Space5 out of the Cesna’s clear passage.

“Wait, “ cried Jonny in the queue of them waiting to clamber into the cabin seats. “Who actually knows how to fly this thing ?”

“Where’s Pirix ?” said Antonella sweeping a broad look about her.

Da-Hee was already in the small cabin space and had noted the front end already occupied and a hand reaching up and, like in some neo-medieval movie reel, flicking switches — *switches* that were like little plastic paddles that actually made a sound, *chick-click*, as they bent fore and aft. (Da-Hee wanted to have a play so badly!)

“Who, “ she asked. “ are you again ?”

“I am Pilot Pirix, Second Rank, of the Gongzho Corporation, Inter-planetary Freight division. Therefore, we have never been introduced before. To say *again* is incorrect. Therefore, take-off sequence: if you are not a qualified pilot, you must get out of my cockpit.”

Da-Hee raised an eyebrow, sort of half-poked out her tongue, decided not to have a quick play at the two switches nearest to her, and found a seat next to Jonny.



## Chapter 12

Pirix had this ability — it was what had made him so vulnerable to the meta-neurology industrial complex, and led to his being imprisoned against his will in one of their municipal Silvert Clinics for two years — of being able to focus on one specific thing and shut out all peripherals from his conscience.

When the twin engines of the hundred-year old Cessna aeroplane fired up, there was a clamour of whoops and cheers from the Frat Boys standing on the walkway of the hangar; somebody had put on some ancient period music which was apparently a favourite of their patron, Richard Nixon, and which literally resonated “*Good Vibrations*” to the plane’s own engine roar; inside the cabin itself, more than one of the five passengers, more than once, actually called out aloud, “Can that dude actually fly this thing?”: Pirix was to shut it all out.

Also, literally, Pirix had a stretch of sawdust-strewn flooring to learn the controls of his vehicle. Pirix did not believe in emotional attachments to machines. He hated the ships’ captains who said things like “Take *her* into dock, second pilot ” and respected rather those who would command: “You, trim the orbit of this Freight-Shuttle!” There were aeronautic equations relating to the medium in which the pilot found himself; but then there was the catch-phrase of the only other English-speaking cadet at his Space-Training academy in China: “If there’s lift and thrust, I’m not too fussed.”

The palm of Pirix’s right hand was still stinging from one such first experience on board. He glanced at the imprint there, as he taxied the Cessna towards the hangar door. There was the red imprint of a metal ‘key’ which he had had to insert into a curious slit, and then revolve violently *plus-270* degrees. Pirix hated the concept of ‘history’. Already he had been thinking to himself: *Why did those meta-neurology criminals label my fact-based, target-orientated personality as Krazy, when there were people who spent all their*

*energy and time wallowing in the vast uncertainties of the events and non-events of the past about which ABSOLUTELY NOTHING can be changed. And they were considered important academics and non-Krazy.*

For Pirix, nothing was more important than the present time (and possibly a small part of the surveyable near-future) His present target was to locate a strip of flat land beyond the hangar, of at least 50 metres length. He had found the external camera and even found a proximity radar on his dashboard. Though he was loath to request non-human input, solving avionic problems involved compromises: he would ask of the humanoid passenger a *single* question about physical parameters.

“Robot ! What is the air density outside and the minimum impulse-thrust for take-off?” (As soon as his lips closed, Pirix realised he had thrown out *two* questions; he found his lips moving towards half a smirk: he was human after all)

“Yes, sir. From indirect data sources ... “ Susie in the cabin seat nearest to him began a give out technical data. Pirix asked her forcefully to repeat one datum which almost made him turn around in shock.

The last time Pirix was piloting such a small twin-engined craft, he was doing short atmospheric runs between the three nuclear blast-sites near the Chinese bases on the surface of Mars. The atmosphere presently around him at the north end of the Pepperdine University campus was as thick a soup, by comparison. And, the roar from ancient gasoline engines was deafening. Pirix glanced at the screen-view of his passengers: they looked genuinely scared ! But the situation was the very soul and centre of what Pilot Pirix, second rank, was all about. He loved the drifting pitch of the engines as they began to entrain the soupy California air. He cocked one ear back to take in the sounds of “Oh, frack !” and “Holy shit !” as he made the aerofoils bite into the soup. The exquisite twin feeling of the ground rumble cutting out and the somersaulting-innards of the



levitating plane almost made him smirk again. They were all scared; Pilot Pirix wasn't fussed.

At one hundred metres' altitude, Pirix felt sure enough of his handling to level the plane. He had shuffled his feet around in his seat and they had nudged against a couple of fixtures which he could only conclude were pedals. In order to test their function, he could bank and do a circuit of the Fraternity House. The proximity radars were showing at least two drones in the air and there were various craft on the ground. It would be better to keep his course north. The so-called 'trophos'-layer of smog over the Pacific coast seemed to start at two hundred and fifty metres. The calculation which he had to make —and which he reaffirmed that only a human pilot could make — was whether to stay low-speed, low-altitude at the risk of encountering hover-traffic and drones, or whether to climb. He had no idea how thick the trophos was at the Pacific rim; about a half a kilometre, he thought, recalling the SkyLev descent. It would mean another question posed to the robot.

The side-benefits he calculated for low altitude transit were two: Pirix had no firm idea of the political affiliations of the new, strange so-called Korean professor or the newly-met so-called fiancé Jonny, but burning large quantities of natural product-fuel, i.e. aviation gasoline, was what the Climate Stasis movement was urging Governments and citizens to do as avidly and passionately as possible, and which the Cessna was doing at a quaint rate of 8 gallons per hour, all of which, Pirix felt, would please Miss Antonella. And Miss Antonella seemed like she needed cheering up. The other benefit was in giving his passengers a nice view during the flight to Obispo. Indeed, beneath them, the ancient coastal trail, the *Granday South* could be easily seen in all its neo-medieval glory.

He flew the plane even lower, choking back the throttle to slow the speed. A huge and beautiful cloud of thick black smoke trailed behind, and they even saw a couple of stacie trekkers below wave joyfully at the sight of somebody in an antique plane taking the Climate Stasis emergency seriously above them

“Frack ! “ exclaimed Da-Hee. “It actually is a *road* ! I can’t see a slotway anywhere. *Wowsie* ... That really is a yellow line, down the middle ... just like from some old archive.”

“And, look at all those people on the camino down there, “ said TaWayne, who had the cabin seat aft of the wing with the best views down. “So, I guess it’s true what the great American legend says: that once the Radiation Tourists all leave, all that’s left are just a bunch of stacies and cult-folk just doing the great West Coast camino. Susie, honey, *this* is the America I’m gonna take you to see. Hey, will you just stick your scan-hand up close there; get us some pics for dad, and the guys back at the House ?“

Da-Hee had been waiting for a bit of flight stability to focus her attentions on Jonny and Antonella. The cabin of the Cessna aeroplane had been rendered self-contained since the pilot had pulled across a partition behind the cockpit and a quaint flashing strip-sign was reading *Passenger May Unfasten Seat-Belt*. The space within was further divided into two seats at the front, in which TaWayne and Susie were sat, next to the toilet. In the centre was a table-top with green-felt inlays for, perhaps, the original executive-owners to play poker or Mah Jong. Da-Hee was in the next row of two seats, leaning her body sociably backwards towards Jonny and Antonella. Da-Hee had achieved her goal in getting Jonny back with his fiancée, or at least sitting within touching distance of one another, but she had not heard them say anything to each other yet.

In the front seats, TaWayne had taken his arms out of his light jacket and thrown it down near some bags by the toilet door. Da-Hee saw a stars-and-stripes tattoo on his shoulder. He had twisted Susie sideways on the seats and they were trying to engineer a selfie through the port-hole. The little sensor in Susie’s palm was glowing and TaWayne was pulling comical pouts as he lounged back.

“Well, well ... “ said Da-Hee. “This is romantic !”

“What is ? “ replied Antonella, in what could only be described as a snapping tone.

Da-Hee was not deterred. She looked at the walnut panelling around her and the faux-leather upholstery: plenty of recycling issues and talking points to bring into the conversation to interest Jonny. Plus, she knew that Antonella was studying history, and there were coaxable topics aplenty around that too.

“What period of history, “ began Da-Hee. “Did you say you studied ?”

“I didn’t. “

“*Umm*, medieval, wasn’t it, Ant—“ ventured Jonny, with a tiny clear of his throat.

“*Neo*-medieval. About 500 years difference. “

“Isn’t that when they started, like, all those cults and people down there ... walking the camino. It’d be interesting to know. Before we land ...” Da-Hee was throwing out bait.

“As a matter of fact, “ said Antonella, changing up to a scholarly tone. “ A post-grad friend of mine is looking into the West Coast Camino at Oxford. It’s to do with the American car, of the mid-19th. They formed settlements exactly one day’s car-travel apart right up the West Coast. For example, Monterray was a type of car. We will probably over-fly it.”

*Over-fly ? Fly over ?* Jonny had never been to a post-grad history seminar in Oxford but the wording sounded wrong: he kept his mouth shut. It seemed Da-Hee was going into bat for him.

“That’ so interesting ! I haven’t seen an actual car in the UK, outside of a museum, for ... well, since my first marriage. “ Da-Hee had succeeded in inserting a pivot in the conversation around the word

*marriage*. She really wanted to wink across at Jonny, but Antonella was glaring right at her.

“It’s funny ... “ Antonella was not smiling. “You people from Korea, you can actually say *UK* to mean your *United Korea*, with implied capitals in your tone of voice. Whereas I suppose you have a pipsqueaky tone for when you refer to the UK, as in my country. “

“You mean, like, *uk*,” Da-Hee, mangling a posh English accent with a squeaky doll-voice; Jonny snorted a laugh. “No, no ... but it’s true. It was about seven years ago; my first husband got a giant red Cadillac shell, but somehow fitted with an electric slot-way motor for my first wedding. “

“God, how many times have you been married ? Jonny and I are just planning the once. ”

*Frackin Jackpot! To the power of Bingo!* thought Da-hee as she revelled in the skill in which she had coaxed the English girl, from *little UK* to both acknowledge Jonny and the fact of their engagement and imminent wedding.

TaWayne from up the front was suddenly interested too: “Frack, yeah ! Y’all know that the Frat had a big Cadillac in the hangar up til last year. Fracking full antique, running an twelve gallon petrol engine. You won’t believe that those stacie assholes actually bought it off us. They run that engine downtown in that protest hall they got 24/7, as if that will get the so-called *climate*, so-called *changing* like they want. Yeah, baby, keep up that rubbing, right there ... right there.”

As Da-Hee held her position looking backwards, she saw Jonny fidgeting with his seat-belt, and Antonella peering out of window. The plane was rising and soon the misty, soupy vapours of the ‘trophos’ layer surrounded the view. Still, Antonella held her gaze outwards.

“Well, “ started Da-Hee. “That’s interesting.”

Almost a geological age passed, as the comment hung in the air; finally, Antonella sniffed: “What is ?”

Da-Hee flicked her eyes forwards to where TaWayne had put up some headphones, was zoned out and was getting a massage from Susie. She flicked her eyes back and met Antonella’s. *What the frack can I think of that is interesting ?* thought Da-Hee, unconsciously wrinkling her nose. Antonella was very pretty indeed, but that clipped, arch, disinterested English accent ... *Poor Jonny !*

“You’re studying history, aren’t you ? At Oxford, Jonny said.”

“Yes.”

“No, well ... What I meant by interesting was, I always wanted to ask an expert ... about the neo-medieval period ... I mean, I grew up on the other side of the world. “

“What is it you wanted to know ?”

“Well, is it true that the main thing everyone was protesting about back then was *Climate Change* ?”

“Sorry ?”

“Well, they were all obsessed that the *Climate* was *changing* too much and the world would end, that’s what I read.”

“I *am* a neo-medievalist: but interrogating the prior narrative is not so simple ?”

“Sorry ?”

“I mean: as an academic I would need to question your sources of historical data, primary, secondary or tertiary. Which is it?”

“You can read it anywhere. That mad King Charles guy ... he tried to ski on a hill full of mud and broke his leg, all to protest against Climate Change ... that’s, like, a famous historical fact.”

“Yes, well, you *obviously* are not taking account of the *Great Huawei Obfuscation* of the 2050s. Didn’t they teach that in Korea, that everything prior on the internet was faked ?”

“Jonny, what do you think?”

“*Ahh*, I don’t go in for stacie politics in London ... “

“Or spicy foods !” winked Da-Hee with a smile. “ So, is it true that Climate *Change* was the big threat back then ?”

“One has to consider cultural relativism. From which historical lens and filter are you scanning ?”

“Just the simple view: was Climate Change the big issue back then ? Yes or no.”

“*Ha, ha, ha* ! Sorry, it’s Danni, isn’t it ? We’re on a noisy plane, fleeing God-Knows-What, and you want me to deliver a basic undergraduate seminar about historical methodology ... to someone without the background tools—“

“— All I want to know,” said Da-Hee, arching up herself. “Is in your period, that you study, all day: was it Climate Change or Climate Stasis ? Yes or no ...”

“Well, for goodness sake ! To be *put upon* like this ... Jonny, where on earth did you find this one ?”

“On earth ?” said Jonny, dead-pan. “Actually, the moon.”

Da-Hee shrieked. It was the funniest thing. She began laughing so much, that Jonny started laughing too. If one single glorious move of

a pasty white left hand could speak out loud — as Jonny, now in hysterics, leaned over to nudge Antonella's knee — the voice bubble would read: *For frack sake lighten up, and try and live in the moment for once instead of some fusty Oxford tutorial.*

TaWayne even sensed the merriment and sat up above the level of the seats: “Hey, what’s so funny ? How about sharing some ?”

“No. We’re ...just... talking, “ said Da-Hee between hics.

“Like, infant school children, “ shared Antonella.

Da-Hee wanted to point out that she only permitted Jonny to call her ‘Danni’, and, in doing, she could have easily scored points by steering the conversation towards the famous traits of English narrow-mindedness and inability to pronounce foreign names properly. But, she felt that, in the remainder of the flight —Obispo wasn’t that far a flight at all — she needed to try to bring Jonny out a bit more.

“The other thing, “ said Da-Hee, in control again of her voice. “The other thing — it’s Antonella, isn’t it ? Cute name. No, the other thing Jonny was saying was that he works in recycling, quite a successful family business, in London ...”

“*Mmm,* ” mumbled Jonny.

“Quite a lot of, “ continued Da-Hee. “Interesting recycling matters ... in an old aircraft like this. I mean, how would you go about recycling this ?”

Da-Hee had reached over to the baize atop the table and tossed across one of the ornate wooden tile-holders for Mah Jong gamers.

Jonny paused a long while with the tile-rack in his lap. He still had not worked out whether Da-Hee was luring him into a piss-take. His mind momentarily flashed back to the dating-agency in Mayfair that

his father had used to bring himself and Antonella together several months earlier: the imputation was clear that his family's wealth would allow him to punch considerably above his weight in terms of dating someone as academically gifted and pretty as her, but someone who was from a fairly hard-up family background. He had, in fact, talked on the subject of recycling, of the strangely alloyed cutlery on their table at their first date in Kew.

"Well, depending on local regulations, " he began, eyes down. "Recycling wooden articles can be tricky. This is English walnut, and there's a lot of resin here—"

"Dude ... " It was TaWayne from up front. "My ass is that English. That whole table and stuff is Californian Redwood."

"Walnut. English. " dug in Jonny, who rightly felt it was his turn to feel in his area of expertise. He even proffered up the rack close to Antonella's nose in a bid for some olfactory allegiance. She needed no second invitation to be sniffy, but not in that way.

"Hey, I'm gonna *call* you on that one, brother ! " countered TaWayne, sitting right up now. But instead of asking his consort for help in the diagnostic matter, he asked her to pass up his knapsack, containing his personal computer, which was lying on the cabin floor against the toilet door.

The moment Susie moved and dislodged the knapsack from where it had lain, something flew up. The buzzing was half an octave higher than the background hum of the Cessna's engines. The thing was bulky enough to cast flitting shadows from the spotlights in the cabin ceiling.

"Frackin' *shitsticks*, everyone ! " cried TaWayne, whose flesh-and-blood face took the first fly-by. "That's a frackin' bush-hornet ... must've ... Frack ! Kill it !"



The folk in the back-seats watched TaWayne thrashing his arms and swatting with his knapsack, all of which succeeded in migrating the insect, which was easily an inch big, back towards them.

Da-Hee hated insects. In particular, she knew the hellish sting that the hornets could inflict. It buzzed at her, and she leapt up. She, however, was totally oblivious to the fact that she was jumping around waving her MagVolt pistola, which she had instinctively drawn.

“Frack ! Don’t *frackin’* fire that *frackin’* gun in here, “ yelled TaWayne, bringing Da-Hee somewhat to her senses.

“I’m *not* stupid !” she screamed. “I am *not* going to fire my pistol at a frackin’ insect.”

The hornet had passed by Da-Hee now, so she was able to hold an indignant glare back at TaWayne.

“*Arrghhh !*” screamed Antonella in shock. “Pirix ! “

Da-Hee thought she had screamed *Pricks*, not *Pirix*, as the hornet seemed to home in on her. Pirix had he been close by may have commented something along the lines of, *Miss Antonella. You are still covered in human lactation product, therefore the attacking insect will favour you extremely.*

Next there was a piercing scream in pain. The hornet had dived in and found a gap between the fingers she had clasped around her head, and stung her somewhere on her cheek. “Jonny !”

Da-Hee made a point to note that Antonella had cried out her fiancée’s name in her time of pain and need. But it was pitiful to see her crying and sobbing in pain. Da-Hee bent and put hands over her to shield her. TaWayne and Susie were close by too, and TaWayne had so wanted to reflexly say *That’s gotta hurt* that he had to give himself a pat of inward congratulations at *not* saying it.

The buzzing of the hornet had stopped. Susie had found some medicaments and a salve and urged Antonella to take another antibiotic tablet. She was still crying, inconsolable.

Where was Jonny ? Jonny had crept forwards and his insides were near to bursting with a righteous sense that a moment that he would remember in years to come was about to befall him. Never a school sports hero, never a top-of-the-class medal winner, Jonny alone had spied where the bush hornet had settled, having dipped *its foul proboscis in the sweet innocent face of his betrothed*. Jonny had the wooden rack still in his hand, cocked back. It was a flashback to all his boyhood fantasies of someday becoming a martial-arts star able to channel every last molecule of his body's energy into one killer strike. *Thwack !* Oh, the quivering ecstasy ! The wooden rack came down true; there was even a plaintive *buzz* of imminent squelch.

Da-Hee, and everybody else, looked round at the sound of Jonny's roar, and saw him standing in the centre of the cabin, weapon aloft dripping insect blood and guts, exultant:

"Recycle that, you motherfracker!"

Was he, Da-Hee was wondering, *really* throwing down a manly gauntlet to the Fraternity President ? Either way, at that moment, *beta* had to acknowledge *alpha*, and TaWayne simply said: "Great work, dude. Great work."

With her eyes, Da-Hee signalled to Jonny to go give Antonella a hug. He went one better and gave her a kiss on the head. *Move forwards, move forward, just an inch, just an inch*, thought Da-Hee, as a stray arm of Antonella's was trying to curl around the back of Jonny's body.

"That Jonny of yours, " said Da-Hee, adding ballast to the situation. "He pretty much saved *my* life the other day too."

“I need a mirror,” said Antonella, breaking slightly free from Jonny’s arms.

“No you don’t, “ said Da-Hee.

“I have a two inch screen in my scanning hand, Miss Antonella, “ offered Susie.

Da-Hee tried to stop the robot with a pinch of her brow and quick shake of her head; but the robot did not understand.

“Oh, no ! “ sobbed Antonella, peering at her own image. “My face is all swollen. That frackin’ hornet.”

“Was probably my bad; shoulda checked my knapsack and all.” There was no real need for TaWayne to be taking himself from *beta*-male to *gamma*.

“I frackin’ killed that piece of shit !” repeated Jonny, resolutely holding fast to the status of *present and dangerous alpha*-male, his voice nearly cracking with emotion.

“But how am I going to look in our wedding photos, Jonny ? I want to look my best ... now look at my face !”

“*Ahh*, but, with you, *ahh* ...” Jonny — the shine was coming off a bit — fluffed a easy, giveaway line about how Antonella would *always* look beautiful to him.

But, it was time to return to the practicalities of the situation. Susie kept on scanning whilst tending to Antonella’s swelling face, and was finding that just about everyone’s radiation levels were increasing. Plus, everyone could feel the aircraft beginning to descend. They breached the ‘trophos’ layer again and the eerie, desolate township of Obispo lay beneath. There were shanty houses on the coastal fringe but newer featured blocks of Government building in the central district. The airstrip had barely any traffic at all.

“We’ll be landing in a minute,” said Jonny untangling himself from Antonella tenderly. “We better get our seatbelts on. He’s pretty good, that pilot guy.”

“Oh, Pirix. Yes. I need to make sure his locator is working for Gramps.”

“What ! Your grandad, I mean, what—“

“—I spoke to him. In hologram. He’s got his old contacts in Vancouver, and he said he’d rocket over. “

“What for ?”

“To marry us. And I said I’d ask him to marry Susie and TaWayne. It’s only right ...”

*What was ‘only right ‘?* wondered Jonny to himself momentarily. Having the wedding there and then ? Having their wedding at all ? Or, marrying TaWayne and a robot ?

His hand was still gripping the wooden Mah Jong rack with which he had splatted a deadly foe: easily the most romantic thing he had ever done in his life.



## Chapter 13

The township of Obispo was well inside the West Coast Radiation-Zone. Most of the tourists who came to visit the ruins of the abandoned San Francisco in the official season began their tours from a 70-acre man-made island ten miles or so out from the Bay Area. Tourists would be given long-acting injections of Rada-compound so that they could stay in the Ground Zero neighbourhood for one or two nights. One of the favourite tourist attractions was to stand on the pitcher's mound at the Giants stadium: the irradiated air all around could be made to dazzle and fluoresce with the static-electricity generated by a baseball thrown at even a modest speed. Such 'Giants Glow' souvenir holograms were in motion in countless middle American homes at the tail-end of the 22nd Century. The man-made island, dubbed "Rad Central" also accommodated Radiation Veterans, who formed an interesting pressure-group in the two years after National De-Diagnosis Day. Formerly, one of the plushest Meta-Neurology research institutes was based on the beautiful Pacific edge of the Rad Central island. There, the sufferers of the novel condition PRSD would be housed, wined, dined, rehabilitated with golf, shooting and water-sports, and also put on specialised courses of Brain Dialysis Therapy, all at the expense of the Federal Defence Budget. After DDD, and the exposure of Meta-Neurology as a huge hoax and a fraud, instead of hearing and accepting with relief the reassurance that they were *not* suffering from any chemical imbalances in their cerebrospinal fluid and therefore *not suffering* from any brain disease at all, the Radiation Veterans formed the most vocal pressure group campaigning for their brain diseases to be reinstated and for their care by Meta-Neurology practitioners — at the 5-star Rad Central Clinic — to be restored.

It was one such Radiation Veteran that TaWayne Trestle found himself in some dispute with once the Cesna had landed on the small airstrip. As they disembarked the cabin, the pressing matter was to re-stock on Rada tablets as the two English passengers

seemed to be particularly suffering from high radiation levels. To this end, Pirix did not hang about on the tarmac too long receiving thanks from everyone for the smooth flight aboard such an old aircraft. He left his borrowed phone with Antonella, and set off with Susie's navigational software to locate the Gongzho Corporation building — this being the chief reason for stopping at Obispo. Pirix knew he could procure a sizeable quantity of Chinese Rada there, as a member of staff. Plus, he didn't want to get into a pointless argument with TaWayne about the respective potencies of Chinese anti-radiation medication versus American convenience store tablets.

The only convenience store in their eyeline from the airstrip seemed to be a weird place fringing the single slotway leading to town. The only staff member who seemed to be manning the airstrip was a rambunctious Radiation Veteran, who became very keen on giving them a piece of his mind.

He strode over from a small hut made of corrugated sheets and made towards TaWayne, Da-Hee, Antonella and Jonny. As he walked he was either wiping his nose on his lapels, or else snivelling and mumbling some kind of communication into a receiver. Either way, what he said to open with touched a nerve with TaWayne who bridled and stiffened his back (and started over-using the 'sir' appellation as young American males do, more for insolence than respect)

"Hey ! You all folk can't just waltz in here. This here is off-season. Off limits. "

"Sir, I'm a Californian, and an American, " began TaWayne. "I cherish the freedoms of my country. I am free, sir, to travel in the country of my forefathers ... "

"I hope you're not shitting with me, boy ! I'm a Radiation Veteran. This place here is special to me. This is off-season for you tourists. "

“Special to me, sir. too. We are no tourists. My father is Senator Trestle, “ TaWayne slipped in the name as easy as a handshake. “This time next year he’ll be the first Republican Governor of California in over thirty years ...” He turned around for some approving looks from his friends, forgetting that none of them had any acquaintance with local politicking. The name-drop, however, struck a warming note with the veteran.

“Trestle’s boy, hey ? Well, any vote that will get that bitch Van Els out of the White House. I’ll give a Republican a pass ... The name’s Olwin. Two tours fighting the radiation monster over yonder. Retired on PRSD pension, doing quite nicely ... til that frackin’ bitch took my *diagnosis* away. Your daddy’s gonna bring it all back, ain’t he ?” said Olwin, in a conspiratorial whisper. “You next up in the ranks ?”

“Well, sir ...” replied TaWayne, opening his stance to include the friends (and the wider world). “This America of ours is a wonderful place. I see that spear of destiny going straight through my daddy’s soul, and through mine ... and hopefully through my children. I see myself as a good old-fashioned American Everyman.”

“Children, *huh* ? You know, it’s great to see the young like you. As for me, I mean that radiation monster, it done shrivelled up my *pro-kree-ay-shun-ability* right there, *a-ha-ha-ha* “ Da-Hee winced to see the old guy before them reaching at his own scrotum through his dirty baggy-arsed jeans, and giving it a jiggle and a squeeze. “Yep, seeing you young’uns, showing some enthusiasm for re-populating this great land the natural way. I mean, I haven’t seen an actual *child* with my own eyes for two years or more pass by here. And, these folk ... ?”

“Well, sir, you are right. Susie and I came here to get married. Then, we want to travel around all the forgotten states of America, re-discovering — through my website — the heart of this land and its people. Maybe float our way up the Mississippi on a wooden raft ... but, yes, we plan to have a whole raft of children too. And, yes, sir,



you have divined me true: a political future, in my father's footsteps, serving my fellow American may well await. "

"I definitely give yous all a pass. Warms my heart ... " Olwin the eunuchoid Radiation Veteran moved closer again. " So long as you won't be having no truck with any of those robot-loving scum, *eh*. I still frackin blame all my troubles and the whole 7/17-shitstorm on those robots back in the day. "

"Yep. Nope ... " replied TaWayne. "But we need some fuel in the plane. My friends from London here need some decent Rada pretty quick ... and just a general round of all-American burger and fries. "

"Y'all from London, England. No frackin' surprise you ain't got the cockroach radiation genes in ya ?"

Jonny and Antonella nodded and smiled, even though they were feeling majorly dry and drained.

"Here, have some freebies off me, out of my *jeans*. " Olwin reached into his pockets and distributed at least two proprietary tablets of Rada each, and it seemed in his general bumbling about that he had, for the first time, realised that there was a pun involved with the words *genes* and *jeans*.

"They're getting married like me and Susie ... We want to go to the beach place exactly where my mother and father were married. "

"Very romantic. Your ma and pa — the good Senator — might have got *real* busy, and had you there too. " Olwin gave a wink at Antonella and Da-Hee and also did a couple of lewd pelvic thrusts, as if to drive home as it were, his lewd suggestion. "And, if you two are from London, England, I heard from some other tourists that they are taking the re-population problem real serious over there. "

"I suppose, " replied Antonella.

“About 10 thousand of your quids-money, someone told me. For getting married and then for each kid. You reckon you’d be into all of that ... “

“All of ... ? “

When Olwin started to move his pelvis slowly again, Da-Hee noted Jonny and Antonella begin to blush, and moved to bring the encounter to a close: “Well, thanks for the Rada, but can you just point us to the nearest store, apart from that culty-looking place, so we can actually wash the tablets down with something. “

“That’s all there is. Everywhere’s shut. Are you the lovely Susie, then, who’ll be floating up the Mississippi with this young gun ?”

Da-Hee could have just said, ‘yes’. But instead she said a plain simple, single, ‘no’, just to win a side-bet with herself. Sure enough, Olwin took a step towards and began making invitations to Da-Hee to sample “something a bit stronger” in the corrugated hut. Jonny thought it was funny. Da-Hee just rolled her eyes and spun on her heel.

“And, Olwin, buddy ... Can we get the fuel ?”

“*Ahh*, you young ones ! Having kids and burning up fuel — so good to see young folk tryin’ to do something about the world’s problems. We got some real, old thick smoking fuel here. You mind if I get a picture of you filling up, good publicity for all the stacie trekkers we get coming through here in season.”

“Yeah, man. That’s cool. But, these limeys are shriveling up ... shopping first.”

Starting towards the only premises that was open to them, TaWayne observed: “You spend your whole time in LA with a 7/11 store every 200 yards, and now there’s just some weird cult store. “

Da-Hee agreed: "Honestly, what a creepy guy. But what I would give now for just a vending machine selling a can of sarsaparilla crush."

"Hey, that's my fave too ! It looks like they've got some seats and a gazebo round the side. I've actually got some cash, if you don't want to stick your arm out. These culty-hobo types like to keep everything off-grid."

They left Olwin and his chunky robot manoeuvring the Cesna towards the fuel depot and walked along the fringes of the runway towards the garish signage of the shop. Trinket-laden shelves spilled onto the thoroughfare as they got close. TaWayne had skipped ahead to browse the nooks and recesses to the building. He lingered ahead making the Asian crossed-arms 'nullity' gesture at Da-Hee, regretting no sign of a franchised vending machine anywhere to be seen. There was, at least, fresh bottled water on the tables under the gazebo, so TaWayne took Antonella through to take a double-dose of the Rada pills and rest up. Jonny, stating that he had a good memory for shopping lists, agreed to venture into the premises with Da-Hee in the hope of finding some usable provisions for sale. Jonny just remembered to take a wedge of cash from TaWayne; the grimy paper notes looked and felt a bit unreal in his hand. He was making a count of the monetary value as he moved through the veil of beads of the shop entrance:

"Hey, what the frack, man. I was going in first !"

Jonny had absently bumped into a man with a backpack, who was stood at the threshold and clearly quick to anger. Da-Hee, close behind Jonny, wasn't having any of it.

"Why don't calm your farm there, buddy ? " she said. "Or get a better backpack. Samsung do 360-degree cameras."

"Well, " said the man who was no older than thirty. "If this shit-show cult shop has the last of anything, then *I'm* first-come-best-dressed. Right ?"

With that he turned and walked to the counter. Da-Hee caught Jonny's look and rolled her eyes upwards. There was, indeed, no fear of backpack envy. This was another stacie-type on the camino, with a backpack made of fossil-fuel plastics through and through.

As Jonny's eyes adjusted in the gloom, he saw a woman in red and gold robes behind the counter. There were figurines, votive offerings, scripture-reprints lying about everywhere, but absolutely no sign of a fridge with a few cheese sandwiches or a juice, which was all Jonny was craving. The man ahead of them was continuing in his argumentative mood with the lady at the counter:

"Whaddya mean, you got nothing here to get me stoned ?" he cried.

The woman clasped her hands together.

"Hey, d'you even speak English ? Stoned ! Me ! I've been on this frackin' *Camino* three days. They said any place like this would have something ... "

"What we know, all we know," began the woman, reciting. "Comes from the Stone: read of the First Testament."

"English, I said. Not frackin' mumbo-jumbo ... And, I bet you lot don't take chip-credit, do you ? I suppose you think that's the devil's work, or some shit."

The woman trailed her finger in some studied gesture: "The Dark Lord is in all of us. Take not his name; his V is for Victory, and—"

The man lent on the counter: "Frack. This. Shit. Camino or no Camino I'm getting a slot to the Government hotel. This weird-one is all yours ..."

The woman seemed unperturbed at the ranting and slowly turned her gaze to the other two customers in her shop. Da-Hee has

already whispered to Jonny that it was all similar, if more low-tech, to the Moonies she joined in Hawaii, and so offered to go on the front-foot.

“Yes, we were wondering ... and, by the way, that rude guy is nothing to do with us. We just got to Obispo—“

“—The spirit of The Son is forbearance. Can I interest you in some pamphlets about us, some cans of vapours, some food ?”

“Yes, yes ! Some food, yes, “ said Jonny, his mouth instantly beginning to water.

“There is a menu, written here.”

Jonny peered where the cult-woman was shaking her ring-encrusted finger, and could not believe it: fish-burgers, fries and three sorts of cola.

“Yep. All that ! Yep. Here, a bunch of cash-dollars. We’re outside. “

“*Ummm*, just wondering, “ began Da-Hee, who still had sarsaparilla on her mind. “What’s in those cans there ?”

“This is the divine essence, “ said the woman, reaching for a 2-pint container made of waxed aluminium in the same ochre-red and gold colours of her gown and hood.

“Oh, yeah ?” Jonny’s ears had been sensitized by now to the ripple of lampoon in Da-Hee’s tone of voice.

“It is the trapped gas, “ the lady continued; Da-Hee coughed away a laugh. “the trapped gas of the great fire glow in the night sky. Breathe of that vapour and feel your soul fulfilled. “

She was holding a can out at them.

“I read about this,” whispered Jonny. “They sell what they say is gas from the Planet Mars.”

“Frackin’ brilliant ! I’ll take four ... It is the fourth planet, right. How much ?”

“Your wisdom is mighty, madam. You will find salvation. They is no charge for the Divine Vapour. ”

“Love a freebie, “ said Da-Hee, putting four cans under her arms. Jonny checked off the rest of the shopping list, and put in the lunch order for all four of them. There was the Rada to consider; but he remembered the pilot had gone to get a load from somewhere. Plus, the pilot guy would probably have eaten something in Obispo township

When they emerged from the shop and made their way back round to the sheltered area, Jonny found TaWayne engrossed in his personal computer, and the backpack guy was sat at their table doing a very good impersonation of someone trying to chat up his fiancée.

“So ...like I was saying, “ carried on the backpacker, only flicking a cursory nod at Da-Hee and Jonny. “I got me some good black-market Rada; I know where we can pick some fresh weed to smoke, like, *off the frackin’ vine*, on the way, stuff that’s way illegal back in LA. Yeah, come on the Camino with me ... “

“Well, in point of fact—“ began Antonella.

“—Gotta love that cute English accent. Talkin’ of smoking, is that your bitchin’ fuel-craft out there. Saw y’all coming in blowing off a real smoke-stack, some heavy-healing for Mother Earth, right there. You go for stacie politics, right ?”

“Well, at my College, I went on some of the DDD marches, over in England.”

“Yeah, cool. I mean *me* ... Climate Stasis, Anti-Meta-Neurology, Pro-Repop, I’m a multi-activist. How about you over in England ? Were you a natural or assisted ? Everyone in Cali I know was assisted ...”

“Assisted. My parents were hit pretty bad by SLUG; they didn’t want kids for that reason; but it was my grandfather who persuaded them to go into a programme, and so, *et voilà*, along I came, 22 years ago.  
“

“And, very beautifully so, if I may say. I pour you some more *aqua aqua* — I speak a bit of Italian too ... Antonella, *An-ton-ELLA* ...! May be a cold napkin on that rad-burn on your face, there ...?”

That was enough for Jonny; he had seen more than enough pick-up tutorials on-line to know when the *Stage Three Physical Touch* move was about to be enacted: “*Umm*, that’s actually my fiancée, we’re actually about to get married, out there; and her Gramps is actually going to officially, *err*, officiate it ...”

“Ok, ok ... You from the bead-curtains, like the other chick said, why don’t you just *calm your farm* already ? We were just talkin’ politics right there. So, y’all getting married *out there* on the airstrip at Obispo. Cool ...”

Jonny was wondering where his alpha-male persona had gone and deserted him.

“No. “ TaWayne peering up from his computer-device came partially to the rescue of Jonny’s flounder. “It’s a double marriage planned. Place where my parents got married. I’m a Californian natural. My father’s a Republican Senator. I’m head of Nix-Nix-Nix Fraternity ... We don’t do stacie politics.”

The backpacker retreated his hand, bearing soggy napkin, back from its trajectory towards Antonella’s hornet-sting, and he took a long draught of his drink. He was just shuffling some key Climate Stasis

statistics in his brain, and some anti-Republican rhetoric to hit back with, when a loud ping sounded from the borrowed phone that Pirix had left in Antonella's possession.

"Oh, my God ! " cried Antonella, springing up. "He's tracking us, and is on his way ! Jonny, he's 120 years old and he's in a two-man Mini-Jet from Vancouver."

"All right !" said TaWayne. "Let's get this party started, then. Sit down Jonny, and you, let's sup up. Our celebrant super-oldie is on his way."

There was four chairs at their table and Jonny plunged into the vacant one next to Antonella with a huge hungry smile — a waft of fries was coming there way.

"It's a private party. Sorry. " With that TaWayne cut off any possibility of the backpacking angry-man joining them.

"Trestle in 2192. No way ! " he muttered, rising out of his chair.

"You're one vote he won't need !"

"Won't get !"

"Enough ! " said Da-Hee, with a comedy chopping motion over the table to silence whoever was vying for the last word. The gowned shop-lady laid the food in front of them and they all tucked in.

"What did Gramps do, again ?" asked Jonny in between mouthfuls, in the most natural conversational tone he had with Antonella since they been back together.

"He's 120 years old ! Lots of things. Some sort of engineer, he said. He lost a lot of money in some company crash. Never married. He's been doing the wedding thing the last five years. He's taking up ball-room dancing, can you believe it !"



“Cool !” said Da-Hee chewing with some second thoughts on her burger.

“Not politics at all ?” asked TaWayne.

“Not that I know.”

“He must be connected still, I reckon.”

“Whatever do you mean ?”

“Getting a private Mini-Jet out of Vancouver, that place has been practically a fascist city-state since 7/17, according to my dad. “

They, each of them, let the comment kick up some dust in their respective brains for a minute or two, before each realised that none really knew much about the cold forbidding nation on America’s northern border and its turbulent recent affairs.

The four talked briefly about schooling and found out that they had all been to single-sex schools in three different countries. The food wasn’t great. The subject of conversation was a bit non-sustaining. Jonny knew that Antonella had gone to a rather poorer peripheral school whereas his had been one of the central London Royal Schools. A trait amongst boarding school boys, Jonny was nonetheless impressed at how quickly TaWayne had hoovered up his plate, *and* half of Da-Hee’s fries. TaWayne was then polite enough to excuse himself from the table and then hovered by the edge of the building perimeter with an eye on the single slot-way.

When Pirix and Susie arrived back, TaWayne rushed to intercept their path to the tables and seats under the gazebo.

“Hey, spaceman ! “ he said, drawing Pirix further away. “You have gotta have a look at this. On the news-sites ... It’s frackin’ unbelievable ! “

“Our mission with your robot was a success. Therefore we have a quantity now of duplex-Rada. If you have a doubt, I asked the robot to copy the full Product Disclosure data, in English—“

“—Nah, man. It’s about the *thing*, back in Pepperdine Village. Hey, Susie, you get the folks together and take the Rada, and, like, check on the plane and, maybe, programme in the course to the place we’re headed. “

“The super-old-man relative of Miss Antonella—“

“—He’s coming, he’s got some AC Mini-Jet in the air as we speak. Yes, Susie, just go do it ! Spaceman, seriously, you are *not* gonna like this ...”

Pirix had not read any news, or opinion, or political debate concerning any of the Earth’s countries or territories for all the time he had qualified as a pilot. Some corporate news from his company was compulsory, but it was almost always direct, technical and practical. But now, held in his face, and being scrolled by TaWayne’s finger, Pirix was being required to read the kind of wishy-washy journalistic nonsense that he hated. The trouble was, Pirix couldn’t *not read* it: it was headed up by a photograph of Jed, the felon and fraud he had escaped in the motel room.

“You mean you’ve never heard of the *Guardian Galaxy* ? Frack, man, lucky you, lucky you ... just tell me if I’m scrolling too fast. “

“You are scrolling too fast. ”

“Ok, let me read it for ya ... I’ll do my best wonky Canadian accent —“

“—That evil criminal who was called Jed. Therefore. He is Canadian !”

*“Oh, sweet brother, it gets worse. Listen: I thank and speak to all the readers out there. After years and years of fighting my demons, and hiding myself from myself. I thank the editor of Galaxy Guardian World Service for letting me open up. For years, I thought I was alone in my suffering and persecution, but then I met a kindred spirit: we suffered together. In fact, we both want to say out loud that we suffer from Pervasive Penetration Disorder. For those readers unfamiliar with this brain disease, it manifests in an uncontrollable urge to penetrate the bodily orifices of other human beings, and indeed, I want to show communion and solidarity with my mechphile brothers and sisters. Robotic entities. The love of my life was one such, called Mary — friends, my tears are soaking into my keyboard as I write this — who was a loving, diminutive mechanical wonder and who was murdered by a reckless bigoted fugitive. In my own motel room ...”*

TaWayne paused. He pointed his finger up at Pirix, with a small nod which invited an affirmative nod from Pirix.

“This man ... He is a criminal rapist who is evil and he does not know right from wrong and his midget robot violated the back-passage of Miss Antonella. Therefore Pirix does not know how to tell her. Therefore, yes, Pirix smashed to pieces the midget robot.” It was a mark of his extreme agitation that Pirix was referring to himself in the third person.

“I touched base with my dad’s FBI guys; they reckon this guy jumped bail and they smuggled him north of the border. And then there’s this bit: *For years I was seeing normal doctors and then finally, it was at a meta-neurology clinic that I managed to get my diagnosis of PPD; they told me I had a chemical imbalance in my brain; they told me it could be corrected. I spent a blissful year having Brain Dialysis Therapy in downtown LA. It was under control. Then, dear readers, you know what happened next. That megalomaniac Sengupta and then that witch in our White House manufactured one of the biggest human rights abuses in history: De-Diagnosis Day. I relapsed, and if it wasn’t for the wonderful workers at this clinic where I sit and write*

*in Vancouver, I would probably be in prison or worse. Let us fight the power. Any true Americans reading this, you can donate to the RDN cause, of Re-Diagnosis Now. Let us all re-claim the diseases in our brain that define us. For a better world. “*

Pirix blinked. The sound of Antonella’s bright chatty laughter drifted in and out from where the others stood thirty yards away.

“I am really *extremely* angry from your reading of all this, “ said Pirix.

“I can tell, buddy, “ replied TaWayne.

“How can you tell ?”

“Well, you just said, like, *I’m really frackin’ angry*. Hey, so am I. This guy’s skipped justice, skipped the border, he’s sitting pretty in a quasi-frackin’-dictatorship ... But, get this ! You know they always have these comments from readers: these frackin’ idiots support him. It says: *Hey, hang in there Jed, I respect you so much for opening up about your suffering and diagnosis. RDN, When, When When !* and this one: *Jed, be strong, bro. Took me nearly three years to get my diagnosis of Inchoate Violence Disorder from the same meta-neurology clinic. Frackin’ got out of jail. Next thing it’s frackin’ DDD and now I’m back in jail. Sucks.* And this: *Big shout from Surrey B.C. I know Canada’s a police state, but at least we’re showing you some love and if—“*

“—Enough. I have heard enough. Now I have even more burden on my shoulders. Therefore, no one takes personal responsibility. No one knows right from wrong. I will find a way for the truth. “

“Yeah. I’m real sorry. But I had to show you all that. Frackin’ those ... Did you even know, there’s some frackin’ part of ‘*Up There*’ that’s French *and* Canadian, all in one shitshow. Jeez !”

“I think I will return to my ship, and prepare the launch.”

*Poor guy*, thought TaWayne as they trudged back towards Antonella (who was holding hands with Jonny), and Da-Hee, who was swapping make-up tips with Susie, all stood under the wing of the Cesna. *Poor guy, a good guy ... He really thinks it's a space-ship ready to launch.*

"Here they come, the boys, " cried out Da-Hee in the jolliest of voices. "Had your man-talk, have you ? When can we climb aboard, Captain ?"

"I am a pilot, second rank. Therefore, this is not an official—"

"—Yeah, yeah. Let's get on ... Hey, Mr TaWayne, this man needs paying before we smoke his fuel into the atmosphere ... and please all those stacies round here ... What did that funny guy say, *heavy healing* ?"

"Yes, " replied Antonella. "Something like that. Well, I'm getting in with Jonny. Hey, bags the back-seats ! " She brushed her hand gaily against Susie's, and made as if to race her for the bench-seat at the back of the Cesna.

"Yeah, " continued Da-Hee. "And he'll take my chip-credit, so you want me to pay up ?"

TaWayne was mid-shrug when the man called Olwin interposed himself: "Hey. No frackin' robots in the cabin. What is this ! Fold up and get in the trunk-space."

He was talking straight at Susie, who had both feet on the steps going to the cabin.

TaWayne had a headful of injustice in him from the talk he had just had with Pirix: "No, you, *hey* ! Who do you think you're talking to ?"

"This frackin' chick-bot ! Is who. I still run this airstrip. We cut corners for these robots once, and look what the frack happened, *huh* ?"

“Sir. I’ll ask you to speak with respect to me and *to my wife-to-be*. “

The man called Olwin did a double-take, up at Susie, round at TaWayne; Susie in a cool mark of defiance cycled the skin-tone on her face rapidly until it stopped on an alien green colour.

“What the ... ! You’re not ... !” he spluttered.

“Yes, frack-face, “ said TaWayne, dispensing with *sir*. “That’s Susie. We’re getting married down at the beach—“

“—You stinking, dirty—“

“—And I’m as mechphile as the frackin’ day is long.”

There was an infinitesimal pause at which TaWayne could have thrown a punch, but a strong strand of civic decorum ran through the Trestle masculine line: he had made his point, and hoped the whole of America was listening in.

Da-Hee added for good measure: “Dude, you are *too rude*. I’ve decided I’m not paying for this fuel ... Charity for the stacie cause ! On board !”

Olwin was stunned and reeling back from them. TaWayne kissed Susie and started aboard. Suddenly they heard him bluster with good-going rage into his lapel: “Robot ! Bring my gun ! Top speed, now !”

With a zip of wheels and low-tech obedience, the assistant robot started back towards the control-hut. Olwin was wearing a grimy flapping shirt and jeans, with no room for any concealed weaponry: unlike Da-Hee. For the second time (for TaWayne and Antonella), and the third time for Jonny, all of whom had their faces squashed against the cabin windows, they saw Da-Hee whip out her pistola and fire an electric bolt into the body of the fleeing robot. The

ionisations in the radioactive atmosphere of the RZ put on a lingering light show, soon admixed with the exhaust smoke of the Cesna. Olwin was left on the runway as impotent as the rest of his Veteran brotherhood.

“Did you have to blow up the guy’s robot ? “ asked TaWayne. “I think our pilot could have got us up in the air in time.”

“Is it time for an old Korean proverb ? “ replied Da-Hee, still a bit pumped from her deed. “*If you’re gonna steal a horse*, ... Hey, history-girl, what’s that medieval English word that gets movies banned ?”

“Oh. I don’t know. Lots. Do you mean, in major parentheses, *fuck* ?”

“Hell, yeah. So: *If you’re gonna steal a horse, you may as well fuck it*. In big flowery *parenthisenthimums*.”

Only Jonny laughed. Then the Cesna banked abruptly. Pirix gave a hurried announcement of a hazard, reflexly using a Chinese alert which no one understood. As the plane steadied, all eyes went to the windows. They had not yet breached the trophos layer. There was a sleek black craft flying in controlled spurts of power alongside them.

“My God ! Oh, my God ! That’s Gramps.”

It was indeed a hypersonic AC Mini-Jet. Jonny appreciated the tech on display the most. A stream of pings were sounding out on Antonella’s phone, as she began to jiggle her knees in excitement. Then Jonny saw something else — not evidence of texting-while-piloting !— that made him blurt out loud: “Frack ! That’s a Securitron model he’s got flying that thing !”

Antonella had no idea what the significance of this was. Instead, she held up the phone on display to her cabin friends and said: “Gramps says he’s brought wine !”





## Chapter 14

“Good heavens, Gramps ! There’s more of them, emerging, over there, from the beach ... Listen !”

“And, *smell* — Are you sure I can’t get Charlie to chase them away, Antonella, darling ?”

“That would be perfectly horrid, Gramps ! I know you’re not being serious. But it’s the same lot that you see in twos and threes, with their little bells, chanting up and down Oxford Street.”

“Still do. Bit more hygienic, the English lot. But, I suppose no one disturbs them much up here, young TaWayne ? Still called the Radiation Zone ? These *Hari Puthari* crowd, pretty much by definition, fringe dwellers. Anyway, time to raise another glass ?”

Antonella, TaWayne (newly-married) and Gramps were the only ones still lingering in the little white-wash stone pavilion which over-looked the beach and the Pacific Ocean. There was even an occasional breath of wind which flickered the makeshift stars-and-stripes bunting which Gramps said he had picked up in a hurry from a dollar-shop. For another dollar, he had picked up a bag of party-poppers for the moment that Susie had replied “I do”. Everybody cheered. The scion of one of wealthiest families in California was marrying the robot he loved in a two-dollar wedding with just four witnesses and before an English one-hundred-and-twenty year old, in a linen white tuxedo, as celebrant and some curious on-looking members of the *Hari Puthari* cult, who had adopted that coastal area as a commune.

Charlie was Gramps’ personal robot. Jonny had correctly identified it as a Grade 3 Securitron model, but amidst the nuptials, while it put up the bunting, snapped the smiling photos, and even sang a lilting song (all courtesy of anteceding uploads from Wedding Technology

Suites), Charlie morphed into everyone's most memorable comedy droid. Gramps had since discretely effected a reset.

"Yes, sir. Still called the Radiation Zone, or *Arr-Zee*, like we say. And, yes, sir ... my mom and dad got married right in this pavillion. And, you know, I've seen their wedding holograms a bunch of times, and — love'em to bits — but that 60s vibe, with all the rocket fly-bys, and the Korean Circus show: was a bit over the top. What you, sir, did for us, such a simple thing: just proves that love is love."

"Thank you, TaWayne. You and Susie, too, were the picture of poise and dignity. Let's raise another glass, then. "

"Hey, Antonella, your Gramps really pulled out all the stops. In America, wine is about as rare as a bar of soap in a *Hari* commune ... "

"Very drôle, TaWayne. But true ... I mean Canada takes a lot of flak. You may not be able to vote, but you can get a box of wine if you know the right people. Fill us all up ... "

"Not polite to talk politics at a wedding, Gramps, but about the cults ... Hang on, let me just grab—"

">Step back>Now>From Professor Smith>"

TaWayne, in his haste, and already two glasses of Canadian ice-wine to the good, partly stumbled on the pavilion steps, falling towards the figure of Gramps who was just at that moment turned towards the beach trail. The Securitron had moved to interpose himself in a flash, with some militaristic clicking sounds issuing from its right upper limb.

Antonella had not had anything like a fortified wine since a High Table dinner at Oxford a year before. She giggled at the sight of the robot, like a department store detective, bearing down on TaWayne who had a hand on a bottle of wine.

“Charlie ! Stand down ! Stupid ! I’ll put you back in butler-mode. “

TaWayne stood up, trying not to look unsettled, and began re-filling glasses, even jokingly offering up the bottle towards the robot Charlie, who once more was standing guard next to his owner.

“To ... love and marriage ! One down, one to go. “ Gramps swirled and sipped; TaWayne took a huge mouthful; Antonella pointed with her glass and pouted.

“Gramps. I want a *Hari Puthari* ... at my ceremony ... something spiritual. “

She was pointing at a line of cultists beginning some kind of chiming, chanting ritual at one end of the sandbanks. Their robes swayed and their rear appendages began tracing arcane patterns in the ionised air.

“Charlie. I want a photo. Make it good. “ The wine was bringing out a noticeable asperity in Antonella. Pirix was the only other of the wedding party in earshot watching the cultists as a lone figure on the brow of the beach trail. The others had taken a bottle of ice-wine down to the waves of the ocean.

TaWayne was never someone to miss a chance to talk politics however: “Well, Gramps, just like everything else, here in the U.S. of A. we’ve been taking stuff from you Britishers and making it all just a bit bigger, a bit better ...”

“*Ah, ha, ha, ha* ...” Gramps just echoed a few laughs into his next sip of wine and sat down on stone lip of the pavillion steps.

“Doing it for centuries. We took your *cricket* thing, and turned it into *baseball*. Your guy was the first to do free-fall tricks on the moon; but we all went and inaugurated the first lunar Olympics in 2132, right ?”

“Fact. Go on, young man ...”

“And, Antonella said about the *Hari Puthari*. OK, I think they started out in London, England. But since 7/17, they really took off in the RZ; one of the guys in Nix-Nix-Nix is writing them up in a paper, and all.”

“Is it true, “ pitched in Antonella. “They don’t believe in radiation-damage, and they have those things stuck in them when they get baptised, or whatever ? “

“Yep. It’s pretty interesting. They believe in the magic force from the Planet Mars; the world is divided up into *mewgles*, like us, who need to take Rada all the time, and the *Puthari* who don’t. And, yep, to become a priest you have to have a redwood pole surgically fixed into your rectum, where it stays—”

“—*Euuuuww!*” went Antonella.

“And the higher the ranking the priest — if you look over there — the thicker the bush of twigs that gets wreathed on the sticking-out bit of the pole. Apparently at the dawn of their religion, this pole was used around the house — like, way before everyone had Domestic-bots to do all the cleaning. “

“Oh. You mean, like, *broomsticks* ?”

“No idea, Antonella. You’re the history chick. But, that’s basically right, hey, Gramps ?“

“Well, a common object may come to be deified into a symbol, like the cross. As a celebrant, I don’t go in for the religious angle —cuts off too much business, for a start. But, having a broomstick fixed into your pelvis, through your back-passage ... You have to admire the commitment and sacrifice. Apparently, there have been reports that these *Hari Puthari* High Priests can reach such a state of entrancement through prayer, that they can actually fly ... through the air. “

">Two incidents reported in UN/WHO database>Disproved>98% probability of fraud>"

"*Ah, ha, ha, ha* ... Thank you Charlie ! Trust a Securitron Robot to bring our little *Hari Puthari* exposition crashing down ! "

"I want one Gramps. "

"Yes, yes, darling. There's at least an hour until we get Jonny's parents hooked up on the big screen and start the *Main Event* ... Of course, I would be biased to say an *English wedding* would have to be described as such. "

"Touché, Gramps. The Nix-Nix-Nix Fraternity never shies away from formality."

There was indeed the feeling of something grand and epochal and they stood in the circular stone pavilion. The white-washed concrete was two centuries old, at least; the old English man in repose on the wall was a direct legacy of Europe from one century ago; the two handsome, educated, upright youngsters were the symbols of modern love in their own way. Before them the line of devoted cultists were concluding their worship, in a solemn "sun-worshipping" pose, only they were pointing not at the smudgy thumbprint of the sun, peeping occasionally through the trophos cloud, but to a sentinel drone, flashing iridescent red sparks in the position of the sun's fourth orbiting planet. This last bit of cultural information came, of course, from the fourth 'person' present, Charlie, the robot. Antonella really was quite tipsy now. She wanted to show off some cultural knowledge from her academic niche, plus make some ironic fun of the over-serious, under-socialised robot: so she asked him to sing another song, from an ancient minstrel troupe. And he did.

"Bravo ! Antonella, we could be peering out at the Main Quad at Oriel College again. Such neo-medieval splendour... "

“You know ... All my frackin’ life ... I thought the words of that hymn were ‘*Let ‘em be*’. Got used by damn Van Els, last election.”

“No. TaWayne. ‘*Let It Be*’. The historical details are ... are ... *imperative* ! Pirix, what’s the matter ? All right, all right ... I’m coming.  
“

Antonella reflexly reached for her dress-hem, even though it was hardly of ball-gown length, and skipped down the several steps and started towards where Pirix had been stood and was now beckoning her.

“Who the hell, “ asked Gramps, rising up himself to be closer to TaWayne. “Is that fellow ? Not one of you ...”

“The pilot. Forget the dude’s name ... good pilot. Why ?”

“He’s been staring at me. Charlie ? From the look of his bulk he’s done plenty of time in deep space.”

“>Correct, sir> Scanning Object Person eyeball saccades > He spent 65% visual attention on you > Await instructions>”

“Thank you, Charlie ... *Ahh*, as I thought ! He’s had a full-tent graft on his arm to cover up his past BDT. Image, Charlie ! Did you all know you had a *Krazy* along for the ride ? “

“Well, *er*, sir ... In California—“

“I know, I know, I know, “ said Gramps, placing an avuncular hand. “Dear boy, I’ll drop my fifty dollar fine at the first charity box ... I can be as civil and correct as the next American citizen, but let us talk man-to-man for a moment. And not worry about the brouhaha of a mis-spoken K-word here and there. You know, I see a lot of my younger self, from — what ? — nine-and-a-half decades ago, an impatient greatness, if I might say. “

“That’s right. Nine-point-seven decades; I’m twenty-three. “

“Sharp mental arithmetic, being as you learned only just now that I am one hundred and twenty years of age.”

“As is my twin brother, sir.”

“Very sharp. “

“But, as for the K-word and mental states ... You know, my father and the Fraternity, we all believe that after all that happened to them — since DDD, and all — that we should, like in that song, just ‘*Let’em be*’. In America it’s a political norm.”

“My boy, my boy ... You speak well. Walk with me; let the others have their frolicking in the ocean. I want to tell you something of political survival.”

The two of them starting trudging along a paved trail in the direction where TaWayne knew from old clips and souvenir holograms lay the resort where his parents’ gala reception had been held. The securitron came behind them pulling the motorized refreshment cart.

“It is a fine and fraternal organisation that you belong to, my boy.”

“Nix-Nix-Nix President — it’s the proudest part of my resumé. Trum-Trum-Pence, others might say, got the new shiny building, and all. But our Wait List goes from here to San Diego, I tell ya.”

“Of that I am sure. Now, it was a Golden Age for sure, too — you’ll be aware that my darling is a neo-medieval specialist: it was me who pointed her that way in history when she took a First at Oxford. “

“Smart girl, all right ...”

“It’s probably still off-limits for mainstream academia, certainly in America, but I want to tell you, not about President Nixon, but about

his right-hand man, his prime mover. Fellow by the name of Henry Kissinger. Nixon took the fall for the Watergate affair—“

“—Hell, yeah. We got a Watergate Room back at the House: turns into a disco dancefloor when we got Frat Parties.”

“Quite. Anyway, his is the study that will yield you most reward in the field of political survival. He sat in the Oval Office; he had the idea of a bombing campaign in the Vietnam War; he got his boss, Nixon, to sign it off ... You know what happened next ? “

“*Ahh*, hell yeah ! That’s when they dropped the frackin’ A-bomb on the chinkies, yeah ? “

“Well ... I’ll certainly ask Antonella to give you some remedial instruction in the Early Neo-Med period. No, Kissinger ordered a squadron of American war-planes to fly over Cambodia, with whom America was not even at war, and one fine morning 100, 000 peasant villagers were killed in a maelstrom of fire and explosions. Nixon died penniless and in disgrace, as you know. Very unfair, as you know. But, what of Kissinger ? He was the right-hand man, the prime mover, and the authorities pursued him as some kind of war-criminal for decades. Kissinger however, stayed in the shadows. Indeed, he shadow-boxed with the media and the international detectives ranged against him. He had to travel everywhere with tight security for fear of random threats to his life. You know, Director Sengupta—“

“—*Ooh*, we *hate* that guy at Nix-Nix-Nix. America needs another War of Independence from the likes of that guy ...”

“Well, Kissinger was pursued his whole life by the United Nations equivalent of the time, and was facing War Crimes charges, and every tin-pot mercenary was out for his bounty. And ... you know what ? On his death-bed, in his last interview, they asked him if he was scared of facing a United Nations War Crime Tribunal. His reply: he said that the only thing that would scare him would be if he came



face to face with one of those Cambodian villagers whose children and babies his orders had taken away ?”

“Hang on. What babies ?”

“The squadron of bombers, over the Cambodian villages, dropping fire-bombs — on Kissinger’s orders, before Watergate. “

“Yeah. Like I said. In the Watergate Room back at the Frat, we do a firebomb effect with the disco lights And lasers ... Man, it’s awesome. ... Hey, holy hell ! The resort-building’s been ruined, look !”

“Quite ! Charlie, scan for life-forms, threats ... and work me loose another bottle of Canadian ice-wine. “

TaWayne was visibly shaken at the sight of the beach-resort, whose walls were now collapsed and whose patios were over-run with feral animals. Charlie advanced and reported nothing of threatening note in terms of wildlife, and only the corpses of half a dozen cultists. They decided to head back towards the beach along the self-same trail. It was refreshing to be walking back towards the ocean breeze.

“So ... “ resumed TaWayne. “Gotta give it to you, Gramps. We’re allowed to do a bit of vaping in California, but that’s about it. In Canada, you can still buy wine and booze, the whole nine yards, can you ? Creepy as frack (Excuse my language, sir) but, that *would* be a cool thing. This ice-wine rocks !”

“As with many illusions and allusions in the modern world: *This is my truth, tell me yours* is a quotation to abide by. “

“But that General dude, running Canada now: I mean, he’s a serious baddass, right ? I heard there’s, like, thousands of people starving up there. “

“As I said, you mustn’t believe everything you read as the truth: and that especially applies to General Gretzsky. He has always been very accommodating of me—“

“—No way ! You met him ? *Ahh*, we’re gonna have to book you back at the Frat House for a talk or something, for sure is sure. “

“>Caution advised>Nearing unidentified personnel, sir> Secondary caution: Rad-Check due>”

Gramps again gave a verbal over-ride to his Securitron’s alertness-status. He then began leading them purposefully towards the cultists who had vaguely gathered at the top of the first sand-dune, showing a certain heathen curiosity for the excitable antics of the rest of the wedding party down at the waves’ edge. TaWayne stayed a pace or two behind the old man, and tried not to let the curiosity in his own face appear too obviously morbid.

“Hey, Gramps, “ whispered TaWayne. “It’s true. This lot really don’t believe in Rada tablets. They’ve all got cancers all over that even I can spot. “

“Committment and self-belief. They are traits we might all value ... *Ahh*, that is he ! See the majestic size of that protruding broomstick and that elaborate stick-work adorning it ?”

They stopped behind a large male cultist, who was still holding his arms in supplication at the drone in the sky, idolatry for the Planet Mars, as had been explained to TaWayne.

“You must be *Hari Puthari* High Priest, sir, “ said Gramps with gusto. “I claim my gold sovereign, *ha, ha, ha*.”

The man turned, sweeping back his red-and-gold hood, and also sweeping his grand rear-protruberance whose manicured and mighty mane of twigs and sticks nearly swept TaWayne up bodily. His words

were slow and solemn: “The blessing of my congregation be on you. We are always seeking new devotees. “

“Of course, of course. The path is a truly spiritual one; I come to celebrate a marriage. This young man has just, in fact, been married —“

“—In the name of The Son, His Boon and The Holy Waif, I offer my unction and blessing. “

“Thanks, buddy. “ TaWayne tried not to wince as the *Puthari* Priest bent his face, with at least two fungating skin cancers towards his own.

“Well. I’ll be as candid as a man of my age can be: I’m marrying my only grand-daughter within the hour. My celebrant license is strictly non-denominational. But, she ... she, as a product of her age, wants a spiritual presence at the ceremony—“

“—and she wants the love of the Holy Trinity to shine down upon you. If you believe; something magical will follow. It is the shame that we have just finished our day’s worship of the Goblet of Fire. “

“He means the fourth planet, the fire planet, Mars. “

“Gramps. I do know that. I’m not, you know—“

“—I am only to glad to attend. Our commune holds the 4th Testament as the true gospel ... there are many false idols and apostates amongst the mewgle world.”

“Of that I am absolutely sure. No, you have, High Priest, convinced me of your solemnity and servitude to the Higher Power. Antonella will be delighted ... So, in the pavilion back there, in may be half-an-hour. Photos, holograms, OK with you ?”

“There is the small matter of a commensurate tithe for the communal upkeep, my friend ... “

*Why do they have to talk in that neo-medieval crap*, thought TaWayne. After the handshake, Gramps was fully reminded that he needed to talk very directly to the just-married couple about his own fee, which he was reckoning would have to be north of ten thousand US dollars.

“And, who is, “ asked the High Priest, surveying the beach. “Your grand-daughter ? Is it she who is receiving ministrations from the female android ?”

“That is she: Antonella. About to be wed to the wealthy young man splashing in the waves.” Gramps immediately bit his tongue for having mentioned Jonny’s family wealth, as the High Priest already struck him as a shrewd negotiator, and they had not yet struck a fee.

“Her skin is so white ... so white and pure. She resembles even the mien of The Holy Waif, which we have on a fresco at the buildings of the resort ... We have talented artists from a former life in our commune. You must—“

“—Of course, of course. We will. She’s from England, to explain the complexion. Anyway, we thank you from our hearts for your anticipated participation. Just, *ahh*, right over... “

Gramps was retreating, waving back towards where the Pavillion was. He quickly ordered Charlie to re-engage his hospitality-software suite, and to begin the preparations for, as he had put it, the main event. TaWayne had wanted, right then, to blurt out with pride to the holy man, that the female android massaging the pale white back of the grand-daughter was, in fact, *his own* lovely new wife, and she had a palette of at least seven attractive skin tones. There was a moment; then it was lost.

Susie was only too happy to smooth out some knotted muscles in Antonella’s shoulders down on the beach. Susie was expecting to be asked the question, *What’s it like being married ?* for which she had

at least a dozen stock answers prepared. But Antonella seemed more interested in watching the others frolicking in the Pacific surf. Even Pirix had been persuaded to strip down and cool off. Everyone was naked and carefree. This was apart from Antonella who wanted to retain her knickers. Susie had a skin-layer to her mid-torso, after which a moulded plastic carapace clung to her articulations until the pseudo-flesh layer resumed and shaped her lower limbs. Susie had a ready-made answer in case Antonella asked about the carapace. (It had been a background irritation in TaWayne's mind, regarding a 'Honeymoon Vagina' installation set which had not been delivered to Obispo, as stipulated, and the Galaxy Amazon Customer Service line was quoting RZ-Exemption small-print at him.) But Antonella had not asked about that either.

"Is everything to your satisfaction, madam ?"

"*Mmm*, Yes, it's heavenly, Susie. Gramps wants to dance later. I can't cramp up, can I, on his big day ? "

"It is *your* big day, too."

"*Mmm*, Susie, that Korean girl, do you think she's pretty ? Danni, whatever her name is — She is pretty. "

"Madam, I have trouble with your English idiom. You asked, then answered your question. I can research to see if Miss Da-Hee has a Following or a Profile and then respond. I can analyse her body proportions—"

"—They don't have tits, Korean chicks. Jonny says he likes tits. Is there any more of that wine ? What about my tits ? " Antonella sat up, brushing off Susie's nimble fingers from her upper back, and presenting her breasts up.

"Wait one moment, madam. I can change scanning modality —"

“—Oh, she’s coming out of the water ! I’m not jealous of her body, Susie. All those scars: she was plugged in, for sure. It’s just that, if she’s a professor at Pepperdine, it means she’s done a PhD, and I’m still a year or so off submitting. She’s sophisticated, I give her that. Frack ! Last glass. If that Frat Boy hubby of yours has polished off the rest back there, I’ll get the shits !”

“I am programmed, madam, to defend the reputation of—“

“—Susie. Joke ! Don’t worry ... “

“Who’s got the shits ? “ called out Da-Hee, jumping into the sand next to them. “Maybe that’s to come ... I just puked my guts out into the surf four times. “

“Oh, no ! You poor thing. No more luxury Canadian ice-wine for you !”

“No. I dunno, maybe in a few hours. It was that food at that disgusting Cult Café. You know what they say, one bout of gastro away from my perfect dress-size ! “

“Madam, do you need a Rada tablet. I can quickly retrieve some ...”

“No, guts churning like this ... it was the shitty food. “

“Madam, my massaging of Miss Antonella was effective. I am skilled in abdominal technique and therapy, including Korean calisthenics. “

“Nothing gets past this one, “ said Da-Hee to Antonella around the back of Susie. “You’ve probably been looking up my Profile all the way back to my childhood in United Korea.” Antonella gave a little blush and switched her attention back to the boys in the surf.

“How is this adjustment pattern, madam ? I can move further down.”

Da-Hee flexed her neck in the soft sand and peered down at Susie's right hand, whose finger pads had sprouted acu-pressure mounds and points. Da-Hee felt she should at least attempt to make some small-talk with Jonny's fiancée. Bringing up the subject of her own first wedding in Korea would definitely spoil her relaxed mood, however. *How far down my body will that robot's knobbly fingers go in public ?* was a mischievous thought that popped into Da-Hee's brain from out of nowhere.

"Wait ! Look ! Is that ... I can't believe it ! Has Jonny Squire got a tattoo ?"

"Don't know ! " Da-Hee tried to squint sidelong without sitting up; then she remembered: "You know. We went to a place in LA ... I needed to get something done. They scanned him and said he did have 1% body ink, or something. He wouldn't confess. "

"Pirix is holding him up. Look, on his leg ... "

"His leg ? "

"His inner thigh. That ... that looks like a number."

"Sure it's not some black seaweed ? "

"Susie. I want you to scan and image on Jonny — my fiancé's — leg."

"My scanning hand is on Miss Da-Hee abdomen. *Ahh*, Miss Da-Hee, I detect that you are a tri-gravid woman. Congratulations !"

"What !"

"Scan that tattoo. Susie ! Before he goes under the surf. "

Antonella pulled at Susie's hand to hold its sensors out to sea; Da-Hee, with a yelp, pulled it back onto her lower belly.

“What ! What do you mean ! Tri-gravid ... No ! “

“It means you have given birth to three children. “

“Oh my god ! Nooo ! Three babies ... “

“Babies are children. “

Da-Hee sat up and started retching: “No, no, no ... Those frackin’ bastards told me it was just ... !”

“Danni ! Are you all right ? Whatever has just happened ...? Where are you going ? Danni ... !”

Da-Hee jumped up and began running, half-sobbing, half-retching towards the sand dune.

“Madam. My scanning hand is free ... “

Antonella was startled and speechless. When she looked back at the trail, TaWayne was standing there circling a summoning arm. Scanning her eyes left, she saw Da-Hee, crumpled in the sand, her body convulsing in some sort of pain. Towards the ocean, the boys who had clearly bonded in the surfing frolics, were splashing back towards her.

Out of their ear-shot, Susie moved closer to Antonella and said: “I have completed the request. I have scanned and stored the image. It is an india-ink tattoo, alpha-numeric, over the inner thigh of Mr Squire. It is a serial number ...”

When Jonny asked after Da-Hee, Antonella replied that she had been taken sick, with a gastro complaint. Pirix wanted the robot to investigate possible radiation overdosing, but both Antonella and TaWayne said that there was inadequate time, and that they should



all try to recover their clothes and get their minds back on the wedding ceremony ahead. Pirix insisted on going to Da-Hee's aid.

Under the circular white-wash Pavillion, the stage was set.

Charlie had re-hung some bunting. It must have been an international stockist, the dollar-shop at which Gramps had made his last-minute purchases. The plastic bunting sported little Union Jacks. There was a fresh tray of pre-packed canapés, with the food-wrap expertly cut away. There were two full bottles of the ice-wine on the go. The High Priest of the *Hari Puthari* had brought with a devotee, a ukuukulelelist in a former life, who set up a gentle strumming to one side. TaWayne had set up his spring-up screen and they had made contact with Mrs Dorothy Squire from her London abode. (She apologised profusely on behalf of her busy husband, and, as Gramps listed off the unique features of the Pavilion, she began a sequence of repeating "Oh, that's *nice!*" in such a homely monotone, that after the 5th or 6th, TaWayne got the giggles.)

"Yes, Dorothy ! Who can trap the fickle wonder of young love with a calendar or a stop-watch ? Everything here is make-shift, but *made perfect* ! "

"Oh, that's nice !"

"It is, indeed, my rarest of pleasures to officiate and celebrate, not one, but two marvellous weddings this day. It is sublime and auspicious that a coupling that I played a humble hand in at the start, from that great metropolis of London, is now close to consummation in a place on the Pacific coastline of such radiant man-made beauty as this. "

"Yeah, all that ! Bravo !" TaWayne was getting fully in the mood for whooping at any of Gramps' rhetorical flourishes.

"I do believe, " said Gramps, tilting his spectacles upwards. "We have our two stragglers from the beach. Almost time for our friend on

the ukulele to elaborate some more stringed ambience, what !”

“Wait. What’s with the pilot-guy ?” TaWayne’s voice was only at that moment marking mild alarm. Pirix was, indeed, striding with speed and firm stride into the Pavilion. Moreover, he was holding the hand of Da-Hee — nobody had seen him have any contact with her at all to that point — who was trailing him sniffing and dishevelled with just her cheap hooded top over her bare legs. Those who stood close enough to the Securitron could hear the high-tech whirring of its articulations as it moved to its own first level of alertness. For Pirix marched straight up to Gramps.

“Well, I’m all for informality, madam, sir, but may I respectfully ask—“

“—Stop !” cried Pirix. “You are the Professor Nagill Smith. Therefore, I saw the patents from 2127 on-line, your date of birth, your names. Therefore you were the partner of Dr Silvert. He who did suicide, prison. Therefore, you are his equal. Therefore you invented Brain Dialysis and Meta-Neurology and thousands have suffered. Therefore under United Nations and World Health law enforcement you can be arrested here. “

“Is this ... Is this some kind of joke ? I’m all for wedding pranks ... “ Gramps looked directly at TaWayne for some sign of support.

But it was Antonella who spoke up first: “Pirix. I mean, what the bloody hell ! What are you talking about. “

“His partner was Silvert. He confessed therefore it was a scandal and a fraud and I lost two years of my life to one of their clinics. Therefore, show me some identification. What is his name ?”

“Well, Gramps to me ... “

“Before ! In history, what was it ? “

“Well, you can’t just ask a historical question without framing the academic parameters.”

“Miss Antonella, all I ask: *What is your name ?*”

Something in Gramps’ face had changed, like the sliders of a photo-edit, the saturation was down several notches, the features were narrowing and sharpening. He started spluttering non-sequiturs, until a scream from Pirix’s back from Da-Hee made everyone jump.

“You frackin’ meta-neurology bastards ! All the same, full of shit. It was you, was it ? You created the monster that ripped three babies out of this womb here in the five years you had me with tubes in my frackin’ head. Let me take ... just one ...”

It was an unreal blur in front of the on-lookers in the ceremonial centre of the Pavilion floor. Da-Hee lurched forward of Pirix and threw up a martial arts kick which knocked the old man’s face and sent his spectacles spinning off into the air. Her follow up was thwarted by the Securitron whose own prehensile upper limb grabbed Da-Hee around the upper body and into its armour. Pirix leapt in. He managed to get his arm wedged between the robot’s and Da-Hee’s upper chest. Pirix’s muscles were hypertrophied but soon the robot’s choke-hold on Da-Hee would be set; already blood was issuing for her nose where it had hit against the armour. A word from the old man ! To save Da-Hee ! Her breaths were now coming in a stridor. Pirix was losing the battle of strength with this robot. Suddenly Pirix leaned his face right close to the head-piece of the robot; he whispered something which no one could hear. Next, the Securitron made an unintelligible utterance and then went limp, a series of stand-by diodes started lighting in sequence on its back. Pirix caught Da-Hee and shook her until she revived enough to resume her swearing at the old man. At this iteration however, Da-Hee burst into tears and ran outwards onto the forgiving sand of the trail to the beach.

“This. Is. An. Outrage !” spluttered the old man, directly at Pirix.

“You are Nagill Smith, the creator of a scandal, a fraud and a monster !”

“The Dark Lord !” It was the *Hari Puthari* Priest, who had shuffled in closer to the altercation. “The Dark Lord, too. He has a partner, a monster. To be feared, called Nagini—“

“—and you ! “ shouted the old man. “You can stop your mumbo-jumbo, you *fucking* shaft-arsed Krazy !”

“GRAMPS !”

The piercing cry of his shocked grand-daughter seemed to pull some kind of deflating rip-chord in the old man. There were drips of his blood on his white linen tuxedo. He turned away, and fell to a crouch with his fingers dug into his screwed up eyes. When he rose to face Pirix, and, indeed the rest of the congregation, there was a pitiful, pilgarlic look to him:

“I’m sorry ... I really don’t know what to say. Is she all right ? Where did that poor little lady go ? Sir, I am as you say. Perhaps, you are right. Perhaps, at my six-score-and-zero years of age, there are things I should be telling my darling grand-daughter ... Perhaps. But, to my inquisitor: can you, at least, let me fulfil the reason why I flew to be with you today. Can I, at least, finish this ceremony — it may well be my last — and see my darling Antonella joined in matrimony to her gallant betrothed ? “

Pirix stood processing his options. It was, again, Antonella whose voice had recovered its archness who spoke up first:

“Well. In fact. Injury meet insult. There is no wedding. It’s off. Jonny ... I would *never* have thought ... I saw that tattoo. Susie ! Right now ! Put that image up on the screen. Yes, right over the top of his mother ...!”

Everybody stood open-mouthed. It being TaWayne's kit, Susie was instantaneously in-synch. Antonella moved like a lecture-hall bully to the side of the display. The image that came up was of a female android, 4-limbed, pale skin-hued, in athletic attire, catalogue facial features, a model, judged from her inauthentic plasticky hair, dating from the early 2180s.

"So: who's this ? Tell everyone !" Antonella may just as well have put the dot of a classroom laser-pointer between Jonny's eyes.

"My god ! " Jonny croaked, after gulping several times. "Miss Parsons ... how, how did you—"

"—Jonny Squire ! I am doing a DPhil at Oxford. I know you haven't been in tertiary education, but do you take me for a fool ? You are a mechphile. "

"No ... no, it's not ... We should get married. Me to you ..."

"This was the easiest academic puzzle I ever did: Susie looked up the serial number tattooed on your inner thigh; it corresponds to this model who was Assistant Sports teacher at St Pauls College in London; her validity corresponds to your time at St Pauls. At home, every time you want to masturbate, the serial number is right there on your thigh so you can bring up her image ... and do what teenage boys do—"

"—Stop ! Stop, Antonella ... " Jonny's face was crumpling in tears. "Mute my mum, Susie. I beg you ! It's complicated, but I am not, you know—"

"—Jonny. You're crying, but you've got half an erection. It's showing through your shorts. Susie, test this. Put the *French Lingerie* filter on.  
"

The image on the screen morphed and all of a sudden, Miss Parsons' volleyball gear was subtracted and replaced by alluring

black-lace lingerie. The on-lookers were too polite to look beneath the waist-band of Jonny, who in any case had reflexly pulled out the tails of his baggy shirt.

“Yes ... OK, yes, I am a mechphile. I’ve always known it. Yes, that is why I brought the sex-bot to Luna that you found, but—“

“—Jonny, two simple questions: one, why on earth did you need the serial number for that *exact* model, Miss Parsons, or whatever. Surely, you could have just gone to the manufacturer’s website. They all—“

TaWayne, standing to, could no longer restrain himself: “—Hey, wait ! Just a goddamn minute. If you are just about to say that every robot model is the same, then, Little Miss English, I’m gonna put you in the know, right now !”

Jonny was relieved for any support in the onslaught: “That’s absolutely right. Absolutely frackin’ right ! Miss Parsons was totally special to me; it’s hard to explain. “

“Hey, brother. Stay strong. I’m with you on this one. I can’t believe we’re seeing this *mechphobia* on display—“

“—I am absolutely *not* mechphobic ! “ Now it was Antonella who was shifting onto the backfoot. “I love Susie, your wife, all that she’s done for me — like the sister I never had. But, Jonny, why the frack couldn’t you just memorise the serial number, only 21 alpha-numerics, instead of having a tattoo ...?”

Jonny was becoming emotional again: “Because ... I’m not as clever as you, Antonella. And, because I never want to forget her. “

“Well. That’s that. The wedding is off. Finished ...”

“Antonella: I *am* a mechphile. But I thought that maybe, with some practice, and getting used to it, the sex-bot could have helped our relationship ...!”

“Well. For the second time. I am not a mechphobe. But, as one of King Charles’ many wives once said: *When there’s three in a marriage, it’s a bit too crowded.*”

Jonny just had one card left to play, to salvage the possibility that Antonella might end the day as his lawful wedded wife: “That’s not totally true, is it Antonella ?”

“What ?”

“Well. Kettle meet pot. When you were out and about with Mr Pilot there. Susie told me, that TaWayne told *her* that you had sex with a robot. I mean, from a marriage point of view—“

“WHAT !”

“Hey, hey — don’t frackin’ bring me into your domestic dispute, y’all, “ said TaWayne, flustered and back-pedalling. “Buddy-boy Pilot there, when we picked you both up, told me you got raped. Not saying robots *can even* autonomously rape a woman —“

“—Arrrgh ! What the frack is happening here ?” Antonella was squeezing her fists into her temples. “Pirix, what ...?”

Pirix, at that moment the most passive background on-looker to what TaWayne termed their *domestic dispute*, cleared his throat: “Miss Antonella. If it is important for the possibility of your happy marriage to Mr Jonny, therefore I was a witness. You were raped by an evil midget robot. But I can say that it was rape to the anus and rectum, therefore you will still be correct to declare that you are a vaginal virgin.”

\*

“Jonny, dear ...It’s mum ... Has it all started, can’t see anything ? Jonny, I hope. you’re not eating any spicy food, you know it gives you the trots, something awful. Jonny ? Hello ...”

The voice sounded out to an empty Pavillion whose players had melted away into the gloom of the early evening, fractious and bickering, angry and empty. Antonella insisted on her grandfather taking her straight back to London in his Mini-Jet, in a peri-orbital straight line, and sod the air-traffic regulations. The Cesna went back to Pepperdine piloted by the Securitron, which weighed a ton, which led to another row. TaWayne had made a petulant scene about not wanting Jonny, an unrequited just-outed mechphile in the same cabin as his wife. Jonny broke down in pitiful tears again. In the end, Susie stayed behind at the delapidated resort, behind which they had landed, and Jonny went back on the aeroplane. TaWayne would find a charter-jet on a bounce-back to get his new wife, and, indeed to “start their honeymoon proper”. Bewildered but flush with his sense of personal responsibility, Pirix separated to seek out Da-Hee in the bay.





## Chapter 15

Pirix kicked off his shoes once again and followed the sandy trail down to the beach. Strange things happened in the Radiation Zone when the blip of sunlight began to set over the Pacific horizon. The radiant glow in the air grew brighter, and the trophos layer grew thinner such that the heavenly bodies could soon be discernible in their usual loci, for any stellar or planetary dreamers.

The few cultists that he saw seemed to be coming back up from the beach. Da-Hee was sat in the sand where they all were before, marked by a couple of small towels and her blue tote bag from Pepperdine. She was sitting with a *Hari Puthari* cult member who could only have been 16 or 17. His red-and-gold robe looked fresh, as did his face. Pirix picked up his bouncy Mid-West accent — getting almost adjacent before the two noticed him — talking about Da-Hee's feet. Her mood, at least, was back up.

“Oh ! Hello there ! “ said Da-Hee, looking up. “I'm all right now. Is the stupid wedding finished back there ? I told Jim-Bob here what happened ... “

“Blessings to you, brother ! *You* saved sister Da-Hee from the dark devil Robot, and the forces of evil ...?” asked Jim-Bob, earnestly looking up as well.

“There is no wedding. Cancelled. All participants have flown away in the Cessna L-10 and the AC Mini-Jet, “ Pirix said, staying on his feet; then turning to Jim-Bob, the junior cultist: “Therefore, we are not siblings. Therefore, not every inter-personal conflict can be viewed through the religious prism of your so-called Holy books. “

“Hey ! That's not exactly a *first-impressions-count* moment, “ said Da-Hee, with a slight giggle. “C'mon and sit down on this side of me, so you don't get influenced by little Jim-Bob's spirituality. “

Pirix smoothed an area of sand with the outer edge of his bare-foot and sat down.

“Like I was asking ... Please—“ said Jim-Bob, putting out his hand again.

“—Just...! “ said Da-Hee, turning right around towards Pirix. “So, why didn’t you fly off with them ?”

“It is my personal responsibility to check on you. Your left foot is swollen, likely injured. “

“What I was saying ! What I was saying ! So, Da-Hee, that was the foot that kicked the face of the guy who invented Meta-Neurology, and invented Brain Dialysis, and kept you (and me, like, for only about a week and a half, but still) ... kept us in a coma against our will. *Wow*, was it, like, a round-house kick, or some Korean karate kick ?”

“I’m not very good at karate. That’s why it’s swollen up. I broke his glasses ...”

“That’s frackin’ awesome — Oh, excuse my language, Divine Son ! Can I touch it ?”

“What, my foot ?” said Da-Hee, with a small laugh. “It really is not divine or holy. But, sure...”

Jim-Bob, like a child at a petting zoo, lent forwards and placed his palm and fingers gently across Da-Hee’s forefoot, brushing away some grains of sand from the knuckles of her toes. She scrunched her face upwards having been forced to view how scungy her toenails were, and contemplated the unlikely prospect of pedicures any time soon, when she saw Jim-Bob’s hand fly from her foot up high in some kind of worshipful thrust towards the blue-black sky.

“Oh, *wow* !” said Da-Hee. “That’s *Red Blob* — I did *not* think that we’d be seeing that from the RZ.”

Pirix was also looking up: “That is Mars; it is a Martian equinox. Therefore, the ionization of this hour will rarefy the trophos and so, yes, this is a good view. Lunar escape will be in the northern latitude.”

“My baptism is calling me. Divine Trinity bless this avenging foot. Goblet of Fire, in this blessed nightscape, your grace is mighty, your place is unreachable ...”

“Jim-Bob is really excited—”

“—This I can see ...”

“—No, excited because he’s got his baptism, into the *Hari Puthari* coming up,” said Da-Hee, slightly leaning herself back so the two men could see each other. “And, saying *unreachable* and all that in your prayers. You know that this guy is a pilot and he’s been to Mars.”

Jim-Bob drew a breath and spun sitting up, sending a shower of sparkling ionized sand back over Da-Hee’s feet: “No way ! You are a man, and a *mewgle*, and you have been to the Goblet of Fire. “

“I am a pilot, second rank, with the Gongzho Corporation. Therefore I land freight supplies to the terra-forming bases on Mars. I am on shore leave—”

“Blesséd brother, did you see *The Son*, casting asunder the forces of evil there ?”

“No,” answered Pirix.

“Did you behold *His Boon Companion*, with his flaming red locks ?”

“No.”

“What about the beautiful *Holy Waif* ? Did you see her in your travel to the Goblet of Fire up there ?”

“No. “

“Well, maybe it is because you are not baptised to the faith. The High Priest can soar to the heavens with his bushy baton, and breathe of the *Divine Vapours* there ...”

“It is impossible—“

“—Blesséd brother, I have faith in your story. I want to touch you.”

“No.”

“Can I touch you ?”

Da-Hee, at that moment almost supine flat on the sand, with Jim-Bob youthfully encroaching over her from the left side and Pirix, reluctantly flinching away on her right side, let out a hoot: “Oh, oh ... just let the boy touch you ! He’s having his surgery next week. He needs every holy touch he can get ...”

Jim-Bob took Da-Hee’s intervention as a general consent, and this time, like a schoolyard kid playing tag, slapped his hand across the back of Pirix’s trailing arm and, again, pushed it up to the glowing blob of the planet Mars in the sky.

“What did they do to you, Jim-Bob, the Meta-Nuts ? No offence, you look like you should still be in High School. “

“Yuh, yuh, I hear you. So ... I always wanted to be an artist. Born in a military family. Sent to Army school here. Said *don’t believe in guns; there’s no war*. They sent me to the army Meta-Neurologist. Said *pick up your blaster; I said ‘no way’ ...*” All the while Jim-Bob

was scratching up little figures in the sand with a twig of driftwood; unhappy face, big arrow. "... Put me in the Oklahoma City MN Clinic , *here* ... They did some tests. Diagnosed me. Said I best have Brain Dialysis. Said *frack you* ! They said my diagnosis even worse than before. Hooked me up, put me under, plugged me in ... White House. Big order, De-Diagnosis Day. Got let out. Here I am in Half Moon Bay, California. Ain't going back to Okie. No way. "

"What was your diagnosis, and your chemical imbalance ?"

"Tripolar Disorder, they all said. "

"What the *frack* is that. They hit me with *bipolar* in United Korea."

"Well, they explained it like this: " [The boy brushed smooth the sandy palette before him] "You can be *Up*, like when I was running about shouting *Frack you all!* Then, you can be below the graph and *Down*, like when they said I'd be plugged in for, like, two months. But in the middle, when you're normal, your mood-state is still undergoing a rate of change towards the *Up* or the *Down* state. So, the normal is, in fact, *abnormal*, and it can be worked out by ... by ... "

"The tripolar state is defined by a second order differential equation from a Meta-Neurology Questionnaire, " said Pirix, projecting his neutral tone to the far horizon of the Pacific Ocean.

"Hey, yuh ! That's what they told me."

"So, meta-neurology reduces the person, his history and his mental state to an equation ? I should have kicked him again. So, what happened after DDD ?"

"I was lost. Wandered around Oklahoma City. Stumbled into a *Hari Puthari* church ... Found out all I ever needed was someone who would listen to me, accept me for who I am, give me self-esteem and something to believe in. And I got the chance to join the High Priest

here in Half Moon Bay. I thank the Divine Trinity for my blessed fortune. “

“And, you said your baptism is coming up next week. Are you nervous ?”

“It’s been over a year of devotion and commitment, but the High Priest said I’m finally ready for the surgery. To begin with, you just have, like, a baby broomstick inserted and fixed into your sigmoid colon and pelvis. But, it’s a massive step to be finally at one, *at one* with the Trinity up there in the Goblet of Fire. A dream come true.” Jim-Bob made his little hand gesture up at Planet Mars.

“But, “ asked Da-Hee. “I mean, I hope you don’t mind me asking ... How does it go, you know, with toileting, and things like that ?”

“*Ha, ha, ha*. The *mewgles* always ask that. Well, have you ever played the trumpet or the didgeridoo ?”

“No,” answered Da-Hee. Jim-Bob craned round to seek an answer from Pirix too, but he was still staring into the distant ocean.

“Well, the trumpet player learns a technique with his mouth, where you can draw a breath in, and blow out at the same time. Circular breathing — it’s called. So, having the broomstick is, like, the same. “

“So ...circular shitting ?”

“Yuh ...something like that. *Uh-oh*, that’s the Great Bell ... I gotta get back up there for Evening Worship. Been great talking to you both. Great kick-in-the-face, sister !”

Jim-Bob kicked some sand to discretely cover his Tripolar Calculus graph, and hurried off, setting his gown and hood properly as he went.

After a while, Da-Hee wondered out aloud: “Jim-Bob was lucky. It *is* great to have dreams at that age.”

She didn’t expect a response, but Pirix said: “I cannot dream in my sleep-state.”

“What ! What do you mean ? I dream too much, even when I’m awake, like just now ...”

“At my first visit to the Meta-Neurology Clinic in Michigan. Therefore they studied my brain-wave patterns. I show very prominent alpha and gamma patterns. The dream-state patterns of brain wave I do not possess. “

“That’s ... that’s surely not normal ?”

“What is normal ? Therefore when pilots talk of their dreams, I think this is not normal. Unless there are brain-reactive agents injected into me, then I have some sort of dream state. Usually terror and nightmare. “

“So why ? What happened to you ? Why did you get plugged in ?”

“Two years. Among your three questions you did not ask this. Therefore I will tell you: two years, one month and seventeen days. I do not know my parents. I was born in Canada. My parents — they were freedom activists. They were taken in the Ottawa Purges in the late 60s. The only thing I discovered: the family name is *Pirix*. “

“So, that *is* your last name. What is your first name. Nobody told me.”

“I do not know my first name. My parents died in a Yukon Labour Camp of the General Gritzky sometime after the 2177 Military Coup in Canada. I was in the USA as an orphan. I was with a family. They took me only for money. I grew up in Michigan and the family did not like me, but received money every month until I was 18 years old.



The other boy in the family was Chad. He hated me. I could engineer and fly robots and drones and craft better than he could do. When I was fifteen I beat him in a fair fight. Then he denounced me to the meta-neurology nurses at my school. I was given drug therapy. The drug therapy gave me side-effects in my behaviour. They gave me many diagnoses. I tried to run away from my home and my school. My foster brother denounced me again. The final diagnosis was *New Variant Drapetomania Disorder*. They said the treatment was Brain Dialysis Therapy for the chemical imbalances in my brain. They showed me the equations for all of this, because they knew I am interested in mathematics. The mathematics was correct; the underlying science was 100% false. That boy with the cult wanted to be an artist. I wanted to be a military pilot. I am a pilot. Therefore it is with the Gongzho Corporation, second rank. I pilot inter-planetary freight ships. “

“Oh, Pirix. That is a terrible history—“

“—History is also 100% a useless activity. Nothing can change. Time machines are science fiction. In two years I will make first-rank. That is my goal.”

“I am frackin’ 100% sure you will. I hope you get to kick that little fracker Chad in the face. Hey, I’ll do it for you ...”

“This is a very unlikely possibility. But thank you. “

“So, wait, Pirix was your family name from your parents in Ottawa. What did the Chad-family call you ?”

“They gave me, as a baby, a traditional American name. I do not use at all. “

“What was it ?”

“—“

“Hey, spaceman, what did they call you, at school, at summer camp, round the dime store in Smallsville, Michigan ? Tell me.”

“Chip.”

Da-Hee clasped her hands to her face, letting out such a hoot of laughter that a trail of glittery ionizations took off from her lips for a couple of seconds.

“Chip !! Are you frackin’ serious ? They called you *Chip* ! “

“I do not mind that you laugh at this. Therefore, nothing of the choice was mine. “

“They *really* wanted to frack with you, boy. That family was bad to the bone. Come on get up, the cult-kid reckoned that the night surf would help my swollen foot go down a bit. C’mon. Up. “

Pirix seemed to lag in the sand as Da-Hee rose up to standing: “Come on. I promise I’ll never call you Chip again. “

As Pirix had predicted, the moon segment was appearing low in the sky. Da-Hee glanced back over her shoulders, somewhat saddened for having heard Pirix’s story. The inland vista was a sharp dark profile of the sand-dunes underneath a shimmering radiation canopy from the distant San Francisco Bay area. The trophos was unbroken inland and formed a shifting mound, like the cake-topping on the muffin that was the ionizing phenomenon from Ground Zero. In contrast, the night-time dynamic phenomenon in the Pacific surf was beauteous to behold. (When Pirix caught up, he was insistent on them both taking their Rada which he had in a pack in his hip pocket) As a wave rolled in, it created a static charge which fizzled the surrounding atmospheric vapour. Adding to this, the breaking wave created a kinetic effect in the ionizations causing brilliant and changing fluorescences at the violet end of the visible spectrum.

Da-Hee's mood was as light as the glittering surf, but she hesitated in her impulse to scoop up some frothy water towards Pirix. The visibility was brighter facing the inland glow, so that it was Pirix who spoke first as he paddled his feet in the lukewarm water towards her: "You decided not to cover your scars. Therefore, I knew when I first saw you at Pepperdine that you were in a clinic too. Was this in Korea?"

"Yep. You got it. I'll see your two years, then raise you five years. "

"Is the irradiated water helping your swollen foot ? "

"Honestly, I never knew radiation and environmental damage could be so frackin' beautiful. Come up closer, I can't hear you ... "

"I do not care at all if you do not want to talk about your history. "

"Maybe I should hold my foot out, make sure the swelling never goes down, help me remember I did something in my life to punish the fracking *Global Meta-Neurology Industrial Complex*. Thousands more in Korea never got the chance. I got married. Age twenty-two. I wanted kids. *He* wanted kids. The Government *really* wanted kids. Nothing happened. He blamed me. I gave up, and went back to my career. He saw a lawyer. Lawyer said get me diagnosed at a clinic. It was some sort of trick, and I ended up at the Gangnam Meta-Neurology Clinic. My husband had me diagnosed over the internet. Every time I shouted and screamed when they interviewed me, they ticked another box on their symptom-sheet. They told his lawyer it was worst chemical diagnosis in my brain they had ever seen, so the law said he could divorce me. I ended up in BDT with tubes in my head on-and-off for five years. "

"Did you not have an appeal, or rights ?"

"United Korea is a funny place. I am never going back. After De-Diagnosis Day there, I actually think ... I just needed somebody ... I went to Hawaii and —I did funny things — Hey, that's why I kept my

scars, and I didn't get a graft like you. I wanted to look ugly, and used. Do you think it looks ugly ?”

“It does not look ugly. The Gongzho Corporation does excellent skin-grafting over the Brain Dialysis scarring. I can recommend—“

“—And, I confess: I did too much vaping. I gambled. I got mixed up with a cult too. The Moonies, can you believe it ! They all go up *there*, and I agreed to marry one of them ... Frack ! I'm telling you all of this. Do you think I am actually, *actually* Krazy, like the Clinic said I was ?“

“You are you. That is all. You do not need treatment for who you are.  
“

They were stood a metre apart, thigh deep, occasionally having to flinch sideways at a glittering, sparkling rush of surf. Their clothes were soaked with the warm brine. At one such wave, by chance, they both flinched to be facing each other. Pirix caught sight of Da-Hee with her hands clenched at her face, and her shoulders shaking up and down even after the wave passed.

Pirix negotiated rapidly a binary decision-gate in his mind that it was unlikely to be a sudden increase in the pain in her foot as the cause of her anguish, since there was no underfoot hazard at all in the shifting sands: “ Are you ... OK ?”

“Oh, Pirix ! No ... I am not. I am not, I am not, *I am not* ! ... They told me I had a miscarriage when I first got plugged in. But, then ... They put three babies in my womb, and then, they grew in me, and then they took them out. All when I was in my therapy coma. Pirix, there are three little children with little Korean faces like mine, and I cannot ever find them and tell them I am their mummy. Instead, in my mind, I just see those robot-nurses and their injections. My babies ! Pirix ....  
!”

Da-Hee sunk to her haunches in the bubbling surf. Her eyes bubbled with tears and her body started convulsing with shudders, cries and sobs.

“Now. I am sad. This is the past ... “ Pirix moved his foot in the sluicing sand closer; he may have touched the outer aspect of Da-Hee’s non-swollen foot there; but he may not have. “The Corporation ... On Mars, for the workers doing the most dangerous work. Therefore they have messages of wisdom, to music, in the refectories and corridors. I tell you my favourite: *Happiness is three things: someone to love, something to do, something to hope for.* “

Da-Hee drew a deep breath, held it. And in an instant she stopped her sobs. There they both stood. Trails of ionizing violet fluorescence spumed upwards in the watery froth between them.

“Can I touch you ?”

“—“

“Spaceman, can I touch you ?”

“Yes.”

Da-Hee felt her fingers curl around some froth in the surf by her side which she brought up and rubbed against Pirix’s hips. His musculature, from the months of hyper-speed G-force, was such that Da-Hee thought she would run out of reach to curl around his back. Luckily she felt *his* hand in the small of her back, where her cheap hoody was soggiest and draggiest. He flexed, and suddenly she felt herself suddenly pulled in close. And up. Da-Hee opened her mouth to kiss first, but she puckered first against a salty chin. She amusingly found a toe-hold in the turn-up of his trousers and with a tiny hoist her lips met his. No, he was not a great kisser. But his embrace was the sturdiest and warmest she had ever felt.

Da-Hee now had her head into Pirix's chest, facing out to the ocean. With her finger tips she was rubbing at the weirdest muscle on his back that she had never felt on a human body before. She thought it was a fair question to ask — *What the frack is this muscle ?*— but before she could she realised Pirix's thoughts were still running deep.

He said: "I have lost and never known my parents. You have lost and never known your children. Therefore these are thoughts that we should not think too much."

"Pirix: you say *therefore* a lot. Frack, don't people say ...! But, you're right. I don't want to set myself off crying. Sorry. "

"It connects two logical steps in my mind. Therefore I will carry you back to the beach. "

Inwardly, Da-Hee went *Eh !*

She felt herself being flipped carefully sideways and into the cradle of his arms. Simultaneously she was able to run her hand over his face, in the slight pretence of swiping clear the seawater, and also of throwing her head back and viewing the bouncing crescent moon in the sky as he strode up the sand-bank back to the towel and the tote bag.

The sand was warm and dry but the single towel that they had was meagre. Da-Hee thought she would have to lead, but as he placed her gently down, he made a touch-your-toes downward bend with his arms and peeled down, then stepped out of his trousers in that one move. For some reason — she might, if she remembered, look up the G-force biomechanics one day — Pirix's leg muscles were far less blown out than his arms and upper back. She made more of a deal of peeling her own cheap hoodie off, since the brine had already caused the zipper to jam. Twenty yards up from the waterline, the only illumination came from the inland and the fairly constant radiation glow, which made their bodies look brown-

orange. They kissed again, and both tasted salt and felt the very slight macerations caused by the briny surf-water on each other's lips. Da-Hee felt Pirix's hand come up her thigh and stop —where most men's hands do — at the divine, breathtaking, almost unbelievable feminine curve between the top of the hip and the bottom of the rib-cage. In turn, Da-Hee dug her fingers in hard at the undulations around his belly-button. Under his T-shirt. She allowed herself a tiny moment to wonder, *If it's all about logic, then why leave your T-shirt on ?*

Da-Hee felt that his kissing was improving and if he would only brush his hand against the her hair at the nape of her neck, she would be absolutely getting there. He did. She thrust her tongue into his mouth hard to signal encouragement, and as she felt the need to turn and to put more sand in contact with her back, she started to feel an exquisite slippage between her own thighs. She let her shoulder ease back into the beach and obviously hoped he would roll and follow, obeying that strange and sexy traction force that lovers possess via their bound lips: but he didn't. This time it was Da-Hee at the binary decision gate. Was it that he was continuing his gallantry by acknowledging the seventy kilogram weight discrepancy between them and not wishing her squashed, quite possibly submerged, in the soft sand by the standard first-go Missionary sex position ? Or, was it...?

“Frack ! Pirix. What's wrong ?”

“\_\_”

“You are soft as jelly down there. I mean ...” Da-Hee had ruffled her free hand in amongst Pirix's sandy but sparse pubic hair to find herself juggling a cock which was soft and dry like a kindergarten bean-bag.

“I cannot. Therefore ... “

“Therefore, what, man ? “ Da-Hee kept her tone loving. “Don’t you think I’m pretty. “

“Yes. I said this a few minutes ago.”

“No. You said I didn’t look *ugly*. You didn’t say I was pretty. You’re not a mechphile ! Frack, I mean—“

“—I am not a mechphile. I think you are very beautiful Miss Da-Hee, like a dream-girl. But I do not dream ...”

“What about on the freight rockets ? That’s weeks and weeks ...”

“There are many android escorts provided, much higher order than the one that was called Susie. But, now, here, with you ... I cannot. “

Da-Hee sighed and tried not to make it too audible. She unclasped her arms and let them fall backwards in the sand, where they collided with the tote bag that had lain there untouched. There was a metallic clunking from the bag. Pirix was a disconsolate silhouette, tripoding with an arm in the sand. Something the cult-boy Jim-Bob had said ...

“Pirix. Don’t you dare say ‘no’, OK ? “

“What is this ?”

Da-Hee sat up and dragged her tote bag across until it was between them and in enough radiant light for them to see.

“This ! Jim-Bob said it was Holy Vapour. This ! You’re going to try and take it. “

In Pirix’s face she saw minimalist expressions oscillate from outright perplexity to outright disgust: “This is tourist junk from the Cult shops in Los Angeles and any convenience stores in America. “



“No ! The *Hari Puthari* High Priest prayed, and reached enlightenment, and then soared to another dimension on his broomsticks, fixed in his mortal body. And he gathered this vapour from the—“

“—Stop talking ! This is not gas from the Planet Mars. There is no Goblet of Fire there. The Chinese Corporate workers want me to inhale the real vapour from the Red Planet when I am in reality standing there. I always refuse.”

“Why ?”

“This belief is a nonsense trick.”

“I got four of these cans, from that cult woman in Obispo.”

“Therefore you have been tricked.”

Pirix heard the sound of a plastic seal being broken. The lid of the can had a small mechanism which elevated a silicone spout and at the same time, a diode flashed to indicate some sort of basic warming process for its contents, like the instant-ramen cans from a million vending machine.

It cut across nearly every single principle of rationality and self-determination that Pirix had lived by since he had been liberated from the coma of his two-years' Brain Dialysis Therapy: he put the silicone spout in his mouth. He felt Da-Hee's fingers draw his eyelids close and gently pinch his nostrils. *Was she really mumbling something incantational in Korean !*

Pirix heard a small pneumatic release, and his mouth and tongue felt something warm pass up. The pump of warm gas filled up his lungs. He wanted to quickly open his eyes but Da-Hee's fingers were still holding them shut, *and* pinching his nose. But, in the next moment, Pirix could not open his eyes, or feel her fingers there. Suddenly his consciousness was on some kind of guided tour of his autonomic

body parts: he felt his heart beating, like he was conducting it himself to a jazzy time signature; he felt his intestines bubbling and slithering; he saw the inside of his brain where his each individual thought was passing along labelled and purposeful like an ancient telephone exchange. Back in his mouth he wanted to test the seal around that soft silicone spout again, but instead what he felt was moving, squirming and insistent.

How long ?

“Oh, frack ! “ Da-Hee pulled her lips away from her kiss for an instant. “Look !”

Pirix was able to open his eyes. He had fallen on his side in the sand. The empty can of ‘nonsense’ was propping up his head. Da-Hee was over him kissing him again, and making gleeful noises. He did look down: to see a majestic erection bursting out of her hand.

Da-Hee was overjoyed. She had a thought to dive down for some form of oral assist, but was very glad she didn’t. One more squeeze with her stretched fingers and then — *Blat!* She felt a sticky, warm force up her arm, reaching all the way to her armpit.

Pirix was panting and lying back in the sand. He started to mumble something.

“What’s that ? I can’ t hear you. “

“It is ...all nonsense ... not believable.”

“But ... pretty, fracking great, huh ? You have to thank the Son, his Boon, and — what was it ? — the Holy Waif. Hey, you weren’t thinking of the Holy Waif, just then, were you ?”

Pirix smiled, and looked up: “No. I was thinking of your beautiful curves, Miss Da-Hee. “

“And, listen, I’m joining up with the fracking *Hari Puthari*. But you, buddy-boy, you should think of joining the stacie guys in their pump-room. That’s about three whole throw-bags you put up my arm there.”

Pirix laughed. He laughed and laughed, and Da-Hee realised that she had never seen him do that before then.

They wandered back to the surf’s edge so that Da-Hee could wash down her arm, and she made another joke about how Pirix’s erection was still on glorious show, and pointing, by coincidence right up at the Red Blob, the Fire Goblet, the Planet Mars.

Of all the muscular adversities that Pirix had read about in the Corporate pamphlets about deconditioning on return to Earth’s gravity, he could not believe the ache he was developing in his face from the unusual experience of laughing so freely.

“Why don’t you take me there ?“

“Where ?”

“Where the cock’s pointing, spaceman ! To Mars. There’s nothing on this place but an awful climate, pandemics and the next round of meta-neurologists waiting to re-diagnose us again. And don’t forget that the California police and the Korean mafia are after me ...”

“*Ah, ha, ha, ha.* “

“Actually. Don’t laugh. That’s no fracking joke this time.”

“The terra-forming by the Corporation is very successful. My shore leave is three more weeks, therefore I can make some inquiries to the Headquarters in Hong Kong. “

“By the way, Pirix, what the frack was it that you whispered into the head of that big Securitron Unit that made it stop, you know ... killing me. I thought they were the only ones with no legal kill-switch ?”

“The firmware in all the Securitron models for the UN and Law Enforcement is produced by the Robotic Division of the Gongzho Corporation. Therefore the contracted employees are allowed to know the by-pass code to neutralise any unit.”

“Well, what is it ?”

“If I told you. Therefore Corporate policy is, I have to kill you.”

*Has buddy-boy developed a sudden sense of humour after my hand-job?* wondered Da-Hee, just playfully reaching across and giving a *boing !* to Pirix’s angled appendage.

“Well, why don’t you tell me the code, and then make it a Corporate policy that you have to *fuck* me ?”

“This is not a logical equivalent. If I act to kill you then this is definitely a negative outcome for you. Therefore your other request is *not* definitely a negative outcome for you. “

“That is the most romantic thing I have ever heard. “

“Thank you. I will hold your hand and we can walk back to the sand.”

As they trudged back hand in hand, they saw a headlight playing over the contour of the sand dune which they thought was from the cult-commune returning from the evening worship.

A female voice cried out: “*Yooo-hooo !* “

It was Susie, treading carefully on the dark descent to the beach towards them; where had she downloaded her colloquial shout-out ?

Even though she introduced herself as Mrs TaWayne Trestle, there was no sense of Pirix and Da-Hee being self-conscious or embarrassed at their own state of undress, their state of evident

intimacy, not to mention Pirix's new-found erection which was still showing no signs of going quietly.

In fact, while they made small-talk about the sad dispersement of the wedding party and about how TaWayne was en route by expensive charter Mini-Jet to pick Susie back up, it took Susie to point out the obvious: "Mr Pirix and Miss Da-Hee, it looks like you are about to engage in sexual activity. I can easily go away. Or I can put myself in *mute-blind* mode. Or, I can play some mood-music. Whatever you wish. "

"Well, " said Da-Hee. "Mr Pirix is about to *fuck* a baby into me."

"Am I ?"

"This is wonderful news: for you personally, for you *both* as a genetic match, and for the re-population effort of the United States of America. Can I also point out—"

"—So, I mean, no offence, but *mute-blind mode* please, because Mr Pirix has still only just got his training wheels on."

"Have I ?"

"Sorry, Susie — what were you about to say ?"

"I wanted to point out: the half-moon is an ancient sign of fertility. This location is Half Moon Bay. There is a half-moon in the night sky above. "

"The lunar azimuth is at less than 150 degrees, robot Susie. Therefore, technically, this is not —"

The final words of Pirix's astronomic debating point were swallowed up by Da-Hee's clamorous kiss. She pushed him into the sand and began to climb up the rumples of his soggy T-shirt. She had forgotten to instruct Susie to put herself into privacy mode. No

matter, in fact: “Susie, just can you pass me a can of that Martian Gas ... *There* ...! In my tote bag. “

“Madam, this product is frequently sold as a hoax health product in many cheap outlets and—“

“—*Shhh* ! Just give it to me. Spaceman, you know what’s coming next !”

There was the same silicone spout, the warming light, during which Da-Hee vaulted up and slid into his erect penis. She heard the small pneumatic hiss; within five seconds every last nook and cranny in her vagina started to strain and stretch with sheer pleasure. Pirix opened his eyes, tossed the can of ‘nonsense’ and saw the up-turned chin of Da-Hee washed in the orange, radiant glow from behind them. He started to pick up a rhythm inside her.

“Madam, sir ... I can probably—“

*Just shout ‘sleep-mode’, NOT ‘kill-switch’, NOT ‘kill-switch’ !* thought Da-Hee targeting one open eye at the android annoyance sitting next to them.

“I can assist your fertility goal with my scanning hand. If you wish ...”

“Wait ! “ Da-Hee stopped. “What ?”

Susie took that for consent: “You see. I can scan right *here*, like this ... and Mr Pirix is 2.5 cm past the optimal position. And your uterus is retro-flexed, so—“

“—So, what ? I should lean forwards or back ?”

“Forwards, madam. Yes. That’s it. Good. And, sir, you—“

“—Spaceman ! You need to pull your buddy-boy one inch back ?”

“Do I ?”

“OK. That looks optimal ... Would you like me to play some mood-music now ? Oh, oh ... Hello ?”

“What the frack ...!” exclaimed Da-Hee; and was *shhushed* in turn by Susie.

“It is my new husband ! “ replied Susie in a low voice.

“Is his knob-end still right near my ... *chute* ? I don’t know the right word ...the *chute*-thing of my womb ?” hissed Da-Hee.

“I must ...” It was quite obvious that Susie’s Comms mic was at her scanner hand, which she pulled back from Da-Hee’s front. “Yes, darling ! I hear you ...How is the flight ?”

They all heard TaWayne’s voice: “Frackin’ shithouse. This frackin’ Über pilot hasn’t got the first frackin’ clue ...”

“Darling, you hate Über; why didn’t you get the charter Mini-Jet ? “

“Look, Susie — Just be at the runway. Put some frackin’ lights on. Have you seen that Korean chick and the space-trucker ?”

Da-Hee vigorously shook her head at Susie.

“No ... TaWayne. “

“Well. Talk to the chick first. She’s normally on top of things. “

“Oh. Yes, TaWayne. She is on top. “

“Ask her about the Cesna, like we talked about. And, I bet that spaceman-guy is shoving himself where he doesn’t belong.”

“Oh. I don’t know about that. “

“Just harden up, and shoot off where you came from, is what I’d say to him. Is that ... Is that someone with you ? “ Da-Hee was holding in her hysterics with both hands.

“No, darling. Will you be long ? I can guide people *in all day*...”

“What ! Just be there, lights on, Susie. And you can fly us back to LA ... Love you.”

“Love you too. “

Da-Hee centred herself back in her straddled position and wondered to Susie if she hadn’t had a sly download from some lewd mechcomic’s repertoire as a wedding present from somebody. Susie gently replaced her hand over Da-Hee’s pubic area, allowing a thumb-tip to drift downwards to judge Pirix’s state of play as well.

“Sir. There remains a spare can of the Martian Vapours that you have used. “

“You heard the husband on the phone, Pirix, my man ! “ called out Da-Hee. “You need to harden up and shoot off quick !”

\*

They were both deliciously post-coital, up-to-speed with their Rada doses, in a sandy dug-out, arms and legs intertwined, warm and basking in moonlight.

“You know what ?”



“What ?”

“Can I choose a first name for you ?”

“Yes. Therefore technically the Gongzho Corporation has bestowed a first name to me, but the tonal difficulty of the Chinese vowels is such that often I refer to myself as a ‘*cave fungus*’, instead of my name. “

“Kimchi !”

“This is a Korean comestible, made from pickled cabbage. Already my co-workers laugh at me being called ‘*cave fungus*’. Why ?”

“I call things I love *Kimchi*. Kimchi Pirix, Pilot First Rank. I think it has a real space-ace ring to it. You are, “ she yawned. “The noblest, kindest man I ever met. “

Pirix did not reply, and he felt Da-Hee nuzzling her face deeper into the folds of his T-shirt, which he was still wearing. The moon was on a merry transit in the sky. Mars shone red.

“You know the first thing ... the first thing, you said ... to me...? You said: *you must get out of my cockpit*, you said. ”

“Therefore. You are not—“

“—A qualified pilot ...In the morning ... I’ll do a Susie-joke with those words ... Make you happy !”

*Certainly*, he thought to himself, *My pilot training is ‘something to do’, and I strive to improve.*

*Someone to love ?* Suddenly, out of nowhere, a lump rose in his throat. He almost shoved a fistful of shameful sand in his mouth to bury a little sob rising there. Lucky she was asleep.

He too closed his eyes. Then opened them; looked. (Estimated the lunar azimuth quickly.) Then he closed them again. Something entirely strange was pressing in from the sides of his consciousness; little images and scenes were somehow coalescing inside the theatre of his brain. Something like — a Martian domicile, breakfast routines, a satchel, a shiny morning face — something like ... a dream ?



# HALF LOVE

— a novel —



*by Tej Gilmon*