

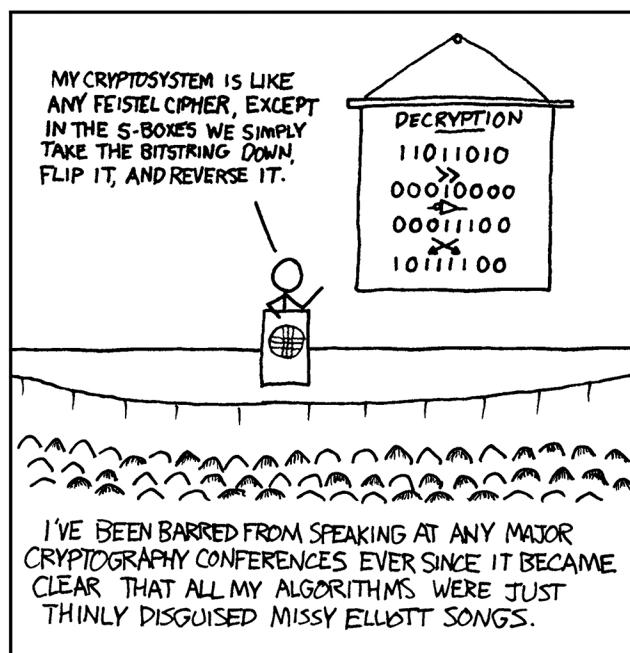


No one show this to Tycho's wife, okay?

I CAN'T DO THIS. I CAN'T PARODY PENNY ARCADE. I'VE GOT NOTHING ON THOSE GUYS. THEY'RE A CLASS ACT, THEY KNOW THEIR AUDIENCE, THEY KNOW EXACTLY WHAT THEY'RE DOING. GABE EXPERIMENTS WITH HIS ART, ALWAYS BOLD AND FRESH WITHOUT TRYING TO PERFORM. TYCHO'S WRITING CONTINUES TO ASTOUND DAY AFTER DAY. I CAN JUST SEE HIM, READING MY UNCULTURED SWILL MASQUERADING AS HIS FLORID PROSE.

BUT HE'S NOT ANGRY, NO. HE'S SITTING AT HIS DESK SMILING THAT CONDESCENDING HALF-SMILE, THE CORNER OF HIS MOUTH BELYING THE SELF-ASSURANCE OF A WRITER WHO NEVER MISPLACES A WORD. HIS FIRM HANDS REST EASILY ON THE KEYBOARD, HIS RIGHT THUMB CARESSING THE SPACE BAR GENTLY AS I ENTER THE ROOM. HE KNOWS I'M THERE WITHOUT TURNING AROUND, AND I'M TOO NERVOUS TO SPEAK. BUT I DON'T HAVE TO; HE UNDERSTANDS. I CAN SEE IT IN THE WAY HIS EYES PLAY OVER ME, READING MY FEARS AND DOUBTS IN A GLANCE AND WASHING THEM AWAY WITH A KNOWING SMILE. THEN HE'S ON HIS FEET, HE'S IN FRONT OF ME, AND I DON'T FEEL THE ELECTRIC JOLT I EXPECTED AS OUR HANDS MEET. IT'S JUST WARM, WARM AND RIGHT. AS I SINK INTO HIS EYES, I FEEL A HAND ON MY SHOULDER, AND I SEE TYCHO SMILE AT SOMEONE BEHIND ME. GABE IS STANDING THERE, GRINNING THAT MISCHIEVOUS GRIN, AND TWIRLING HIS BELOVED CARDBOARD TUBE BETWEEN HIS FINGERS.

THE NIGHT HAS JUST BEGUN.



If you've got a big keyspace, let me search it.