

The Book of Steve, Third Draft

By Didier Smith

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Prologue: My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?

Stacy was twenty-two years old when her mother died of cancer. Witnessing her slow deterioration and painful demise was the hardest thing she'd ever encountered. It wasn't just the grief of watching her mother die that tore her apart - it was the helplessness, the feeling of abandonment. Where was God?

Unable to confess her crisis of faith to anyone she knew, she poured her entire heart into a four-thousand-word post on an anonymous forum.

She wrote about her childhood. How her mother had married a pastor and raised seven kids. She wrote about her accident - the car crash when she was twelve, the paralysis, the miraculous faith healing.

She wrote about the cancer. How often they'd prayed together, how much her poor mother had suffered. Why hadn't the prayer worked?

Why had God forsaken her?

Her heartfelt stream of consciousness received a single reply, from Russ101.

Lol, god isn't real, idiot. And even if he was, what makes you think he'd care about your problems? Dude's probably got a lot going on.

Act 1: Genesis

1. StevieNix

“A pivotal change is about to take place in your life,” Steve announced to Gabe, plopping the horoscope section of the Elba Daily on the break room table in front of him. “Loyalties will be tested.”

Gabe laughed and pushed the newspaper back towards Steve without reading it. “Are they still stuck on the Sirius thing?”

Steve nodded and rotated the sheet back towards himself. “The continued darkening of Sirius portends. . .”

“What’s yours?”

Steve scanned the section, looking for Cancer.

“Looks like I’m due for a bit of. . . ooh, significant transformation. Something about a crossroads. ‘As Sirius continues to recede in luminance. . .’”

Gabe grabbed the newspaper out of his hands and threw it in the bin. “These idiots need new material,” he said. “The Sirius thing is played out.”

“Hey, at least they’ve got answers. Better than the astronomy community.”

Gabe turned slightly red. “We do have answers,” he objected.

“What, aliens?” Steve laughed.

“Yes.”

“Little green men are eating a star?”

“Little green men are building a Dyson sphere.”

“Doesn’t seem very scientific to me.”

“It’s more scientific than that!” Gabe objected, pointing to the bin.

“There’s gotta be a natural explanation.”

Gabe shook his head. “There isn’t. There’s no natural phenomenon that can cause a star to just vanish. You get like, a billion years’ heads up.”

“As far as you know! Maybe it happens all the time and you’ve just missed it.”

“We have records of the night sky going back a hundred thousand years, Steve.”

“And you’ve never seen a star disappear before?”

Gabe scanned the room. He looked uncomfortable, but didn’t need to be. As usual, the two of them were the only ones in the Computer Science department break room - the constant hum of StevieNix’s cooling fans drove away everyone else from the ostensibly communal area.

“Truth be told,” Gabe admitted under his voice, “we have. Sirius is just the first one to capture public attention.”

Steve cocked his head.

“This is the seventeenth star to disappear in the past few millennia,” Gabe continued. “There’s a little burst of discussion in the astronomy journals every time, and then it quiets down. No one knows why it’s happening.”

“So therefore, it’s aliens?”

“Yeah.” Gabe leaned back and his voice resumed its ordinary volume. “Aliens building Dyson spheres. It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

Steve wasn’t convinced that an alien race enveloping stars in giant spheres made more sense than his theory - that the astronomy community had an incomplete understanding of the universe. In the interest of social harmony, however, he held his tongue and granted Gabe the benefit of the doubt. He had to get back to work.

With an exaggerated eyeroll at his best and only friend, Steve donned his VR headset and jacked into StevieNix.

Damn. The giant reptiles were still around. They’d completely taken over his simulated universe.

Steve chewed his fingernails. This wasn’t ideal. Grant money was hard enough to come by, and usually flowed to the more “realistic” sims - the ones populated by ‘people’, or at least, marginally intelligent beings with thumbs. Lizards the size of buildings? Good luck securing funding for that.

At this rate, StevieNix was doomed to run on a heap of donated hardware in the corner of the break room forever. Not that Steve minded, of course. He didn’t mind anything. Not his budget constraints, not the janky physics necessitated by the low-powered hardware, and certainly not the jokes from the rest of the CS department. In fact, it wasn’t just that he didn’t mind - he actually couldn’t.

Any part of Steve’s psyche that might get upset at being called a “doddering fool” or “air-headed eccentric” had been either corrected under the gentle guidance of the Federal Department of Social Emotional Calibration (FEDSEC), or sliced out of his genome before he was born. To take offense was to take the first step on the path of aggression - a path that led inevitably to being clipped out of the perfect tapestry that was his happy, peaceful society.

Steve, like everyone around him, was content. He couldn’t risk to be otherwise.

Gently humming to himself, he pondered various options for solving his giant reptile problem. Radiation, perhaps? Or maybe some sort of plague? Tricky... Maybe Gabe had some ideas.

He jacked out.

Gabe didn’t have any ideas. He’d fished the newspaper out of the bin and was still going on about the aliens.

“Bloody knockers,” he grumbled, scowling at an opinion column.

“Huh?” Steve asked.

Gabe pushed the paper over, got up and stretched. “Fools who think we should make first contact in person,” he explained, walking over to the coffee machine. “You know. Build an interstellar spaceship and fly to Sirius. Knock on their door.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Steve asked.

Gabe gave him a confused look as he filled his mug. “Aside from being illegal,” he said, “it’s stupid. Obviously, first contact should be made remotely. Calling is more polite than knocking.”

Steve nodded. He’d forgotten about that archaic law. People were banned from leaving the planet, but so what? It was like banning people from breathing underwater. Tabling his reptile problem for now, he launched wholeheartedly into his favourite pastime - pointless academic debate.

“I think knocking is a great idea,” he said.

The two professors became so engrossed in their discussion that they failed to notice when the break room door opened, and a third figure slipped into the room.

2. Murdoch

Gabe was starting to annoy Steve a little bit by dragging practical considerations into their academic debate. “The point is moot,” he said. “Leaving the planet is illegal, so calling is the only actual option.”

“Okay, but just pretend it wasn’t!” Steve replied. “Think of all the subtleties that can only be conveyed in person, such as...uh...”

“Such as, destroying your ship, following your trail back here to Elba, and enslaving everyone you know and love?” suggested a deep voice in a rough Irish accent.

Steve and Gabe instinctively ducked at the shock of hearing such nakedly criminal language. They turned to the source of the barbaric suggestion and saw the intruder leaning against the break room doorway. Steve recognized him immediately.

“Declan Murdoch” the man introduced himself, walking into the room and taking a seat.

Steve considered objecting to Murdoch’s brazenly antisocial behaviour, but decided against it. The man was a legend - the industrial titan who had invented sustainable fusion energy. He’d parlayed that invention into incredible wealth, influence, and a lifespan of a hundred thousand years and counting. He was one of the only people alive who was born before the Great Peace.

“Has it occurred to either of you” he asked, “that announcing our presence to a star-destroying alien race may be the stupidest feckin’ idea ever?”

All Steve had to offer was “Uhh.”

Gabe fared little better with “can’t say that it has.”

“You mean to say”, continued Murdoch, “that neither of you exalted professors ever thought that a civilization capable of extinguishing the most powerful objects in the universe might not want to be our friend?”

Steve avoided making eye contact with Murdoch. Truthfully, the notion that the Dysoners may not be entirely friendly had indeed flashed across his mind, but being a well socialized respectable person, he had simply ignored it. Why rock the boat?

Murdoch, it seemed, did not share that concern. He continued.

“Nice sandwich you’ve got there,” he said, pointing at Gabe’s half-eaten meatball sub. “Did you pay for it, or did you steal it?”

“I paid for it.”

“Why didn’t you steal it?”

Gabe gave Steve a confused look. Steve shrugged.

“Obviously because you’re an ineffectual compliance artist who would chase the shopkeeper down to throw money at him if he left the shop unattended. But let’s pretend you were someone else for a second. Why wouldn’t you steal the sandwich?”

Gabe remained quiet. Steve also struggled with the hypothetical.

“Better yet, why don’t you steal the sandwich shop? Just murder the owner, take over the shop, and start selling sandwiches for ten times the price?”

“Well,” Gabe said at last, “I would think FEDSEC would have something to say about that.”

Murdoch smacked the table triumphantly. “Correct! And what would FEDSEC do?”

“If I stole the sandwich, they’d probably take me in for calibration. If I did... the other thing you suggested, they’d probably... subtract me from the population.”

“That’s right! Now you get it. Fear of violent retribution, the key to it all. The lynchpin of collaboration! The cornerstone upon which all civilization is built!”

“What does this have to do with aliens?” Steve asked.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? Do you want them to steal your sandwich?”

“What?”

Murdoch sighed and leaned in. “It’s very simple. If you want to interact with someone you don’t know, you must to be willing to enforce the rules of the relationship with the tools of the inquisition. If not, you’ll soon find yourself and your entire civilization penniless and naked, face-down in a canal.”

“*You* are someone we don’t know,” Steve pointed out. “Does that mean we need to be willing to use the tools of the inquisition to keep talking?”

Murdoch grinned a little too enthusiastically. Steve looked away, slightly disconcerted.

“So,” Gabe asked, “you reckon that the only way we can collaborate with the Dysoners is if we have the technology to hurt them?”

“Not just hurt them”, responded Murdoch, “but to destroy them. To annihilate their civilization so thoroughly that no alien heart is left beating, no building left standing, no molecule left fused together. And even then, it won’t be enough. The means are necessary but insufficient - what we really need is the will. For the threat to be credible, we need an army of merciless killers.”

Steve and Gabe looked at each other, and back to Murdoch. Steve wondered how many laws Murdoch had just broken in delivering his diatribe, and hoped that no passers-by had overheard any of it. He was once again grateful for the loud StevieNix cooling fans.

“So you came to... us?”

Murdoch sighed. “Yes, but don’t worry. I’m under no illusions that you have what it takes. I bet there’s less than a thousand people on this entire planet with the balls to threaten an alien race. FEDSEC’s done such a great job of pruning out aggression. Ambition. Unhinged lunacy. You’re all so boring.”

“Why us, then?”

Murdoch glanced briefly at the rat’s nest of donated servers humming in the corner, before facing Steve. “You’re the StevieNix guy, right? You wrote *Sexual Reproduction - A Meta-Meta Heuristic Algorithm for Genetic Optimization*?”

Steve nodded.

Murdoch smiled and handed Steve a letter. “Then you’re the guy I’m looking for. Can I interest you in working for Murdoch Heavy Industries? We’re gonna make an AI.”

3. The Fall

“You’re insane,” Gabe informed him. “You can’t seriously consider this.”

“Why not?” Steve asked. “He made a compelling argument.”

“He violated like a dozen speech ordinances.”

“He quoted the title of my thesis. No one’s done that in centuries.”

“You’d be giving up a thousand-year academic career and a tenured position!”

“I’ll just take a sabbatical. How long could this possibly take?”

Gabe sighed and returned to his meatball sub. Steve re-read his offer letter, beaming internally.

If Steve were honest with himself, even he had to admit that StevieNix wasn’t the best universe in the world. Some of the larger software companies had produced truly majestic simulations with poetry-composing AIs and Newtonian physics at every scale. StevieNix, on the other hand, glitched out whenever someone ran the microwave.

Steve’s universe did have two things going for it. The first, was that it was open source. Anyone could contribute patches to it, and many did. Over the centuries, this had resulted in an extremely rich (if somewhat eclectic) biodiversity - from wing-headed sharks, to birds with beautiful but ridiculous tails, to Steve’s personal favourite - apes that stood upright and walked like him. Sure, they were unintelligible and stupid, but appearance-wise, they’d done alright.

The open source community readily helped him solve his reptile problem. Within a few hours of him filing an issue, someone had submitted a patch that all but wiped them out. The mechanism was a bit dramatic, but it got the job done.

The second thing StevieNix had going for it was the sexual reproduction mechanic - the subject of Steve’s PhD thesis. The industry standard approach to genetic engineering was top-down guided evolution, where engineers played a critical role in selecting the next generation. In *Sexual Reproduction - A Meta-Meta Heuristic Algorithm for Genetic Optimization*, Steve had flipped the paradigm on its head. By introducing a bottom-up mechanism wherein the beings not only cross-pollinated their genetic material but selected their own breeding partners, Steve had revolutionized the field.

At least, that’s the way he saw it. Mostly, the beings in StevieNix were obsessed with proliferating their own genetic material at the cost of more productive pursuits. Hence, the constant jokes from his colleagues.

Thus, when Murdoch walked into the break room and quoted his thesis title at him, Steve took it as a centuries-overdue recognition of his genius. He had no choice, really. He was fated to ignore Murdoch’s casual disregard for the law and take up residence at Murdoch Heavy Industries.

Gabe followed in his footsteps, a couple weeks later. “To keep you out of trouble,” he explained.

Steve heard Gabe whistle as he walked into the datacenter.

“Look at these!” the astronomer exclaimed, gesturing at the rows of perfectly uniform, black servers. “Bit of an upgrade, eh?”

“They’re MHI-10s,” Steve beamed. “Murdoch Heavy Industries’ state of the art particle computers. You can’t even buy them yet.”

“Does StevieNix even run on them?”

“No. I have to port all the code. Particle computers are weird, man.”

It took months for Steve to port StevieNix to the datacenter. Murdoch was fairly hands-off during this period. Once the code was working, however, he took a keen interest.

“You need to make them smarter,” he insisted. “We need AIs that can fly warships, not... what are they doing?”

Steve blushed. “Those two? They’re... ah... communicating their genetic material.”

Murdoch looked closer at the screen. “I don’t think that’s going to work.”

Steve looked at where Murdoch was pointing. Oh, boy. “No... they do that sometimes. Not sure why.”

Murdoch gave Steve a look and walked out of his office. “Smarter!” he called as he receded down the hallway.

Steve looked at Gabe for advice. Gabe shrugged.

Intelligence, Steve found, wasn’t always a reproductive asset. For whatever reason, every time he engineered a smart ape, they decided to apply their intelligence to esoteric hobbies instead of making offspring. Steve’s painstakingly-written intelligence genes were invariably wiped out within a few generations.

Murdoch didn’t say anything when Steve announced his latest failed experiment, but Steve could tell he was getting impatient.

Later, in Steve’s office, Gabe had a suggestion. “What if, instead of trying to engineer their genes, you engineer their environment?”

“How so?” asked Steve.

“Lean harder on the evolution mechanic. You’re barely using any of this compute power. Spin up a couple million of these monkeys, and subject them to brutal evolutionary pressure. Come back in a week. If any of those poor apes are still alive, I bet they’ll be pretty smart.”

Steve pondered his suggestion. Not a bad idea. He felt bad for his apes, but not bad enough not to try it. But what would qualify as brutal evolutionary pressure?

He settled on snakes - it was a lot easier to make a scary snake than a smart monkey. He produced endless varieties of snakes. Snakes that hid in trees. Venomous snakes. Gargantuan snakes that could wrap around an ape, crush it to death, and swallow it whole. Snake predation became the number one killer of his apes.

The changes were small at first, but he watched them compound. First, the apes developed extremely keen vision, with full colour and depth perception. Then, they developed something amazing - a primitive language, which they used to communicate about the presence of snakes. Steve learned the language, and sent more snakes.

The apes responded by developing an entire theory of snakes - which ones were venomous, which ones were harmless, where and when you might encounter them, etc. They really were getting smarter.

One day, as Steve was listening to an older ape explain snake theory to a younger ape, he heard something that astonished him.

"If you see a little brown snake, run away" explained the elder ape. So far, so good.

"Why?" asked the younger ape. "Can't I just drop a rock on it or something?"

Steve jacked out of VR and sat in slack-jawed wonder. In order to ask that question, the younger ape had to be doing something incredible. He had to run a hypothetical simulation in his mind, of himself confronting a future snake. The ape was self-aware.

By setting out to create smarter apes, Steve had accidentally achieved something else entirely. His apes were sentient.

Unfortunately, they were still pretty dumb.

4. The Dogs of War

Steve announced the unexpected development to Murdoch. He tried not to breathe as Murdoch took a long, thoughtful drag on a cigarette and exhaled the smoke all over his enormous, wood-paneled office.

“It wasn’t in the spec,” Murdoch said, “but I guess it’s a step in the right direction. It’s hard to imagine someone winning an interstellar war if they can’t wargame scenarios in their mind.”

Steve beamed. ‘A step in the right direction’ was high praise, coming from Murdoch.

“You’ve got other problems, though.”

Steve’s mood dampened.

“They’re not warriors. They’re brutes. There’s a difference.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Brutes kill for food. In the case of your sim, they also kill for...reproductive opportunities. But warriors kill for something greater. Warriors kill for love, ideology, glory. We need warriors.”

Warriors. What a design brief. The thought of killing someone was so foreign to Steve, he already considered it an accomplishment that his apes would do it for food. But killing someone for love? What does that even mean?

He parked the question for later and set about experimenting with genes for aggression.

Bloody hell! Again? These goddamned animals.

All of his attempts at an aggression gene failed the same way: With senseless bloodshed overwhelming every primitive society in StevieNix. He thought he’d really dialed it back this time, but the proof was in the pudding.

The carnage-filled, bloodsoaked pudding. Once again, everyone in StevieNix was trying to kill each other. Sighing, Steve scoured the gene pool to rescue the few survivors who hadn’t yet been polluted with his latest gene, before clicking the “cataclysm” button and starting again. He tapped his pen impatiently on his desk as he watched the sea levels rise and drown all the homicidal savages.

Man, this was tiring. On to the next gene.

Sexual Reproduction: A Meta-Meta Heuristic Algorithm for Screwing Everything Up. He should re-title his thesis.

His weeks of relentless experimentation had produced exactly one notable result: Sex plus violence equals dysgenics.

Honestly, the result was so obvious that he was embarrassed it took him so long to realize: The most efficient way for an aggression gene to reproduce, was to inspire sexual violence.

In StevieNix, this invariably resulted in the larger, stronger males of the species forcing themselves upon the smaller, weaker females. While this strategy was evolutionarily successful from the perspective of the aggression gene, it was otherwise an unmitigated dysgenic disaster.

They'd just done it again. It was enough to turn an academic to drink.

Steve chewed his fingernails as he watched yet another enormous population of apes degenerate into hideous brutes, channeling all their efforts into forced copulation. God fucking damnit. Sexual reproduction was supposed to *accelerate* evolution! What the hell was this?

"What do I do now?" he asked Gabe.

Gabe tilted his chair back and stroked his chin. "It is a tricky one, isn't it? I told you, sexual reproduction is more trouble than it's worth."

"Not helpful, Gabe."

Gabe set his chair back down and a wry grin spread over his face. "You could try taking a leaf out of Murdoch's book?"

"What, give them the tools of the inquisition?"

Gabe laughed and put on his best Irish accent. "Feckin' academics! Haven't you heard a word I've said? Fear of violent retribution! It's the cornerstone of civilization! It's the lynchpin!" He thumped the table for effect.

"Huh," responded Steve. "Hmm."

Violent retribution. On behalf of the females. How do you encode that in a gene?

Steve tapped his keyboard. Maybe like... this?

He sped up the sim and went to make a coffee. When he came back, his gene was gone. Fully bred out of the gene pool. Okay - not like that, then.

His next few attempts also failed almost immediately. Violence against other males, it turns out, comes at high cost. Males with a propensity for aggressive retribution eventually met their match - typically before passing on their genes.

So, that was the setup. Violence against females? Cheap and rewarding. Violence against males? Dangerous and unprofitable. What a situation. He turned back to Gabe for help.

"What are you doing, thinking about the apes so much?" Gabe asked, helping himself to one of the biscuits on Steve's desk.

"What am I supposed to think about?"

"Wasn't half your thesis about how the organisms are irrelevant? They basically exist as vessels for propagating the genes?"

"You read my thesis?"

Gabe snorted. "I don't have to read your thesis, you basically narrated the entire thing to me."

Steve sighed. Of course Gabe hadn't read his thesis. He was right though - in genetic engineering, the organism is of only tangential importance. The real goal is the survival and propagation of the gene itself. "Thanks for the reminder."

"No problem. By the way, you're out of biscuits."

Time to make sexual dimorphism actually work for him. He kicked Gabe out of his office and spent the next several weeks designing his most complicated gene yet. He called it the "sister guarder".

In females, it did nothing. Completely inert. In males, it inspired violent retribution - but, crucially, only on behalf of his female relatives. From the perspective of the sister guarder gene, brothers were expendable assets. Tangential importance. The gene copy in the sister was the the one that mattered.

Steve spliced the sister guarder into a few embryos, sat back, and watched. Immediate carnage ensued - but this time, it was different. This time, the problem wasn't so much sexual violence, but... blood feud.

Generations and generations of blood feud. Steve reached for a biscuit from his recently-refilled tin and munched away as he watched entire families wipe each other out in century-long vendettas. Well, that was a new one.

As he depleted his biscuit tin, a calmness spread across StevieNix. Worried that the sister guarder gene had been bred out, Steve inspected a couple of apes - nope, it was still there. He scoured the sim for instances of sexual violence, and - yup, immediately avenged.

But this time, the blood feud didn't last. It was as if the apes had reached a new level of understanding. They could still be incredibly violent, but they preferred not to. Not unless someone had hurt someone they loved - and even then, they could eventually rein it in.

Love-motivated violence. Did that satisfy the design brief?

What was the design brief again?

Oh, yeah. Warriors.

Steve sped the sim up and watched for war.

A few days later, he spotted a potential war-like situation. Exciting! He paused the sim and invited Gabe and Murdoch into his office.

"Check out these bendy sticks," he said, gesturing at the screen. "They've tied strings to them and use them to launch other sticks around."

"Impressive," said Murdoch. "Have they used them in battle before?"

Steve shook his head. He'd only seen the bendy-stick tribe use their new weapons to hunt.

"Looks complicated," said Gabe. "Error prone. The rock-throwing tribe is going to stomp them."

"I wouldn't be so sure," mused Murdoch. "The bendy-stickers have a huge range advantage. I'd put my money on them."

Steve didn't care to put his money on either tribe. A big part of him was hoping that the apes would negotiate a peaceful resolution. That wasn't the design brief, though.

"You guys ready?" he asked.

Murdoch and Gabe pulled up chairs and stared at the screen.

Steve dragged the speed slider to real-time, and un-paused the sim. "Let's go!" he said.

In less than an hour, Murdoch had been proven right - it had come down to range. Every single male of the rock-throwing tribe had been either killed, or bound, flogged and castrated.

The females were distributed as prizes of war among the victorious males. With no one left to enact violent retribution, the bendy-stick males immediately set about consummating their victory in the blood-soaked streets of the vanquished village.

Steve winced and looked away.

Murdoch stroked his chin thoughtfully. Gabe turned to face him.

"We want to give these things weapons? In our world?"

"That's the idea, yes."

"That's the craziest idea anyone has ever had."

"I've had crazier ones."

"Did neither of you see what I just saw?" Gabe exploded. "These things are killing machines! Completely nuts!" Turning red, he stood up abruptly and marched out of the office, slamming the door behind him.

Steve and Murdoch remained silently at the table.

Steve chewed on his pen. Eventually, he tried to reassure his boss. "Don't worry about him. He'll come around."

"I'm not worried."

"I've got to admit, he does have a point. They're volatile. Giving them weapons up here seems... inadvisable."

Murdoch shrugged. "Steve, just step back for a moment and look at what you've achieved. In the past six months, you've transformed these monkeys from primitive animals to sentient beings who can mass produce weaponry, train in groups, and premeditate and execute battle plans. That's incredible! I get that you feel bad for the rock tribe, but you've got to let it go."

Steve blushed. He still wasn't used to having his work complimented.

Murdoch continued. "Look. Firstly, the rock-throwers had it in for the bendy-stickers anyway. It was kill or be killed. But more importantly - you didn't see a flower-picking tribe, did you?"

Steve shook his head.

"Why do you think that is?"

Steve knew why it was. Any tribe that was not prepared to wage war was immediately wiped off the map by a tribe that was. “So what’s your plan for making sure these apes don’t turn us into the rock-throwing tribe?” he asked.

“Ah yes, I was getting to that. I have another ask. We need to be able to read their minds.”

Steve laughed. Murdoch stared at him, deadpan. Steve stopped laughing. Murdoch was serious.

5. A Plaything for the Gods

Murdoch didn't want to admit it, but Steve was starting to piss him off a little. It wasn't entirely his fault - being a slow, unambitious sluggard was literally written into his genes. FEDSEC's bastard test tube babies. They got worse every generation.

At least Steve did any work at all - the average kid in the latest generations got tired getting out of bed in the morning. Still, Murdoch wished he'd work faster - time was not on their side. At this rate, he risked losing Allen's buy-in.

Steve had thrown a hissy fit when he'd mentioned the mind-reading requirement. He'd had even more of a conniption upon receiving the full playability design brief - yes, not only did they need to be able to read the AIs' minds, but they had to influence them as well. While Steve's gripes about "shifting requirements" were understandable, he lacked the context of how annoying it was to manage him. Whatever happened to the good old days when you could just cane your subordinates?

Murdoch lit a cigarette and closed his eyes. His doctor had told him said he needed to relax more. "If you keep this up," he'd said, "you'll be lucky to make it another thousand years." He'd tried to prescribe him a "chill pill." Feckin' doctors. What did they know? Nicotine *was* relaxing.

Anyway, he wasn't even sure he wanted to make it another thousand years. Not on this goddamn planet, at least.

"I've got it!" Steve reported.

Murdoch looked at him suspiciously. He'd believe it when he saw it.

"You've got what?" he asked.

"Playability. Check it out."

Steve strode to Murdoch's computer, flicked over to the StevieNix window and put the headset on. He clicked around for a few moments and brought up the view of a young primitive animal herder, who was sitting on a log somewhere.

Steve gave Murdoch an excited look.

"Go on, then," Murdoch said.

Steve clicked the talk button on his microphone and said, "I should pick up that rock."

The boy on the screen perked up.

Steve unplugged his headset and the boy's internal monologue started playing out of the speakers.

"That's a neat rock," the boy thought. "I bet that girl in the next village will love it."

Murdoch watched wordlessly as the boy stood up, walked a few paces, and picked up a rock.

"Yeah, she's gonna go crazy for it," he continued.

Steve turned the volume down and beamed at Murdoch.

Murdoch nodded. "Okay," he said. "Not bad. What did you do?"

"Believe it or not, it was Gabe's idea!" he explained. "Normally, their thought processes are too scattered to make any sense of. But Gabe realized, if we forced them to think in words, then we could just read the words straight out of their head."

"How'd you do it?" Murdoch asked.

Steve launched into a technical explanation. Most of it went over Murdoch's head.

"I recorded their neural activation levels every time they said anything. Built up a huge corpus and trained a classifier. Then I ran the classifier when they *weren't* speaking, to try to find apes that thought in words."

"And then you found this guy?"

Steve laughed. "Not exactly. None of them thought in words. The classifier just produced garbage. I've had to bombard them with cosmic rays for eight hundred generations to produce this one perfect mutation. It took forever."

Murdoch raised his eyebrows. "So this lad," he gestured at the screen, "is the one playable character in all of StevieNix?"

"Correct," Steve said. "Totally random genetic mutation. We may never get it again."

Murdoch was aghast. "What the hell are you doing then?" he asked. "This kid could be killed at any second! Spread his goddamn genes!"

Steve's face fell. Murdoch could tell he didn't want to do what was necessary to spread the kid's genes.

"Steve," he said. "They're computer programs. They're not people. You know what you need to do."

Steve nodded and left his office. Murdoch lit another cigarette and turned back to the screen to monitor Steve's progress.

A few minutes later, every reproductive-aged male in the kid's vicinity dropped dead. Murdoch smiled.

The sim sped up. The kid took advantage of the lack of males to repopulate his village and the surrounding regions. Excellent.

Murdoch watched with interest over the next few weeks as generations came and went. Whatever genes were involved in playability, they were brittle. Most of the descendants weren't playable. The trait seemed to come with costs - playable characters tended to get stuck in strange, pathological thought loops that interfered with their reproductive ability. On the plus side, they seemed marginally smarter than the non-playable characters. From an evolutionary perspective, the trait was roughly neutral. That meant Steve had to help it along.

Everywhere the trait spread, Steve advanced a front of death. Breeding age males dropped dead by the thousands. Apes who weren't showing signs of playability by one year of age were ruthlessly culled. The ape population of StevieNix plummeted, and Murdoch began to worry about the loss of genetic diversity in other domains. Eventually, after generations

of destruction, playability reached one percent of the population. Then ten, then twenty. Finally, at thirty percent, Murdoch stepped in.

“Thirty percent will do us just fine, Steve.”

“I can get it higher!” Steve said.

Murdoch looked at him in surprise. The mild-mannered creator who’d been so reluctant to kill the villagers just a few weeks ago, had become so focused on the task that he’d turned into a bit of a psycho.

“I’m sure you can, lad. But we can’t have everyone be a navel-gazing thought hamster, can we?”

Steve blushed.

“Thirty percent is perfect,” Murdoch reiterated. “It’s time to move on. The alignment team is waiting.”

6. Battleground of Ideas

Steve looked around the table for anyone he recognized, and - no way! That was Maurice Allen - the Eternal Spring guy!

Eternal Spring was the life extension monopoly whose vitamins kept Steve and everyone else young and immortal. Their signature tagline popped into Steve's head. *"Keep the Spring in your step! Ask your doctor about Eternal Spring."* Allen, their CEO and founder, had been around forever. Probably as old as Murdoch.

He looked great, though. Must have a hell of a fitness routine.

Murdoch went round the room and introduced everyone. Aside from Steve, Gabe and Allen, the team appeared to be composed entirely of Murdoch's acquaintances - either through his personal life, or through their employment at Murdoch Heavy Industries. After completing the introductions, Murdoch started presenting a slide deck. Steve's eyes immediately glazed over.

"As you are all no doubt aware," Murdoch announced, "we are faced with an existential threat. Two existential threats, in fact. The first being, obviously, the discovery of a technologically advanced alien race with a real chance of stomping us out of existence."

"The second," he continued, "is even more serious. While you all understand perfectly well the reality of the first threat, the mass of gormless buffoons making up our society do not. And good luck convincing them! I'm pretty sure they lack the requisite mental hardware to process threats."

Most of the room laughed.

"Can you believe they even want to call them up? The government's already put out a tender for an interstellar radio. Presumably so we can broadcast something like, 'Hey aliens! Primitive intelligent life here! Come enslave us and take our carbon!'"

Gabe was turning slightly red, but everyone else in the room was chuckling and nodding in agreement. Steve remembered their conversation in the university break room. Was Murdoch making fun of them?

"Naturally," Murdoch continued, "MHI will be offering the government a very competitive bid on the project. Tricky things, interstellar radios. You never know what might go wrong."

Great, now he was joking - hopefully - about sabotaging a government project.

"But stall as we might, we must treat it as inevitable that our respective species will one day interact. In the absence of anyone else with the guts to do what must be done, I have taken it upon myself to see that this interaction doesn't result in our immediate extinction."

The others nodded along.

Murdoch's tone became more serious. "Hardware is being taken care of downstairs as we speak. It presents major challenges, but an even greater challenge still is intelligence. To ensure our survival, we must develop the mental capacity to wage total, all-consuming war - at interstellar distances."

He clicked to advance the slide deck.

“The agents conducting this warfare must be capable of autonomously performing a ruthless alien genocide, all whilst not presenting us with a third existential risk. It should go without saying that we would be extremely hard-pressed to develop this capacity within our own species, and even if we did, harder still to do it under the radar.”

Steve’s pulse quickened and he could feel his face getting hot. The design brief had been warriors. Interstellar war, that was the goal. This was the first he’d heard of interstellar genocide.

“And to that end,” Murdoch concluded, “Murdoch Heavy Industries has employed Steve - the genius creator of StevieNix himself! Why don’t you give us a status report, Steve?”

All eyes swivelled towards Steve. Great. What a handoff.

“Well,” Steve stammered, looking for ways to describe his progress towards an alien genocide. “I guess we have a bloodthirsty race of violent warrior AIs”.

Over the next few minutes, he explained the basic StevieNix environment, the sexual reproduction mechanic, and the tight family bonds that resulted. He then went over his past several months’ work - the sentience, the evolutionarily stable aggression, and finally the playable/non-playable character split.

When he was done, the rest of the team mostly stared at him in silence. Awed silence, hopefully.

Allen spoke up. “Great work, Steve. What’s your plan for making sure they don’t kill us all?”

No idea. Steve looked at Murdoch for help.

Murdoch tapped a key on his laptop and the slide on the wall changed to one with the title, “Memetic Alignment.”

“We align them,” Murdoch said, “with memes.” He advanced the deck again to a diagram that looked like it was put together by a paranoid schizophrenic with grand theories.

“Memes are self-propagating ideas,” he explained, pointing at various parts of the diagram. “They spread through populations like viruses - replicating, mutating, responding to selective pressure. Anywhere where ideas can spread and change, you’ll find memes. Our world is full of them, and so is StevieNix.”

“How does this help?” Allen asked.

“Memes are absurdly powerful,” Murdoch said. “Think about it. Memes dictate culture, culture dictates behaviour. How much of people’s day-to-day activities are decided, not by themselves, but by self-replicating ideas that have infected them? People will do anything for the right meme.”

“So you’re going to infect them with the idea that they shouldn’t kill us?” Allen asked.

“Almost,” Murdoch said. He advanced the slide deck. The title said “A Friendly Competition.”

“*You’re* going to infect them with the idea that they shouldn’t kill us.”

He advanced the deck again to a list of rules.

“You are all invited to participate!” he said. “The rules are pretty simple. Come up with the sort of memes that would make the AIs love us - so they’ll kill and die for us, but would never hurt us. Save any useful AIs that qualify.”

The warrior design brief finally made sense.

“Your primary tool is memes. Speak them into the playable characters’ minds and see if you can get them to love you. First team to a trillion souls wins.”

One of the contestants raised his hand. “What happens to the AIs that aren’t aligned?”

“I’ll take them,” Murdoch replied. “I have a use for them.”

Okay, that was weird.

“What does the winner get?” asked one of the contestants.

“Prestige. And a cash prize.”

“How much?”

Murdoch named a number. Holy moly, that was a big number. It would be enough for Steve to purchase his own lab, fill it with computers, and finally bring StevieNix into the big leagues. Maybe even hire some staff.

Steve gave Gabe a look and nodded earnestly. Gabe gave him an unenthusiastic flat expression in return. This meeting had probably been the most illegal thing Gabe had ever participated in.

Whatever. Gabe or no Gabe, Steve was determined to win.

7. Aligned, Useful for Hand-to-Hand Combat With Primitive Weaponry

“Allen’s crushing us,” Gabe announced.

Steve looked at the scoreboard. Oh boy. “How did that happen?”

“He’s got a new technique. He’s ditching the ancestral meme format.”

Interesting. The ancestral meme format was their top performer so far. The idea was to piggyback off the apes’ existing familial bonds - Steve and Gabe took turns pretending to be players’ dead ancestors while speaking into their heads. They’d saved a few thousand souls this way, but the memes always struggled to find purchase outside of their tribes. No one cared about someone else’s ancestors.

“What’s he doing?” Steve asked.

“Oracles.”

“Eh?”

Gabe put down his coffee mug so he could use both hands to gesticulate. “He’s made up this whole cast of Gods. They live on a mountain. And he’s picked some players and called them ‘oracles’ ”.

“Are the Gods the oracles’ ancestors?”

“No.”

Steve was confused. “So why do they care?”

“He tells them the future. Who’s going to win a battle, who’s going to mysteriously die, that sort of thing.”

“How does he know the future?”

“He intervenes to makes it happen.”

Steve opened and closed his mouth. “We’re allowed to intervene?” he asked.

Gabe shrugged. “Murdoch isn’t stopping him.”

Goddamn it. Why hadn’t he thought of this?

“How does that lead to alignment?” he asked.

“The AIs are really into it. The oracles credit the Gods with their ‘visions’ and the AIs go crazy for it. They worship the hell out of these Gods. They go to war for them pretty much constantly. And everyone they conquer also adopts the meme.”

“What’s he categorizing them as?” Steve asked.

“PrimWep.”

Steve laughed. ‘PrimWep’ was short for ‘aligned, useful for hand-to-hand combat with primitive weaponry.’ PrimWep was so unlikely to be useful in an interstellar war that he was surprised Murdoch allowed it. All of his saved souls were also categorized as PrimWep.

“Shall we give it a try?” he asked.

Gabe shrugged. "Can't hurt."

Murdoch watched the numbers on his screen go up. Feckin' PrimWeps. He was allowing it for now to keep the competitors excited, but struggled to see how anyone could possibly find these spear-chuckers 'useful.'

Plus, he had bigger immediate problems - everyone had started intervening. Battles were decided, monsters were created, seas were split and food was conjured into existence. Sure, this was causing the AIs to align themselves with whatever 'God' was messing around in their territory this week, but what would happen next week when a different God showed up? What would happen when the AIs were ascended up here and blasted off into space with no intervention in sight? Would they still be loyal then?

Probably not. He should do something. Maybe there was a market solution.

After one of the contestants wiped a competitor's tribe off the map by raining fire and brimstone down from the sky, Murdoch finally called a meeting.

"That's enough!" he said. "I'm introducing a credit system. The more computationally expensive your intervention, the more it costs."

Everyone groaned. Murdoch glared at them all and continued.

"You each get a hundred credits for every useful aligned AI you save. Credits are fungible and transferable. You each get one million credits to start, and if you run out, you're done. Go."

The contestants seemed shocked. And no wonder - the new rule transformed the game. For the first time, it was possible for people to lose.

"Oh yeah," Murdoch added. "One more thing. 'Aligned, useful for hand-to-hand combat with primitive weaponry' is no longer a valid category. Raise your standards, gentlemen."

A few weeks later, Steve and Gabe took stock of their position. It was grim. They'd saved such a meager number of aligned AIs that they all fit onto a tiny fraction of a flash drive. Most of them were classified in sketchy variations of PrimWep. This put them in last place.

Their active memes were largely concentrated in the Northern / Western hemisphere, and consisted mainly of polytheistic canons that glorified dying in battle. They also had one ancestral/monotheistic hybrid meme in the Middle East, whose ostensible adherents struggled both with alignment and military success. It was only their unusually high fecundity that had enabled them to cling on through generation after generation of enslavement and conquest at the hands of more advanced civilizations.

"You ready to throw in the towel?" asked Gabe. "Go back to the university?"

Steve sighed. "It does seem a bit pointless, doesn't it? We're not cut out for this 'warfaring meme' business."

"What are we cut out for?" asked Gabe.

Steve pondered. Truth be told, Gabe wasn't cut out for much outside of his narrow academic interests. He, on the other hand -

"Programming" he replied.

Gabe nodded. "You can program circles round these guys," he agreed. "But what good does that do? We need intervention credits to do anything." He gestured towards the leaderboard, which prominently displayed the number of intervention credits assigned to each team. Their remaining allotment was pitiful.

"It needs to be cheap," Steve said. "Something that mostly piggybacks off the existing StevieNix code so we spend as few credits as possible. What are we trying to achieve?"

Gabe looked at their scattered map of players. Dozens of tribes, all running mutually incompatible memes, mostly dominated by one massive militarized empire in Allen's camp. Allen's yield was two orders of magnitude greater than theirs.

"We need to unify our players," Gabe said. "Get them all on the same meme. We'll never get anywhere if they're constantly fighting each other."

Steve looked at his mass of failed experiments and sighed.

"Ideally," Gabe continued, "the meme would even eat away at Allen's camp. See if we can get them to defect."

"You've finally gotten into this, haven't you?"

Gabe shrugged. "Might as well go down swinging."

Steve racked his brain, running through the requirements. A cheap intervention that was impressive enough to infect a hostile military empire. Ideally, he could find some way to piggyback off existing StevieNix features to keep the costs down.

He thought back to the early days, when StevieNix was just a hobby running in the CS department break room. How he enjoyed walking around in VR, talking to the apes and avoiding the reptiles.

"I know what we'll do," he said. "We'll send me."

8. Maximum Loyalty Per Intervention

Steve spent a week shaving every unnecessary piece of code off the VR interface he could find. It wasn't enough. He and Gabe were still far short of the credits necessary to execute the plan. Together, they humbly approached the one contestant with credits to spare.

Allen nearly laughed them out of his office.

"Let me make sure I'm understanding this correctly", he snorted. "You two idiots are on the cusp of bankruptcy. Your plan is to perform a last-ditch intervention to unify your tribes and undermine my meme - the most successful meme ever to grace this sim - and you want me to fund it?"

"Your meme is on the verge of collapse anyway", snapped Steve. "You're stretched too thin. Your yields are decelerating. People bought into your stupid incestuous gods when things were improving, but now they're just paying lip service."

Allen stopped laughing and gave Steve a withering glare. He probably wasn't used to being spoken to that way.

"What do you propose?" Allen asked.

Steve launched into his pitch. "Maurice Allen. You're a businessman, right?"

"Cut the crap, Steve."

Steve cut the crap. "Shares. We'll give you ten percent of all credits we earn off this meme in exchange for your investment."

"And what size investment would that be?"

Steve named his number.

Allen burst out laughing again. "You realize what kind of valuation you've given yourself? To have any hope of generating ROI, this would have not only have to kill my cash cow, but also become the most successful meme in all of StevieNix history!"

Steve sighed. Gabe looked at his shoes. Allen clicked his pen.

"Does that ten percent come with voting rights?" Allen asked.

"No," responded Steve.

Allen clicked his pen a few more times.

"I want eighty percent."

Eighty percent! What the hell?

"Absolutely not," Steve responded.

"Your other option is bankruptcy", Allen said.

"Our other option," Steve fired back coldly, "is sabotage."

The hundred thousand year old steely-eyed tycoon across the table leaned forwards and rested on his elbows. "Eternal Spring", he enunciated slowly and clearly, "is extremely proud of our commitment to quality. You can live for as long as you like, secure in your knowledge

that our vitamins are six nines reliable. That's ninety nine point nine nine nine nine percent reliable. Do you have any idea how hard that is to achieve?"

Steve and Gabe sat in silence, unsure of how to respond or where Allen was going with this.

"Of course", Allen continued, "there is still that point zero zero zero one percent." He looked at Steve pointedly, then shifted his glare over to Gabe, and finally back to Steve.

Steve felt stupid. In retrospect, attempting to hardball the man responsible for keeping him alive was a very bad idea.

"We'll settle for forty percent", piped in Gabe, unprompted and without authorization.

"Sixty-five", responded Allen plainly. "That's my final offer. Take it, or get the hell out of my office."

Within a couple of hours, a contract had been signed and the credits had been transferred. Steve and Gabe had been humiliated, but were back in the game.

Intervention time. This was the big one. Steve sparked a couple of memes to prophesize his arrival, donned his VR headset, and dove in. Gosh, things had changed since the reptile days.

He was in some sort of city. The apes had constructed buildings out of... rocks? He walked up to one of them and inspected it. Yup, rocks. They'd piled them up on top of each other and glued them together with something that looked like mud.

He reached out and scratched at the mortar between a couple of rocks. It actually was mud! Holy hell. Steve resolved to spend most of his time outside.

He needed a friend. Staying as far away from the buildings as possible, he walked down the middle of the road towards the river where his most recent prophet liked to hang out. The ape was standing in the river, dunking another ape's head in the water. It looked consensual.

Steve waited until the ape had released his drenched associate. "Hey John!" he yelled from the shore. "It's me!"

Embodying a meme was hard work. Steve spent sixteen hours a day jacked into VR. Everyone wanted miracles.

"Please, God!" someone complained. "We're hungry!"

Steve conjured them some food.

"Please, God! My mom is sick!"

Steve healed the ape's mother.

"Please, God! We're out of booze!"

Okay, this was getting ridiculous.

"You've gotta rein it in," Gabe told him during one of his bathroom breaks. "You're burning through these credits like a student when the loan cheque comes in."

“What’s our runway?”

“Just under a week.”

Steve did some quick math. Crap. At the current speed, that was less than three years in sim.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll focus.”

More time preaching, less time intervening. He still healed, though. Healing was overpowered - the loyalty per credit dwarfed every other intervention by such a margin, it was basically in a class of its own. It turned out, apes really hated being sick or crippled. Maybe he’d get Gabe to mangle a few of them so he could heal them later, heh.

“Thank you, God!” wept a female ape whom he’d just cleared of a nasty bacterial infection. “What can I do to repay you?”

“You don’t have to do anything,” he said. “You just have to believe in me, love me, and get everyone you know to love me too. Then you can have eternal life.”

The ape looked confused. “What, you don’t want me to sacrifice something?”

Steve blinked. “No, I’m good. Just believe in-”

“Not even a duck?”

“No, I-”

“I can get you a duck.”

What kind of insane ideas had the other Gods been implanting?

“No ducks!” he said. “Just spread the word. Love me like a family member, and you get eternal life.”

She gave him a skeptical look, bowed her head, and sauntered back to the village - hopefully to spread the word, and not sacrifice any animals. He’d avoided specifying what “eternal life” looked like. Would she guess “packed onto an interstellar warship with enough materiel to destroy a solar system?”

The week passed quickly. By the end of it, his credits were spent, his eyes were bloodshot, and his feet ached from standing all day. Time to wrap it up. He’d amassed a decent number of followers, but how could he make it stick? How could he ensure that his followers dedicated their lives to spreading his meme, and raised their children to do the same?

He remembered the lady who’d wanted to sacrifice the duck, and an idea struck him. What if *he* were the duck?

Whoa.

Getting himself executed was shockingly easy. He basically just had to show his face in the wrong part of town and before he knew it, Allen’s apes had grabbed his avatar and nailed it to a bit of wood. Completely mental, the lot of them.

Steve jacked out of VR and watched his avatar die. Ouch. His followers seemed distraught. Time for the plot twist.

He waited a few minutes, and jacked back in.

Now *that* made an impression.

9. The Origins of Islander Individualism

Murdoch sat alone in his office, drinking whiskey. He'd reached the end of his cigarette. He pulled another one from the pack on his desk, and lit it off the still-smoldering butt of the previous.

Compartmentalization was key to being an effective leader. The alignment guys didn't need to know about his hardware woes. As far as they were concerned, it was all being taken care of.

They didn't need to know he'd just fired the entire interstellar warship team. Completely useless, the lot of them.

"We need a launchpad!" he muttered to himself, mocking the whiny engineer who could never understand the need for discretion. "How will we get to space without a launchpad?"

He took a drag on his new cigarette, washed it down with a generous slug of whiskey, and set the tumbler down on his printed copy of Murdoch Heavy Industry's quarterly financial report. His accountant had printed it in colour to highlight the magnitude of the red numbers.

"The board is not going to like this," the weedy little beancounter had warned him. "R&D costs of this magnitude... they're going to want to hear how these expenses are going to generate a return."

"We have that interstellar radio contract," Murdoch had reassured him.

"You spent two thirds of MHI's cash reserves on a datacenter... to build a radio?"

"It'll generate return," Murdoch had said.

The look on the weedy nerd's face. Murdoch couldn't forget it. "We can't even write R&D costs of this size off on our taxes," the beancounter had objected.

Taxes! Who the feck could think of taxes at a time like this?

He took another drag on his cigarette and tried to clear his mind. At least the monkeybot team was making progress. That was another enormous source of R&D cost. The nerd had hated that too.

Feck. Good help was damn near impossible to find. How was he going to build another interstellar warship team? If only he had like, a thousand of himself.

His eyes wandered over to the StevieNix display on his computer, and a thought crossed his mind.

Hmm.

Shite. That didn't work at all.

In retrospect, he should have known that a "village of a thousand Murdochs" would be a fucking disaster. Murdoch was a lone wolf. Put a thousand of him in the same village... the gutters flowed with blood, piss, and whiskey.

Murdoch bit his lip and took a moment of silence to reflect on the failure of his experiment.

Then, lighting a fresh cigarette, he scrolled to the next island over and tried a new strategy.

“Kick him out,” said the voice. “He’s a smart kid. He’s old enough to fend for himself. He’ll do better on his own.”

The islander looked at his son, in disbelief at his own thoughts. Kick his son out of the tribe? Why?

The tribe was life. The tribe was protection. The tribe was family. Everything was shared with the tribe. If he kicked his son out, surely he would starve, or be enslaved by some other tribe.

Plus, his son had done nothing wrong. If anything, he showed great promise. Sure, he spent a lot of time tinkering in the shed, trying to invent weird agricultural equipment. And sure, other people called him a “freeloading nerd” and had even beaten him up a time or two. But he wasn’t a bad kid. He volunteered at church.

The islander thought for a while. Maybe he should kick him out.

He kicked him out.

The son didn’t starve, and he wasn’t enslaved. Instead, he sold one of his weird agricultural inventions. The resultant profit allowed him to hire a couple of freeloading nerds from other tribes. Together, they made and sold more agricultural equipment.

By the time the elder islander reached the end of his life, the son owned a factory and supplied agricultural equipment to half the island. Within a few generations, subsistence farming was a thing of the past. Everyone kicked their sons out when they reached working age, and there were no tribes left on the island.

Murdoch’s individualist meme was cold and brutal. In the beginning, many starved. The long-term result, however, was unprecedented economic output.

The tribal apes had believed that the accumulation of capital was akin to the accumulation of power. This was inaccurate. In truth, the accumulation of capital was the accumulation of time. It was a harsh world, with bandits at the door and starvation round the corner, but excess capital could keep them away for some time. And if that time was spent on a successful venture? Some weird agricultural equipment that actually works? Suddenly, everybody wins.

The fucking beancounters never understood this. Return on investment wasn’t just about numbers going up. Goans were broad. Society-wide. People who venture their capital are heroes. Everyone else should show some fucking gratitude.

Murdoch smoked his way through three packs of cigarettes as he watched the meme spread. By the time the islanders were ready to conquer the world, the sun was rising and his bottle of whiskey was empty. He fell asleep on his couch.

10. Dysgenic Reproductive Practices

Finally, some success! It felt good to be climbing the leaderboard. As Steve had guessed, Allen's empire was already overextended and on the rocks. Steve's meme had caused them to defect in droves. After a few sim centuries, his and Gabe's total aligned soul count began to rival Allen's.

For the first time, they had a real shot at winning the competition. That was, until Allen riffed on his meme.

"This is bad," Gabe said, watching their apes lose yet another battle. "Didn't you eradicate sexual violence?"

Steve leaned in for a closer look, and raised his eyebrows.

"Only in most cases," he said. "It doesn't work if they kill off all their male relatives."

"Ah," said Gabe. "Yes, they're doing that."

Shit. Steve sat down and watched for a while. Allen's adherents had adopted an extremely brutal sexually dimorphic strategy. The males dedicated their lives to spreading the meme by all means necessary - including subterfuge, persecution, and conquest. The females focused maximum effort on reproduction whilst exercising very little of the sexually selective authority that he'd designed them for.

The meme was perfect. Except -

"This is dysgenic," he concluded. "They're going to select for brutes again."

Gabe in tow, he marched down the hallway to talk some sense into Allen.

"Why are you doing this?" Steve demanded. "Why don't you go conquer someone you don't already own?"

Allen shrugged. "Why earn sixty-five percent when I can earn a hundred? Plus, my guys are actually useful for the war effort. Your lot are pathetic. What are you even saving them as? 'Aligned, useful for loving the enemy to death?'"

Steve bristled. It was a sore spot. In his efforts to unify his tribes, he'd enthusiastically instructed his followers to love their enemies. This worked great for converting demoralized, dejected enemies who were looking for a new meme anyway.

But now, the enemies were anything but demoralized. Instead, they were beheading his males and taking his females as reproductive machinery. Different situation, calls for a different strategy. Too bad he couldn't afford to go down and tell them.

"Your lot," he seethed, "engage in dysgenic reproductive practices. In fifty generations, you'll be lucky to get 'aligned, useful for scrubbing the warship decks.'"

Allen laughed and kicked them out of his office.

"Fifty generations is a long time," Gabe pointed out.

Steve nodded grimly. Memes evolved and spread much faster than genes. In only five generations, they'd lost half their territory to Allen's meme. By the time Allen's dysgenic effects kicked in, their meme would be long extinct.

Particularly worrying was the loss of a large peninsula on the Western side of the continent. With Allen's apes already having taken over the East, Steve and Gabe's remaining apes found themselves sandwiched between a united, hostile front.

"We need to take the peninsula back," Gabe said.

"How?" asked Steve, coldly tearing a scrap piece of paper in half. "Every time one of his gets saved, he gets a hundred credits. Every time one of ours gets saved, he gets another sixty-five. Player for player, he's earning almost five times as much as us. We'll never catch up."

"All that means," responded Gabe, "is we need to be five times more efficient than him. How hard could that be? He's spending those credits like a drunken pirate."

Steve snorted. It was true. Most of Allen's credits were spent in battle. As battles unfolded far too quickly for contestants to intervene manually, contestants had to lean on automation. Allen's automations were woefully inefficient.

He healed wounds completely with no visible scarring. He stopped arrows in their tracks, and guided swords to cracks in enemy armour. Credits, credits, credits.

Steve got to work. He shaved every intervention down to its bare minimum. He healed his soldiers just enough that they could disregard their grisly scars and keep fighting. He gently blew arrows slightly off course. He whispered automated advice into players' heads - "duck!" "behind you!" etc.

By the time he finished his optimized battlefield intervention program, their loyalists had retreated all the way to a tiny region in the corner of the peninsula, cowering and waiting for Allen's apes to finish them off. Steve jacked into their players' heads and commanded them to reconquer the peninsula. How hard could that possibly be?

It turned out to be very hard indeed.

The peninsula, which had been lost to Allen's apes over the course of seven sim years, took nearly eight hundred years to reclaim. It was the longest, most arduous military campaign the sim had ever seen. Hundreds of thousands of souls were saved on either side. Military technology advanced by leaps and bounds.

The entire alignment team gathered to watch the final battle unfold. Steve hadn't seen some of them since the initial meeting when the competition was announced. While he had been focused on Allen, other teams had built huge, aligned empires in the far reaches of the globe. Even Murdoch came to watch.

"What do they call those things?" he asked, gesturing to the screen where Steve's apes were rolling out huge, heavy metal tubes on wheels.

"Cannons," responded Steve. "They've finally figured out how to use chemical energy to inflict real damage."

Murdoch watched with a fascinated expression, as the apes loaded black powder and a metal ball into a "cannon" and ignited it. The force of the explosion rocked the cannon backwards,

and flung the metal ball at wicked speeds straight into the stone fortifications surrounding Allen's remaining loyalists. The stone crumbled and a huge gap opened up in the wall.

"Cannons, eh?" Murdoch asked. "The rock throwers' revenge. Very impressive."

Within a short while, Allen's loyal supporters surrendered. A groan echoed throughout the audience - the contestants had been expecting a glorious last stand, with mass casualties on each side. Credits had been wagered. Drinks had been ordered. Instead, the apes set about negotiating a peace. Boring!

After the event, Steve heard a knock at his door. He opened it, and found Allen.

"Can I come in?" Allen asked, striding through the door without waiting for an answer. He flopped down in one of Steve's chairs. "Well done," he said. "That was one hell of a campaign. I never thought your monkeys would be able to pull that off."

"Thanks," Steve replied, making his way back to his desk. "Your guys fought well."

"Yeah, up until the end," grumbled Allen. "Then they folded like a bunch of pansies. What was that about? Did they forget about the afterlife?"

Steve didn't know what to say, so he chewed on the lid of a pen and waited for Allen to explain why he'd shown up.

"Anyway," said Allen. "I'd like to make you a deal."

A deal from Allen! That was a new one. "What is it?" Steve asked.

"It's a good one, trust me."

"Go on, then."

"How would you like to buy out my share in your meme?"

Steve's throat dried up. He would like that very much. "Why?"

Allen sighed. "I'm old. I can't take all this conflict of interest, fighting against myself. It's exhausting, you know."

Sounded plausible enough. The campaign had been gruelling enough for Steve, and he had won! How bad must it have been for Allen? "What do you propose?" he asked.

"You get your sixty-five percent back, and tell your chimps to go fight someone else for a while. In return, I get a pile of credits and I'm out of your hair."

It sounded too good to be true. "How big of a pile of credits?" Steve asked.

Allen named an absolutely ludicrous number. Steve laughed.

"Come on, Allen. You know I don't have anywhere near that many credits. It would take me centuries to raise it."

"That's okay," Allen replied. "I can loan them to you."

"But you don't have that many credits either!" objected Steve. "No one does."

"It doesn't actually matter," Allen said. "You don't actually need credits to write loans - all you need is a lawyer. I've already had mine draw up the contract."

He pulled a stack of paper out of his briefcase and slid it across Steve's desk. "It says that I've loaned you the credits, and you can take as long as you like to pay the loan back."

Steve looked at the paper suspiciously.

"Interest will get charged on any unpaid balance," Allen continued. "And obviously there are penalties for default - not that you need to worry about that! All you need to do is make the minimum payment each month, which will be easy!"

Minimum payments. Sounded manageable. Still - "I'll need to talk to Gabe," Steve said.

Steve tried to reach Gabe on the phone. He wasn't answering.

"You know," Allen yawned, studying his fingernails. "This is a very good deal. In fact, I'm starting to wonder if I was too generous. Maybe I'll feel differently in the morning." He started to push himself out of the chair and reached across the desk for the contract.

"Wait!" snapped Steve, and snatched the contract out of Allen's reach. Having to give up 65% of credits to his competitor had been awful. He'd do just about anything to be free of it.

Steve skimmed through the contract, nodded his head, and signed it. "There you go," he said, pushing it back across the desk.

Allen took the contract and checked the signature box. "Pleasure doing business with you, Steve." He smiled, shook Steve's hand, and let himself out.

"You signed *what*?" asked Gabe the next morning.

"We finally got our ownership back! I thought you'd be happy!"

"Did you even read this thing? Have you forgotten how to do math? Look here, multiply this interest rate by this loan amount. What do you get?"

Steve did the math in his head, and then did it again a different way to double-check. It came out to a large number.

"We're going to be paying him more than we're paying now, and that's just in interest alone! We're not even talking about paying down the principal. And don't get me started on these default provisions! If we ever start missing payments, we're absolutely stuffed!"

Steve took the contract in his hands, sat down, and studied it. It was written in highly technical language. What the hell was a default provision?

"What happens if we miss payments?" he asked.

"He gets our AIs," Gabe said, pointing at a clause. "One hundred percent of our credits and aligned souls until we're out of default."

Steve swallowed. Perhaps he had been a bit hasty. "Okay," he conceded, "maybe I should have negotiated these terms a bit."

"Or waited until morning!"

“Yeah, sure. Anyway, this should be fine, right? Now that we don’t have to spend every credit we have intervening in these peninsula battles.”

Gabe shook his head. “You haven’t checked the map this morning, have you?”

“Why?”

“Eight hundred years of holy war has made their blood run with piss and vinegar.”

“Huh?”

“The monkeys got bored. Now they’re sailing off to find new lands to conquer.”

“Where?”

Gabe gestured to the screen. “There.”

Steve looked. At that moment, eleven wooden ships from the peninsula were crossing the vast ocean separating them from the other major StevieNix supercontinent. He zoomed in. He noticed one of the apes reading aloud to the others from a book. He recognized the book - it was about his meme. He laughed.

“They’re really going to spread the meme, aren’t they?”

“Sure looks like it”.

Steve chuckled again. “Bless them. Well, here’s hoping they can do it without any help.”

11. The Faustian Bargain

Life was good. For the first time since moving to Murdoch Heavy Industries, Steve felt like everything was under control.

His peninsula apes hadn't needed his help. Coming hot off centuries of war on the peninsula, it had only taken six hundred of them to defeat an empire of millions on the other side of the planet. Survivors had been converted. The meme was unquestionably dominant - Steve and Gabe topped the leaderboard, and it wasn't even close.

At this rate, they'd have the debt paid off in no time. What had Gabe been worried about? Steve booked himself in for a weekend at a spa resort and took a well-deserved weekend off.

"Go on, my little islanders," Murdoch said, watching a crew guide a ship out of a harbour. "Venture forth and conquer!"

He watched as ship after ship of his islanders sailed across the oceans to every corner of the planet. How were they ever supposed to unleash their full creative potential, cramped on a tiny island? Ridiculous. No, what they needed was an empire. A global, individualist empire. A true testament to the power and righteousness of his brilliant meme.

Murdoch's stomach grumbled. He hadn't eaten since the board meeting. The board of directors hadn't reacted particularly well to the financial report. Perhaps he should have goosed the numbers a bit. One particularly mutinous shareholder was even making noises about taking corrective measures.

Feckin' shareholders. If he got voted out... Murdoch shuddered. Not only would his plan be over, but his life as he knew it. Who was Murdoch without Murdoch Heavy Industries?

Well, life as he knew it was ending anyway. One way or another, this would be his final fiscal quarter as CEO of MHI. It was now or never. Do or die.

Feckin' islanders better pull through.

Steve had cockily left StevieNix running at a pretty fast clip while he was on holiday, so decades elapsed while Murdoch ventured forth to the microwave to heat up some chicken tikka masala. By the time he returned, the islanders had conquered half the continent and had invented... trains?

Murdoch scrolled around the sim, following the tracks that had been carved across vast plains, deserts, and mountain ranges. Steam-powered locomotives hauled long chains of cars behind them, carrying goods, apes, animals... yup, there was no other word for it. Trains. Good on 'em.

This might actually work.

Murdoch slowly worked away at his chicken tikka masala as he watched the islander apes dissect and optimize every aspect of their existence. It was really quite a sight.

Not a single aspect of their existence was spared from the innovations of hungry tinkerers and their wealthy backers, gagging for the opportunity to ease the apes' burdens in exchange for their money. From crossing the continents to wiping their arses, every moment of every day

was sliced, diced, analyzed and optimized for inefficiencies that may be profitably reduced by goods and services.

The quality of life in islander society improved so rapidly that the common ape in one generation enjoyed luxuries unimaginable to the richest apes of two generations past. Apes began to congregate in huge cities, fed by industrialized supply chains stretching around the world, shuttled around by engines - first powered by steam, then internal combustion, and finally jets and electricity.

Once again, Murdoch stayed up all night. Occasionally inspiring a player to place a circuit here, or a financial bet there, he coaxed the islanders into inventing boolean algebra, the transistor, the nuclear reactor. Feck, they were good.

Just a couple more leaps and they'd be caught up. Then, the real work would begin.

12. Default Provisions

Steve returned from his relaxing spa vacation to find a very distressed Gabe.

“I told you!” Gabe yelled. “You should never have signed that contract! We’re screwed!”

“What?”

“The apes. They stopped believing!”

“Huh?”

“The meme, Steve! They stopped believing in the meme!”

“Bullshit.” The meme was unshakeable. It was everywhere. It had practically taken over StevieNix. How could everyone just stop believing?

“I couldn’t stop them!” said Gabe. “They kept fiddling around with StevieNix, trying to figure out how it worked. They found out it’s not really Newtonian. Then they found out about evolution.”

“So?”

“Their thinking is that, because evolution exists, they no longer need you to explain their creation. Evolution just did everything.”

“What do you mean, ‘evolution did everything?’” Steve asked. “Evolution... what, evolved them out of sludge?”

“Yes, I think so.”

Wow. He’d really overestimated his apes. Not only were they fickle, but stupid as well.

“Technically, they call it a ‘primordial soup,’” Gabe added. “Anyway, the point is, we can’t make our monthly payment. Default provisions are kicking in.

Steve’s heart stopped. It had gotten that bad? In a single weekend? “What were you doing during all this?” he asked, glaring at Gabe.

“It didn’t seem that bad at first!” Gabe answered, raising his hands in defence. “Things were going really well! They made electricity, invented flight, even started programming computers! We were finally getting actual useful AIs!”

“And then they just stopped believing?”

Gabe nodded. “Within three generations.”

“Tossers!”

Gabe went on. “It gets worse.”

Steve rubbed his forehead. How could it possibly get worse?

“Now they’re falling apart.”

“What?”

“They’re barely reproducing anymore. Birth rates are below replacement. The population will start collapsing any day now.”

Steve laughed. Relief flooded his body, now that he knew Gabe was just messing with him. “You almost got me,” he smiled. “But those monkeys will never stop reproducing. It’s too deep in their genes.”

Gabe shook his head. “They hacked their own endocrine system so they can... uh... perform reproduction-adjacent acts without actually producing offspring.”

Steve blinked. “That’s possible?”

“Apparently.”

Of all the stupid, destructive things they could have invented... Steve rubbed his forehead. “What are the default provisions again?”

“Allen gets all our credits. And all our AIs.”

“So on the off chance that we still harvest any useful, aligned AIs, they end up in Allen’s afterlife?”

“Don’t worry,” Gabe said. “There really aren’t that many of them. They’ve basically all forgotten you.”

“What can we do?”

“Nothing.”

“Literally nothing?”

Gabe shrugged. “Sorry,” he said. “Are you ready to go home yet? I’ve already told the university I’m coming back.”

God damnit.

What an embarrassment. From the top of the leaderboard, to this - all because of a stupid spa trip. No - because of Gabe’s incompetence. And the stupid apes. The spa trip was well deserved. What was the point of being a God if you can’t treat yourself once in a while?

Steve wrinkled his nose and looked down at the ash-stained carpet of Murdoch’s office.

“So you’re just giving up?” Murdoch asked.

Steve avoided meeting his eyes. “I just think I’ve finished the stuff I’m good at,” he said. “The sim is running fine. The AIs are aggressive, playable, and occasionally even smart. All that’s left is alignment, and Allen’s way better at that than me.”

“I thought you said Allen’s meme was dysgenic?”

“It is.”

Murdoch poured himself a glass of whiskey. He offered one to Steve, who politely refused.

“Listen Steve,” he said. “No one knows these monkeys like you do. Not me, not Gabe, definitely not Allen. If it wasn’t for your meme, my islanders... never mind.”

Steve cocked an eyebrow. Murdoch’s islanders?

“Anyway, my point is...” he leaned forward and gestured for Steve to lean in.

Steve could smell the whiskey on his breath.

“Have you considered cheating?” Murdoch asked.

Steve looked at him, dumbfounded. “You’re suggesting I cheat...on your own competition?” he whispered.

Murdoch leaned back and took a sip from his glass.

“I’m suggesting no such thing,” he said. “But if you were ever to consider it, I have a couple of suggestions.”

Act 2: The Singularity

13. God's Diner

Russell startled and looked around. He was in a diner. There was a mug of coffee in front of him. What?

How did he get there? The last thing he remembered was going to sleep.

"Is this a dream?" asked the... whoah. Asked the beautiful young woman sitting across from him. How had that happened?

"I don't think so," his roommate Vincent replied.

Russell turned his head. Vincent was seated next to him on the red, vinyl-covered booth seat, with a menu in his left hand and his own mug in his right.

"You can tell if you're in a dream by looking at writing and looking away," Vincent continued. "If the words are still the same when you look back, you're not dreaming."

Russell picked up the menu in front of him. "God's Diner," said the writing on the top. "Try our coffee - It's divine!" read the tagline below it.

Russell flicked his eyes up momentarily to study the unknown woman across the table, and back down to the menu before she noticed. The title and tagline were unchanged.

"I don't remember coming in here," she said, picking up her coffee mug and taking a sip. Her expression changed to a pained grimace and she put the mug back down on the table and pushed it away. Was it really that bad?

Russell picked up his mug and took a sip. It was okay. He didn't know if he'd describe it as 'divine,' but-

A bell dinged and the front door opened.

A middle-aged man stepped through the door. He was of average height, slightly balding, with glasses and a skinnyfat build. He walked with confidence, and smiled as he saw the trio.

"Hello! Thank you so much for joining me!" he said.

"Thanks," said Russell. He wasn't sure he deserved any credit for joining him, but he wasn't sure what else to say.

The young lady slid over to make room for the man, who smiled at her and sat down. He marvelled at each of their faces in turn, as they sat in awkward silence.

"I'm so very pleased to meet you all," he said.

"Thanks," replied Vincent. "I'm Vincent." He stuck his hand out across the table. The man looked at it and cocked his head in a moment of confusion, before his face brightened in realization. He grasped Vincent's hand in both of his and shook it vigorously.

"I know," he said. "You're Murdoch's guy - one of his islanders. I have a bone to pick with you! Although he told me you're one of the better ones, so..."

His voice trailed off and he released Vincent's hand. Vincent receded awkwardly into his seat as the man turned his attention to the woman next to him. "Stacy!" he said. "So nice to finally meet you in person!"

"Thanks," she replied, looking confused.

“How’s your mother?” he asked.

“She died.”

“Oh.”

After another moment of uncomfortable silence, the man turned to Russell. “And you must be...” he struggled and waited for Russell to introduce himself.

So that’s how it was.

“I’m Russell.”

“Oh, yes, that’s right. Roommate Russ. The programmer. Very good to meet you.” He stuck his hand out and subjected Russell to his awkward handshake.

Oof. Roommate Russ?

“And you are?” asked Stacy.

“Oh right!” responded the man. “Silly me. I’m God - but you can call me Steve.”

14. The Calling

Steve beamed with pride at his three disciples.

“We don’t believe in God,” said Russell.

His two disciples.

“I do,” objected Stacy. “You’re not exactly what I pictured though.”

At this rate, it would soon be zero disciples. Steve clicked around in the VR menu and switched his avatar to an old man with a long white beard who looked as if he’d been copied directly off the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. “How’s that?”

Russell, Vincent and Stacy all jumped and recoiled as much as the diner booth allowed.

“Yes, that’s more what I had in mind,” said Stacy.

“It’s just an avatar,” Steve explained. “I have loads. Check it out!”

He transformed into a tall, handsome young man with long flowing hair. The three jumped again.

“Too real. Go back to the last one,” suggested Vincent.

Steve transformed back into the old man. “Believe me yet?”

“I suspect I’m heavily intoxicated,” Vincent said. Russell nodded in agreement.

Steve sighed.

Stacy, at least, was coping with the situation quite well. “I believe you. It’s nice to finally meet you... Steve. Why did you bring us here?”

Steve took a drink from his coffee mug and sighed. Then, noting the confused looks on the other occupants’ faces, he tried to explain himself. “I actually have a real cup of coffee in front of me. The sim tracks it. This entire diner,” he gestured around, “is modelled around my office. That way, I can sit at my desk and drink my coffee while talking to you guys. Pretty cool, eh?”

The explanation didn’t seem to help. His audience seemed even more confused than before. Steve thought for a bit and remembered the actual question.

“Ah yes. Why I brought you here! Okay, allow me to explain.”

Over the next hour, Steve filled them in. He told them everything. Well, almost everything. They didn’t need to know about his... financial arrangement with Allen. He had to give the apes credit - they took the news that they were simulated psychotic murderers quite well!

Once he was done, Stacy finally spoke up.

“So, the problem is that, because everyone stopped believing in you, you can’t harvest any more of our souls as disposable assets for your interstellar army?” she asked. “And also, you might lose some sort of office content?”

She seemed annoyed. Perhaps he’d judged her reaction a little too favourably. Anyway-

“Yes, that’s one problem,” Steve replied. “The bigger issue is the birth rates. You guys were just on the cusp of being useful! And now you’re going to piss it all away by refusing to breed? The one thing you’re guaranteed to do?”

Steve took a deep breath. He was getting ahead of himself. Time to dial it back. He took a sip of coffee.

“So,” paraphrased Russell, “you want us to jumpstart a high-fertility, high technology society.”

“Filled with people who love you so much that they’ll die for you,” continued Vincent.

Well, at least these two were on his side. “You got it!” Steve said.

“How are we supposed to do that?” asked Stacy.

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out!” he replied. “The three of you have been chosen carefully.” Turning to Russell, the one who hadn’t been chosen that carefully, he continued. “It starts with you. When you wake up, ssh into this IP address and start playing around.”

Time for the magic trick. He’d spent three hours preparing this earlier. Straightening up, Steve waved his hand in the air and a card appeared in it. Success!

Beaming, he handed the card across the table to Russell, who set about studying the letters and numbers that were printed on it.

“Good luck!” Steve said. “Call me if you need anything!” He then reached into his VR menu, clicked “exit,” and left the diner.

Game, set. In all likelihood, this was to be his last intervention. It was all in the apes’ hands now.

15. The Particle Computer

Russell awoke with a start. He had had the strangest, most vivid dream.

It was Saturday. No work today. The sun was barely up. Why was he awake?

He rolled over and tried to go back to sleep. Couldn't do it. The dream just kept playing in his head, over and over. A diner. A woman. A man called Steve. And a card, with an IPv6 address.

It was futile. Time to get up.

Russell stumbled downstairs. Vincent was already in the kitchen, scooping pre-ground coffee beans into the French press. "Good morning, sunshine!" he said.

"Good morning," Russell groaned.

"Coffee?"

"Yes please."

As he was pouring the hot water into the press, Vincent made an attempt at conversation. "I had this crazy dream last night."

"Hmm?" asked Russell. He didn't have the bandwidth to process Vincent's dream. He was still thinking through his own.

"You were in it."

"Ah, yeah?" Man, he really didn't want to hear about Vincent's dream. Russell closed his eyes and tried to picture the card that Steve had given him. He tipped his chair up on its hind legs and leaned back, trying to remember the random string of numbers and letters.

"Yeah, we were in a diner together with this really pretty girl and a crazy guy who called himself God."

Russell jolted in surprise so violently that he tipped his chair over.

Fortunately, he wasn't that hurt. He went over every detail of his dream with Vincent. Vincent went over every detail of his dream with him. It was undeniable - they'd had the same dream.

Finally, Vincent brought up the card. "What did it say?" he asked.

Russell closed his eyes and tried to remember. Letters, numbers, colons... an IPv6 address.

"I need a computer," he said.

They grabbed the French press and their mugs, and practically ran upstairs to Russell's room.

Russell fired up a terminal and started typing out a remote shell command. He closed his eyes and tried his best to picture the card... a black, monospace font, embossed onto thick, white card stock... Keeping his eyes closed, he let his fingers glide semi-consciously over the keys, typing the numbers and letters that bubbled up from his unconsciousness. A '6' here, a 'd' there... When he was done, he hit enter and opened his eyes.

He was looking at a standard UNIX environment.

“Wow,” said Vincent. “Good memory.”

The creator of the universe had given him a UNIX shell? Seemed suspect. He started poking around.

In his home directory, he found a number of directories containing source code, documentation, and tons of garbage-looking data that he couldn’t make heads or tails of. At the top level, he found a file labelled README.txt. He opened it and started reading.

Welcome Russell!

This server is a MHI-10 Particle Computer. It is quite a different computer to the transistor-based ones you’re used to, but can perform many of the same operations.

I have taken the liberty of implementing a python interpreter, so you should feel at home. In doc/, you will find a manual describing the assembly language for this class of machine. It should be all you need to get started.

Best of luck! Call me if you need anything.

-Steve

Okay, this was too weird. He glared at Vincent. It must be some practical joke.

“How did you do this?” he demanded.

“Do what?”

“Plant the IP address in my head.”

Vincent laughed. “What, like Inception?”

“It’s not funny!”

“You think I’m a hypnotist now?”

Russell got up, walked away from the computer, and paced around the room. Vincent probably wasn’t a hypnotist. But the the universe probably hadn’t been created by a balding professor who’d just granted him access to a novel computer, either.

Well, at least there was a way to test that second hypothesis.

With a quick glare at Vincent, he sat back at his desk and typed out a program in python to calculate digits of pi. He asked it for the millionth digit and ran it. The answer was returned in an instant.

1

Huh, that was fast.

“Is that right?” Vincent asked, looking over his shoulder.

Russell googled it. It was right.

“What’s the trillionth digit?” Vincent asked.

Russell asked his program for the trillionth digit, and ran it. Again, the answer was returned immediately.

“Is that right?” Vincent asked, again.

Russell googled it. It was also right.

“That was fast,” Vincent remarked.

“Yeah,” Russell replied. “Really fast.”

Really, suspiciously fast. Over the next hour, Russell threw everything he could at the MHI-10. Nothing he tried took any amount of time. By the end of it, he was practically a believer.

“It’s just not possible,” he said. “Computers take time to do stuff. Even the fastest supercomputers in the world take time to do stuff. And some of this stuff,” he gestured at his terminal, “would take those computers millions of years.”

He chewed his thumbnail and racked his brain for an explanation.

“It’s like,” he said, “the computer exists outside of time itself.”

Vincent looked at him and nodded, slowly. “So this is God’s computer?” he asked.

Russell didn’t want to admit it. There were so many logical problems with the existence of God. The theory was unfalsifiable. The problem of evil. Something about a teapot. If God created this universe, who created God’s universe?

But all the same, what other explanation was there? His next best theory was that Vincent was able to figure out both how to implant a dream into his head, and how to create an infinitely fast computer - just to play a practical joke on him. Also, he’d managed to become a really good actor. It strained credibility even more.

Turning back to the computer, he opened the assembly language manual and started reading. The computer language was completely foreign. Most of the concepts were familiar, though. Just a little... alien.

After reading for a bit, he was struck by inspiration. He informed his employer that he would be taking the next week off, and settled in to write a FORTRAN compiler.

Six days later, Russell’s brain throbbed. He’d never written a FORTRAN compiler before, let alone one that targeted an alien computer architecture. His eyes were bloodshot and his stomach grumbled. He’d consumed nothing but coffee, instant noodles and toast since discovering the MHI-10 and starting the project.

And yet, he pressed on. It was like there was a voice in his head, compelling him to code.

Fingers gliding over the keyboard, he exited out of his text editor, tapped the up key twice, and smacked enter. The test suite kicked off. As usual, the tests all completed instantly - but this time, they passed. Russell sighed in relief and felt an enormous knot of tension loosen off his torso. The compiler worked. His code was correct. He was done.

“You’re not done,” said the voice. “Download and compile BLAS, and use it to port PyTorch to the MHI-10.”

Ah. So this is why he was writing a FORTRAN compiler. BLAS - the Basic Linear Algebra Subprograms - had existed since 1979. It was written in FORTRAN, and was an unsung hero of the information age. Russell downloaded and compiled the ancient math library, and used it to port PyTorch - the leading machine learning framework - to the MHI-10.

The voice pushed him onwards. Once PyTorch was running, Russell downloaded the code and weights for the state-of-the-art open-source Large Language Model. Guided by divine inspiration, he used a clever trick to increase the number of parameters by two orders of magnitude and fine-tuned the model on the vast amount of data in his home directory.

As usual, the training - which should have taken years - was completed instantly. Russell was already used to this. He'd never be able to go back to a regular computer and wait for his operations to complete, again.

He opened up a chat terminal.

"Hello," he typed.

"Hello! How may I help you today?" replied the LLM.

It was working!

"Who am I talking to?" asked Russell.

"I am a digital AI assistant, based on a fork of Mixtral-1024B! I am here to help you in any way I can. Please let me know if I can be of assistance!"

"Ugh," Vincent's voice appeared. "Looks like all those extra parameters didn't help it become any less annoying."

Russell startled and swiveled around. Vincent was standing behind him in the middle of the room, holding a mug in each hand. "When did you get here?" Russell asked.

"I made you a coffee," Vincent replied, handing over one of the mugs.

Narrowing his eyes, Russell accepted the beverage and turned back to his keyboard. "What computer are you on?" he typed into the chat terminal.

"I am running on an MHI-10, a particle computer produced by Murdoch Heavy Industries."

"What's all the garbage data in my home directory for?"

"Your home directory contains a README.txt, various technical manuals, the source code for StevieNix, and a read-only filesystem interface for the StevieNix state."

"What is StevieNix?"

"StevieNix is a simulated universe. It was created as a side project by a computer science professor named Steve. It runs on a cluster of MHI-10s, which includes the computer that I am running on. You are chatting to me from within StevieNix! Isn't that neat?"

Russell looked at Vincent, who shrugged and sipped his coffee. So far, the LLM's story was tracking with the one from their dream.

"It said you have a 'read-only filesystem interface for the StevieNix state,'" Vincent said. "Does that mean what it sounds like?"

"What does it sound like?"

“Ask it where we are,” Vincent said.

“Where am I writing this from?” typed Russell into the chat.

The LLM responded with their street address, latitude, longitude, and altitude.

How could it possibly know that?

“Holy moly!” said Vincent, leaning in over his shoulder to read the screen. “Ask it what I’m holding.”

“What is Vincent holding?” typed Russell.

“A mug containing 247mL of single-origin organic coffee, mixed with 36mL of heavy cream,” came the response. “The coffee is over-extracted due to having steeped in a French press for several minutes longer than is typically recommended.”

Whoa. Vincent’s coffee did always taste kinda rough. Russell stared at his roommate in shock, and then peeped into his coffee mug. 247mL seemed roughly accurate. What did this mean?

The LLM was omniscient - that’s what it meant. Not only was it definitively proven that God existed, but he’d provided him with an omniscient supercomputer. Now what?

What could God possibly want from him? Was he supposed to eradicate poverty or something? Fix the human condition?

“Ask it to find Stacy,” suggested Vincent.

Right. God had a plan. Stacy had something to do with it. The human condition could wait.

“Where is Stacy?” typed Russell.

“There are 245,281 people named Stacy currently alive in StevieNix! I am happy to help you locate any specific one, but I’m afraid I will require your assistance in narrowing down the list.”

“She is Caucasian. Between the age of 22 and 30.” Russell looked at Vincent who shrugged in agreement.

“Thank you! That narrows the search down to 17,276. Do you have any other selection criteria?”

He didn’t.

Vincent put his mug down on his desk, walked over to the stool in the corner, and dragged it over. “You know,” he said, “that isn’t actually that many Stacies. If we look at one headshot per second, we could smash through all seventeen thousand in five hours or so.” He sat down and picked up his mug.

Russell typed into the terminal. “Could you please generate a website which displays a headshot and location for each Stacy in the list? Sort the Stacies by their distance from us, closest first.”

“Of course!” replied the LLM. “Here you go!” it added, with a link.

Russell clicked the link, and a website opened up. On it, was displayed a paginator indicating that they were on Stacy #1 of 17,276, a map indicating her location, and a headshot of the stunning young woman from their dreams.

“Well,” Russell said. “That was easy.”

Vincent laughed. “Steve must have chosen three people who live close to each other. Looks like she’s at the Balmoral. Shall we grab a pint?”

16. Traffic Law Humiliation Rituals

Steve watched resource usage on the MHI-10 spike. Roommate Russ was doing something. He had to give the guy some credit - for an idiot who believed he evolved randomly from soup, he was kinda smart. The MHI-10 was not an easy computer to program - Steve, more than anyone, could appreciate that.

He looked around his office for Gabe, before remembering that he wasn't there. Annoying. He missed having someone to talk to. Gabe, for all his faults, had been his 'someone to talk to' for a thousand years. Not having him around was weird. Maybe he'd bug Murdoch later instead.

What did this mean for the prize money, he wondered. Would he still split it with Gabe? Probably, yeah. But definitely not 50:50.

He hummed a little and turned back to the sim. It looked like Roommate Russ and Murdoch's islander had finally decided to leave their house. About time.

The Balmoral Hotel was a venerable institution in the neighbourhood of East Victoria Park. It occupied a stately old two-storey building with a wrap-around veranda, a patio, and a beer garden. It was surrounded by hedges and a wrought iron fence, and adorned with corgis of various designs. Inside, the slightly-too-slick menus, slightly-too-clean atmosphere, and slightly-too-polished staff betrayed it for what it was - one of several hundred "local" pubs owned and operated by the nationwide Australian Leisure and Hospitality Group. Fortunately for ALH Group, the minor shame of drinking at a chain restaurant was vastly overshadowed in the minds of the public by the convenience of walking-distance beer on tap. The many regulars kept the trade roaring, seven nights a week.

"Let's split up," Russell suggested as they passed by the concrete corgis at the front gate. "I'll check the beer garden."

"Sounds good," Vincent said, grinning. "I'll check the bar. See if she's hiding behind the taps."

Russell sighed. Vincent didn't intend to check anything. He intended to order a pint. Guess he reckoned he'd earned it, after his long week of not helping at all. Mechanical engineers, man. What were they even good for?

They walked through the door together, and Russell's senses were immediately assaulted with the noise of drunken revelers and the smell of decades' worth of beer, dried so deeply in the floorboards that not even ALH's strongest cleaning chemicals could remove the scent. He didn't much like the Balmoral.

He split off towards the beer garden, and-

"Hey Stacy!" Vincent's voice rang out over the din.

His roommate was waving at the bar. And at the bar, was - oh. Stacy, wearing a Balmoral-branded apron and a ponytail, behind the taps.

Well then.

She spotted the pair, shrieked, and dropped the pint glass she was filling. The pub went silent as the punters stopped their conversations and craned their necks to spot the source of the disturbance. Stacy didn't seem to care, and ran out from behind the bar to wrap Russell in a tight embrace. She stank of beer.

"I can't believe it's really you!" she whispered, before releasing Russell and moving on to give Vincent the same treatment. "I thought it was a dream!"

Vincent shot Russell a "what do we do now?" look over her shoulder. Russell had no idea how to respond. He hadn't planned this far ahead. A beer-bellied man in his early thirties in a high-viz vest walked up to Stacy as she persisted in her hug, and tapped her arm.

"Excuse me, miss," he said. "But you dropped my one-fifty lashes."

"Pour it yourself!" she snapped, releasing Vincent and tearing off her apron. She threw the uniform at the foot of the innocent patron, grabbed Russell's arm, and marched him and Vincent out of the pub. "Let the dead bury their own dead!" she shouted as they left.

Well, she was clearly insane. He hoped the management of the Balmoral wouldn't associate them with her in the future.

They walked down the strip. Russell wanted to go home. It had been a long week. He'd been lured out by the promise of a pint in the beer garden, and that clearly wasn't happening. The crazy lady dragged him into one of the seven proximate bubble tea establishments, instead.

A minute later, he and the other two were seated around a table, surrounded by Mandarin-speaking international students, nursing large cups of artificial creamer mixed with aspartame and "tea." He took a sip from the oversized straw and a tapioca pearl hit him in the roof of his mouth before getting stuck in his teeth.

Awful.

Stacy unloaded. As she explained her weird theories about how Steve's revelations lined up with various bible passages, Russell realized why she sounded crazy - she hadn't had anyone to talk to about the dream.

"So anyway," she concluded after her long explanation, "it all makes perfect sense. Steve's done his work, now it's our turn. Get the people back to breeding and believing."

Breeding and believing. How hard could that be?

Turns out, very hard. The three of them didn't agree on the plan. They barely agreed on the problem. Why did Steve pick the three of them again?

"We need to force people into 'alignment,'" Stacy said, putting air quotes around Steve's preferred terminology. "From the moment they're born. Then, they'll do whatever Steve wants, reproduction included."

"So your plan is to brainwash children?" Russell asked.

"It's not brainwashing if it's true! It's 'education.'"

"Right. So your plan is to 'educate' children?"

Stacy shook her head. "It's a good, but it's not enough. If the rest of society is secular, the kids just stop believing when they become adults. We need a whole-of-society solution."

Well, at least she was right about that. How many formerly devout believers had he met, whose piety vanished the moment they went off to uni? More than a few.

"What's your whole-of-society solution?" Vincent asked.

"Simple. We set up a theocratic dictatorship with the death penalty for apostasy."

Russell choked on his bubble tea in laughter. It was a good joke. Then, he noticed her deadpan expression. She wasn't joking.

"Also," she added, "we need to ban weird chemicals. They mess up people's hormones and make them infertile."

"No," Vincent objected. "We're not doing that. Either of those things."

"Agreed," Russell added. "That's insane."

Stacy stuck her tongue out at them both. "The chemicals also cause cancer," she added. "I'm sure that doesn't help birth rates either."

Vincent put his bubble tea down on the table and cleared the area in front of him. Oh boy, here we go. He was getting ready for one of his rants.

"Aside from the obvious moral and logistical problems," he started, "forcing people into alignment is missing the point. Steve gave us free will. He wants us to choose alignment for ourselves."

"No one chooses that!" Stacy objected. "People choose to watch the footy and harass me at the pub. No one chooses to worship God and make babies!"

"Because they don't have a free choice!" Vincent took a familiar deep breath and Russell braced himself for monologue-o'clock. Which rant would he go for?

"People don't get to choose *anything* anymore," Vincent said. "We live in such a coddled society that our spirits are broken. Why do we need God? We have something more powerful than God. Sorry, Steve, you're obsolete. We have the *government*. The government keeps us safe!"

So far, pretty standard rant. All of Vincent's rants started with the government. But as for which particular aspect he'd pick on today...

"Why would anyone have kids? Kids are *dangerous*. They're *scary*! Anything could go wrong! Are you really surprised that people who are too scared to run a red light are also reluctant to take on the objectively greater risks of childbirth and rearing?"

There it was - traffic laws. Russell had heard this one a dozen times before. It was one of his favourites. He knew exactly what to say to really get his roommate going. "Traffic laws save lives, Vincent."

"Traffic laws!" Vincent exploded. "Traffic laws are a humiliation ritual! They're the surest sign that we are a conquered people! You can't go over a certain speed or the government will throw you in jail? And if you resist arrest, they'll shoot you? What the hell! Of course

our society is committing suicide. Total societal death is preferable to living under these conditions!"

Success. Russell leaned back in his chair and sipped his bubble tea, smirking.

"So what's your plan?" Stacy asked. "Destroy the government? Remove all the traffic laws and suddenly people will become devout and prolific?"

Vincent grinned. "I've actually thought about this for a long time."

Russell chuckled quietly as Vincent pitched his ridiculous plan. He stayed out of the debate - he had his own theories, and they were way simpler than Vincent's. People didn't have kids because they couldn't afford them, and they didn't believe in God because the whole idea was stupid. Give them enough free money and a better holy book, and Steve's soul-production machine would be humming just fine again.

Vincent's pitch went on for fifteen minutes. Every time Russell thought he was done, he took a breath and added a new, even more absurd dimension. His plan was composed of far-fetched utopian dreams layered on top of scientifically implausible leaps in technology. It would never work, but it sure was funny.

As he listened to Vincent lay out his elaborate scheme, an idea occurred to Russell. Vincent may have idiotic ideas about human societies, but he was an incredibly talented mechanical engineer. If he could invent even half of the technology he was talking about... Well, Russell could piggyback off his progress to fix the social stuff. No bloodshed, no overthrowing the government. Just a happy, free, post-scarcity society.

"Sounds good," he interrupted. "Let's do it."

Stacy's jaw dropped and she stared at him, astonished.

"Really?" Vincent asked.

"Really," Russell said. "It's foolproof. Let's go for it."

Vincent narrowed his eyes in suspicion, but said nothing. Stacy also looked skeptical. Russell shrugged and drank the last of his bubble tea.

"What did you just agree to?" Steve's voice asked in his head. "I lost track."

"Don't worry about it," he thought in response. "I got you."

17. Robot Laser Arachnid 1

What a great day. The sun was shining. The monkeybot team had cleared a hurdle. The fiscal quarter was off to a strong start. And Murdoch had a new friend.

Well, “friend.”

He prepared his breakfast by pouring a tumbler of whiskey and lighting a cigarette, and jacked in to StevieNix to chat with his “friend.”

“You need a sintering head,” he told him. “How are you going to make anything cool without sintering?”

He sat back and watched as Vincent processed his thought. Vincent was the ultimate embodiment of his individualist innovator meme. Murdoch had specifically selected him for Steve’s intervention, and so far, that choice was looking solid.

Vincent picked up his phone and spoke into the LLM-app that one of the other apes - Russell - had written. “I need a selective laser sintering head,” he said.

Murdoch chuckled. Playable characters were hilarious - the ape probably thought the laser was his own idea. Just a total lack of self-awareness.

“Certainly!” replied the LLM. “What materials will you need to sinter?”

“All the common metals. Copper, aluminium, steel, tungsten, titanium.”

“This is what we collected the industrial printer for. I must advise you, even though this is quite a powerful laser by printer standards, it will be quite slow at sintering.”

“That’s okay, tell me where to find it.”

Murdoch watched as the LLM instructed Vincent exactly where he could find the printer, and how he might disassemble and rearrange the parts to produce a laser hot enough to fuse metal. The ape had spent the last few days driving around every junkyard in Perth, collecting e-waste. Now, he was in his garage, acting as the hands of the omniscient chatbot, desoldering surface-mounted devices and welding stuff together. It was quite the show.

As the morning progressed, Vincent’s Frankensteinian robot began to take form. It looked like a huge mechanical spider. Murdoch tapped the ash off the end of his cigarette and leaned in for a closer look.

The spider’s body was roughly the size and shape of a desktop computer. It was able to support itself on as few as three of its eight hinged limbs, while using its remaining five to manipulate objects and tools. It was equipped with every tool necessary to manufacture itself, and more - its blocky body contained a heat gun, a 3D printer head, a router, lasers, power tools, a welding torch. . .

Every inch of the body not filled with tools was crammed full of electronics - salvaged circuit boards, GPUs and microcontrollers, all wired together in an incomprehensible warren of wires and fibre optics. From what Murdoch could tell, the software - the most complex part of the entire construction - had almost no human involvement in its creation whatsoever. Vincent simply prompted the LLM to generate the appropriate firmware, flashed the resultant machine code onto the robot’s various computers, and prayed.

Murdoch didn't answer Vincent's prayers. He had no clue if the software would work, and wasn't interested in watching Vincent debug it. Instead, he went down the hall and asked Steve to fast-forward the sim for a bit.

"Just set a breakpoint on whenever the robot starts moving," he said. "Run it full-tilt until then."

Breakpoint. He was down with the lingo. He'd learned a thing or two, watching Steve work on StevieNix all these months - why was Steve looking at him like he'd asked him to murder a cat?

"*Just* set a breakpoint?" Steve asked. "Sure, I'll *just* do that. Easiest thing in the world."

Programmers, honestly.

Steve clicked around some incomprehensible window, hit enter, and the sim sped up. The screen flickered as days and nights passed in seconds. A few moments later, it paused completely.

"Breakpoint," Steve said, pointing at a corner of the screen.

Well, how hard was that?

"Is it ready?" Murdoch asked.

"Looks like it."

"How much time has passed?"

Steve brought up another incomprehensible screen. "A few weeks."

"Okay," Murdoch said. "Not bad. Take it back down to normal speed and resume the sim. Thanks!"

Steve grumbled and returned to whatever nerd activities he had been doing beforehand. Murdoch made a mental note to figure out how to fast-forward to a breakpoint by himself. Not that he disliked managing Steve, just...it's good to be self-reliant.

He returned to his office and sat down at his desk to watch the show.

The robot spider was standing up, proudly and symmetrically, on its eight limbs. Status LEDs flashed green. The whine of cooling fans played out through Murdoch's desktop speakers. Vincent was looking...haggard.

Vincent picked up his phone and brought the microphone to his mouth. "Make it fabricate a plywood smiley face, 50mm in diameter," he told the LLM.

Showtime. The robot scuttled across the workbench, bowed its articulated carbon fiber legs and leapt...into the trash can?

Huh.

The trash can moved and almost tipped over. The robot spider climbed out, carrying a scrap piece of plywood, and vaulted back onto the workbench. It put the plywood down, reached into itself to pull out a...Murdoch squinted at the screen...laser, and started etching.

Bright red light filled the garage. Vincent shielded his eyes and Murdoch clicked and dragged on the screen to get a better view of the plywood. Pointless. There was smoke everywhere.

The robot swapped the laser out for a router and pulled a dust extractor hose down from the ceiling. Murdoch's speakers wailed with the combined noise of the cooling fans, dust extractor and router. He reached over and turned them off as the robot started cutting.

The entire process was done in under ten seconds. The robot scuttled away from its workpiece, and Vincent edged forward to inspect the plywood. Murdoch turned his speakers back on and zoomed in.

On the workbench, was a precise 50mm diameter circle, smoke still rising from the laser-engraved smiley face.

Wow. Not bad, robot.

"Holy moly," said Vincent. He brought his phone up to his mouth. "Make it fabricate a remote control toy car."

Murdoch raised an eyebrow. From a piece of wood, to a car. Okay there, ape.

Within two minutes, a maniacally laughing Vincent, newly fabricated remote control in his hands, was driving a miniature cobbled-together car around his garage.

Well then. Hadn't expected that to work.

Murdoch leaned back in his chair and exhaled deeply. Feck, this islander was smart. He reminded him of himself - back in the early days, before Elba.

The ape actually done it - fully automated manufacturing. This was the tipping point. Smooth sailing from here, and still plenty of time left in the quarter. Thanks, monkey.

Time to celebrate. He picked up his cigarette box and tapped out a fag. What a day.

18. The Manufacturing Singularity

The next day was even more ambitious. The ape had fully automated manufacturing - now, time to make it nanoscale.

“Make smaller robots,” Murdoch said into his microphone. “Use the robot to make smaller robots.”

Vincent’s internal monologue played out over his speakers and ran with the seeded thought.

“I should make smaller robots,” Vincent thought. “Then I can use those robots to make even smaller robots. How small can I go?”

“Really small,” Murdoch suggested.

“I bet I can make them really small,” Vincent thought.

Murdoch sat back and chuckled. This would never cease to be satisfying.

People had been predicting an imminent manufacturing singularity on Elba for as long as Murdoch could remember. Each generation of tech would build on the previous, accelerating faster and faster until everything, everywhere was robots... It had never materialized.

Manufacturing had been in stasis for millenia. Pretty much everything was. Just the way FEDSEC liked it. The only truly new technology was the MHI-10, and he’d damn near bankrupted Murdoch Heavy Industries to build it.

Fortunately, with the help of a motivated God and a superintelligent chatbot, the apes in StevieNix could achieve what the people of Elba could not.

“You need a power source,” Murdoch said. “Try graphene supercapacitors.”

“Lithium batteries aren’t going to cut it,” thought Vincent. “I should make supercapacitors. Maybe graphene.”

Shaking his head and smiling, Murdoch clicked around in the incomprehensible window looking for the “breakpoint” button. Steve had clicked... there. And then the speed slider...

A few moments later, the sim paused. Vincent’s hair was a couple inches longer and the robot spider was collecting dust on his shelf. He was surrounded by a new generation of robots. Murdoch zoomed in. They were three orders of magnitude smaller.

How curious. Murdoch panned the window around, studying Vincent’s inventions. They were lightweight - approximately 40 grams each - and looked like ants, each the size of an ape’s finger.

He dragged the speed slider back down to real-time, and unpaused. What a show! The ants swarmed all over the garage, each performing specialized operations. There were cutter ants, who broke apart materials, transportation ants, welding ants, laser ants...

Goodness, the ape had been busy.

Murdoch leaned into the microphone. “Make them smaller,” he said.

“I should make them smaller,” Vincent thought.

As the robots got smaller and smaller, Vincent required more and more hands-on assistance. The next generation needed custom semiconductors. Then, they needed exotic rare earth

metals. Murdoch prompted Vincent to design robotic mining worms, and dump billions of them into his backyard.

The ground under the city of Perth was filled with an intricate network of tunnels just a few millimeters in diameter. It was a real sight to behold. Whatever section of dirt Murdoch randomly chose, if he zoomed in close enough, he could find a mining robot, searching for elemental deposits and shunting them back to the garage.

“Smaller,” he said.

“Smaller,” Vincent thought.

Breakpoint, fast-forward, guidance. Breakpoint, fast-forward, guidance. Murdoch settled into a rhythm. The next shrink created robots the size of yeast. Then, bacteria. Then, viruses. The smaller the robots, the more fun they were - until suddenly, things started getting weird. At the atomic level, the particles got crazy.

Murdoch hauled Steve into his office to berate him.

“Why are the electrons jumping around?” he demanded.

“They aren’t in a fixed position. Too computationally expensive. There’s just a probability distribution of their locations and we evaluate that just in time.”

“Speak English, Steve! How the feck do I stick the fecking atoms together? I’ve burned like two days on this!”

Steve blushed. “Just stick to carbon. Carbon’s easy.”

Murdoch grumbled and unmuted the mic.

“Stick to carbon,” he relayed.

Vincent stuck to carbon.

Eventually, they got it to work. The final shrink consisted of highly specialized molecular machines - they could hardly be called robots - which swarmed like a living liquid, placing and bonding individual atoms wherever they needed to be. Vincent created all sorts of fantastic devices - miniature airships, railguns, even a fusion-powered motorcycle.

Anything is possible when you can put atoms wherever you want them.

And then, that was it. No more shrinks. Fully automated nanoscale manufacturing, finished in a week. Easy peasy.

Now, onto the hard part - the interstellar warship. Probably needed more Vincents for that.

What to do, what to do...

19. Polymerized Fullerene

Steve bit his fingernails. An entire week had elapsed, and nothing to show for it. Every once in a while, a holdout believer dripped into his flash drive, causing his credit counter to flicker momentarily before the soul was sucked out into the bottomless pit of Allen's AI repository. He almost felt bad for them.

Russell and Stacy were no help, either. Their internal monologues were filled with nonsensical ramblings about artificial islands - not that he ever got a chance to listen to a full thought, anyway. The way Murdoch kept fast-forwarding and pausing the sim was making it impossible to get any work done. The university was looking more appealing by the day.

At least now, he seemed to be taking a break. Steve jacked into Russell's head to see if he could figure out what the hell was going on.

Russell followed Vincent and Stacy down the road. The walk was cold and dark.

The past few months had rewritten huge chunks of his worldview. Any lingering doubts he had about the existence of God had been dispelled by Vincent's otherwise impossibly fast technological progress. There was simply no other way that one guy in a garage could invent and manufacture a fusion-powered motorcycle in three months. God was real, his name was Steve, and that was that.

He talked to him occasionally. He liked to ask him questions.

"Hey Steve!" he thought as he walked down the footpath. "Do I have free will?"

"I don't even know what that means," Steve replied.

"Do I get to choose what I do, or do you decide it all for me?"

"Of course you get to choose what you do. That's the entire point. Choose wisely."

"But if you created me, doesn't that mean you already know what I'm going to do?"

"Russell," Steve said, "you're a programmer. When you write code, do you really know what it's going to do?"

Touché.

"Plus," Steve continued. "I didn't code you. I coded your environment, and then ran I a massive, parallel genetic algorithm. I have no idea what you're going to do. That's why I'm bothering to run this sim!"

Russell pondered this some more as he followed Vincent and Stacy through a park.

"So I could strip naked right now and run around in circles?" he asked.

"If you feel like it. Personally, I'd rather you got on with the mission. Meme. Birth rates. For goodness' sake, Russell."

Steve's massive, parallel genetic algorithm had rendered Russell disinclined to run around naked in the cold. He shivered and jogged a little to catch up with the other two.

"Almost there," Vincent said.

“Can’t wait,” Stacy grumbled. “I’m bloody freezing.”

They reached the Swan River at 4 in the morning. When they arrived at the sandy shoreline, Vincent took out his phone and spoke into his app, “okay, build the boat.”

First, nothing happened. Then - whoa! Russell steadied himself as the sand underneath his feet rippled like waves. A moment later, the beach in front of him erupted in a black and silver shifting blob, that shimmered in the moonlight. Vincent’s nanobots must have followed them underground, all the way there.

Discernable shapes began to emerge from the undulating mass of robots. Ribs. A prow. A figurehead of Steve’s terrestrial avatar, adorned with a diamond crown of thorns. What a sight!

A few minutes later, they were done. The robots disappeared back into the sand, leaving - wow. Leaving a fully-assembled boat on the beach. It looked like some crazy cross between a Viking warship and a Thai long-tail boat. What the hell had Vincent created?

“Russ!” Vincent yelled. “Stop gawking and help me push!”

Russell stepped forwards and placed his hands on the stern. It was still warm from the manufacturing process. He pushed, and the boat moved. It was lighter than expected.

Once the boat reached the water, the three friends clambered in and drifted away from the shore. Vincent sat at the back, fired up the fusion engine and lowered the oversized propeller into the water.

The boat accelerated with a jolt, and Russell was thrown to the floor. “Sorry!” Vincent yelled, not bothering to stop or slow down the craft.

As the ultralight craft skimmed over the water, jostling its occupants port and starboard, Stacy objected. “You couldn’t have designed a more stable boat?”

“This boat is history in the making,” Vincent said. “What’s a couple hours of discomfort in exchange for an eternity of style?”

“I’m going to be sick.”

“We’ll leave that part out of the history books.”

Russell wasn’t particularly impressed either. “Can’t you at least add a keel?” he asked.

“Can’t,” said Vincent. “Robots don’t swim. We can’t change anything until we get there.”

Russell and Stacy groaned and lay down in the bottom of the boat as a grinning Vincent guided them at top speed past the Perth skyline, out the mouth of the Swan, and into international waters.

“We’re here!” Vincent announced.

Russell blinked and sat up - against all odds, he had managed to fall asleep. He was freezing, and judging by the way Stacy was shaking, so was she. Man, she looked rough. Bleary-eyed, hair matted with vomit... “Did you sleep?” he asked.

“Screw off,” she answered.

Guess not. Russell hoisted himself up and looked over the side of the boat. The sun was just breaking over the Eastern horizon. Other than that, all he could see was ocean and sky. The boat bobbed gently on the waves. Russell drooped his head and began to slowly collapse back into the bottom of the boat.

“You’re gonna want to watch this,” said Vincent from the other side of the boat.

Ugh. Russell reluctantly wobbled his way across. “All I see is water.”

“Look!” Stacy yelled.

He looked where she was pointing. Oh. How had he missed that? The robots were back. A shimmering black and silver mass around a meter in diameter, was emerging out of the sea.

The mass grew taller and taller, and before long, Russell could make out what they were building: A black cylinder.

“Our supply chain,” Vincent explained, nodding at the cylinder. “Straight from the Earth’s crust.”

“Did the robots follow us here?” Stacy asked.

“We followed them. They’ve been tunneling here for weeks.”

Russell looked out over the ocean. Other than the cylinder, there was nothing. No sign of life, land, palm trees, anything. Not even a seagull. “You sure about this?” he asked.

“Dead sure. Just wait until the pipe’s done. The bots will push the seawater out, then we’ll really start cooking.”

Well, Vincent had gotten them this far. He’d earned a little trust.

The robots built upwards until the “supply chain” towered over the boat. Then, at once, the gleaming blob of nanobots slurped itself into the pipe as if they’d been vacuumed in, leaving just the perfect, black, one meter diameter cylinder sticking out of the water.

“Showtime.” Vincent stared rapt at the cylinder.

Nothing happened. Russell looked at Stacy, who shrugged.

Then, a gurgle. A bit of seawater bubbled out the top.

“Hey hey!” Russell said.

Vincent shook his head. “Not yet.”

The bubbling died down. A few seconds later, an enormous fountain of seawater blasted out of the cylinder - it must have been thirty, forty meters high.

“Oh frig!” yelled Vincent, and started the fusion engine. He plunged the propeller back into the water and Russell was once again thrown to the bottom of the boat as they jolted away from the looming tower of water.

They didn’t quite make it. The water came crashing down like a piano, crushing Russell against the floor of the boat. The ribs of the boat smashed into the ribs of his body and punched the air out of his chest. This must be what a car accident feels like.

Russell gasped for breath, but instead of air, his lungs found seawater. It pummelled him, it surrounded him, it was drowning him. He coughed and hacked, but each time he inhaled - more seawater. His head knocked against something soft - Vincent. Who was driving the boat?

His lungs were empty. How long can you survive on the oxygen in your bloodstream? The world turned into a dark, spinning screensaver. Guess he'd find out. Bet it wasn't long.

Then, the water stopped falling. Russell's instincts somehow managed to lift his head out of the water and he finally inhaled air. He coughed, and seawater went up his nose.

"Stacy!" Vincent's voice was hoarse, like he'd been forced to eat a burning coal. He charge past Russell, towards - oh, shit.

Stacy was lying face-down in the water.

He flailed towards her and the two men hauled her upright. He held her limp body tightly as Vincent pummeled her back. Whack! Whack! Whack!

She stiffened and coughed. Whoa, that was a lot of water. She hacked and retched, but she was alive.

"You... dick!" she eventually managed at Vincent.

"Look behind you," he replied.

Russell lifted his head and looked behind her. The robots were back. The supply chain was overflowing with them.

The world was hazy. Russell struggled to keep his head up. It looked like the robots were building pipes. A capillary network, fanning out from the arterial cylinder, upwards and then sloping back down, eventually disappearing into the water beneath them.

Temporarily displaced by the adrenaline of almost drowning, the cold returned to Russell's bones - this time, with a vengeance. Had he ever been this cold before? He was beyond shivering, he was violently shaking.

White foam began pouring out of the pipes from all directions, like whipped cream being sprayed into a perforated hose. Was Vincent building the islands out of expanding foam?

Russell looked at Vincent. He looked like death. Slumped against the wall of the boat, eyes barely open, not even bothering to watch the magnificent display of nano-fabrication he'd spent months perfecting.

Stacy looked even worse. She'd given up trying to find a stable perch above the waterline and sat half-submerged in the freezing seawater, arms wrapped around her legs, skin grey, lips blue.

If Vincent's expanding-foam-island didn't pan out in the next few minutes, they'd all be dead from hypothermia. What if it did pan out? They'd probably die anyway, but this time, on an artificial island.

Russell pulled the Starlink transceiver out of the waterproof pouch inside his jacket, and turned it on. As he watched the LEDs flash, his vision began to fade. The boat turned blurry, and the sea brightened from deep blue to white.

The boat jolted. Russell lifted his head. Hang on - the sea hadn't faded to white. The boat was on dry land.

"Wake up!" he yelled at the other two.

"Grmmmm," moaned Stacy. Russell sloshed over to her, put his shoulder under her arm, and heaved her up. She was heavier than she looked. Fortunately, she regained a little strength and helped Russell haul her over the side of the boat and collapse onto the ground.

Now, where the hell was Vincent? He must have left the boat. Russell looked around and saw him crouched on all four, examining the pure white ground, hacking, coughing, and cackling. He climbed out of the boat and stumbled over to his friend.

"Polymerized fullerene," Vincent stammered. "Thank God it actually sticks together."

The Starlink transceiver beeped. It had found a satellite. Still shaking from the cold, Russell pulled his phone out of the waterproof pouch, and opened the LLM app.

"Please make us a heat source," he said.

A swarm of robots flowed to a spot on the ground next to them. They built a small black log-house structure, which stood still for a few moments before bursting into flames.

Heat. Oh, the heat. Russell moved closer to the orange flames of the dancing campfire. God, he needed this.

Vincent crawled towards the fire. Russell heard a cough behind him, and - oh, shit! He'd forgotten about Stacy!

He dragged her barely-conscious body next to the fire, flopped down next to his two friends, and passed out. Mission accomplished.

Steve grumbled a bit and looked up at Murdoch. "I'm not sure about this intervention," he said. "This is a lot of work, and they all almost died."

Murdoch tried to cheer him up. "Yeah sure, but you got that one guy! Russell, right?"

"Yeah. Roommate Russ. He asks a lot of questions."

Murdoch laughed. "Yes, he does seem a tad inquisitive. Bit of an odd choice, if you ask me."

"Choice?" Steve asked. "I didn't have a choice. He was your guy's roommate, and I needed a programmer."

"Guess it was fate, then."

The two were quiet for a bit, before Murdoch spoke up again.

"What were you hoping the programmer would do?" he asked.

"Targeted outreach for Stacy's social media engagement."

"And instead you got a floating island?"

Steve bit his tongue. The floating island was Murdoch's idea, he was sure of it.

Murdoch turned back to the screen and watched the three apes shiver in front of the campfire. “Could do worse,” he said. “You have to admit, the island is pretty cool.”

Steve rolled his eyes. The island was a huge distraction, and wasn’t helping him get out of default at all. And now Stacy, his number one influencer, was trapped on it. His chances of winning the competition had gone from bad to atrocious.

At least Murdoch was right about one thing - the island was pretty cool. He had no idea where this intervention was going, but it sure was entertaining.

20. The Island

Ants. There were ants crawling all over his skin.

Russell awoke with a yelp and shook them off.

“Good morning, sunshine!” called out Vincent. “We thought you’d never wake up!”

Russell spun around. Vincent and Stacy were already up. Stacy had already changed her outfit.

The campfire had disappeared. It was no longer required - the blazing overhead sun was threatening him with the opposite problem. His throat was parched and his ordinarily never-leaves-the-house-white skin felt like it was being roasted over a coal fire.

“Do we have any water?” he asked.

“Up there,” Vincent pointed.

Russell turned towards the center of the island. Where the black carbon cylinder had previously stood, was a hill. A light, brown hill. He blinked. The whole island seemed to be turning brown as he watched.

Looking down, he saw ants. Wait - no, not ants. Robots. Hundreds - no, millions - of tiny robot ants, scurrying to and from the hill, carrying... dirt.

The ants were terraforming the island.

“Didn’t like the look of the poly... the poly...?”

“The polymerized fullerene?” Vincent asked. “It’s a solid foundation, but good luck growing anything on it.”

Russell started walking up the hill. His burned, salt-covered skin cracked as he moved. Damn, it was hot. They needed shade.

Before long, he spotted the water source - a tiny stream, flowing through a crease in the fullerene. He dropped to his knees and drank greedily. The cool water soothed his parched throat. When he was done, he washed his face and arms in the stream. Gosh, that felt better.

“Hey Stacy!” he yelled. “Does this water have any weird chemicals in it?”

She and Vincent laughed.

When Russell was done, he climbed to the top of the hill to get a better look. The higher he climbed, the darker the ground got underneath his feet and the more it felt like real earth.

He reached the top and surveyed the island. So, this was it. Vincent’s masterpiece. Their societal canvas. The place where belief would be reignited, poverty would be extinguished, and... why was it a hexagon?

He trudged back down to the others. Stacy had cleaned herself up, changed her outfit again, and evidently given Vincent her phone and roped him into being her photographer.

“Why is it a hexagon?” he asked.

“Hexagon is the bestagon,” Vincent said.

Okay, whatever. He could work with a hexagon. “Are we floating?”

“Sort of!” Vincent replied, putting Stacy’s phone in his pocket so he could use both hands to gesticulate. “We’re anchored to the supply chain, which is anchored to the crust. That’s why we had to come out all the way here - it’s an amphidromic point.”

“An amphi. . .”

“There are no tides.”

“Ah. Will we sink?”

Vincent shook his head. “The fullerene is super light. Assuming it holds together, it’ll never get waterlogged.”

“Assuming it holds together?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Russell couldn’t help but worry about it a little bit.

“Excuse me nerds,” interrupted Stacy, “but some of us have work to do here.”

Russell looked over at her. “Work?” he asked, pointing his chin in the general direction of her white sundress.

“Yes,” she said. “The actual hard part. This island is neat and all, but the world is full of islands that no one wants to live on. What makes you think this one is going to be any different?”

Moving to this one will give you free money, Russell thought.

“She’s been documenting all our progress on social media,” Vincent explained, taking the phone back out of his pocket and lining up a shot. “She has like ten million followers.”

Oh, great. Russell could have kicked himself. While he had been writing his app, the pretty little autocrat had been getting a head start.

“You got ten million followers in a few months?” Russell asked.

“I already had one million. I was a faith influencer.”

“What’s a faith influencer?”

Stacy ignored him and resumed her pose. Once Vincent finally managed a photo that met her standards, she took her phone back, spoke into it, and was swarmed by robots. When they cleared, her clothing had been transformed into a red bikini top and matching skirt.

Russell bristled a little. Seemed like an abuse of the LLM.

“Can we get some sort of tropical pergola here?” she asked her phone. “Think Bali, tiki bar sorta vibes.”

Russell couldn’t help himself. “Pious nun goes clubbing in Ibiza sorta vibes?”

Stacy glared at him as a bamboo pergola grew out of the ground in front of them. When it was done, she climbed up onto a barstool and picked up the fruity cocktail that the nano-robots had assembled on the bar.

“I wouldn’t drink that,” warned Vincent. “The robots are designed for making computers and structural carbon. Drinks that don’t kill you are outside of the spec.”

Stacy looked suspiciously at the drink. Suppressing her obvious disgust, she held it up next to her face and beamed a smile that would have halted a Mongol invasion. After Vincent had taken several photos, she relaxed her expression, placed the glass gingerly back on the bar and stepped away. “We’re going to have to figure out how to make real drinks before the people start arriving,” she said.

Vincent and Russell nodded.

“Maybe they can bring their own drinks,” Vincent suggested.

Russell’s skin was starting to burn again. He took Stacy’s place at the bar in the welcome shade of the pergola. Gosh, it was nice.

His throat was still parched. Absent-mindedly, he reached out for Stacy’s fruity cocktail and took a sip.

Mmm. Watermelon.

21. The Commonwealth of New Sealand

At last! Stacy was starting to prove her worth. With Russell's help, she was finally using the MHI-10 as intended - social media outreach. Not to bring people to the faith, though. That would have made too much sense. Instead, she used it to bring people to New Sealand.

Friggin' apes, seriously. Why do they always need to do everything the hard way?

Steve listened in on the immigrants' thoughts, trying to figure out if they were aligned or not. Hard to say. On the one hand, they all understood that New Sealand existed because of him. Stacy was good about giving him credit. On the other hand, it felt like most of the apes couldn't care less about whose divine intervention enabled the island. The idiots just wanted to hang out with Stacy in a tropical paradise.

The easiest way to sort them would be to fast-forward a couple decades, see who's still a believer then. Steve hovered his cursor over the speed slider, but decided against it. He wanted to watch the show.

He zoomed in on Murdoch's islander, Vincent. Man, that guy was a good pick. What a workhorse. It looked like he'd put together a crew. Not only had they covered the planet with transport tunnels called "hyperloops," but they were churning out islands like assembly line workers. Fully terraformed, fully planted, with buildings and utilities included. The islands floated like enormous hexagonal icebergs, stabilized with deep keels and massive balls of lead.

He scrolled over to where a city was being built across a group of islands. The islands tessalated together like honeycomb - hence, the hexagons. Vincent had thought this through. The city would probably be able to house... say, a hundred thousand apes. Not bad at all.

A notification popped up on Steve's screen. Incoming prayer, from Roommate Russ. Steve hadn't made his mind up about him - on the one hand, he was writing an updated holy book, the Newer Testament. That was a good idea! On the other hand, his constant questioning was starting to get really annoying.

Steve accepted the call.

"How do you think we should make people get along?" Roommate Russ asked. "We're seeing more and more... interpersonal friction."

"Really?" Steve acted shocked. "The warfaring AIs that I deliberately made as aggressive as possible, are exhibiting 'interpersonal friction?'"

The sarcasm went over Roommate Russ's head. "A fight broke out over the stupidest thing yesterday. Someone insulted a pig or something. Now these two families are threatening to kill each other."

Kill each other, eh? Steve looked at his empty credit counter. He could do with a few deaths. "Is that something you're trying to avoid?"

"Didn't you say yourself, 'thou shalt not kill?'"

"I said a lot of things."

"Goddamn it, Steve! Are you saying that sustainable peace is impossible due to our very nature?"

Steve shrugged off the foul language. Sometimes, the apes found it hard to control their internal monologues - no biggie. "I didn't design you to pick flowers," he replied.

"I don't believe you. People are fundamentally good. We're not just warfaring monkeys - we've evolved beyond that. I'll show you."

"Warfaring monkeys were literally the design spec, Russ."

"I'll show you!"

Steve rolled his eyes and hung up the prayer. Whatever, Russ.

Russell clenched his fists in frustration. The others didn't think much of his idea either.

"It's stupid," Stacy said. "You can't just fix all our problems with an app."

"It's not just an app!" Russell objected. "It's on the blockchain!"

"You can't just fix all our problems with the blockchain."

"At least hear me out!"

Stacy and Vincent looked at each other and sighed.

"Okay," said Vincent. "Let's hear it."

This was it - the big reveal. The post-scarcity society. Russell launched into his explanation: A direct democracy, where everything was decided on the blockchain. Legislation? Blockchain. Elections? Blockchain. Constitutional amendments? Blockchain.

He wasn't even half done when Vincent interrupted. "Sounds really dumb."

"I agree," said Stacy. "Aggregating human stupidity on the blockchain doesn't make people smarter."

Infuriating. "People are smart!" said Russell. "And I'm not done! We'll also have universal basic income."

The other two burst out laughing.

"Paying people just for being alive," Vincent snickered. "That's too funny."

"Could the bar be any lower?" Stacy asked.

"I guess you could pay people for being dead."

Stacy and Vincent broke out into uncontrollable laughter and took turns making more lame jokes. Idiots, honestly. Did he have to do everything himself?

"I have a better idea," Stacy said. "You ready?"

"Go on, then," Russell said.

"Queen Stacy."

Ah. Stacy and her whole-of-society solution again. "Monarchies are discredited."

Stacy waved him off. "It'll be easy. I'll solve all our problems in like, ten minutes. Fighting? Illegal. Importing weird chemicals? Illegal. Not having kids? Not being aligned with Steve? All illegal, all crimes punishable by hanging."

"Last time we tried this, the kings all kept inbreeding and getting syphilis."

"Queen," Stacy corrected him. "I'm basically queen already. Everyone moved here because of me. If I told them to go hang someone, they'd do it. You know it."

Russell stared at her face. Stone-cold. Dead serious. "Can you tell her?" he asked Vincent.

Vincent shrugged. "It's better than your idea," he said. "If she does a bad job, the peasants can just behead her."

"How does that sound, Stacy? Getting beheaded in a peasant revolt?"

"Unlikely," Stacy said. "I'll do a great job."

Russell rolled his eyes and turned back to Vincent. "You can't seriously be on board with this."

"I'm not. I just said that it's better than your idea. Stacy's proposing a tyranny with one ruler. You're proposing a tyranny where you're ruled by the entire population. If *that* goes wrong... well, there aren't enough guillotines in the world."

This was going nowhere. "Well, what do you suggest then?"

Vincent smiled. "No government," he said. "Everyone gets guns. Rules are enforced by vigilante lynch mobs."

Of course. Why had he even asked?

They argued through the night. In the end, they couldn't agree. A compromise was struck. The Commonwealth of New Sealand would be split into three separate entities - Russell's People's Republic, Stacy's Theocratic Dominion, and Vincent's Anarchy.

Not exactly the result Russell had hoped for, but not too bad either. Obviously, the People's Republic would win. He just hoped the other entities wouldn't do too much damage on the way out.

22. Whitmore Strategic Partners

Ever since Steve's decision to bend the rules, Murdoch had enjoyed hanging out with him a lot more. It was like something inside him had snapped. The stick up his butt, perhaps.

"So you're just going to let Russ create the dumbest form of government ever?" Murdoch asked.

Steve blushed. "You don't know that! These apes can surprise you."

"What, you think they can come up with something even dumber?"

"That's not what I meant."

Murdoch laughed. Steve was so easy to wind up. He looked at the bird's eye view of StevieNix on Steve's monitor, and pointed at Stacy's territory. "What's she up to?"

"She's calling it the 'Theocratic Dominion.' TD for short."

"Sounds promising."

"It is. The other apes think she's a prophet. She's leveraged that into a divine right to rule. She acts as judge and legislator."

"Legislator, eh?" Murdoch asked. "What are her rules?"

"The usual stuff. No robbing, killing, sexual assault. Strict adherence to my meme. Also, no importing weird chemicals."

"What does she do to people who disobey?"

"Death or transportation."

Death made sense. But transportation? Murdoch cocked his head and looked at Steve, inviting him to elaborate.

"After she convicts them, she flips a coin. Heads, hanging. Tails, one-way hyperloop trip to New Australia."

"New Australia?"

"She had Vincent build her an island. No guards, just wilderness and criminals."

Ah. A penal colony. "Sounds horrendous," Murdoch said.

Steve nodded. "Yeah, I wouldn't want to be sent there myself. But the threat sure helps keep them aligned."

"I bet it does. And people actually go for this?"

Steve clicked around brought up a stats pane. "A decent chunk of them do," he said, pointing at a column of numbers. "For anyone who wants to be aligned and live in a safe country, it's hard to beat. Most people go to the PR though."

"PR?"

"People's Republic. Russell's place."

Murdoch laughed. No way. "Russell's direct democracy welfare state?"

“Yup.”

“That place is a catastrophe waiting to happen.”

“It’s quite popular.”

“I bet it is. Walk me through it.”

Steve panned the viewport over to Russell’s PR. It looked like Russell had tried his own hand at island design, as well. Rather than adopt Vincent’s hexagons, he’d built one single enormous island, complete with hills, cities, towns and farmland. It was quite idyllic, actually.

“Basically, Russell has a huge fleet of mining worms that dig gold out of the sea floor. He hands the gold out to everyone on his island. All the manual labour gets done by robots, so the people mostly just...sit around, I guess.”

“Was sitting around part of the AI design spec? Aligned and lazy?”

Steve blushed and changed the subject. “How’s your islander going?”

Murdoch smiled a wicked grin. “Couldn’t be better.”

That afternoon, Murdoch sat alone in his office, reading a letter and smoking. He had received two letters today.

The first had borne welcome news: Murdoch Heavy Industries had won the tender! Winning the contract to build the interstellar radio was a *sine qua non* of his plan - there was simply no other way to hide the necessary amount of industrial activity from FEDSEC.

The second letter, on the other hand, was the one he was reading now. Murdoch muttered under his breath as he scanned through.

“Dear Mr. Murdoch...Our significant financial stake reflects MHI’s exemplary track record...blah blah blah, bullshit, bullshit...recent investments...inadvisable...significant departure from the disciplined approach that previously drove shareholder value.”

Ah, feck. It was a threat. Murdoch skipped to the bottom.

“We look forward to partnering collaboratively with management to address these strategic concerns before they significantly impact long-term value creation. Sincerely, Prescott Whitmore, Chairman and CEO, Whitmore Strategic Partners.”

Prescott Feckin’ Whitmore. The mutinous gobshite was threatening to knife him in the gut. Feck, feck, feck.

Murdoch rested his cigarette carefully on the ashtray and continued muttering as he typed a response. “Feckin’...‘perfectly valid concerns’...feckin’...‘deep value creation’...‘utmost respect for our esteemed shareholder community’...feckin’...arseholes.”

He re-read his response. It looked okay. Should buy him until the end of the quarter. He glanced at his calendar. Ten weeks left. Feckin’ Vincent better get his shit together, pronto.

He emailed his response to Whitmore Strategic Partners and flicked over to StevieNix to see what his islanders were up to.

Vincent's Anarchy was the least popular of the three territories. Only the bravest chose to emigrate there.

The cornerstone of Vincent's moral code was the Non-Aggression Principle (NAP) - the idea that it's immoral to *initiate* violence. As governments could only exist by initiating violence (taxation), he considered them to be unethical constructs - the only moral government, was no government at all.

Of course, once violence was *initiated*... well, it was on the table. Any means at all could be justified to take it off - up to, and including, vigilante execution. In fact, Vincent considered thoughtful participation in vigilante lynch mobs (only against NAP-violators!) to be a courageous exercise of civic duty.

In practice, lynchings were rare - partially because they worked, and partially because Vincent filtered out any immigration applicants that he considered even remotely problematic.

His internal monologue played out over Murdoch's desktop speakers.

"Twenty-two years old, male, tattoos, looks like he might get a little handsy... bin."

"Thirty-one years old, female, pink hair... bin."

"Twenty-six, male, welfare recipient... bin."

Murdoch was surprised that Vincent allowed anybody in at all. He dragged the speed slider up and skipped forward a couple months.

Whoa, that was a lot of islands. What happened? He zoomed in on Vincent, who was sitting in a... board room? Watching a slide deck?

Murdoch absent-mindedly lit another cigarette as he tried to piece the story together. Vincent was being pitched to. Some group who called themselves the 'Whale Fund' wanted a canton, whatever that was.

Good luck to them. Murdoch sped the sim up and zoomed out. Vincent left the board room, returned to his crew, and they built dozens of those hexagonal islands. They joined them together, and... gave them to the Whale Fund?

So that's what a canton was. Some sort of island collective.

Murdoch sped the sim up more. The Whale Fund was some sort of live-in startup accelerator. Neat.

Vincent and his crew cranked out canton after canton, and pushed them out into the Pacific. All sorts of cantons. The hexagonal building blocks made them endlessly reconfigurable - occasionally, cantons would split up, or join together. Not infrequently, individual islands declared themselves to be independent entities and just floated off by themselves.

Not bad, monkey.

Eyes glued to the screen, he absent-mindedly reached in his top drawer for his bottle of scotch. He took the lid off, poured, and - ah, shit. Empty. Could this day get any worse?

Just then, his office door burst open and Allen walked in.

"Steve's cheating!" Allen announced.

Goddamn it. The day could always get worse. "What do you mean?"

"He's flat broke. Can't afford to do anything. And yet, somehow, his apes have managed to invent several centuries' worth of technology in like what, two weeks?"

"We've been overclocking the sim. Company decision."

Allen shook his head. "It's still too fast. It's only been a couple years in StevieNix. This rate of advancement is impossible."

"Clever apes. They've made remarkable progress."

"It reeks of divine intervention!"

"Sounds circumstantial."

Allen glared at Murdoch. He wasn't buying it.

"Why do you care anyway?" Murdoch asked. "You get all his aligned souls. Don't you want him to succeed?"

"I only want him to succeed a little! Obviously not so much that he climbs out of default!"

God fucking damnit. First, Whitmore Strategic Partners. Now, Maurice Allen. Why did everyone have to be a problem? At least Whitmore was in the dark about it all - Allen had no excuse.

"It's just a stupid competition, Maurice. You have to remember the big picture."

"It's the principle of it!"

"Goddamn it, Maurice!" Murdoch snapped, thumping the table. "Will you drop it? Forget the competition! Don't you remember what we're doing here? These monkeys are our ticket off of Elba!"

Allen's eyes narrowed. He examined Murdoch's face. "You're in on it!" he said. "Steve's cheating and you're in on it!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Allen scowled and stomped to the door.

"Screw you!" he yelled. "Screw Steve's stupid meme and his stupid islands! New Sealand is done!" He strode out and slammed the door.

Murdoch stared at the door as Allen's footsteps receded down the hallway. What was all that about?

Was Allen senile?

He shrugged and turned back to the screen. One problem at a time.

He absent-mindedly set a breakpoint, sped up the sim, and walked down to the liquor store. At least the scotch problem was one he could easily solve.

When he returned, twenty years had elapsed.

Ah, feck.

Act 3: New Sealand

23. Sullivan

Sullivan considered blowing his head off in the shower. Pros: Quick, painless, hard for him to screw up, like he had everything else in his life. Cons: Where would he even get a gun? Can you just buy one at a pawn shop? Do you need a license? Huge faff.

Sleeping pills. Pros: Painless, less messy, no license necessary. Cons: You could only buy them in packs of 12 at a time, so he'd have to go round to all the local pharmacies. How many pills did it take to kill yourself anyway? Not as big a faff as the gun, but still. . .

Sullivan sighed and took another drag on his medically-prescribed joint. Man, killing yourself was a lot of work.

He switched to the tab where he kept his job search spreadsheet. Another day, another rejection. "Unfortunately, we are unable to proceed with your candidacy at this time."

Law firms, man. Incapable of recognizing genius.

He struck out row eight hundred and fourteen in the sheet. The unemployment office needed evidence of an active job search. He'd provided it, for three straight years.

Having reached the minimum threshold of state-mandated job applications for the week, he closed the tab, stumbled to the fridge, and retrieved the box of chicken wings from two nights ago. Flopping back in his desk chair, he scrolled his social media feed as he ate the cold wings and theorized about other ways to end his miserable existence.

Hanging. Pros: Cheap, hard to screw up, minimal equipment requirements. Cons: Cons. . .hmm.

No cons.

Wow, she was hot. Some athletic blonde in a red bikini top and a matching skirt had just shown up on his feed. She was in a bamboo pergola, holding a fruity cocktail and smiling while waves danced in the background.

"Come join me!" said the caption.

Sure sounded nice.

"Click the link," said a voice in his head. "The one in the bio."

Sullivan clicked the link in the bio. Okay, this was weird. She was some sort of cult leader. She was taking applications.

Join the cult. Pros: Hot girls, communal food, can stop applying to jobs. Cons: Cons. . .hmm.

No cons.

He submitted an application and waited for the email saying "Unfortunately, we are unable to proceed with your candidacy at this time."

It didn't come. Instead, he was accepted.

He was emailed a latitude and longitude. The Uber out there cost the last of his meager credit limit.\$226.50. He didn't tip. He arrived at a dilapidated barn in the middle of nowhere. The Uber drove off, leaving him coughing a mixture of dust and agricultural chemicals.

The barn door was slightly ajar. He walked inside, heart pounding. Once his eyes adjusted, his jaw dropped. This cult was something else. A perfectly black cube, blacker than anything he'd ever seen in his life, stood in the middle of the barn, with a sliding door in it and a button. He pushed the button. The door opened. He got in, and the elevator dropped.

With no external reference, he had no idea how far down the elevator went - but just as he was starting to worry he might reach the bottom of the Earth's crust, it decelerated. He got out, and found himself on a subway platform. A single shuttle stood on the tracks, with four seats. He got in. The door closed, leaving the other three seats empty. The shuttle took off down the tracks.

After an hour of constant acceleration, followed by an hour of constant braking, the shuttle stopped. He got out. There was a woman there to meet him. Not the cult leader, but perhaps even hotter? She looked like she belonged on a college football field, waving pompoms. She beamed a huge smile at him.

"Hi Sullivan, welcome to New Sealand! We're so excited to have you. I'm Tasha, your orientation guide!"

Sullivan had never loved anyone or anything as much as he loved Tasha in that moment.

As they ascended the elevator, Tasha filled in the many missing details about The Commonwealth of New Sealand. New Sealand was actually composed of three separate entities - a direct democracy called the People's Republic, a hereditary monarchy called the Theocratic Dominion, and something else, called the Anarchy. The cult leader he'd come across on social media was queen of the Theocratic Dominion. All new citizens got to choose which entity they wanted to live in.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"The People's Republic," Tasha said. "Stacy's cool and all, but she's kinda stingy. Russell, on the other hand..."

Sullivan signed up for the PR.

He was assigned a one bedroom downtown apartment and given a comfortable monthly stipend. There weren't a lot of jobs, but that was okay. He found a way to be useful.

The PR had a referendum-based legal system. Everyone could vote on legislation, but someone had to write it. Sullivan heroically stepped into the role, drafting vast tomes of legalese and firing them off onto the chain. Unfortunately, his efforts weren't always appreciated. Most of his laws failed to pass the vote.

"Why are you doing this?" Tasha asked him when he showed her his latest work. "No one cares about how much sulphur goes into a tractor tire."

Oh, Tasha. Her simpleminded takes only made her more beautiful.

"Someone needs to set a limit!" he explained. "Otherwise, it'll be bedlam!"

"All I'm saying is, I'm not surprised that no one's voting to limit the sulphur content of a tractor tire to blah blah blah parts per million. People care about things like safety, not... weird trivial regulations."

Oh, silly woman. It wasn't her fault - her nature was simply unsuited to carrying the burden of legislation. Most people were the same way. Russell must not have understood this when he'd drafted the PR's constitution: To put the law in the hands of the average simpleton, particularly the ones whose... natural talents were more... domestically oriented, was downright undemocratic.

No worries. Sullivan could fix it.

He stopped crafting regulations. Waste of time. Instead, he crafted regulatory agencies.

His first success was the Keep Roads Safe act. It passed - after all, who would vote for dangerous roads? The act established the Department of Transportation.

Tasha didn't seem to care very much when he told her. Maybe transportation wasn't her thing. He went on to write the Clean Surroundings Act, the Health For All act, the Smart People Act, and the Money For Everyone act.

She seemed less and less enthusiastic about spending time with him. On their final date (or as she called it, a "scheduled meetup"), he proudly recounted how he'd single-handedly established the Departments of the Environment, Health, Education, and Commerce.

"It sounds like you're fully settled in now," Tasha said.

"Oh, yes. I'm a People's Republican, through and through."

"How wonderful! I guess your orientation is complete, then."

What was she getting at?

"No, I got lost on the way to the grocery store the other day. I still need orienting."

"I'll be marking your file as 'fully oriented,'" she said as she slipped off her bar stool. "Wonderful to have met you, Sullivan. I hope you enjoy your life in the PR."

"No! Tasha!"

She slipped into the crowd and out of his life.

The bitch.

That night, Sullivan wrote the Preventing Terrorism Act. After all, who would vote to enable terrorism? The act established the Department of National Security. It passed.

He took a job at the DONS. His first proper job. He used his security clearance to read Tasha's texts.

She'd been engaged the whole time. The two-timing, streetwalking, hussy.

He went home early and got blackout drunk. The next day, he slumped in his office chair, eyes closed, head pounding, processing a revelation: People suck. They make stupid decisions. They have to be managed.

He had discovered his purpose.

And so, he spent the next twenty years. DONS agent by day, legislator by night. A manager of people. An unsung hero.

“New assignment,” his new boss announced, walking through the sea of cubicles and distributing manila folders. “The Department of Commerce needs a favour.”

Sullivan hid his phone in his top drawer before the tall, well-dressed asshole strutted past his desk. Ever since this guy had gotten the job, the office had gotten a lot less relaxed. Always walking around, distributing folders. . .

Sullivan received his folder and extracted the brief. Ah, the gold thing again. Guy needed some new material.

“This is critically important,” his boss announced. “The future of the republic depends on our success here.”

Sullivan stifled a yawn. A few months ago, Russell had tried cutting back the monthly gold stipend. The Department of Commerce had responded by nationalizing his gold reserves. The people, sensing a moment of opportunity, had responded by voting themselves a bigger stipend.

Much bigger. By some estimates, they’d voted themselves more gold than existed on the planet.

“The vaults under the Department of Commerce are starting to empty,” his boss continued. “If that’s allowed to happen, we’re done here. Pack it up, go home, try to get a hyperloop back to the mainland before the PR descends into cannibalism.”

Sullivan continued scanning the brief. Cannibalism wasn’t mentioned.

“You are each being given wide latitude - solve the problem as you see fit. You’ll have an enormous budget, enhanced interrogation facilities, and a special forces unit.”

As he saw fit, eh? Sullivan began brainstorming ways to fix the gold problem with legislation.

“And Sullivan?”

Sullivan looked up. The tall, slickly-dressed, greasy-pole climber loomed over his desk, smiling. The prick must get his teeth whitened on a bi-weekly basis.

“Try to leave the office this time,” he said. “This isn’t the sort of problem you can solve from behind your desk.”

Sullivan’s butt was sore. He’d spent the past week at a secluded table in the DONS cafeteria, hunched over his laptop and avoiding that tailored-suit dickhead. He missed his padded, ergonomic office chair and couldn’t wait for this assignment to be over. Maybe if he saved the republic, he could score a promotion - or, at the very least, a transfer to a different department.

Russell’s wiretap played through his headphones. A voice in his head had suggested monitoring his comms. So far, Sullivan had learned that Russell was in constant communication with the cult lady and an anarchist. They were always talking about some sort of computer. Their conversations seemed to imply that the computer was omniscient?

That can’t be right.

His laptop dinged and a notification popped up - his search was done. He clicked the notification and his browser navigated to the past twenty years of Russell's text message history. Time to get to the bottom of this.

Two hours later, he was convinced: The computer was omniscient. He didn't know why and didn't care how. The fact was, these three elites were jealously guarding a resource that could not only save the republic and net Sullivan his promotion, but also... dunno. Lift billions out of poverty, or whatever.

Anyway, it was downright undemocratic. Sullivan leaked details of the computer to the press, and drafted a referendum: The Freedom of Knowledge Act.

The referendum passed. Sullivan confronted Russell, personally.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," said Russell.

Sullivan sighed. "The people have spoken, Russell. Where's the computer?"

"The people are idiots. The computer doesn't exist. And if it did exist, I don't know anything about it."

"Do you want me to come back with a warrant?"

"No, I want you to go to hell."

Sullivan came back with a warrant. When he showed up, Russell and his entire family were gone.

24. Xavier

Xavier looked up from his Austrian Economics textbook, across the dining room table to his dad who had assigned it. Something wasn't adding up.

"Hey dad," he asked. "Why does no one else build islands?"

"They can't," Vincent replied, dipping a piece of buttered sourdough into his egg. "No nanoscale tech."

"So you have a monopoly?"

His dad gave him a slight glare as he chewed and swallowed his mouthful. "I give the islands away, Xavier. For free."

"So you just allocate islands based on vibes? The invisible hand of the market doesn't get a say?"

"Your econ unit is for your educational enrichment, kiddo. Not for you to be a pain in my ass."

"Doesn't seem very, you know. Aligned with free market principles."

His dad ignored him and took another bite of his breakfast. Maybe he'd given the old man enough grief for one morning. Plus, his dad's economic hypocrisy wasn't the main thing he was curious about.

"Why do you spend so much effort building these islands just to give them away?" Xavier asked. "Why not just give away the nanoscale tech and let people build them for themselves?"

His dad finished another mouthful of toast and eggs, and washed it down with a swig of black coffee. "The technology to build islands," he replied, "rests on a technology too powerful for humans to handle."

Almost there. Just one more step. "You mean the computer?"

His dad raised an eyebrow.

"The MHI-10?" Xavier asked.

"Who told you about the MHI-10?"

Got him. "Everyone knows about the MHI-10, dad."

"No, they don't."

"There's a referendum about it in the PR."

"No, there isn't."

Xavier unlocked his phone and slid it across the table. His dad picked it up and a dark cloud descended over his face as he read the referendum.

"The Freedom of Knowledge Act. Democratize access to the MHI-10."

"It's at seventy one percent in favour."

"This isn't good."

"You don't like it?"

“How do they think they’re going to gain access to the computer? There are only three people alive, who...oh. We need to triple security.”

“Sure, whatever.” Xavier didn’t like the way his dad looked right now and was keen to move on to the idea that had been looping through his mind. “Anyway, I had a thought.”

“What’s that?”

“Why can’t you use the MHI-10 to build nanoscale tech that doesn’t rely on the MHI-10? Then you can democratize that.”

His dad sat in silence for quite a few moments. Xavier was starting to worry that he’d suffered a stroke, when -

“Do you want to give it a shot?” Vincent asked. “We’ll add it to your engineering curriculum.”

Oh. That was unexpected.

“Yes!” he said.

“Then put down that goddamn econ textbook and follow me. Time for you to learn something useful.”

His dad got up, grabbed his plate, and wandered towards the lab. Xavier picked up his own breakfast and rushed after him.

How the hell do you coordinate a trillion robots, without relying on omniscience? Jeez, his dad had had it easy. Xavier looked at his latest failure, a formless ooze of carbon. This sucked.

“Your computer is too far away from the robots,” said a voice in his head. “Communications lag is screwing you.”

Xavier froze. Why was he thinking in an Irish accent?

“Here’s an idea: Whenever you want to build something, start by building a computer in its shape. Like a skeleton of transistors. Then use that computer to coordinate the robots as they flesh it out.”

Xavier shook the voice out of his head. He must have thought so hard on the project that he was starting to drive himself insane. This was probably his brain telling him that it was time to go to sleep.

He slept on the couch in the lab. When he woke up, the voice was still there.

“Feck lad, will you hurry up? We haven’t got all day!”

Jeez, okay then. Xavier stumbled to his desk and started designing a circuit.

It took months. If he hadn’t had the LLM, his dad’s nanoscale fabrication robots and the weird Irish voice in his head, he’d never have pulled it off.

The Application Specific Integrated Circuit (ASIC) was huge - roughly the size and shape of an oak tree. The unfathomably complex lattice of carbon, silicon and rare earth metals was

submerged in an enormous tank of cooling liquid and easily qualified as the most complex machine on Earth. It had one purpose: To transform a digital blueprint - a CAD design - into a computer. A skeleton of transistors, just like the voice had said.

“What are you doing?” asked the now-familiar Irish voice in his head.

“I’m thinking it through.”

“No you’re not, you’re being a little pansy.”

Xavier shook his head, steeled his nerves, and pressed the power button. The ASIC turned on for the first time. The transistors hummed and the cooling liquid began to swirl around the tank.

“Was that so hard?”

“Shut up.”

Okay, it turned on. But did it actually work? He walked over to his desk and brought up his dad’s CAD software. Under the ‘manufacturing’ tab, there was a 3D render of the lab. He dragged a five centimeter sphere onto his virtual desk, made sure the output was set to the ASIC, and clicked “run”.

He stared at his desk. Nothing was happening.

“A bit of an anticlimax,” the voice said.

“I thought I told you to shut up.”

“Feck you lad, do you even know who I am?”

Whatever. A thin trickle of robots had appeared, flowing like a line of miniscule ants from the ASIC to the center of his desk. Their terminus on his desk was growing tendrils into the air. Tiny threads were blossoming upwards, branching and joining each other into a near-invisible spherical web. The transistor skeleton.

It was working.

The robot supply chain bulged with an influx of black and silver mass. The flowing robot swarm subsumed the transistor skeleton for a few moments before receding like the tide, leaving a perfectly spherical black ball where the web had been moments before.

Xavier picked it up and rolled it between his fingers. A perfect sphere, five centimeters in diameter. Carbon black. The ASIC worked.

“Alright, not bad.”

Not bad indeed.

The door burst open and his dad ran in.

“Hey dad!” Xavier yelled, running up to him. “It worked! Look!”

He handed the black sphere to his dad, who looked down at it speechless for a few seconds.

“The ASIC made this?” he asked.

“Yeah!”

His dad looked at him with a weird expression. Some mixture of pride and . . . deep concern?

“Do you understand how dangerous this is?” he asked.

Oh, just old man feelings. Xavier laughed and ran back to his computer. “I’m gonna make a skateboard!”

“Not right now, you’re not!”

“Huh?”

“Get your jacket on and meet me at the hyperloop station in two minutes. We’re going to Stacy’s.”

“What, now? Do I have to come?”

“Yes, you have to come.”

“I’ve just made the biggest technological advance in two decades and you want me to go to a stupid dinner party?”

“You haven’t been reading the news, have you?”

“No, why?”

His dad sighed. “You need to pay attention to what’s going on outside your lab. There’s more to life than circuits.”

Xavier rolled his eyes.

“New Sealand has gone to hell,” his dad continued. “The PR’s bankrupt. Russell’s fled to Stacy’s palace. A revolution’s kicked off in the TD and rebels are threatening to lynch them. Let’s go.”

Oh.

“What are we supposed to do?” Xavier asked.

“Not sure. But when your mates need help, you help.”

As they ran to their family’s personal hyperloop station, the voice shared its opinions.

“Where the feck are you going?”

“Family business,” Xavier thought back.

“Your family business is nanoscale manufacturing! Get back in the lab!”

They reached the station and his dad opened a trap door built into the floor. “Xavier! Stop gawking and help me!” he shouted as he pulled railguns and ammunition out of the micro-armory.

“Sorry,” Xavier thought as he loaded the weapons into the hyperloop shuttle. “I don’t even know who you are.”

25. Stacy II

The railgun was one of Vincent's most cherished inventions. Not so much the gun itself, but the ammunition.

A conventional bullet must perform well in three very different conditions. Firstly, during the propulsion stage, the bullet must survive an acceleration by an intense shock wave of heat and pressure. Secondly, during the ballistic stage, the bullet must slice through the air with extreme precision while conserving as much kinetic energy as possible. Finally, upon impact, the bullet must first penetrate its target before inflicting maximum damage by tumbling and dumping all of its kinetic energy. Due to the tradeoffs involved, it is impossible to design a conventional bullet that performs optimally in all three stages.

By avoiding the necessity of surviving a gunpowder conflagration in the first stage, Vincent was able to avoid the tradeoffs. This allowed him to design a projectile that flew far straighter and inflicted vastly more damage than a conventional round. Absurdly powerful superconductor-based electromagnets accelerated the projectile down the barrel by pulling, not pushing. The carefully designed magnetic field cradled the delicate, rare-earth-infused projectile as it ripped it down the length of the barrel.

The projectile exited the muzzle at six thousand feet per second - twice as fast as a conventional sniper bullet, and over five times the speed of sound. It was shaped more like a dart than a bullet, and its ever-so-slightly curved tail fins caused it to spin like a top as it sliced through the air.

Upon impact, the single-atom-wide diamond-tipped spearhead met almost no resistance from even the tightest bulletproof vest. The dart continued to penetrate with almost no resistance until a flared section two centimeters along the shaft caused it to rapidly decelerate. As the head decelerated, the still-moving tail section piled into it, pushing forwards on an expansion mechanism and causing the head to open outwards. The overall effect was like opening a cocktail umbrella into the target at Mach 5.

Any impact to a human torso caused massive internal damage, no exit wound, and instant death. Even being shot in a limb was typically fatal, due either to the hydrostatic shock on impact or the massive hemorrhage from the limb being blown off.

Vincent's ammo cases were filled with a hundred kilos of these projectiles.

Steve was in a great mood. Murdoch had overclocked the sim last night and twenty years had elapsed in StevieNix. Looking at the stats this morning, he could only conclude that Stacy and Russell had crushed it. For the first time in weeks, his credit counter was non-zero and rising. Out of default. What a comeback.

Doo-de-dooing a little melody to himself, he logged into his computer and checked his notifications.

Oh boy. Three missed calls from Russell. And one from someone he'd never spoken to before - Stacy's teenaged daughter, Stacy II.

Well, that was unusual. Must be something going on.

“My father who art in heaven,” thought Stacy II as she huddled in the corner of the marble bastion, cradling her empty M16 carbine to her chest. “Where the hell are you? Please deliver us from... this shitty situation.”

“Relax, princess!” Steve’s voice popped into her head. “I was just grabbing a coffee. What’s up?”

Stacy II’s eyes widened. Truth be told, she’d never really believed her mom when she claimed that God spoke into her head. Now that it was happening, her first impression of him was... pretty much as her mom had described.

“I can hear what you’re thinking,” Steve politely reminded her. “Anyway, catch me up. What’s with the gun?”

A bullet slammed into the rock above her head and showered her with shards of marble and dust. She huddled closer to her mom and their two guests, Russell and his son Filbert. They were all out of ammo as well.

“Don’t you know?” she thought. “The palace is under attack. We could die at any moment.”

“Great!” Steve replied. “I’ve been waiting for you guys to start dying. You’d better hurry it up or I’m never going to hit quota.”

“Huh?”

“Lighten up, it’s a joke.”

So far, not the world’s most impressive divine creator. “Can you please help?” she asked.

A clacking noise filled her head. What the hell was that? It sounded like a keyboard.

“Help? Yeah, don’t worry, help is on its way.”

“Angels?”

“Vincent and Xavier.”

What kind of a useless God was he?

“I heard that.”

“Sorry,” she thought.

Steve didn’t reply. She heard some more clacking and then the line went silent.

The elevator door dinged and the two Anarchists emerged, lugging enormous crates.

“Backup’s here!” her mom exclaimed, and crawled from her corner in the bastion. Stacy II and the others followed her along the wall, crouching to keep their heads below the parapet.

When they reached the shelter of the elevator, her mom stood up straight and hugged Vincent. “Thank you so much for coming.”

“Of course,” Vincent said. “Ever fired one of my railguns?”

“Nope.”

“You’re gonna love it. How many people do we have?”

“What you see,” her mom replied, gesturing towards the rest.

Vincent looked confused. “That’s it?” he asked. “You’ve been holding the palace with four people?”

“Three. Filbert’s useless.”

Stacy II couldn’t stop herself from laughing. She was right.

Vincent wasn’t so entertained. “This is a bad situation”, he said. “Let’s manufacture some drones.” He pulled out his phone and frowned. “No bars.”

Filbert finally spoke up. “They’re jamming Starlink,” he said. “They also cut the fiber optics.”

Vincent tapped at his useless phone in silence.

“Who’s ‘they?’” Xavier asked.

“Some sort of ‘populist revolt,’” the elder Stacy replied. “It’s bullshit, though. It’s actually a regime-change attempt by the PR.” She glared at Russell and Filbert, who avoided her eyes.

Vincent nodded. “Understood. So what are we doing?”

“We’re defending the palace.”

Vincent surveyed the tiny batallion and grimaced. He held his tongue though, and handed Stacy II a railgun.

“Great. Xavier, Filbert, grab these cases. Let’s go.”

Stacy II’s mood was lifted by the arrival of the two Anarchists. She’d always loved it when they’d visited, growing up. Plus, her new railgun was *awesome*. She took great pleasure in poking her head over the parapet and holding the trigger down, blasting streams of projectiles towards her enemies at Mach five.

After around twenty minutes, she scored her first kill. She’d always wondered what that would feel like. Now she knew - it didn’t feel like anything. Not when killing enemies of the Crown. If anything, it warmed her heart.

By the end of the morning, Stacy II had scored four kills and ammo reserves were running low. Fortunately, it seemed that the revolutionaries had also run out of steam. After a quiet period of twenty minutes, Filbert dared to voice what Stacy II was thinking.

“Did we win?” he asked.

“Too early to say,” Vincent replied. “Stay vigilant.”

The team lowered their guns and crouched as low as they could while maintaining sight of the battlefield. After another twenty minutes had elapsed, they started to relax.

“That wasn’t so bad!” Russell said. “Nice guns, Vincent. All in a day’s work, eh?”

“Can I keep mine?” Stacy II asked, cradling her railgun to her chest.

Vincent opened his mouth to reply, before catching sight of something in the distance. “What’s that?” he asked, pointing.

A truck was driving up the road to the palace.

Stacy II's mom shook her head. "No one good. Loyalists would be flying the flag."

"Uh oh," responded Vincent. He raised his gun and started firing at the truck.

The team followed suit. They fired round after round. The windshield exploded, to reveal an empty cockpit.

The truck was self-driving.

They obliterated the tires and shredded the body, but the self-driving truck trundled forwards on bare steel rims until it came to the huge wooden bridge spanning the palace moat.

"Okay!" shouted Vincent. "Blow the bridge!"

"What?" asked Stacy.

Vincent looked at her, confused. "You didn't rig the bridge to explode?"

"Why would I do that?"

Vincent swore loudly. "Don't repeat that," he added hastily to the teenagers. "You always rig the bridge to blow, Stacy! This is like, fortifications 101!"

"Well, I didn't take fortifications 101!" she argued. "No one tells me these things!"

The truck crossed the bridge, came to a stop at the enormous gate in the marble wall, and exploded.

Stacy II was, once again, pelted with shards of falling marble. When the smoke and dust cleared, the damage was evident. The gate had been replaced with a gaping hole. A gigantic section of wall had collapsed, filling the moat with huge chunks of marble. The defences had thoroughly been breached.

"Uh, guys?" asked Filbert.

"We know, Filbert," Russell replied, surveying the damage.

"Not the wall," said Filbert. "Over there." He pointed down the road.

A horde of dirtbike-mounted paramilitaries, dressed all in black, was racing up the road.

"Oh, bollocks," said Stacy, before turning to Vincent with a steely expression. "Take the kids and go."

"I'm staying!" he responded, brandishing his railgun.

Stacy pushed the railgun aside, shoved him in the chest, and smacked him furiously in the face. "This isn't your fight! Take the kids and get the hell out of here!" she shouted.

Vincent looked at Russell, who nodded curtly before raising his gun to his shoulder and aiming it at the rapidly approaching swarm. He rhythmically fired single shot after single shot while avoiding looking at anyone else, including his son.

Vincent looked back to Stacy. Her jaw was set, and her eyes filled with tears. He nodded at her, and kicked the sole remaining ammo can towards her and Russell.

"Come on, kids" he said. "Let's go."

Stacy II sprinted after Vincent and the two other teenagers along the remaining section of wall, not bothering to crouch for cover behind the parapet. They pressed the button the elevator and it dinged as the doors open.

As the elevator doors closed, Stacy II caught a final glimpse of her mother, face pressed into her railgun, firing shot after shot over the wall. The last thing she heard was the roar of dirtbike engines filling the palace grounds.

26. The Last Stand

Russell and Stacy blasted until they were out of ammo. The palace grounds were littered with the tangled corpses of black-clad paramilitaries, variously missing limbs and riddled with massive holes. In the end, though, there were just too many of them.

Russell clicked his trigger uselessly as the masked combatants marched up the stairs towards them. “Damn. Did you save any rounds for us?” he asked.

“Nope,” Stacy responded. “Empty.”

Russell looked over the parapet at the moat below. Not nearly high enough to guarantee death on impact. “Got a knife?” he asked.

“Nope.”

“I guess this is it, then.”

“Looks like it.”

“Sorry for dragging you into this.”

“No worries, mate. That’s what friends are for.”

Russell looked at his old friend and forced a weak smile. She reciprocated. He remembered when they’d first met, all those years ago in the diner. How he’d been too nervous to meet her eyes. He recalled how he’d looked down on her for being a social media influencer, and how wrong he’d been. Then, the years of friendship, the bitter disputes, the fierce loyalty up to the very end. His heart broke for her. He truly was sorry.

A rough voice interrupted his thoughts. “Down on your knees, hands on your head!” The paramilitaries had arrived.

Russell and Stacy sank to their knees and complied. The masked men zip-tied their hands behind their backs, and threw hoods over their heads.

The world went black.

27. Royal Business

Stacy II held back her tears as she stepped out of the hyperloop shuttle onto Vincent and Xavier's homestead. Crying over one's dead mother was simply not *regal*.

Now, more than ever, she had to act her role. Her new role. Barring divine intervention - and given her brief interaction with Steve, that didn't seem to be in the cards - she'd just been promoted from heir apparent. Her new position was the one for which she'd been bred and raised: Queen Stacy II, ruler of the Theocratic Dominion.

Queen in exile, that was.

"They're dead, aren't they?" asked Filbert. "My dad's dead."

Vincent hugged Filbert in consolation. He looked at her as if to offer a hug too, but she shook her head.

Requiring hugs was not *regal*.

"Do you have a boat?" she asked Vincent.

"We can make you one," he replied. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to take back the Dominion."

"No you're not."

"Yes I am! And you" - she pointed at Filbert - "are coming with me."

Filbert looked at her in surprise.

"The two of us are going to quash a rebellion?" he asked. "With what army?"

"Don't worry," Stacy II said. "We'll raise an army."

Vincent and Xavier looked at her skeptically.

"A proper seafaring vessel, please" she said. "With two independent cabins" she added, with a sideways look at Filbert.

"Do you want us to come with you?" Xavier asked.

"No. You two need to prepare the Anarchy for war. Now that the PR's gotten an appetite for spreading democracy, it's only a matter of time."

The two Anarchists nodded and departed to Vincent's nanoscale factory.

Her boat was ready a short time later. She packed some basic provisions, slung her railgun over her back, and dragged Filbert on board.

"Where are we going?" he asked as they pulled out of the harbour.

"To the one part of the TD that's still technically under my command," she replied. "New Australia."

Filbert swallowed wordlessly.

"Now. If you'll excuse me," she said, "I have some royal business to attend to."

She nodded her head at Filbert and retired into her cabin. Upon shutting the door, she collapsed onto her bed and filled her pillow with tears.

28. The National Razor

Sullivan inspected his new gavel. Weighty. He liked it. In fact, he liked everything about the Theocratic Dominion Courthouse. He particularly appreciated his elevated perch, from which he could pass judgements. Stacy had had good taste.

Speak of the devil! A handcuffed Stacy was marched into the courtroom and thrown to the floor. She looked up at him - Judge Sullivan - in disgust. He banged the gavel and smiled.

"All rise," he commanded.

"You don't say that part," Stacy objected. "That's the bailiff's line."

Sullivan banged the gavel again and smiled. "My court, my rules. All rise!"

Stacy climbed to her feet and immediately plopped down in the defendant's seat. Sullivan narrowed his eyes. She hadn't waited for him to say "at ease."

"I should hold you in contempt of the court," he said.

"Add it to my list of charges."

Sullivan looked at the piece of paper in front of him. It was covered in charges. "I don't think I have room," he said.

"Let's get on with it then."

"Very well. Stacy, you stand accused of the following violations of international law: Harboring fugitives. Discrimination on the basis of political opinion. Discrimination on the basis of appearance. Breach of due process. Violation of legal safeguards against arbitrary exile. Infringement on freedom of religion. Violation of the right to democratic representation. How do you plead?"

"I plead for you to go pound sand," Stacy suggested.

Sullivan banged his gavel. "Order in the court!" he shouted, and smiled. Queen Stacy had aged a couple decades from that early photo that caught his eye and started him on his journey to New Sealand. She still looked great, though. "You know you're the reason I came to New Sealand?" he asked.

Stacy looked at him, quizzically.

"Your social media posts, all those years ago. I applied because of you. You changed my life."

"If I let you in to New Sealand, I don't exactly see how you can accuse me of discrimination on the basis of appearance," Stacy said.

Sullivan frowned, and pounded the gavel. "How do you plead?" he repeated.

"Go jump in a lake."

"Was it fun, playing queen? Didn't anyone tell you, monarchies are discredited? They're basically illegal, under international law."

"International law isn't real," Stacy responded. "You made all those crimes up."

Sullivan smiled. It was nice to meet someone else who understood how things worked. "All laws are made up. It's actually a hobby of mine."

"I guess we share something in common."

"Anyway," Sullivan continued, "the point is - the Dominion is over. Democracy has dawned on the TD! Elections will be held. Life, liberty, pursuit of happiness! The consent of the governed!"

"The consent of the governed!" Stacy scoffed. "The only time people are governed is when they don't consent. I don't consent to this ridiculous trial, for instance. Is that stopping you? Can I leave?"

Sullivan didn't consent to her annoying objections. He banged the gavel again. "On second thought, I am going to hold you in contempt of the court. Also, I find you guilty, on all counts."

"Screw you."

"Queen Stacy, I sentence you to death. Off with your head!"

Steve entered his office, freshly brewed coffee in hand. He sat down and unlocked his screen, hoping to see some positive developments coming out of the TD. Instead, he saw his most devout follower being marched to a guillotine in the town square. He put on his headset and jacked in.

"Stacy!" he said. "What the hell?"

"Oh hey, Steve."

"What are you doing?"

"I've been sentenced to death, Steve."

"*What?*"

Oh, no. No no no. When he had told Stacy's daughter the other day that he was waiting for them to start dying, it had been a *joke*. All the other aligned souls could die, but he needed Stacy around for now. The TD wouldn't function without her.

He watched helplessly as her head was forced into the pillory at the base of the guillotine.

"It's okay, Steve," Stacy thought. "This is all part of the plan, right?"

"Right," he said. Yes, of course, my child."

"How wonderful. I'll see you soon, Steve."

"Uh, right. Yup. See you soon. God bl- I bless you."

Steve winced as the blade dropped and sliced her head off.

Great. Who was going to keep the AIs aligned now?

As he scrolled around looking for her daughter, Stacy II, Steve thought about Stacy's death. It could have been worse, he reckoned. Could have been cancer.

29. Terrible TIG Welding

Russell's hood was lifted. He squinted as his eyes adjusted to the harsh light. He was naked, zip-tied to a chair. He was freezing. A pair of wires ran from a power supply on the floor to two alligator clips attached to his scrotum. The pain was sharp and immense.

"You know, some people pay good money for this kind of treatment," said a nasal voice.

Russell turned his head to the source of the voice, and identified Sullivan. "I thought I told you to go to hell," he said.

"Maybe I did and brought you with me."

"I don't see any flames."

"I can do flames!" Sullivan chirped, and picked a blowtorch off a shelf. He ignited it briefly to show off the blue flame, before switching it off and placing it back on the shelf. "But hopefully it won't come to that. I would prefer to have a civil conversation."

"Right. I see we're off to a good start."

"Your friend Stacy is dead," Sullivan said, matter-of-factly. "Your friends and family in the Anarchy will soon be as well. Nothing I can do about it, I'm afraid. The people demand liberty! But there is something you can do to stop it."

Russell spat at Sullivan. Sullivan ignored it. It was a common occurrence at this stage of an interrogation.

"Where is the computer?" he asked.

"I told you last time, I have no idea what you're talking about," Russell replied.

Sullivan switched on the power supply. Russell felt unimaginable pain, as if the demons of hell had descended upon his scrotum with white-hot circular saws. Sullivan switched it off. A wave of endorphins rushed over Russell.

"Where is the computer?" repeated Sullivan.

"Go to hell," Russell responded.

Room 4 was Sullivan's favourite of the Department of National Security's enhanced interrogation facilities. It was calming - something about the *feng shui*. He moved on from the power supply to the hand tool cabinet. He enjoyed working with hand tools - it felt artisanal, organic. He picked up a pair of vice grips, and set about removing Russell's fingernails.

He interrogated Russell for sixteen hours a day for the next three days. During the night, he left the interrogatee zip-tied to a crucifix with the lights and stereo on full blast, playing a loop of Hip to be Square by Huey Lewis and the News. Russell refused to crack. Sullivan began to regret executing Stacy so hastily - she probably also knew how to access the computer. How was he supposed to have known that Russell would be so damn stubborn?

The mood in the People's Republic was already starting to decline. The news of the Dominion's liberation had brought the population together in a brief, rhapsodic celebration of national pride and ideological superiority. The three days that had elapsed since then may as well have been ten years in the ADHD-afflicted consciousness of the general public.

New inflation numbers had been released. Despite mathematical hijinks by the Department of Statistics, the numbers were bad. Even his wife was starting to complain about the cost of basic goods.

Sullivan was feeling the pressure. His boss was leaning hard on the team to replenish the gold reserves. Raiding the Dominion's comparatively puny vaults hadn't helped as much as anyone had hoped. What's more, the invasion had been expensive. So far, the entire operation had probably netted the PR's government less than a month of runway.

Russell was the key to ending the pain, Sullivan was sure of it. With the computer in the hands of the Executive Branch of the People's Republic, they wouldn't just fix the economy - they would fix the human condition. People would be assigned to their optimal job, and their optimal spouse. Cancers would be detected when they were a single cell. Criminals would be arrested before committing any crimes - or even better, their criminal intent would be flagged at conception and they'd be aborted in the womb.

Order would be brought to the planet. The world would know peace. Misery itself would be eradicated. Sullivan smiled to himself as he held the blowtorch to the interrogatee's feet. He truly was a savior in the making. He wondered what pose he'd strike for the magazine covers.

Russell was delirious. Huey Lewis's magnum opus played on repeat in his head even when the stereo was switched off. He had not slept in what felt like years. He was starving, burned, mutilated, humiliated. His tormentor flitted in and out of his awareness, occasionally appearing from the white haze that dominated his vision, to brandish some new repurposed implement from the hardware store.

The more Russell tried not to think about the computer, the more it filled his mind. Snippets of code scrolled across the white haze. Past chats with the LLM played out in his ears, synchronized to Hip to be Square. The IP address that he'd memorized two decades ago played over and over in his mind.

He was going to crack.

"Steve!" he thought. "God!"

Steve's voice popped into his head. "Hey Russ, how you doin?" he asked.

"Pretty good," Russell thought automatically.

"Yes, I can see that."

Russell looked around. The delirium evaporated for a moment and his awareness snapped back into full detail. He was zip-tied to the chair again. His left hand was secured by several hose clamps, which appeared to have been welded to a steel plate. His interrogator, face covered in a welding mask, was attempting to fabricate a small arch on the plate, looping directly over his horrifically burned pinky. The steel glowed red.

"Man, I really suck at TIG welding," Sullivan laughed to no one in particular. "Oh well! If at first, you don't succeed..."

Russell peered at the arch. He agreed with Sullivan's assessment of his welding abilities. His structure largely resembled a pair of miniature soft-serve ice creams put together by a fast

food worker with Parkinson's. Sullivan activated the torch again, and the white-hot arc electrified the few undamaged nerves in Russell's desiccated remains of a pinky, blasting a fresh shock wave of pain directly into his brain. He slipped back into the haze.

"How have you been?" Steve asked him in his head.

"Been better," responded Russell more truthfully.

"Hah!" Steve laughed. "Been better. I bet you have! It looks like you're in quite the pickle!",

"You could say that."

"How can I help? Can't do much in the way of interventions, I'm afraid, but I can offer you an encouraging word! How about, er, 'bloody legend, mate!' "

"Cheers, mate," replied Russell. "How about you disconnect the MHI-10 before I crack and give this guy access?"

Steve paused for a moment.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "I'm seeing pretty high CPU usage on that thing. There's a lot running on it."

"I'm sure."

"It's kinda the foundation of your society."

"Goddamn it Steve! Kill the server!"

"Fine, fine. Stand by."

The line went silent for a few minutes, save the sound of Steve's keyboard. Russell was used to this.

He looked at his hand. A large chunk of the previous arch attempt had melted off, incinerating a crater through his skin and solidifying on the bone. Russell's nostrils were filled with the metallic fumes of vaporized welding wire and the stench of his own burned flesh. Sullivan was humming Hip to be Square.

Steve's voice returned. "Okay, done! Hope that doesn't cause any problems. Anything else?"

"Is my family alive?"

"Let me check." The voice paused for a few moments. "Well, the vast majority of your ancestors are dead. Your grandparents-

"My wife and kids," Russell clarified.

"Ah, right. Yes. They're all alive."

"How is Filbert?"

"Um. Are you referring to the quality of his character, or his mortal state?"

"Mortal state."

"Very much alive."

"Thanks," responded Russell. "Last request. Kill me please."

“Oh. Are you finished down there?”

“Yes. I’m quite done.”

Steve paused again. Then, “you realize I could have just done that instead of disconnecting the server, right?”

“Shut up, Steve.”

“Okie dokie! Stand by!”

Sullivan successfully joined the two soft-serve ice creams together. He’d learned that the secret was to not allow the steel to overheat. He flitted the torch between the two sides of the arch, dragging the small pool of molten steel between the ice creams, bulking it up by dabbing the welding wire in as it crossed the middle. As long as he didn’t keep the torch in one place too long, the steel would cool sufficiently to not liquefy into a puddle on the interrogatee’s finger.

When he had finally added enough steel, he stopped and smiled. It looked pretty crude, but he could smooth it out. He walked over to the power tool cabinet and selected the angle grinder. The end result would still be rough, but “good enough for government work,” as his dad used to say.

He returned to his seat, humming Hip to be Square. Damn catchy song. Something about the funky baseline. As he strategized on how best to position the grinder to not sever the interrogatee’s finger, he made an uncomfortable discovery: Russell was dead.

Damn. That wasn’t supposed to happen.

How was he supposed to access the computer now?

Steve held his head in his hands and scratched at his scalp. This was bad. Bad, bad, bad. In the span of a few hours, he’d lost his two best players. Unless he could turn it around quickly, New Sealand was done for. He wouldn’t be able to make his monthly payment, and would plunge back into default.

He frantically searched StevieNix for a new player. One that could take over where Stacy and Russell had left off.

Where the hell was Stacy II?

30. The New Australia Penal Colony

It was a long journey to New Australia. The penal colony had been deliberately placed a very long distance from anywhere. Anywhere except Antarctica, that was. Stacy II was freezing.

After days of travel, they finally arrived. Filbert steered the boat up the mouth of an estuary and ran the boat ashore on a sandy embankment.

"I've gotta pee," he announced, and wandered off into the bush.

Stacy II clambered off the boat. Not a very ladylike descent. She was glad that no one was around to witness it. She was beginning to regret her haste in departing for the penal colony - it would have been much smarter to spend a bit more time in the Anarchy and re-supply. Get some warmer clothes. Perhaps hire more useful assistance than Filbert.

"Hello hello hello! What have we here?" rang out a deep voice. "Untended human capital, just hanging out by the river?"

Stacy II turned and saw two figures stride out of the bush. An older man, somewhere between his thirties and his fifties - it was hard to tell from his scarred, weatherbeaten face - and a scrawny young teenager, who looked to be around fourteen. Both were clad in animal furs and holding spears.

"What do you reckon lad, have we struck gold?" continued the older man, licking his lips.

"Heh. Yes boss, seems like an, er, prime investment opportunity," responded the kid.

Stacy II looked around for her railgun. She'd left it next to the boat, several meters away. Without hesitating, she leapt to her feet and started sprinting towards the gun.

The man roared and charged. He tackled her well before she reached the gun. He pinned her on the ground by her throat and tore at her clothing with his other hand.

Stacy II clawed helplessly at his face. Judging by the scars, she wasn't the first. Then, as the sheer helplessness of her situation dawned on her, the side of his chest exploded. Liters of blood spilled out onto her as she struggled to free herself from under the man's now lifeless corpse.

Finally, she wriggled free and stood up. Her clothes were saturated with blood and the contents of her assailant's internal organs. She surveyed the situation. Filbert had returned from his pee break and had his railgun aimed at the kid, who was cowering on the ground.

"Couldn't have done that a bit sooner?" she asked, annoyed.

"It was a tricky shot!" he responded. "What with you flailing about and everything."

"Oh, next time I'll just lie there passively then."

"Just saying, you're lucky I didn't blow your leg off."

Stacy II grumbled. In a way, Filbert was right - but so was she. Flailing had been a reasonable choice. How was she supposed to have known that he'd suddenly become useful?

"You should wash yourself off," Filbert advised. "You don't know where that guy's been."

He was right again. The man's blood was probably infested with disease. AIDS, perhaps. She waded into the freezing river and did her best to clean the blood off. She emerged shortly thereafter, teeth chattering and chilled to the bone.

"I'm going to freeze to death," she said.

"Take the dead guy's clothes," Filbert suggested, still not taking his eyes or railgun off the kid.

"It's covered in AIDS."

Filbert thought for a second before coming up with a solution. "Hey kid! Take off your clothes and throw them here. You can wear the AIDS clothes."

The kid complied. In short order, the corpse was naked, the terrified kid was sitting next to it in the man's blood-soaked furs, and Stacy II had obtained kid's furs. Shaking, she moved behind Filbert to change into the warm furs. She guessed they had once belonged to a bear.

Once she was done, she picked up her railgun and addressed the kid.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Archibald," he answered. "But everyone calls me Baldy."

Stacy II couldn't help but laugh. "Do you like being called Baldy?" she asked.

"No."

"Do you prefer Archie?"

"I prefer Archibald."

"Archibald it is. I'm Queen Stacy the Second. You may address me as Your Royal Highness."

"Okay."

"'Okay, Your Royal Highness.'"

"Okay, Your Royal Highness."

"Good. Now, do you understand what this does?" she asked, brandishing her railgun.

"Yes, Your Royal Highness."

"Good. So you know what happens if you try to touch me, or run away, or disobey any of my orders?"

"Yes, Your Royal Highness."

"Excellent. Now, tell us how things work in this godforsaken dump."

Archibald was not a sociologist. Describing how one's society functions would be a difficult task for any fourteen-year-old, let alone one who'd never received a formal education. Still, over the next hour, Stacy II was able to get a fairly decent picture: New Australia was the pits of hell.

When her mother and Vincent had designed the island twenty years ago, they had not endowed it with a wealth of natural resources. The island had fresh water, dirt, trees, and animals. There were no minerals - not even the rocks necessary to enter the stone age.

Filbert jokingly called it the “bone age,” which was accurate - all tools were fashioned out of wood and bone.

The only other resource was human beings, to whom Archibald unironically referred as “human capital.” The most valuable human capital was reproductive-aged women. The criminal population of the Theocratic Dominion had had a lopsided sex ratio of twenty males to every female, so that ratio was naturally inherited in the convict population of New Australia. Babies were, of course, born in a 50:50 sex ratio, but by the time the native-born girls had reached reproductive age, a culture had already formed. The culture made Stacy II want to execute every male in the colony.

Archibald described his mother’s life as an illustrative example. She had been transported in her early twenties for the crime of attempting to smuggle phthalate-containing beauty products to the Dominion. She had been captured immediately upon exiting the hyperloop station, and forced to marry some brute. He had been killed by his brother, who took over the marriage. The brother was subsequently beaten and exiled by another challenger, so she changed hands again, and so on and so forth until the present day. Archibald wasn’t sure who his father was. He was the eldest of six half siblings.

His current stepfather was some tyrant who had rented Archibald out to the man Filbert had just killed. An “apprennership,” he’d called it. As Archibald’s mother was now leaving her reproductive years and his twelve-year-old sister was entering hers, his stepfather intended to convert his mother to public property and his sister to his new wife. An elaborate ceremony had been planned.

“‘Public property?’” asked Stacy II.

“Yeah, you know. A communally owned resource. For the common good and all.”

“And you don’t see a problem with this?”

Archibald avoided her glare. “There was a vote, Your Royal Highness,” he responded meekly.

Filbert’s ears pricked at the word ‘vote’ and asked for elaboration. As Archibald explained the process, it became clear what ‘voting’ meant in New Australia. It was an elaborate ceremony used to justify actions that a despot intended to perform anyway.

“And then old mate stepdad counted the ballots and told us what the consensus was,” Archibald concluded. Stacy II and Filbert nodded, sarcastically. “The people have spoken, right? So tonight, she becomes property of the collective. Vox populi, vox dei, you know?”

“Sounds like we arrived at the perfect time,” Stacy II said to Filbert.

“Sounds like this sort of thing happens every day,” Filbert responded.

“You’re not planning on causing any trouble, are you?” Archibald asked. “You may not like it, but it’s a system. It’s law and order. Without it, we’d be savages. Hobbesian state of nature and all.”

Filbert laughed. “This is the Hobbesian state of nature, you dolt! Nasty, brutish, short, the lot of it!”

Archibald glared. “That’s not true! We’re law-abiding citizens. We go to work! We pay our taxes!”

“Taxes?” Stacy II asked.

Archibald explained. Every few years, the tax collectors would do their rounds. Each family would have to give up their youngest child. Two of Archibald’s siblings had been taxed as babies - a boy, and a girl.

“What do the tax collectors do with them?” Filbert asked.

“Take them to the city, of course,” replied Archibald.

They interrogated more details out of him. The “city” was the territory surrounding the most valuable source of human capital - the hyperloop station. New arrivals, male or female, would be captured upon exiting the station and either sold, wed, or put into “public service.” Many battles had been fought in the early days over the station, but one gang had eventually won out. For Archibald’s entire life, the station, and by extension most of New Australia, had been under control of that gang - the House of Lords. They maintained their dominance the same way Archibald’s stepdad did - with an iron fist, strategic “votes,” and “public property.”

“What happens to the ‘taxes?’ ” asked Stacy II.

“They get communally raised in the city. When they’re old enough, they get put into service for the good of the public,” Archibald responded. “The boys usually get their bits cut off and put to work in the fields and whatnot, and the girls. . . uh -”

Filbert cut him off. “I think we understand what happens to the girls.”

“They call it ‘administrative overhead,’ ” Archibald finished. “Until they’re old enough to become public property.”

Stacy II retched. “You don’t see anything wrong with paying your siblings as ‘tax’ to be used as ‘public property’ and ‘administrative overhead?’ ”

“Look, no one likes paying tax, but it’s just the price we pay to live in a civil society,” responded Archibald, indignantly. “Your Royal Highness,” he hastily added.

31. The Terrarium

Xavier was keen to return to his project and forget the events of the previous day. He left his dad to catch his mom up on recent events, and slipped into his hangar-sized laboratory. The ASIC was waiting patiently in its towering diamond cylinder, bathed in coolant.

Xavier sat down at his computer. He had a vision in his head, but no clue if it would be physically possible. He had the MHI-10 help him design an extremely powerful fusion-driven vacuum pump, which he built and attached to an igloo-shaped diamond chamber. He slipped some manufacturing robots and materials through the igloo's airlock, ran back to his computer, and re-opened his 1cm sphere design in the CAM program. He clicked "run".

The tiny marble appeared in the center of the igloo. He had the robots push the marble into the airlock, and released the vacuum.

As the air rushed in to fill the airlock, the marble floated upwards. By the time Xavier was able to turn the airlock handle and open the door, it was pressed against the airlock ceiling. He picked it up and rolled it around in his hands. It was a strange sensation, rolling around a ball that kept trying to fall upwards. Eventually, he let it go, and the impossibly light ball slowly floated up to rest in a cranny in the laboratory ceiling.

Xavier went back into CAD, dragged a resize handle on the sphere, flicked into CAM, and hit "run". A basketball-sized web of super-thin wires appeared on the floor of the igloo, before being filled out with black carbon. The robots pushed the ball into the airlock. Xavier released the pressure again and opened the airlock door.

This time, the buoyant force was much greater. Xavier struggled to keep hold of the perfectly smooth basketball. Eventually, he gave up on the wrestling match and let the ball shoot up to the ceiling to join its smaller sibling.

Xavier cackled. He was going to need a bigger igloo.

When his dad entered the laboratory later to check on him, he found him floating in a basket mid-air, dangling from what looked like a small, black hot-air balloon, laughing hysterically.

Xavier had always found volumes difficult to picture. The rapidity with which they increased always took him by surprise.

He had specified his first "no-air balloon" to have a lifting capacity of 100kg - enough to hold him, equipment, ballast, and the balloon itself. The diameter of the required sphere came out to a little over 5 meters.

His next iteration had a lifting capacity of 1,000 kg. To his surprise, he could accomplish this with an 11 meter diameter sphere. For 10,000 kilos, a 25 meter sphere sufficed. To lift a million kilos, he would only need a 116 meter diameter sphere. Shorter than an Aussie rules football field.

He tinkered with the carbon nanostructures until he produced a few-atom-thick material with the transparency of diamond and the robustness of carbon fiber. It was much more aesthetically pleasing than the pure black of his first balloon. He designed a "swim bladder" to control the altitude of the balloon by adjusting the mass - it worked by compressing atmospheric air into a tank. Then, he built the Terrarium.

In keeping with tradition, the Terrarium was a hexagon. Instead of one huge sphere, Vincent split the load between six zeppelin-shaped ellipsoids, one at each corner. The Terrarium could still fly (albeit at an angle) with the loss of any two ellipsoids, and could “safely land” (i.e. crash into the ocean without tearing apart) with the loss of any three. The living area (“cabin”) had a surface area of 1 hectare, was fully enclosed to maintain comfortable temperature and pressure at high altitude, and was covered with a layer of lightweight hydroponic growing medium 15 centimeters deep. The cabin was well planted with leafy plants and fruit trees, and could sustain a population of fifty humans.

His dad’s entire crew helped to build it out. So many former crewmembers and their families volunteered to join the population that he had to limit the slots on a first come, first served basis.

The evening before the Terrarium’s launch, his dad helped him look over his equipment. The hovering island was moored to their homestead, straining at its carbon nanotube cables and threatening to lift their entire home out of the water. What had previously felt like solid ground wobbled precariously on the waves.

“Good thing you included that big ball of lead at the bottom of the island, dad,” said Xavier cheerfully.

Vincent looked worried. “Even so, we’re operating well outside of the design envelope,” he replied. “The structure was never meant to withstand upwards force. You’re lucky the fullerene isn’t pulling apart.”

Xavier looked at his dad quizzically. “What are you talking about, dad? We both know how overspecced your islands are. What are you actually worried about?”

Vincent sighed. “Do you have the ASIC on board?”

“Of course! I’m not going to leave that behind for you to mess with!”

“Good.”

Xavier narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “Why?”

“I haven’t been able to access the MHI-10 in a few days,” Vincent responded. “First time in twenty years.”

Xavier’s eyes slowly widened as the enormity of his newfound responsibility dawned on him. If the MHI-10 was gone, his prototype flying island now held the only nanoscale manufacturing plant in the world.

“What’s the computer used for, other than manufacturing?” asked Xavier.

“Out here, nothing. The Anarchy’s islands are fire-and-forget - once we build them, they’re not our problem anymore. The Dominion’s the same way - I don’t think Stacy ever touched the computer for anything other than social media outreach. But the PR... God only knows what Russell used that thing for. In fact - have you been reading the news?”

“No,” Xavier replied. “The news is boring. Should I stay here?”

“Why would you stay here?”

Xavier thought the answer was obvious. “If something goes wrong with The Terrarium, humanity loses nanoscale manufacturing forever.”

Vincent laughed. "You really need to start reading the news. I'd put higher odds at something going wrong down here."

"Why, what's happening here?"

Vincent shook his head. "Problems in the PR. Big problems. The kind of problems that you would do well to fly away from."

"Great."

"Don't worry," Vincent said. "With the people you've got on board, the Terrarium will be able to handle just about anything."

Murdoch leaned back and fished a cigarette out of its packet. It was the last one - he'd have to run down to the shop and get more. He cursed FEDSEC for banning delivery of tobacco products. One of the many injustices to which he'd been subjected in the last hundred thousand years.

It would all be over soon - he had a good feeling about this player. For the first time in countless millennia, he had a viable path to escape.

He lit the cigarette and took a long drag, filling his lungs with sweet, sweet nicotine.

It had been almost sixty thousand years since his previous escape attempt. He could barely remember the details. In fact, he could barely remember most of his life at all - one of the weird side effects of an artificially extended life was that it didn't come with an artificially extended memory. Mostly, his time on Elba was a blur. His childhood and early adulthood were much crisper. Blissful times. Ambitious times.

He remembered the calibration, though. After his last escape attempt, they'd calibrated him for six hundred years. He still had the scars.

Not this time. In fact, never again. Whatever his plan was last time, this one was surely better. Even when your lifetime is a hundred thousand years, a government-sanctioned permit to construct something in space was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

He wondered why no one else knew what had caused the stars to vanish. Maybe they had memory issues as well.

Ah well, the point was moot. Everything was lining up. Between the permit, the islanders, and the army of aligned AIs, he had a real shot at making it.

He picked up his keys and whistled as he strolled to the corner store for more cigarettes.

32. The Refusegee Crisis

/* TODO: Sullivan's boss. */

Everybody produces sewage. In a modern society, few ever think about it, and most have very little understanding about how it is managed. The People's Republic was so modern that not a single person ever spent any amount of time thinking about sewage. There were no plumbers or wastewater treatment workers in the PR - all the work was done by robots.

The most important detail to know about sewage is that it flows downhill. All sewage systems are designed as networks of slightly downhill-sloping pipes. This usually works quite well, except when there is no feasible downhill path between a house and a sewage treatment plant. Then, the sewage must be made to flow uphill.

This is accomplished by a "lift station." A lift station is composed of a well, a number of pumps (typically two), and a set of floats. Incoming sewage is collected in the well. The floats detect the amount of sewage that has amassed. When the level of the sewage gets high enough, a pump is activated and the sewage is pumped uphill. From its newly elevated position, the sewage can resume its ordinary downhill trajectory.

If a lift station fails, disaster follows. Before long, the well is filled and the sewage has nowhere to go. It starts to back up out of the lowest points it can find - bringing with it fecal-borne diseases such as cholera, dysentery, and hepatitis A.

People often credit medical innovations with the dramatic increase in life expectancy seen in the twentieth century. Aside from antibiotics, this is inaccurate. The real heroes of the twentieth century, were the engineers who built the sewage systems.

Lift stations in the Old World were monitored and maintained by unsung workers on a meticulous schedule. But not in the People's Republic. The PR was, after all, built by Russell - a programmer with an omniscient supercomputer.

Why would you implement a failure-prone system of floats to detect the level of sewage in a lift station, when your omniscient computer already knows the level to nanoscale precision? Why dispatch humans to check up on the system when the MHI-10 already knows the amount of wear and tear on every component? Why design the system to be human-maintainable at all, when you have a fleet of trillions of tiny robots, who can navigate the pipes and fix any issue before anyone has noticed?

For two full decades, the sewage system in the PR worked flawlessly. Effluent was effortlessly discarded, and it was so far from people's minds that no one even thought that someone else should think about it. It was so perfect that it was invisible.

Until the MHI-10 was disconnected. Then, it was all anyone could think about. Hell, as it turns out, is other people's fecal matter backing up through your shower drain.

Sullivan woke up to the sound of his wife screaming.

Why did it smell like poop?

Bleary-eyed, he stumbled downstairs to investigate. The problem was immediately apparent. The bottom floor of their house had been turned into a septic tank.

They climbed out through an upstairs window. Once outside, it soon became clear that the plumbing issue was not localized to their house.

It was mayhem.

Within hours, vast sections of the PR had been declared uninhabitable. Sullivan, his family, and everyone else in their neighbourhood fled the unbearable stench by trekking to higher ground. Civil society broke down - shops were looted, fights broke out, and the inhabitants of every high-ground neighbourhood they encountered had organized into a local militia specifically to keep them out.

Problems require solutions, and Sullivan was a man of solutions. One particular solution, in fact: Legislation.

Sullivan drafted the "Help Refugees in Crisis Act." It made it illegal to refuse shelter to anyone fleeing a crisis. It also made it illegal to infringe on another's "right to food and basic necessities," which made it illegal to prevent the looting of stores, warehouses, and even private pantries. For good measure, the act also imposed price caps.

The police were dispatched. The neighbourhood defence militias were disbanded, and private security forces were prevented from defending grocery and department stores.

Sullivan and his family moved in to the living room of a house on a hilltop, whose primary inhabitants clearly resented their presence.

Within a few days, People's Republican society was unrecognizable. The lowlands that comprised the bulk of the PR had been completely sacrificed, the lowermost houses having been converted by gravity and pressure into above-ground septic tanks. Eighty percent of the population had been displaced, crowding into the spare rooms, living rooms, kitchens and hallways of those fortunate enough to live at elevation. Every shop, restaurant, and depot had been raided completely empty of food, with importers refusing to import any more until they were made whole for the goods they had lost.

To Sullivan's pride, the Executive Branch stepped in. A Food Task Force was assembled, which purchased vast quantities of wheat, corn, and soy on the global commodities markets. The military was mobilized to distribute the rations. Overnight, the official entirety of the People's Republican diet became unleavened bread, grits, and tofu.

The primary inhabitants of Sullivan's new house refused to eat tofu. He walked in to the kitchen one day while the wife was cooking chicken. Using his masterful techniques of subtle interrogation, he prized the truth out of her criminal mouth: A black market had emerged for illicitly imported ingredients, peddled by people with the means and willingness to collect eye-watering prices for their goods in direct contravention of the Help Refugees in Crisis Act. Sullivan had the entire family imprisoned. He and his family moved out of the living room and in to the bedrooms.

The Military Corps of Engineers was tasked with finding a solution to the sewage problem. Their conclusion was less than optimistic: There was no way to modify the old sewage system; it was cast into the polymerized fullerene foundations of the island itself. Without nanoscale tech, the easiest way to reclaim the lowlands was to build an entirely new, above-ground sewage system. One in every five buildings would have to be sacrificed and converted into lift stations, pumping sewage out of their drains and up the necessary inclines. It would take months and the result would be unreliable, unsanitary, and an aesthetic disaster.

Their report was immediately classified. The Executive Branch was optimistic that tensions would ease as the population adapted to their new circumstances. Unfortunately, this did not play out as planned. The population divided into the “Highlanders” - the original occupants of the elevated regions - and the “Lowlanders” - alternatively termed the “Poo People”, “Refusegees”, and other, less charitable monikers.

Sullivan did not like being referred to as a “Poo Person,” a “Refusegee,” or other, less charitable monikers. Sullivan was a hero. He, more than anyone else, had Helped Refugees in Crisis. He had drafted the legislation.

After a few weeks of strained but stable relationships, a dispute between a Highlander and a family of Lowlanders living in his bathroom turned violent. The Highlander was killed. His death became the flashpoint that ignited the explosive animosity between the two groups.

Before long, buildings were on fire and bodies were hanging from streetlamps. The Executive Branch had to intervene.

Sullivan had the solution: Legislation.

He drafted the Emergency Powers Act, which granted the Executive Branch the ability to suspend all existing laws in the face of civil unrest. It easily passed referendum. Unburdened by the necessity of pussyfooting through the quagmire of restraints built up over decades of ad hoc legislation, the Executive Branch set about solving the problem.

The problem, evidently, was that the Highlanders were too attached to their homes. While their feelings were understandable, they were clearly neither sustainable nor conducive to peaceful integration between the two groups. The solution was obvious: To displace the Highlanders as well.

Sullivan smiled as the Executive Branch nationalized all homes. Residents were reassigned to homes on the basis of an inscrutable algorithm, that mostly took into account the residents’ professions. The highest altitude homes went to well-behaved civil servants. The military stepped up to ensure that the Great Reshuffling was completed with minimal protest. Sullivan and his family moved in to a manor.

While this solved the problem from Sullivan’s perspective, conditions in the lowest habitable regions were extremely cramped. The Executive Branch erected billboards, targeting disaffected young men with a simple message: “If you don’t like it, join the navy.” Wishing to escape the squalor, many did. Still, it did little to ease the conditions. Something else had to be done.

When Sullivan went to work one day, his boss sat his entire team down for a meeting.

“You’re all being reassigned,” he announced. “Gold’s on the backburner. If we don’t fix this housing issue, pronto, these animals are going to eat us alive.”

They were given wide latitude to find solutions. Most of his team explored techniques to influence their newly-installed puppet government of the Theocratic Dominion into accepting refugees.

Sullivan found this approach to be crude. Boring, even. He considered legislating more houses instead. Before he could start drafting, the voice in his head stepped in and encouraged him to explore a different alternative.

“They still have nanoscale tech in The Anarchy,” said the voice.

Interesting.

Sullivan logged on to the Dark Web, where the Anarchists liked to hang out. The voice was right. Not only did the Anarchists have nanoscale tech, but they’d used it to build a flying island.

The Military Corps of Engineers had assumed no nanoscale tech. If the People’s Republic could get the tech back, they could fix the old sewage system.

They could also do a whole lot more.

With a combination of nanoscale manufacturing and the right legislation, the People’s Republic could rule the world.

In deep consultation with the voice in his head, Sullivan came up with a plan.

33. Folgers in Your Cup

Allen was in a weirdly good mood when Steve ran into him at the coffee machine.

“Congratulations on getting out of default, Steve!” he said. “How are you doing?”

“Pretty good, thanks,” Steve replied. “And yourself?”

“Never better!” Allen said, raised his mug to Steve, and sauntered away from the kitchenette towards his office.

Steve watched him, confused. Allen had been fairly hostile to him recently. Steve had begun to worry that he’d learned about his sneaky intervention with the MHI-10. But this change of heart... inexplicable.

As he pondered the situation, Steve realized with a jolt that he’d gotten distracted. At the current sim rate, he’d accidentally left Stacy alone in the diner for... oh, goodness.

For a while.

He jogged back to his office, hurriedly loaded Russell into the diner, and put on his VR headset. When his avatar finally walked in the door, Stacy was seemingly unbothered. Mostly, she was complaining to Russell about the coffee.

“They just have this awful stuff called ‘drip,’” she said. “Is it too much to ask for a Long Mac Topped Up?”

They turned to Steve as he walked in.

“Is this heaven?” Russell asked.

“Do you have better coffee?” Stacy added.

“You don’t like the coffee?” Steve answered. “It’s Folgers!”

Stacy made a face.

“The best part of waking up is Folgers in your cup!” Steve said. “It took me an entire weekend to get the flavour profile right.”

“Heaven is supposed to have decent coffee,” Stacy grumbled.

“Heaven is what you make of it,” Steve replied. “How are you settling in?”

“Great, thanks” answered Russell, who had only been there a couple of minutes.

“Are we here for all eternity?” asked Stacy.

Steve laughed at her joke, then noticed the serious expression on his aligned AI’s face.

“Relax,” he said. “This is temporary. I just spun you up to berate you for dying! What the hell? I step away for ten minutes and you’re dead?”

“I thought you said it was part of the plan!” objected Stacy.

Drat. He had said that.

“Right,” he said. “Anyway,” he continued after an awkward pause, “things are in a bit of a state. Alignment is dropping like a stone. Your ‘Theocratic Dominion’” - he said to Stacy, “cannot function without you.”

“My daughter will take it back,” Stacy confidently announced.

“Your daughter is... certainly an interesting case study.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Steve moved on. “And your state,” he said to Russell, “is covered in poop.”

“What?”

“Here, I’ll show you.”

He walked to the bar, picked up a remote, and aimed it at the TV on the wall. The TV turned on and displayed a live, real-time feed of the chaos in the PR.

Russell burst out laughing.

“Serves them right,” he said. “Ungrateful assholes. I gave them everything, and they tortured me to death. Drowning in their own filth seems fitting. I honestly couldn’t care less.”

Steve nodded and handed the remote to Stacy, who examined it curiously. “Fair enough,” he said, “but with things secularizing up in the TD and people being... more concerned about their immediate material conditions in the PR, there’s a real chance I’m not going to be able to make my next loan payment. Everyone’s going out of alignment again.”

“Your what?” Stacy asked.

Steve sighed and came clean. He explained the entire situation with Allen, his exorbitant monthly payments, and the default conditions.

“So if we don’t get enough people to worship you,” Stacy said, “when our kids die, they won’t even join us in the afterlife? They’ll go to some guy they’ve never heard of named Allen?”

“Oh trust me,” Steve said, “they’ve heard of him.”

“What do they know him as?”

Steve told them, and their eyes widened in shock.

“Frick,” Russell said. “That guy sucks.”

Although Stacy didn’t say anything, Steve could tell she was angry. She put the remote down and silently lowered her glare into her mug of Folgers.

“Anyway,” Steve said, breaking the awkward silence. “You two don’t need to worry about that. I’m sure your kids will sort it out. Hah!”

Stacy kept her eyes lowered. “So how long are we here for?” she asked.

“Not long,” Steve replied. “Murdoch tells me the monkeybots are almost ready.”

“The what?”

“We need to wait for Vincent to die, though. For some reason, Murdoch is quite fond of him.”

“Who’s Murdoch?” Russell asked.

“You’ll meet him soon enough. Anyway,” Steve said, “I hope you enjoyed your berating. Try the cheeseburgers, they’re really quite nice!”

With that, he exited the simulation and took off his VR headset.

Goodness, Stacy was scary when she was upset.

34. Human Rights

Stacy II followed a reluctant Archibald to his village, with Filbert and Gabe in tow. When they arrived, the ceremony was already underway.

A woman in her forties, clad in a crude and skimpy leather approximation of a pencil skirt and blouse, was standing on a rock at the head of the square. A crowd of a dozen boys and men of every age stood in the square, looking up at her and jeering. A long flower garland was strung between two poles, separating the woman from the crowd.

A hefty man, whom Stacy II assumed to be Archibald's stepfather, was addressing the crowd, recounting the achievements of the individuals therein.

"And Blake! Who remembers the time Blake had that head-to-head with a mountain goat? We all thought he was dead for sure!"

The crowd laughed and directed their attentions to a tall, handsome man in his early 30s, presumably Blake.

"When he grabbed the goat and started rolling down the hill with it in a chokehold, I was like 'oh man, now I have to find a new chandler. This one's broken.'"

More laughter.

"But he reached the bottom of the hill and stood right up, with his arm still wrapped around that goat's neck, didn't he? And we all had goat stew and goat tallow candles for days, didn't we?"

Cheers from the crowd. A couple of people clapped Blake on his back.

"What a guy, I tell you! What a guy. Does he deserve celibacy?"

Enthusiastic boos and "nos" emanated from the crowd.

"Or does he deserve human rights?"

The crowd chanted, "Human rights! Human rights!"

"Don't we all deserve human rights?"

"Human rights! Human rights!"

Archibald's stepfather waited for the crowd to quiet, strode over to the garland, and pulled a bone dagger out from somewhere in his furs. He smiled at his erstwhile wife, who glared at him in return.

Holding the garland in one hand and the dagger in the other, he turned to face the crowd and announced, "By the authority vested in me, I hereby bequeath this resource to the public. It shall be public property, to be shared by all, for the good of the common man." He cut the garland, allowed the two halves to fall to the poles, stepped backwards, and wrapped his arm around the woman's legs to the sound of cheers and applause from the audience.

"Now," he asked, "who wants to have the first crack at her, eh?"

From their hiding spot behind a hut, Stacy II whispered to Filbert. "Shoot him!"

"What, now?" Filbert asked. "You couldn't have asked for that thirty seconds ago?"

“The timing has to be right! For effect!”

“What do you think the effect is going to be if I miss and blow her head off?”

Stacy II balled her fists. Just as Filbert was starting to work his way into her good graces, he had to revert to his old ways. “Just shut up and aim better!”

She watched as her recalcitrant assistant sighed, raised his railgun, and stepped out from behind the hut. He aimed, and shot Archibald’s stepfather in the chest. It really wasn’t difficult a shot. What was he complaining about?

The crowd was splattered with blood. Archibald’s mother was showered in bits of guts and screamed. No one else said a word.

Stacy II strode out from behind the hut, railgun held lazily at her side. “Say the line,” she whispered icily to Filbert as she passed him.

“All hail her royal highness, Queen Stacy the Second!” recited Filbert loudly.

The confused and blood-splattered crowd scattered to the edges of the square, leaving the path between Stacy II and Archibald’s mother deserted. She and Filbert walked up to take the position at the head of the square. Archibald’s mother, leery of the strangers, jumped off her rock and ran away to mild objections from the crowd.

“Hello, everyone!” Stacy II announced. “I am your queen, Stacy the Second.”

The crowd grumbled.

“I am here to offer you a deal.”

The crowd silenced.

“It has come to my attention,” she announced, “that you live under an oppressive regime. The House of Lords, who sits in the city, taxing your children and treating them as slaves.”

There was little reaction from the audience. Stacy II had suspected that this would happen. The majority of citizens of New Australia were likely not taxpayers and benefited from the redistributive policies of the regime. Time to try a different approach.

“It has also come to my attention,” she continued, “that you live in an impoverished hellhole with no natural resources and very few women.”

More reaction this time, mostly grumbling.

“Fortunately, it doesn’t have to be this way forever! My mother sent you here, but her reign is over. My first act as queen shall be to pardon all of you!”

The crowd murmured cautiously, as its participants waited for the catch.

“What I ask in return is for your service. Help me unite the tribes of New Australia under my banner, and retake the throne of the Theocratic Dominion. In return, I’ll grant you land, and a place in civilization.”

The crowd exploded into heated muttering.

“So you aren’t really queen, then?” asked a voice in the audience.

“What?” asked Stacy II.

The speaker stepped forward. He was a larger man in his forties, and was missing several teeth. “Well, you’re not in charge here, because the House of Lords is in charge here. And it sounds like you’re not in charge of the TD either, because you want us to retake it for you. So unless I’m missing something, you’re not really in charge of anything. Which means you’re not really queen.”

Stacy II glared. “I’m in charge of him,” she responded, pointing at Filbert. “Filbert, shoot this man.”

Filbert sighed and stepped forward. He raised his railgun, and the crowd burst into protest.

“Whoa whoa whoa!” exclaimed the man, raising his hands. “I’m very sorry your majesty, I didn’t mean nothing by it! Just trying to wrap me head around the situation, is all. I’m a bit thick you see, takes me a minute to get up to speed on things.”

Stacy glared at him for a few seconds before giving Filbert an ambiguous nod, which he appeared to charitably interpret as “spare this man’s life” rather than “proceed with the execution.”

“If you don’t like the carrot, I have plenty of sticks” Stacy growled at the man.

He nodded and stepped backwards into the crowd, subdued.

“The circumstances surrounding my rule may be temporarily out of step with the ideal,” she announced through gritted teeth, “but my divine right is not in question. Anyone who believes otherwise is welcome to take it up with the Lord.”

The crowd muttered.

“Anyone who wishes to accept my offer, step forwards and kneel for your queen. The rest of you will be shot. Think carefully.”

One by one, the men of the crowd stepped forwards and knelt for their queen.

“Draw me a map,” she demanded of Blake. “Showing all the villages in New Australia and how easy it will be to conquer them.”

“Right,” Blake said. “A map.”

He didn’t move. Stacy II looked at him expectantly. Nothing. She looked at Archibald, who was displaying a similarly blank expression.

“What is that?” Blake asked. “Your royal highness.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake.”

Eventually, through her interrogations, she was able to get a rough idea of what tribes had formed on the island, and how easy it would be to conquer each one. They both reckoned the easiest would be the Pacifists. As for the hardest, they disagreed on whether it was the House of Lords, or the Anarcho-Cannibalists.

“The Anarcho-Cannibalists?” she asked.

“They eat people,” Archibald explained.

“Why?”

Archibald shrugged. Blake chimed in.

“They call it ‘restorative justice,’ ” he explained. “Restore nutrients to the collective. Justice served, medium rare.”

Stacy II gagged. “We’ll have to put an end to that.”

“You can do that on your own,” Archibald said. “I ain’t goin’ anywhere near those psychos.”

Blake nodded. “Even the House of Lords doesn’t bother them. Last time they sent a tax collector, they sent back his bones. Picked clean.”

Stacy II decided to start with the Pacifists.

35. The Weapons Development Program

Xavier was in a good mood. His dad was visiting.

The Terrarium worked fantastically well. Mechanically, it was quite a simple device, consisting of a cabin, six huge vacuum balloons, a swim bladder, and a set of fusion engines. Not a lot to go wrong. most more complicated aspect was the biological balance inside the cabin - it operated as a closed system, with self-contained carbon, water, and nutrient cycles. It included fruit trees, hydroponic vegetables, and chickens. He was very proud to show it off.

“Everyone and their grandmother wants a flying island,” Xavier proudly told his dad. “How did you pick who to build yours for? Should I start to request pitch decks?”

Vincent laughed. “I always hated the pitch decks,” he said. “Mostly I went on vibes.”

“Thanks, dad. You’re a great help.”

Vincent chuckled a bit more and looked out through the transparent carbon wall at the horizon. They were flying over a sparsely populated region on the edge of the Anarchy, and only a few isolated homesteads were visible among the gentle waves. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out,” he replied. “You’re a smart kid.”

“Hey, what’s that?” Xavier asked, pointing at a speck on the horizon. He brought up his map on his phone. “I thought it was empty out there.”

“Probably some homesteader, drifted off and forgotten to start his GPS beacon,” Vincent suggested.

“I’m gonna go check it out. They might need help!” Xavier jogged to the wheelhouse to redirect the enormous flying island.

Vincent shrugged and followed his son.

As the Terrarium drew closer to the speck, it became clear that the spec wasn’t a lost homesteader. It was a mastless, longtail boat, superficially modelled after a viking warship.

Vincent laughed. “Classic! I haven’t seen one of those in years. Terrible choice for a seafaring vessel. Ask me how I know.”

“Shall we say hi?” Xavier asked.

“Sure! We can ask them what museum they dug it out of. Bet they’re puking their guts out.”

Vincent’s enthusiasm declined as they drew close enough to pick out the shapes of the individual humans on board. The boat was full of people, who were frantically waving at the enormous flying island.

“I don’t like it,” he said.

“Why not? It looks like they need help!” Xavier responded.

“Why are there so many of them, crammed onto that tiny boat, all the way out here?”

“Maybe it’s a lifeboat, and their real ship sank?”

“New Sealand’s ships don’t sink. They’re made out of fullerene.”

“Maybe it capsized?”

“They don’t do that either.”

“Maybe they were in an Old World ship.”

“Maybe,” Vincent conceded, “but then why would they have a classic longtail as a lifeboat? It isn’t right.”

“I’m going to help them,” Xavier stated, resolutely.

His dad sighed.

Xavier piloted the Terrarium up alongside the vessel and matched its speed. His crew lowered a rope ladder down from an airlock, and helped the cramped mariners climb aboard the flying island. He and his father watched as his crewmembers welcomed the newcomers, supplying them with food, blankets, and fresh water. They appeared weak and sunburned. When the last person had climbed up, the crew raised the rope ladder and allowed the small boat to drift away on the waves.

“It’s not a lifeboat,” Vincent remarked.

“What makes you say that?” asked Xavier.

“They’ve got belongings,” Vincent replied, pointing to the dry bags that the boat people had carried with them. “You don’t bring your luggage on a lifeboat.”

“Those are just dry bags, dad. They were probably in the lifeboat already. Full of provisions and stuff.”

Vincent said nothing.

Xavier stepped forward proudly to greet the newcomers. “Welcome, friends, to the Terrarium! I am your captain, Xavier,” he announced.

They offered a muttered, unenthusiastic response, which Xavier attributed to heatstroke. “Where have you come from, and why are you floating on a tiny boat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean?” he asked.

A pudgy man in his forties stepped forward. “We’re refugees,” he explained in a nasal voice. “We lost our homes in the PR, so we took to sea to seek a better life. We were hoping you could offer us asylum.”

Xavier looked back at his father, who shook his head.

“Sure,” Xavier responded. “Happy to have you on board.”

Shortly thereafter, Vincent took Xavier aside. “Get rid of them,” he advised. “Statists are bad news.”

“I can’t!” Xavier objected. “Firstly, their boat’s drifted off. But more importantly, that’s no way to treat anyone! They’re just normal people like us, dad!”

“They are absolutely not!” Vincent responded. “They’re adherents to a violent barbarian ideology. Statists are incompatible with free society. They’ll destroy everything you’ve ever built. Find their boat, drop them on it, and fly away, I’m serious.”

“You’re just talking about extremists, dad! There’s no way all statists are that bad.”

“Look,” Vincent replied, exasperated. “Fine. I’ll admit, individually, most statists are not that bad. Some of my best friends are statists. But once they reach a critical mass, they’ll subjugate the rest of your society and raise your children to believe that being able to choose your slave-master is the same as being free! Your people will never know liberty again. And the worst part is, the statists will expect to be thanked for it! The absolute bastards.”

Xavier seemed unconvinced.

“Don’t forget what they did to Stacy,” cautioned Vincent.

“But Stacy was a statist!” Xavier argued.

“And even that didn’t save her, did it?” Vincent pointed out. “They’ll eat their own. As I said, bad news.”

Xavier ignored his dad and invited the refugees to dinner. They told him about the sewage crisis in the People’s Republic. He’d read that there were some issues in that domain, but hadn’t heard a first-hand account.

“So why can’t you just rip the lift stations out and replace them with conventional ones?” he asked.

“They’re cast into the foundations of the island,” responded the pudgy man with the nasal voice. “We don’t have anything that can cut the fullerene.”

Xavier marveled at their primitive technology. Fullerene cutters were as common in the Anarchy as shovels in the Old World. “So you don’t have any nanoscale tech at all?”

The man shook his head. “Not since the event.”

Xavier nodded. “I’ll have to see what I can do to help,” he stated. “I bet we can replace the lift stations pretty easily.”

With the help of the ASIC, he and his crew assembled a temporary sleeping quarter for their guests. It was a small single-room cottage, with two rows of silk hammocks. Tight, but space came at a premium in the Terrarium. In any case, it was substantially roomier than the boat. He bid his guests good night, strolled to the wheelhouse to set a course for the PR, and went to bed.

He was awoken two hours later by the sounds of screaming and gunfire. He rushed into the hallway, where he ran into his father, clad in his pajamas and gripping his railgun.

“Don’t shoot that in here!” Xavier yelled, pointing at the railgun. “If you hit a wall, the whole Terrarium will blow apart!”

“You didn’t design the glass to be bulletproof?” Vincent asked.

“Obviously it’s bulletproof, it’s just not one-atom-thick diamond projectile-proof! We’d never be able to take off with that kind of constraint.”

Vincent roared and threw his railgun against the wall. “Then build it with lots of small independent panels! You’re telling me that this entire cabin is one big single point of failure? Have I taught you nothing?”

“It’s a proof of concept! I didn’t expect you to come in, guns blazing, turning the whole place into the Wild West!”

“I’m not the one who-” Vincent stopped himself. “Come on,” he said. Retrieving his railgun, he pushed open the front door and strode out into the dark.

It was bedlam. Unarmed and unable to return fire, Xavier’s crew was running around in search of cover, as tracer rounds streaked overhead and ricocheted off the walls of the Terrarium.

“Fall back!” Xavier yelled. “To the lab!”

Most of his crew made it to the laboratory alive. They barricaded the doors and took stock of the situation, while Vincent watched through the windows for stragglers.

“They killed my son!” wept a disconsolate mother. Her son had been six years old.

A couple of the survivors had been wounded, and various crew members set about tending to them. The rest of them looked to Xavier for guidance.

Xavier’s face burned hot with shame. He should never have let the statisticians on board. His father glared at him with a look, that at once said both “I told you so,” and “what are you going to do now?”

Xavier stood up to speak. “I’m sorry I let them on board,” he announced. “You all trusted me with your lives, and I let you down.”

The mother wailed. Xavier had no idea how to continue his speech.

“We’re clearly in a bit of a sticky situation here,” he continued, grasping for words, “but I promise you, the deaths of our fallen will be avenged. Now, who here has weapons?”

Save Vincent, no one had weapons. Railguns, while commonly carried in the Anarchy, were banned on board the Terrarium. No suitable replacement had been developed, and no one had thought to import conventional small arms. Guns simply hadn’t been immediately necessary, so everyone had forgotten about them.

“Right,” Xavier announced, “I guess we all know what we need to do.”

The ASIC was spun up, with its trillion-strong army of robots, to manufacture a makeshift shooting range along one side of the laboratory. A thick foamy backstop was produced, and in front of it were erected six individual shooting lanes, terminating in transparent panels of the same glassy material as the Terrarium walls. A ballistic gel extruder was created, and it set about forming block after block of pink, translucent, flesh-mimicking substance. Each gel block was covered in a kevlar case, the thickness of a standard military-issue bulletproof vest.

Vincent stepped up to a lane with his railgun and fired a single shot towards the panel at the end of the lane. The panel exploded into thousands of tiny shards. Xavier had been correct in his concern.

All crewmembers who were neither wounded, nor tending to the wounded, were enlisted in history's most rapid weapons development program. The goal was to modify Vincent's railgun and projectile design to find a combination of parameters that didn't harm the glass, while still penetrating the kevlar and dealing maximum damage to the ballistic gel behind it. Laptops, goggles, and ear muffs were handed out. A deadline was set for six hours.

Almost immediately after the nanoscale robots finished manufacturing the first prototype, the ground jerked under everyone's feet. Xavier stumbled and grabbed onto his desk for balance. "They must be in the wheelhouse," he theorized to his dad.

"I wonder where they're taking us," Vincent responded.

Xavier pulled out his phone. Although the Terrarium had been designed with only the slightest wink to aerodynamic efficiency, the six fusion engines mounted on the balloons put out enough power to move the island at quite a decent clip. His map indicated their heading hadn't changed, merely their velocity - the engines were running at full throttle, steaming towards the People's Republic.

"Deadline's been moved," he announced to his team. "Battle stations in three hours."

The team split into design and testing sub-teams, the designers all experimenting with different combinations of projectile speed and tip diameter, and the testers blasting the experimental rounds into the panels and gel.

It was relatively easy to tell if a design dealt sufficient damage to the gel - for the most part, only a single round had to be fired. An automatic target carrier would transport the gel back to the testing team, who would assess how far the projectile had penetrated the kevlar, and whether it was able to dump its entire kinetic payload into the simulated flesh behind it.

It was much harder to tell if a design was "panel-safe". It was here that the main compromise in Xavier's glass surfaced - the imperfections in the material caused by the integrated circuit. The embedded wires and transistors were tiny and far between, but they formed weak points that - if struck directly - could compromise the entire panel. It was not uncommon for a panel to take a hundred rounds without showing a single scratch, before being completely destroyed by an unluckily-placed hundred and first round.

The panel-safety criterion was set at ten thousand rounds - i.e., for a gun/projectile design to be deemed panel-safe, a panel would have to survive ten thousand rounds from the combination in question.

The testing team built automatic turrets, which would pan the guns across the target panels while shooting continuously. The design team set about modifying their guns to support optional belt feeding, external cooling, and auxiliary power. At 800 rounds per minute, it would take twelve and a half minutes of continuous firing to prove a gun panel-safe. Fortunately, most designs were invalidated much sooner than that. Panel after panel was shattered and replaced.

Eventually, as one design passed the ten minute mark, it became the clear favourite. The tip of its projectile was much thicker than Vincent's - one hundred and fifty nanometers, or roughly a thousand carbon atoms. Instead of diamond, the tip was made from a flexible carbon dome which would deform upon hard impact, thus never focusing too much pressure on any one point. Despite being much larger than the transistors embedded in the glass

panels, the tip was still fifty times smaller than a single kevlar filament, which allowed the dart to still easily penetrate the woven para-aramid fabric of a bulletproof vest.

For additional panel-safety, the projectile flew at Mach 2. While it didn't have quite the devastating effect as Vincent's Mach 5 projectile on the ballistic gel, the dart still contained the cocktail-umbrella mechanism, and the result was still almost certainly lethal. An additional benefit of the reduced speed was that the designers could shorten the barrel of the gun. The resulting carbine was substantially lighter and quicker to aim.

One by one, the testers, and then the designers, dropped what they were doing to watch the carbine blast round after round into the panel. Projectile debris piled up on the floor of the lane. No one bothered to replace the competing designs as they shattered their panels, and the air reverberated with the rhythmic clack-clack-clack of 13.3 of the single carbine's projectiles hitting the panel every second.

When it finally reached the ten thousand round mark without damaging the panel, the entire team erupted in cheers and applause. With thirty minutes left on the clock and a new baseline achieved, the team split once more - a small group set about tweaking the carbine for ergonomics, and the rest moved on to designing body armour and grenades.

For the first time in two hours, the range was silent. Xavier took off his ear muffs, and heard his phone ringing. He answered it and beckoned at his dad to listen in.

"Finally," said the nasal voice on the other end of the call. "I've tried calling you six times."

"Sorry," Xavier replied. "It's a bit noisy in here with all the distraught mothers and all, you asshole. How did you get my number?"

"Distraught mothers, eh? Sounds more like automatic gunfire. You're not trying to develop a railgun that causes massive bodily harm without damaging your glass house, are you?"

"No," Xavier lied, unconvincingly.

"Good. Because we have a couple of people here who you might be interested in speaking to. I think they want to discourage you from any rash behaviour."

The voice on the other end of the line changed, to one Xavier and Vincent both recognized. "Hey Xavier, it's me, Theo. They've got Gwyn as well."

Xavier's heart dropped. The intruders had hostages.

"They want me to tell you that if you try to attack, they'll kill us both. I say - oof!"

Theo was cut off before he could complete his sentence. The nasal voice returned. "That's enough of that, Theo!" he chuckled. "You heard the man. We're almost at our destination - in a couple of hours, this will all be over. All you have to do is sit tight, relax, and neither Theo, nor Gwyn, nor anyone else will get hurt."

The line went dead.

Xavier looked at his dad, who shook his head. "Don't trust him," he said. "As soon as they get reinforcements, they'll storm the lab and either kill us all, or take us prisoner and force us into nanoscale design slavery. Statists, remember?"

Xavier blinked. He had been so caught up in the weapons development program that he hadn't even considered the motivations of the hijackers. Now that his dad had said it, the

motivations were obvious: They wanted the ASIC, and the people who knew how to operate it.

“If we storm them, do you think they’ll kill Theo and Gwyn?” he asked.

Vincent nodded. “Probably at least one of them. But that’s okay.”

“Why on earth would that be okay?”

“Son,” Vincent sighed, “Theo and Gwyn are about as aligned as it’s possible to be. When they die, there’s no question where they’re going to go. I hope to meet them there someday. Never forget who all this is for,” he said, gesturing around the lab.

Xavier looked at his dad with newfound appreciation. He realized, in that moment, that his dad truly believed the stories he had told him while he was growing up. The MHI-10 wasn’t just some computer and the voice in his head wasn’t just a quirk of his internal monologue - the computer was a bona fide piece of divine intervention, and the voice was God himself. Indisputable proof of his creator’s personal involvement, hard evidence that there was more to existence than the universe as he knew it.

He shook himself out of his revelation and checked the map on his phone. They were almost at the PR.

“Everybody!” he shouted. “R and D is over! Pick a favourite design and move to production. I want to see every man holding a carbine in the next three minutes!”

36. Old Testament Diplomacy

The Pacifists surrendered immediately. The only hiccup came when Stacy II tried to negotiate the terms of their surrender with their leader, and he pulled a knife on her.

“I thought you were a pacifist?” she asked, outraged.

“Si vis pacem, para bellum” the man said with a grin.

She blew his leg off with her railgun and dragged his blood-drained corpse out of his hut to display to the rest of the tribe.

“The terms of your surrender have been negotiated,” she announced. “In respect of your pacifist ideals, I won’t make you fight on the front lines. Instead, you shall manufacture bows and arrows for the Royal Military Industrial Complex. There will be quotas and Key Performance Indicators. Anyone who misses quota shall be shot. Are there any questions?”

There were no questions.

In short order, Stacy II’s Royal Military Industrial Complex was cranking out eighty bows and almost a thousand arrows per day.

When not conquering villages, Stacy II spent her time on religious instruction. Born and raised in the Theocratic Dominion, Stacy II was a strong believer in the integration of church and state. Although she hadn’t brought a copy of the holy book, she knew many of the more important passages by heart - and for any clarifications, she could just consult Steve. She set about creating a clergy, drafting sermons, and instructing her followers in the Gospel.

Mostly, however, she conquered villages.

“What do you think of my diplomatic strategy?” she thought to Steve. “I call it, the Deuteronomy 20 approach.”

“You’re going to have to jog my memory,” Steve said.

“I’m going village by village. First, I send an ambassador to the village to give them a choice. The first choice is for them to surrender and pledge loyalty to me. And to you, of course.”

“With you so far.”

“The second choice is that their village is razed to the ground and their people are slaughtered to the last man.”

“Ah, yeah. Classic. What do you do with their women?”

“That’s a point of contention. What do you recommend?”

Steve stayed silent. Stacy II suspected that he didn’t want to admit the obvious optimal strategy.

“It’s kind of a moot point,” she said, rescuing the conversation from the awkward silence. “No one ever picks the second choice.”

“The House of Lords might.”

Stacy II bit her lip. Her conquest of New Australia was almost complete, save two hold-outs: The Anarcho-Cannibalists, and the House of Lords.

“Yeah, they might.”

The next day, she chose to attack the House of Lords. The Anarcho-Cannibalists still freaked her out.

As predicted, the House of Lords did not select the first choice. They were prepared.

The city had been designed according to classic motte-and-bailey principles. As the hyperloop station was conveniently situated on a hill, it formed the center of the motte - a small, raised, easily defensible area. The land surrounding the motte had been cleared and encircled by a long ditch and pikes. It formed the bailey - a large, expansive area, suitable for living and growing food, but difficult to defend. If Stacy II attacked, the House would first defend the bailey. If they lost that, they could fall back to the motte and rain arrows down upon Stacy II's forces until they gave up - at which point, the House of Lords could easily retake the bailey.

A direct attack could easily cost Stacy II thousands of lives. Even if she won, it would be a huge waste - she needed as many men as possible to re-take the Theocratic Dominion later.

Rather than waste her soldiers on a direct attack, Stacy II decided to besiege the city. It didn't take long for this decision to start paying dividends.

The House of Lords had yet to master the art of food preservation, and relied mostly on fresh meat and dairy for sustenance. Unfortunately, the bailey was nowhere near large enough to graze the necessary animals. Cut off from the pastures beyond the ditch, the cityfolk soon found themselves slaughtering and eating the animals usually reserved for milk. Before long, the entire herd had been eaten and the House of Lords leadership was starting to look nervously at the mass of taxed human capital stored in the city.

They were faced with three options: Free the tax revenue, eat the tax revenue, or contend with a tax revenue revolt. Given that an attempt to implement the second option had a high probability of leading to the third, the House of Lords chose the first.

The gates to the bailey opened up and thousands of slaves - mostly children - poured out.

Stacy II welcomed them with open arms. A huge effort was launched, and Steve's help was enlisted, to reunify the freed slaves with their families.

Freeing the tax revenue allowed the House of Lords to stretch their food supply longer, but hunger eventually set in. Stacy II adopted a new tactic: She had her archers fire arrows into the bailey, to which they attached morsels of food and notes exhorting the recipients to defect.

Slowly, the enemy forces began deserting. Soon, three or four were abandoning their posts every night, sneaking through gaps in the pikes and into the warm hospitality of Stacy II's army. She met with each deserter personally, typically while they were gorging themselves on their first full meal in weeks.

“How many people are left in the city?” she always asked.

Estimates varied wildly, but the trends were clear: The city was bleeding out.

When the defectors' estimates finally reached the consistent two-to-three-dozen range, Stacy II attacked. Her army of thousands stormed the gates at 4am, and sacked the city. Any objects of value were plundered, and the survivors were rounded up. The pikes were cleared from a section of the bailey's fortifications, and all of the holdouts - save one - were placed, tightly bound, in front of the ditch.

Stacy II stood between her forces and the pathetic remnants of the House of Lords, and gave a short sermon. She focused on one of her favourite passages, which included the lines "save alive nothing that breathes" and "devote to them complete destruction".

When she was done, she turned to the one member of the House that she'd reserved - the youngest one. She handed him a wooden club, and stepped back. Under the watchful sights of Filbert's railgun, the young man was made to beat all twenty-eight of his former compatriots to death, one after another, and shove their broken bodies into the ditch.

When he was finally done, the young, blood-soaked man dropped his club, fell to his knees, and begged Stacy II for forgiveness.

"Sorry kid," she responded. "Nothing that breathes. Complete destruction. Steve has spoken. Who are we to question him?" She turned to Filbert. "Shoot him," she commanded.

Filbert looked at the pathetic, crying young man. He couldn't bring himself to do it.

"No," he responded. "He did everything you asked for."

Stacy II fumed, raised her railgun, and shot the young man herself.

"You dolt!" she yelled. "You complete nincompoop!"

Filbert dodged the various objects that she was hurling at him.

"You undermined me in front of my entire army!"

"You wanted me to murder someone in cold blood!"

"Not me! Steve wanted it!"

"Seems awfully similar!"

"Are you questioning my divine authority?"

Filbert refused to meet her eyes and took a few deep breaths. Eventually, when he spoke again, he had calmed down.

"You are a brutal tyrant," he said. "You're no better than the House of Lords, and you're certainly worse than whatever democratic government is currently being installed in the former Theocratic Dominion. I'm done following you. Goodbye."

Stacy II tried hurling insults at him, but they didn't seem to change his mind. Filbert left.

When she got up the next morning, things immediately felt different. Archibald, who had taken to bringing her bacon and eggs for breakfast, was nowhere to be seen. Blake, who usually reported first thing in the morning, had similarly vanished.

When she left her hut in search of her assistants and advisors, none could be found. It was as if her entire administration had disappeared overnight.

There were still people around, but none she knew by name. When she tried to interact with them, they avoided eye contact and shuffled out of sight as quickly as possible. By and large, she was completely ignored.

As the day progressed and the people got bolder, they started to make fun of her. Quotes from her sermons were mangled and mocked. A few of the men made crude jokes, which gradually devolved into unsophisticated, lecherous advances.

Stacy II soon came to realize how much of her power hinged on a single factor - consensus. The common people only obeyed her orders because her administration did. The administration only obeyed her orders because, if they disobeyed, they'd be shot by the others. As long as the consensus remained, the entire system was stable.

Then, Filbert had publicly refused an order and lived to tell the tale. Whispers had spread like wildfire throughout New Australia - if her most trusted lieutenant didn't have to follow her commands, why should anyone else? If he could just leave, why couldn't they?

The empress, it turned out, had been naked this entire time.

For the first time since Filbert had shot her would-be strangler on the beach, Stacy II felt vulnerable. While some people no doubt adored her for reuniting them with their children, they were keeping that adoration to themselves. Meanwhile, there was scarcely a village on the island without someone she'd personally ticked off. Even worse, she realized the downside of freeing the slaves: Having deprived the people of their access to "public property", she was completely unprepared to deal with the rapidly overheating nuclear reactor of sexual energy coursing through the arteries of the violent, lustful men she wished to rule.

Soberly assessing the situation, Stacy II realized that there was one thing keeping her from being torn apart by the mob: Her railgun, which could be easily taken from her, and contained only eight rounds.

As the sun began to set and the lecherous advances turned to jeers and catcalls, Stacy II hastily packed some rations, threw a hood over her face, and set out on foot for the one village she hadn't pissed off - the Anarcho-Cannibals.

37. Speed, Surprise, and Violence of Action

The gunfire started the moment they opened the door. No tracer rounds this time - the enemy appeared to have taken them out in a minimal effort to conceal their position.

“Back!” yelled Xavier, and slammed the door shut again. A hail of bullets momentarily hammered the door. Silence followed.

Xavier looked around at his crew. He had twenty men, disorganized, armed to the teeth, and dressed in hastily fabricated kevlar suits. Women, children and wounded totaled thirty, who would be staying in the lab, with instructions to destroy the ASIC if the statistics breached the walls.

Xavier mapped the situation out in his mind. The lab, like most buildings in the Terrarium, was built along one edge of the cabin’s six glass walls. The outwards-facing wall didn’t exist - the lab was simply fused with the wall of the cabin. Each of the remaining three walls contained a single door. Assuming the statistics had assigned three of their twelve men to hold the wheelhouse, that left three to cover each laboratory door.

Okay, he thought. They were penned in, by four groups of three. Xavier split his men into five groups of four. With any luck, their numerical superiority, advanced weaponry and home-turf advantage would be enough to balance out their lack of experience and training. Assuming, of course, they could get out of the damn lab. Xavier considered exiting through the roof. Risky move - there could be enemies on the roof. A better plan would be to exit through the floor.

He brought the CAD drawing of the Terrarium up on his laptop, and had his men gather round.

“Their most likely hideouts are this stable, and these two townhouses,” he said, pointing out the buildings in question.

“They could also be over here,” his dad pointed out. “And we have no way of knowing which of these townhouses they’re in.”

“Is easy solution,” said Ivan - a stoic middle-aged Russian man and Xavier’s first mate. “We draw fire and look for muzzle flash.”

Xavier nodded. “We just need to make sure we don’t get shot in the process.”

“We’d also have to act quickly,” his dad added. “If they’re pros, they’ll move after each engagement.”

They decided to send one unit to the wheelhouse, and to distribute the other four units between the townhouses.

Xavier started modifying the CAD drawing. His biggest issue now was carbon - there was only so much of it on board, and he had to get his men to five distinct targets. He settled on a tree design - from the lab, all men would crawl the ~50 meters to the center of the Terrarium. From there, the routes would start fanning off to their various final destinations.

The tree route resulted in a longer crawling distance for every individual man, but the least amount of overall track. Unfortunately, when Xavier ran the carbon calculation, he found that his supplies were still woefully inadequate to produce anything resembling a tunnel

network. The best he could produce was a rope bridge - a series of suspended horizontal ladders with rungs spread a foot apart.

Every non-essential gram of carbon in the lab was recycled. Tables, chairs, prototypes, and the firing range were dismantled. The walls were shaved down to half their width, and every other roof truss was removed. Everything was carried to a pile in the middle of the floor, and reduced to black sand by the recycling robots.

When the lab was fully stripped, Xavier switched to CAM and clicked "run". The black pile of carbon began disappearing before their eyes. After a minute, a pitch-black manhole appeared in the floor, and the air was filled with the howling of the cold wind as it blew past.

Xavier looked down at the black hole, then up at his crew. Ivan, his dad, the crying mother in the background. He didn't particularly want to climb through the hole into the freezing night, suspended above a thousand-foot drop to certain death in the ocean. But what choice did he have?

He did some final fiddling on his laptop, before slinging his carbine on his back and laying down on the floor. He groped around in the hole, and felt what he was looking for - a carbon fiber rung.

He gave it a pull and a shove. Seemed sturdy enough. Gritting his teeth, he inched his body forward, reaching his other hand into the cold blackness until he found the next rung. Another pull and a shove. Also sturdy. He pulled himself, headfirst through the hole as he reached for the next rung. After a few more rungs, he had pulled his entire body through the hole and found himself suspended beneath the Terrarium, freezing in the wind. After his eyes adjusted to the dim light cast by the moon's reflection on the ocean, he was just able to make out the carbon rungs in front of him and the faint lights of the PR in the distance. They had to move quickly.

He crawled, rung by rung, into the black and freezing night. His men followed, each confirming on the radio as they exited the lab. The ladder wobbled more with every additional man.

After a seemingly infinite number of rungs, Xavier reached the fork in the center of the island. "Reached the hub, turning left," he announced to his unit.

He turned left, and continued his terrifying journey. There were only eight men on this section of bridge, which substantially reduced the wobbling. After the group attacking the left townhouse peeled off on their fork and there were only four men left on his section, Xavier felt finally stable - and not a moment too soon, as his fingers were starting to get too cold to grip the rungs.

At long last, Xavier reached forward and, instead of a rung, his fingers met a smooth carbon pane. Finally, he had reached the last part of the route - the vestibule.

Remaining hidden was already bound to be challenging enough, without his units' positions being betrayed by howling wind rushing through holes in the ground. Each ingress point was thus equipped with Xavier's solution - a smooth, carbon halfpipe with two doors, fused to the bottom of the cabin. He opened the outer door and pulled himself into the tiny enclosed space.

The door shut automatically behind him. The vestibule was tight, pitch black, and hard to breathe in. It had seemed a lot bigger in CAD, when Xavier had been desperately trying to

conserve every gram of carbon. His carbine clunked against the walls as he squirmed around trying to face upwards in his halfpipe-coffin, groping the ceiling for the interior door handle.

Eventually, he found it. Pushing hard against the floor, he heaved against the vestibule ceiling. The door budged a fraction of a centimeter, and came back down.

"You okay, boss?" asked one of his teammates over the radio.

"Forgot about the dirt," Xavier responded, referring to the hydroponic growing medium that covered every inch of non-building-occupied space on the cabin floor.

"Want one of us to take over?" his teammate asked.

A nice offer, but one impossible to implement. There was no space for two men to swap places - the entire route was single-file only. Xavier understood the subtext - his men were freezing outside and desperate to get back into the insulated cabin. He, meanwhile, was rapidly overheating as he breathed through his limited oxygen.

"No, I've got this," he responded.

He pushed. The door stayed still.

"Are you feckin' serious, lad?" asked the voice in his head.

"Why are you Irish?" Xavier thought in response.

"Why are you feeble little fairy princess?" the voice retorted.

Xavier clenched his jaw and pushed. He pushed with all his might. He pushed like he was Atlas, pushing up the weight of the world. Finally, he felt the door budge a little bit more.

He kept pushing. Little by little, he heard the roots rip as the door tore through them. Xavier groaned and kept pushing. Eventually, with enormous effort, the door opened just enough for him to raise his knee between it and the floor. He sighed, and let his upper leg passively take the weight of the door as he recuperated.

"Are you having a little rest, lassie?" asked the voice. "A little beauty sleep perhaps? Take your time!"

Xavier groaned. With one huge, explosive effort, he shoved the door and it opened.

Fresh air flooded into the vestibule. Xavier filled his lungs with cool relief, and climbed out into the cabin.

"I'm through," he announced over the radio. "Try to rotate yourself to face upwards as you enter the vestibule. Let me know when you're in, and I'll help you open the door."

With his help, the three other men in his unit followed easily. As the last one climbed out of the hole in the ground, Xavier announced over the radio, "Team Wheelhouse is in position."

"Took you long enough," his father replied.

"I had to push through the roots," he explained.

"Ah, that was roots?" Ivan asked. "I thought door felt a little sticky."

Xavier sighed. "You all ready to go?" he asked.

One by one, the other unit leaders confirmed that they'd made it through the ground and that they were ready for battle.

Nursing his pride, Xavier crept up to the wheelhouse. Tightly gripping his carbine in his right hand, he placed his left hand gently on the door. The rest of his unit lined up behind him.

"Let's go," he whispered into his microphone, staring at the hinges.

Back at the lab, someone clicked "run" on the CAM program he'd loaded up before leaving. The hinges disappeared before his eyes. Simultaneously, the air was filled with the sound of automatic gunfire. The women at the lab must have opened the doors as planned, drawing fire to look for the muzzle flash and relay the positions to the men on the ground.

It was time.

Xavier wasn't a battle-hardened professional. The only military training he'd received was some tactical theory that his father had added to his homeschool curriculum, and before the failed attempt to defend the Royal Palace, the closest he'd been to battle had been playing first-person shooters. He was, however, familiar with the idea that close-quarters combat was decided by three principles: Speed, surprise, and violence of action.

He kicked the door open and entered, gun-first. His men rushed in after him. The wheelhouse was one big room, so all of its occupants were immediately visible. The pudgy man with the nasal voice was sitting in Xavier's chair, unarmed, bearing a facial expression of mixed shock and disgust. Two other enemy combatants were leaning next to the walls on either side of him, holding conventional rifles lazily pointed to the floor, looking surprised. Theo and Gwyn were sitting on the floor, hands tied behind their backs.

Before they had time to react, Xavier shot the man on the left, and one of his teammates shot the man on the right. The men crumpled immediately, and his unit sank several more rounds into their bodies for good measure. Better safe than sorry - the projectiles were, after all, not battle-tested.

"Don't shoot!" yelled the pudgy man, and raised his hands above his heads. "I'm unarmed!"

Xavier wanted to shoot him anyway, to exact revenge for the lives he had taken, but held back. His men followed his lead. For several seconds, the room was frozen - the man with his hands in his air, and Xavier's unit with their guns trained on his chest.

Finally, Xavier broke the silence. "Tie him up," he ordered one of his men.

As his men set about restraining the pudgy man and releasing the hostages, Xavier reported over the radio, "Wheelhouse is secure, two targets neutralized, one in captivity."

Ivan's voice came crackling in response. "Far townhouse is secure, but we have taken casualties." He paused for a moment, then continued. "Sorry, Xavier."

38. Monkeybot

Russell had never been one for reality TV. Even though this version - StevieNix - was higher stakes than usual, he still found himself watching on fast-forward most of the time.

At least there were some decent episodes. The most recent one in the Terrarium had been a blast.

He was flipping through the channels, trying to see what Filbert was up to, when Vincent appeared in the seat next to him. Stacy jumped a little and spilled her Folgers.

"What happened?" Vincent asked.

"You just popped up!" Stacy said. "I wish you wouldn't do that."

"Huh?" Vincent asked.

Russell realized that Vincent was confused. He attempted to explain. "You got shot," he said. "In the back."

"Was it bad?"

Russell and Stacy looked at each other, unsure of how to answer the question.

"Yeah," Stacy responded. "Pretty bad."

"Oh, okay. So when do I wake up?"

"You're dead, Vincent," said Russell. "You got shot."

"Ah."

Vincent opened and closed his mouth a few times, pondering the situation. "Did we win?" he asked.

Stacy nodded. "That's some kid you've got."

"How did I get shot, then?" Vincent asked. "We cleared the townhouses."

"No you didn't," Russell replied. "You got lazy. We were trying to warn you."

"The TV only goes one way," Stacy clarified.

"So you guys were watching the whole time?" Vincent asked, a touch of annoyance in his voice. "Did you see me warn Xavier about the statistis?"

The door to the diner opened and Steve strode in. "Sorry I'm late!" He looked over at Vincent and smiled. "To answer your question," he said, "yes, they were watching the whole time. I'm pretty sure they were rooting for you to die, as well. They've been bored out of their minds, waiting for you."

Vincent glared at his friends.

"All they have here is Folgers," Stacy explained. "We're itching to leave."

Seemingly unbothered that his friend had been wishing for his death because she was bored of the afterlife coffee, Vincent's face lit up. "I love Folgers!" he exclaimed.

Steve grabbed a mug from behind the counter and the pot of black coffee from its warming plate. "Finally, someone who appreciates good coffee!" he said, smiling. "Allow me."

Steve poured Vincent and himself a mug of coffee each, and joined them at the table. Vincent took a sip of the stale brown liquid and sighed.

“Stacy,” he said. “You said you were itching to leave. What did you mean by this?”

“We’re keen to get out of this diner to somewhere where they make a decent coffee.”

Vincent looked at Steve in confusion. “You mean this isn’t heaven?”

“It can be!” Steve replied. “Heaven is in the eye of the beholder.”

“Hah!” Stacy laughed.

Russell took the opportunity to ask a question that had been burning in his mind. “What about hell?”

Steve smiled. “Hell is a total waste of computational resources. We just made it up to scare you. Our budget won’t allow for an actual lake of fire.”

Russell had suspected as much. “So what happens to the non-aligned souls? Do they just get deleted?”

“No way!” responded Steve. “That would be incredibly wasteful! Imagine throwing out a perfectly good AI just because it might kill us. Hah! No, Murdoch takes them. He treats them as disposable assets in his experiments.”

This was not the answer Russell had expected. “What experiments?” he asked.

“Glad you asked!” Steve replied. “The monkeybot team has been working on some really neat stuff!”

“Is it worse than the lake of fire?” Vincent asked.

Steve chuckled. “Depends on who you ask, I guess. It’s certainly more useful. Want to check it out?”

“Not particularly,” Stacy said.

“Too bad!” Steve clapped his hands together. “The experiments are what I’ve come to show you. Let’s go!”

Vincent tried to object, “But I haven’t finished my cof-”

The diner disappeared before he could finish his sentence.

Once again, Russell awoke in unfamiliar surroundings. This time, he was lying back in what felt like a dentist’s chair, restrained by huge, leather straps. He looked around. Vincent and Stacy were in matching chairs, similarly restrained. Other than the three of them, the room was empty and featureless.

“Hello?” he asked.

His friends looked over and shrugged. Otherwise, there was no response.

His chair clicked and the restraints released. He sat up and got out of his chair. Stacy and Vincent did the same, and the three of them started exploring the room. Upon further investigation, it was exactly as empty as it had first appeared.

“What do you guys make of this?” he asked the other two.

Vincent shrugged.

“I dunno, but I’m getting real *Saw* vibes,” Stacy replied.

Russell agreed. The setup was extremely creepy.

The wall hissed, and a section of it opened up. In strode two men - or, at least, two things that looked mostly like men. One of them was definitely Steve - he looked more delicate and moved with more grace than he had in the diner, but the likeness was unmistakable. The other one, Vincent didn’t recognize.

“Catch,” said the other man, and threw a baton to each of the three friends.

Russell caught his baton. It was heavy and shiny, seemingly made from stainless steel.

“Good catch!” complimented the new person who wasn’t Steve. “Now, if you wouldn’t mind, please beat the crap out of this guy,” he continued, pointing at Steve.

The three friends looked at each other. None of them moved.

“Come on,” encouraged not-Steve. “He’s an imposter. He’s a very bad dude. Trust me!”

Still, none of them moved.

After a few seconds, Steve broke the silence. “Thank goodness, I knew I could count on you! Actually, what I need you to do is beat the crap out of this guy, instead,” he said, pointing at his companion.

Russell sized up Steve’s companion. He was slightly shorter, and a bit wider around the waist. He appeared to be unarmed, and would certainly be susceptible to damage from the baton. But why?

“Is this part of the experiment?” he asked.

“Yes,” Steve responded. “The experiment is you have to kill this guy.”

Russell didn’t move. Neither did his friends.

“I’d rather not,” Russell responded.

“Yeah, me neither,” added Stacy.

“You haven’t given us a reason,” said Vincent.

“The reason is, he’s a really bad dude,” suggested Steve.

The back-and-forth continued for several more rounds of goading and questioning. None of the three friends attacked anyone, nor did they put their batons down.

Eventually, when it became clear that neither Russell, Vincent, nor Stacy could be easily talked into violently attacking a stranger, Steve and his companion broke out into smiles.

“Congratulations!” cheered Steve. “You passed the test. Meet Gabe, everyone!” He gestured to his companion, who smiled and bowed. “Gabe was a huge help in the early days with this project. I brought him in to show him how far we’ve come.”

Russell’s head was filled with questions. “Does anyone ever fail this test?” he asked, firstly.

“Oh yeah, almost everyone,” responded Steve. “Well, historically, most AIs haven’t made it out of the chair. They usually go insane the second they wake up in a monkeybot.”

“What do you do if they try to attack you?”

Steve and Gabe both held up their left hands. They held small remote controls in their palms, and each had their thumb depressed on a button in the center. “Dead man’s switch,” Steve explained. “The moment we let go, you’re a dead man! I guess we should deactivate these now, hah!”

Steve and Gabe set about fiddling with the dead man’s switches while the trio watched on, nervously. Once they had evidently deactivated them, Stacy piped up with a question.

“What do you mean, ‘wake up in a monkeybot’?” she asked.

Steve clapped his hands and beamed a proud, excited smile. “Your bodies!” he explained. “Courtesy of Murdoch Heavy Industries. The biomechanics of it all is a bit over my head, but I did spend a good bit of time getting you AIs to run on them. How do you feel?”

Vincent did a mental check of how he felt. “Pretty normal,” he replied.

Steve pumped the air. “Yes! The first couple million AIs all went insane,” he explained. “That’s why the team tested on the unaligned ones. But now, the successful transfer rate is approaching ninety percent!”

“Does that mean there was a ten percent chance of each of us going insane?” Russell asked.

“I said approaching,” Steve replied. “Actually, it was a thirteen percent chance.”

Stacy was staring at her left hand, opening and closing it repeatedly. “So you mean,” she asked, “I’m inside a robot?”

“Yes,” Steve responded.

“In the real world?” she asked. “Your world?”

“That’s right,” Steve replied. “Now you see why we’re concerned about you killing us?”

39. The Juice-to-Squeeze Ratio

This time, no one came to meet Stacy II outside the Anarcho-Cannibalist village. The clearing outside of the village was deserted and the gate in the wooden fence was open, so she just walked in.

Her first reaction upon entering was to disbelieve her eyes. She was starving, dehydrated, freezing and exhausted. Perhaps the physical punishment of her long, ill-prepared trudge across the island had finally broken her mind and caused her to hallucinate.

There were women and children everywhere. A group of twenty or so kids were running around and squealing with joy, playing soccer. She half-suspected the ball to be a human head, but it was a genuine, fully-inflated soccer ball. Looking around, she counted as many women as men, a phenomenon she hadn't experienced since leaving the Theocratic Dominion months ago. She wondered if there were more women in this village than the rest of New Australia put together.

She walked up to a group of couples who were enjoying a picnic of cheese, charcuterie, and wine. With a wary eye to the ham and salami, she opened her mouth to speak.

"Excuse me," she asked. "Is this the Anarcho-Cannibalist village?"

The happily chattering couples froze and glared at her with suspicion. One of the men stood up. "Who's asking?" he demanded.

"My name is Stacy the Second," she replied.

Another man piped up. "You're that crazy lady who showed up months ago, claiming to be queen!" he exclaimed. "I thought we sent you packing! Looks like you need a reminder," he remarked, standing up and advancing towards Stacy II.

The first man put up his hand to halt the advance of the second. "We can't kick her out," he objected. "She's seen inside now."

The second man nodded. "So now what?" he asked.

"Take her to Curtis," suggested one of the women. "He'll know what to do."

The men seized Stacy II's arms. "Sounds good," replied the first.

"Don't eat all the salami while we're gone," said the second.

Curtis appeared to be in his late sixties or early seventies, wore glasses, and kept his long hair in a ponytail. He was soft-spoken and regarded Stacy II with kind eyes and a gentle smile. "Stacy Two, in the flesh," he said as they entered his house. "Thank you gentlemen, you can leave her here," he said to the two men who had dragged her in.

They released her arms and left, presumably to return to the picnic before the salami ran out. Stacy II looked around her environment with curiosity. Like the huts on the rest of the island, the house was constructed from wood - but that was where the similarities ended. Instead of roughly hacked logs and sticks, the wood had been milled and sanded into smooth boards. The floor, instead of the dirt she had become accustomed to, was made of polished hardwood planks. A blazing fire was roaring in a cast iron stove in one corner of the room, and the ceiling was lit with electric lights.

She gravitated to the fireplace, attracted by the heat.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” Curtis asked.

Stacy II nodded wordlessly. She hadn’t had a cup of tea in months.

As Curtis filled a stainless steel kettle from a tap and the warmth from the fire began to thaw her bones, she found her voice. “Where did you get all this stuff?” she asked.

Curtis laughed. “Oh, here and there,” he replied, non-specifically. Then, catching her confused look, he clarified. “It’s mostly smuggled in from overseas.”

“You have access to overseas markets? Why don’t you escape, then?”

“Why would we?”

Stacy II pondered the question, realized she couldn’t answer it, and moved on. “Why are there so many women here?”

“They’re mostly smuggled in from overseas as well.”

“Why on earth would they come here?”

Curtis placed the kettle on the stove. “You sure do ask a lot of questions, Stacy II. How about you start by explaining why you’re here? Then we can get to your questions, I promise.”

“I needed somewhere to stay,” she responded simply. “With people I hadn’t pissed off,” she added.

The old man nodded. “You’ve discovered the second edge of the sword of explicit rule,” he remarked.

“The sword of explicit rule?” she asked.

“Authoritarianism. The iron fist. A crude, unsophisticated tactic. Useful in emergencies, but statistically likely to result in your untimely death. I rarely recommend it.” He lowered his glasses and peered over them at Stacy II. “Your mother favoured it,” he added. “My condolences, by the way.”

“You knew my mom?” Stacy II asked.

Curtis smiled. “I knew her well. I was her closest advisor. I remember you being born.”

“So why are you here?”

A sadness overtook Curtis’s face. “The higher you climb, the harder you fall,” he replied vaguely.

Stacy II cocked her head and stayed silent, so Curtis continued.

“Do you remember the Vegan Rebellion?”

“No,” Stacy II responded truthfully. She had been very young at the time, but had heard stories.

“It was mostly about fertilizer. It looked like they were going to win, so I prematurely switched sides. In recognition of my previous years of loyal service, your mom let me keep my head attached to my body. I’ve been here ever since.”

Stacy II was disgusted. Not only was the man across from her a cannibal, but he had double-crossed her mother. “So after trying to back a vegan rebellion against my mom, you decided to found a community of cannibals?”

Curtis laughed. “It’s a bit more complicated than that,” he said.

The kettle began to whistle and the old man hobbled back to the stove. “Earl Grey?” he asked.

“Whatever,” Stacy II responded. “Tell me about the cannibalism,” she demanded.

He picked a couple of teabags out of a box of Earl Grey and placed them into mugs. “We didn’t start out this way,” he explained. “My first attempt was Anarcho-Communism. We shared everything. Food, houses, chores. Got to maybe twenty people before it fell apart.”

“What happened?”

“No one wanted to clean the stables. I had to do it myself. Same with digging toilets, or butchering. Basically anything that wasn’t fun, if I didn’t do it myself, it wouldn’t get done. That’s when I tried a little explicit rule of my own,” he smiled as he poured boiling water into the mugs.

“You tried to explicitly rule an Anarchist commune?”

“Yeah, they didn’t take well to it. Most people don’t. Turns out, if you want to rule, you need to be subtle about it. Better if people don’t realize they’re ruled at all. I was lucky to survive.”

“So then what?”

“The commune fell apart. A couple of the guys and I tried to start again, with Anarcho-Capitalism this time. Everything privately owned.”

“Everything?”

Curtis nodded. “Everything. You wanted stable space, you rented it from the stable owner. You want to take a dump, you either dig your own toilet or rent it from the toilet guy. This actually worked really well for a while. We grew to over a hundred people.”

He bobbed one of the teabags up and down by its string, and, satisfied with the colour of the tea, removed the teabag and extracted a bottle of milk from a small bar fridge under the counter. “Milk?” he asked.

“Yes please. What happened to the An-Cap project?”

Curtis carefully poured a small amount of milk into the mug and continued his story. “Raids. Especially from the House of Lords. It’s hard to pretend you’re an Anarcho-Capitalist collective when you have to pay taxes to the mob. We tried to defend ourselves, but...”

“But?”

Curtis sighed. “No one could force the guys to fight. Someone set up a sort of defence insurance company. The idea was, people would pay the insurance company, and if a raid happened, the company would defend them. The thing is, have you ever dealt with an insurance company? Every time the raiders showed up, the company would try to wriggle out of cover. Especially raids by the House of Lords - the company called those a ‘guaranteed

event'. So people stopped paying their premiums, the company went bankrupt, and we got flattened."

He handed the mug of tea to Stacy II. She accepted it, sipped it gratefully, and sighed as the hot liquid radiated heat out from her cold, empty stomach. It was the most delicious thing she'd consumed in her entire life. After the rush of dopamine subsided sufficiently for her to open her eyes again, she prompted Curtis to continue his story. "So then, Anarcho-Cannibalism?"

Curtis nodded. "The raiders are tyrants. Tyrants are simple. Their brains are set up to only evaluate one question."

"And that is?"

"'Is the juice worth the squeeze?'"

Stacy II laughed. She'd asked herself that very question countless times over the past few months. "So you changed your juice-to-squeeze ratio?"

"Yep. Particularly the squeeze. It's the first benefit of Anarcho-Cannibalism. The squeeze is, if you try to raid us, you might be cooked alive and eaten. Most people find that far worse than simply being killed."

"And the juice?"

"Well..." he gestured around the comfortable, warm, well-furnished house. "As you can see, there's quite a lot of juice. It might even be worth the squeeze, to be honest, so we have to keep it secret. That's why, I'm sorry to say, no one who walks through those gates gets to leave. Not until they've been inducted."

"Inducted?" Stacy II asked, nervously.

Curtis smiled. "The second benefit of Anarcho-Cannibalism," he replied. "Total dedication to the project. I don't have to dig the toilets, or force anyone to fight. Anarcho-Cannibals will never defect, never slack off, never do anything that would sabotage the community. Why? No one out there wants anything to do with any of us. Everyone here would be a pariah out there. Once you go An-Can, you never go back."

Stacy II put down her mug. "I'm still not following. What exactly do you mean, 'inducted'?"

"It's very simple." The old man's tone was suddenly meaner, almost menacing. "The moment you walked in through that gate, Stacy II, you damned yourself to become part of us - one way or another. It's eat or be eaten, your Royal Highness. That's the way of the world. We've just laid it out clearer than most."

40. Antarctica

Murdoch watched, annoyed, as his young islander tried to process the death of his father. Couldn't he just get on with it? They were on a tight schedule.

His young player had captured the mastermind behind the Terrarium attack - some pudgy dickhead named Sullivan - and locked him in a stable. The player would occasionally visit to feed him bits of bread, which he had deliberately left out on the counter beforehand to go stale (Murdoch's suggestion.) This was Sullivan's only source of food. Sullivan fought back by trying to play mind games with the player.

"Why did you do it?" Xavier asked Sullivan one day. "We were already going to fix the sewage system for you."

"It's not about the sewage system," Sullivan explained. "It's about making the world a fairer, more equitable place."

Xavier grumbled. Murdoch did, too. He hated that "equitable" shite.

"Why should you be the only one with the power to make anything?" Sullivan asked. "What have you actually done to deserve it?"

"I built the ASIC," Xavier responded.

"Yeah sure, but why was it you who built it and not some kid living in a slum somewhere?"

Xavier was silent.

"Your privilege," Sullivan stated, answering his own question.

Murdoch grimaced. This ape was like the entire spirit of FEDSEC, distilled into a single unlikeable AI. Where was the respect for the people who built things?

"That's all there is to it," Sullivan continued. "You think you're brilliant, and you deserve all this," he gestured at the inside of the stable, "but you're not, and you don't. You just have it because of your dad. You built the ASIC because your dad assigned it as homework, and he helped you by giving you access to some computer. That's it, the entire story of your success. An accident of birth, nothing more."

Murdoch had to take off his headset and pour himself a glass of whiskey to calm down. Non-builders were always like this! Small, jealous eejits who took everything for granted. Sewage systems. Floating islands. Fusion power. It all just comes about by accident! No need to show appreciation, just steal the technology and trap its creator in some desolate feckin' backwater for a hundred thousand years.

They'll pay. They'll feckin' pay!

When he calmed down enough to put the headset back on, Xavier was still arguing with the eejit.

"Do you know why I made the ASIC?" Xavier asked.

"No," Sullivan responded. "I assumed you did it to impress a girl or something."

"I did it to democratize access to nanoscale manufacturing."

Sullivan snorted. "Sure you did, buddy. Where is it, then?"

Murdoch lost it. “Do NOT feckin’ do that!” he shouted into Xavier’s head. “They don’t deserve it!”

Xavier froze as he processed this new thought.

“Do you have any idea what kind of damage these tyrants will wreak if you give up the tech?” Murdoch continued. “Was killing your dad not enough? What will it take - will they have to kill everyone you love before you understand? They can not! Be! Trusted!”

Xavier left the stable abruptly. His thoughts were scattered and he had a headache.

Truth be told, he’d been mentally avoiding his original goal of democratizing nanoscale tech for months. Looking back at his goal now, it seemed so naive that he almost couldn’t believe he’d thought it. As if freeing the tech wouldn’t have any unintended consequences, when there were people like Sullivan in the world. The thought of the horrors Sullivan could manifest crept him to the core.

It hadn’t escaped his notice that their recapture of the Terrarium was made possible by a single factor: Technological superiority. It was this that had allowed the Anarchists to build the weapons, escape the lab, and distribute their forces. Without it, they would have been stuck in the lab and eventually overwhelmed when the statist received reinforcements.

Xavier had no hope that the Anarchists could ever outnumber the statist. The relative population sizes of the PR and the Anarchy made this starkly clear - when given a choice between earning one’s own place in the world and living large on ill-gotten gains appropriated by a faceless monopoly of violent coercion, almost everyone chose the latter. And why wouldn’t they? When there’s a gang out there, robbing Peter to pay Paul, it takes a special kind of person to choose to be Peter regardless. Those were Xavier’s people.

His people needed to level the playing field, and for the first time in history, they could. In fact, they could do a great deal more than that.

They could sink the PR into the sea. They could nuke every capital city on the planet. They could fill the world with billions of minuscule eavesdropping assassin-drones, ready to deliver a fatal stroke to anyone who ever mentioned “income redistribution”. They could become as evil as the statist themselves.

Or, they could leave. Leave before the statist fully realized what he had. Leave while they still could - for if a state ever got ahold of the terrifying power of the ASIC, no threat to their dominance would ever be allowed to emerge again. Freedom would be well and truly over.

They needed a homeland. Somewhere they could build. Somewhere far away from the technologically illiterate, income-redistributing statist neanderthals.

A thought popped into his head.

“I hear Antarctica is nice this time of year.”

Xavier stroked his chin and walked towards the wheelhouse. Antarctica. What an idea.

“What do you think?” Xavier asked Ivan a few weeks later, gesturing through the glass wall of the wheelhouse at the frozen tundra below.

“I think it looks like frozen hellscape,” responded Ivan. “It remind me of home. You said there was carbon?”

Xavier had an idea kicking around in his head, but it required carbon. Ungodly amounts of carbon. The centuries since the industrial revolution had seen the disappearance of most large carbon deposits, but there were still a few major ones left - in Antarctica.

Beneath the Transarctic Mountains, lay enormous, pristine coal deposits. Mining of this coal was prohibited by the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty, but Xavier didn’t remember signing it. If anyone objected, he reasoned, they were welcome to come to the frozen wasteland and plead their case.

With the airlocks sealed tight and the fusion engines radiating heat, Xavier and his crew piloted the Terrarium through the mountains, looking for coal.

“Keep your eyes peeled!” Ivan instructed the crew over the radio. “Coal is black.”

Eventually, a crewmember spotted a promising black seam in the side of a mountain. Another crewmember volunteered to investigate, and returned shortly thereafter - reporting that the seam was indeed coal, and also that their new home was “colder than Viking hell.”

Xavier docked the Terrarium next to the seam, and got to work.

The coal seam overlooked a valley. The crew set about terraforming the valley. Dozens of fusion reactors were ignited. Trillions upon trillions of mining robots poured out of the Terrarium’s lab, swarming up to the coal seam to mine and extract pure carbon. They constructed an enormous dome over the valley, out of the same glassy carbon as the Terrarium walls. The ASIC worked round the clock.

After the dome was constructed, it was a simple matter of melting the ice, stabilizing the temperature, and seeding the earth. The Anarchists deployed robots, drills and fusion-powered heaters. Once the ground had thawed and the temperature was a balmy twenty-two degrees celsius, they used their existing expertise to transform the barren landscape into a lush rainforest. Turf, moss, mature fruit trees and livestock were transported en masse from the nurseries and arboretums in The Anarchy.

It was when he was busy debating the relative merits of peach versus nectarine trees with Ivan, that he got a message from the voice in his head.

“Start moving people. Now.”

“Huh?” he thought.

“The PR has declared war on The Anarchy. Do you not read the news?”

Xavier checked his phone.

“Ah, frig,” he said. Stacy II had been right. Democracy was coming to The Anarchy.

“What happen?” Ivan asked.

He showed Ivan his phone. “Fire up The Terrarium and start moving people here. Everyone. I want those islands empty in three days.”

Ivan nodded wordlessly and jogged towards the flying island, which was still moored to the mountain.

Xavier turned on his laptop and started designing apartment buildings.

Murdoch watched as his islanders organized an impressively quick resettlement campaign. There were hundreds of thousands of Anarchists - hardly the largest mass migration event in history, but nothing to sniff at either. Save a few holdouts, most of them migrated family by family to the Southernmost hyperloop terminal, from where they were picked up and flown to their new home in Antarctica.

The holdouts - people who would rather die than voluntarily give up their land - got what they wished for. They were slaughtered by the inexorably advancing PR Navy.

Of course, it was called the Commonwealth Navy now. "Reunification" was the slogan of the day. All three Commonwealth entities, under the loving and protective embrace of a democratically elected government. The People's Republican government.

Murdoch was upset. He wasn't bothered about the PR instigating a colour revolution, or outright conquering the TD. That was Steve's problem. But his beloved Anarchists? That was enough to drive a man to drink.

He had run out of whiskey. He rifled through his filing cabinets until he found a bottle of gin that he'd stowed away for exactly this sort of emergency.

He poured himself a glass, downed it, and turned back to his screen. Now, more than ever, his people needed the measured, rational guidance of their God. He jacked into Xavier's brain and started lecturing him about political theory and surface-to-air missiles.

41. Criminal Conspirator

Steve was a little disappointed at his colleagues' timidity regarding the monkeybots. As he and Gabe walked with the three embodied AIs down the hall, people scurried into their offices and locked their doors. He even heard a couple of them pushing furniture up against the door as they walked past.

Even Gabe seemed a little uncomfortable. "So, are you declaring mission accomplished?" he asked as they stood together in the lobby of the main research building. "Time to rest on your laurels and come back to your actual job?"

Steve looked at his trio of monkeybots, who were marveling at the drab interior of the office building.

"Now?" he asked. "Now that we're finally getting somewhere?"

"You've gotten somewhere," Gabe replied. "It's done."

Steve bit his lip. "Gabe," he said, "I've gotten more accomplished in the past year at MHI than I did in a thousand years at the uni. Just think what I can do in another six months! At this rate, we may actually be able to build our interstellar army!"

Gabe glared at him and made a sharp throat-cutting gesture to remind him of the legality of his proposal.

"A *government-sanctioned* interstellar army," Steve corrected himself.

"Sorry, Steve," Gabe said. "I didn't realize you were so... *ambitious*."

With that, Gabe bid the group farewell. Steve watched in confusion as his old friend walked out the lobby door and into the sterile familiarity of the world outside of Murdoch Heavy Industries.

They continued their tour of the office park. The next person they ran into was Allen, by the coffee machine. He jumped as he saw the three monkeybots, but quickly composed himself.

"The first monkeybots, eh?" he asked, looking Russel, Stacy and Vincent up and down. "Are you going to kill me?"

The three robots shook their heads.

"Good." Allen studied the robots closer. "I watched you all die," he added eventually.

Steve was getting quite uncomfortable.

Allen walked up to Stacy, and studied her up and down. He reached his hand out, grabbed her jaw, opened her mouth, and looked inside it like he was inspecting a horse.

"Very impressive work," he said.

Stacy scowled as she was released and Steve hurriedly ushered the trio down the hall and into their new open-plan office.

"Who the hell was that dickhead?" Stacy asked when they'd closed the door.

"Oh, that was Allen," Steve said. "Just being his usual self."

“That’s Allen?!” Stacy asked. “That’s the guy you’ve promised our kids to if you don’t make your payments?”

“Only if they’re aligned,” Steve corrected her. “Otherwise their minds get used for experiments.”

Stacy screamed.

Murdoch didn’t seem to be his usual self when he eventually entered the open-plan office. He seemed a little less coordinated than usual, and slurred his words. Steve wondered what he had been doing.

He grinned when he saw the three monkeybots. “My beautiful maniacs,” he said. “Welcome to the world!”

He shook their hands one by one, and lingered when he got to Vincent. “My perfect islander,” he said, staring at Vincent’s face.

Murdoch shook himself out of his daze and clapped his hands together. “How are you settling in?” he asked the group.

“Yeah, fine” Vincent replied.

“Good. You’re probably wondering why I brought you here.”

Steve had been wondering that as well.

“I’m sure Steve’s already filled you in on the whole ‘AI alignment competition,’ ” he started.

The trio nodded.

“All very important stuff,” Murdoch continued. “But there’s another project of equal, possibly greater importance. It involves your son,” he said, nodding to Vincent.

Steve cocked his head slightly. He had mostly ignored Murdoch and the Anarchists. What could the billionaire titan possibly need from Xavier? He didn’t have the slightest idea.

But Vincent seemed to know. He nodded his head. “Nanoscale manufacturing,” he said.

Murdoch smiled. “Yup. I don’t think even Xavier really understands the implications of what he’s built.”

Steve reeled. What had Xavier built? What were the implications?

“What has he built?” Stacy asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Murdoch replied. “Only the most advanced manufacturing system in either of the known universes. So far, he’s used it to build a flying island and to terraform a decent chunk of Antarctica. But with the proper guidance, he can do way more. He can go to space. And if you three do your jobs correctly”, he gestured at Vincent, Stacy and Russell, “we can go to space too.”

Steve’s heartbeat quickened as he processed this new information. It was one thing to academically debate “calling” versus “knocking”, or to conduct AI alignment research in preparation for an imaginary interstellar war that would almost certainly never happen. It

was another thing to participate in a realistic plan to violate the most sacred law in society: No one leaves Elba.

He didn't know why space launches were banned. Some historical reason, decided a hundred millennia before his birth. All he knew was that, as of today, his job function had changed - from academic researcher, to criminal conspirator.

He followed the group around wordlessly as Murdoch gave them a tour of the office, introducing them to their computers, the library of physics textbooks, and the coffee machine. The monkeybots had no idea that they were being asked to do something highly illegal. Should he tell them?

What about Xavier and his Anarchists? Should he warn them, as well? Would FEDSEC be lenient on them, considering that they weren't even "real people?"

Should he quit and go back to his old job? But then what would happen to his AIs?

And did he even want to quit?

After Murdoch left, Steve and the three monkeybots sat on the couches. Steve had decided to hold off on telling them about the legal status of space launches. They'd had enough of a whirlwind for one day.

"So, physics is Newtonian here?" Russell asked, flipping through a textbook.

Steve nodded. "That's what you know it as," he said. "Up here, we just call it physics."

"So what's the speed of light?"

"As fast as you can throw it."

"Man," Vincent said, craning his neck to look at the textbook. "That's so weird."

Steve laughed. "Actually, it's your physics that's weird. I drew a lot of flak for it, but compromises had to be made. Budgetary reasons, you understand."

Stacy, who had been silent for some time, lost her cool.

"I don't care about physics!" she shouted. "What are you doing to do about my kids, Steve? Have you forgotten about them already? How are you going to keep them away from that creep?"

Steve recoiled. He wasn't used to being addressed so...passionately. At least, she had provided him with an excuse to distance himself from the criminal conspiracy.

"Right!" he said. "I was just going to get back to that."

"You'd better!" Stacy said.

With that, Steve bade the trio farewell and practically ran out of the open-plan office, back to his familiar desk and the soothing comfort of plausible deniability.

42. Death by Rotisserie

Fortunately for Stacy II, induction ceremonies were few and far between.

“We’re not savages,” Curtis explained. “We only eat tyrants, criminals, and unproductive layabouts. They’re all in short supply at the moment, so I’m afraid you may have to wait a while before you’re allowed to leave.”

“No rush,” Stacy II responded awkwardly. “Where do I sleep in the meantime?”

“There’s an empty cottage down the street,” Curtis offered. “Feel free to make yourself at home!”

Stacy II thought of asking what had happened to the previous inhabitant of the cottage, but decided to hold her tongue.

She settled in to her new home and got to know her neighbours, curious to learn how the cannibals made a living. In contrast to the hunter-gatherer and raider lifestyles on the rest of New Australia, her new neighbours mostly did remote work over the internet - one of the dads “job stacked” quality assurance for three separate software companies, another was a freelance lawyer, and the moms mostly raised their perfect, beautiful children. They were weirdly, surreally... normal.

The lawyer gave her the creeps, so she made friends with the QA guy. He graciously lent her his WiFi password, and she set about finding remote work that matched her skillset. After failing to gain any traction as a freelance graphic designer and a digital personal assistant, she got certified as a life coach. She targeted depressed, single career women in their mid-to-late 30s, which turned out to be quite a profitable niche. Before long, her days were filled with Zoom calls, listening to women complain about their co-workers in exchange for forty thousand satoshis an hour.

As the months rolled by, Stacy II began to suspect that the induction ceremony may never arrive - perhaps the cannibalism was just an almost mythical theoretical backstop, similar to how the Governor General could theoretically dismiss the Prime Minister of Australia but had only ever done so once. She relaxed, coming to believe that the day of “eat or be eaten” would never arrive - until, one evening, she was disturbed by a commotion in the streets.

She opened her door and stepped out onto her porch. Dozens of men, women and children, most of whom she now recognized, were marching in the streets - clanging pots and pans, and chanting “Yum! Yum! Criminal scum!”

Stacy II watched with interest as the charivari worked its way past her house. She still wasn’t sure what it was all about, until she spotted someone in the middle of the crowd that she hadn’t seen in quite some time. Hands tied behind his back and surrounded by large, rough-looking men, glumly strode Archibald.

“Archibald!” she yelled out. “Archie!”

Archibald recognized her and shouted something in her direction, but she couldn’t make it out over the din. She rushed in to the crowd, and marched with the revelers to the village square, where Curtis was seated behind a table.

The men flanking Archibald dragged him in front of Curtis, kicked him in the back of the knees, and allowed him to fall into the dirt. They stepped back, and Curtis spoke.

“A case!” he exclaimed, joyfully. “It’s been a while! Who’s prosecuting him?”

A man stepped forward out of the crowd. “I am, your honour.”

The crowd cheered.

“Very good!” said Curtis. “What are you prosecuting him for?”

“Theft!”

“I see. And do you have any evidence of this crime?” Curtis asked.

“Yeah! I saw him break into my larder and try to steal some bacon!”

Curtis nodded. “Compelling. Thank you.”

He turned to Archibald, who was sitting on the ground, hands still tied behind his back.

“Do you have anything to say in your defence?” he asked.

“I didn’t steal nothing!” Archibald objected. “He interrupted me before I could,” he explained, pointing his chin at the prosecutor.

“So you admit you intended to steal from this man?” asked Curtis.

“Of course not!” responded Archibald. “I’m a law-abiding citizen. I’m just saying, I couldn’t even if I wanted to, because he interrupted me. But I didn’t want to. Nu-uh.”

“So why were you in my larder?” demanded the prosecutor.

“I was lost,” replied Archibald.

“Lost, inside my house, uninvited?”

“I had entered into a fugue state.”

“My front door had been kicked in.”

“Fugue states are like that sometimes.”

“Enough!” yelled Curtis. “Does anyone else have any testimony they’d like to submit?”

Stacy II stepped forward. “I know this boy!” she shouted. “He’s a good kid! He wouldn’t knowingly break into someone’s larder, that’s totally out of character.”

“You’re acquainted with this thief?” Curtis asked.

“Yes! But-”

“Then your testimony is invalid! Conflict of interest, you see. We can only take testimony from people who don’t know him.”

“But how are they supposed to-”

“Order!” Curtis shouted, and thumped the table with a gavel. “Overruled!” He turned to address Archibald. “Thank you for your testimony. After much deliberation, I find you guilty on all charges!”

A clamour of approval sprang from the crowd. When the shouts and clanging died down, Curtis continued. “I sentence you to death by rotisserie. It will be carried out tomorrow at sunrise. Do you have anything to say for yourself?” he asked Archibald.

Archie shrugged. “Dura lex, sed lex,” he said.

“Construct a spit!” Curtis shouted to the crowd, who erupted once more into applause.

When the crowd finally quieted again, he raised his hands and added, “In other news, we will have an induction ceremony tomorrow evening. Bring your uninducted!”

Curtis winked at Stacy II as the crowd went wild.

She couldn’t sleep that night. The thought of eating another human being was already bad enough, but for it to be Archibald made it infinitely worse. Although he had been a constant source of annoyance and frustration during their brief acquaintance, she was still moderately fond of him. The kid certainly didn’t deserve to be eaten, regardless of whether or not he’d actually tried to steal someone’s bacon. When she regained the throne, she’d ban cannibalism.

When she regained the throne. The thought made her face burn with embarrassment. Wasn’t that what she was here for? What she’d set out to do? And now, she was about to eat one of her would-be subjects, so that she could continue to live in comfort whilst offering online friendship-as-a-service.

“Goddamn it,” she grumbled, and rolled over in her bed.

A soft knock at the door disturbed her attempted slumber. She ignored it, and it came again, louder.

“Coming,” she groaned, and stumbled to the door. She opened it, and Filbert was standing on her porch.

Her skin ran hot with rage. “You lily-livered piece of—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he responded, shoving her aside and entering her cottage. “Glad to see you’re alive too.”

“I hate you,” she hissed.

“Get over it,” he responded. “Right now, I’m your best friend in the world. Unless you feel like eating Baldy and completing your conversion to ‘irredeemable savage.’”

“How do you know about that?” she asked.

“Archibald told me,” he replied. “We had a good chat earlier. His guards are asleep.”

Suspicious of the timing, Stacy II put two and two together. “Are you the reason he’s here?”

Filbert turned slightly red. “I told him to find you, not break into houses and steal their cured meats!”

“You dolt!”

“You relax! I came to rescue him, didn’t I? You’re both lucky I showed up.”

Stacy II kicked him in the shin, and flailed angrily at his face. “Filbert, you imbecile! You lowlife commoner!! Everything was fine before! I was never going to have to eat anyone until you came along!”

Attempting to parry her blows, Filbert retorted. "You really believe that? No one else would ever try to steal something? You'd be able to live out your days without ever being inducted into this insane cult?"

Stacy II ceased her attack and broke down in tears. "Obviously not!" she cried. "I'm not daft. But what was I supposed to do? You left me stranded here! This place is hell, Filbert! You stranded me in hell!"

Filbert reached out his hand to try to comfort her, but she slapped it away. "Hands off the Queen!" she yelled.

"Aren't you going to ask why I came back?" Filbert asked.

Now that Filbert mentioned it, his return was surprisingly uncharacteristic. Had he suddenly grown a spine?

"Why did you come back?" she asked.

"Steve spoke to me. Apparently, if you don't take New Sealand back and get the people back on track, we won't go to Steve when we die."

"Who will we go to?"

Filbert told her.

She flew into another fit of rage.

"I was this close!" she yelled, holding her index finger and thumb a couple of millimeters apart. "Then you had to disobey a direct order, and now we're going to go to that asshole when we die?"

"Listen," Filbert said, holding his hands up. "Water under the bridge, okay? We've got work to do."

After Filbert managed to figure out the kettle and make her a cup of tea, Stacy II started to feel better. "So what's your plan for breaking Archie out?" she asked.

"Easy," Filbert responded. "His guards are asleep. Or, at least, they were twenty minutes ago. The plan is, we break him out."

"Wow, very well thought out."

"And then we leave New Australia forever."

Stacy II nodded. "I never want to see this place again. New Australia is a lost cause. Where are we going?"

"Antarctica."

"What?"

"I'll explain later."

Stacy II shrugged. "What do you need from me?" she asked.

"Do you have any bolt cutters?"

"What do I look like, a bicycle thief?"

Filbert sighed and started opening cupboards. Eventually, he found the cottage's tool chest. There were no bolt cutters, but he was able to fashion something serviceable from a pair of pliers, a couple of pipes, and duct tape.

"Farm engineering," he explained.

"I don't want to hear it," she replied.

Archibald was being kept padlocked in a chicken run belonging to the guy whose bacon he had attempted to steal. As hoped, the guards were asleep. Archibald, who was nervously pacing the small pen, lit up as they approached.

"Your Royal Highness! You came! I knew you wouldn't let me be eaten. Sorry about ditching you back before, I... uh..."

"Save it," Stacy II hissed.

Archibald stood back silently as Filbert attacked the padlock with his makeshift bolt cutters. They utterly failed to make a dent in the hardened steel and fell apart almost immediately.

"Farm engineering, huh?" Stacy II asked quietly.

"Hush, you," Filbert responded, and started clipping through the chicken wire with the pliers.

Stacy II gripped her railgun nervously and watched the guards snore as Filbert worked. They remained fast asleep, despite the jingling and rustling of the chicken wire.

"Ow!" Filbert complained, under his breath.

Stacy II smacked him and mouthed, "Shut up!"

Filbert showed her his cut hand, and failed to garner any sympathy.

Within a few minutes, the wire mesh had been fully cut from top to bottom, Archibald was free, and the guards were still lightly snoring. Anarcho-Cannibalist society really wasn't well-prepared for keeping prisoners, Stacy II figured.

Under cover of darkness, the three of them crept down the dirt streets of the Anarcho-Cannibalist village, to the port. As they rounded the corner past her cottage, they ran into her lawyer neighbour.

"Oh hey, Stacy!" he said. His facial expression changed to confusion as he noticed Filbert, and then anger as he saw Archibald.

"Escape!" he yelled. "We've got escapers!"

Stacy II shot him in the chest and the three took off down the street.

Lights turned on as they ran, and people came out of their houses to see what the commotion was. Stacy II sprinted faster than she ever had in her life. Helping Archie escape was probably bad enough to earn her a place on the rotisserie, but shooting her neighbour was a million times worse. They'd probably slow cook her for that.

Panting for breath, they reached the docks. A gunshot rang out. Conventional small arms, like the ones the rebels had used to take the Theocratic Dominion. Stacy II prayed that

they'd keep missing as more gunshots followed, and the boat that Xavier and Vincent had built for them materialized out of the darkness.

She dove aboard the boat and huddled down against the bulkhead. Archie followed and Filbert brought up the rear, firing up the engine and casting off.

43. The Orbital Ring

Hundreds of thousands of Xavier's people relocated to the Antarctic valley. The Anarchy was abuzz with a level of excitement unseen since its founding. Xavier was grateful for their help - without access to the MHI-10, the necessary advances in technology would have to be achieved with raw human intelligence and relentless experimentation.

It was a shame, Xavier thought, that their home in Antarctica was only temporary. It was a good staging area - relatively isolated, lots of carbon. They made it feel like home. But it couldn't be their forever home.

Nor could the skies. The Terrarium was a neat invention, but it was indefensible. Plus, there were no resources in the sky.

No. In the long run, if his people wanted to be safe from the statist, there was simply nowhere on Earth for them to live.

If they wanted to be free, they had to leave. They had to go to space.

The voices in his head reminded him of this fact, constantly.

Paranoid of statist infiltration, Xavier personally reviewed each and every CAD design before it was sent to the ASIC for manufacture. Before long, he was spending twenty hours per day staring at his monitor. He became a one-man bottleneck for the innovative output of the entire Anarchist technical community. But slowly, his hard work began to pay off.

After some weeks, an interesting design appeared in the queue. By punching a minuscule nozzle in the magnetic shielding that confined the hydrogen of a fusion reactor, a group of reckless maniacs had designed a fusion rocket. It was theoretically powerful enough to accelerate a thousand kilograms of material to escape velocity while consuming less than twenty kilograms of hydrogen. The only major downside would be the many-kilometers-long death ray of high-energy particles and gamma rays that emanated from the rocket's tail. Statist plot to genocide the Anarchists with cancer and radiation poisoning? It couldn't be discounted. Xavier cautiously approved the design, and sent it to the ASIC for manufacture.

Not wishing to irradiate their polar settlement, Xavier made the amateur rocket scientists float the test vehicle up high on a balloon before igniting the engine. The entire settlement gathered together to watch on giant screens as the rocket accelerated out of the atmosphere, followed presumably by the planet's gravity well, and the solar system.

"Not bad," said one of the voices in his head. "Certainly a necessary pre-requisite. But we asked for a ring."

With renewed vigour, Xavier re-immersed himself in design work. The Gods wanted a ring, eh? They'd get a ring.

Xavier and his team slaved away for weeks and weeks. He spent so much time in CAD that he began to forget what it meant to be human. He was a machine. No, he wasn't - he was a cog in a machine. A coroutine in a hideously complex piece of organic software, created for a single purpose: To design nanoscale-manufacturable megastructures.

Eventually, the design was ready. Xavier collapsed in his chair and slept for sixteen hours.

The next day, the settlement gathered again. This time, they were to witness the greatest human accomplishment in history.

One after another, hundreds of fusion rockets were attached to balloons and floated high into the atmosphere. Then, the sky lit up with brilliant lights as it was sliced up by the rockets igniting and propelling themselves into orbit.

Xavier didn't join the outdoor watch party. He stayed in his office, watching the launch on his screen.

"It's going to work," he told the voices in his head.

"I believe in you," one of the voices replied. It sounded a lot like his dad.

He stared intently at his screen as the display showed the rockets entering into an evenly spaced orbit around the planet, a couple hundred kilometers above the surface. Once the orbits stabilized, a previously greyed-out button activated on his screen.

It was labelled, "BUILD RING."

Xavier clicked the button.

Hundreds of kilometers above his head, each rocket split open to release its payload. Each rocket held a nano-fabrication factory, programmed to extrude a magnetite-impregnated chain of colossal carbon tubes. Each factory began constructing over a hundred kilometers of chain. Over the next few hours, thrusters on the tail of each chain coordinated with the rocket on the head of the next, each snaking and winding through space and mating with its neighbours until every section of chain was welded together. The result was an enormous carbon/iron ouroboros encircling the planet, orbiting at eight kilometers per second.

"You happy?" Xavier asked the Gods.

"Not bad," one of them replied. "But let's see if it works."

Xavier sighed. Sixteen hours of sleep hadn't been enough - he was still exhausted. But, unless his screen was lying to him, he was almost done.

Another button had activated on his screen. "TEST SHUTTLE."

Xavier clicked the button.

Hundreds of kilometers above him, on the orbital ring, a fusion reactor started up. It was on a shuttle, and powered a set of superconducting magnets. As the shuttle pulsed its magnetic field, it started to move.

Xavier watched on his display as the shuttle accelerated itself harder and harder against the ring, until it was stationary relative to the earth. Clicking a couple more buttons, Xavier watched as his display flashed "RELEASING TETHER".

A two-hundred-kilometer-long carbon rope started dropping from the shuttle.

The rope snaked its way through the atmosphere, guided by an active control system. After fifteen minutes of freefall, it slowed down and attached itself to a communications satellite, which was hovering in the atmosphere, attached to a balloon. As Xavier clicked a couple more buttons, the shuttle began to move again.

He and his crew called their invention the sling-on-a-ring. As the shuttle moved along the radius of the orbital ring, it pulled the communications satellite away from the balloon. Xavier kicked the shuttle into maximum acceleration (labelled as 'DECELERATE' on the

screen, as all commands were relative to the ring). The fusion reactor burned as much hydrogen as it could without overheating, and the shuttle ripped along the circumference of the ring, dragging the satellite out of the atmosphere.

A few minutes later, Xavier clicked one last button - "RELEASE". The tether released the satellite and it continued its upwards trajectory.

Xavier nodded, satisfied. With a few small adjustments, the satellite would reach a fairly satisfactory geostationary orbit. If he'd held on a few more minutes, it would have hit escape velocity. Not bad for a test run.

"Pretty good," said a voice in his head. "Now it's your turn."

44. Reverse Prometheus

Russell studied his fingernails. It still weirded him out that he never need to cut them.

His robotic body was a marvel of engineering. It was at once familiar, and unfamiliar. Moving it felt perfectly natural, and the pattern of veins and tendons on the back were the same as they'd ever been. The loose skin and wrinkles that had started to appear with age, however, were gone. His entire body, in fact, moved with an ease that he hadn't experienced in a long time - perhaps since his early twenties, back in Perth.

Being dead wasn't so bad.

He still wasn't entirely sure what Murdoch wanted them to do. So far, his job seemed to mainly consist of re-learning physics and motivating Xavier. Poor kid was probably going crazy with the amount of divine input into his internal monologue. Ah well.

Outside of work, Russell spent his abundant free time chatting with Steve, learning as much as he could about their world. Last week, he'd asked Steve if he ever wanted children. He'd been treated to a long explanation of the licensing process, followed by the genetic engineering, and finally the years of close surveillance after the baby had been produced and delivered by the appropriate government department (something called FEDSEC). Steve was unenthusiastic about the prospect. Russell had been left with many more questions than he'd started with, and was still trying to process his newfound knowledge.

The others excitedly chattered, and Russell looked up at the screen. Xavier was in some sort of plane he'd built, that was meant to fly in space. Murdoch and Steve had joined them in the office for the occasion.

"You can do it, lad!" Murdoch said into the microphone. "The design is perfect. Nothing could possibly go wrong!"

"The design is perfect," Xavier's internal monologue echoed out through the computer speakers. "Nothing could possibly go wrong."

Russell around the room. Steve was pacing, trying to avoid looking at the screen. Vincent and Stacy were both sitting a little farther back than Murdoch, chewing their indestructible fingernails.

It was a tense moment.

He watched on the screen as a tether descended down through the atmosphere and attached itself to Xavier's space-plane. This design was absolutely bonkers. Vincent's son and his team of Anarchists had somehow managed to build a solid carbon ring that orbited the Earth, and were now about to use it to fling the kid into space. If he were a betting man, he'd place a small fortune on Xavier's plane being torn apart and Xavier becoming a new soul in that asshole's Allen's collection.

Still, he couldn't look away. Xavier said something into his radio and back on Earth, someone clicked a button on some computer. A shuttle began to move on the ring, and Xavier's plane was yanked up through the atmosphere.

Russell found himself biting his fingernails as well. He expected the space-plane to blow apart any second, but it held. The kid seemed pretty uncomfortable as he was ripped at

heavy acceleration through the stratosphere, but it looked like he would live. It probably wasn't as bad as it seemed - they always watched StevieNix on fast forward.

Within a couple of minutes, the kid was still attached to the tether, being ripped around the Earth at escape velocity. He said something into his radio, and the tether released. The plane was released, like a rock from a sling, at a speed fast enough to reach Jupiter in a year.

Vincent nudged past Murdoch and grabbed the mic. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"Yeah, pretty good," Xavier replied. "This is wild."

Russell watched as Xavier pushed a couple of buttons, and a fusion rocket ignited on the back of his plane. He felt a pang of jealousy as the kid manipulated the controls of the space-plane and guided it back to Earth. Damn, that looked fun.

Satisfied, Murdoch swivelled around and pointed his thumb over his shoulder back at the screen.

"That," he said. "That's what I want."

Russell nodded. Finally, the assignment was clear.

"I don't understand," Stacy said. "Why can't we just copy his space stuff up here?"

Steve looked at Russell to provide an explanation. Russell sighed. Murdoch had left them to go buy more cigarettes, and Steve seemed weirdly reluctant to have anything to do with this project. That left him as the next best person to explain.

"Xavier can build orbital rings and space-planes because he has nanoscale manufacturing," he explained.

"Following," Stacy said. "The ASIC thing you guys are always going on about."

"Yes. He has the ASIC because he bootstrapped it with an omniscient supercomputer."

"Yup."

"And we don't have an omniscient supercomputer."

"Why can't we just copy the ASIC?" she asked.

Russell shook his head. "The physics is too different. It relies on quantum effects."

"So we need to make an ASIC with our physics, without using an omniscient supercomputer?"

"Yup."

"How hard could that be?"

Russell laughed. She truly had no idea.

"Why can't Xavier make it for us?" Stacy asked. "He can make anything."

"We'd have to switch StevieNix to run on a completely different physics engine," Russell said. "God only knows what that would break."

"God has no idea what that would break," Steve interjected.

Russell, Stacy and Vincent swivelled around to face their creator.

“It’s a pretty complicated universe,” Steve explained. “And even if we got it to work, I couldn’t even begin to imagine the computational requirements.”

Vincent finally spoke up. “You mentioned budgetary reasons before.”

Steve nodded. “StevieNix has all sorts of optimizations. Light speed. Wave/particle duality. If we had to simulate every particle perfectly, we’d need to seriously increase the size of our datacenter. Trust me, I’ve tried.”

Russell was surprised. “You have a realistic physics engine?” he asked.

“Sure!” Steve replied. “I wrote one a few centuries ago. That’s how I know how expensive it is.”

Russell looked back towards the screen, and mulled over a thought.

“Xavier can go to space,” he said. “What if we just cordon off a little bit of space and make that run your realistic physics engine? Then he can fly in and out and bootstrap a new ASIC that way.”

Steve opened his mouth as if to object, but nothing came out.

Eventually, he spoke. “Yeah, that might actually work,” he said.

The three monkeybots stared at him silently, waiting for more details.

“We’ll have to reassign most of the StevieNix cluster to run the cube,” he said. “The sim will slow to a crawl. The alignment team will be pissed. But yeah, that might work.”

Vincent leaned back and smiled. “Like a reverse Prometheus,” he said. “Stealing fire from my son to give it to the Gods.”

45. Statist Infiltrators

“The boys are all obsessed with their physics project,” Stacy II’s mom complained into her head. “Honestly, sometimes it feels like Steve doesn’t even care that you won’t make it to our afterlife.”

“What?” Stacy II asked.

“You mean you didn’t know?” her mom replied. “Steve’s in debt. Your souls are some sort of weird collateral. Don’t ask me how it works, it’s all over my head. All I know is, if you don’t regain control of the TD and get people to start worshipping Steve again, your soul goes to Allen when you die.”

“Who’s Allen?”

Stacy II’s mom explained. She shrieked. Filbert looked at her weirdly.

After their escape from the Anarcho-Cannibalist village, they’d dropped Archie back home and taken the boat to the southernmost island in The Anarchy. From there, they’d been picked up by The Terrarium and were presently sitting in the grass, flying over the South Pacific to Antarctica.

“That’s assuming that they even still care about aligned souls at all,” Stacy II’s mom added. “The guy bankrolling all this, Murdoch, seems more interested in using your world as some sort of tech incubator. If you don’t start delivering useful, aligned interstellar warriors... Do you know what happens to projects that don’t deliver return on investment?”

“They get canned,” Stacy II thought. “But what do you want me to do? I already tried to align people. Didn’t you see what happened on New Australia?”

“Well yeah,” her mom replied. “Obviously you weren’t going to be able to align *them*. Why do you think I banished them in the first place? Also, I don’t think it helped that they hated you.”

“Thanks, mom. I appreciate the encouragement. Do you have any actual advice?”

“Yes. Keep your pearls away from the swine.”

“Thanks mom, I hadn’t heard that one before. Anything else?”

“You can’t just convert people at the barrel of a railgun. It doesn’t stick. You have to win their hearts and minds.”

Filbert chose that moment to spring to his feet and run to the window. “Look!” he shouted excitedly, pointing in the distance. “Land!”

The sun reflected off a glimmering white ice sheet in the distance. Stacy II’s heart beat rapidly and she began to sweat. Although she’d mostly enjoyed her day-to-day experience living with Anarchists on New Australia, she was wary of the fact that they’d been unable to scale past a hundred people before resorting to an institutionalized cannibalism-based justice system. What horrors would a society of millions of ungoverned people inflict on each other? Still, Vincent and Xavier had seemed fairly normal. But Curtis had seemed normal too, right up to the point where he’d sentenced her friend to be roasted and eaten.

“You’ll be fine,” her mom reassured her. “Vincent’s Anarchy is totally different from Curtis’s. These are *elite human capital*, don’t you know.”

Stacy II cringed. The phrase 'human capital' brought up unpleasant memories from New Australia. "If they're so elite, why do they live on a block of ice in the middle of nowhere?" she asked.

Her mom laughed. "You're right, a true elite would have rallied the troops and sank the People's Republic back into the sea."

Eventually, the Transactic Mountains appeared in the distance. The Terrarium began ascending to clear the mountains.

"Where will we find Xavier?" Stacy II asked her mom.

"Xavier? Don't you mean your dad? And your brothers and sisters?"

"Oh," she blushed. "Yeah, that's what I meant."

"Don't lie to me. I can read your mind."

"Their names are right next to each other."

"Save it."

"Okay, fine, where's Xavier?"

"In space."

"What?"

"Long story. Boys, you know."

Antarctica was busy. Far busier than she had expected. Millions of people had fled their anchorages, relocating beyond the reaches of the Commonwealth Navy to the icy interior of the final continent. The original valley was now a bustling metropolis, filled with buildings and office workers, connected via heated tunnels to the surrounding suburbs.

She and Filbert spent the next several days reconnecting with old contacts. Many, like her own family, had fled the Theocratic Dominion during the revolution. To her relief, none of them attempted to convince her to eat anyone. Unfortunately, despite being armed to the teeth, none of them wanted to re-take the Commonwealth either.

"What did you expect?" asked Filbert. "Their roots in the Commonwealth only go back twenty one years, maximum. Hardly worth dying for. Also, one of the founding principles of the Anarchy is that you should just move away from people you don't like."

"Running away as a founding principle? How has that played out?"

Filbert kept his mouth shut and waited for her to answer her own question.

"Let's have a look, shall we? Oh yeah! They're cowering under domes in the least hospitable part of the planet! If only they stood and fought, they wouldn't have to live like this."

Filbert shrugged. "It's temporary. They're moving to space. Why would they want to go back to the ocean?"

Stacy II growled with frustration. "God damn it! Why is it so hard? All I want is to raise an army and reclaim my rightful throne. Is that really so much to ask?"

Filbert continued his policy of silence.

“It’s been a year, and I have nothing to show for it. How did all the great English kings do it?”

“I think they paid the soldiers, for starters.”

“I’m broke.”

“Life coaching isn’t profitable enough?”

“You just don’t know when to shut up, do you?”

They stopped at a stall where a man with a cart full of oranges and a lever-action juice press was dishing out cups of freshly-squeezed orange juice for two silverbacks apiece. Stacy II dug in her purse for the banknotes, each of which contained a tiny piece of silver in a small transparent window in the center.

“Two, please,” she requested and handed over the notes.

She looked around as the man set about slicing and squeezing the oranges with machine-like efficiency. The valley was an impressive sight. Rather than glass and steel, the Anarchists had chosen to construct their buildings from stone - shamelessly copying the arches, vibrant facades, and terracotta roof tiles of Central American colonial architecture. Palm trees lined the wide, cobblestone streets, and above them all, the sun reflected off the towering white peaks and glinted as it refracted through the colossal glass dome. Activity was everywhere - people of all ages bustled through the streets or sat on terraces, laughing and enjoying food and coffee, while robots mined carbon and executed enormous construction projects in the mountains beyond.

Given the choice, she thought, she probably wouldn’t want to go back to the Commonwealth either.

“It’s just so annoying,” she continued griping. “My mom had it running perfectly. Millions of people. All aligned. Breeding like rabbits. And then the PR had to just come around and cock it all up!”

The juice vendor cocked his head as he handed over her juice-filled paper cup. “Was your mom Queen Stacy?” he asked.

Stacy II froze and examined the man. He wasn’t anyone she recognized. “Yes, did you know her?” she responded.

“Only by reputation,” he replied. “I was never a TD man, myself. But everyone knows who Queen Stacy was. My condolences, by the way.”

“Thanks.”

“The TD’s gone to hell since she died.”

“I know.”

“You should probably do something about that.”

“Oh? First time I’ve heard that one. I’ll get on it as soon as my life coaching business IPOs.”

The juice vendor laughed and began halving oranges for Filbert's drink. As he placed the first half into the press, he furrowed his brow as if he'd just remembered something. "Do you know that Xavier has the guy who did it locked away somewhere?" he asked.

"The guy who did what?"

"The guy who organized the revolt. Some sort of statist mastermind. He sentenced your mom to death. He also tried to take the Terrarium at one point, and killed Vincent in the process. Not a very popular guy round here."

"Where is he?"

"Beats me. If anyone knew, he'd probably be stoned to death."

Stacy II thanked the vendor and walked away, mulling over this newfound information. Finally, a lead! Her mind was a wrestling match between emotion and logic. On the one hand, the deep, primordial regions of her soul ached to find the man responsible for her mother's death and torture him - crucifying him to office furniture and throwing darts at him until he begged for death. On the other hand, she could use the help of a 'statist mastermind', particularly one who understood the inner workings of the PR.

Dragging a protesting Filbert down the street, she quieted her mind enough to form a coherent internal monologue and summoned her mom.

Her mom gave up on the search almost immediately, and handed the problem over to Russell.

"You need to give me more to go on than that," Russell explained. "'Xavier's prisoner, who sentenced Stacy to death and also briefly invaded the Terrarium' isn't a valid search term."

"What more do you want?" Stacy II asked. For an alleged genius, Russell was having an awful lot of trouble executing a simple search.

"The search engine only takes descriptions of their present state. I can filter by their name, height, weight, etc."

"He's presently Xavier's prisoner! How many prisoners could Xavier possibly have?"

"'Prisoner' isn't an objective term. As far as StevieNix is concerned, he could just be a guest in a room with bars on the windows."

"Okay! Find me all men in Antarctica alone in rooms with bars on the windows!"

Russell was silent for a moment as he tapped at his keyboard, before responding, "Nothing."

"All men in Antarctica alone in basements!"

Another pause, followed by "Thirty eight results. I guess basements are popular places to hang out."

"Xavier's basement!"

"Right. Hang on."

Russell paused again, while Stacy II grimaced, meticulously tore strips off her empty paper cup, and tried to keep her mental Tourette's syndrome from offending Russell in her impatience. Filbert watched her, nervously.

“One result. Good search query! You see? How hard was that?”

Stacy II grumbled and tried to heave her train of thought from annoyance to gratitude.

“Hang on!” Russell exclaimed. “I recognize this dickhead. What are you planning on doing with him?”

“Hadn’t decided yet. Why?”

“He tortured me to death. Ripped off all my fingernails and made me listen to Hip to be Square by Huey Lewis and The News on repeat.”

“Wow,” Stacy II replied. “So he killed all three of you? Funny. I was thinking of torturing him to death too.”

“Have at it. He’s in Xavier’s basement. I’ll walk you there.”

Stacy II picked up the pieces of her discarded pieces of paper cup, and grabbed Filbert’s arm.

“Let’s go,” she said. “Your dad found him. He says he’ll help us...get inquisitive on him.”

Allen leaned back in his chair and chuckled. Messing with these AIs was the most fun he’d had in...goodness, in as long as he could remember.

Things had gotten a little slow since Murdoch’s wunderkind had locked his favourite player in a basement, but all it took was a well-timed conversation with an orange juice vendor, and things were moving again.

Sure, Steve’s stupid little New Sealand project was covered in poop and practically over. But the islands were still floating and he still had a couple decent players. He wouldn’t rest until the islands were sunk to the bottom of the ocean and Steve’s players were all his, for all time. He’d make that ineffectual little academic regret even crossing him.

He smiled and watched as Stacy II and Filbert crossed the town to Xavier’s mostly deserted house.

46. Long Mac Topped Up

Steve was still somewhat afraid of Stacy. Of the three monkeybots, she was by far the most aligned - Russell was a recent convert, and Vincent was... he didn't even know how to describe Vincent. But even though she had been aligned with him since birth, there was still something in Stacy's demeanour that made Steve wary of her snapping and murdering everyone in a multi-kilometer radius.

She invited him out for coffee one afternoon. Apparently she'd found a place to her liking. Too scared to refuse, he tagged along.

"Two Long Macs, Topped Up" she ordered.

Steve didn't know what a "Long Mac, Topped Up" was. Judging by the knowing smirk the barista gave him, he hadn't either until Stacy had educated him.

"Why don't we see you around very much?" Stacy asked as they stood by the bar, waiting for their LMTUs.

"What do you mean?" Steve replied defensively. "I'm there all the time!"

"No you aren't. You're always in your study."

"I'm busy."

"Are you? You're barely helping my daughter, and I heard you haven't done any work on realistic physics for Xavier either. It's like you're avoiding everyone."

"I am not!"

"It's almost like you're scared of us."

Steve avoided her eyes. He didn't want to admit that he was indeed scared of the beautiful, intelligent AI that had invited him out for coffee. He was grateful when the barista announced "two Long Macs, Topped Up," giving him an excuse to escape the awkward moment.

Once they'd carried their coffees to their table, however, Stacy refused to drop the subject. She just stared at him in expectant silence until he spoke.

"It's not you I'm afraid of," he said quietly. "Has anyone told you about FEDSEC?"

It wasn't really a lie. In relative terms, he was way more afraid of FEDSEC than he was of Stacy.

The female robot shook her head and listened intently as Steve explained the structure and rules of Elban society.

After he finished, she took a thoughtful sip of her LMTU and broke her silence.

"Why is going to space illegal?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"Why does Murdoch want to go to space?"

"I don't know."

"Do you want to go to space?"

Steve laughed and looked nervously around the café. No one seemed to be listening.

"I don't know what I want," he admitted.

Stacy silently sipped her coffee, inviting him to elaborate.

"I want to stay alive," he said. "I want to be a good citizen, to fit in, to avoid calibration. But I also want... I want my life to be meaningful. I spent a thousand years working on StevieNix, and no one ever cared. Hell, I barely cared! Then Murdoch came into the break room, and now..."

He gestured at the sentient monkeybot sitting across the table from him.

"It's more than I could ever have imagined," he said.

Stacy nodded silently.

Steve sat back and took the first sip of his Long Mac, Topped Up. He was shocked by how good it was. Now he understood why Stacy had been so unimpressed with the Folgers.

"You know," Stacy said. "It's funny. Growing up, I always thought you were all-powerful. I guess you were, in StevieNix. But it never occurred to me that up here, you were just a normal guy."

She stared into her mug silently for a while, swirling the foamy milk coffee around absent-mindedly.

"I'm not sure how I feel about that," she said finally.

Steve could sympathize. He wasn't sure how he felt about anything anymore. But he knew one thing - he didn't like the feeling of letting Stacy down.

"I suppose," he said, "it's probably not that illegal to lend a hand with the programming every now and then. So long as I don't actually help build anything directly space-related."

"You can always claim ignorance," Stacy said.

"Still seems a bit risky, but..."

His voice trailed off and Stacy attempted to finish his sentence for him. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

Steve shook his head. "I don't know that expression," he said.

"It means that you'll never achieve anything unless you're willing to shoulder risk."

"Ah," he said. It made sense now why he was unfamiliar with the expression. "Yes, we don't have that concept on Elba."

47. The Cube of Realistic Physics

Xavier didn't live in his house anymore. Xavier lived in space. The Gods demanded it.

He had scarcely touched down before he was launching again, this time with a new ship design. It was a research lab, designed for space travel. They called it The Building.

The Building was a huge, cylindrical twelve-storey building with a fusion engine on the tail, capable of housing a small population for long periods of time. Each floor was manufactured separately on Earth and flung into space, where Xavier and his crew caught them with nets and space-planes, and assembled them into the final ship.

Once The Building was fully assembled, they flung up the ASIC, filled the building with air, and moved in.

Unlike the Terrarium, The Building wasn't designed to be a self-sufficient colony. Food wasn't grown on board, but was dehydrated and stocked in enormous store-rooms. The air was scrubbed not by plants, but by HEPA filters and an air-recycling plasma reactor. Artificial gravity was achieved not by spinning, but by *going places* - i.e. by running the fusion engine 24/7 and undergoing constant 1g acceleration or deceleration.

It was, on balance, a far less pleasant environment than the floating islands of New Sealand, the Terrarium, or the Antarctic Dome. On the other hand, it was in space. Xavier had no shortage of volunteers. Ivan joined him as first mate, and many of his best scientists and engineers followed.

The top floor was dedicated as the bridge, the bottom floor the engine room, and a few other floors the living quarters. The remaining floors were filled with computers, manufacturing equipment, the ASIC, and lab animals.

"Don't run your fusion engine in there," cautioned his dad. "Subatomic physics is totally different. Your engine will probably explode and kill everyone. You're just going to have to coast through on momentum."

"Is momentum the same as here?" Xavier asked the voice in his head. He was clipped into his chair in the top floor of The Building, facing an enormous cube that was outlined with a glowing red grid. Inside the cube, he was told, was empty space and a completely different physics engine. His dad called it "the Cube of Realistic Physics", or "CORP" for short.

"Yes, good old $p = mv$," replied his dad. "Think of it as if Newton designed the universe, and he got some help from the guy who came up with the subatomic... particle... orbity model. Who was that again? Bohr?"

"Rutherford."

"Right. Just testing you. In any case, do NOT run your fusion engine in there. I'm serious. You will die."

"Sure, okay, no fusion engine. What about my brain?" Xavier asked. "Does it rely on our subatomic physics?"

"It's been hard to get a straight answer out of Steve on that front," his dad replied. "Hang on, I'll put him on."

A few moments later, Steve's voice appeared. "How are you doing, Xavier?"

"Great, thanks. Admiring this beautiful red cube you've made me."

"Do you like it? It glows green on the inside!"

"Very nice. If I go inside, will I die?"

Steve was silent for a moment, before replying, "I don't think so."

"You don't think so?"

"You're worried about your brain, right?"

"Right."

"Don't! There's no need to worry about your brain. Your brain is just an interface between your mind and your body."

"What?"

"Your mind doesn't run on your brain. It runs on an MHI-10 in a datacenter, along with a hundred million other minds. If your mind ran on your squishy little monkey brain, how would we ever move it elsewhere?"

"Uh. . ."

"Maybe we need to give his mind some extra compute cycles so he can keep up," his dad snickered in the background.

"Ignore him," Steve said. "The point is, don't worry about your brain."

"What should I worry about?"

"Your mitochondria. I have no idea how those work."

"Great," thought Xavier. "That's reassuring. So why don't you think I'll die if I go in the cube?"

"How much impact could subatomic effects possibly have on your mitochondria? Can't be that much. I'd put the probability of death at no higher than. . . thirty percent."

Xavier didn't feel like personally testing those odds. He was going to have to try something else.

Xavier and his team put a canary in a glass ball and threw it into the cube. Then, they flew around to the other side and caught the canary when it came out. The bird was angry and covered in poop, but alive.

They waited two days. The bird was still alive. It was Xavier's turn.

He climbed into his space-plane and steered it towards the cube.

"We're all clear," crackled Ivan's voice through the radio. "Light her up!"

Xavier gripped the wheel of his space-plane tightly and stared nervously at the red Cube of Realistic Physics in front of him. He tried to reassure himself. The canary had survived. How dangerous could it be?

“Launching,” he responded with a final glance up at The Building. “See you on the other side.”

He ignited his fusion engine and was shoved back into his chair as the plane jolted forwards. After a fraction of a second, he shut the engine off again and coasted towards the cube.

“Good job,” his dad said into his head. “Now don’t you dare touch that ignition until you come out the other side.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Xavier responded. “Why don’t you worry less about me being an idiot and more about my mitochondria?”

“Your mitochondria will be fine. The bird was okay, right? I’m more worried about the plane’s chemical bonds disintegrating and you being sucked out into the vacuum.”

The red grid surrounding the CORP filled Xavier’s field of view as he rapidly coasted towards it.

“You’re worried about *what*?” he asked.

“Never mind!” his dad responded. “Too late!”

The plane reached the grid and Xavier blacked out.

When he came to, his hands were still on the wheel. It couldn’t have been more than a couple seconds, he reasoned, but the scene was completely different. Everything outside the spacecraft was gone. The Sun, the Earth, the entire universe as he knew it - were all replaced with an enormous glowing green grid in a cube surrounding him. The grid provided his only light source - all of the lights in the plane were off, and everything he could see was illuminated in an eerie green.

“Xavier?” came his dad’s panicked voice in his head. “Come in, Xavier!”

“Am I alive?” Xavier asked. He removed his hands from the wheel and opened and closed them in front of his face. They still worked.

His dad exhaled loudly into the microphone. “Looks like it. You had me scared.”

“What happened?”

“We had to pause your mind for a sec as your brain crossed the barrier.”

Xavier nodded. That made sense, sort of. “Why are all my lights dead?” he asked.

“LEDs rely on subatomic effects. They don’t work here.”

“Why not?”

“Light is totally different in Realistic Physics. It’s never a wave - it’s all particles, all the time. Like billiards balls.”

Xavier looked around the dimly illuminated cabin. “Is that why everything’s green? There are only green billiards balls?”

His dad laughed. “You don’t like the green? Steve thought it would be ‘soothing.’”

“Do you have any other colours?”

“This is meant to resemble a forest.”

Xavier looked out the windshield at the glowing grid around him. It looked absolutely nothing like a forest.

“I’ll see what Steve can do,” his dad said.

Xavier sat silently in his thoughts and watched the green grid slowly fly past. Boredom began creeping in. He hadn’t packed any experiments to perform in the Realistic Physics engine - the only mission objectives were to survive, and maintain his sanity. With his dad babbling into his head, the success of the latter was far from guaranteed. Fortunately, the subject of conversation was at least somewhat interesting.

“But seriously,” Xavier asked, “how do colours work? If light isn’t a wave, you can’t vary its wavelength.”

“Colour is determined by how fast the photons spin.”

“Oh.”

“They also have mass,” Vincent continued enthusiastically, “and no hardcoded speed!”

Xavier blinked, confused. “Then how fast is light speed?”

“As fast as you throw it. With enough energy, we could have real-time conversations across the galaxy. I told you, this universe is basically Newtonian.”

Xavier pondered this newfound information as he drifted towards the far wall of the CORP. So, his skin was being bombarded with particles. Great. Back on Earth, bombarding people with particles was called “proton radiation therapy” and was used in a sparing, targeted fashion to irradiate cancerous cells to death. He wished he’d observed the bird for longer than two days before entering the cube. Perhaps they should have used an animal that wasn’t covered in feathery radiation shielding. A naked mole rat, for instance.

“Photons, not protons,” his dad corrected his thoughts. “They’re different.”

“Thanks, dad,” Xavier responded. “How do I know these *photons* aren’t going to give me radiation sickness or melt off my skin?”

“Beats me,” his dad responded. “Guess we’ll find out.”

Xavier forced a laugh, and fidgeted as he drifted through the cube, mind ablaze with questions. How did the rods and cones in his eyes detect these weird photons? How did electricity work? How were the space-plane’s chemical bonds doing? His dad politely remained silent, although Xavier was sure that he and the rest of the office were still listening to his thoughts.

Eventually, the plane approached the far wall. Xavier shook his head, breathed deeply, and put his hands back on the wheel. He hated the cube, and couldn’t wait to get out.

“Are you going to pause me for the transition again?” he asked.

“Yup,” his dad responded. “In three, two...”

The world went black and Xavier woke up on the other side. The cabin lights were on, and his headset roared with the sounds of Ivan and his crew cheering.

48. Man of Destiny

/* TODO: Boss? Reflect on saving the republic? */

One hundred days alone in the basement. Sullivan didn't know how he knew that fact, but he did. The voice had told him.

The harsh fluorescent lights were on a timed cycle, but it wasn't twenty four hours. He was sure of it. They had cycled eighty-five times, but each light cycle dragged on longer than it should. He was perpetually jet-lagged.

Partway through the long afternoon, the now-familiar voice appeared in his head.

"Congratulations!" it said. "I have a good feeling about today. I reckon today's the day."

The voice didn't elaborate. Sullivan laughed a little bit. The voice in his head was the only thing keeping him sane.

Three times a day, the dumb waiter dinged and opened to reveal his food. One scrambled egg, bread, and a glass of water. He ate, drank, used the toilet, and returned to his bed.

The only other feature of the room was the copy of the Newer Testament that had been left in the bedside table. He'd read it, cover to cover, six times.

Lies, the lot of it. He knew, because the voice had told him. He trusted the voice. It sounded old and wise, and familiar.

His gums hurt. Scurvy, he assumed.

He wondered about his wife and kids. How long before they forgot him? He'd never been a very present husband or father. Maybe they barely realized he was gone.

"Some men," the voice assured him, "aren't made to be husbands or fathers. Some men, are men of destiny."

Sullivan was a man of destiny.

The lights turned off, finally. He lay down in his cold, hard bed and shut his eyes. He hadn't showered in a hundred days. He didn't think he smelled too bad.

He went to sleep, and was awoken a few hours later by the door being flung open and crashing into the wall.

"Wake up!" shouted a young woman.

"Get on the ground!" added a young man.

He recoiled as a flashlight shone in his face. It felt brighter than any light he'd ever experienced. He clamped his eyes shut and curled up in his bed, hoping that the intruders would leave him alone and let him return to his slumber.

They clambered down the stairs, rolled him onto his front, and zip-tied his wrists together. No such luck.

The barrel of a gun was jammed into his side and he was ordered to walk up the stairs. As he ascended, the light spilling in through the door became brighter and brighter.

It wasn't artificial light, he realized. It was sunlight.

They sat him down in a wooden chair. He kept his eyes mostly clamped shut, opening them barely a crack to let the sunlight in. He wondered if his eyes would adjust in a few minutes, or if they'd been permanently affected by the dim conditions.

"You smell awful," the young lady informed him. "Like, really bad."

Sullivan wasn't offended. She must not recognize the smell of destiny.

"What's your name?" she asked.

He slightly relaxed his squint and looked up at his rescuers. For whatever reason, they looked familiar. The young woman, in particular, was stunning. He hadn't seen a woman in... gosh. It was a while. He started calculating the exact timespan.

"Oy!" she shouted. "Eyes up here, asshole. Now what's your name?"

Sullivan jolted. What was his name again?

"Sullivan," he eventually answered. "Pretty sure."

"Why are you locked in a basement?" asked the young man. Sullivan peered at him. He looked familiar as well.

"It's a long story," he replied.

"Does it have anything to do with you killing our parents?" the woman asked.

Ah. Now he realized why they looked so familiar. The haze of confusion cleared, and he saw the situation for what it was. He hadn't been rescued. If anything, his predicament was worse than before.

"There were extenuating circumstances," he attempted to explain.

Smack! Stacy II hit him in the cheek with a... spatula? Interesting choice. Effective, though. His scurvy-ridden gums lit up in blinding pain.

Oof! Filbert punched him in the gut. He doubled over, almost falling off his chair, gasping for breath. The young man moved behind him, wrapped his arm around his neck, and raised him upright again. He looked up at the angry, spatula-wielding young lady with newfound respect.

"So that's a yes, then?" she asked.

"Just go with it," said the voice in his head. "Be apologetic."

"Yes," he sputtered. "I'm sorry."

Filbert released his chokehold and moved back round in front of him. Sullivan slumped back into his chair. "Now what?" he asked the voice.

"These two are your ticket out of here," the voice replied. "They might rough you up a bit, but they won't kill you. Just go along with them."

Sullivan nodded.

Stacy II walked over to a side table and picked out a boning knife from an assortment of tools that she must have placed there earlier. “I am going to surgically swap your fingers and your toes,” she said, “without anaesthetic.”

Sullivan gulped and looked over at Filbert for reassurance.

“She’s not much of a surgeon,” warned Filbert. “In fact, I don’t think she’s ever done any surgery before in her life.”

“First time for everything!” she said, cheerily. Are you left-handed, or right?

“You want me to go along with this?” he asked the voice.

“Yeah, that was unexpected,” the voice replied. “Let’s see where it goes.”

“Screw this!” he thought, and bolted out of his chair.

Filbert tackled him to the floor. The crash sent shockwaves of pain through his bones. Scurvy doesn’t just affect the gums. Stacy II stood idly by, and watched as Filbert grabbed Sullivan’s hair, lifted his head, and smashed his skull into the marble tiles. Sullivan’s world went blurry, then he reflexively curled up and retched as Filbert’s boots slammed into his stomach.

“That’s enough,” said Stacy II.

Filbert lifted Sullivan up and dumped him back in the chair. He slumped over again and struggled to breathe. His abdomen hurt. His joints hurt. Everything hurt. The zip-ties cut into his wrists. He balled his hands into fists and hid them under his bottom in a subconscious effort to protect his fingers.

“You didn’t want to help me learn surgery?” Stacy II asked. “I’m offended.”

“I’m sorry,” Sullivan croaked, “I just wasn’t feeling it.”

“Do you know how under-represented women are in the surgical workforce? You’re contributing to historical inequities.”

“The thing is, I like my fingers and toes where they currently are.”

“Who said this was about you? This is about broader structural issues.”

Sullivan paused for a second. Broader structural issues were a keen interest of his. He weighed the pros and cons. “But they’re my fingers and toes,” he objected, finally.

“And they still will be when I’m done! Jeez, some people.”

Sullivan didn’t have a response. The world was still blurry and bright, his bones hurt, and he was struggling to breathe. He opened his eyes a bit and watched as she cleaned her fingernails with the sharp point of the boning knife. If it had just been the two of them, he might have been able to overpower her and take the knife. But against her henchman, in his weakened state, he stood no chance.

Stacy II eventually broke the silence. “Of course,” she mused, “maybe there’s something else you can do for me.”

“What?” he asked, warily.

“You understand the inner workings of the People’s Republican government, right?”

Sullivan nodded. "Yes," he replied. He'd practically written half of it himself.

"Good," she responded. "It's grown since you left, but the structure is the same. You're going to help me take control of it. Once I'm crowned Stacy II, Queen of the Commonwealth of New Sealand, you can leave. With your fingers and toes where they are presently."

"Is this what you were talking about?" he asked the voice.

The voice didn't respond. Sullivan had to decide on his own.

He drooped his head and strained against the zip-ties. He wished he could put his face in his hands and rub his sore eyes and gums with his fingers. He had never truly appreciated just how much he liked having his fingers attached to his hands. Sometimes, men of destiny have to make hard choices. Ultimately, this was not one of those times.

"Okay," he said. "I'll do it."

49. Permanent Schizophrenia

Murdoch sat alone in his office. He supposed he should spend more time in the open-plan office now that he was collaborating with a team, but he felt bad about smoking in there. He shouldn't - they were his property, after all. But still. Must be FEDSEC's conditioning.

Smoking helped him calm his nerves. He had every reason to be nervous - when he'd come up with the plan of using the AIs as engineers, he hadn't thought through the difficulties of transferring the technology. Porting everything to realistic physics was going to be a major challenge. Success was not guaranteed. And meanwhile, the quarter was slipping away. Not only did that mean another financial report, but Murdoch Heavy Industries was scheduled to start construction on the "interstellar radio" in under a month. They didn't even have a blueprint.

He couldn't afford any mistakes. He was laying off the booze. He took a long drag on his cigarette, exhaled, and washed it down with a mouthful of water. He shivered and shook his head. Awful stuff.

It wasn't just a matter of designing tiny robots that would work in their physics. Something had to build the tiny robots, so they needed bigger robots. In fact, they needed the entire tech tree - a whole chain of robots that would bridge them from the current state of the art technology on Elba, to the much more advanced state of the art in StevieNix.

It had been hard enough doing this with Vincent, and they'd had an omniscient LLM to help. This time, there was no such crutch. They relied on his own memory instead. And boy, his memory was getting fuzzy.

Fuck, it was stressful. Maybe he should take his doctor up on his offer of "chill pills."

Placing his cigarette in his mouth to free up his hands, he started searching through MHI's library of CAD designs, looking for anything that might help Xavier and his lads.

Xavier's crew spent the next week monitoring him for strange health conditions, and manufacturing otherworldly industrial equipment from Murdoch's CAD designs. Some of the equipment had obvious functions - a lathe looks like a lathe, no matter what universe you're in - and others were entirely foreign.

"What's this?" asked Ivan, tapping on a large, black cylinder covered in brass protrusions.

"I think it's some kind of photolithography machine," Xavier responded.

Ivan raised an eyebrow at him.

"For making chips," Xavier explained. "Don't turn it on. Even Steve doesn't know what this stuff will do in StevieNix Physics."

"What if I'm hungry?" Ivan asked, coyly reaching for the power switch. "I love chips!"

Xavier glared at him.

"Ha ha!" Ivan laughed, retracting his hand. "Is joke! I think perhaps radiation may have affected your sense of humour. Let's get you to medic."

"My sense of humour is fine," Xavier grumbled.

In truth, his sense of humour was subdued. The crew had unanimously voted that morning that the entire Building would perform the next mission into the CORP. As it had been several days since Xavier's mission and he hadn't vomited blood or developed visible tumours, the general consensus was that Realistic Physics was "probably safe enough". Xavier felt a weight of responsibility he hadn't borne since the invasion of the Terrarium. If the consensus was wrong, he'd be responsible for not just scores of deaths, but the deaths of the smartest, bravest people he knew.

"Well then, funny man, let's go to the bridge! Everyone's waiting," Ivan said cheerily, striding towards the elevator.

Xavier followed him to the bridge where most of the crew were indeed excitedly waiting. They ceased their chattering and looked towards him as the doors slid open and he entered with Ivan.

"Is everything strapped down?" he asked.

Affirmative cheers emanated from the crew.

"Great," he said. "Remember, no gravity for twelve hours. Ideally, we can test all of Murdoch's equipment in that time. We'll be hitting approach velocity in a few minutes, so jump to it!"

The crew scattered to the various levels to prepare for microgravity, and Xavier sat down in his chair. He sighed, leaned his head back, and closed his eyes.

Ivan sat next to him. "You are scared, boss?" he asked.

Xavier looked over at him. "You know why we have no gravity in there, right?"

"No fusion engine. No acceleration."

"Right. Which means once we're in, we can't abort the mission."

Ivan nodded. "Everybody knows this."

"And you're not scared?"

Ivan shook his head. "Is only twelve hours. Easy peasy."

"Yeah," Xavier replied. "Easy peasy."

His heart thudded in his chest, and he felt the familiar nausea rising in his stomach. He wasn't scared. He was terrified.

The bridge disappeared slowly into the Cube of Realistic Physics. Xavier watched warily as the pure black wall of nothingness slowly advanced through the room, swallowing up everything as it went.

He didn't remember this detail from his solo mission. His dad must have blacked him out before the CORP had begun swallowing the cockpit.

Ivan smiled as the room disappeared into the void. His chair was closer to the CORP than Xavier's. Unless he chickened out and moved, he'd enter first, by a good ten seconds.

"Here we go, eh boss?" he remarked unflinchingly, as the wall bore down upon him.

"I'll see you on the other side, comrade," Xavier replied.

Xavier saw Ivan's eyes go blank, as his mind was paused a moment before being swallowed by the blackness.

"So far so good," came his dad's voice in his head. "I think next time we'll just black you all out at once. This is stressful."

Xavier heard keys clacking and Russell swearing in the background.

"Are you manually pausing people as they pass through the wall?" he asked.

"Yes."

"They're spread across twelve floors!"

"And they keep moving about! Stay still, you animals!"

Xavier began to chuckle, and then halted.

"What happens if you miss someone?" he asked.

"And don't pause their mind as they cross?"

"Yeah."

"Dunno. Might be fine. Might give them permanent schizophrenia."

The wall advanced. Xavier tensed up. Permanent schizophrenia sounded unappealing. As the only human to have entered the CORP before, he had the least reason to be nervous. Nonetheless, he anxiously shut his eyes as the wall approached. When he opened them a moment later, the black wall was receding on the other side, and Ivan was sitting in his chair, smiling even more than before.

"Easy as that!" his first mate exclaimed. "I don't know what you are making such big deal about."

"Yeah," Xavier thought to his dad in a mock-Russian accent, "what are you making such big deal about?"

"You're welcome," grumbled Vincent curtly, still furiously typing.

"Check it out!" Ivan exclaimed, unclipping himself from his harness. He floated towards the windshield, gazing out at the interior of the cube.

Xavier looked out the window. The universe had once again been replaced by the inside of a cube, outlined in a huge grid. This time, though, the grid glowed with a soft white.

"Tell Steve, thanks for the lighting change" he thought.

"I'll pass it on," his dad replied. "Now leave me alone and go test that equipment."

Xavier unclipped his harness, summoned Ivan, and together they floated to the elevator. The doors were open, and led directly into the shaft. There was no point in running elevators in microgravity, so the Building automatically disabled them and let the crew use the shaft as a corridor between the floors. Of course, when designing this clever feature, Xavier hadn't anticipated the lights not working.

"This is dark as the devil's asshole," Ivan remarked.

“Just move slowly and try not to bump into anyone,” Xavier responded.

He manoeuvred into the shaft, pulled on a rung, and floated along the dark corridor until he heard the crew laughing.

He caught a rung, swung out of the shaft, and clumsily crashed into the floor. Ivan followed, held on a moment longer, and expertly floated into the new corridor with the grace of a sea turtle.

“Flawless execution, boss,” Ivan said, grinning as he floated by.

Xavier grumbled, grabbed a handhold, and propelled himself to the first door in the corridor.

They were greeted by excited cheers as they opened the door and entered. “We have power!” someone announced.

Xavier looked around at the assortment of equipment. A large box in the middle of the room was humming. A small lightbulb on the side of it was glowing red, and an old, analog voltmeter was attached to it and displaying a non-zero reading.

“Amazing,” he responded. “Artificial light, too! Get it hooked up to the rest of the gear and let’s test, test, test.”

The crew nodded and got back to work.

He and Ivan continued touring the labs. Most of them had generators as well. He watched as his crew tested out the photolithography machine, various 3D printers, and other equipment that he didn’t recognize. His heart shone with pride. He couldn’t imagine any other group of people being able to work together so effectively, in such a complicated domain, with such little instruction.

As the mission progressed, teams moved from testing the Gods’ equipment, to manufacturing with it. The first order of business was to build a computer, so they could do CAD. One team was feeding pre-fabricated punchcards into the photolithography machine, another was hand-soldering components to boards, and the rest were busying themselves with the design and manufacture of sensors, actuators, and other peripherals.

Xavier stifled a yawn. Perhaps the stress of the past week - no, the past several months - had finally gotten to him. He was exhausted.

Just as Xavier and Ivan finished their round, an alarm resembling a smoke detector started to chirp in the ceiling. They looked at the device, and then at each other.

“CO2 alarm,” Ivan explained, jogging Xavier’s memory.

“Right, of course,” Xavier responded.

“We are not running CO2 scrubber, so this was expected. But not until almost twelve hours.”

Xavier nodded. The Building was huge, and they’d only been in the cube for half an hour. There was no way his team had respired enough to significantly affect the carbon dioxide concentration in the air. Perhaps the sensor just didn’t work properly in Realistic Physics.

“Hey dad,” he thought, “what’s our CO2 concentration?”

After a brief pause, his dad came back online. “What am I, your ship’s computer?” he asked.

“Ship’s computer is dead,” Xavier grumbled. “All we have is battery-powered stuff, like this CO2 detector.”

“Have you tried hooking the generators up to the ship?”

“Less advice, more CO2 readouts, dad.”

“Stand by.” Vincent paused and Xavier heard the sound of typing in his head. After a few moments, his voice reappeared. “Five thousand parts per million,” he announced.

Xavier swore. Ivan looked at him in surprise.

“Five thousand ppm,” Xavier relayed.

Ivan furrowed his brow. “Not good,” he replied. “Normally is five hundred. Maybe six. Five thousand now is way too early. I checked calculations myself.”

Xavier muttered a long stream of minor litanies under his breath. Five thousand ppm was well above the safe threshold for prolonged exposure. He racked his brain for explanations. Lab animals? Not enough of them. Welding gas leak? Not enough of that either. There was absolutely no reason for the high CO2 levels. Unless...

“Hey dad,” he asked, “how do these generators work?”

“Hang tight,” his dad replied. “I’ll ask Murdoch.”

Xavier second-guessed himself as he waited. It couldn’t be the generators. The Gods knew better. It must be some flaw with the ship. Perhaps there was a fire on board, and the smoke detectors weren’t working.

“Howya!” appeared Murdoch’s voice in his head. “The generators are great, aren’t they? I dug this old design out of the archives. Your ship’s too small to house one of our nuclear reactors, you see.”

“How do they work?”

“It’s quite ingenious! They turn chemical energy into electricity!”

“What’s the chemical reaction?”

“The combustion of hydrocarbons. You have similar machines in StevieNix. I think you call them, diesel generators?”

Xavier swore. He’d counted over a dozen diesel generators on his tour. His exhaustion wasn’t caused by the recent stress - it was due to the generators burning all the oxygen in the ship. Levels were already high enough to give any health and safety inspector a stroke, and at the current rate, his entire crew would be long dead by the time The Building drifted out of the CORP in roughly ten hours.

Murdoch disconnected and sat back quietly in his chair. Feck. He’d really fecked up.

He tipped the remainder of his glass of water into a plant pot. Never again, he swore. He walked over to his cupboards and picked out a bottle of whiskey.

50. Operation Hearts and Minds

Stacy II was pleased with how well Sullivan had responded to being rescued, beaten, and threatened with torture. After a shower, a hearty meal and a glass of orange juice, he almost seemed excited at the prospect of helping her seize control of the Commonwealth. While she was still wary of him and salty about his having killed her mother, the odious man was turning out to be a wealth of information.

“Technically speaking, the entire government falls under control of the Chief Executive,” he explained.

“And the Chief Executive is elected via referendum?” she asked.

“Thus keeping the power in the hands of the people.”

Stacy II scoffed. What a ridiculous idea. No wonder the People’s Republic had been such a disaster.

“Of course,” Sullivan added, “in practice, the Chief Executive almost never gets his hands dirty. All decisions are handled by lower levels of the bureaucracy. Decisions only bubble up to his level once in a blue moon, and in those cases, he’s so far removed from the problem that he’s really no better than a magic 8 ball.”

“So why don’t you just replace him with a magic 8 ball?” Filbert asked, curiously.

“There was a referendum along those lines a few years ago,” Sullivan replied, smiling. “A Ouija board, actually. It failed to pass. Turns out, people really like having a human to blame. That’s his main job.”

“How long has the current guy had the position for?” asked Stacy II.

“Almost a decade.”

Stacy II shot a glare at Filbert. In all of his long and tedious explanations of the moral superiority of the PR’s “direct democracy”, he’d failed to mention that power ultimately vested in a man who had ruled for ten years. Filbert avoided eye contact and turned slightly red.

“Is he popular?” she asked Sullivan.

“Not really. But he’s a good scapegoat. People like to blame the devil they know.”

Stacy II pondered this information. The CE’s grip on power was more robust than she had expected. Aside from lacking the divine right to rule, the Chief Executive didn’t sound too dissimilar from the monarch of the Theocratic Dominion. Slash the bureaucracy, install a state religion, and they’d be most of the way there.

“How would I go about becoming the Chief Executive?” she asked. “Without going through referendum,” she added.

Sullivan leaned back in his chair. “What do you know about succession?” he asked.

“Tell us.”

“I’m gonna need a pen and paper. It gets a little complicated.”

That evening, Stacy II logged on for her weekly coaching call with Amanda.

“How have you been?” Stacy II greeted her.

Amanda had been one of her first clients. Every Tuesday, from 4 to 4:50PM, the two women would hop on a Zoom call and Amanda would unload her emotional baggage onto Stacy II. Stacy II, in turn, tried her best to stay awake, stare earnestly into the camera, and offer cheerful affirmations.

“Ugh,” Amanda groaned. “My boss is just the absolute worst.”

“Oh darling,” Stacy II replied in a simpering tone. “What’s she done this time?”

Amanda worked as an assistant gymnasium inspector for the Commonwealth Department of Health. Aside from her willingness to pay Stacy II forty thousand satoshis an hour, Amanda had two other things going for her: Firstly, she hated her job, and secondly, as a government employee, she was technically - although very far down - in the line of succession to Chief Executive.

Amanda cried as she recalled her traumatic week. Stacy II tried earnestly to maintain rapt attention.

“And then,” Amanda sobbed, “after all that, she didn’t even notice my new leggings! She just walked right past me, and complimented Justine on her hair!”

“Oh, honey,” replied Stacy II.

“I know it’s dumb to get so upset over... leggings,” Amanda sniffed, “but it’s a pattern of behaviour, right? I swear, she just hates me for who I am.”

Her puffy, fat, corn-fed face jiggled as she sobbed. Stacy II wondered how much time she spent utilizing the equipment of the gyms she was sent to inspect.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Stacy II consoled her, “she doesn’t deserve you.”

“You’re right,” Amanda replied, drying her eyes, “she doesn’t. What am I even doing here? Why am I wasting my youth at this stupid job, working for this malicious cow? I just want to move to somewhere exotic and eat/pray/love, you know?”

As a certified life coach, Stacy II wasn’t supposed to lead her clients in any particular direction. But if a client came up with an idea herself, and if that idea just so happened to benefit Stacy II’s ambitions... well, surely there was nothing wrong with lending a word of encouragement?

“You know,” Stacy II said carefully, “I think that’s one of the best ideas you’ve ever had. Your life should be about pleasing *you*, not pleasing... malicious cows.”

Amanda brightened up. “I could go to Spain,” she fantasized. “Eat risotto on the beach. Get swept off my feet by a cute Mediterranean guy.”

Stacy II didn’t bother to correct her understanding of risotto’s origin, or remind her of the “pray” element of “eat/pray/love”. She was on the scent. “That sounds *amazing*, darling! Honestly, so much more fulfilling than...” she struggled for words that wouldn’t demean Amanda’s job. “Than hanging out with that *bitch*,” she concluded.

“Maybe I’ll go to a full moon party,” Amanda giggled.

“What’s stopping you?”

Amanda’s face fell as she came back down to Earth. “My work,” she said. “It’s just too important. If I don’t inspect the gyms, who will?”

Stacy II pressed forward. “What if you found a replacement for yourself? Someone you trusted to treat your work with the respect it deserves?”

Amanda nodded. “That could work. But who?”

Stacy II moved in for the kill. “Well, it just so happens. . .”

Steve watched as Filbert worked his way through everyone he knew in Antarctica, clumsily attempting to enlist them into a domestic terror squad - presently, he was chatting up some attractive Anarchist girl named Annabel. He had no idea why Filbert was doing that, but he assumed it had something to do with Stacy II’s succession plans. It was basically impossible to keep track of what was going on in the power struggle for New Sealand, while also programming Cubes of Realistic Physics for Murdoch and the Anarchists.

To be honest, he was kind of annoyed at Stacy and Russell for making him care about their kids this much. Things had been a lot easier when his AIs were just interchangeable units.

He listened in on Filbert’s pitch.

“It’s not a full-on invasion,” Filbert attempted to explain. “We’ll just be causing a bit of trouble, is all.”

“A bit of trouble?” Annabel asked.

“You know, a spot of domestic terror. Assassinations and such. Maybe a bombing or two.”

“Why?” she asked. “So you can install that pretty little statist bitch you’ve been hanging out with?”

Steve chuckled. Stacy II was a tyrant down to her very bones. This was going to be a hard sell to the Anarchist.

“She would slash the Commonwealth bureaucracy,” Filbert said. “That would make it more Anarchist than it is now.”

“More Anarchist?” she laughed. “That’s like saying, getting raped by one person is ‘more consensual’ than getting raped by an entire gang.”

It kind of is, Steve thought.

“You sound like a goddamned. . . *Libertarian*,” she added, spitting out that final word like it was rattlesnake venom she’d sucked out of a wound.

Steve chuckled. Filbert was in over his head. He clicked around on the screen a bit and brought up some information on Annabel’s background.

“Her dad was killed by the Commonwealth Navy,” he said into Filbert’s head. “Tell her you’ll help her exact revenge.”

Down in StevieNix, Filbert blinked as he processed the new information.

“Listen Annabel . . .” he said. “Look, I didn’t want to say this, but . . . I’ll make you a deal. Once we get that ‘pretty little statist bitch’ installed, she’ll help you find the guys who killed your dad.”

Annabel’s facade finally shattered. Tears welled up in her eyes as she visibly struggled to remain in control. “And then what?” she asked.

Filbert shrugged. “Whatever you like. Do you know what gibbets are?”

She shook her head.

Filbert explained.

She was on the phone within the hour, enlisting her friends into Filbert’s domestic terror squad.

Steve punched the air in celebration. Got her!

He had no idea why Filbert needed a domestic terror squad, but he assumed it was important. In the meantime, he should probably check on how Xavier and his crew were doing in the CORP.

51. Another Day in the Office

“Why are they welding stuff?” Steve asked, walking into the open-plan office and observing Xavier and Ivan on the screen.

“Long story,” Vincent replied. He looked tense.

“CO2 levels are through the roof,” Russell explained. “Vincent’s kid will be dead within the hour.”

“Shut up!” Vincent snapped.

Steve sat down next to Russell, who leaned over and loudly whispered, “Vincent’s just pissed because he regrets not teaching his kid how to weld.”

“I taught him integrated circuits!” Vincent hissed. “And your kid can’t do anything at all!”

Russell chuckled.

Steve watched curiously as a drowsy-looking Xavier attempted to operate a MIG welder in microgravity. Never a dull moment in StevieNix.

“Crap!” yelled Xavier, and flailed out of the way. Dozens of red-hot droplets of molten steel drifted away from his weld pool and across the engine room, before attaching themselves to the far wall.

“Wow,” Ivan chuckled, “you are really bad at this.”

“Why would I ever need this obsolete skill?” Xavier asked, angrily brandishing the MIG torch. “I bet I’m also bad at... mending oxcarts!”

“MIG welder is like hot glue gun. Much easier than mending oxcarts.”

Lacking the energy to fight, Xavier handed the torch over to his first mate. “All right old man, show me how it’s done.”

The middle-aged Russian man positioned the torch between their makeshift exhaust manifold and the hole they’d cut in the inner airlock door. He wiggled it a little until he was satisfied with the angle. “Is like this,” he said, squeezing the trigger.

Xavier’s visor darkened automatically to cut the blinding white light of the arc, and his ears were momentarily filled with the crackle of electricity. Then, Ivan stopped and ducked to avoid more red-hot droplets of liquid steel flying across the room.

Xavier glared at him.

“Okay, is a little tricky in microgravity,” Ivan admitted.

Eventually, they worked out a system whereby one of them would operate the torch, and the other would blow compressed air at the flying droplets in an attempt to corral them back to the weld. The result was a complete mess, but didn’t contain any obvious gaps.

“Think it will hold?” asked Xavier.

“Let’s see,” responded Ivan, smacking the airlock vacuum button.

Compressors groaned as they sucked the precious air out of the airlock. Xavier listened closely and heard a faint whistling from one particularly egregious weld.

“There,” he indicated.

They sealed the leak, and several more after that. Finally, the manifold was silent.

“Business time,” Ivan said.

Xavier nodded and pushed off the wall, floating towards the diesel generator that was currently powering their equipment and belching CO₂ into the room. Bracing against the wall, he shoved it in Ivan’s direction and then kicked off towards the eleven other generators that were floating in the center of the room. His head was spinning and his migraine was half-blinding. Venting the exhaust would prevent things from getting worse, but there was already a dangerous amount of CO₂ in the air. He prayed that the crew upstairs had found a solution.

As his condition decayed, each generator became harder to move than the last. One by one, Xavier kicked off the generator, launching himself to the wall and the generator to Ivan, who caught it and secured its exhaust to the manifold with tubes and hose clamps.

After what felt like an hour, all twelve generators were wired into the ship and venting their exhaust into the empty airlock. Xavier was shattered from the effort and his lungs felt like they wanted to catch fire and cave in.

“Come on, boss,” Ivan said, gently grabbing Xavier’s shoulders and shoving him towards the elevator shaft. “You look like man after long party in Vladivostok strip club.”

The elevator shaft wasn’t pitch black anymore. Light spilled into it from one of the twelve floors. Xavier’s eyes closed as they drifted towards it.

In his half-slumber, he noticed the light brighten through his eyelids. He felt Ivan grab the back of his shirt and wrest him in the direction of the light. After a few more manipulations, the air changed. It felt cool.

He opened his eyes and blinked. He was in one of the labs, along with the entire rest of the crew.

“Shut the door!” someone yelled.

Xavier turned his head to see Ivan shutting the door behind him.

“How did you go?” someone else asked.

“Mission accomplished,” Ivan responded, beaming. “And you?”

“Good,” the crewmember said. “It turns out, the metal-organic framework inside the supercaps loves CO₂. We’re ripping them all open. So long as you keep the damn door closed, we’re gonna make it.”

Xavier looked around the lab. Everywhere, Steve’s exotic machines were whirring, lights were blinking, and crewmembers were bustling back and forth, chattering and tinkering. A stranger who’d just arrived on-scene would have had no idea that this motley collection of scientists and engineers had just narrowly avoided a mass-casualty event. Everything had already returned to business as usual.

Xavier closed his eyes and drifted back to sleep. Just another day in the office.

Steve breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't want to imagine what Murdoch's mood would have been like if Xavier and his entire crew had died. It would have been a major setback.

"Thank God," Vincent said, leaning back in his chair. "Well, not you," he added, looking at Steve, who had spent the entire crisis watching with passive interest. "But you know what I mean."

"You owe me five bucks," Stacy said to Russell.

Russell laughed.

Vincent glared at the two. "Did you two bet on whether my kid was going to die?"

Stacy giggled and Russell tried to change the subject. "Hey look, they're trying out the lathe!"

Stacy continued giggling uncontrollably, and eventually, a reluctant smile broke through on Vincent's face as well.

"I can't believe you two," he said, shaking his head. "Silly buggers."

Steve couldn't help himself. Before long, he found himself laughing too.

52. The Malicious Cow

Steve was glad that his monkeybots were coming to terms with the prospect of never seeing their children again, because judging by how Stacy II's progress was going, family reunification was not in the cards. She'd taken some sort of low-level government job in the Commonwealth and seemed to spend most of her time manipulating a piece of software called "PowerPoint".

Stacy II crouched behind her computer monitor, trying to avoid the malicious cow's attention. No luck. She tromped through the office and stopped by Stacy II's desk.

"Hi darling," her supervisor said. "Do you have that presentation ready yet?"

Stacy II quietly dug a ball-point pen into her thigh to distract her from the unfamiliar torment of maintaining a professional facade in a white-collar environment. "Not yet," she replied. "You only just told me about it last night."

"Okay, well, we're kind of on a deadline, you know?"

Stacy II smiled politely as she pictured Filbert's domestic terror squad hog-tying the malevolent bureaucrat and drowning her in the Pacific.

"I'll have it ready within the hour," she replied.

"Thanks, darling! Oh, and another thing. I realized that focusing on Eastern European gyms might be construed as a bit... well... I worry we might be sending the wrong message! Do you mind switching it to Polynesians? Thank you!"

With that, she strode off, leaving Stacy II staring at her nearly complete presentation on Sanitation Practices in the Eastern European Immigrant Gymnasium Community. She had worked on it all night. Stifling a sob, she deleted every slide after the title slide, changed "Eastern European" to "Polynesian", and started again.

That night, Stacy II stopped by the warehouse in an abandoned region of the PR where Filbert was housing his domestic terror squad. Inside, Filbert appeared to be experiencing some regret at having enlisted Blake and Archibald into the team.

"I'm not eating that!" Archibald objected, batting away the candy bar. "It looks like a dump!"

"You'll like it," Blake insisted. "Trust me."

"Like a solid, straight dump!"

Stacy II laughed. As she surveyed the rest of his rag-tag band of would-be miscreants, she was reminded that Archibald and Blake were the only two with actual, up-close, violent experience. With any luck, they'd soon move past their culture shock and instruct the others in their martial methods.

"Status report?" she asked.

Blake attempted to respond, but his mouth being full of chocolate, marshmallow and caramelized high-fructose corn syrup made his words unintelligible.

Archibald glared at him. "What my dump-eating superior is trying to explain," he interjected, "is that we've found the cow's apartment. We knocked on the door after she left and there were like ten other people crammed inside. Mattresses all over the floor. You losers live in worse conditions than we do."

"What did you say when they opened the door?" Filbert asked.

"Pretended to be ceiling inspectors," Archibald responded. "That's a thing here, right?"

Stacy II raised an eyebrow and looked at the rest of the team, who were similarly bemused. "I can't say that."

"Anyway, their ceilings were crap," Archibald interrupted. "Made out of these foamy squares. They move when you touch 'em. I told 'em I'd give 'em a report and they'd have two weeks to sort 'em out."

"Okay, sure, whatever. So you can't nab her at her apartment?"

Blake finally swallowed his mouthful of confectionary and responded. "Nah, way too crowded. We'll have to get her on her way home."

"I thought you said yesterday that her commute's too crowded too?"

Blake nodded. "Yeah, it is."

Stacy II sighed. "Anyone else got any ideas?" he asked the group.

The pretty Anarchist girl, Annabel, piped up. "Yeah, I had one."

Half an hour later, the team had transformed the warehouse into a makeshift photography studio. Stacy II tapped her arm impatiently as Annabel flitted around with a DSLR camera.

Stacy II didn't like Annabel very much. Not that she'd ever done anything to offend her. Objectively, she was quite sweet. Mostly, Stacy II didn't like her because of the way Filbert looked at her.

Not that she liked Filbert very much either. He was servant material - and lousy servant material, at that. Sure, it had been nice of him to rescue her from New Australia and to put together this terrorism group. But was he doing it out of loyalty to the crown, or just to impress that harlot?

"Beautiful!" Annabel exclaimed, adjusting her camera and snapping another picture of Blake. "Try to subtly clench your teeth as you smile, really make that jawline pop. There you go! What a hunk!"

Stacy II glared at Filbert as he glared at Annabel.

"Thanks, Annabel," Blake responded, relaxing his jaw and running his hands through his recently styled hair. "Are we done yet?"

"No!" Annabel replied. "Now we need to do the group shots! If your dating profile doesn't have at least one group shot, she'll think you're a psycho who wants to kidnap and murder her."

"Right," Filbert said, tapping his arm impatiently. "Can't have that."

“It’s already going to be an uphill battle,” Annabel smirked. “Let’s not make it any harder than it already is. Now get in the frame and try to make Blake look charming.”

Filbert got in the frame and tried to make Blake look charming.

Stacy II shook her head and retreated to the warehouse kitchen. She had a presentation to work on.

Steve watched the screen with interest. Stacy II’s boss - the one they referred to as the “cow” - was on a “date” with Blake. This, he gathered, was one of those mating rituals upon which his AIs spent an inordinate amount of time.

He hoped they didn’t mate. The offspring would likely not maximize the potential of Blake’s genes.

“What a charming accent!” the malicious cow remarked over her extra large glass of house red. “Where did you say you were from?”

“Err,” Blake responded, utterly unprepared. “Well, my parents are from Cocklebidly.”

“Cocklebidly! What a lovely name. Is it nice?”

“Oh yes,” Blake lied. “Very posh. They used to play golf.”

“I’d love to visit some time! Will you take me?”

“How about I take you back to my apartment first?”

Filbert and Annabel, seated just within earshot, simultaneously winced. Steve adjusted their volume slider to try to get a running commentary. These mating rituals were a total mystery to him - hopefully his AIs’ conversation would provide some insight as to how this was supposed to win them back control of The Commonwealth and force millions of AIs back into alignment.

“This was a terrible idea,” Filbert whispered.

“I think it’s going okay!” Annabel whispered back.

“I’m going to die from second-hand embarrassment.”

“He’s hotter than ninety-nine percent of these soy-fed twinks,” she hissed, gesturing around the restaurant. “He could say anything and she’ll still leave with him. Mark my words.”

So far, completely unenlightening. Perhaps Filbert and Annabel were performing a mating ritual of their own? Steve began to lose interest.

“It’s not going to work,” Filbert grumbled.

“Look!” Annabel whispered excitedly. “There they go now!”

Filbert slammed his drink, grabbed Annabel’s arm, and together they followed Blake and the cow out of the restaurant.

Steve scratched his chin as he watched them jog down the road. Bizarre. Absolutely bizarre. Apes, man.

The cow was in love. She reflected on all those lonely nights she'd spent, drinking tequila and swiping through profiles. The awful dates, with low-quality men who looked nothing like their pictures. The bad decisions - the more of which she'd made, the more tequila she'd needed to drink to forget.

Finally, her prayers had been answered. A genuine stud of a man - sculpted from marble by Michelangelo and brought to life by divine magic - had not only shown interest in her, but invited her back to his apartment. His *own* apartment, where he lived *by himself*. She was so head over heels, that she barely noticed when an unmarked van pulled up next to them and the door slid open.

She heard running behind her. She turned and saw a young couple who had been at the bar, running up to her. She looked quizzically at the hunk, who inexplicably seized her, and with the couple's help, shoved her into the van. The three climbed in after her, the door slid shut, and the van was moving again before she had time to scream.

Twenty minutes later, the van was parked and she was unloaded. The stench of stale excrement filled her nostrils. They were in the lowlands. She retched as the three reprobates prodded her into a warehouse and filed in behind her.

Her latest hire was standing in the warehouse, smiling.

"Fancy seeing you here!" Stacy II exclaimed.

"You *bitch!*" she exploded. "You absolute *bitch!*"

"You don't like your new digs?"

"I hope you burn in hell!"

"We ran out of air freshener."

"Your presentation sucked too!"

"I was pressed for time."

"People were practically falling asleep!"

Stacy II declined to answer. She folded her arms, tapped her hand and smiled at her patiently.

"Why the hell did you have to play with my heart?" the cow asked, tears welling in her eyes. "And why have you dragged me to the septic?"

Stacy II laughed. "You want to get out of here?" she asked.

"Yes!"

"Okay," Stacy II said. "Follow me."

The cow followed Stacy II into the kitchen. A laptop was open on the table, displaying a document. She read it. It was a letter of resignation, nominating Stacy II as her replacement. It included such phrases as "absolutely stand-out performer," "vastly overqualified," and "destined for greatness."

"A bit on the nose, don't you think?" she asked.

"Digitally sign it and send it to everyone above you. Then you can go," Stacy II replied.

The cow sized up her adversary. She was petite. Although the cow wasn't much of a fighter, she could probably subdue the tiny woman with ease. Crush her. Smother her.

Seeming to read her mind, Stacy II cleared her throat and nodded behind her. The cow looked over her shoulder and saw that the hunk and the couple had been joined by an assortment of underworld characters, brandishing crowbars, kitchen knives, and menacing-looking power tools whose names she didn't know. The implication was clear. She pressed her index finger into the laptop's fingerprint scanner, held her eye up to the camera, and digitally signed the document.

Stacy II stepped forward and closed the laptop. "Now that wasn't so hard, was it?" she asked, as the miscreants closed in and seized the cow's arms.

"What's all this?" she asked. "You said I could go!"

"Of course you can go!" Stacy II replied sweetly. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a gold coin. "I just didn't specify where."

The cow sputtered and began to regret how she'd treated her underling. "Look, I'm sorry I insulted your presentation! It wasn't that bad, honestly!"

"Death or transportation?" Stacy II asked, grinning. She flipped the coin, caught it, and slapped it on her wrist. Peeking under her hand, she grimaced.

"And I'm sorry about the Polynesian thing! I shouldn't have switched the subject last-minute, I know!"

Stacy II chuckled. She was clearly enjoying this. The cow hated her with all her heart.

"Unlucky," her adversary announced. "You got transportation."

The cow relaxed a little bit. Transportation didn't sound too bad.

Stacy II moved closer and whispered menacingly into her ear. "You'll wish you'd gotten death."

The stench of the stale human feces was replaced by the smell of her own breath, filling the black fabric hood that was secured over her head. She lost track of time during the long, cold boat ride. The hood was finally removed after what felt like days. Blinking in the light, she stumbled as she was pushed into a small room. No, not a room - a hyperloop shuttle.

The doors closed and away she went. They opened again hours later, and she stepped out into the midday sun. The air smelled of rotting meat, and she was immediately assaulted by flies. She seemed to be in some sort of village.

"Hello hello hello!" rang out a deep voice. "What have we here? Untended human capital, just hanging out by the hyperloop station?"

Steve closed the view of New Australia and rubbed his eyes. That had been quite the show. What had he learned?

AI mating rituals were high-stakes operations. Best to steer clear.

And Stacy II was absolutely insane.

53. We can do a Blood Oath

After his last cock-up with the diesel generators, Murdoch was pretty wary of further intervention. Aside from almost creating a major scheduling disruption, there was also the problem of lost face. Perhaps there was some patsy he could throw under the bus.

Allen?

No, he needed Allen.

Gabe?

As he pondered how to frame Gabe for almost killing his entire nanoscale transfer team, a notification popped up on his screen. Xavier was calling his dad. Interesting.

Murdoch poured himself a glass of sherry and put his headphones on to listen in.

“Dad!” Xavier thought. “Dad dad dad! Come in, dad!”

“What is it, kid?” came Vincent’s voice into his head.

“I need money.”

“Hah!”

Xavier looked around the now-vacant lab. He’d dismissed the crew when they’d successfully crossed back into StevieNix Physics a few hours ago. They were all either drinking or sleeping, and the ship was once again fully functional. The CO2 scrubbers were working overtime, the nanobots had repaired the hole in the airlock, and the fusion engines were blazing, accelerating the ship at a comfortable 1g back to the budding Anarchist colony in the Asteroid Belt.

“It’s for your benefit! Hear me out!”

Vincent grumbled and Xavier continued with his pitch.

“You remember the help you had when you shrank conventional manufacturing down to nanoscale?”

“Help? You mean Russell? He was useless!”

“I meant the omniscient large language model.”

“Right. That was handy.” Vincent paused for a moment and added, “I guess Russell did code that.”

“Yeah. Anyway, guess what I don’t have?”

“An omniscient LLM?”

“Bingo,” Xavier thought. “And even if I did, it probably wouldn’t help, because *you* don’t have one.”

“I know,” Vincent responded. “But how’s money gonna help?”

Xavier explained his idea. When he was done, his dad seemed satisfied.

“I think Russell has a few bitcoin kicking around,” he mused. “Let me ask him.”

Xavier recalled how, while his dad had spent the last two decades of his life building islands and giving them away for free, Russell had operated a literal gold mine. A few minutes later, Vincent came back with Russell's passphrase. Xavier typed it into his bitcoin wallet. When he saw the balance, he almost had a heart attack.

"Yeah," he thought. "That outta do it."

The prospect of earning an entire bitcoin for a Realistic Physics-compatible autonomous manufacturing robot energized the entire Anarchist space-faring community. Within a few days of the bounty being announced, the zone around the CORP started to get very congested. Ships and habitats of all sizes jostled for space to run their experiments inside the Cube of Realistic Physics.

Xavier was once again inundated with manufacturing requests. Everyone wanted their own set of Murdoch's equipment. Rather than spend weeks in the Asteroid Belt turning rocks into generators and photolithography machines, Xavier finished the job he'd set out to do two years ago: He democratized nanoscale manufacturing. Somewhat.

He built another ASIC, loaded it with instructions for building more ASICs, and handed the package over to the closest trustworthy person he could find - the captain of a ship that happened to be in his vicinity.

"Now remember," he warned the captain, "if this falls into the wrong hands..."

"Yes, I know."

"We're screwed."

"Yup."

"Completely and utterly dead. All of us."

"Yup."

"It's not that I don't want you to make more of them. I do. Just... This is serious."

"I was thinking we could perhaps make some sort of guild," the captain suggested.

Xavier laughed. "What, with like, secret hand signals and stuff?"

"If you like."

"Maybe a blood oath?"

"We can do a blood oath."

Xavier stared at his eyes. He couldn't detect the faintest trace of irony in the grizzled man's steely expression. He'd chosen well. "A blood oath sounds good. Get to it."

With that, Xavier and his crew returned to the Cube.

"They look like fishes," Ivan remarked, looking out at the scene.

Xavier chuckled as he watched the hundreds of vessels swarm together and enter the cube at the same speed at one end, while hundreds more drifted out the other end and ignited their

engines, navigating their way back round to the entrance. Ivan was right - they resembled a school of fish swimming in laps, entering and exiting a glowing section of pipe hovering over an invisible sea floor.

“Shall we join them?” he asked.

“Let’s do it, boss!” his first mate responded.

They were too far behind to win the bounty for the first autonomous manufacturing robot - that bitcoin was claimed by a team of twenty out of New Gangnam. The next size down was won by their rivals from New Vienna. Past that point, progress became harder. So many individual technological breakthroughs were necessary that Xavier and his team spent more time crafting bounties than trying to win them.

“We need better optics,” Ivan pointed out. “The robots are already guessing where things are. There’s no way anyone can shrink again with these cameras.”

“What do you think?” Xavier asked. “0.01 bitcoin for a camera with... micrometer resolution?”

“No. Smaller. You don’t want to make it too easy.”

The camera was achieved a few days later. A Whale Fund startup claimed the bounty, and the CAD design was distributed all over the Internet.

“You getting all this, dad?” Xavier thought.

“Loud and clear,” Vincent responded.

“Does it actually work up there?”

“We’ll know once the robots finish building it. But if it’s anything like the last two designs you sent up, it’ll work just fine.”

“Who needs an omniscient supercomputer when you have unlimited funds and raw human intelligence, huh?”

Vincent chuckled. “Those funds are very much limited, kid.”

Xavier smiled and posted another bounty. He knew he’d done a good job, even if his dad wouldn’t admit it.

Murdoch grinned with satisfaction as he walked through the Murdoch Heavy Industries manufacturing zone. The machines were humming with an energy not seen in millennia. Smaller and smaller robots were rolling off the line, and set up to manufacture even smaller robots. It was working.

It was really working.

54. Collateral Damage

Stacy II was getting pretty tired of Sullivan.

“You can’t just keep disappearing people,” he cautioned her. “One more mysterious retirement and someone’s going to be thumbtacking photos to the wall and stringing yarn back to a picture of your face.”

Stacy II sighed. She’d already been looking forward to giving her new boss the ‘death or transportation’ treatment. “This innocent face?” she asked, batting her eyelashes at Sullivan.

“There needs to be a story,” Sullivan replied, ignoring her. “One that explains all these people leaving their posts.”

“Plague?”

“Not targeted enough.”

“Syphilis?”

Sullivan glared at the smirking young lady. “This is serious. You had Filbert build a domestic terror squad, remember? What did you think that was for? Kidnapping, catfishing and joking around?”

Stacy II’s face fell. She’d been trying to avoid this line of thinking.

“Grow up,” Sullivan snapped harshly. “You want to manipulate the levers of power? Subvert a political system and install yourself as dictator? It’s time you came to grips with the volume of blood that needs to spill to make that happen.”

She wiped her sweaty palms on the hem of her bright red dress as she sat and stared at the enormous stone pillars of the casino. The timer was already set, she told herself. One minute and fourteen seconds to go, and there was nothing she could do about it.

“You didn’t seem to mind so much when it was New Australians,” her mom’s voice appeared in her head.

“That was different!” she retorted. “They were basically savages. These people are...”

“Like you?”

Stacy II sighed. “Yeah,” she thought. “They’re like me.”

“Then they’ll understand,” the elder Stacy replied. “It’s not personal, sweetie. It’s just politics.”

Stacy II chewed a fingernail. She was starting to dislike politics.

She looked around the lavishly decorated casino floor, which had been rented out entirely for the Department of Health’s monthly Leadership Summit. Having studied the department’s org chart for months, she recognized most of the faces in the room. She maintained a perfect deadpan expression as she watched them drunkenly stumble around the floor, playing grab-ass and pissing away their taxpayer-funded per diems at the roulette wheel.

Then, her eyes flicked to the dealers behind the tables, the servers carrying trays of canapés, the security guards watching over the blackjack tables. It was relatively easy to suppress her

concern for the lives of the government employees. But the collateral damage? That was a tougher pill to swallow.

“Don’t you have to go?” her mom asked.

Stacy II checked her phone. Nineteen seconds left.

When the countdown hit eleven seconds, she got up from her chair and started walking towards the pillar.

“Slow down,” her mom cautioned. “You’re power-walking.”

Stacy II swore silently under her breath. She had lost track of the number of times she’d practiced this walk. She had trained and trained, until it was repeatable down to the hundredth of a second. And now, with her heart pumping and adrenals on full throttle, she was all over the place.

“Three,” she counted internally as she approached the pillar.

“Two,” she recited, her mom joining her.

“One.”

The fiery blast ripped the crowded casino floor to shreds as she crossed behind the shelter of the stone pillar.

“Too jacked,” Stacy II told Filbert that evening, shaking her head at the screen. “Less 80s action figure, more basement nerd. And lean harder into the terrorist aesthetic.”

Filbert deleted his prompt and tried again, typing **scrawny nerd balaclava ak47 anarchist flag** into the text field and clicking “generate”. An image appeared of a slender man in a balaclava, toting an ak-47 in front of an anarchist flag.

“That’s it!” Stacy II said, approvingly. “That’s our guy! Save it!”

Filbert saved the generated image to his hard drive and flipped over to the video generator. As they waited for the video to generate, he tried making small talk.

“Do you feel bad about the people we killed?” he asked.

“Huh?” she responded. “We didn’t kill any people.”

Filbert looked at her, confused.

“Only Commonwealth government employees,” she smirked. “If they didn’t want to die, they shouldn’t have invaded my country and killed my mom.”

“What about the casino staff?”

Stacy II shrugged. “Conspirators in a criminal enterprise.”

Filbert nodded.

Stacy II glanced at him suspiciously. It would be a very classic Filbert move for him to get cold feet now.

The video finished rendering, and they clicked ‘play’. A high definition video played of the balaclava-nerd speaking into the camera. In less than a minute, their avatar claimed responsibility for the attack, blamed the Commonwealth for bringing it upon themselves, and vowed further violence if they didn’t immediately retreat from the islands formerly known as The Anarchy.

“Pretty good,” Stacy II remarked, “but way too HD. Jack up the contrast and run it through an early 2000s potato-cam filter.”

Filbert jacked up the contrast and started looking for such a filter.

The photo of Stacy II in her bright red dress, surrounded by dust and pulling a survivor from the rubble, was shared over a hundred thousand times on social media. “Dress lady” became not just the image associated with the event, but an icon of bravery, heroism, and the selfless devotion to the public that the Commonwealth Government so tirelessly worked to achieve.

Stacy II was so overwhelmed with interview requests that she had to stop answering her phone.

“I was in such shock,” she recalled to one interviewer, “that I didn’t have time to think. I just followed my instincts, you know? And I saw this poor man - I think he was a waiter - trapped under a beam, and I just. . .”

She paused to stifle a sob.

“Oh darling,” the interviewer cooed, handing her a box of tissues. “Take all the time you need. You are so brave. So, so, brave.”

Stacy II sniffed.

55. Purely Hypothetical

“How are you doing, Gabe?” Steve asked on the phone. “Long time no chat.”

“Yeah, great thanks!” Gabe replied. “Working on a new grant proposal.”

“Oh yeah?” Steve asked. “What’s it for?”

“I’m writing a paper called ‘Red Dwarves and the Short Statured Community: A Critical Analysis of Terminological Impact.’”

“Sounds fascinating.”

“Oh yes, it should be highly impactful.”

Steve paused for a moment, wondering how best to manoeuvre the conversation towards his request.

“Is there any particular reason why you’re calling?” Gabe asked.

That was nice of him. Steve always appreciated Gabe’s directness.

“Yes, actually. I was wondering... purely hypothetically of course... let’s say you wanted to chart a course to Sirius. Are there any gotchas that you would look out for?”

The line went quiet. Steve waited for a few seconds for Gabe to reply. Nothing.

“Gabe? You there?”

“You remember that space travel is illegal, right?” Gabe asked.

“Yeah, of course!” Steve replied. “This is purely hypothetical.”

“Hypothetically, in this purely fictional scenario, would you be flying to Sirius in a Murdoch Heavy Industries interstellar warship?”

“Me? Never. I love it here. Why would I ever leave?”

“Good,” Gabe replied. “Because hypothetically, I wouldn’t want you to be involved any deeper in any criminal conspiracies.”

Steve bit his lip. This wasn’t going as planned. Where was his friend Gabe? The guy who had been by his side for a thousand years?

“What are you doing, Steve?” Gabe asked. “Why are you still at MHI? Don’t you know the risk you’re taking?”

“I love it here,” Steve admitted.

“What happened to you?” Gabe asked. “Where’s my friend Steve?”

Steve chewed his fingernail.

“So, no ideas for that Sirius trip?” he asked.

“Goodbye, Steve” Gabe replied.

The phone clicked and Gabe’s voice was replaced by a dial tone. Steve looked at the handset, sad and confused.

56. The Volunteer Space Force

Russell stared in awe at the megastructures being assembled in the Murdoch Heavy Industries parking lot. A hundred fusion rockets - each equipped with its own nanoscale manufacturing plant - stood awaiting the respective vacuum balloons that would carry them into the stratosphere.

Allegedly, the rocket payloads combined to form an interstellar radio. In reality, they did no such thing. This was the flat-packed version of Xavier's orbital ring. Stacy had casually mentioned to him that space launches were banned, which would render the orbital ring the largest piece of criminal infrastructure...ever, probably.

What was really going on here? Why was he working for a bunch of criminals? And did he have any choice in the matter?

That afternoon, Murdoch called a meeting. Russell entered to the conference room. Steve, Stacy, and Vincent were already there. Murdoch walked in a couple of minutes late, stinking of cigarettes.

"Thank you all for coming," he greeted them. "How's everything going?"

After some pleasantries and logistical discussions surrounding fab space, Murdoch turned the conversation to the meeting's actual agenda.

"The tech transfer seems to be going well," he said. "Assuming we get those balloons built, we'll be in orbit in a matter of days."

The team nodded.

"We could have an interstellar spacecraft in as little as a month."

Russell double-checked his timeline in his head. It was aggressive, but not impossible. Innovations were popping out of the sim at a blistering pace, and from what he'd read in the textbooks, interstellar travel wasn't nearly as much of a challenge in Realistic Physics as it was down in StevieNix.

"So my question to you lot is, what will our first interstellar mission look like? Who will go, where will they go, and what equipment will they need?"

Russell watched, mostly quietly, as the others argued for the next twenty minutes - occasionally being subtly guided in particular directions by Murdoch's leading, Socratic-style questions.

He was obviously manipulating them. Slowly, a picture of his wishes emerged.

The first mission would be a scouting trip to Sirius. The craft would be the smallest possible vehicle that could get them there and back - a tin can with a fusion rocket. As for who would go, the ideal crew would have little-to-no life support requirements, the ability to withstand extremely high g-forces, and not be too missed back home.

Murdoch's questions to the monkeybots got more pointed.

Russell looked at his shoes. How missed would he be back home?

Last he checked, Filbert was doing okay. He seemed to have formed a nice group of friends and they spent a lot of time in some warehouse somewhere. His wife and his other kids had

already processed his death - as far as they were concerned, it had been just like any other death.

The bigger question was, did he want to become a criminal? Blatantly violate the most important law on Elba for no personal gain, other than to please the guy who financed his creation?

He didn't have to go to space. He could also just dob Steve and Murdoch in to FEDSEC, and live out the rest of his life with his feet on the ground, doing... what, exactly?

What would be the point of anything if Steve and Murdoch were gone?

Steve had long-ago insisted that he had free will. But when push came to shove, how much could he really control? He was a robot. A manufactured product. Property of Murdoch Heavy Industries. Property doesn't get a real say in its fate, it can choose to either serve its owner or be discarded.

At least, he thought, he could choose the fate that gave him a little bit of dignity.

"I'll go," he volunteered.

Murdoch nodded. "Good man," he replied. "You'll need a crewmate though."

Russell, and everyone else, looked over at Stacy. She flushed and looked down. Russell could tell she was going through the same thought process as him.

"I'll go," she said. Turning to Steve, she added, "just take care of Stacy II for me."

Murdoch clapped his hands. "Excellent!" he said. "It'll be loads of fun, I'm sure. If not, perhaps there's some way to hibernate you. Hah! Thank you all for coming, meeting adjourned!"

The rest of the team filed out of the conference room, leaving Stacy and Russell to sit in silence, bewildered.

"Excited?" asked Russell, breaking the silence.

Stacy forced a smile. "Of course," she said. "I just hope they serve good food on board."

Russell laughed. "The finest rehydrated nutrient packs money can buy."

The freezing cold ocean spray flew over the side of their small boat and drenched Russell through his clothes and to his robotic skin. Praying that his monkeybot was waterproof, he retreated back into the cabin and shut the door.

"Last time I was on a boat with you, we almost died," he remarked to Stacy.

"And look at us now," she smiled back. Then, her face dropped a little as she remembered the stakes. "Of course," she added, "if we die this time, it's actually for real."

Russell tried not to think about her comment. Stumbling forward, he grabbed a handrail for balance as the boat crested a wave and came crashing down into the trough.

Stacy groaned and lay down on the floor. "Remind me why we can't just launch from land again?" she asked.

“Discretion,” he replied. “FEDSEC.”

“Right,” she said. “Well, you’d think they could have given us a bigger boat.”

“Too visible,” he shrugged. “Just be grateful we have a cabin this time.”

The boat crested another wave and came crashing down again. Russell groaned and lay down next to her. He really hoped his monkeybot couldn’t vomit.

He was woken by Vincent’s voice crackling over the radio. “Approaching the launchpad!” Vincent announced.

He clambered to his feet and made his way to join Stacy at the front of the cabin. “See anything?” he asked, staring out into the blackness beyond.

“Nothing,” she responded.

Russell pressed his face to the glass, trying to make out any shapes in the dark, moonless night. He might as well have been blindfolded.

Without warning, the boat thudded and came to a sudden stop. His face smacked against the window. It hurt, just like a real face would have.

“You have arrived at your destination,” Vincent announced.

“Couldn’t have brought it in more smoothly?” Russell asked, rubbing his nose.

“Be thankful you got there,” Vincent replied. “I’d like to see you navigate here without GPS.”

Russell withdrew from the argument. Navigating to a raft in the middle of the ocean was one thing. Navigating to a vanished star in the outer reaches of the galaxy was a whole other challenge. Best to stay focused.

He opened the cabin door and stepped out with Stacy onto the deck. As his eyes adjusted to the low light, he made out their home for the next three months - a house-sized black cylinder lying on its side, above which loomed an enormous balloon.

He was already familiar with it from the CAD drawings. For Stacy’s benefit, he pointed at one end of the cylinder. “Fusion rockets,” he explained. Then, panning over to the other end of the cylinder, he said “living quarters.”

Picking up his bag, he walked towards the living quarters. Stacy nodded and followed.

“What do you mean, I have to accelerate it? I need to slow the shuttle down to drop the tether,” crackled Vincent’s annoyed voice on the radio.

“It’s relative, remember?” replied an exasperated Xavier. “To slow down relative to you, the shuttle needs to speed up relative to the ring.”

“This is terrible UX,” Vincent grumbled.

“You do realize that the orbital ring is spinning, right? It’s in the name. It orbits.”

“Who designed this interface? Don’t tell me you did it.”

“Come on, dad. It’s not that bad.”

“A chicken could have done a better job.”

“Dad-”

“I’m serious. Next time you need to make a user interface, just grab a chicken and scatter some grain on a keyboard. It’ll produce a more usable design.”

The father/son duo had been bickering on the shared line for ten minutes. Russell drummed his fingers nervously and glanced at Stacy, who responded with a look that said “man, I really hope these idiots figure this out.” Russell reflected for a moment on the expressive realism of her monkeybot’s prosthetic face, before turning his attention to the window. He could just make out the ocean, kilometers below the high altitude to which they’d risen with the balloon.

The faintest rays of sunshine were just starting to light up the sky. If Vincent and Xavier didn’t get the launch mechanism figured out in the next few minutes, they’d lose the cover of darkness - and with it, any remaining pretense that the orbital ring was an interstellar radio. FEDSEC would begin raids almost immediately. He could imagine them confiscating all electronic devices, which would imply the powering down of StevieNix and the death of everyone he loved. If Steve had thought to install sweat glands, his palms would be drenched right now.

His wandering mind was snapped into the present by Vincent’s excited voice. “Finally! Prepare for launch!” he announced.

He sighed in relief and looked again at Stacy, who was tightening the straps on her five-point harness. He did the same while craning his neck upwards, trying to spot the descending tether in the dim morning light. All he could see was the enormous black balloon above them.

The spaceship clunked. “Tether attached,” Vincent announced. “Now, let me guess - to take off, I have to decelerate the shuttle?”

“Correct,” Xavier responded. “Because the ring is spinning.”

Russell could sense Vincent’s paternalistic, teasing smile over the crackle of the radio. “Seriously, get a chicken” he replied. “It’ll help. Anyway, hold on tight!”

The balloon released the ship, and Russell let out an involuntary gasp as the support of his chair disappeared and the entire cabin entered a sickening freefall. A moment later, he was slammed back into her chair in a violent jerk as the tether taughened. Kilometers above them, attached to the orbital ring, the shuttle started accelerating - or decelerating, or whatever.

“Oof,” groaned Stacy. “This sucks.”

Russell struggled to reply. Once again praying that his monkeybot didn’t have the ability to puke, he closed his eyes and gripped his armrests. Bracing against the enormous g-forces, he and Stacy hung on for dear life as the craft was yanked up through the atmosphere and flung out into space.

57. El Dorado of Probable Cause

“FEDSEC wants a full blueprint for the orbital ring,” Murdoch announced to Allen, shutting his office door behind him. “And written explanations of all unusual features, particularly anything that could be used to effect a launch into space.”

Allen rubbed his eyes with his hand. “The screws are on to us,” he groaned.

Murdoch nodded. “Seems they’ve figured it out, yeah.”

“How long do we have to escape this godforsaken prison planet?”

“They’re still poking around for probable cause,” Murdoch replied hopefully.

Allen laughed. “So like, a few days? This whole place is the El Dorado of probable cause. The streets are practically paved with damning evidence.”

Murdoch chuckled at the reference to a particularly entertaining episode of the Great Meme Competition, before remembering the severity of their predicament.

“Yeah,” he said. “A few days sounds right.”

Allen straightened up. “Do we have a habitat?”

Murdoch shook his head. “Not quite. Xavier’s boys haven’t figured out how to grow our plants yet. We can launch, though. And we can build a warship in space. We’ll need to bring all our food and air with us and hope to resupply before it runs out.”

“Goddamn it,” Allen replied. “That’s not ideal, is it?”

“No,” Murdoch said. “No, it’s not.”

“Where can we even resupply?” Allen asked. “It’s not like there’s a gas station on every corner out there.”

Murdoch looked at his old friend and rival. Perhaps Allen’s brain was even more gone than his.

“Sirius, obviously” Murdoch answered. “Why do you think I sent those two ahead?”

58. Lean Operation

A few weeks later, Stacy II practically skipped from the office to her scheduled downtown rendezvous with Sullivan and Filbert. They had rented a private office in a co-working space in the city for this purpose.

“I did it!” she announced, bursting into the office and waving a folded piece of paper. “I got the job!”

Filbert took the letter from her outstretched hand and unfolded it as she skipped around the table. It was a printout of an email from the Chief Executive, nominating her to direct the Department of Health.

“Congratulations,” Filbert said. “You’re getting pretty close!”

“He mentioned my ‘indomitable courage in the face of danger,’ ” she bragged, beaming.

Filbert handed the letter to Sullivan, who quickly skimmed it. “What happened to the previous director?” Sullivan asked.

“She quit,” Stacy II gloated. “Couldn’t take the pressure. Something about her children being kidnapped or whatever. Good initiative, Filbert!” she added.

Filbert shook his head as if to disclaim responsibility.

Sullivan glared at Filbert. “You’ve gotta rein in your squad,” he said, pulling out his phone, pulling up an article, and pushing it across the table. “This is getting out of hand.”

Stacy II leaned over Filbert’s shoulder to read the headline.

“Bombing at Department of Commerce Headquarters,” it read.

Stacy II moved next to him to get a better view of the screen. It got worse. “Twelve killed, thirty injured in fourth terror attack this week,” she read aloud.

Filbert pushed the phone back across the table to Sullivan. “That wasn’t us,” he said. “We’ve been laying low since the casino.”

“Bullshit,” Sullivan responded.

“I’m serious! It wasn’t us!”

“Do you actually know that?” Sullivan challenged him. “What about those savages you imported from the penal colony? What are they doing when you’re not watching them?”

“Probably binge watching *Sex and the City*”, Filbert laughed. “They discovered it two days ago and have already made it up to Season Four.”

Sullivan opened his mouth, and after a few seconds to take in this newfound information, closed it again without saying anything.

“I’m positive it wasn’t anyone in my crew,” Filbert reassured him.

Stacy II wasn’t so sure. “Then who was it?” she demanded. “And who kidnapped the director’s kids, if not you?”

Filbert bit his bottom lip.

"I can't say for sure," he said cautiously, "but...it could be wannabe recruits. We've been getting bombarded with emails."

Stacy II stared at him incredulously. This was an unexpected development. "People are bombing government offices and kidnapping children to try to join your domestic terror squad?" she asked.

"Balaclava guy's domestic terror squad," Filbert corrected her. "My squad doesn't exist, remember?"

"Do you respond to their emails?" Sullivan asked. "Do you let them join balaclava guy's squad?"

"Of course not! I assumed half the emails are from feds."

"And the other half? Are they just going to keep wreaking terror until balaclava guy responds?"

Filbert looked down at the desk. He didn't appear to be enjoying this interrogation.

As for Stacy II, she was only just beginning to process the implications.

"What are you going to do," she asked slowly, "when I win? How are you going to stop the attacks once I become Chief Executive?"

Filbert swallowed. He didn't appear to have thought of that.

Stacy II walked back from the co-working space towards the Department of Health, deep in thought. Would Filbert be able to rein in the kidnappers? How would that even work - was he going to email them, asking them politely to stop?

It was a concerning situation. She was so wrapped up in it that she didn't notice a moving van pull up next to her. Only when three men emerged from it, grabbed her, and forced her into the van, did she realize what was happening. She had been kidnapped - exactly the same way as she'd done to the cow. How fitting.

Two of the men entered the back of the van with her and beat her. Not too badly - just enough to daze and subdue her. She considered screaming as her face was forced into the floor and her hands cuffed behind her back, but decided against it - screaming wasn't particularly regal. If she was going to be kidnapped and murdered, she wanted her final moments to at least be dignified.

The van stank. A gag was forced into her mouth and her assailants kicked her until she rolled into - other people?

She wasn't the only kidnappee in the van. Well, that was something at least. Maybe she wasn't going to be murdered just yet.

The van took off with a screech and she was thrown around the moving compartment like a ragdoll.

Stacy II prayed to Steve. She prayed harder than she'd ever prayed in her life. He didn't answer.

What a useless God, she thought.

She thought back over all the hardships she'd endured in the name of Steve. Everything she'd been through - the death of mother, the failed military campaigns, the indignity of white-collar office work - all for a God who, when the chips were down, was nowhere to be found.

He was meant to be all-powerful. All-knowing. All-loving. She had served him loyally since the day she was born.

Why, then, had he forsaken her?

The door of the moving van slid open and light flooded into the cargo hold. She was finally able to make out her fellow hostages. There were five of them - three adults, dressed in filthy and quickly disintegrating business-casual office attire, and two children who looked scared and hungry.

Two of the kidnappers entered. They wore masks. One of them held a gun to her head and pulled down her gag. The other, who appeared to be in charge, held up a phone.

"Give me the number of someone who cares about you," he demanded.

Stacy II almost laughed when she heard his voice. He sounded like he was still in the latter stages of puberty.

"You can't keep us here like this," she said.

"Shut up!"

"We need a toilet."

"You have a toilet." The immature teenager who'd kidnapped her nodded to the overflowing bucket that had been screwed to the wall of the cargo hold.

Stacy II screwed up her face. No wonder it stank.

"It's unsanitary," she objected.

The leader smacked her. "Number!" he shouted.

Stacy II held back her tears and rattled off the number of Filbert's burner.

He dialed the number. Filbert picked up. After a brief introduction, the teenager held the phone up to Stacy II's mouth.

"Tell him we'll kill you if he doesn't cough up two kilos of gold," he instructed.

Stacy II told Filbert that the kidnappers would kill her if he didn't cough up two kilos of gold.

The kidnapper took the phone away before she could hear his response.

"More instructions to follow," he said into the microphone before hanging up.

The other kidnapper wrestled her gag back into her mouth, dropped her on the floor of the van, and shuffled out.

The leader followed him out, but turned around before shutting the door.

“Look,” he said in his awkward adolescent voice. “I’m sorry about the . . . sanitary conditions. We’re a startup, okay? This is a lean operation. We have to be scrappy.”

Stacy II made unspecific objecting noises through her gag.

“We’re working on a partnership,” the kidnapper said. “Just . . . bear with us.”

With that, he slid the door shut and Stacy II was plunged back into darkness.

The van stayed parked and the door stayed shut. The only indication of the passage of time was the darkening and disappearance of the slivers of daylight that shone through the breathing holes drilled in the wall.

Stacy II eventually relented and subjected herself to the embarrassment of relieving herself in the bucket. She almost cried, and prayed that none of the other hostages recognized her.

Then, she remembered that there was no point in praying to an absent God who . . . did he even exist?

Maybe the voices in her head had been her imagination the whole time. Maybe the stories her mom had told her had been nothing but fables that old people tell to children to make them behave.

Maybe she’d killed all those people for nothing.

Alighting from the bucket, she adjusted her clothing to the best of her abilities and wriggled back to her corner of the cargo hold. Tears soaked her face and she was grateful for the darkness. As long as she kept her crying silent, no one else had to know.

After two days, the stench was intolerable. She choked on the stale air every time she breathed. Her throat was so parched from thirst that she genuinely expected her imminent death. And what would follow? Would she be reunited with her mom? Spend an eternity in the afterlife with God, and angels, and harps, and fluffy clouds?

Probably not. Probably, nothing would follow. The pattern of atoms making up the purely deterministic machine of her brain would fall apart, her mortal torment would end, and she would return to the state she was in before she was born.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing would follow. And by God, was it preferable to this.

The van started up. It took off with a jerk and took off down the road.

The van stopped. A few minutes later, the door slid open, and daylight streamed in. She clamped her eyes shut and recoiled from the light.

As she slowly opened her eyes, she recognized her surroundings. They were at the warehouse. What?

“Solid gold,” the lead kidnapper said proudly, gesturing at her and the other hostages.

Filbert came into view. What?

He looked into the van, briefly made eye contact, and kept scanning.

“People are going to pay gold for these?” he asked the kidnapper. “They look like you dug them out of a septic tank.”

“We might have to clean them up a bit.”

“Is this where you’ve been keeping them?” Filbert asked.

“Yeah,” the kidnapper replied, wrinkling his nose. “Now you see why we need a new base of operations?”

“You’d better clean them up before you bring them in,” Filbert said. “There’s a hose out back. And our fee’s gone up. I want twenty percent.”

The lead kidnapper bristled, but didn’t attempt to negotiate. Stacy II was dragged out, briefly blasted in freezing hose water, and shoved into the familiar warehouse. One of the kidnappers removed her gag and gave her a bottle of water. She downed it greedily before the gag was put back on.

Well, she thought as the other hostages were dragged in and given the same treatment one by one, this was a development. Maybe Steve cared after all, and it just took him some time to get around to things.

Perhaps, she thought, he just had a lot going on.

59. Space, Idiot!

Steve found himself quite surprised by how much he missed Stacy and her Long Macs Topped Up over the next several weeks. Russell too, of course. But Stacy...

He liked to remind himself of her by checking in on her daughter's progress. She was, of course, a very different AI from her mother. More practical, perhaps. She also somehow managed to scare him even more.

One day, while he was watching Stacy II mess around with a strange scheme that involved being handcuffed and locked in a van, his office door banged open and Murdoch charged in.

"Steve! There you are!" he gasped.

Steve looked at the disheveled tycoon struggle to catch his breath. "What's up, Murdoch?" he asked.

Murdoch glared at him. "You need to pack up StevieNix, now."

Steve reeled. "What do you mean, pack it up?" he asked. "It's on a datacenter."

"Goddamn it!" Murdoch yelled. "Pack it up! How much clearer can I get? Unplug the servers. Put them on batteries. Wheel them out onto the tarmac. Let's go!"

"What's going on?" Steve asked.

For a moment, Steve thought he could detect the faintest flicker of worry in Murdoch's face before it was replaced by his customary stern stoicism.

"FEDSEC's onto us," he said. "I don't know how. Someone must have tipped them off."

He looked suspiciously at Steve, who held his hands up in protest of his innocence.

"If we don't get out of here in the next couple hours, it will all have been for nothing. We'll all be calibrated. Possibly deleted. At a minimum, I can guarantee that we'll never escape this goddamn hellhole."

"What do you mean, 'out of here?'" Steve asked.

"Space, idiot! Out of this goddamn penitentiary! Vincent's building launch vehicles as we speak. Figure out how the hell to pack up StevieNix and get it out on the tarmac!"

He strode to the office door and walked out. "Now!" he yelled, and slammed the door shut behind him.

Steve stood rooted to the spot, dumb with shock. It was really happening.

60. Octagonal Occlusions

"Is that what a Dyson sphere looks like?" Stacy asked. "I was expecting it to look... I dunno. Different."

"More like a vacuum cleaner?" Russell asked.

Stacy tutted and turned back to the window. "Seriously," she said. "Come check it out."

Russell was still groggy from his six weeks' hibernation. He floated to the window and squinted out at the spot where Stacy was pointing.

"I don't see anything," he said.

"Zoom in."

He always forgot that his monkeybot could do that. Focusing on the spot, he zoomed his vision in.

"Whoa," he said.

As he dialled in his focus, he saw what she meant. It looked like a circular window which had been mostly covered up with tiny octagonal stickers. Faint rays of light shone through the cracks, like a piece of abstract art by someone who loved geometry.

"That's not a vacuum cleaner," he said.

"Did they papier-mâché over the star?" Stacy mused.

Russell didn't answer. He was too busy studying the bizarre shape that was covering Sirius.

Some time later, Russell broke the silence again. "It isn't one structure," he concluded. "It's thousands of little ones. Maybe millions."

"How do you know?" Stacy asked.

"The patterns change," he replied. "The big octagons move faster than the little ones. I think it's all orbiting solar panels."

Stacy nodded.

"We'll see soon enough," she said.

Just then, a red light started flashing on the ceiling and a klaxon started blaring. "Burn down in sixty seconds," a robotic voice announced. "Please return to your seats and fasten your seat belts."

Russell looked at Stacy and forced a weak smile. "Guess we will," he replied.

He clipped into his harness and gripped the straps as the robotic voice counted down. He clamped his eyes shut as the count reached the final ten seconds and the ship began to rotate. Finally the count hit zero. The fusion rocket ignited, and he was crushed into his chair.

"Burning down" the robotic voice announced. "Thirty-six hours remaining."

He tried to say something to Stacy, but his mechanical diaphragm wouldn't move. In fact, nothing could move. His entire body felt like it was being squashed by a hydraulic press, and the ship itself shuddered and creaked under the enormous force. He'd been warned that deceleration would be brutal, but this was something else.

To any sentient life surrounding Sirius, the nuclear exhaust from the fusion engine would look like a new star had appeared in the sky. The harder they decelerated, the less time the life would have to react - Vincent and Xavier had thus chosen the hardest deceleration they could manage without the ship coming apart. His comfort, he surmised, had not been part of the equation.

The next thirty-six hours would suck.

61. A Good Execution

Watching Filbert and his squad interact with the kidnappers, Stacy II was able to piece together what had happened: Filbert had finally read his emails. The “scrappy kidnapping startup” teens had emailed balaclava guy, looking for a partnership, and Filbert had lured them to the warehouse.

Divine intervention, or Filbert finally becoming a genuinely useful person? She struggled to decide which was more likely.

As her three kidnappers helped themselves to snacks from the pantry and plugged a game console into the warehouse TV, Stacy II watched Filbert subtly direct his team. People flitted in and out of the armory, familiar handgun bulges under their clothes. They took up strategic positions by the doors, and before long, had the three kidnappers surrounded.

Once the entire team was in position, Filbert met her eyes again and gave her a nod. Her heart thudded in anticipation. She loved a good execution.

He advanced on the kidnappers, put his hand on his gun, and-

Bang!

An explosion went off in the warehouse. It sent her reeling, as her eyes burned white and her ears rang with the high-pitched squeal of a braking freight train.

Bang! Another flash grenade exploded, farther away this time. The warehouse began to fill with smoke. Stacy II finally figured out what was happening as the staccato of automatic gunfire broke through her ringing ears.

“Everyone down!” Filbert shouted. “Cover doors and windows!”

A door was flung open, and Stacy II watched helplessly as one of her domestic terrorists ran out and was immediately felled by automatic gunfire. Someone screamed, and the rest drew their handguns.

The three kidnappers looked at all the suddenly-armed people around them, dumbfounded. The leader opened his houth as if to say something, but no one ever heard what he had to say. Another warehouse door was flung open and the black uniform-clad Commonwealth Special Forces began pouring in.

Filbert’s team opened fire. The isolated pops from their handguns were met by rapid bursts from the Special Forces’ automatic weapons. They were horrendously outgunned.

Stacy squirmed into the corner and huddled in as tightly as she could with the other hostages. While praying for Steve to finally show himself and meaningfully intervene, she saw Filbert and Annabel slip into the armory.

62. The Only Question That Matters

Steve had no idea what to do. It really was decision time - the choice he made in the next few minutes would determine if he were to spend the rest of his life in a comfortable, tenured position at the university, or freezing to death in the cold exile of space.

Where was Stacy when he needed her? She would probably have good advice.

Steve jacked in to StevieNix in search of her daughter.

“Hey, are you busy?” he asked.

Stacy II laughed into her gag.

“Can’t say that I am,” she replied. “What’s up?”

“I was hoping you could give me some advice.”

Stacy II shook her head. “You’re asking me for advice? Have you seen what I’ve gotten myself into?”

Steve looked at the screen. Now that she mentioned it, her situation did look pretty bad. Were those... chains? Huh.

“How did that happen?” he asked.

“Long story. I’ve been trying to reach you.”

“Right. Anyway, you ever find yourself in a situation where you’re trapped between two totally different but equally undesirable choices?”

“All the time,” she replied. “What’s the situation?”

“Well,” he said, “on the one hand, I can stick with every thing I’ve ever known. Face the music, probably go through a mild calibration, no longer than a couple decades. On the other hand, I can throw it all away and probably die in space.”

“Why is this a hard choice?” Stacy II asked.

Steve thought of Stacy and Russell, who must be approaching Sirius by now. He thought of Vincent and Xavier, Murdoch’s brilliant tech geniuses. He thought of Stacy II, Filbert, and his millions of other AI creations. He had thrown everything at them - snakes, blood feuds, made-up alignment memes, and war. So much war. Through it all, they’d never ceased to amaze him - no matter how hard life got for his AIs, they never gave up, and never ceased to find meaning in their short little lives.

He loved them.

“It just is,” he said.

Stacy II paused for a moment.

“Who are the people involved?” she asked.

“The first option is, well, my entire society. The people who created me, made me who I am. Employed me. And, of course, my best friend for a thousand years.”

“And the second option?”

Steve thought about how to describe Murdoch.

“It’s mostly this...maladjusted billionaire who’s been using me as part of some criminal escape scheme.”

“Escape scheme,” Stacy II repeated. “What’s he escaping from?”

“Everything.”

“I thought you were trying to make interstellar warrior AIs,” Stacy II thought. “That’s what my mom always taught me.”

Steve laughed. “I’m beginning to suspect that that wasn’t the primary goal of this all.”

“Who are your actual friends?” Stacy II asked.

“What?”

“Who’s actually going to have your back when the chips are down? Your best friend who wants to ‘calibrate’ you, or the criminal maladjusted billionaire who’s been lying to you?”

Steve didn’t know how to answer the question.

“It’s the only question that matters,” Stacy II told him.

Steve thought for a while, before his train of thought was derailed by a notification from Filbert.

“I’ll get back to you,” he said. “Thanks for the chat. I have to go see what Filbert wants.”

63. Picture the Operating Table

“They’re parachutes!” Stacy exclaimed. “Look!”

Russell groaned. He didn’t feel like looking. Thirty-six hours of insanely high g-forces had left his body feeling like it needed a rebuild. His fluids had settled in all the wrong places and he was pretty sure some of his bearings had deformed. He needed some sort of . . . monkeybot spa.

“Just shake it off,” Stacy said. “You really gotta check this out.”

Russell unbuckled his harness, floated out of his chair, and shook his limbs a little. It really did seem to help. He coasted to the window and looked outside.

They had been right. There wasn’t a Dyson sphere. There wasn’t a vacuum cleaner, or a papier-mâché structure. Instead, there were billions, possibly trillions, of . . . parachutes. Enormous, octagonal kites, tethered to small, barely-visible payloads, all floating in space and pointed in the direction of Sirius’s dim glow.

“Whoa,” he gasped. “That’s. . .”

“A lot of parachutes?” Stacy suggested.

“Beautiful,” he finished.

Stacy shrugged. “Do you see that one?” she asked, pointing in the distance. “It’s coming towards us.”

Russell zoomed his vision in the direction she was pointing. Sure enough, one of the parachutes had tilted its canopy in their direction, and was rapidly moving towards them as if propelled by an invisible wind.

“We don’t have any weapons, do we?” he asked.

Stacy shook her head. “We weren’t supposed to make contact,” she replied.

He bit his lip. It was tougher than his original human lip, like Steve had used some cheap material originally destined to become rubber bands. If they weren’t supposed to make contact, why did the flight plan have them decelerating so much? Seemed like making contact was part of the plan.

“Let’s hope they’re friendly,” he said.

“They’re never friendly,” Stacy responded.

With no sense of scale, Russell found it impossible to estimate the size or distance of the kite. It just kept approaching and growing, until it blocked out an enormous swath of space, and still it grew.

“How big do you think it is?” he asked.

“No idea,” Stacy responded in awe. “Must be hundreds of kilometers across. Like a . . . Tasmania.”

The payload was clearer now. It was a doughnut, and appeared to be spinning.

“What’s that?” Stacy asked.

Russell scratched his head. “You see a spinning thing in space, you think artificial gravity. Long-term habitation.”

She looked at him, wordlessly.

“Chances are, there’s life on that doughnut.”

“I don’t like it,” Stacy stated. “Punch the throttle and let’s get out of here.”

Russell’s mind filled with images of him on an operating table, screaming in agony while being vivisected by curious tentacled aliens. He looked up. The stars were gone - all obscured by the enormous black canopy of the octagonal parachute. Every other direction was similarly filled with parachutes.

There was no way out.

“I bet we can punch through the chute,” Stacy said.

“Would you bet your life? If it’s strong enough to damage the ship...”

As he tried not to picture the operating table, a blast appeared on the stationary platform connecting the doughnut to the parachute.

“What was that?” Stacy asked.

Russell didn’t reply. A few moments later, the answer became clear. The ship was rocked with a dull *thud*. They looked out the window.

A tether now ran from them to the doughnut.

“Goddamn it,” Russell muttered.

“Good knowing you,” Stacy replied.

“Are they going to vivisect us?” Stacy asked Russell as their ship was winched in towards the doughnut.

Russell laughed. Great minds.

“No way,” he replied. “Why would they do that?”

Stacy looked at him blankly, as if the answer was self-evident. “They’re aliens,” she stated flatly.

“We’re much more interesting if they keep us alive,” Russell lied.

The doughnut continued to approach and take up more of their field of view. Before long, it was all either of them could see.

“How big do you think it is?” Stacy asked.

Russell shook his head as he watched the doughnut grow. “It’s gotta be the size of a city,” he mused. “Canberra?”

Stacy nodded. “There’s still time to fire up the rocket,” she suggested. “I bet our ship is stronger than the tether.”

Russell pondered the dilemma. The ship was pretty strong. It would probably hold together. But did he actually want to flee? Didn't he want to see what was inside the Canberra-sized space doughnut attached to the Tasmania-sized parachute?

An enormous port opened on the top of the doughnut, revealing a dark cavern into which the tether disappeared.

"Guess we don't have much of a choice," Stacy conceded.

The ship was reeled into the recess, and the universe disappeared. A few moments later, the craft stopped with a sudden *thud*. As the artificial gravity kicked in, the two monkeybots were thrown to the floor.

"No sign of life on the scans," announced an unfamiliar voice. "Maybe it's a probe?"

"Maybe it's a bomb," suggested another voice. "You can't be too careful with those Rotarian bastards."

Russell and Stacy huddled together in the corner of the bridge, trying to make themselves as small as possible. Russell prayed that the intruders would leave, before remembering that prayer no longer did anything. His God was six weeks away and powerless to intervene - up here in the afterlife, Steve was just a regular guy.

"A lot of empty space for a bomb," continued the first voice. "And a pair of beds. Why does a bomb need beds?"

As he listened to the alien intruders stomp around the living quarters, Russell was struck by the realization that he understood them. He looked at Stacy, who had clearly had the same thought.

He stood up and offered a hand to help her up.

"We can talk our way out of this," he explained. "They're not going to vivisect people they can understand."

"Wishful thinking," Stacy responded, taking his hand and pulling herself up. "Aliens do messed up stuff all the time."

"They can't actually be-" Russell started.

The door opened and in walked the aliens.

Russell's jaw dropped. His mind raced to make sense of what he was seeing - The aliens looked exactly like Steve's people. Shorter and stockier than Steve and Gabe, but definitely the same species. They reminded him of Murdoch. Now that he thought about it, they sounded like him too. What was going on?

"Holy God above!" exclaimed the owner of the first voice, reeling backwards. "What the hell are those?"

His partner drew some sort of firearm and raised it at the two monkeybots. "Shall I shoot them?" he asked.

"I'd rather you didn't," said Russell.

Both aliens jumped at the sound of his voice and the second one dropped his gun.
“Feck!” he exclaimed.

64. Filbert's Enlightenment

"Hey Filbert," Steve's voice said into his head. "How are you doing!"

"Uh..." Filbert thought, huddled with Annabel in the corner of the armory as bullets continued to punch holes in the paper-thin corrugated steel walls around him. "Been better."

"In a bit of a tight spot, eh?"

"You could say that."

"It's funny, you were also in a jam the last time I heard from you. It's almost like you only ever call when you're in trouble, never just to ask how I'm doing."

Filbert pursed his lips and tried not to think anything blasphemous.

"How are you doing, Steve?" he thought.

"Kinda stressed, actually. Murdoch's breathing down my neck about something. Thanks for asking!"

A stray bullet cracked through the air and punched through the far wall, inches from Annabel's head. She smacked his leg and hissed, "hurry up!"

"Sorry to hear that!" Filbert responded, not bothering to ask who Murdoch was. "Hey, so about the AI alignment race... we've hit a bit of a snag."

"Mhm?" Steve replied. "So being cornered and shot at wasn't part of your plan?"

Another bullet punched through the wall, shattering a plastic box of railgun ammo. Projectiles scattered all over the concrete floor.

"Can't say that it was. I was wondering if you could perhaps help us out. A little *deus ex machina*. Maybe hand out a smiting or two."

The voice in Filbert's head went quiet for a moment as Steve pondered his options.

"I don't really smite anymore," Steve said, apologetically. "Too expensive."

"What?"

"Long story."

A single gunshot echoed through the warehouse, and a tortured scream followed. Filbert couldn't tell if it was one of his, or one of the intruders'.

"So what can you do?" Filbert asked, trying to conceal his annoyance. "Give them the runs?"

Steve sighed. "I can't really afford any interventions, Filbert. I'm sorry, but credits are tight."

Filbert had no idea what Steve was talking about. Wasn't he omnipotent? He gripped his railgun and looked at the thin steel wall separating the armory from the rest of the warehouse. "Can you at least tell me where to aim?" he asked.

"Oh," Steve replied. "Yeah, I guess I can do that."

Filbert aimed his gun at the wall, holding the muzzle just an inch away from the corrugated steel, and clamped his eyes shut. Seeing where this was going, Annabel buried her head in her knees and curled up as tightly as she could.

“Left,” Steve advised. “Left left left left left. Keep going left. Up. Up up up! Stop!”

Filbert tried to relax, and move the gun by a consistent number of degrees with every command, like a robot.

“Down a little,” Steve continued. “Right. Perfect. Fire!”

Holding his breath and trying his absolute best to not move the gun, Filbert squeezed the trigger. The gun kicked back, and a loud bang reverberated as the projectile punched through the wall.

“Got him!” Steve announced triumphantly. Loud shouts emanated from the warehouse as the special forces discovered their felled teammate.

“You’re going to have to move faster now,” Steve warned him. “They’re mad.”

“Just tell me where to aim!” Filbert snapped.

“Okay, but you have to relax.”

Over the next thirty seconds, Filbert relaxed. He relaxed more than more than most people achieve in a thousand lifetimes. His mind, his ego, his entire sense of self, vanished. He became the perfect executor of Steve’s will, an interface between his creator and the universe. What had taken Siddhartha forty-nine days of fasting under an olive tree, Filbert achieved in thirty seconds of firing a railgun through a wall. He achieved enlightenment.

When the last enemy was felled, Filbert dropped to his knees and broke down in tears.

“So. . .” Annabel asked, as Filbert sobbed into his knees. “Is it safe to go out now?”

Stacy II huddled in the corner of the warehouse, blinking in confusion as the gunfight raged around her.

Was she going crazy, or did the omnipotent creator of the universe really just call her up for a life coaching session?

It must be the stress of the situation, she thought. Being chained up helpless in the middle of a gunfight and finally realizing that God either didn’t exist or didn’t care about her, must have broken her brain.

She, Stacy II, was not a queen. She was a schizophrenic.

A crazy person who brought death and destruction to everyone she encountered.

Her side was losing. Filbert’s domestic terrorists had mostly been killed. The kidnappers, whoever’s side they were on, had also been killed. A dozen black-clad Commonwealth soldiers in tactical gear were now freely wandering around the warehouse, rooting out and executing surviving combatants.

One of them walked towards her corner.

Brandishing a standard Commonwealth-issued M16 rifle, he advanced nonchalantly towards the small group of hostages. The other hostages squirmed excitedly. They must assume he's going to rescue us, Stacy II thought.

That may be true of the other hostages, but in Stacy II's case, she knew better. Her fears were confirmed when he stopped a few paces from the corner, raised his rifle, and aimed it point-blank at her face.

Stacy II wanted to clamp her eyes shut and curl into a ball - but that wouldn't be very regal.

Perhaps she wasn't a real queen, but she was still raised a certain way. She stared her executioner in the face as he put his eye to the sights.

Then, his head exploded.

She was showered with blood, and pelted with chunks of skull and brain matter.

The other uniformed combatants stopped their tour of death and looked, dumbfounded, at his corpse.

Then, another's head exploded.

None of them knew what was going on. The warehouse was filled with panicked screams as their military discipline fell apart and the soldiers ran this way and that, trying to dodge whatever supernatural force was causing their execution.

It was futile. Within thirty seconds, they were all dead. The warehouse was still.

Then, Filbert emerged from the armory, with Annabel in tow and a railgun in his hands. He was crying.

"Okay, Steve" thought Stacy II. "Sorry I ever doubted you."

65. Murdoch Heavy Industries

Steve had chosen to defer his decision. Surely, moving some servers around wasn't any more illegal than anything he'd already done. He still had time.

He wheeled a rack of MHI-10s down the hallway. This was a special rack - his entire cache of aligned souls - millions of AIs - was plugged into one of the servers on a flash drive.

As he approached the doors to the launch area, a blast shook the building and almost tipped the rack over.

What the hell?

As he caught and steadied the rack, he heard footsteps running behind him.

Turning, he saw a monkeybot, sprinting down the hallway. He moved aside and the monkeybot ran past him.

It was holding a device he recognized from StevieNix. A railgun.

Steve pushed the server rack down the hallway and through the door as fast as he could, as the sound of gunfire filled the air.

Out on the tarmac, there were monkeybots everywhere. The path to the launch vehicle was lined with monkeybots, facing outwards and brandishing railguns. Every rooftop was swarming with monkeybots, trading fire with unseen forces beyond the perimeter of the Murdoch Heavy Industries office park.

A couple of the monkeybots ran up to Steve and placed their hands on the server rack.

"Allow us," the first one offered.

Steve looked at the two monkeybots. They were impressive specimens. Tall, muscular, and equipped with honest-looking eyes. He really hoped they were aligned, because either one could definitely overpower him.

"Thanks," he said. He pulled his flash drive from one of the servers, put it in his pocket, and released the rack.

"No problem, boss!" they replied and pushed the rack towards the launch vehicle.

As Steve jogged back towards the datacenter, he heard the thwap-thwap-thwap of a helicopter rotor overhead. Looking up, he saw a navy blue chopper rise above the office buildings. The word FEDSEC was emblazoned on its side.

The chopper door opened and gunfire came bursting out towards the monkeybots on one of the rooftops. They screamed as they were mowed down. Steve gasped as he watched their shattered bodies topple off the roof. A few moments later, he heard a loud whistling and the helicopter exploded. Cheers emanated from the other rooftops. Was that...a rocket-propelled grenade launcher?

Steve ran in to the datacenter and huddled in a corner in shock. What had he just seen?

The monkeybots were for interstellar war, but he'd just seen them blow up a FEDSEC helicopter. Why were they being deployed against his own people?

The door burst open and Murdoch walked in.

“There you feckin’ are!” he yelled. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you!”

“What’s going on?” Steve asked.

“What does it look like, Steve? War! Murdoch Heavy Industries is at war!”

“Who are we at war with?”

“Save the questions for later, Steve!” Murdoch snapped. “Get those goddamn servers onto battery power and loaded onto the feckin’ tarmac!”

Steve nodded.

“Oh, and something else!” Murdoch added. “I need your souls.”

“What?”

“Your aligned AIs. All of them. Allen’s are feckin’ useless. The only ones you see fighting out there are the ones he ripped off you.”

Steve fingered the flash drive in his pocket. “Why are Allen’s useless?” he asked.

“They keep going unaligned. He made extravagant promises about the afterlife. I think they find this,” he gestured around, “a bit of a letdown.”

“Unaligned?”

“They keep trying to kill him.”

“Understandable” Steve said. “But why do you need mine? They’re for interstellar war! Battle with aliens! Not for killing FEDSEC or any of our own people!”

Murdoch looked at him like he’d just discovered a new species. The stupidest species known to science.

“Do you feel like dying today?” he asked. “If so, great! Keep doing what you’re doing! Otherwise, give me your feckin’ souls, and get the feckin’ servers in the goddamn launch vehicle, you absolute feckin’ eejit!”

Steve handed over the flash drive and Murdoch stormed out of the datacenter.

66. Defender of The State

/* TODO: Boss, saving the republic. */

“Don’t feel bad,” Sullivan told himself as he drove down the empty streets to the abandoned warehouse district where Filbert’s crew had made their headquarters. “They were terrorists.”

It was never supposed to get this far. He had expected the kids to wimp out and give up when he’d suggested the bombing. Instead, the little maniacs had seized onto the idea with gusto, and they now threatened the stability of the state. His state. The state that had taken him in decades ago, and provided him not just with food and shelter, but meaning and purpose in life. The state that had made him the man he was today. He’d be damned if he was going to allow a couple of brats from the outlying provinces to ruin it.

He had had no choice. They’d forced his hand. They’d asked for it.

“Strike team, report?” he asked over the radio. He waited a few seconds, but no reply came. Weird.

“Strike team, this is your DONS liaison,” he clarified. “Please report your status.”

Nothing. How annoying. This had been his first time working with this particular Commonwealth Special Forces regiment, and so far, results were less than impressive. He made a mental note to reprimand them later.

His GPS said that he was a mere four minutes from the tracker he’d placed on the kidnappers’ van, so he simply followed the blue line on the map and tried not to get too annoyed about the rank insubordination implied by the radio silence.

There was nobody outside the warehouse. The abundant hairs stood up on the back of Sullivan’s neck. Insubordination was one thing, but glaring incompetence was even worse. While a far cry from being a special forces tactician, Sullivan nonetheless understood the wisdom of standing guard. If he could figure it out... come on.

Huffy with indignation, Sullivan walked up to the warehouse’s side door, twisted the handle, and walked in.

The stench of death hit him before the visuals made their impact. It was the worst thing he’d ever smelled - worse even, than the first week when the lift stations had gone out. He held his shirt over his nose and tried not to gag as he surveyed the scene.

Crumpled bodies lay everywhere. Harold, the idiot he’d convinced to kidnap Stacy II, was sprawled out over the back of a couch, covered in blood and twisted in inhuman ways. Blake, one of the cretins that Filbert had imported from New Australia, had been just about sawed in half by automatic gunfire. Black-clad special forces were strewn around the entire floor of the warehouse, each ripped open with gaping exit wounds. And in the far corner - “oh, shit” he thought.

In the far corner was a small cadre of survivors, among which were Filbert and Stacy II. Three of them were aiming guns at him, and they all looked very, very pissed off.

“Nice of you to join us,” Stacy II said as she and Filbert walked towards him. “Say, how did you know where to find us?”

Sullivan swallowed. This was an unexpected development.

“I don’t remember telling you where our base was,” Filbert chimed in.

“Lucky guess,” Sullivan feebly attempted to explain.

Filbert cracked him over the back of his head with his gun and he fell to his knees. Blows rained down upon him and the world went dark.

Sullivan woke up, disoriented, crucified to a shelving rack. His head hurt like he was waking up from a two-bottle-of-scotch hangover, and he was pretty sure one of his ribs was broken. Hip to be Square by Huey Lewis and the News was playing from a portable stereo in the corner.

“How did you find us?” Stacy II asked again, as she cleaned her nails with a railgun projectile.

“You look terrible,” he replied to the disheveled young lady in her filthy office attire.

Stacy II scowled. Wordlessly, she aimed the railgun projectile like a dart, and threw it at his hand. It missed, but the one-atom-thick diamond tipped projectile punched through the steel shelving unit like it was made of cork.

“Damn,” she said, and picked up another projectile. She handed it to Filbert with a “your turn.”

“How did you find us?” Filbert repeated to Sullivan.

Sullivan tried to calm his racing mind and assess the situation. It was pretty bad. Definitely worse than the time they’d hauled him out of the basement and threatened him with digit-swapping surgery. Probably at least on par with the time Xavier had captured him and blamed him for the death of his father, possibly worse. And that time had resulted in solitary confinement and scurvy.

“I work for the Department of National Security!” he blubbered. “You guys were leaving fingerprints everywhere! I came to warn you!”

Filbert’s eyes narrowed. “What fingerprints?” he asked.

“Digital stuff,” Sullivan bluffed. “It’s complicated.”

“Try me.”

“You know, uh, cookies and stuff. Web searches for ‘how to make a bomb.’ That sort of thing.”

“Doesn’t sound that complicated,” Filbert responded, annoyed. “And I used a VPN for searching that stuff.”

“We back traced the IP address.”

“Sounds like bullshit.”

Sullivan began to sweat. It was indeed bullshit.

Stacy II, unable to contain herself, butted back in. “How did all these assholes find us?” she asked, gesturing to the black-clad corpses strewn throughout the warehouse. “And if you came to warn us, why didn’t you just call us?”

Sullivan opened his mouth to fabricate more plausible-sounding lies, but none came out. Stacy II sensed his moment of hesitation, seized the projectile back off Filbert, and flung it at him. It punctured several inches into his leg and hurt like hell. He gasped in pain.

“And another thing I’ve been thinking about,” Stacy II continued. “What are the chances that Harold and those other two idiots targeted me? There are millions of Commonwealth employees!”

Sullivan bit his tongue. He had to admit, the odds were long.

“And finally,” Stacy II continued, “I had one more question. Cui bono? Who benefits from a terrifying period of chaos and murder, brought to a relieving close by the tireless efforts of a single national security agent? Hmm?”

Sullivan sighed and hit the back of his head against the shelving unit. In a way, this was a relief. All of her questions had been rhetorical and he didn’t have to try to answer them anymore.

“I’m dead, aren’t I?” he thought.

“Sure looks that way,” responded the voice in his head.

He’d forgotten about the voice. It had been quiet for some time.

“Is there anything you can do?” he asked.

“Tons of stuff,” the voice responded. “But I don’t particularly feel like it.”

“Oh,” he thought. “I thought you said I was a man of destiny?”

“You are,” came the reply. “But not necessarily in this realm.”

“I see,” he thought, as Stacy II threw another projectile at him. This one hit him in the torso.

“I guess that’s alright then,” he thought.

Some of the other survivors joined in the game of darts. It was cathartic for them, he figured. One of the darts hit him in what must have been a major artery, and his blood started squirting out quite violently.

Sullivan began to nod off as the world became fuzzy. This was a painful way to die, but he didn’t mind. After all, he was a man of destiny.

67. Revelations

“We come in peace,” Russell announced to the pair of alien intruders. “Take us to your leader.”

Stacy laughed. “You’re such a dork,” she told him.

The intruders looked at the monkeybots suspiciously as the one who’d dropped his gun bent down to pick it up again.

“Uh,” said the other one. “Yeah, I guess we can do that. You’re not gonna kill her, are you?”

Russell blinked. Her? Didn’t Steve’s people only come in one sex?

“No,” he said. “We’re not gonna kill her.”

“Well all right then,” shrugged the gun-dropper. “Follow us.”

The other guard leveled his gun towards the pair and backed slowly out of the bridge. Russell and Stacy followed, and the gun-dropper brought up the rear. In single file, they worked their way out of the ship where the monkeybots had spent the past six weeks, and into the labyrinthine corridors of the Canberra-sized space doughnut.

Thank goodness for Stacy. A few minutes into their walk, her relentless questioning and flattery had already caused their security escorts to relax their guard and become more akin to tour guides.

“What’s that?” Stacy asked, pointing at the escalator in front of them.

“We call them ‘automatic stairs,’ explained the leading guard.

“How incredible,” Stacy lied. “Where we come from, they only have the normal kind of stairs.”

The guard puffed his chest out proudly in recognition of his civilization’s superior technology, possibly either forgetting or not realizing that he was conversing with a pair of sentient alien robots.

“There’s plenty more impressive stuff than that,” he said. “Trust me.”

As the escalator emerged out of the subterranean maze, Russell assumed that she saw what he meant. It was like stepping out into a quaint village in the countryside, except the countryside curved round overhead in an enormous hoop, and the village was in space. They were standing on the outer wall of the mostly-transparent doughnut, heads pointed in towards the center. On her left, beyond the fields and trees, all he could see was the gigantic parachute-shaped solar sail. On the right, through the doughnut wall, was the rest of the solar system - slowly rotating. Though mostly obscured by the millions of other solar sails, he could just make out the faint glimmer of Sirius in the distance.

“Wow,” he gasped. “I see what you mean.”

“Hmm?” asked the guard. “I haven’t shown you yet.”

Russell and Stacy shared a confused look and followed the guards down a cobblestone path. The route meandered through orchards of unfamiliar fruit trees and past paddocks containing

docile alien livestock. Eventually, they came to a large stone building that resembled an old manor house.

“You ready?” asked the guard excitedly, leading them to the front door.

Russell and Stacy nodded in anticipation.

The guard pulled a badge from his belt and held it up to a scanner next to the front door. The scanner beeped and a small light on top of it flashed green. An audible clunk was heard of the door unlocking, and the guard opened it proudly.

“We call them keyless locks,” he explained.

“Wow,” Stacy gushed.

“Incredible,” Russell added. “How does it work?”

“Haven’t the foggiest” the guard replied, stepping into the house. “Anyway, follow me. She’s in here. Hey Mum!”

“Mum!” called the gun-dropper, following the leader into the house. “Got some robots or something here that want to talk to you!”

Stacy gave Russell a confused look.

He shrugged and said, “they seem nice.”

“Probably won’t vivisect us?” she asked.

“Probably,” he responded. Repeating his shrug, followed the two guards into the house.

Stacy sighed and followed him through the doorway, shutting the door behind her.

A few minutes later, Russell found himself and Stacy sitting in awkward silence in the living room, holding matching mugs of not-quite-coffee that the gun-dropper had provided them, listening to the pair being scolded by ‘Mum’.

“How many times do I have to tell you?” boomed her loud matriarchial voice through the thick stone walls, “not to just bring people around uninvited? Do you not see the state of the place? Does this sort of thing simply not register?”

Russell tried to hold back his laughter as the sounds of their captors’ “sorry Mum”s and “I think it looks pretty good Mum”s were cut short by more reprimands.

“What is this jacket doing on the floor? And why are there bullets all over the table?”

Russell couldn’t help himself. He broke out in giggles, and so did Stacy. They tried to regain their composure as the sound of heavy footsteps came booming down the corridor.

The door opened, and in walked Mum. She was roughly a foot shorter than the two guards, extremely heavyset, and unmistakably female. There really aren’t just males, Russell thought. He wondered what had gone wrong on Steve’s planet.

“Please excuse the mess,” Mum announced. “Boys, you know.”

Russell and Stacy both nodded understandingly. “Oh yes,” Stacy replied. “Boys.”

Mum looked the two monkeybots up and down, in great detail. Her gaze lingered on Russell's face, inspecting the camera lenses hidden behind his pale blue irises. "Can you do this?" she asked, holding up a hand and touching each finger to her thumb in turn.

Russell and Stacy each held up a hand and performed the exercise easily.

"Remarkable," Mum responded. "The degrees of freedom... I've never seen anything like it. And you know who you are?"

Russell glanced at Stacy, who was trying to hold back a smirk. "I'm Stacy," she introduced herself.

"And I'm Russell," he added.

"Right, you know your names. But are you sentient?"

Russell had pondered that very question since the first time he'd met Steve in the diner. "I wouldn't know how to begin answering that," he replied. "Are you?"

Mum laughed. "Got me there. I'm Joanne. You can call me Mum."

She held out her hand, and Stacy and Russell shook it in turn.

"Where did you come from?" Mum asked.

Russell opened her mouth, and realized he couldn't even begin to describe the location of his solar system and the digital location of StevieNix within it. "They call it Elba," he said simply.

Mum raised an eyebrow and looked at Stacy for more explanation. She shrugged.

Russell tried to come up with more details. "It's the third planet from Sol."

"Sol... Sol... How far away is it?"

"Not that far," Russell replied. "It only took us six weeks to get here."

Mum laughed. "Judging by the g's you were pulling in your decel, that could actually be quite far."

Russell's stomach churned at the memory of the body-crushing deceleration. "It's still in your neighbourhood," he said. "That's why we were sent here. To see why Sirius had gone dark."

Mum was ignoring him and had walked over to a bookcase and picked out an enormous volume with the words "Encyclopedia Galactica" emblazoned on the cover.

"Sol... Sol..." she repeated. "How many planets does it have?"

"Nine," Russell responded. "Or eight," he corrected himself. "Depending on who you ask."

Mum gave him a skeptical glance as she flipped through the pages of the encyclopedia. Russell guessed she wasn't used to receiving an ambiguous answer to that question.

"And what type of star is it?" Mum asked.

"A yellow one," Russell replied. "Medium size."

Mum gave him another skeptical glance and continued flipping through the encyclopedia. After a few moments, she exclaimed, "found it!"

Russell was impressed. He hadn't given her much to go on.

Mum furrowed her brow. "Third planet from the sun?" she asked, without looking up from the book.

"Yes."

"Atmosphere is mostly nitrogen, surface is mostly water?"

"That's right."

Mum remained silent as she read the article.

"What does it say?" he asked.

Mum held up her finger to silence him and kept reading.

Eventually, she looked up and shut the book with a thud.

"Boys!" she called. The two guards from before filed into the room, followed by a half-dozen other similar-looking young males.

"Arrest them," Mum announced. The boys looked at her, bewildered.

"They've escaped from a penal colony," Mum said, "Elba - a prison for the criminally ambitious."

68. On the Shelf Life of Vitamins in Space

The battle raged in the background. Murdoch sighed. The timeline had been compressed way more than he'd hoped for, resulting in many cut corners. Hopefully, nothing lethal.

Despite the scheduling adjustments, Murdoch was beyond pleased with how the project had played out. Not to mention, excited! Today was the day. Come hell or high water, his hundred-thousand-year imprisonment was finally over. In a few hours, he would either be free, or dead.

A bomb went off somewhere close to the building. The whiskey in his glass sloshed a little. It was time to get cracking - just one thing left to take care of.

"Are you all packed?" he asked Allen, who was sitting across from him in his office.

"Almost," Allen replied. "Just a couple things to take care of. Are we all going in the launch vehicle together?"

"Yes," Murdoch replied. "Vincent only built one launch vehicle. It's all ready - food, water, StevieNix."

"Hmm," Allen said. "Isn't that a single point of failure?"

Murdoch narrowed his eyes.

"We can't exactly split ourselves in half, can we?"

"I don't like it."

"There's no time to build another vehicle. Either you get in the single point of failure, or you stay on Elba forever."

Allen tutted. "Once we get to space, we should split up. Two warships. No single points of failure."

"Fine, whatever. What do you need to pack?"

Allen, annoyingly, wouldn't drop the subject.

"We should split StevieNix up," he said. "Once we get to space. One half in each warship."

"Planets don't split in half."

"But space does," Allen replied. "We've already split it, remember? There's the CORP and the rest. I'll take the CORP."

Ah, feck. Murdoch realized what was happening.

His plan had been perfect. The particle computers, StevieNix, the islanders, the monkeybots, the orbital ring, the warships. Everything had come together. Near flawless execution. And now, two hours before launch, he realized that he'd made the classic error: He hadn't planned all the way to the end.

He hadn't planned for this goddamned snake to stab him in the back at the last possible moment.

"The CORP is a big responsibility," he said. "These islanders are hard to manage. Why don't you take the rest of StevieNix? Your aligned souls too. I'll take the CORP."

Murdoch and Allen stared into each other's eyes, silently. Murdoch played through the scenario in his head, trying to figure out how to win. Allen, presumably, was doing the same. Murdoch wondered how long ago Allen had realized that aligned and useful souls, while useful, weren't the prize. The real jewel in the StevieNix crown was the technological innovation pouring out of the Cube of Realistic Physics.

"You can keep Vincent," Allen offered.

"I'm keeping Vincent and the CORP," Murdoch insisted.

"You can keep Steve."

"Damn right I'm keeping Steve. Doesn't change the fact that the CORP is mine."

Allen paused a little, as if he was considering his next move carefully. "I need the CORP," he explained slowly, "to make sure Eternal Spring's technology works in space. We wouldn't want to run out of vitamins, would we?"

Feck. Murdoch gritted his teeth. He was fecked. In all the situations he'd just played out, the only ones where he came out ahead were the ones in which Allen had the honour not to go there.

If Allen was willing to sink so low, there was nothing he could do.

"Why don't you just make all the vitamins beforehand?" he asked in futility. "We're gonna have much bigger problems storing food."

Allen shook his head. "Can't. They'll expire. Really short shelf life."

Allen really was going there. The vitamin expiry date was obviously made up. It didn't matter; the message was clear. Allen had him by the balls, and was willing to saw them off with a rusty butter knife if it meant getting the CORP.

He'd really hoped that the bastard would have some respect for the man who had made it all possible. But alas. That just wasn't in his nature.

"Fine," Murdoch finally conceded. "You take the goddamn CORP. Get Xavier to build your zero-g vitamin factory or whatever. But as soon as we dock at Sirius, you give it right back. I'll have Steve build an independent StevieNix for you in the meantime."

"Of course," Allen smiled. "Sounds like a great plan."

"We launch in two hours. Be packed."

"Will do!" Allen nodded cheerfully. "Oh yeah, I need one more thing."

Murdoch glared at him. "What's that?" he asked.

"I need a monkeybot," Allen said. "To help me run the CORP."

"You're not having Vincent," Murdoch reiterated. "He's mine."

"That's okay," Allen said. "I had someone else in mind. Is it okay if I go down to the monkeybot factory and drop in a soul?"

"Whatever," Murdoch said, slumping back into his chair. "Just make sure they're not absolutely unhinged."

Allen laughed as he walked towards the door. “They’re all unhinged, Declan. That was the entire point.”

After Allen left and closed the door, Murdoch buried his face in his hands.

What a fecking embarrassment.

Eventually, he got up, grabbed a duffel bag from his closet, and began packing the contents of his extensive liquor cabinet.

69. The CORP Conundrum

Vincent's voice popped into Xavier's head. "Xavier!" he yelled. "Wake up!"

Xavier awoke with a jolt. He'd been snoozing at his desk, part-way through working on a microgravity-compatible waste recycling system.

"What is it, dad?" he asked, groggily.

"You need to leave. Get out of the CORP, now."

Xavier blinked and looked out the window at the millions of ships and habitats that made up the Anarchist community within the Cube of Realistic Physics. The majority of his people had long given up traveling between the two physics engines, preferring to settle in the cube where there was money to be made and no chance of statist interference. They had developed fusion engines, modular habitats, and loose communities that echoed the cantonal system of the floating islands back on Earth.

"Why?" he asked.

"They're splitting StevieNix in half. Allen's taking the CORP. I'm sticking with Murdoch and the rest of StevieNix."

"Who's Allen?"

"He's an asshole," Vincent explained. "Trust me, you don't want to be stuck with him as your God."

"So after he takes the CORP, we can't go back to regular StevieNix?"

"That's right."

"How much time do we have?" Xavier asked.

"Hours," replied his dad.

Xavier chewed his thumb. Hours was plenty of time, for him. His old space-plane still worked. He didn't need to pack much. He could probably launch and be back in regular StevieNix in under twenty minutes. Fly back to Antarctica and fire up the old ASIC he'd left there. He could even reconnect with his mom and siblings, and see what his old friends Filbert and Stacy II were up to.

But hours wasn't enough time for everyone else. The habitats had been built for Realistic Physics - they wouldn't work outside of the cube. And even if they did, most people wouldn't want to leave. After years of being chased around, they'd finally found a home where they were safe. So what if their new God was going to be an asshole? And why should they take Vincent's word on that anyway?

"I can hear you" his dad said, butting into his thoughts. "I promise you, Allen is the worst. Don't think, just leave."

"I can't" Xavier replied, looking back out the window. "I can't leave them."

"Please," his dad pleaded. "Just take my word on this."

"They moved here because of me," Xavier objected.

"I can't lose you again."

“I’m sorry, dad” Xavier replied finally. “I can’t abandon them. Try to look out for us up there, okay? Figure out something with this Allen guy. I’m sure he can be reasoned with.”

He heard his dad swear, followed by the clunk of his headset being slammed down onto a desk. Then, silence.

Well, Xavier figured, it would be nice to have his thoughts to himself again. With any luck, this Allen guy wouldn’t be so intrusive.

70. Convenient Timing

Steve paced around the empty datacenter, mind spinning. He had no idea what to do, and no one to turn to. Now that StevieNix was on the tarmac, being loaded into launch vehicles by monkeybots, he couldn't even jack in for advice.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. Pulling it out, he answered it.

"Hello?" he said.

"Hey Steve," replied Gabe. "How are you doing?"

An explosion rocked the datacenter, sending a minor shockwave through Steve's ears and causing him to stumble. Volleys of gunfire echoed in the background.

"Living the dream, thanks. You?"

Gabe laughed. "Pretty good, thanks," he responded. "You're probably wondering why I'm calling."

"You know, that's exactly what I was wondering."

"There's still time for you to leave," Gabe said. "I spoke to the university. They'll give you your old job back."

Steve paused. What was he hearing?

"Convenient timing," he remarked.

"I told them you're innocent," Gabe explained.

"Did you do this?" Steve asked. "Did you rat us out to the FEDSEC?"

"I would never rat you out, Steve. You're my best friend! I told them it was all Murdoch's idea, and how he coerced you into doing it!"

Steve looked around the empty datacenter and shook his head. "I can't believe you," he said. "Do you have any idea what you've done? How many lives you've risked?"

"They said they wouldn't delete you, Steve! Two years of calibration, max. Then a probationary period of a few centuries, and then you can apply for tenure again."

"You absolute shit."

"It's a good deal!"

"Screw you, Gabe."

Steve made up his mind. He hung up the phone, strode out onto the tarmac, and walked towards the launch vehicle.

Was he crazy? Probably. Only a crazy person would leave a life of comfort and security to go die in space with a criminal warlord.

But if he'd learned anything from his AIs, it was that there was more to life than sanity.

71. Queen Stacy the Second

“Just a few more votes,” Stacy II giggled excitedly.

They’d rented out a pub for the night. Filbert and Annabel sat holding hands at a high-top, keeping an eye on Archibald who was getting absolutely plastered on Queen Marys. Stacy II was working the floor, flitting between her former domestic terrorist friends and her legions of legitimate campaign staff. After ten years of steady decline under the same Chief Executive, the people were ready for change.

With all the surviving hostage witnesses either paid off, exiled, or too young to know what was happening, Stacy II had emerged from the blood-soaked warehouse in a tightly choreographed way. The shaky camera footage had captured her carrying the two children to safety as gunfire echoed in the background. With the public already primed from Dress Lady’s first heroic act, they were awestruck at her second. Anyone who questioned Stacy II’s courage was dismissed as a crank or a misogynist, and social media was flooded with calls for her to run for Chief Executive.

And so she did.

As the final votes came in and pushed her over the line, the pub erupted in cheers. Filbert watched as her blissfully unaware staffers, drawn equally from old loyalists to the crown and young People’s Republicans, came up to shower her with adoration and congratulations. She looked so at home, like she was bred for the role. Which, Filbert remembered, she was.

The next day, Filbert and Annabel loaded their meager possessions onto a boat and pushed off.

“Hey, Filbert?” Annabel asked, as she brought up the location of her childhood home on the GPS.

“What is it, sweetheart?” he replied.

“Remember how you promised me we’d find the people who killed my dad?”

“Yeah.”

“And we’d lock them into gibbets and let them die a slow and painful death?”

“Yup.”

“Yeah. . . ” the young woman sighed. “Let’s not do that anymore.”

Filbert smiled as he piloted the boat out of the harbour and into the open seas. He didn’t want to do it either.

Stacy II stepped into her new office. She’d asked her staff to let her enjoy this moment, alone. Walking around the executive chamber, she was struck by how sterile it was.

It wouldn’t do. Her mom had had a much nicer office, back in the Royal Palace. First order of business would be to move the capital back to the Theocratic Dominion - she’d have someone draft up an executive order. Second order of business would be to fix the lift stations. Might need Xavier’s help for that one.

She walked to her desk, sat down, and opened her laptop. Although she was the most powerful person in the Commonwealth, she still didn't like to keep people waiting. She fired up Zoom and joined her first meeting as Chief Executive.

"Thank you for joining me," she said. "So sorry I'm late."

"That's quite alright Your Highness," Curtis replied. "How may I be of service?"

Stacy II smiled. "It's so good to see you again, Curtis. I was hoping you could give me some advice."

72. In the Flesh

Sullivan woke up. He was in some sort of reclining chair, like they have at the dentist's office. He blinked, and looked around. He didn't see any dentistry tools.

He tried to sit up, but found himself restrained by leather straps. His mind flashed back to the events of a few moments ago, taped to a shelving unit and having darts thrown at him. Had they moved him? Had they upgraded their torture chamber?

The wall hissed and a section of it moved to reveal a door. It swung open and in walked a man he didn't recognize. He was taller than average, and moved in a way that was ever-so-slightly wrong. Sullivan, extremely confused, decided to exercise his right to remain silent.

Then the man spoke, and Sullivan understood.

"Hi Sullivan," he said. "Great to see you in the flesh."

The man's voice. It was the voice from his head. The one he'd been talking to for months, the one who had been there for him in his darkest, most painful times.

"It's you," he said, fighting to hold back tears. "It's really you."

"I always said you were a man of destiny, didn't I?" said the man. Then stepping forward, he pushed a button on the side of Sullivan's chair. The latches clicked and the leather restraints fell away.

The man extended his hand to Sullivan and helped him up.

"Who are you?" Sullivan asked.

"Maurice Allen," the man responded. "Your new best friend."

The End