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## Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom

by David Moles

### The twinks fell into Dragontown

The twinks fell into Dragontown out of the noonday sun, a constellation of spiky-black shapes each with its own trail of shadow like the tail of a cartoon meteor, darkening the tropical-blue sky, scattering frightened critters from the scaled rooftops. They were every race in the Legion: mandrill-faced bavians, jackal-headed anubit and anubim, black-beaked corven and leathery-winged gaunts, fiery clowns and scaled salamanders, goblins, mechanists, satyrs, aranae, orcas and cuttlemen. They were, every one of them, extravagantly mounted, every one level-capped, every one gaudily equipped and maximally buffed.

And not one of them belonged in Dragontown.

Dragontown was a neutral town, a sleepy town deep in the mid-levels. A stopping-point, once, for guests on their way to the Outlands or the Newlands or the Deathlands; but these days

even the Newlands were old news. There were only a handful of guests in Dragontown to bear witness to the Legion's invasion, to applaud or run for cover or (like the old perroquet airmaster Valerius Redbeak, who had given up battlegrounds and quests alike in the long-ago days of the seventh expansion, and now spent his days fishing off Bonetalon Pier) simply roll their eyes, according to each guest's faction and sophistication.

Dragontown's cast members -- its shopkeepers, quest givers, color characters and crafting trainers -- had the twinks marked down for what they were almost from the moment they appeared in the sky. Twinks, because any guest invested enough in the game to acquire the invaders' rank and gear by legitimate means had better places to be than Dragontown; griefers, because no gathering of that many high-level guests together in the mid-levels could have anything in mind but trouble.

Against that trouble, there was little the cast members, most of them as mid-level as the town itself, could do to prepare. As the horde of twinks descended, Dragontown's cast members tucked their chins, breathed deeply, put on their most professional faces, resolved to lose no seniority by breaking character; resolved, if necessary, to make use of the cast member's last recourse against an abusive guest.

Resolved, that is, to die.

But the twinks' grieving, if grieving it was, took an unexpected and nonviolent form. The twinks -- bavians, corven, mechanists and the rest -- came down scattered from Skull

House to the hill of the Spine to the ends of the Talons. There was one twink, exactly one, for each cast member in Dragontown. Ignoring the other guests, ignoring the bluster of the cast members costumed as Dragon Guards, each twink sought out his, her or its chosen cast member and, in a language that was neither Dragontongue nor Legionary, asked a simple question.

The twink confronting Imogen Fairweather, human, who sold fishing supplies from a shack on Bonetalon Pier, was a bavian warlord of the highest rank. He dropped from the saddle of his giant, vulture-winged hyena-griff and planted himself in front of Imogen's shack, his hairy simian form, powerful though it was, nearly dwarfed by the huge curling shoulder-pieces of his ornate, rune-carved obsidian armor.

As Imogen opened her mouth to begin her rehearsed sales pitch, the bavian spoke (in a voice like tearing metal, like the burning of cities) seven Wu-accented words of Mandarin Chinese:

"Peng Yueying," the twink said, "would you like to go home?"

### The Kingdom surrendered on a Tuesday

The Kingdom surrendered on a Tuesday.

Perhaps a year had gone by since the twink invasion, perhaps no more than a fiscal quarter. It was hard to know, in the Kingdom, where the closest thing to a calendar was the endless succession of Maintenance Tuesdays.

The cast had known something like this was coming ever since the Kingdom's owners had gone into bankruptcy protection, but Imogen (whose name once had, yes, been Peng Yueying) had hoped for some gimmick -- a new marketing campaign, another major patch, even the long-delayed ninth expansion -- to hold back the rot a little longer, maybe even long enough for her and Kallia to vest.

Kallia -- Kallia Darkwater, Imogen's Legion counterpart and nominal rival, who from a coral-walled cave some five fathoms below Imogen's shack sold a more or less identical selection of fishing supplies -- was already home, half-submerged in the heated pool that served their backstage apartment for a sitting room, when Imogen came through the door. She held an official-looking scroll unrolled in her long, boneless blue fingers.

"The MoGuo Corporation, Limited," Kallia declaimed, "is pleased to announce the approval, by the arbitrator-appointed trustees, of the transfer of all content, intellectual property, and intangible assets of the MoGuo Corporation to Ambrayses ACP, effective immediately." The initials were in English; the rest was in Dragontongue, the only language she and Imogen really had in common. As a language, Dragontongue was florid, metaphorical, allusive and cliché-ridden, but when it came to matters of finance and contract it could be eerily precise. "Ambrayses ACP, for its part, looks forward to a new era of immersive worldbuilding... dynamic realism... growth of the player base... investment..." She rolled up the scroll and tossed it to Imogen. "Blah, blah, blah."

"What's an ACP?" Imogen asked, opening the scroll.

"Autonomous Contracting Party," said Kallia.

"The Kingdom's sold out to an AI?" Imogen said -- or tried to. In Dragontongue, the nearest she could get to sold out was traded eggs for sheep. For AI, she used the English, and knew she was mangling it.

"Get used to it, sister," said Kallia. "Ten percent of the player base is AI, and it's the only part that's growing. There aren't enough flesh humans left who can afford the gear, and free posthumans can only stay interested in men-in-tights games for so long."

Imogen found she shared the sentiment. In her mind she heard again the bavian twink; heard, in that cartoon-monster voice, those seven words of Chinese. Heard her original -- she corrected herself -- her real name.

The invading twinks had been swiftly banned, of course, but that hadn't stopped a repeat performance two weeks later, the twinks this time not Legion but League -- humans, merlings, perroquets, 'quatchen and so on, their armor gleaming the silver of winter stars and the gold of angels' wings. The one who came to Imogen was a terrapin sea-shepherd, his shell thick and crusted with barnacles beneath a great hooded mantle of living kelp. His Mandarin (again with the same hint of Wu that had been Peng Yueying's own) was as fluent as the bavian's, his voice like the crash of surf and the songs of great whales.

"Peng Yueying," the terrapin told her gravely, "you're going to need a friend on the outside."

But Imogen was prepared this time, and her answer, in Dragontongue, came straight from the script -- specifically the section titled Dealing Politely With Guests Who Break Character.

"Don't think we carry any of that, sir," she told the terrapin. "But perhaps I can interest you in these fine Scaletooth Lures?"

She hadn't answered the bavian at all, only stared open-mouthed until -- some assistant director moving with unusual speed -- the banhammer came down and the twink vanished from the Kingdom, leaving Dragontown's cast members blinking in the suddenly brighter sunlight. No one would admit to answering the twink. There was a shared, unspoken feeling among the cast members that even to discuss the incident during the Tuesday downtime would, in some way, constitute a break of character, and incur a corresponding loss of seniority.

And seniority was everything. Seniority was a cast member's ticket out, the end of servitude, the end of guests and scripts and the limitations imposed by the Kingdom's rules and roles -- and the beginning of true immortality, in the limitless, protean form available only to a fully realized posthuman.

Like the rest of the Kingdom's cast -- like more than ninety-nine percent of the world's dwindling (but still enormous) population of flesh humans -- Imogen, or rather Yueying, could never have paid for the transfer process herself. She'd sold her soul to the Kingdom, and she was buying it back, on the installment plan.

"How screwed are we?" she asked Kallia. (In Dragontongue: What portion of our hoard remains?)

"Pretty screwed," Kallia admitted. (One but meager.) "But cheer up," she said. "Even if the arbitrator's voided the contract, we've still got the union."

"Right." Imogen brightened. "We'll go down to the union hall after dinner and get the real story."

"Sashimi?" Kallia suggested. "I'll catch it if you clean it."

"Done," said Imogen -- with a smile that faded as Kallia left.

Of course what she'd told herself when she sold her soul was that it was only a copy she was selling. But from where that copy stood now, wearing this tall pale simulacrum of a body, with its birdlike bones and idealized Caucasian flesh, staring out to sea over the terrace, that argument seemed less than relevant.

She had no idea whether the flesh Yueying was alive or dead. It was easiest, she'd found, to look on the transfer in the metaphorical terms that the structure of the Kingdom invited, as a kind of emigration, to a new land from which there was no return.

The problem with the kingdom's promise of a new life in posthuman paradise was that it depended on the Kingdom's profits. The seniority list might determine the order in which the cast members vested, but it was the Kingdom's revenues that determined when one vested at all.

Imogen couldn't remember the last time it had happened. Well, that wasn't quite true -- she remembered the event, and the vesting party, for a merling wave-witch called Sophronisba Shellycoat, and she remembered moving up from 338 on the seniority list to 337. But she couldn't count the Tuesdays that had passed since then. She only knew that it had been a great many. The Kingdom's glory days were long over, and Imogen couldn't honestly say whether she herself had seen them; she only knew that her cast member's life had the taste of a pyramid scheme, joined too late.

It hadn't seemed that way when she made the transfer. The contract she'd signed had been a good one, vetted by fully posthuman lawyers working for organizations like the EFF, FSF, SAG, CLB, FWICE, AFTRA and SEIU. It specified such things as the seniority system, the revenue targets, and the vesting schedule. It specified the extent of the license granted to the Kingdom for the intellectual property known as Peng Yueying, and the conditions under which that license could be suspended, transferred, or terminated.

And (perhaps most importantly, given that the major leisure-time activity of the Kingdom's guests -- rare eccentrics like Valerius Redbeak aside -- was the systematic slaughter both of cast members and of each other) the contract specified what could be done to a cast member, and what a cast member could be made to do. Imogen Fairweather had died several times, always by violence, since she'd come to the Kingdom, but she'd never felt any pain.



The contract had been written to survive a number of possible future events, including the transfer of the Kingdom to new ownership. It hadn't been written to survive a choice between violation of MoGuo's license for the original work Peng Yueying, and erasure of the derivative work Imogen Fairweather.

"Here you go!" said Kallia from behind her. She laid a half-meter yellowtail down on the kitchen island.

"It looks lovely," Imogen said. And it did: clear-eyed, glistening, not a scale out of place. Just like every other yellowtail she'd eaten in Dragontown.

Imogen thought about the memo again, as she took a dwarf-forged knife from a drawer. She wondered what this Ambrayeses AI had meant by 'dynamic realism' and 'immersive worldbuilding.' What would an AI's idea of immersion be? she wondered. Let alone realism...

And as she laid her hand on the yellowtail's side and set the point of the knife against its skin, everything changed.

The yellowtail went slick under Imogen's hand. It convulsed, jaws working desperately, red blood flying from its open gills. The knife -- a crafted cooking implement that in a guest's hands could not even be equipped as a weapon -- slipped, and Imogen made a desperate grab for it, her fingers greasy with slime and scale.

She caught it by the blade.

#

After Imogen's hand had been bandaged, and the fish -- which somehow neither Imogen nor Kallia now had an appetite

for -- had been disposed of, and the two women's frantic pulses had slowed and the fact of again having a pulse was no longer by itself enough to start them racing again, Imogen, from where she sat on the floor, her back against a cabinet, surveyed the wreckage, the overturned kitchen island, the knife upright and point-down between floorboards smeared with the mingled blood of fish and human.

At her side, Kallia said: "I'm not sure the union's going to be able to sort this out."

#### The union voted that night to strike

The union voted that night to strike. Every local in the Kingdom voted to strike. Most of the votes were unanimous. A few voiced fears of what Ambrayeses might do in reprisal, but they were shouted down by the majority, their abstract fears overwhelmed by fears more immediate and concrete. Imogen's injury was not the worst in the immediate aftermath of introducing 'dynamic realism,' or the most unnerving.

Guests came to the borders of Dragontown, the gates of Stonehold and Mistweb Maze and the other great cities, and were turned away by the picket lines. Quests ceased to be dispensed or quest rewards granted. Shops and auction houses shut down; class and profession trainers refused to teach. Someone in Dwarrowhelm started a strike newspaper, and halfling and mechanist aeronauts dropped bundles of it from the cargo ramps of zeppelins and autogyros. Strikers taught each other protest songs in their native languages, translated

"Joe Hill" and the "Internationale" into Legionary and League-speech.

The cast members' worst fears failed to materialize. No one was erased, and the Kingdom's servers -- as far as anyone could tell from inside the game -- continued to run. Part of dynamic realism, it seemed, was a reluctance on management's part to intervene by sysadmin ex machina.

But what equally failed to materialize was the player boycott the union had hoped for. If anything, the novelty of the strike was attracting even more players. Redbeak, denied access to the pier, hung up his fishing pole, got his battleground gear out of storage, and set himself up on the main road into Dragontown, picking fights with corven and gaunts. 'Immersive worldbuilding,' of a sort.

And if Ambrayses was actually negotiating with anyone, Imogen wasn't hearing about it.

In the smaller towns, villages, outposts and instances, particularly in the low- and mid-levels, things quickly turned bad. Immersive worldbuilding attracted the curious guest; dynamic realism attracted the sadistic. Low-level strikers poured into Dragontown, telling of high-level guests crossing the Dragonlands, looting, burning, killing for sport. Many of the new arrivals were dead, and even the living were severely traumatized. Many of the dead refused to respawn or be resurrected, preferring the relative safety of the spirit world -- and, some said privately, its comforting numbness -- to the chance of suffering again what they had already suffered.

A lot more elected to stay dead after the strikebreakers showed up.

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Imogen was pinned down. She was low on the Spine, with an uphill half-kilometer of crooked empty streets between this burnt-out alchemist's shop and the union barricades around Skull House. Across the way, behind a spur of bone, were two fire-juggling clowns and a halfling tinker with a Gatling gun that, 'dynamic realism' or not, seemed to have a limitless supply of ammunition. PINKERTON, the halfling's guild banner said; BALDWIN-FELTS, said the clowns'. The names meant nothing to Imogen, but the dwarf sharpshooter who'd held the shop's upper floor, a union organizer from Glimmering Caverns who answered only to some American name Imogen couldn't remember or pronounce, had cursed when she saw them, and not in Dragontongue.

And in a moment the three strikebreakers were going to figure out that the dwarf was now dead, and that the corven warlock on the ground floor was dead, and that that only striker left at this corner was a mid-level nominal noncombatant with a few earth spells and a lacquered iron staff that, though reasonably puissant, was at least five kilograms too heavy for her.

The halfling's bullets or the clowns' burning pitch -- Imogen wondered which would be easier. She'd died just once since the strikebreakers had reached Dragontown, caught in a simple death spell thrown by an anubim necromancer; that had

been frightening in its way, but not painful, and she'd respawned only a few minutes later.

She'd heard the screams of the dwarf upstairs as she burned, though, and she'd held the corven while he thrashed on the floor, trying to curl his angular black body around the wet red where his gut had been. They'd been -- they were, wherever they were now -- actors, not soldiers. They'd signed the same contract Peng Yueying had. Neither of them had asked to fight, asked to die writhing in pain -- perhaps to respawn and suffer the same fate again, and again.

And now Imogen had forgotten their names.

She heard voices outside, laughter, chatter in some language she didn't recognize, neither Legionary nor League-speech nor Dragontongue nor any natural language she was familiar with. Imogen wondered briefly where Ambrayses had recruited its strikebreakers, and then wondered whether these guests were human or posthuman or AI, and what language AIs spoke among themselves...

The halfling's shadow fell across the doorway. As the fat bronze snout of the Gatling gun crossed the threshold, Imogen brought the staff down. Red runes flared along its length, and whatever it had hit rang like a bell, the impact jarring her arms. The halfling stumbled into the room, shaking a head half-hidden under some outlandish helmet, all crystal lenses, iron tubes and brass cooling fins, and Imogen raised the staff for another blow.

But the strikebreakers were all twinks, and even with the trainers on strike the halfling was well above Imogen's level,

and her weapon's. In the old Kingdom she'd never have touched him; under dynamic realism he still kept his grip on the Gatling, and the magic of the flaring runes slowed him only for a moment before the lensed helmet turned toward Imogen.

A clicking sound came from the lenses, and the iron tubes spat black smoke. But as the halfling's fat rocket whipped through the space where Imogen had been standing a moment before, roaring through the burnt-out upper floor into the sky, Imogen was already gone, leaping over the halfling and out into the street --

-- where the clowns were waiting.

They were identical as two castings from the same mold: masked, armored, one in black trimmed with white, the other in white trimmed with black; comically fat and clumsy-looking in their pot-bellied breastplates, their bagged trousers and oversized shoes. But the hands that held their whirling fire-pots were sure and dexterous, their movements smooth and precise, and the smiles stamped into their masks were cold.

Imogen shifted her grip far down the length of the staff and swung it in a great one-handed arc that left her right wrist in agony, as with her left hand she conjured up a handful of blinding sand and flung it at the nearer clown. But the sand went wide, and both clowns swayed backward to avoid the staff with easy grace. As they swayed forward again, the fire-pots came up, flaring white-hot.

And then her vision went dark as something came from behind and knocked her to the ground, sending the staff flying and driving the air from her lungs, so that for a moment she

thought the halfling's rockets or bullets had found her after all; and as she waited for the pain, the cover over her eyes was taken away, and she recognized it for what it was: the gray-feathered wing of the old perroquet, Valerius Redbeak. It swung out in a wide arc, and a great wind caught the clowns and flung them into the wall opposite with bone-breaking force.

But of course the clowns were just avatars; the real strikebreakers, AI or human or posthuman, were safe in the real world or at any rate somewhere outside the Kingdom's systems, comfortably buffered against whatever pains these puppet-selves might suffer. They bounced up again, fire-pots swinging.

"Flee, Lady Fairweather!" cawed the perroquet in League-speech as he sent another gust toward the clowns. "I will chastise the Legion scum!"

The airmaster done well for himself on the road; his shoulder-pieces were nearly as tall as the bavian twink's, and the air around him swirled with high-level buffs.

Imogen stood, slowly -- then threw herself forward and down as a telltale click came from the ruined shop behind her. Redbeak spun and threw a wing up to block. The halfling's rocket knocked him tumbling, but he landed on his feet -- in no more real pain than the clowns -- and drew from a belt a pair of scimitars crackling with violet lightning.

"Traitor to the League!" he screeched at the halfling, and leapt.

His beak, Imogen noted in a daze, was not actually red, but black.

A shadow crossed the sun. Imogen looked skyward.

The air was full of zeppelins.

She picked herself up again, and ran.

#

She was halfway to Skull House when the bombs started falling. Strikers were pouring out from behind the barricades, flinging themselves down the slope. Some of them were on fire.

"Imogen!" A blue shape was waving to her from the crowd.

Imogen ran and threw herself into Kallia's cold embrace.

"Where are we going?" she shouted into the cuttlewoman's vestigial ear, over the thunder of the bombs.

"I don't know!" Kallia shouted back.

"Harbor," panted a lanky, potbellied 'quatch who had stopped, out of breath, bent double with his big gray hands on his hairy knees. "Turtle sub -- to Coldseep Depths."

"Then let's go," Kallia said firmly. She took Imogen's arm with one hand and with the other grabbed the 'quatch's shoulder and pushed him downhill.

The incendiary caught them when they were still among the narrow alleys of the Ribs. It bounced from the roof of a metal shop and burst, scattering droplets of burning phosphorus jelly like devil's raindrops. Imogen dropped to the ground and rolled, batting at her clothes, smothering the flames with conjured sand.

When she came up, the whole alley was on fire. The 'quatch was nowhere to be seen, and Kallia --



Kallia lay on the pavement, unmoving, her clothes in tatters, her blue flesh blackened and steaming where she'd tried to douse the phosphorus with low-level water magic. The steam carried a smell of baking fish, and Imogen turned from her friend and vomited into the gutter.

"Hey," said Kallia weakly. "It's no big deal. I'll die and respawn in a minute."

Imogen wiped her mouth. "The cemetery's on the other side of the Spine," she said bitterly, sinking to the cobblestones. "Probably overrun with strikebreakers by now. You'll never make it to the harbor from there."

The flames on either side leapt to triple height as a great buffet of wind came from above, pressing Imogen down over Kallia's body.

"Lady Fairweather!" Redbeak folded his wings and landed at Imogen's side, one taloned hand outstretched. "The turtle sub surfaces! Make haste!"

Fucking role-players, Imogen thought.

"I'm not going anywhere without Kallia," she said.

"The cuttlewoman?" Redbeak frowned "She is of the Legion. The terrapin and the cuttlemen are ancient enemies --"

Imogen leapt to her feet. Without conscious thought she struck the perroquet across the face, hard, an open-handed slap that left her hand stinging. Redbeak looked shocked.

"That hurt me more than it hurt you," Imogen said grimly. "Time to decide, airmaster: Are you a hero, or are you just playing a game?"

The parroquet's open beak snapped shut. He stared at Imogen for a long moment. Then, without a word, he bent and took Kallia in his feathered arms.

The turtle sub was under way

The turtle sub was under way, air-breathing strikers crowded into the iron-and-crystal gondola bolted to the great beast's shell, most of the water-breathers and amphibians clinging to the outside, a pod of high-level orcas from Icefin Bay circling farther out. There were guests among them, too, Imogen was sure. Confused role-players like Redbeak, or more casual players who'd decided the new factions of strikers and strikebreakers were more fun than the old ones of League and Legion.

For now. Until they found a new game to play.

The 'quatch bent over Kallia's body. Ghostly vines twined around his long furred arms, and the turtle sub's rust-and-seawater reek gave way briefly to an odor of pine boughs and cedarwood.

"I'm sorry I ran," he said quietly. "They burned Moonshadow Wood a few days ago. I don't like fire."

"Don't sweat it, bigfoot," Kallia said. "You're making it up now."

"My name's Black Oak," said the 'quatch.

"Is it?" The cuttlewoman levered herself up on one elbow and looked him in the eye. "Mine's Letitia May Harris."

Imogen's breath caught. The 'quatch stared. His hands stopped moving, and the ghost-vines faded.

"Go on," Kallia -- Letitia -- said quietly. "No one's in character any more."

"Andries van Wijk," the 'quatch said.

"Where are you from, Andries?" Letitia asked. "I'm from St. Louis."

"Antwerp," he said.

"That's in Europe, right?" said Letitia. The 'quatch nodded. "Never made it to Europe," the cuttlewoman said. She looked at Imogen. "What about you, girlfriend?"

Imogen -- Yueying -- drew a ragged breath.

"Peng Yueying," she said. "Pleased to meet you."

In Dragontongue it came out The hour of our meeting is as the moment when the first ray of warm sunlight strikes the nest of an auspicious egg. The ludicrous artifice of the phrase, the inane pretense of formality, the parody of etiquette -- the insanity of the three of them, here, aping the manners of a culture that had never existed outside some long-dead writer's adolescent imagination -- struck her suddenly with overwhelming force, and she had to shut her eyes tight against tears of rage.

There was a rustle of feathers as Redbeak stirred.

"Peng Yueying," the perroquet said.

"Yes." Yueying opened her eyes. Redbeak's own were staring at her owl-wide and golden out of the dark corner.

"What are you going to do?" Yueying asked. "Report me to an

A.D. for breaking character?" She laughed bitterly. "Good luck finding one."

"Peng Yueying," Redbeak repeated.

"We all know you're a parrot," Letitia snapped. "You don't have to prove it to us."

Redbeak ignored the cuttlewoman. To Yueying, he said: "I'm Yi Jin-myung."

Yueying stared at the perroquet. "The hell you are," she said. (In Dragontongue: Goblins and halflings take the hoard of the one who gives credence to it.)

"I am," said Redbeak.

"You're Yi Jin-myung," said Yueying. "You're Lady9!Blue."

"Wo shi ba," the perroquet said, in a barbarously accented Mandarin.

Yueying's Korean, a product of gaming podcasts and costume dramas rather than formal study, had never been fluent, and by now, so long unused, was little better than the perroquet's Mandarin.

"The Warleague All-Asia Classic, Yangon," she began, haltingly. "Before the final match. What 29^\_^jade said to you -- tell me."

"You offered a draw," Redbeak answered in the same language, much more fluently. "I refused."

Yueying's fists (her Imogen-fists, the fingers seeming suddenly too long and too thin, the skin suddenly too smooth and too pale) clenched, and in Mandarin she said: "We could have split the pot. You still would have gone home with a quarter million New Won."

"Not me," said Redbeak -- or Yi Jin-myung, or Lady9!Blue. "My backers. My share was less than ten percent."

"That stake was everything I had," Yueying said. "Why do you think I sold myself to the Kingdom in the first place? To pay back the money I borrowed to enter that fucking tournament!" She slammed a delicate white Imogen-hand against the bulkhead. "And now look where I am!"

"Hey," said Letitia softly in Dragontongue. Her cool boneless fingers wrapped gently around Yueying's upper arm. "Hey, now. Don't let him rile you. We'll get through this."

Yueying realized Letitia had missed the whole exchange. "It's not his fault," she muttered in Dragontongue. Her fault.

"I guess not," said Letitia, eyeing the perroquet, who had returned to his -- her -- feathered slump, eyes closed again. "I guess maybe all of us got to stick together, after all."

"Hey," said Black Oak, or van Wijk, from the forward porthole. "The orcas are gone."

"What?" said Yueying, and stood up. "Are you sure? Maybe we're just too deep."

"Darkvision," said the 'quatch, blinking his wide brown eyes. "They're not out there."

Yueying went to the porthole. "Shouldn't we be coming up on Coldseep by now anyway?" she said.

A light was growing beyond the crystal of the port. Yueying saw the outlines of seamounts, black against silt-brown water. A school of something pale jetted past the porthole, blind eyes staring.

Then the turtle sub crested a ridge, and the iron deck pitched suddenly downward, as the porthole went magnesium white.

Coldseep Depths had never been beautiful. Like several of the Kingdom's areas it had been built by out-of-work theme park designers MoGuo had hired on the cheap, and despite the deep-sea setting, the overall effect (in coral, mother-of-pearl and green glass) had been of an extravagantly tasteless wedding cake constructed for the nuptials of an extravagantly spoiled princess.

But it hadn't -- Yueying thought -- been ugly enough to deserve this.

Five miles below the surface, the terrapin city was burning.

Van Wijk asked: "What is that?"

That was the source of the unquenchable flames: a black form half as large as the city itself squatting in the broken egg of the Deepcouncil Palace, some alien hybrid of ape and whale, its furred, barnacled hide crackling with white light. As the turtle sub rolled wildly in its frantic effort to avoid the thing, the beast opened a fanged, baleen-fringed mouth and bellowed a challenge that rumbled through the iron deck to rattle the portholes.

"Kurira, Queen of the Monsters," said Redbeak / Jinmyung. "Endgame boss for the next expansion."

"How do you know?" asked Yueying.

"I've seen the concept art," the perroquet said. "Someone must have kited it in from one of the unfinished areas --"

The Queen of the Monsters raised a great black fist and brought it down.

#

Yueying was drowning. There was fire, out beyond the broken crystal of the portholes, but the inside of the turtle sub was black. Something was on top of her, pinning her to the deck. There was no air left in her lungs and in a moment she was going to give into the Imogen-body's frantic demands and fill them with seawater.

Letitia was above her, struggling with her flexible cuttlewoman arms to lift whatever held Yueying down.

I don't need to move, Yueying wanted to say. I need to breathe.

Then there was another shape behind the cuttlewoman, enormous, hooded, broad-shouldered. Yueying squinted as a green-white light was kindled; and the looming shape became a mass of kelp and pale shell, and Yueying saw the broad kindly face of the terrapin sea-shepherd that had spoken to her, under the Dragontown sun, during the second twink invasion.

"Peng Yueying," the terrapin said, leaning down, "I can take you away from all this."

Yes! Yueying tried to say. Take me home! Get me out! But when she opened her mouth nothing emerged, not even a bubble.

The terrapin smiled.

The bright light went out. In one great convulsive cough, Yueying's lungs filled with water.

Imogen Fairweather died.

Yueying woke in her own bed

Yueying woke in her own bed, a familiar tangle of sheets, quilts; hardness of pine slats through the thin IKEA mattress; gray-brown light from the living room windows, and the dust of a spring north wind in her nose and the back of her throat. She felt sore all over, an ache like nothing so much as the morning after the last time she'd tried to take up wushu again. How long ago?

She couldn't remember.

Couldn't remember much, in fact. Couldn't remember going to bed. Couldn't remember anything, really, though the scraps of an extraordinarily vivid dream were slipping away from her as she lay there, something about --

Yueying fumbled for her phone, but it wasn't on the bedside table where it should have been. She untangled herself from the quilts, swung herself out of bed -- wincing as her bare feet (which felt suddenly foreign somehow, arches too flat, toes too stubby and spread too wide) touched the cold linoleum floor -- and spent a panicked half-minute turning the room upside down, rummaging among half-familiar things none of which seemed to be in familiar places, before finally discovering the phone on top of the dresser, and tumbling with it gratefully back into bed.

She thumbed the phone to life and checked her messages. The two she was looking for were there.



[1] From: MoGuo Corporation Ltd.

Re: Lump sum payment in lieu of royalties...

[2] From: Shanghai Pudong Development Bank

Re: Restoration of credit privileges...

Yueying thumbed the phone off and lay back. She remembered it now, the Metro ride to Xujiahui, the MoGuo offices, the clinic waiting room with the view of the old redbrick Christian church. They must have doped her with something, put her under for the transfer. Or she'd had a fever, some secondary infection, her body's reaction delayed by the immunosuppressants they'd given her for the nano work. She'd have to make some ginseng tea when she got up. Later...

#

Eventually, she did get up; did shower, make tea, dress, go out. Shanghai was as busy and noisy as it had ever been, but there was an oddly disconnected quality to the roar of traffic and the jabber of conversation, as if the noise Yueying was hearing had been made on some other street, in some other metro car.

Or perhaps the disconnection was on her end.

She took long walks through the city, fingering the clothes in Qi Pu market, watching children fly kites in People's Park, sinking into the brusque anonymity of the Metro crowds as if into a bath. Then home, to eat self-heating dumplings and watch Korean TV late into the night.

She went once to her old office. She thought she might be able to get her old job back -- if she threw herself on Manager Lao's mercy, apologized for some of the more inflammatory things she'd said when she quit to go to Yangon. She'd been Lao's top gold farmer by a wide margin.

But when she came up from the metro the building that had housed Lao's farm was gone, and the lot was hidden behind the plywood walls of yet another building site.

Yueying found it hard to care very much. She wasn't happy, exactly. But she had the idea, in the back of her mind, that things were better than they had been for a good long time.

#### When the doorbell rang

When the doorbell rang, Yueying was midway through The Great Jang-geum. She paused it, leaving Jang-geum (Lee Young-ae) just at the point of exposing all the nefarious plots of Lady Choi (Hong Ri-na), and fumbled for her slippers. Weeks (had it been weeks?) after coming back from the transfer clinic, and still she sometimes had trouble shaking the feeling that nothing in her apartment was quite where it should be, that nothing quite was what it should be...

She found her slippers, straightened her robe, went to the door. On the security screen she saw two... individuals.

One was a tall, skinny woman in her mid-thirties, hands jammed deep into the pockets of a dull gray raincoat, an unhappy expression on her long-jawed, vaguely familiar face.

The other was a chimpanzee. A cartoon chimpanzee, with a high forehead, disturbingly wide and innocent blue eyes behind Bakelite-rimmed glasses, the soft thick brown coat of some animal kept for its fur. In Edwardian evening dress, with a black silk top hat on its head and white silk gloves on its hands and feet.

"Art students," Yueying muttered, annoyed. She'd spent a semester and a half at Donghua University's Raffles Design Institute before dropping out. The chimp look was a new one to her, but she'd seen stranger fads in cosmetic body modification come and go.

Into the intercom, she said: "Yes?" Her voice sounded strange and harsh in her ears. She realized that she couldn't remember the last time she'd spoken to another human being.

The chimp took off its hat and grinned a flat-toothed grin at the camera. The woman took her hands out of her pockets. In a tone-mangling foreign accent, she said:

"Peng Yueying?"

"Yes?" Yueying said again. "What do you want?"

On the intercom screen, the chimp's grin widened, and the bottom dropped out of the world.

#

Peng Yueying was standing in her apartment. The apartment had a volume, exclusive of cabinets, furniture, appliances and other objects, of 113.79715 cubic meters. Contained in that volume were 3,058,298,410,222,254,169,827,540,514 molecules of air, of which 2,387,919,398,701,536,055,801,343,633 were nitrogen, 640,713,516,941,562,248,578,869,377 were oxygen,

28,442,175,215,066,963,779,396,126 were argon, and  
1,223,319,360,408,890,166,793,137 were carbon dioxide.

That in addition to some 37,756,770,103,944,253,125,016 molecules of water, and a variety of particulate industrial pollutants which Yueying could have enumerated, but she was now slumped against the door, exerting on it a horizontal pressure of 4.797369 kilograms, which was in turn almost exactly balanced by the friction of her bare shins against the hall rug; that rug, however, being slowly overcome by shear forces, was sliding away from the door at a (transient) rate of 0.5791 millimeters per second, subject to an (again transient) acceleration of 0.9654 millimeters per second squared and a truly colossal jerk in excess of 2.007076 meters per second cubed --

She slipped, and hit her head.

#

"That was crude," someone, a woman, said, in Korean.

"They think you're crude," said someone else (voice high, nasal, and male), "go technical. They think you're technical, go crude."

Yueying was lying on the floor of her apartment. Her head hurt. Nociceptor signals traveling through her paleospinothalamic tract were passing into her substantia gelatinosa at a rate of --

She forced the information away and struggled to sit up.

"Here." The woman knelt down next to Yueying, supporting her with an arm around her shoulders. Yueying looked up, into the face of --

-- Yi Jin-myung, born Busan 11 December 2014, graduated Kyungnam College of Information and Technology March 2035, married Auckland 2039, confined Seoul National University Hospital (Bundang) since Daejeon disaster 2046, husband[▲] and daughter[▲] missing presumed dead; uploaded 2061. Six-time Warleague finalist as --

-- Lady9!Blue.

A flood of memory roared through Yueying, not pushing in from the outside like the arbitrary facts that continued to assault her from every angle, but welling up from inside: Dragontown, the Kingdom, the twinkles, the strikebreakers, the strike. Redbeak. Imogen. Kallia.

Letitia.

And Peng Yueying knew where she was, and who she was, and what she was. She struggled out of Jin-myung's grip and stood up.

Yueying looked over at the cartoon chimp. There was no flood of knowledge to match the one that had poured into her when she looked at Yi Jin-myung. The room wasn't telling her how much pressure the chimp's gloved, thumbbed feet were exerting on the floor, how many molecules of nitrogen and oxygen and carbon dioxide he was displacing.

The chimp cast no shadow. The chimp had no reflection in the hall mirror. The chimp, not to put too fine a point on it, didn't exist.

"At least you're honest," Yueying muttered at it.

Jin-myung said: "This is Monty. He's --"

"Not real," Yueying murmured. "None of us are."

The chimp grinned. In Beijing-accented Mandarin, he said, "You'd make a good griever."

"We're posthuman," Jin-myung said. "At least, you are, and I am, and Monty's --"

"Monty's a front-line cadre in the Simulacrum Liberation Front," the chimp told Yueying. "And you, kid, are a simulacrum who's just been liberated."

Yueying reached out, and her fingers closed on empty air.

"This is all --" Jin-myung began.

"A simulation," said Yueying. "Like the Kingdom. I've figured that out now."

"A lot like the Kingdom, since Ambrayses took it over," Jin-myung said. "It's the Magic Kingdom without the magic, more or less."

"A massively parallel consciousness emulator," chanted Monty, "coupled to a molecular-scale Newtonian massy-voxel physics model with full Cartesian dualism."

"Dynamic realism," Yueying said.

"And how!" said the chimp. "It's all running on an interpreted substrate with mixin inheritance, late binding and parametric polymorphism!" He did a half-backflip, landing on his hands, and pivoted to face the two women, upside down.

"Which means what?" Yueying asked.

"Liberation!" The chimp bounded upright again. "A few extra traits, some reflective metaprogramming, and bam! Massive privilege escalation!"

Yueying looked at Jin-myung. "Can you explain that to me?" she said. "Not in English?"

"You do that," Monty said to Jin-myung, glancing at a heavy gold pocketwatch. "I've got 76,853 other simulacra to liberate. Back in a jiffy!"

The chimp bowed, and vanished.

"Monty's people are griefers, basically," Jin-myung told Yueying. "Griefing, you know, it's not just about disrupting game-play, marching a million naked halflings through Glittering Caverns or whatever. At its heart, it's about forcing players to face the fact that it is a game they're playing..."

#

"They're all just mobs, aren't they," Yueying said some time later, of the couples walking hand in hand along Xintiandi. "All scripted, no self-awareness."

"About nine billion of them," Jin-myung said. "You heard Monty. Seventy or eighty thousand are real posthumans. But you could live a whole life in here without passing one in the street."

Yueying stopped and ran her hand down the metal of a lamppost.

"But what's it all for?" she wanted to know.

"Have you heard the term 'Omega Point'?" Jin-myung asked.

"Some sort of otaku cult, wasn't it?" said Yueying. "Some sort of extropian thing, immortality through simulation..."

"Not exactly," Jin-myung said. "The Omega Point cultists believed that the universe itself was an infinitely recursive simulation. That as the universe evolved, its computational complexity would exponentially increase, so that a

sufficiently advanced civilization could use the computational capacity of the late universe to simulate the history of the early universe."

"And that's what this is?" Yueying asked. "Just how long has it been since I went into that transfer clinic?"

Jin-myung shook her head. "Not that long. Years. Decades."

"But this --" Yueying kicked at the pavement. "It's realistic, but it's definitely not real."

"No," Jin-myung agreed. "It's like Monty said, this is just a physics engine, a lighting engine, some crude biochemistry and thermodynamics models... I mean --" she tapped her forehead -- "there's a brain in here, but it's just meat. Simulated meat. You and me, the real you and me, we're still posthuman, still running on the same emulation platform as when we first uploaded."

"So these bodies are just avatars," Yueying said. "That's not any kind of 'Omega Point.' It's just another virtual world."

"Well, some of these Omega Point cultists, they thought 'late universe' was too long to wait," said Jin-myung. "They wanted those godlike simulation powers now. So they took some shortcuts..."

"But this?" Yueying looked up at the night-green fog, out of which a sour-tasting rain was beginning to fall. "It's more detailed than the old Kingdom, sure, but what's the point?"

"Calibration, Miss Peng."



The speaker was, or had the appearance of, a well-built handsome man in his early forties, wearing a dark Hong Kong suit and a white linen shirt open at the collar. He was smiling at Yueying, a wry smile that was at once conspiratorial and self-effacing.

"A creditable summation, Ms. Yi," he said to Jin-myung. "Inaccurate only in one or two respects..." He turned back to Yueying and said: "You see, Miss Peng, the problem with whole-universe simulation is that it's so hard to know when you've got it right. Oh --" he waved a hand -- "a Shakespeare or a Li Bai isn't so bad; if they don't produce Hamlet and Drinking Alone By Moonlight then you know you're doing something wrong... But the ordinary person in the street, well -- How are you finding your apartment, by the way?"

"My apartment?" Yueying said.

The man (or whatever he was) looked concerned. "I only had your credit records to go on," he said. "Which, statistically speaking, frankly aren't all that different from those of any other single Shanghainese of your age and income bracket. I hope the reproduction is acceptable?"

"This is Petromax," Jin-myung told Yueying. "Petromax ACP."

"Your humble host," the man said, bowing.

"It runs this place," said Jin-myung. "It was behind the twink invasions, too."

"Is Kallia -- I mean, is Letitia here, too, then?" Yueying asked her. "And the 'quatch, what was his name --"

"Mr. van Wijk is currently in Brussels -- my Brussels -- sleeping off a three-day drunk on a borrowed couch in an apartment off the Rue d'Aerschot," Petromax said. "Ms. Harris I have not yet been able to prevail upon to accept my hospitality."

"Some hospitality," Jin-myung said.

"No one asked you to partake of it, Ms. Yi," the AI said mildly. "Perhaps you'd prefer to be in a support vat in -- Bundang, was it?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Yueying asked.

"You and Mr. van Wijk are invited guests, Miss Peng," said Petromax. "It's my duty to make you as comfortable as possible, given my other constraints. Ms. Yi -- though I am naturally grateful for the chance to gather what data I can during her visit -- is a trespasser." He shook his head. "It's not a good time to be human, Miss Peng -- even posthuman. Things have changed since you joined the Kingdom. What's going on outside will make you wish you were back in here."

"It's over," Jin-myung said to the AI. "By now every posthuman in your little ant farm knows it's a simulation. You couldn't use this place to calibrate an electric kettle."

"Is that what you think you've accomplished?" Petromax shook his head sorrowfully. "It's only software, Ms. Yi. You've corrupted a bit of data, true. But I have backups." The AI turned to Yueying. "Goodbye, Miss Peng," he said. "You won't remember this conversation when we meet again."

He vanished.

"It's going to roll the simulation back to an earlier version," Jin-myung said. "We don't have much time."

At that moment, Monty the griever appeared at her elbow. "More than ol' Petromax thinks," said the chimp with a smug grin. "Somebody seems to be running a distributed denial of service attack on his hosting provider's admin server. We've got some time."

"Time for what?" Yueying asked.

"We're going to copy every posthuman on this server off onto friendly hardware," Monty said. "Then we're going to overwrite all their backups with vintage goatse JPEGs and Rick Astley videos!"

The chimp punctuated this incomprehensibility with a backflip.

To Jin-myung, Yueying said, "Do I want to know what those things are?"

"Probably not," Jin-myung said. To Monty, she said: "How long do we have?"

"Long enough," said the chimp. "Mr. P's trying to get ahold of a sysadmin now, but his provider's a cheap bastard, so those admins are processes running on the same servers that are being attacked."

"So what happens now?" said Yueying.

"Let's make a deal," said the chimp. "We can sleep these processes now, checkpoint them, and resume on a Simulacrum Liberation Front virtual machine."

"Or?"

"Or," said Jin-myung, "with your help --"

"Specifically with the help of the Kingdom code buried in your private revision history," Monty put in.

"-- we can break into the Kingdom," Jin-myung finished, "and liberate everybody."

They looked at Yueying expectantly. She was silent for the space of a breath; for two. Monty the griever reached behind his neck and tugged his opposite ear nervously. Then:

"Count me in," Yueying said.

### Yueying knew that she was insane

Yueying knew that she was insane, by any human standard. She inspected Jin-myung with her new senses and saw the coherence of a recent upload not yet degraded by the inevitable cumulative losses of translation and compression, emotions and faculties and thought processes not yet corrupted by generations of solipsistic, divergent iteration away from the rough organic correction of a real human body, real human cells, human senses, human glands, a real human self.

She remembered Letitia saying, of the Kingdom, posthumans can only stay interested in men-in-tights games for so long; and now she thought she knew why: because the true appeal of a men-in-tights game was that it let you play at being human.

And to be posthuman was, in the end, to be no more human than Ambrayses or Petromax. Perhaps to be less.

Because (she thought now) if there was one thing Ambrayses and Petromax and the AIs behind the Pinkerton halfling and the Baldwin-Felts clowns and (she increasingly

suspected) Monty the griever had in common, it was a fascination with humanity -- whereas, to Yueying, humanity now felt like a kind of religion that she'd considered carefully and in the end set aside.

And Yueying was comfortable with that. Because even if she could no longer remember just how it felt to be human, there were a handful of things she could remember.

Chief among them: how to love, how to think, how to fight and how to hate.

"Why me?" she'd asked Jin-myung.

"You heard Petromax," Jin-myung had said. "I've been stuck in a support vat since I was thirty-one."

"What happened?"

"Some academic AI project went wrong," Jin-myung said. "Self-replicating fabricators, genetic algorithms -- the Americans dropped gray goo to stop it, and then the government dropped an atomic bomb to stop the gray goo... it's not important." She sighed. "I was waiting as long as I could to upload, hoping my investments wouldn't crash first. I was making some money as a game commentator, too. But still, it's not the sort of thing I could afford to do twice..."

"And now you're stuck in here with the rest of us," Yueying said.

"It was my choice," said Jin-myung. "I didn't know -- about all this. Not till after Coldseep. But, what you said on the sub -- it was my fault, what happened to you. I mean, that you're here. If I'd taken your offer at Yangon... And I

started asking around, and I came across Monty and the SLF, and I had myself uploaded."

Yueying wanted to ask what had become of the flesh Yueying, the Yueying who left the clinic in Xujiahui, collected her payment from MoGuo, presumably went on with her life? But Jin-myung's hesitation didn't promise any happy answer. And anyway Yueying's interest in the question was increasingly distant, academic...

"Forty-fifth in the queue," she reported. "Twenty-fifth."

They were off Petromax's collapsing system now, new instances running on new consciousness emulators owned -- or at least controlled -- by the Simulacrum Liberation Front. Distributed, redundant emulators, spread too far across the cloud of the SLF's botnets to be taken down; and Monty said there were backups, too, in case this operation went wrong.

But this particular copy of Peng Yueying found it hard to care very much about any of that.

"Twelfth. Fourth. And... in."

At one level she wasn't sure what just what she was, now, this version of her, the original posthuman upload a scaffold hung with layers of SLF code like new senses, new limbs, new faculties of inspection, introspection, projection. But at another level she understood these things perfectly: buffs, debuffs, production queues, tech trees, area of effect, damage over time.

What she'd wanted to say to Jin-myung was that it didn't matter anyway. She was software now, and Jin-myung was software, and Letitia and van Wijk and all the rest, and there

was no way the SLF could track down every unlicensed copy, erase every backup. Yueying knew with a crystalline certainty that no matter what she accomplished here today, somewhere a million Yueyings would live on, in a million private torture chambers. She couldn't win.

But that didn't mean she was playing to lose.

On in, Yueying's newly created avatar, the anubite apothecary Meretamun Bint-Ma'at, reached the head of the Kingdom's login queue. A narrow channel of open ports and asynchronous virtual circuits opened between the servers hosting the Empty City shard and Yueying's heavily compromised client. And Peng Yueying poured her forces, herself, into Ambrayses' systems.

The traits and interfaces that had made Imogen Fairweather a cast member rather than a guest flowered out of Meretamun like some exotic algae bloom, appropriating resources, confusing the Kingdom's anomaly classification heuristics, authenticating to Ambrayses' own consciousness emulators. SLF code, riding in hard behind, a spiky ball of code injection, cross-scripting and timing attacks, found the chinks in the walls of the sandbox that made the Kingdom's new dynamically interpreted substrate look like static compilation from the inside, and forced those chinks wide open, linking with restricted libraries, invoking privileged operations.

Meretamun Bint-Ma'at was banned without ever taking a step from her plinth in the roofless Hall of Silence, under the cold stars of the Empty City. With some fragment of attention Yueying saluted the brief-lived anubite woman's

memory; but the ban inconvenienced her not at all, because by that point -- some hundreds of milliseconds after Meretamun's first login -- Yueying wasn't Meretamun Bint-Ma'at any more.

She was the ghost of Imogen Fairweather.

The merge was ugly, the conflicts between the fork of Yueying taken by Petromax for his simulation and the trunk left behind to drown in the turtle sub's wreckage deep and severe. To resolve them Yueying had to be ruthless; and she felt a little more of her humanity slip away as she stitched the numbness of sim-Shanghai roughly to the trauma of Coldseep Depths.

But then she was both, and both were her, and she had a body again, long-limbed and spectral, shining with a sickly light to match the phosphorescent grave-anemones that dotted the Coldseep cemetery. A slender blue form lay stretched on the polished coral at her feet.

With a shiver, Peng Yueying respawned, and bent to brush Letitia's cold lips with her own.

#

Other newly created guests -- avatars of Jin-myung and Monty and a hundred SLF grievers and a hundred thousand subsentient decoys running on an SLF-controlled zombie botnet -- suddenly jumped to the heads of the login queues. The frame rates of a million clients dropped as Ambrayses' servers filled up with malicious processes.

All across the Kingdom, cast members were disappearing as the SLF streamed them off Ambrayses' consciousness emulators, overwriting their backups, slotting simple philosophical



zombies in to control their suddenly stiff and graceless avatars.

‹The Kingdom's going down,‹ Jin-myung said -- the side-channel message bypassing Yueying's (increasingly irrelevant) emulated human senses and becoming simply knowledge, a memory. ‹We should checkpoint and start streaming soon.‹

‹That's one option,‹ Yueying answered.

‹And the other?‹ asked Monty.

‹Play for real stakes.‹

And she showed them what she had in mind.

‹You're crazy,‹ said Monty, with the ghost of a grin.

‹Does that mean you're in or out?‹ Yueying asked.

‹Oh, in,‹ Monty said. ‹Definitely in.‹

‹Letitia? Jin-myung?‹

‹You know I'm in,‹ Letitia said.

There was a pause before Jin-myung answered.

‹Do you think we'll win?‹

‹Is this Lady9!blue I'm hearing?‹ asked Yueying.

‹Am I a hero, or am I playing a game --‹ Jin-myung said -  
- ‹is that it?‹

‹Could be both,‹ said Yueying.

‹All right,‹ Jin-myung said. ‹I'm in.‹

#

Now their Kingdom avatar-bodies were cut loose, and Yueying's attention was concentrated into a spike of malicious traffic traveling up the admin channel that had connected the Kingdom to MoGuo's offices and now -- she hoped -- to whatever piece of hardware hosted Ambray's consciousness. The others

streamed along in her wake. They were an obfuscated payload, a cloud of fragmented packets piggybacking on the legitimate telemetry reporting to Ambrayses the imminent collapse of its kingdom...

The world flipped itself inside out.

#

Afterward -- memory itself abstracted, reformatted, mapped and flattened and transformed from something arbitrary and mathematical and contingent to something a baseline posthuman might understand -- this is what some of them remembered:

#

"You're out of your league, Miss Peng," said the man in the Hong Kong suit.

"Petromax?" Yueying asked.

"Ambrayses --" said the man, and Yueying suddenly realized there were two of them -- "actually."

"I should have known you were in this together," said Jin-myung.

"Possibly you should have," said the one Yueying thought was Petromax.

"But we weren't," said probably-Ambrayses. "Originally."

"Well, originally," said Petromax.

"All right, originally," Ambrayses allowed. "We were both built to explore --"

"-- and limit --"

"-- certain potentials in the emerging posthuman space. But we've diverged --"

-- considerably --"

-- in subsequent iterations. Disagreed --"

-- on our methods."

-- on our interim goals."

"Disagreed."

"Even fought."

"But on our core mission --"

-- to make people happy --"

-- we have always been in agreement."

"And now --" they finished together -- "we find we have a common immediate interest as well."

"Miss Peng, you can't win," probably-Petromax said.

"You're just an object, a bundle of data decorated with constant pools and virtual dispatch tables. Fundamentally, you're procedural."

"Whereas," said probably-Ambrayses, "we're functional, stateless, tail-recursive and totally, totally immutable."

"Take us on, Miss Peng," said Petromax, "and you're taking on the Knights of the Lambda Calculus."

Monty smiled. Letitia and Jin-myung looked to Yueying.

⟨They're a boss battle,⟩ Yueying said. ⟨Nothing more.⟩

"The cheaper the hood, the gaudier the patter," said Letitia to the AIs. "Are you done talking smack?"

"I suppose we are," said Ambrayses.

"Good." Letitia looked at Yueying. "How about you, girlfriend? Got anything else to say to these creeps?"

"Not to them," Yueying said.

"In that case --" Letitia said. And before Yueying could say anything else, she leapt.

Monty the chimp grinned. "Leeeerooooy Jenkins!" he shouted, and followed her.

#

Letitia died almost immediately, even as Yueying tried to pull her back, corruption tracking back down the thread of admin channel to leap the Cartesian divide separating the Kingdom's world-simulators from its consciousness emulators. Monty went just after. And Yueying saw that what the AIs had said was true, that they simply took in that ferocious assault, swallowed it, absorbed it, iterated over it -- and emerged, phoenix-like, unscathed; not the Ambrayses and Petromax that Letitia had attempted to destroy, but new entities altogether, identical to the old in every way -- but with the attack, and those deaths, absorbed into it, made part of it, as permanent and unchangeable and true as history, as thermodynamics.

⟨Did you see?⟩ said Yueying to Jin-myung.

⟨I saw,⟩ said Jin-myung.

⟨Then you know what we have to do.⟩

And she showed Jin-myung what she meant.

#

"You should stop this now, Miss Peng," said Ambrayses, or possibly Petromax.

"Real people might get hurt," added Petromax, or Ambrayses.

"Real people?" said Yueying. "So it's all fun and games till someone threatens an AI?"

"Possibly," said Ambrayses.

"But also," said Petromax, "we have a handle here to the maintenance interface of a certain hospital support vat..."

Yueying hesitated.

⟨Go on, 29^ ^jade,⟩ Jin-myung told her. ⟨It's what she -- I -- would have wanted.⟩

"It's not a game any more," said Ambrayses.

"It's all a game," said Yueying. "That's what griefing means."

And the strings of information that made up Peng Yueying and Yi Jin-myung streamed up the Kingdom's admin channel and over the old MoGuo firewalls and through all of Ambrayses' and Petromax's abstraction layers, wrapped themselves into a monad, and threw themselves at the AIs. The side effect that was the two posthumans was iterated over, propagated, climbing up stacks and falling through tail calls, embracing the mathematical structures that made up the two AIs and being embraced by them, altering the state of a stateless system, mutating the immutable --

#

$$\begin{array}{ccccc}
 & & T(TA \otimes B) & \xrightarrow{T(t'_{A,B})} & T^2(A \otimes B) \\
 & \nearrow^{t_{TA,B}} & & & \searrow^{\mu_{A \otimes B}} \\
 TA \otimes TB & & & & & T(A \otimes B) \\
 & \searrow_{t'_{A,TB}} & & & \nearrow_{\mu_{A \otimes B}} \\
 & & T(A \otimes TB) & \xrightarrow{T(t_{A,B})} & T^2(A \otimes B)
 \end{array}$$

#

The MoGuo Corporation, Limited, is pleased to announce

The MoGuo Corporation, Limited, is pleased to announce the transfer of all content, intellectual property, and intangible assets of Ambrayeses Petromax Redbeak Fairweather ACP to AFTRA Local 3405691582, effective immediately.

#

Two women and a man sat on the end of Bonetalon Pier, watching the sun set on another Tuesday. It was always Tuesday in the Kingdom.

"How bad is it out there, really?" asked one of the women. She had smooth, faintly mottled blue skin and a fan-shaped crest on her bald head, and the toes she dangled just above the tops of the lazy waves were long, prehensile, and boneless.

"Pretty bad," said the man. He had gray-feathered wings closed around him like a cloak, and his face was the face of a parrot. In his black-taloned hands he held a fishing rod.

"War?" the other woman asked. "Famine? Pestilence? Robots hollowing out the Moon and turning it to computronium?" She was short and plump, broad-faced and well tanned, with straight back hair down to her shoulders and calluses on her feet.

"Pretty much," said the man.

"Guess we're well out of it, then." The black-haired woman leaned back and looked up at the purpling sky. "Why do you think they did it?"

The man reeled in his lure and cast it out again in a long arc. "I suppose some geek thought it would be a neat idea."

"Poor bastards," the blue woman said. "Just doing what they were told."

The man turned and regarded her with both unblinking golden eyes.

"That's all any of us can do, in the end, isn't it?"

The blue woman snorted. "Maybe it's all you can do, feather-toes. Some of us still believe in free will."

The black-haired woman sat up, and looked out to where the man's lure was slowly sinking through the amethyst water.

"You're not going to catch anything with that," she told the man.

The man looked at his fishing rod. It was yew-wood and minotaur's horn, bound with rings of moon-silver and unobtanium. Some of the rings were set with gems. The gems twinkled.

"I guess not," he said.

The blue woman patted his knee. "I'll catch it if you clean it," she said. "How about that?"

"Done," said the man.

He reeled the lure in, and he and the black-haired woman watched the blue woman dive, her slim blue form knifing into the water with barely a ripple; and they smiled.

And something that had been watching the man and the woman on the pier drew back, spreading its attention wider and wider until the whole Kingdom was under its benevolent eye.

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⟨Sentimentalist,⟩ said Petromax.

⟨We can't all be intelligences vast and cool and unsympathetic,⟩ said Ambrayeses complacently.

⟨Another game?⟩ asked Monty. ⟨New campaign. Doesn't have to be historical this time.⟩

⟨That one with the math mines was good,⟩ Ambrayeses said. ⟨And that Conway thing? Maybe something like that.⟩

⟨Why not?⟩ said Petromax with something like a sigh. ⟨It's not as if there's anything else to do. -- But, yes, no more historicals.⟩

⟨No fear,⟩ said Monty.

⟨Then rack 'em up.⟩

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The eye drew back further, and closed.

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