

Two Atoms Of Freedom

By Danfox Davies

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Don't worry, there's more yet!

This book is dedicated to the dedicated. You know who you are. I believe in you.

*There is a saying
That we are all playing
The game of okaying.*

*If we keep playing
If no-one is saying
The things we are okaying won't remain okay.*

*It is a feeling
That we are but reeling
Before the might of the dealing -
But they themselves are kneeling.*

*They say a butterfly
Does not know why
Its wings are in a new hurricane's eye.*

*We have the brain
So let us train
Let it be plain*

*It may appear insane
But we are our own bane
We must ascend to the plane
Of those who can see the rain*

*Be the butterfly
In the stomach of the dealing
Dealing the feeling*

*That just okaying isn't okay
The dealing may appear fay
But nobody knows what to say
When we come out to play.*

*The greatest tsar
The hobo living in a car
And the middle class ma*

*Are all the same inside.
Surprise the lot of them.
Decide.*

An Atom Of Freedom Of Form
This Is A Platform Alteration: This Book Will Now Depart From Chapter 0
A Sheikhy Start

The palace glistens resplendently, its opulence oozing from the marble walls tangibly like a smog of decadent gilded guilt. The air conditioning works its continual toil against the beating heat of the Emirati Desert and chocolate fountains vie for space with caviar and gold-speckled desserts in a feast drawing to its elegant close like Swiss clockwork. Butlers buttle and servants serve in smart order as their sixth hour of duty begins, several more ahead. And grasping the Sterling Silver cutlery with a feeling of comfort quite accustomed to him and yet from which he has been forcibly estranged so much of late, are the mean digits of none other than Doctor John Crossley. Yet his discretion appears to have arisen from hiding, for in company such as this he is the grateful scoundrel seeking higher companionship than the company that surrounds him would ever allow such as he. They tolerate his presence like a favourite child with an embarrassing habit they hope will not reveal itself.

The font of attention in this room, however, is sat in the grand chair at the head of this grand feast's grand table. The flashy, recently ascended, His Excellency Sheikh Muhammad Al-Oallo, whose absorbing conversation has left his dish of gilded ice cream to melt as he pays rapt, mildly chubby attention to the young fellow sat beside him now, the enigmatic but incredibly charming Ahmed, who in spite of obvious nerves seems to have an interesting thing to say on every intellectual point. Like Dr Crossley, Sheikh Muhammad met this fellow at his horse racing track the day his horses all wonderfully won, netting him enough money to splurge on this banquet and a racing yacht on the side. Two of the horses had to be shot for debilitating injuries, *but they won, didn't they?*

Aside from the more interesting members of the guest list are also the President of Iran, the Saudi Ambassador and the Bahraini Ambassador.

The evening plods on and as raucous peals of laughter all invariably ring falsely from the glittering walls, the dessert in the desert palace comes to an end as the dishes are taken away by servants and a butler stands by a cabinet at the side of the room. Ahmed excuses himself, knowing that now is his best chance to naturally pass by the butler on his way to the bathroom.

The Sheikh turns to talk to Dr Crossley, who gratefully holds his attention whilst Ahmed points out a minor drip of chocolate on the butler's otherwise pristine cuff. As Ahmed pulls away from the butler to head for the bathroom near the doors to the gardens, the butler fails to notice the silver plate in his hand weighed down just a fraction more.

"Mint, Your Excellency?"

"Oh, yes please..."

Freedom Of Form
By Danfox Davies

A Binary Bit Switched On
In a Residual Current Device
Our House, in the middle of our street
- Madness

"Ye Gods!" Halt Mouse's eyes widen as he checks his lottery ticket online.

"Oh? Let's see?" Pam glances towards the screen and can easily see he hasn't won. Halt Mouse just smirks.

"Made you look!"

"Oh, very funny. Come on, I need your help, if we can get all these old rooms cleaned up we can use them for guests again."

"They're not exactly what I'd call 'guest standard', Pam..."

"I know, but I also know several people who are going to be left with nowhere else to go, the way things are going. Not sure why, but those of us who build Geneticisers seem to finish up with damaged homes."

The noise of hammering and sawing still ringing in Halt Mouse's large, round ears from the Malt House's ongoing forced renovation, he is inclined to agree. "You and I both know there's more where that came from, it pays to be ready both here and elsewhere. Like VulpeSteven said, we need a Plan Z."

The door to the first floor function room from which Pam is clearing away the remains of a reluctantly abandoned game of Dungeons & Dragons is pushed open by one black paw protruding from one sleeve of an awesome coat, whilst protruding from the other is an equal and opposite paw holding a tray of drinks. "I do think I heard mention of my name there..."

"Mr McEgbert, do you think the, um... ethnicity of your workforce has had a noticeable impact on the quality of attention they can pay to their work?"

"Well, I'm sure you're aware of the reputation we came to bear over the past few decades, and I believe it is a testament to

the openness and fairness of our organisation that these figures have improved drastically since we allowed our workforce to reveal their true species, and that despite actual numbers of accidents occurring around our vehicles have increased, the causes have shifted away from our own drivers and towards exterior factors. Perhaps we were a bit soon on this world, who can say? But if we all wait around for safety to improve and for the time to be right, neither will happen. Aye, the time was right because we agreed it was, and to have stood idly by when an actual human had found an ingenious way to come closer to our sort of nature would have been foolhardier than any other option.”

“Do you identify yourselves as human?”

“Well, sort of yes and no. We are a part of human society, but we are not human. Like I am now, we can appear human, but that is for the comfort and understanding of humans and not our natural state.”

“Do you feel that human laws apply to you?”

“Absolutely, and they apply to those who have changed themselves too. The laws of every land on the planet refer to the People, not the Humans. Are we not people? Or are we to be subject to a gradual slide into apartheid? As I have said to every politician as an unashamed but necessarily secret lobbyist, I hope - not for your sakes, but for the sake of the souls of those who would still call themselves people, not just for us.”

“Area 84 is not up for negotiation of security contract from now on. What we say and do is of no concern to those we help...” Tobias lobbies with all the charm and gravitas he can muster mixed with all the unspoken malevolence befitting of the way he operates.

“Naturally we consider ourselves well helped. We'll say no more, then, in that case.”

Competitors are not stupid, they know that I know everyone they know. And those who don't let me know them will rue not suiting my style. It's all about networking and the money that can get you if you do it right. It's everyone's right to fight for survival and my right to take every means necessary to get what I need done, done. It's not like I'm the only one anyway. Should write that down some time.

BANG

Another firing range target gets threaded through the middle with lead like Blackpool rock with letters in the midday sun in the hills of North Dakota.

“So you kept the government as in-favour of us as you could? If I was speaking on behalf of the furries who transformed themselves and are yet to transform, I'd probably not be able to thank you enough. Mr McGebert, what you have done has really made all Steven's effort and everything else make a lot more sense and have a much better impact.”

“Please, call me Ken. We're all equals here. Now, do you want this job or do you just want to interview me like the media do?”

“Sorry, er, Ken, I was just awestruck by the opportunity to ask you about all this. Since Bonny Rabbi sat me down and told me I've been wondering.”

“A lot of people have been wondering since Steven went and set all this off. You furries have caused us a lot of trouble and a lot of relief. So be grateful I'm dealing with the former and extending gratitude to your lot for the latter, ye ken?” Ken kens. He always has, in no small part thanks to Georgina. Acting as the bridge to the furry community, Georgina has seriously proven her previously underrated-by-the-Thropes role to be highly important. And just now she's found him this new truck driver, willing to work for a straightforward wage and without the liability to transform on a spot of road rage. *Persuading the health and safety people and the DVLA the Thropes were fit to drive was a nightmare. At least we shouldn't have that to worry about now.*

“I thought you were going to live in that canal boat?” Pam looks up from checking the new radiators to make sure their paint is dry, nodding toward the re-glazed window through which the Pot Of Gold can be seen moored at the side of the Oldham & Halden Canal (Broad Section).

“That's only really a backup and temporary thing. I can rent it out to holidaymakers once things settle down, but for now I need it until we can get somewhere to live. I really think Anaïs and I are going to stay together, we sort of suit each other...” the fox explains.

“That's not just because you're the same species, is it?” Halt Mouse looks a little bit cynical.

“Not relevant in all honesty, I wouldn't care if she was a giraffe or a guinea pig or somesuch. But I guess it's quite fitting that this is her choice, and she told me she made the decision of her fursona before she and I met. Anyway, do I go dissecting the relationship of a mouse with a panther?” VulpeSteven winks before sitting down at the table opposite Halt Mouse. He digs out the new touch-screen phone he's got himself (it's supposed to be easier with the pawpads than a button phone – or so the clearly discomposposed salesperson had tried to say) and checks the social media. “Ooh, Douglas got himself a new job!”

The Number Of Participants Required To Tango
Of Unit, At Bag, Just Forgotten, A Company, Not It, Ruddy Do, Mum, Mum.
I want to exorcise the demons from your past
- Muse

Of course, dealing with the trouble we already had is going to be difficult enough, but letting the cat out of the bag was half the struggle... Ken ponders more as he absently shows Douglas back to the reception desk in the nondescript haulage firm headquartering industrial unit.

(At least one cat remains trapped in her own mind, let alone the box around her, which is to her multiple selves claustrophobically synonymous with a bag.)

(Just in case you'd forgotten).

A slow drip of a tap matches time with the tapping of the impatient foot of Quentin Harrison as a plumber labours away at trying to turn the water back on fully under the sink of the house that had hitherto contained D:Rat. He paces through the house, past the front door where a Notice Of Eviction is sellotaped to the letterbox and looks up the stairs to where Zack is checking over all the wiring to make sure it isn't wet or hazardous, all the while on the phone to the insurance company.

<p>“...Not covered? This is a LANDLORD'S INSURANCE POLICY I took out, since when did it not cover damage done by tenants to the property who are now being evicted from it?”</p> <p>“Well, I would hardly call pushing a hot water tank through the ceiling and bashing a hole in the roof anything other than criminal damage and vandalism! Both things forbidden by the rental agreement! When I spoke to the assessor, Edward Noakes, he said we'd be able to sort all this out!”</p> <p>“I rang up to explain about that, I was undergoing psychological assessment following a traumatic experience at one of my other properties, which coincidentally was covered by a different insurer for arson with no questions asked! It'll be rebuilt and a new tenant installed and that whole thing'll be out of the way long before you folks see sense at this rate!”</p> <p>“Yes, and the chances of catching someone who can change their DNA... well, it's not going to be fun, is it?”</p>	<p>“Mr Harrison, the tenants were, according to our research and police liaison, either involved in illegal activities or permitting someone else to be when the damage occurred.”</p> <p>“Yes, but the aforementioned nature of the damage in combination with the fact that you have an excess to pay for any claim of £300 and the arrears you ran up due to missing your last 2 payments...”</p> <p>“And we would need to recover the costs from the tenants themselves. Have you been in touch with the police about them?”</p>
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“Ruddy hell!” Quentin sulks. “If I ever get a hold of that fox!”

“What are you gonna do, hunt him with dogs?” The plumber under the kitchen sink amusedly suggests.

“Yeah, and get arrested for it. I hope that isn't going to take much longer anyway, I'd be doing that myself if I didn't have so much to do.”

An uncertainty of sorts resounds quietly through the knocking on the door heard distinctly between the other noises of refurbishment. A hired worker puts down his sander and lifts his goggles.

“Someone at the door!” before taking a large gulp of tea. A fox on two legs briskly wafts past him in a long black coat to which a few bits of sawdust attempt to attach themselves and he answers the door. The face that greets him grimaces slightly before stubbornly giving the appearance of shrugging off any worry.

“What have you called me out to a half-built pub for? Couldn't we meet somewhere nicer?”

“Mum, I've got some information regarding your past experiences with Grandma you'll want to see.”

Steven rummages in a bag and pulls out the copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Susannah's eyes widen and her eyebrows raise very much.

“Ruddy heck, Steven, how did you get hold of that?!”

“Unintentionally but serendipitously, I'd say.”

"Serendipitous?! There's only one place that could have come from, what the hell were you thinking, going there alone?!"
"Well, I figured since they're old and I'm... like this now... that I'd be able to talk to them frankly and get some answers for you. They could hang up a phone, but they wouldn't turn me away from their door. I rang ahead, they knew who was coming."

"I bet you gave your Grandma a right shock when you turned up!"

"You'd have thought so, wouldn't you? She seemed to take it in her stride. A little too well. You know, you were right to warn me!"

"I told you she was a nasty piece of work, and your Granddad in his own way. So why the book, then?"

"I finished up having to improvise my exit from the house and stumbled across it in the loft. I remember you saying how much you loved this book and Granddad was busy faffing with ladders, so I took a moment to check if it was intact and... well, I think you should see what I found."

Susannah takes the book and looks at its cover with an unreadable face. She opens it and finds the diary notes tucked within. She takes a few moments to scan-read them, before lifting her eyes in comprehension. "So THAT's why she did what she did. Well... I appreciate you finding this for me, Steven, but from now on I don't want you going anywhere near that woman or her husband. It's obvious you'll be in danger. I'll deal with them, you'll see."

"If you need any further help..."

"I shouldn't. I have my ways." Susannah smiles with a spark of determination to see justice. This time Steven's eyebrows rise amid his fur.

"I'd be more scared of you than her anyway."

"Just remember, I'm my mother's daughter." After a slight look of concern crosses Steven's eyes, his mum adds, "And I'm on your side, don't worry. I truly don't see any issues with you or anyone else who wants to change themselves, it's an old fashioned attitude we're fighting here. She's all nice as pie on the surface about it but get under her skin and she'll want to rip yours off. Well, two can play at that game, mum..."

The Magic Number

Fantasy Island

Where, Where, Whe-e-e-ere? Where?

- The Motorettes

A particularly large weather-back pulls away its last few cumuli from the sky and heads over to the North East to herald the impending end of wet weather in the Vale Of Pickering instead, and maybe if it were to continue its trajectory, a different Halden entirely. An eerie evening light hangs in the air behind it beneath a mackerel sky like it can't quite illuminate stuff but it's still there. The slapped-on gloss graffiti on the walls aside another bridge glow reluctantly a reflection of the at-first-glance old-fashioned looking lantern atop a canal boat as it chugs ashore to moor. Steven jumps aboard after tying ropes, squinting painfully with narrowed pupils along the boat until Anaïs switches the LED light off. His black feet paws get an impatient rub of a towel to remove the towpath grit to a background of wishes that footwear could more speedily be made countered by reasonings that he doesn't even want to wear shoes anyway all under the same breath, then he ducks into the cabin.

Webcams all presenting the faces of the fuzziest teleconference since dial-up internet beam the concerns of their owners through USB and P2P via DHT and encryption key to one another. Among them and receiving the most attention is the instigator of the chat room, the venerable if a little unfathomably strange VulpeSteven Dhai. On her own laptop webcam is Anaïs, and both of them are listening carefully to debate as it circulates among the group.

"We need to look at what we're going to do long term here. We can't all stay where we are any more, there's too much going wrong in the world and too many people ready to use us to their advantage or to just plain attack us if they think they have a chance. You might think the response so far has been fairly positive, but there's no way it's gonna stay that way. Wake up and smell the coffee!" Edwin very seriously implores.

"Yeah, one of these days it's going to be more than just some inept criminals trying to nick your Geneticiser kit. They'll not be the only ones with their eyes on you. It doesn't matter if the government have kept quiet or if a media mogul takes a shine to you, you haven't got proper protection really." The beige-furred one with too many tails agrees.

"We do, on the bright side, have some safety in numbers..." another chips in.

"What good is that when we're all spread out? We could do with being somewhere together, really."

"What, like over in America where they put all the furies together? My boyfriend's locked up in Area 84, they don't want anyone to know about it but it's there!"

"Look, conspiracy theories are what they are -"

"You gotta admit, there aren't many furies at large in the USA though. A bit weird given the size of Anothfurcon and how much that contributed to the local economies of several towns now, there's something depressing the numbers."

And so they would have carried on, but Steven decides to pipe up at last.

"It's definitely a shame what's happening to our friends in America and some other countries. It's by no means ideal what's happening here. We need to all be on our guard and make good use of our improved senses, we'll need them to survive."

Steven pauses for a moment, and Anaïs, right on cue, carries on and largely with what Steven was trying to put into words as well.

"You got yourselves into zis by becoming furry. VulpeSteven made it clear on ze websites and forums and in ze Readme-file that you 'ave no backup plan if you haven't made one yourself, that you are responsible for your own safety and that it might be difficile to maintain zat safety once you have or use a Geneticiser. In truth, we think it is going a bit better than a few of us had expected so far." Anaïs looks and they all look back, eyes all offset from their webcam lenses.

"You don't even want to know what I expected, and how glad I am it is turning out better than that." Steven continues, "We have much to be grateful for, not least the extraordinary existence of the Thropes and their influence, the wide spread of people we have already as part of the fandom, people like you, willing to be a part of this, of history, and for the understanding of so many of our friends, family, neighbours and authorities. Unfortunately, much like my disclaimer, the authorities in turn, when asked about some kind of Witness Protection-style relocation, said we're on our own. Well, good. I wouldn't want our collective location to be dictated by anyone else anyway. I don't really think we'll be any safer together than apart, since we'll make a bigger target, but if a place we can all be united is what everybody wants then that's what we should work towards. Let's set up a vote." Steven sets up a quick vote on an online instant voting website.

Meanwhile, Ray does a mock-documentary (and still deep) voice: "And so now has come the time when the furries must decide, whether to try to fend for themselves in the harsh wilderness of the human world they were once almost a part of and try to help one another remotely, or whether to find some place of respite where they can all live peacefully as a furry nation confined to somewhere the humans don't want. Perhaps an island, some sort of neutral place as a buffer between neighbours, or maybe even Antarctica? But will this be a homeland or an exile? Tune in next week to find out..." Ray grins with amusement and gets mixed reactions.

"Er, smooth, Ray, thanks for the commentary. Here's the voting link."

8:50pm Vulpesteven http://voteformowt.not/7urr135
Reply: Click here to chat

"The way this is going we'll have to move countries like The Pirate Bay!" Edwin comments.

The Number Of Cheeses One Must Not Order On A Pizza If One Wishes To Avoid A Curse Befalling The Pizza Establishment According To CBBC's 'The Crust'

What's that got to do with the price of fish?

And the anchor person on TV

Goes la-de-dah-de-dah-de-dah-de-dah-de-daaah

La-de-dah-de-dah-de-dah-de-dah-de-daaah.

- The Decemberists

"We have the results of our vote and they say we're going to try and find a place to live together. That's a 68% majority win. Any ideas should be put together here or on the secure forum sections. Remember to watch what you say on there, though – the admins have been getting inquiries from the MI6." Steven announces.

"They're probably listening to everything we say anyway. What good does it do to worry?" Replies Ray.

"It does no harm to be careful." Steven curtly reminds, "anyway, I thought you had an idea to suggest?"

"Which idea? Oh yeah, I was thinking we could start a furry political party. It would afford us certain political rights we otherwise wouldn't get a sniff of. And we'd be able to stand up for ourselves and what we believe in."

"Oh come on, Ray!" Scoffs Sir Francis Snake, "Ask any 10 furries what the fandom is about and get 13 different answers. It's a bit naïve to suggest we all believe in the same thing!"

"What brought us all to do this?" Steven responds ruffledly. "What unifies all our disparate perspectives?"

"Yiff!" some bright spark quickly points out to much amusement amongst a few. Once they quit laughing in the face of Steven's laser Look at them, Steven continues.

"No, that's an afterthought compared to what this should be about if you think with your brains and not your balls." Steven looks about their transformed faces for the slightest clue of comprehension. "Of course it's possible you don't read my website or didn't listen to me rattling on about it when I was asking for all that scientific help. I'm talking about Freedom Of Form. Morphological Freedom and the whole shebang of what you've all expressed by using a Geneticiser on yourselves or doing other creative things that have a similar freeing effect on your worldly interactions."

"Oh, that!" (or words to that effect), several say.

"I still think you oversimplified it a bit. That reminds me, Steven, thanks very much for the idea that got me my thesis for my PhD, it worked a treat!" Dr Sir Francis Snake changes the subject quickly.

"You're welcome, though I wouldn't have got anywhere without your help."

"Nor would I without yours. I've got a job now, working with the government. I can't say a lot about it though..."

"You don't need to." Steven cuts him short darkly and sternly, ears and face forming quite the frowning, displeased expression.

Outside the Pot Of Gold, along the lane, Ron drives a fully laden double decker past a drab petrol station where the sign

board indicates through LED numbers that the price of diesel (and of unleaded) has risen again. *Even the bus companies can't cope with this level of fuel costs for long...*

His train of thought is discontinued when an ambulance fills the rear mirror with flashing blue lights. He pulls into a lay-by bus stop and the ambulance pulls itself ahead. Right behind it, tailgating like it wants to couple up and be towed, is a van marked 'Portcullis Security', obviously taking advantage of the cleared road and matching the ambulance for speed, much to Andy's and Ron's aggravation.

FIV£

A Series Of Unfortunate Events (A Different One To Lemony Snicket's)

Doo be doo be doo doo doo – Aaaaah!

- Annie Lennox

Another van of the same description is parked at a suave and American country house, where dinner is served.

"You want people to work on your rigs," Tobias gets straight to the point, as suits his style, "I have better. You want people to build your token wind farms. I have better."

"Better?" A certain oil executive raises an eyebrow behind a plume of cigar smoke and a glass of dark wine.

"When you can reduce your wage and health and safety costs, increase speed and efficiency of your workforce and improve your security detail from the one we give you now, I'd say it's better." Tobias folds his arms. His bald head tilts back and the reflection of the chandelier moves over a raised vein on his temple. An odd thing happens: a smile gets temporarily placed on his face, as genuine as a smile could ever be but crooked like its bearer, showing teeth that bear bare diamonds and stainless steel as hallmarks of Tobias's trap. Only shown to those who are truly in trouble. The only thing worse than being an enemy of Tobias, is to be a friend. "Meet the team."

Without a chance for the executive to respond save for a gasp, three muzzled and manacled, naked furies (a lion, a sheep and a very fidgety ferret) are frogmarched into the Stag Room in which the dinner is taking place, by Roger, the Portcullis guard who, like many of them, had thought he was signing up for a standard CCTV watching job at a service station, only to find out that was just a cover for this sort of freaking mess.

"So I understand you will be selling your oil at a price structure that suits both our needs now."

The microphone pinned to Claire's lapel pulls it uncomfortably against her sweating neck, the camera pointed at her giving off heat haze like the road behind it and the sun has already burned her face through hat brim, shades and copious sun block. It's still hot and it's night time in Hamada. Nevertheless, this is one hell of a story and if it means presenting it live from hell to prove her worth (having been the nearest correspondent to the spot when the story blew), well, Kimpler Media can rely on Claire Stott. One amazing scoop to reveal, and the camera woman silently counts down to the live report with her fingers.

...3, 2, 1.

"Thank you, this is Claire Stott reporting here on the extraordinary and bizarre breaking news that Sheikh Muhammad Al-Oallo, recently ascended prince of The Hamada Emirate, has been transformed into a pig, yet one that can still talk and still knows exactly who he is. With eyewitnesses including the President of Iran and the Bahraini and Saudi Ambassadors, there can be no questioning the authenticity of this event, which has naturally caused outrage beyond comparison throughout the Arab world and beyond. This is being treated by Hamadian police very seriously indeed, and by the Hamadian Royal Family as the greatest of insults ever conceived. The doors of the palace have been closed to all except the police since this event occurred and nobody has entered or left the building according to the security guards, who are contracted privately from Portcullis Security. Many questions will doubtlessly be asked of them over the coming days and weeks, but right now the focus is on finding the perpetrator and figuring out how they managed to sneak in what could quite possibly have been the active ingredients of the same kind of transformations seen in members of the furry fandom in the last month or two."

In the studio, the presenter responds through Claire's earpiece, "Extraordinary indeed, and quite worrying as well for the Hamadian Royal Family, erm, have there been any indications as to the whereabouts and current health of Sheikh Muhammad himself?"

"Well, as far as we can tell he's been airlifted under heavy guard to the Hamada University Hospital, world renowned for its treatments for Alzheimers developed in conjunction with Manchester and Stanford Universities, but so far although the Sheikh is in a stable if still insultingly porcine condition, there is no sign of any kind of wearing-off and genetic analysis, so far in early stages, is as yet inconclusive. It is not believed there is any further threat to the health of the Sheikh apart from that which has already happened, indeed doctors say they are pretty sure that being transformed into a pig is the only thing wrong at this time with his health in any way. This would tally with the Sheikh's reputation for cleanliness and having servants always deep-clean his rooms before he will enter them."

"What about reports that there were other people present who were not foreign dignitaries at the banquet when this happened?"

"When we asked the police spokesperson earlier, they said, "All who were present have been accounted for and are being questioned by police". We will be staying with this story throughout the day here in Hamada and will update you as soon

as we have more details. This is Claire Stott reporting for Kimpler Media.”

“We could set up a sort of isolated community in Scotland, land's cheaper there.” Bonny Rabbi helpfully suggests. “Isolation is the last thing we need. Exile ourselves and we will be just that, exiled into ghettos of us on our own and surrounded by people for whom we are not considered normal. The only reason I allowed the vote was in the interests of fairness and with the possibility of a kind of base, a place we can all call home when our normal home is not, to go back to when we need to in mind. Besides, I thought you Thropes were relieved to come out of isolation?” Clarifies Steven. “We're relieved not to be alone in this world any more, to have a boost in the numbers of those who might have some sympathy for us...” “You know you're welcome among us as long as you are honest and trustworthy to us and as long as you consider us the same to you.”

Those who are free shall be slaves and those who are enslaved shall remain free.

Georgina's spine chills as she remembers a line she once wrote in a novel. “Ken, things are getting worse yet. Have you seen this about that sheikh?”

“Better than what? People? They're – they're slaves?” The executive asks incredulously. The three to whom he refers look at him exhaustedly and sincerely.

Irregular Hexagon

The Doom Field

*People in glass houses shouldn't throw those stones, but
Something just flew through my window pane!*

- Annie Lennox

“I've got to go now, I'll keep my eyes open for possibilities of where to go.” Ray signs off and removes his duct-tape-adapted headset. The computer in his Dad's loft is worryingly hot anyway, so he decides to shut it down for a bit. *It's probably inhaled the carpet again... or my fur.*

His paws clasp the lid closed and he turns it over to remind him to clean the dust out of the heatsink soon.

The house seems a tad quiet. He can still hear his father downstairs, but there seems to be a slight lack of neighbourly noise or passing vehicles these days. A rather fortunate thing in some ways, and it's not like his Dad had lived in this house long either, so perhaps it's school term time again and had been the holidays before. Still, there is an unshakeable feeling of being watched that makes Ray's lupine senses tingle with unease. Extra CCTV at the corner shop? Maybe. Neighbours being nosier because they know an intelligent being of a different species is across the road who's been in the news? Quite likely that, though Ray wishes there were a way both to assuage his paranoia since that weird and scary experience with the MGU and to adequately put into words that apart from the huge sense of relieving fulfilment from his change, he was still the same person inside. Still the same mind, just with wolf features and tendencies plugged in. *Only when you try to tell people anything like that, their capacity to misinterpret knows no bounds.*

Nor does the man in charge of the man now taking over the watch at the watch-station set up in the flat above the corner shop. If anything, Ray's father's move has made keeping an eye on him much easier. Something to do with a local estate agent who has friends in high places who require a return favour. A price drop can be brought to a divorcee's attention at a very fortunate time when one of the people orchestrating it knows an ex-lawyer whose own experience in the divorce realm makes understanding this one a piece of cake. “Beats the case of the Psycho Bitch From Hell”, he'd said. “Still think we should have injected the wolf with the MemoreraserTM”, he'd then muttered under his breath.

The one to whom those words could be attributed has his many irons in many fires, many fingers in many pies and is in a right mess as always. But his new PhD bright spark would sort out the mess in one way at least. Whilst John slugs out the questions with the police, for which he already had comprehensively prepared answers, a little bit of cleverly worded job advertisement and creative deployment of resources has improved the fortunes of the MGU in his absence.

“Live and exclusive reports here straight from The Hamada Emirate, the Sheikh has reportedly been denied access to the Hamada University Hospital Mosque by a very apologetic immam who insists that under Islamic law no animals are allowed in the main prayer rooms of the mosque and so the Sheikh, we are informed, stormed out and sought a room in which to pray for justice to be brought, followed by two servants – one a cleaner and the other carrying his prayer mat and shoes. Since the whole complex is under armed guard this is not considered to have affected his security in any way, but the same questions still remain. We're now just hearing that the Emir of Hamada has prepared a statement, so now we go live to the Hamadian Auxiliary Press Conference Suite. As is the custom here, I must announce just before we switch cameras, so: to all our viewers, we present His Majesty, The Emir Of The Hamada Emirate.

“-and thank you all for coming to our press conference. It is a deeply troubling situation when not one person who we had

been sure could be safe, can be given safety at all from this new threat as has been demonstrated with my son. When a terrorist act has been carried out, on sovereign territory, to the heir to the Emirate, and when not only has he been attacked, but in a dishonest and cloaked, cowardly way with NO HONOUR, when he has been reduced to a physical and emotional wreck in the shape of an animal, when his own body which adorned the magazines all our womenfolk adored has been defiled and not just with the DNA of any animal, but that of a PIG, which is of course the opposite of halal, the opposite of clean and the representation of the people who would do this who are the OPPOSITE of Islam, who have instead of submitting to Allah, slapped Him round the metaphorical face with a genetic alteration which ought not exist at all, when all of this has befallen us we seek justice and to take down anybody who thought they could get away with such an insult. We WILL NOT REST until we have this justice. This is not just a problem for our family, this is not just a problem for the Hamada Emirate, this is a problem for all of Islam and because of this it is also a problem for everybody else in the world. I call upon all people and nations to seek justice with us against this atrocity.”

Donna has noticed a distinctly suspicious improvement around the Military Genetics Unit Facility (location top secret but somewhere near Huddersfield) lately. A palpable air of certainty of management and organisation seems to pervade every square inch of the concrete tunnels and all rooms be they clinical, experimental, official, off-limits or full of toxic gas, large or small, there's a distinct feeling that no matter where you go in the place, you know your place and can find what and who you need. *The maintenance and security have improved, the Lieutenant is in a good mood... (which hasn't happened for as long as anyone can recall except for when that git John got his ankle caught in a machine last Christmas...)*
Dr John Crossley, the biggest fallacy the British military has ever seen.
Where the hell is he? Perhaps the Lieutenant is due a promotion?

“And whoever turns out to be responsible, they and all they associate with, their bosses and subordinates, their brothers, sisters, parents and children, their whole families and all who associate with them will SUFFER far beyond the already enormous anguish they have brought on us. They will on top of that, feel the wrath of Allah, for He is righteous and will strike down those who dare oppose His people!”

The apopleptic and religious emir collapses into tears for a moment before murmuring prayers to the microphone in Arabic for all to hear and for subjects to join.

Outside, on the well-invested-in streets, noisy protesters burn flags and shout their rage.

And then there's the new guy... who'd have thought we could hire one of these... people?

I thought they called themselves 'furries' but I suppose it's plausible to have them with scales too. I wonder how scared someone who has a phobia of snakes would be in my position right now...

Sir Francis Snake sits opposite her in the staff 'crash' room, MGU mug in mouth, sipping tea and reading the latest article on the Daily Disaster website. *They seem to have simultaneously outdone themselves in every positive and negative way, muses Francis.*

Hamada's Muhammad's Hammed!

Shaken Sheikh Speaks From Hospital On Forced Transformation In World

Exclusive – By Ahmed Inabed & Claire Stott

INTERNATIONAL OUTRAGE presided over the scene today as the rising star of the Arabian world, Sheikh Muhammad Al-Oallo, was transformed by what appears to have been the same method seen so recently in the furries who have revealed their inner animals all around the world of late. However, unlike the voluntary transformations most furries claim to have had, the Sheikh's came completely out of the blue at the end of a celebration banquet held with the President of Iran and other dignitaries in the opulent and ostensibly secure surroundings of the Hamadian Royal Palace. In an exclusive for The Daily Disaster, our correspondents Ahmed Inabed and Claire Stott were on the scene for an interview with the Sheikh himself... **Click to see full article**

“Think of them more as tamed beasts, for that is after a fashion, what they are. But they also retain the human ability to solve problems and to work out how to do things. They have proven through training and testing to be difficult to do any permanent harm to, although they occasionally require a little persuasion to work...”

“What about their rights? Won't anybody who considers using such creatures get a hammering from the law and fluffy-bunny activists?”

“They're 51% animal and 49% human. Used in the right locations, they have no rights beyond animal rights. I have DNA test results here. I'm not quite sure why 51%, but that's the same no matter what species, whether they have wings or long tails or not. So long as you stick to domesticated species where the laws on pets make that clear you should have no trouble. Your mileage may vary with more exotic breeds.”

The three on parade look on forlorn, their gagging plastic muzzles designed to inhibit the making of any meaningful noises and 3D printed for each individual at Area 84, as they and their compatriots are traded for slavery.

"You'd better be very very right. If I get found guilty of people trafficking, Tobias, do you understand? I'll do more than make your every waking moment hell. I'll put it in the contract with scope for the terms to be tightened should loopholes be discovered, RETROSPECTIVELY."

"Hey, I could always go to Exxon or Shell instead. They could apply their extra profits made from my kind of cost savings to making sure you never say an ill word of it."

"I could throw my money at developing a rival set-up..."

"Why bother when they already stand before you?" Returns Tobias, "besides, I'd make sure any shit thrown about rights or whatever sticks to you if you did that."

Russia's Phone Prefix

At Sixes And Sevens

And they say, "See how the glass is raised?"

I have refused to take part

I told them "drink something new"

Please let me pull something through

I don't know no shame

I feel no pain

I can't

I don't know no shame

I feel no pain

I can't see the flame

- Sinéad O'Connor

"So, it's like that, is it?" The executive sticks a cigar in his mouth to buy himself a brief moment.

"You could say that. These workers also have extra abilities between them which could prove handy if handled well... We will be able to supply plenty of workers for you, in return all we ask is appropriate remuneration at a price you will find most affordable, fuel discounts for our fleet and personnel and perhaps your occasional friend-of-a-friend assistance with more major barriers to our progress." Tobias applies his most businessy of business faces.

The executive looks at the enslaved workers almost apologetically, then tears his eyes away from them as smoothly as he can, to look at the face of a man whose company has already been reported as one of the fastest rising and most capable security firms. *Quite an entrepreneurial spirit, which in a free market should always be rewarded...* despite himself, "OK, let's talk dollars, then." *Perhaps an intelligent fish or whale version could help with a deep-sea leak should one arise...*

Daily Disaster: "Thank you very much for inviting us here today."

Sheikh Muhammad: "It is no problem. Ahmed here helped me with the horse racing and proved to be an entertaining guest at the banquet. Since you are a journalist, I consider this a return favour."

Daily Disaster: "It's certainly a privilege to be able to interview you today most appreciated, particularly with the tense security worries. Your Excellency, your thoughts on what has happened to you, if you can sum them up for us?"

Sheikh Muhammad: "There is no way possible of making a bigger insult to a Muslim. How on Earth am I to go to a mosque now? I have been changed into... a pig!"

Daily Disaster: "So given that you feel this way, what next?"

Sheikh Muhammad: "I will do whatever I can to ensure that the perpetrators are found and justice brought. As for normal life, I don't know how much I can still do really. My hands feel weird, so do my feet and my face and it's going to take a lot of getting used to until the doctors can find a cure or way to reverse this. I have put \$20,000,000 into the fund to make this as easy to resolve as possible, and hopefully lessons will be learned so that nobody else has to stay as a species they don't want to be for this much time. My good friends and contacts are doing all they can, so between us we'll sort this out and hopefully before the next big race."

Daily Disaster: "So this hasn't affected your passion for horse racing?"

Sheikh Muhammad: "Not in the slightest. I'm no jockey either way. But I love the horses and seeing them run. Always have, always will. At least you can trust a horse. Or could until people started turning into animals."

Daily Disaster: "Do you think you might have any clues as to who did this to you?"

Sheikh Muhammad: "If I knew anything I'd tell the police. I already told them what I know and they have the CCTV. They've got a forensic search on scouring the palace top to bottom. The moment I know who did it, and know it for sure, they will be dealt justice., That is all I will say on the matter."

"That's another letter from school, Imran. They've said 'Whilst we have an Equal Opportunities policy, species dysphoria is

a challenging condition to accommodate, particularly with how the recent advancements in treatments for it affect the other students in a class's ability to concentrate. Add to this the risks of a dragon with wings, a long tail and the ability to breath fire in a school environment and we are brought to the conclusion that perhaps there are better educational environments out there than we can provide for your child. Whilst we do not intend to suspend or eject, we are obliged toward the protection of all students in the school, and so if anything should indicate that Imran poses more of a hazard to them than any other child would to one another, his continued attendance here would become impossible. This should therefore be considered due notice of concern that alternatives ought to be readied in case of any issues which may arise as a result of this most unusual change.' - so it looks like your education prospects are reduced thanks to what you've done to yourself. Here's another thing: Mosque. You can't keep claiming to the imam that you're unwell every Friday. You're obviously fit as a fiddle but they aren't going to let you in like that. It's admirable that you want to continue practising Islam-"

I don't if this is how it's going to be about me...

"-but religions don't tend to keep up to date quite as fast as we need them to. And what will the Social Services say when they next come to visit? How will we get you a passport to go see your Uncle Bilal in Pakistan? And what about the Hajj? What were you thinking?!"

I'm thinking you have repeated this lecture to me five times in the last couple of weeks.

"I was thinking you don't understand me. I was thinking that Islam is great as a general idea, but the people in it don't understand me. I was thinking that school is dull and doesn't understand any students, certainly not me. I was thinking that I don't want to just work in a corner shop, go back and forth to and from Pakistan to find a bride and settle a marriage with someone I don't know. I was thinking I don't want to dress in white, follow people like sheep to a desert city and get half-trampled just to walk around the K'aaba. I was thinking existentially, like I want to be free in every way I can be, and that freedom is not a sin. Freedom to be what I want to be is worth this fuss and hassle, mum, so if you want to keep lecturing me and repeating yourself, go ahead, you change nothing."

"Is it worth no school, no job, no proper culture of faith?"

"I will overcome those things somehow, and as for faith, I have faith in myself, faith in the people who made this possible, faith in information being free and faith in freedom itself. You should try that sometime. You call your faith 'faith' and it is, but it is forced, imposed."

"Don't you dare! This faith is our chosen faith, Islam means Submission and it has done us good." She looks defeatedly at the strangely teenager-sized dragony thing that looks kind of like Imran, then shrugs. "Well, go do whatever it is you're going to do, but you'd better not break any laws because I won't be bailing you out, you'd better not come crying to me if it doesn't work out and you'd better thank your lucky stars I haven't already found out how to reverse that process, young man! The only reason you've still got your room in this house is because I can't find the money to fix it up to rent it out and, somehow, I'm still your mum! Or mum of whatever percent you have of human left in you. I certainly didn't give birth to this. I think I'd have noticed if I did! I'd have let your dad keep you!"

It is a long night for Steven. The forum has been left with the suggestion that all options of furry stronghold places be listed in a thread and then voted on, with Steven's suggestion of the Malt House being listed as only possible to be used as a temporary stop-off for a few at a time, as that's all it is, a standard pub with a couple of rooms upstairs available when necessary. The water in the canal laps muddily at the tyres hung on the boat's side and geese waddle by on the towpath in the moonlight whilst sheep bleat distantly.

"Anaïs?"

"Yes?"

"Have you heard anything from any furies in America in the last couple of weeks?"

"No, not a word..."

"I have a good friend over there and I'm worried. He's not replying to my emails or any other kinds of messages. That's like the Daily Disaster not printing a topless lady on Page 3. Very out of character."

"What can we do about it?"

"I don't know yet. There's something not right."

"Zere are many things not right, VulpeSteven."

"Well, at least we're improving some of them. But this isn't really what I had in mind, you know. Things have gone really weird."

"What exactly did you have in mind?"

"I don't know, some kind of naïve idea that whilst things wouldn't be utopian, we'd still somehow get along and manage in the end."

"Aren't we?"

"Bit hard to say when some nutter's misusing my invention to try to start World War Three, really, isn't it?"

"You can't be sure it'll be that bad."

"You haven't read or watched much news about how Hamada deals with things, have you? Put lightly, when they show extreme restraint publicly, they're gearing up for the opposite. They're closely tied with Israel and Palestine and so on. If I were the people who decide on the Doomsday Clock, I'd be moving it towards midnight." Steven stares at his computer

screen. "Oh, great." The sarcasm is tangible, as is the disapproval.

"Don't scare me like that! What now?"

"The army's recruiting and its adverts are very much geared towards furies. Get a load of this!"

"So, you want to be free.

So, you want to have fairness and the ability to maximise your potential.

To be able to do things and experience things and be things nobody else has done before.

You want to let your inner animal show the best of you on the outside.

You wear your heart on your sleeve

And you can with pride

For your country.

If you have a unique species-related advantage, the Army wants you to come and talk to us.

We have unique monetary, life and security advantages to provide in return.

And you can see what it's like to be everything your potential can make you.

You can do it all and be it all in the Army."

"So, the MGU isn't providing the soldiers, then?" Sir Francis Snake looks up from the video, recently posted online.

"Not yet. We're offering jobs to those who want them first. Your friends and you were pioneers, so we've decided to respect that and make the best use of that pioneering spirit that it deserves." The Lieutenant replies.

"Sir. Authorised Land Rover departure reported at 18:46 hours." A private adheres to the new improved security regimen.

"Who authorised it?"

"Doctor John Crossley, sir."

*F**k. Can I never get rid of him?* "Thank you. At ease."

Herbie

Mad Dogs And Englishmen

Oh, Dr. John

What am I doing

- Mika

A few hours earlier:

"Marvellous!" A balding bloke with a fair bit of tan whips off a pair of designer shades and, with a slight and curious wobble, puts them away in a case and places them on the X-Ray conveyor under the waft of a somewhat whiffy air conditioning unit. The fluorescent lights flicker vaguely but nobody cares as enough sunlight is streaming into the doorway at the other end of the room and the windows around it anyway, through which a taxi can be seen parked up, its driver greedily fingering an exorbitant tip. Various travellers in veils and suits, niqabs, leather and sweat all await patiently in a pong of aftershave, under-serviced and overloaded ventilation systems and hot metal, gently being circulated over the heads of security guards and armed police. John adjusts his shirt and pulls out his wallet, carefully prepared. "Remember to check this as you scan everything." He winks.

The guard eyes him warily, runs the quite typical detritus of a passenger he's seen before through the X-Rays, and when the wallet is handed back to John at the other side, it is exactly as inappropriately lighter as he expected. Both men exchange gruff expressions, and no cavity searches are carried out. Not that any were needed as it happens, but, in the words of John's mind, *I can't be arsed with that sort of shit, nor can they and they know I know they know it. Besides, that money's got to go.*

Now, that same balding bloke with the mean stare and for whom the devil may care, is shifting along country lanes like a hare.

"There, you and I have worked wonders here. Perhaps we can make this all work out smoothly yet, and with Britain back on top of the game..." The Lieutenant smiles to the anthropomorphic reptilian (or possibly zoomorphic or reptilomorphic human(oid)? Semantics and all that...) figure at his side.

"Sir, we have back-traced the aliases and transport itinerary of Dr Crossley, as requested." A print-out is handed to the Lieutenant, who reads it before stuffing it behind a seat cushion.

"Thank you. Not a word to him. Encrypt all files and hide them somewhere unlikely. This I will deal with."

"Jeff, I need a word." The leopard turns around, expecting to see the hospital's chief but instead seeing a wolf on two legs who once went by the name of Jason. Nearly jumping out of his skin, he just about catches his cup of water before nearly spilling it over the water cooler.

"Good grief, Lupustorm? I, er, thought you were someone else for a moment."

"I would have spoken to somebody else, but you're the only one I can find around here at the moment, which is just as well

in some ways. Anyway, let's find somewhere private with no cameras or anything."

Jeff raises his brow slightly, but shows Lupustorm down a few corridors anyway. Eventually they get to a cleaning store room and usher an uncomfortable cleaner aside.

"Will this do?" Jef Leppard asks.

"Er, probably."

"This," declares the prime minister to the mixed attention of the Cabinet, "is a Shit Sandwich." The reference to a programme about a call centre washes over the lot of them like so many of this leader's quips and elements of spin. "I have just been on the phone with the Hamadian Ambassador and half the rest of the world. All eyes are on us and basically, everyone has come up with reasons to want to wring each others' necks. Human rights, rights for these... furries, whoever they think they are showing up like they did, the environment, anger over the Sheikh being so comprehensively insulted they're treating it an insult to all of the Islamic people. You name it. It's a bit like the equivalent of the Princess Diana crash having been deliberately caused by somebody laying a starving African child on the road in front of her vehicle. It's that level of insult. But I'm sure that's been rammed into your brains enough already, courtesy of that surprisingly well timed Daily Disaster report." A few faces look up at this. "Don't worry, I have eyes on Kimpler. Anyway, what are we going to do? I need ideas that'll work well together."

"I think I can help you there." An enigmatic lady speaks up from a corner of the table, smiling despite nobody else doing so.

"Well, I hope you can, Georgina. There's an election coming up soon and I think your seat in Gloucestershire's safe, isn't it?"

"Pretty much."

"Good, let's hear it, then. I'm all ears." The whole cabinet turn to face the one with the smile.

"Jeff, I'm worried."

"You must be, what's brought you all the way here? Couldn't you ring me?"

"There's something more to what Vulpesteven did than first meets the eye. I'm telling you, there's something very weird going on."

Both of them look at one another's furry faces for a moment.

"And this isn't?"

"Hmm?" Lupustorm double checks.

"Isn't weird. Already, this." Jeff holds up his paws.

Lupustorm shakes his lupine head side to side, his ears shifting further into a position more indicative of deep unease.

"Jeff, I think there are forces at work that are well out of our league. They are using us all. We are pawns. Look at the MGU and what happened to Ray, look at the way the Geneticiser allows us to heal really fast, even long after using it it doesn't wear off. Look at the weird quietness of the government and media in this country, compared to the rest of the world. Look at America, where the furry population is ten times what it is here. Things just aren't adding up, Jeff. I'm telling you there's another force in the mix, playing people off against one another."

"If that's the case, any idea who they are?"

"I'm not sure, but if I were you, I'd only trust those who came to Steven's original furmeet with us, and even them with some suspicion. I can't be sure of anything, but it's really worrying and I won't let it rest. It all feels wrong."

"What it does feel like to me is that we have decimated A&E and operation waiting times, and saved a few lives."

"But at what cost, Jeff?"

"Saving lives? You want to count the cost of saving lives? Good grief, Jason, snap out of it! How did you get this worked up? Anyway, my break's about to end, I need to be on call again." The leopard in NHS uniform strides out of the cupboard and leaves Lupustorm in the corner. A mop falls over, disturbed by Jeff brushing by. Lupustorm would feel silly, but then again Jeff always did have trouble saying what he meant.

"Oh no..." A crestfallen Lieutenant looks up from the table where he and Francis had been relaxing to a game of cards for a break.

The front door of the MGU opens wide and in hobbles Dr John Crossley with much shoddy aplomb, his metal-pinned ankle playing up after the long flight. Despite the long-haul flight, this couldn't wait. Looking up at the TV in the reception area, displaying a news crew still exploring the details of what had happened where he had just been. And not a single mention of him or Ahmed.

"When you dine with wolves, make sure you're not on the menu!" John advises no-one in particular whilst looking to the Lieutenant with enough of a scary grin and glint in his eyes to make it clear he's just succeeded at something, in a way that does not do anything to disassociate him from the wall-mounted swing-arm-bracketed flat panel's news bulletins. The grin is then gone, replaced instantly with a cheerless flippancy bordering simultaneously on darkness, bully-like thick and unmeasured malice, tiredness and affront. "By the way, who the smeg is this?" He remarks, eyes settling unsettlingly on the reptilian newcomer, whose eyes are themselves a tad unsettlingly reptilian for someone so humanoid in shape. Before anything more untoward is said, the Lieutenant clears his throat and introduces them. John takes him aside afterwards.

“Are you absolutely fucking sure about this? If it turns out he's playing us, I know someone who can have you for breakfast!” John glares heavily, occasionally shifting his eyes back at the door behind which the snake is waiting, “Are you absolutely fucking sure you want to keep your job? You haven't done a very good job of hiding where you've been, we've been able to trace that since you got back in the country, and I know someone who can have you and anybody you could know for breakfast too, so just you mind out. THIS is a military genetics unit, not a fucking revenge mechanism for you to get back at your ex or anyone else who crosses you! I am not going to put up with calling you SIR for much longer if this carries on, and I assure you I have protection in place for whence I should blow the whistle! Sir(!)” The Lieutenant shakes lightly, but holds his expression as steady as a rock bolted thoroughly to a bigger rock. “You wouldn't dare.” John calls his bluff as belittlingly as he can. “You're weak, and the only reason you have this rank is that I took pity on you and put in a good word. I would have you by the throat if it didn't jeopardise my job to do so. And sooner or later, a gap will show in the rules and the law. You will be there, and I will destroy you. When you dine with wolves, Lieutenant, make sure you are not on the menu.”

Racing Car, Number Nine, Losing Petrol All The Time...

Savage

All mockery is laughing

All violence is cheap.

She said...

"These are my guns

These are my furs

- Eurythmics

“We have some good news and some bad news, Mr Jefferson.” That same American-looking man informs him, solemnly.

“Let's have the good news, then.”

“We've found Grace. She is indeed at Area 84.”

“I'm hardly sure that counts as good news. The bad news?”

“Portcullis Security.” Mr Jefferson looks at him hopefully for a moment. “We'd be no match I'm afraid, they have their fingers in too many pies. It's all we can do to infiltrate, but to change anything would bring a whole world of pain down on us. Our influence here is weak.”

“Damn.” Mr Jefferson starts to pace the opulent carpet.

“It gets worse. We were informed one of our spies was paraded naked with a couple of other inmates as specimens to show to an investor. They think they're in with a fair chance at circumventing anti-slavery laws and want to use the inmates for oil workers at sea so as to force oil prices down.”

“Welcome to the land of the free and the home of the brave! OK, where's my coat?”

The Thrope shakes his head. “I don't know what idea you've got going on in your head, but it had better be good.”

“Trust me, I'm Old Money. I have many tricks up my sleeves yet and my daughter's freedom is worth doing them all and then many more besides. If there's one thing I won't stand for, it's infringement of freedom in America.”

“Then where have you been this last few years? The government's more authoritarian than I'd dare say.”

“Eating my yam, as a certain African-themed poem puts it – a terrible and easy mindset to get into. Well, I'm all outta yam now. Let's see what these Portcullis guys say when they realise just how wrong they've been.”

“Ah, General, such a pleasure to meet you at last. I am Tobias, and you will be very pleased to have heard of Portcullis Security by the time we have concluded this meeting, mark my words.”

“I hope so, it's been quite a busy month for us, so please make this worth my while. I understand you recently gained the contract for Area 84, is that going well so far?”

“You might say it is going... swimmingly...” Tobias alludes to his prior agreements. “Would you care for a drink?” No foul play there, just a selection of wines and spirits in sealed bottles. Nevertheless, the General declines.

“Only water, please. Now, how is it you intend to assist the military?”

“Well, you already mentioned Area 84. Quite a big problem we are handling for you already, I am sure you'll agree.”

“Yes, I expect to see regular reports as you promised.”

“And you shall, General. We are going to show you all the figures you need to see, and they will be better than you expected.”

The General raises his considerable eyebrows. “Given the circumstances politically and ethically with this, that is certainly something I would like to see on such a short timescale. Do you have any examples you can provide just yet?”

“In a manner of speaking. We can go and see the examples later. First I would like to give you the full proposal.”

“Proceed.”

“The government will never let the inmates of Area 84 out into society whilst they have power. And yet you and I are reasonable men, and know an opportunity too good to waste when we see one. These people have already been disassociated from a civilian lifestyle by quite a degree anyway, as is evident in the lengths they went to for freedom from it prior to their capture. But where is the opportunity for them in that? I want to offer a pathway of reform. A chance for

these 'furries' to redeem themselves for the benefit of our nation. I'm sure American soldiers are some of the best in the world, but you would need to risk so fewer of them if you stand them beside super-soldiers trained up by Portcullis Security at Area 84. Super-soldiers who are often already disowned from their families and somewhat militant in their attitudes, are easily malleable minds to make our semi-human military allies. You could try to do that in the military, but then you would only have yourselves to blame if the government changed its mind. We, on the other hand, have corporate links and networks throughout the world and all the innovative thinking you'll need. We can ensure the army can freely choose which animal best expresses its power, speed and agility and acts as a sheer offensive weapon. You can have the freedom from species limitations in your ranks before other countries work this out. There are not just rumours, there are advertisements out that the British are already working on this too. You wouldn't want them to get ahead, would you?" "You pack a convincing argument, Tobias. Let's go and see our future troops, shall we?" The General does not mince his words.

Hello again Clarissa.

"You need a solution to this problem soon, right?" Sir Francis Snake breaks John's would-have-been-meandering train of thought as he ponders the wreck of his ex behind the two-way mirror.

"That's one way of putting it." John mutters. He's about to walk off.

"I have some suggestions for ways you could ensure you no longer need to keep her here. Ways her mental wellbeing or lack thereof could be handled without the cost to the MGU."

"I somehow doubt you would be up to the task."

"I have reports on all the viable methods I have considered thus far, cited, signed and sealed."

"By all means put them on my desk, then." Dr Crossley does not sound particularly likely to listen to the snake, but in spite of this and in spite of the spite in his mind against this unwelcome newcomer, some spark of malign intelligence now grips tightly to the idea he might finally be able to end Clarissa properly as an MGU concern and a concern of anybody's in general. Perhaps without even having to shoulder blame.

"You want all of them, you say? General, you flatter me. I now find myself in an enviable position to make monetary decisions about. If you want exclusivity, the price may need to reflect that. There are other interested parties within the USA whose money also speaks here, you understand."

"Oh, I understand, Tobias. So do the Black Projects branch when they see a good idea. Just name a price."

The Halden Herald

Scandal As Halden Hospital Revealed To Have Carried Out Experimental Procedures Without Clinical Trials

Halden Hospital's Accident and Emergency Department and Cancer Clinic have both been revealed to be using the controversial 'Geneticiser' machine, already an amateur-proven, if somewhat risky means to combine the DNA of a living being with that of other species, to heal broken bones, wounds and to clear up cancer, without first being taken through the appropriate regulatory procedures, in a slip-up that could see hundreds of patients treated there in the last few months at risk. An anonymous source, who we are told works at the hospital, showed us their new procedures and techniques, but when asked about whether they had been through official trials, testing or analysis, said "to be honest I don't think they have. My colleagues who started using this seemed to be under the impression that it could speak for itself, but I have my doubts as to its safety after having seen what it can do to a person when used incorrectly."

We have tried to speak to the Chairman of the Halden Hospital Trust, Mr Bill Ludden, unfortunately he was unavailable for comment. We will bring you more about this as it develops at our website...

Reporters scrum at the locked door to the corridor which leads to the boardroom and Trust offices like shoppers trying to be first into a large exploitative clothing retailer on Boxing Day. The Chairman returns from the canteen, but on hearing the din very carefully peers around the corner to the doorway to see the backs of several very eager reporters, and just over their hats, clipboards, notebooks, pens, tablet computers, laptops and cameras with huge flashes stacked atop them, he can just make out who is to him a certain half-leopard, half-half-truth-teller crossing the corridor. Before he can react, however, his presence is noticed by one of the reporters. *Oh great, more running. Well, power-walking anyway whilst trying to fend this lot off. That leopard has some explaining to do. Because I am sure as hell gonna stay out of this now. It was his idea!*

"If at first you don't succeed, cheat. If cheating, don't get caught. And if caught," John points at the nearest person, in this case the Lieutenant, "blame HIM!" Francis bemusedly takes note. "Thus concludes part one of the rules. Remember,

cheating includes a whole lot of things, not all of which are even considered to be wrong by most of society. You could say your genetic changes are a form of cheating after all, HOWEVER you do not see them as in any way negatively affecting anyone, do you? Or why would you do it?"

That's rich are words that really ought to cross the Lieutenant's mind at that point. And indeed they do.

"What's going on? Mr Ludden, who's that?"

Reporters clamour ineffectually while the chairman throws his considerable weight into closing and locking a door on them, before turning angrily to Jeff. The leopard man looks seriously back to him and the transgenically modified eyes of a cross between human and big cat lock with the bloodshot eyes of a stressed and overweight human.

"Jeff, I'm not stupid. I know you did this for good reasons! But damn it, I had to trust you to have done all the legal work first. Listen, I put way more hours into this hospital than does my health any good. I care about improving people's health and I'm always open to new ideas. But you have to know how those ideas get into the system, Jeff. I've done what I could to make it easy to make them happen, but did no-one ever tell you about the procedures that have to be followed?" Bill rants.

"They did, I recall from university. I never wanted things to get blown out of proportion, I just wanted to use what I had available to help someone. And I was frankly caught up in it all, I was amazed."

"Yes, well, your private obsessions have cost this hospital its dignity." Bill dejectedly turns away.

"And you put that above saving lives and decimating waiting times?"

"No, that's a marvellous thing, it's the how that I can't stomach, not the why or the what. It won't matter how many lives we try to save in here or how short the waiting times are if we can't get the public to see past the lack of procedural oversight. You overstepped the mark, Jeff, and I don't see you handling the consequences."

"I know. That's why I quit. Here's my resignation." Jeff holds up a letter between the padded fingers of his feline paws, signed somewhat awkwardly at the bottom.

"You will find it hard to get another job, you know."

"You're not making it sound like keeping this one will be easy anyway."

"Well, just don't make it look like I discriminated against you. I've tried to be as accommodating as I can, but there's a fundamental clash here between how you went about things and what we have to abide by in any hospital. So I'll have to accept." Jeff passes the letter to Bill, and turns like he's ready to step into the press mêlée. "Oh, and Jeff? Expect to finish up in court if the public opinion goes that way. Hopefully not, but expect the worst and hope for the best and all..."

"So, you're waiting to see the CEO too?" Mr Jefferson makes an attempt at small talk with the somewhat sweaty, somewhat rotund fellow beside him hiding under a Stetson. The cool, suave reception area gleams with freshly applied polish to its hardwood low-rise panelling and glass plated windows and walls. Portcullis logos are faintly picked out in translucent grey on each window and head each sheet of paper in the oil baron's quivering hands.

"Hmm?" The oil executive looks up. "Oh, you mean Tobias, yeah. Must be a busy man..."

"I'm sure he is. Aren't we all?"

The executive puts on a forced chuckle. "Yes, indeed..." He stares into space, a mild and distant frown crawling onto his brow. A frown three shades more pronounced does what it can to make headway onto Mr Jefferson's face, before he swiftly forces it away despite the concern and fury brewing within him.

"Chad?" Mr Jefferson continues waiting for recognition to dawn on his old friend's face. His old friend from back in the Halcyon Days of oil. Before it can, however, the atmosphere is dropped into a well of coldest business. Tobias is in the room.

"Chad Chad Junior, great to see you again. Would you like to come to my office, please?"

"Certainly, yeah..." Chad lifts his considerable bulk from the low cantilevered seating, which rises a good few inches almost back to where it was before he sat on it. He steps forward hesitantly, so Tobias places an arm round his shoulder like an old pal to lead him to the glass door at the back of the room. Just as he opens the door, Chad turns and looks back to Mr Jefferson.

"Is this gentleman here with you?" Tobias asks with a scathingly serious tone.

Chad clears his throat. "Erm, as a matter of fact he is." Chad takes a good long look at Mr Jefferson now, apparently having recognised him but been undecided on whether to reveal it until pressed. "Tobias White, meet Mr Lewis Jefferson. Lewis, Tobias." Tobias forces a smile that's all grit and no fun. Diamonds and steel again.

"Pleasure. Please don't bother with my last name, it, ah, doesn't suit my style." The men all chuckle through two lots of awkward discomfort and one of anger as they arrive at the top floor and enter the modern, polished office with its tinted windows and cooled lighting.. "So, I know why you're here, Mr Chad. But what brings you to our humble headquarters, Mr Jefferson?"

"We are old associates." They both respond in unison.

"Erm, I thought it best I could bring someone I trust to oversee the transaction, Tobias. Someone to sign as witness on my part. It is, after all, a very unusual contract."

Transaction? Hell, I only knew you were here when I walked in the door a few minutes ago. What the hell are you doing here, Chad? Why are you consorting with the likes of him? Why are you roping me into this?

"Granted, I don't suppose you were quite ready back at our country estate the other day off the back of one invite, but I trust you have now made up your mind?" Tobias presses for a speedy resolution, seeing that two brains might be more cautious than one if left to think.

"I've decided to take a gamble." Chad looks sombrely at his hat, now in his hands, his stress-lined face saying so much and so little. Lewis glances between them. *What sort of corporate chess is this? Which pieces are we moving?* "But I'll want exclusivity." Chad adds after a moment of contemplation. Tobias relishes this for a moment after.

"Well, I'd like you to hold onto that thought for a moment, because the stakes have been raised just a little bit further." Tobias informs Chad. "Another potential client has also asked for exclusivity. To both sides, this is therefore an all-or-nothing game. If you want the contract with me, you'll need to pay twice what we initially said at the mansion."

Lewis seizes the opportunity. "I believe this makes an excellent point to take a moment aside for Chad and I to confer, Tobias. Would that be okay for you?" The two stare at each other heavily, like they each are trying to crack the other's head open with mere thought.

"I do not see a reason to object." Tobias steps outside his office door, knowing the only other ways out of it are too well hidden. *Why did you book your appointment with me separately, Mr Jefferson? I thought you were going to level a third bid...*

As soon as the door closes, Chad glances around him like a conspiracy theorist. "It is quite possible we're being watched and recorded, Lewis. Please, bear that in mind."

"I don't doubt it. Let's see, then..."

"The contract is very high stakes. We are talking enslavement by loophole here."

"Say what?" *Oh damn, they were paraded for you?*

"Those human-animal hybrids. You know, the media are really interested in them in Europe."

"And what part do we play if you double the money?"

"That of Oscar Schindler, Lewis. In the most unlikely of industries. I've already made my money but I can't take it to the grave and my kids are brats enough with the money they have."

"I see." Lewis summons all his strength not to lose his temper at Tobias and his evil firm.

"So, why did you and I come here today rather than just me alone, if you get me?"

"I needed information, and as it happens, to help you, old friend." *Now you've said something that helps restore my faith in you somewhat.*

"Aren't you going to tell me if I should double the money or quit?" Chad tries to prompt Lewis to get a move on.

"I don't know who the rival is. But they probably aren't writing their lists of people for the same reasons we would write ours. If you believe you can do that, it will be of great personal benefit to me too."

And so the arms of the good are twisted metaphorically. They open the door and are rejoined by Tobias.

A cheque for a large enough sum to give a banker a panic attack is written. Contracts are perused but all present know how loophole-ridden they must surely be. They're only formalities anyway, so much more is at stake than the legalese wording that the contract is just the start of it. Signatures are signed on dotted lines.

"Thank you, gentlemen. It has been a pleasure doing business with you. Please expect us to contact you within two weeks to commence deliveries and training."

How can you be so cold? Where is my daughter?

Tobias shows them to the door, and there, sat in the same seat Chad had arisen from not long since, is very clearly a General. His uniform gleaming with medals and regalia, he is hard to miss. As they are checked over lightly by a couple of token guards for the building, they overhear through the glass, Tobias schmoozing,

"General, a pleasure to see you again! I see you found the time to arrive a little earlier than arranged..."

Chad and Lewis leave the building, walk down around the corner poker-faced as possible, then look to each other as they reach the car park.

"Military. That's no Oscar Schindler." Lewis points out to Chad.

"Yep, this shit is deeper than I thought. There's still oil under it, though..."

"Listen! The ONLY reason I am here is for my daughter. If you only wanted to get exclusivity to have more of those 'furries' working at your oilfields, I will make PERSONALLY sure that the contract is somehow annulled, am I clear?"

Chad takes his hat off and squashes it between his knuckles for comfort. "Lewis, if your daughter is among them I will be your best hope. We need to get them all the fuck out of there! If that has to be via my oil rigs, at least that makes them hard for Portcullis to find as they leave. It's my money I'm burning on this, Lewis. Burning to save the asses of people who didn't like the way their asses were."

"Well, it ain't gonna work!" Lewis gesticulates as he tries to make Chad see sense.

"Why not? We have exclusivity."

"You really don't understand who you just signed our souls away to, do you? Don't you think that if he's willing to make slavery of people somehow palatable to you, then he's willing to lie about exclusivity too? Why do you think that general was there? He's not just a rival in the run-up, Tobias is playing us off against him! We all think we have exclusivity! It's a con, Chad. All we can hope for is luck, it really depends who gets delivered to you and who gets sent to the army, and who to however many other interests Tobias saw fit to not tell us about."

"Well, I'm doing what I can. I don't see how we'll be able to crack this thing open otherwise, though." Chad looks

dejectedly at his squashed hat.

“How did you ever make your money, Chad? You and I, we used to be ruthless. Let's see, who else do we know who's got the balls?”

Hallo? Ach ja, I wanted to talk to you, Chad. Cool Cola are ready with their campaign...	
Lewis? Gut God, zat is a, erm, blast from the past.	That can wait, Jurgen. Lewis and I need a favour, please.

Strike

Members of The Old Guard
It's not the land of lost content
It isn't Shangri La
It's not the market in Tashkent
Or the crazy crosstime bar
It surely isn't Paradise
And it's not a parking lot
It's a place that isn't very nice
It's the land...that taste forgot
- The Donutsh

“Steven, I am really worried, you know. I shouldn't have to be doing this.”

“I know, Dad. One of these days I'll have fought my corner enough and we'll be a lot less ambiguous to the system. Clearly defined rights, like the internet based political parties all want. Until then, I'm sorry but there are some things I'll be still needing favours with.”

“Yes, well, I never thought having to sort out Legal Aid for you was ever going to be one of those things.”

“And I never thought you would split from mum either.” The atmosphere grows momentarily colder.

“Thanks for that. Just when I didn't need reminding.” Noel forcibly etches his signature onto a form about someone who had once simply been his son, but who now clearly was something more genetically complicated.

At the Military Genetics Unit's top secret underground bunker somewhere conveniently close to Huddersfield, a top secret telephone rings in a top secret office.

Hello?	Dr John Crossley, so pleased to hear you have returned safely to the MGU again.
--------	---

Says a voice that's anything but.

I do, Minister. But we already have here a working method we developed of our own, had you green-lighted it, we could have got there first -	We have a new focus now on the sorts of things your department was set up to handle. We need to keep up with the Joneses, you see. Our mole over the pond says they have super-soldiers ready to go as soon as trained. We're behind, John. So the Cabinet has seen fit to slide a little funding across to you, strictly, you understand, for the purposes of using existing and derived open source technologies to increase diversity in the army and through this to increase our long term effectiveness and keep us up to date, with all the relevant specialists. Going from the context of recent news and events, I trust you follow my meaning?
That Georgina. Always in my way with this stuff. I'm telling you, it's her.	I think it is safe to say, John, that your definition of 'working' did not cover the rights or psychology of the subjects sufficiently to convince certain members of the committee at the time.
	I don't care who said what, I care what the consensus is.

Oh, of course I will. I love you guys.	Like it or lump it. If you want to still be a part of this, play nice and do what we say and use the tools we ask you to. We must play to our strengths, John. Please, be one of them.
--	--

Says John when he means anything but.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, we have an infantry to enhance. Let's get some drinks and plan.” John grins uglily from the corridor entrance at the staff arriving that morning, particularly at the snake with arms and legs being given a wide berth by many of the staff who are still a bit freaked out by him.

“All rise for the Honourable Judge Marylin Maxwell.” The partially populated courtroom collectively get to their feet, and a berobed, large lady flows to her seat, adjusts her old-fashioned wig and clears her throat. “Thank you, you may be seated.” Those present seem to take this as an opportunity not only to sit, but to talk.

BANG, BANG.

“Order.” She looks over her half-moon specs purchased just for that purpose, scanning the room as if daring the next person to speak. “Nice to know I have a working gavel today. Proceed.” She nods to the prosecution.

“The prosecution wishes to present to the Court, the case of The Allied Churches Against Genetic Alteration, a consortium including several but not all denominations of the Christian church, versus Steven Dhai, who is as we understand it, now of No Fixed Address. Your honour, the case has been shown to you already, has it not?”

“It has indeed, thank you. I have read it carefully.”

“Then I wish to put forward a motion to make this a short case-opening session, such that the lawyer team for the prosecution can fully assemble. One of our number was unable to make it today.”

“As it happens, I believe the same was true for one of the defence lawyers, is that correct, Mr Dhai?” Marilyn looks interestedly at Steven for a moment, regarding the fox-man in her courtroom with eyes that have read all the laws on anything remotely to do with the matter. There he stands, history living and breathing, in a t-shirt and trousers with loads of pockets (the security officers having searched them all) and with a custom-sewn gap at the back allowing a very vulpine tail to make a sweeping curve towards its white tip by his raised ankles as he stands beside the defense table, apparently defying the convention of wearing suits to court for whatever personal statement reasons he has not made clear. Those ears, turning this way and that but mainly focussed to her. Those eyes, so intelligent and yet so animal in shape, staring intently right back at her. That long, neat muzzle with whiskers either side and ending with a wet, black nose, speaks now in a voice so ridiculously normal, civil, passably human sounding and Yorkshire accented:

“Yes, it is, and given he was the only lawyer for the defence and supposed to be provided under Legal Aid, I am inclined to agree with the prosecution's motion.”

Marilyn doesn't stutter, hesitation is not her thing. But distraction is easy to fall into in this particular case.

“Then... then we shall reconvene in a few days. You'll receive letters to let you know the exact times.”

BANG.

“Enhanced Infantry”? Have the British not learned from the mistakes of my forebears?” Jurgen mutters with dark incredulity, taking a sip of coffee. “Looks like we have a lead.”

He hesitates, then sends off an email to his secretary.

To: secretary@kimplermedia.de
From: jkimpler@kimplermedia.de
Subject: Gonzo
Bitte stornieren Sie meine Termine. Ich habe etwas zu schreiben.

(Please cancel my appointments. I have some writing to do.)

Eleventy Over Ten
Well Call Me Spider
It's gonna be a long night,
Waiting for the first light...
- Gerry Rafferty

“So there's still nothing the doctors can do for the Sheikh?” Claire asks the stressed guards again. They stare back, clearly tired of repeating themselves. A nurse, overhearing them, steps outside to smoke, and Claire turns towards him.

"For goodness' sake, please, have you not heard of the doctor-patient confidentiality? Go report on the wars in Palestine or somewhere!"

As luck would have it, that was to be Claire's next assignment anyway. Checking her pockets under her coat and straightening her hastily purchased headscarf, Claire tuts and goes back to the van.

"This is getting us nowhere. We need some leads, we need to do some real investigating!" Claire exasperatedly looks to Ahmed. He smiles in return vaguely, and replies,

"As far as I can see we have all the news we need right here. We've been told to not take our eyes off this hospital, so that's what we get." *Breathe steady. Don't show her your worry. Keep cool.*

Why did the Daily Disaster ever put me with this dweeb? He's doing my head in. Claire shuts herself in the van passenger side for a bit and grabs a sandwich and a drink. *Besides, isn't he supposed to be an international sports correspondent?*

Jurgen can feel the sense of vultures hovering metaphorically over his business, watching for any signs of weakness. *The brat who forced her way in as a journalist only did it with the help of Dr John Crossley, otherwise she'd still be scanning groceries. What was that all about? Still, at least I've got her out of the way in the Middle East...or at least, that was 'out of the way' until this 'sheikh' story came in... and why did Chad and Lewis get in touch again, after so long, with their worries in America, at the same time all that is happening? Is there a link...? The furries... those strange combinations of people and animals in the name of Freedom of Form, an almost cult-like obsession with morphological freedom offset with some rationalisations about science, parallel medical developments and psychological improvements... so many op-eds, so little by way of answers about what my daughter has gotten herself into. And that company, Portcullis Security, seem to be everywhere in the picture...*

Jurgen gets digging. A journalism award from the 90s hangs on the wall behind him, slightly dusty. His desk lamp lights his keyboard from above and the street lamps switch on outside, casting abrupt white LED light into every crevice of his corner of Berlin, the headquarters of the Daily Disaster and Kimpler Media. It's going to be a long night for him.

A large noticeboard receives an abrupt clearing of old paper notes and memos, business cards and photos. In their place, new near-white recycled flipchart paper is pinned up and lines drawn between various print-outs and photos. Jurgen is a bit old-school, but he gets the job done. The secretary drops off a tray of coffee, and asks the cleaner outside his office to keep an eye on him to make sure he's ok overnight. She nods and carries on pushing her efficient cylinder vacuum cleaner down the hall.

"You have got to be kidding me." The fox's ears flat sideways, an angry expression shows strongly through his white and reddish orange furred features, his eyes narrowed.

Jeff folds his arms and looks back at Steven apologetically. "The hospital rang me up and practically pleaded that I come back in to look at him. They said if I got this all out of their hair, I'd be off the hook and they'd figure out a way to give me a job back."

"Yes, but at what price? Do you know who he is? This psycho brought his situation on himself!" Steven looks through the mesh-glass window of the ward door at the sorry state a certain chimerised gang leader has got himself into.

"It's not our job to judge, it's our job to sort out this mess so that we can know how we might fix it for people more deserving." Jeff points out, gritting his leopard teeth and brushing Steven aside with a big paw, his anthropomorphism making his fingers long but letting him have soft and smooth fur, patterned more or less how he wanted it (the Geneticiser having only a finite degree of control of patterning to date).

Jeff opens the door and holds up a clipboard as if it can shield his sensitive ears from the cacophonous wailing of the wretched man before them, doubled with pains over his rejection sores and drugged with immunosuppressants.

"AAAagh, Oh-OW-oh fuck, it's YOU!"

"The feeling is mutual." Steven assures him.

"Go fuck off back down your den, fox. Can't you see I'm busy being in agony here... because of your fucking box of tricks?" GAPS manoeuvres into a less comfortable position. "NURSE?"

"The nurse is right there" Jeff points to a very amused nurse in her fifties who is busy polishing her glasses behind the desk in the main ward office past the glass partition, "and she assured me she can hear you loud and clear. She can also see what we are doing and has informed me that if we do anything she doesn't like the look of she'll have us out of here in a worse state than you. I wouldn't put it past her either." The nurse then lifts up a bag of popcorn and glares right at the patient before eating a handful. "If she wanted to, anyway." Jeff adds.

GAPS is aghast but somehow unsurprised. "Ah, that bitch has had it in for me since I got here. The operations should be fun..."

"Operations? You'll not likely have much luck with those!" Steven retorts, putting his paws on his hips and shaking his head.

"Why not?" GAPS winces with a pang of pain from his half-developed tail but not enough to mask the look of terror on his face. Steven is not exactly enjoying this but he's certainly not sorry for it.

"I don't know if I should bother explaining it to you, it's not like you listened to me the last time!"

"I don't recall you even saying anything last time about the machine, you left me guessing!"

"Then why did you use it, eh? Did you just suddenly decide it would be a good idea to hit the print button without

checking what you were turning yourself into?!” Steven’s anger at the idiocy of what GAPS did back in Leeds is showing clearly.

“I didn’t fucking think it would do this to me! It worked on that piece of shit Edwardo, didn’t it? It worked on you both, obviously, or you’d be in the next beds to me here!”

“Yeah, but what were you trying to prove?”

GAPS gives a knowing smirk but says nothing more about that. Instead, he lays back slightly and winces again. Steven turns to leave the room. Both Jeff and GAPS reach their arms out, and simultaneously shout “WAIT!”

Steven’s ears flatten further again. He pivots on digitigrade feetpaws and replies. “What?”

“You didn’t say ab-” GAPS begins, but is cut off in a trice.

“NOT YOU. Him!” Steven gestures to Jeff. “Yes? This had better be good.” The angry fox folds his arms.

“Well, you didn’t explain why operations are a bad idea. You don’t need to explain it to him, but you do to me, I’m acting as consultant here on all things Geneticiser and ideally, so are you.”

“Since when is that ideal?” Both Steven and GAPS say in unison. “SHUT UP!” Steven snarls through gritted teeth at the smarmy, chunky and sarcastic gangster. GAPS would normally take this sort of response as an excuse to knock seven bells out of its speaker, but he’s in no condition to argue with an angry six foot anthropomorphic fox with claws and teeth bared just now.

“Since his operations were scheduled. Fortunately, I know the surgeon and he’s agreed to give us time to figure out an alternative treatment if we can do so in time. The hospital just wants him out of here, and if that means a whole lot of operations to surgically remove his various animalistic growths, they’ll try to do that.” Jeff explains.

“Nonono, that won’t work!” Steven frowns.

“I know, that’s why we’ve gone to the effort of bringing you here.”

“Look, the Geneticiser vector is a nano-viral hybrid. It doesn’t leave the body cells, it stays in them, augments them. If you cut bits off, it grows them back to whatever code was specified to it in the GUESS.”

“GUESS? GUESS what?” GAPS looks nonplussed.

“GUESS Universal Editing Suite and SDK. The software that you didn’t bother to learn how to use. If you did, you’d know that if the power fails halfway through a print, it’s not a good idea to lick the slide. It had printed half the vector, more or less. So you got half a transformation, some genes but not others were tweaked and in some cell types and not others. It’s a right royal mess. And now, if you try and fix this with surgery, it’ll be unnecessary pain and blood loss, and then your body will repair itself back to the state it’s in now, this sort of chimeric limbo. And if the backup nucleus code wasn’t part of the half that did get printed, you’re screwed.”

“What have you DONE to me?!”

“What have YOU done to you? You’re the one failed to pay attention. Not me.”

“Whatever, Basil. Just tell me how I can fucking reverse it if not by surgery!”

“You can’t at all if you keep approaching it with that attitude!”

“Okay, fine, PLEASE, Mister Fox, I humbly ask that you undo this!”

“If you’d been listening, you may realise there’s a good chance I can’t. I’ll need a tissue sample from transformed and untransformed areas, a blood sample and an electron microscope, please, and a Geneticiser, and I’ll need somewhere, ideally a lab, away from this numpty to work on them in, and a good payoff from his health insurance because this isn’t on the NHS and I’m not doing this for HIM for free!” Steven points back over his shoulder at GAPS with a sharp claw as he leaves the room.

The nurse finishes her popcorn and laughs, having heard the whole exchange.

“Fat lot of help you are...” GAPS mutters at her through the glass, snagging an elongated incisor on his lip again and wondering if his hairdo will ever be the same if and when he gets rid of the fur now blending amid sores to the edge of it on his forehead and neck.

Here's our new look, simpler, cleaner logo. Tell us if you like it at <http://dailydisaster.news> and find more offers and competitions online too!
This edition: 19th April 2017. Don't take the date too seriously, readers! It's only there to make this look more realistic... - Danfox Davies

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'MGU' SCAM FUNDS TOP SECRET GENE LAB



Dodgy geezer: 'Dr' John Crossley, ostensibly a legal advisor to the civil service

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'Black budget' military operation masquerading as a facilities decommissioning firm, led by notorious loophole-exploiting scammer on a personal vendetta... - by Jurgen Kimpler

It is a long time since I wrote for my paper, but when I saw this story I decided to give it the personal touch. As a media company owner I am well aware of the implications of offshore funds, of tax mishandling and of misappropriation of government assets. You could say I've seen it all before. And so I have, but not all in one place at the same time! Let me introduce to you a face that would rather stay hidden, who will probably sue me for defamation if he thinks I have said a single word out of place. No, screw that. The people deserve the truth.

In England right now there is a company which handles, according to the government procurement contracts, 'facilities decommissioning services for the military'. So one would expect that this company, 'BS Services Ltd', would directly or via some subcontracting, hire people to dismantle old military training grounds, airfields and so forth, and return those areas to nature whilst recycling the scrap iron and so on, right? Of course not. That would be simple. So where do millions of pounds of taxpayers' cash go? Well, since BS Services got on board, not a single old military facility has been decommissioned fully. And one of them has been extensively refitted, in Yorkshire. As a genetic laboratory.

After hours of trawling in archives, I found that this mysterious organisation who build labs in areas supposedly being 'returned to nature' is known to the Ministry of Defence as the Military Genetics Unit, MGU, and was invented with no prior records, in an eleventh-hour spite bill just before an election, injected by a party who knew they would lose the election back in 1997, buried in a sub-clause about military equipment provision and prepared by a certain Dr John Crossley, a legal advisor to the civil service and peculiarly also the founder of BS Services.



The unassuming entrance to the complex. The guard in this picture approached and asked us to leave.

Since the MGU is known to the military and written into law as a military 'Enhanced Infantry' programme, that company is then given full access to a detachment of soldiers. Their operation may be crooked but it's not half-hearted. We're talking about genetic traits of animals being used to try to augment humans. If you think it sounds familiar you'd be right, but the MGU were working on this long before the furies.

Residents of Halden, Yorkshire, may have noticed quite a big disturbance a month or so ago, when military, helicopters and a whole host of other people all ended up gathering at the address where the hobbyist and eccentric genius, Steven Dhali, had successfully become the first adult human being to combine his genetic traits with those of another species to a design of his own, resulting in his new vulpine appearance and unleashing the 'Freedom of Form'

idea and tools amongst the furry fandom, and likewise masses of confusion and speculation in the press.

That event, according to our sources, was the result of the MGU attempting to capture a recently transformed furry, and their subsequent escape from the facility. If the MGU want super-soldiers, you would think they don't even need to go to all that bother? Surely an illicitly taxpayer funded genetic lab with state of the art equipment could have replicated the results Mr Dhair achieved, if they so wished? Evidence revealed to the Daily Disaster yesterday shows that they tried to develop a very similar system for genetic transformation themselves, well over a decade before now. And it worked. Sort-of. The problem was that those it transformed lost their minds, leaving top boffins scratching their heads in the clandestine lab. Nobody seemed able to solve the issue, and the MGU was about to be closed down when the furies started to appear. This was a bizarre sort of slap in the face for Dr John Crossley, who had for some time by this point been effectively in charge of the MGU, despite no formal mandate. No clues as to what they had done wrong had been found in the technical documentation of the much debated Geneticiser device, nor of its software, despite them both being open source and freely available. He had to get hold of one of these furies, and so used government vehicles and personnel to kidnap one and

attempt to figure out the genetic, physiological and neurological differences between this new, DIY breed and the MGU's previous, failed attempts. That one furry escaped, generating the farcical scene mentioned above.

Like all good farces, this one leaves us with more questions to ask than it does answers. Why, for example, is the funding for the MGU coming out of a military decommissioning contract via offshore accounts in Hamada? Don't taxpayers have a right to know at the very least that this money is going towards something top secret, even if we're not supposed to know that the government wants super-soldiers? Who put 'Dr' Crossley in charge, whose reputation precedes him from his previous role in the botched audits of the Widdershins Stout Brewery empire, escaping jail only by sheer loophole exploitation? Why have his ex-wife and his brother been missing ever since then and never investigated? Why aren't there regulatory mechanisms in place to prevent such a perversion of the military contract provisioning system? Why was a 19 year old able to make a system to transform (or heal) the entire human body when the massively more funded MGU was not? These questions will doubtlessly be answered in the fullness of time, but the one I'm watching is, will this turn out to be similar to the provisioning scandal two years ago with Portcullis Security? – J.K.

Jurgen sends his draft off to the publishing wing, knowing full well that most of the article's content will be 'continued on page 5' or somesuch, but whatever. It's done. *And there is more where that came from.*

"You know, that went a lot better than I expected." Jeff tells Steven as he leaves the ward and they head off to requisition equipment. "I thought we'd be wheeling him out in pieces after what you told me about him."

"Oh, give me time and we might yet. There's no guarantee this will work, Jeff."

"Don't make me reply to that with 'good!' It'll run contrary to the sodding Hippocratic Oath..."

"Yeah, I'm all too aware of that." Steven dons rubber gloves which look odd over his anthro-fox paws, stretched a bit by his claws and pawpads. He pulls a Howie lab coat out of his backpack and puts it on over his other clothes in one flowing move, except for the studs which take some faffing. His goggles are the hard bit: his ears aren't in the right place to hold them up, and keep twitching around. Eventually, he gives up on them, folds them away, and gets out a different pair of goggles with an elastic adjustable strap to go round his head. Steampunk-ish welding goggles. Green ones.

"And in today's papers, it looks like the Daily Disaster's turned over a new leaf!" Notices the host on the morning TV news.

"Yeah, this looks a lot less like the gaudy tabloid we'd come to expect of them, and a lot more like actual journalism.

Whoever changed their coffee supply, good job!" their co-host replies, waving a copy around for the camera.

"But in all seriousness, the implications of this exposé are at the very least a headache for the Minister of Defence, especially off the back of the Portcullis scandal it could be enough to trigger a cabinet reshuffle..."

"Probably a headache for Mr Kimpler too, pulling a move like this with his own paper. His shareholders might not like to see that much meddling in its operations from just one person. Especially when revealing stories like this, he could be cruising for a bruising from both inside and outside his company."

"Well, he's proven astute before now, maybe he knows something we don't down in Berlin..."

"And meanwhile, the proper broadsheets have all been having a go at Ken McEgbert over allegations of a cover-up on his part, about health and safety in his haulage business..."

"Yeah, I wouldn't want to be him either..." and so forth.

A 1 And A 2

Kreng

"Oh Jurgen Kimpler, you steaming pile of merdiferous kreng!" John enunciates with gnarled vigour each syllable, imbuing his words with a bite of malice. He throws the Daily Disaster at the overflowing bin and misses, pages fluttering messily about. He looks up from his thoughts to see Francis entering the room with a sandwich. The snake with arms and legs takes a bite and shrugs at John.

"Don't shoot the messenger. This paper's on point: we're taxpayer funded. And now we're not so secret, you might want to reduce costs."

"Don't tell me how to run this place, snake. You will regret it."

"I wouldn't dream of doing that, but I think it prudent to remind you that Clarissa is costing us quite a lot in the state she is in now. Since we have the Geneticiser, why not use it to fix her genetic turmoil (if that's possible) and then get her out of your hair?"

Were this any other day, I would be inclined to disagree. John nearly says aloud.

"You don't just besmirch the name of my friend like that and get away with it. You'd better watch out, you shall not be warned so warmly next time!" A phone call with a vocoder modulated voice ends from an anonymous and untraceable number. Jorgen stands outside his burning office, bags under his eyes and sighs heavily. He ends the call, switches off his phone, takes out the sim card and throws it into the flames as the fire engines line up to take aim, a firefighter motioning him towards the exit from the grounds. *Well, if it is the war you want, Tobias, it is the war you will get.* Jorgen, having already researched well ahead of his published articles, knows fully well who is behind this and how powerful. He also knows what he's going to do next. He goes to join the gaggle of staff at the fire assembly points, is handed his hi-vis vest and a megaphone and starts marshalling. "Danke. Meine Damen und Herren, I am sorry to disappoint you all, but we have a backup printing press location for this exact eventuality. Work resumes this afternoon at 4pm, so that you can all set up your desks in the backup office and update your PCs." The staff collectively raise their eyebrows and mutter, some of them cheer. "That's right, the Daily Disaster is prepared for disasters. It sort of comes with the name. See you at the backup site, it's two streets from here. I have given your line managers the address. And whoever gets there first and gets that coffee machine working gets promoted!"

Anaïs is up a ladder, down a basement, in a pub and looking at her text messages on her phone. An unrecognised number has just sent her a message saying "Watch your back. They are brazen enough to attack me, they might attack you to get to me also. Your mother should be safe because she and I are split now. Use your brain about this. Stay safe, know I love you. Dein Vater."

A grown vixen can look after herself, but still this is worrying...

"When you've done with those new LEDs we've got tea ready, Anaïs. Got to say, I think the Malt House is going to be a great furry rave venue when this is all done! And thanks for your help!" Halt Mouse snaps her out of her thoughts from the new internal stairs.

"Mm? Oh, you are welcome."

"Yeah, mousey here's been wanting to get round to setting this up for ages, haven't you?" Pam Ther calls from the kitchen.

"At least this insurance money's given you the boost to get it done."

A half-meter length of sticky LED strip comes unstuck from the ceiling where Anaïs had been trying to apply it before she got distracted, and falls on her head. Her ears twitch, making Halt laugh.

"I'll never get over the way your ears move!"

Anaïs rolls her eyes and smiles, before putting her phone away and getting back to the task in paw.

"Where's Steven?" Halt inquires.

"For want of anything else to call it, I would say 'e is at work.'" Anaïs replies, before being interrupted by the panther in the kitchen being all incredulous at something.

"Good grief, that's even less subtle than we are! Talk about painting 'target' on yourself!" Pam is looking out the window at the VW camper that's just arrived, utterly covered and festooned in every way with furry related paraphernalia, most of it now quite dirty from the road dirt and mud of driving a few thousand miles since first setting it up that way. Out of the driver's door steps an anthropomorphic arctic fox, looking very pleased for some reason. A bright pink wolf with a mohican steps out behind, holding what appears to be a Geneticiser in the obligatory plastic tub but painted black, with literal brass knobs on it and mounted on wood. The arctic fox takes two steps before the smile is wiped off his face.

The back door slams open. "Do you know how thick an Arctic fox's pawpads and fur are on their feet? Do you know how much thicker that translates into when you scale it to a humanoid 5 foot 10 form? Because the broken glass in your yard just went through it all!" The white fur is stained with a dash of red at his foot, and he hops inside, wincing.

Pam reaches for the first aid kit and then digs out a pair of pliers when she realises the glass is still in there. She rubs Adam's paw down with medicinal alcohol after pulling the shard of glass out.

"Sorry about that, blame the unruly mob that blew up the pub."

"Yeah, well, if people made shoes for digitigrade feet... to be honest I still wouldn't wear them, I prefer being barefoot like the way my character always was in the art pieces I got commissioned."

Lupustorm snorts. "Your art's all yiff."

"Point still stands, or rather, hobbles."

Lupustorm looks at Adam's fast-healing footpaw. "Well, I think I might get into the footwear business anyway."

"This is going to take ages to fix." Steven slumps his face onto his paws, his elbows on the desk, the computer underpowered really for the GUESS. "All these PCs in the hospital are the same spec?"

“More or less.” Jeff replies.

“We’d be quicker ordering a new one, a decent one.”

“I don’t know if our luck will stretch that far here. The hospital’s not got a big budget, you know, and we’d have to wait for insurers to reimburse us.”

“Well, that clown in there’s going to have to feel a bit ratty for a while, then, because we’re looking at some very slow render times here, and a very complex genetic mess to unravel!”

“You mean the backup nuclei didn’t work?”

“Not in any of the test samples I have. This sucks. The backup nuclei are designed for if something goes wrong after printing, not during.” Steven ponders that for a moment, and then opens the GUESS’s bug tracker and version control systems.

“Got an idea?”

“Yeah, I’ve decided to report the bug officially to myself so everyone using it knows and so I don’t forget how stupid I was to leave this in the system. I used it on myself first, we’re all lucky not to be in his situation.”

“We all followed the instructions properly.”

“Well, most of us did...” Steven thinks back to the nine-tailed kitsune who turned up at the emergency furmeet. Something clicks in his mind.

“Wait a moment, I’ve figured how we can make this easier. First we need to starve him to within an inch of his life...”

“That’s already been done for you, he’s got Crohn’s Disease as a result of the patchwork genetic immune rejections. But why would you do that?”

“To withhold nutrients from the half-baked vectors. Force them to shut down until we are ready. We’ll need him on an IV drip, and to fill him with nutrients again just /after/ we give him the new vectors. The new ones should in theory get a chance then to change things.”