

The Archfornicator of Canterbury

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1 The Bulimian plains

The sky was the colour of a television tuned to a Las Vegas three-ring circus extravaganza. Muted shades of blue gave way to iridescent swirls. Marshmallow clouds fused together in sweet harmony only to tear themselves violently apart a moment later. Between the clouds, enormous pulsating geometric shapes took up every square inch of available space. The sky looked like it was constructed from infinitely thin neon tubes which glowed in a myriad of bright day-glo shades.

A casual observer would not necessarily have been able to observe any of the iridescence. Jack Back, however, had had enough foresight not to attempt crossing the vast plains of Bulimia without a heady supply of CIA-grade psychedelics. That same casual observer would have been able to determine, with a not insignificant degree of certainty, that Jack was a man on a mission. His muscular frame was clad in black from head to toe, and his eyes were protected by a pair of vintage sunglasses. It was quite obvious that he was not going to waste time to stop and smell the roses.

Not that there would have been any roses to smell at any rate. Rural Bulimia was not exactly known for its multitude of lush gardens. The plains were almost as barren as the surface of the Moon, with only patches of sunburnt grass here and there to give the impression of a place that was almost, but not quite, entirely incapable of sustaining life.

Jack strode on without paying any attention to the landscape around him. This was not particularly difficult, as the landscape had not changed at all for the past few days. Every now and then he would take a swig from his pocket flask, presumably to avail himself of some space-age concoction designed to provide sustenance in extreme conditions. Judging by his grimace after each swig, delicious flavour had not been one of the design goals.

2 Unidentified flying object

Meanwhile in orbit, twenty thousand kilometers above Bulimia, preparations for a historical encounter between *Homo sapiens* and life from another planet were under way. Strictly speaking, first contact had actually been made quite some time ago. This time, however, nobody would be able to escape the conclusion that extraterrestrial life did, in fact, exist.

The alien visitors could not know for sure that Earth had not already been contacted by another alien species. However, they were confident enough to hazard an educated guess given that the inhabitants of Earth were not exactly an intelligent lifeform.

3 The Spanner & The Cockroach

Bulimians were generally a peaceful people. Occasional bar brawls, as well as disputes over yak ownership before the invention of earmarks a few weeks ago, were part and parcel of daily life, but any major altercations were few and far in between. No wonder then that Judas Bobrichoff, senior wordsmith at the Ministry of Insults and a descendant of Russian emigrants from way back, was not concerned in the least with any possible violations of his personal space. His most pressing need had to do with the procurement of another pint of what passed for a mild intoxicating beverage in Bulimia.

It has been said that every country must have a beer, an airline, and preferably either a football team or nuclear weapons to be considered a country. For Bulimia, this was a tall order. Civil aviation had yet to take its first baby steps, as most Bulimians were intensely suspicious of all things technical, and instead preferred to travel on yakback. According to an article in the Wall Street Journal, the Amish are seven to eight times more likely to take up jet flight in the near fu-

ture than Bulimians. The publication of this article caused a moderate stir in Bulimia. The King had an apoplectic fit and wanted to declare war on the United States. His advisors, even though they agreed that this would have been a well-deserved response, were able to convince his otherwise. However, the tourism board was thrilled. In general, Bulimia did not rate a mention in international media very often, and when it did, it was usually in a medical journal on obscure hereditary diseases.

The art and craft of brewing faced quite a few obstacles in Bulimia. Barley, one of the essential ingredients of beer, was impossible to grow in the mineral-poor soil covering most of the country. However, Bulimians are nothing if not ingenious when it comes to devising ways of getting shitfaced. A traveling yak farmer from Mongolia, on a trip to trade sperm with local breeders, was gracious enough to inform his colleagues of the fact that yak milk contains sugar and can therefore be fermented. It did not take long before this piece of critical knowledge spread like wildfire throughout the country. Grocery stores ran out of baker's yeast almost daily. Yak farmers had to guard their cattle day and night, in the fear of guerilla milkers striking and helping themselves to the rare and precious nectar. Some of the more enterprising farmers started building stills from old milk containers. Even so, distillation remained a rare pursuit, mainly the fermented milk tended to get drunk long before it reached a still.

The object of Judas Bobrichoff's desire, a pint of fermented yak milk, was available in copious quantities at The Spanner & The Cockroach. Indeed, the innkeeper was famous for not ever having run out of this vile substance, with one exception. Once upon a time, Bulimia had almost managed to beat archrival Transvestitia in relay strip poker and the whole town had assembled to drown their sorrows and bitch and moan about the umpire's eyesight. Everyone did

their best to forget that woeful day, and very few could have recalled it even if they tried, so this singular lapse in preparedness was not held against the innkeeper.

Judas turned his gaze away from the heaving and ample bosom of the barmaid just in time to avoid being caught and getting slapped on the face.

“Yo wench. Another pint of blues juice if you will.”

“Who are you calling a wench.”

“Excuse me. I had the impression that that was the canonical mode of address.”

“That was last week. This week the union has mandated that we are to be called sustenance providers.”

“I see. In that case would Miss Sustenance Provider be so kind as to provide me with another pint of your wonderful house beverage.”

“Let’s see the colour of your money first.”

“I have an understanding with the innkeeper concerning the settlement of my tab.”

“Well he’s not here now is he.”

“Indeed he is not. However let me assure you th—”

“You can assure me by showing me the money. No money no pint.”

“Ah. You see at this particular time I prefer to travel without cash lest I be robbed. These are troubled times as I am sure Miss already knows.”

The bar maid was visibly unmoved by Judas Bobrichoff’s arguments. Before she had a chance to reply, a stranger stepped through the twin swinging doors of the inn. The stranger was a tall man, clad in black clothes that he had probably worn for quite some time. He was covered in maroon dust from head to toe. He sat himself on a stool next to Judas, dug up a five ralloed note from his pocket and threw it on the bar.

“A beer.”

“We don’t have any Sir.”

“You don’t have beer.”

“No Sir.”

“But this is an inn.”

“Yes Sir.”

A foreboding silence fell as the visitor grew visibly irritated by the unexpected turn of events.

“We do have fermented yak milk though.”

“One of those then.”

Judas cleared his throat and addressed the stranger.

“Excuse me sir. I could not help noticing that you have a five ralloed note there.”

“What’s it to you.”

“Well you see a pint of fermented yak milk is only 50 ke-pocks. It so happens that I forgot my wallet on the armoire on my way out. If you could kindly lend me 50 ke-pocks you would still have enough for a room for the night. I would of course pay you back at the first possible occasion.”

The stranger answered by way of grunting. Shrugging her shoulders, the barmaid took this to mean that Judas had had his prayers answered. She poured two pints of fermented yak milk from an unglazed clay jug and placed the mugs along with change on the bar.

“I drink to your continued good health generous Sir. May you live long and prosper and sire a large yet tractable number of strong and handsome male offspring. And your name is.”

“You may have come here to chat. I came here to drink.”

“Quite so Sir. Judas Bobrichoff Esq. at your service Sir. And may I enquire what brought you to this august establishment on this day of our Lord Sir.”

The stranger did not answer, nor did he grunt. Instead, he glanced at Judas in a way that very clearly communicated his preference not to divulge this information. Judas was not one to give up so easily, however.

“Well you see Sir we don’t get visitors very often in these

parts. The last one I think was a tax collector from the capital. I don't believe he left with much more than he came with."

The stranger emptied his mug in one gulp and addressed the barmaid.

"How much for a night."

The barmaid blushed.

"I'm not that kind of girl Sir."

"I meant a room."

"Three rallods and one rallo for clean sheets and a towel Sir."

"How much for clean sheets and a clean towel."

"I don't understand Sir."

"Never mind. Here."

The barmaid took a key from a hook on the wall and handed it to the stranger.

"The room is up the stairs Sir. There's a commode behind the curtain in the corner. What would you like to have for breakfast."

"Black coffee and a pack of cigarettes."

"We don't have coffee Sir."

"What do you have."

"Yak milk Sir. And eggs."

"Two eggs sunny side up. Don't forget the cigarettes. Camels. Filterless."

"We don't have camels in Bulimia Sir. Only yaks."

"Figures. Don't tell me the eggs are yak eggs."

"No Sir. Yaks don't lay eggs. Hens do. We have hens in the yard."

"Just the eggs then. At 7 AM sharp."

"Very well Sir. Have a good night Sir."

The stranger was already halfway up the stairs. Judas and the barmaid watched him disappear through the door and slam it shut.

"A peculiar fellow this stranger. Not from around these

parts. I can tell.”

“Can you now.”

“Most definitely. I detected a certain air of how shall I put it foreignness in him.”

“He speaks very good Bulimian.”

“Ah but with an accent.”

“So do you. And I. And everybody. Everyone in Bulimia has an accent.”

“Even so. Mark my words. There is something rather foreign about the stranger. How about another pint love.”

“I already told you no credit.”

“Ah. Well if you insist on being so inflexible I must bid my adieu and be on my way. Things to do business to take care of. Fare thee well and I will see you again soon the good Lord willing.”

“Good night then.”

4 US Embassy, Nuevo Saunabad

Richard Black paced restlessly in front of a bulletproof window on the second floor of the US Embassy building in Nuevo Saunabad, the capital of Bulimia. He could see a handful of Marines at the gate eyeing the ever-present demonstration mob with varying degrees of contempt and amusement. Black’s ability to make this observation from such a distance had little to do with an acute eyesight. In spite of the title “cultural attaché” on his business card, he was in fact the most senior CIA agent at the US Embassy. This meant it was simply his job to know these things.

Black was just about to start his fiftieth lap on the carpet, when the door opened and an immaculately groomed man in his twenties stepped in.

“Any word from Back.”

“We haven’t heard from him in five days. He may not be

alive.”

“He is. It takes more than a couple of Bulimian peasants to stop Jack.”

“What do you suggest we do.”

“Let’s just sit tight for another day or so. I have a feeling he’s not far.”

“Whatever you say Boss.”

“Was there anything else.”

“The demonstrators want an audience with the Ambassador.”

“Tell them he’s not here. He wasn’t here yesterday. He wasn’t here the day before. As far as they are concerned he’s unlikely to be here tomorrow. Or the day after. You’d think they would have figured this out by now.”

“Stubbornness is a sign of manliness in Bulimia.”

“Well there’s certainly no shortage of signs of stupidity in this sorry excuse for a country. Remind me why we even bother to be here.”

“The Communist Party of Bulimia might overthrow the Government without a strong US presence. It’s standard procedure.”

“KPB has three members. One of whom is deaf and blind and another is in an iron lung.”

“I know. And you know HQ knows. It’s still standard procedure.”

Black sighed and turned to face the window. The younger man took his leave, shutting the door quietly behind him.

5 The Royal Palace

The Royal Palace stood on a hill overlooking the valley in which the hustle and bustle of Nuevo Saunabad was hustling and bustling. It was obvious that the palace had seen better days. The large garden, though now decrepit and run down,

looked like it had at one time been quite impressive. The general impression, however, was more of a yakshed than the dwelling of the hereditary ruler of a sovereign nation.

Ironically enough, the lack of impressiveness that was the defining feature of the Royal Palace was there precisely because the original plans of Oswald I had been quite ambitious. His dream was to build a palace that would make the Versailles look like a shack and the Taj Mahal look like an outhouse. In fact, the original plans called for an outhouse the size of Taj Mahal. Unfortunately for him, the kingdom of Bulimia wasn't quite as flush with money as would have been required to carry out his grand scheme. The construction of the palace drove the country to the brink of bankruptcy. The palace plans were scrapped, and new plans were drawn based on the materials that were on sale at the local DIY supermarket at the time. The garden was built according to the original plans, although it had to be scaled down to one twentieth of the size that was initially intended. This was the reason why most of the garden was decorated with bonsai trees.

Oswald III, the King of Bulimia, sat on his throne and looked bored, much as his father and grandfather before him had done. The King's wife, Queen Svetlana, had died giving birth to Prince Vadim, the younger of the couple's two sons. His beloved Queen's death affected the King very much. Oswald III was no longer the valiant sovereign monarch he had once been. He was no longer very much interested in the affairs of the country, although he was making some progress, having started to follow the yak polo results religiously.

The cabinet was still reporting weekly to the King, although he rarely saw fit to comment on anything his Ministers got up to. The Minister of Insults had just finished his report, and the remainder of the cabinet waited for their turn. A valet stood at attention and announced the next in line.

“The right honourable Minister of Porn and Propaganda

your Highness."

"Speak."

"Your Highness I am happy to report that Customs have seized yet another pornographic magazine at the border. It was found in the luggage of a Mongolian yak herder."

"I see. And where is this magazine now?"

"I have taken the liberty to bring it with me your Highness. Here it is."

"Very good. I shall peruse it to acquaint myself with the atrocities that go on in less civilised countries so that we may continue to keep Bulimia pure of heart. You are dismissed."

"Thank you your Highness."

"The right honourable Minister of Pugilism your Highness."

"You may speak Minister."

"Your Highness we have been able to procure another pair of sneakers for the national pugilism team. This means that we will finally be able to commence training in the ring."

"Excellent news. Keep up the good work Minister. You are dismissed."

"Thank you your Highness."

"The right honourable Minis—"

"Yes yes. Gentlemen I feel quite tired. What do you say we continue this some other time. Maybe next week or perhaps the week after."

"Of course your Highness."

"May you sleep well your Highness."

"You are all dismissed. Good day and may God bless your way home."

The valet opened the door and the cabinet left the room in single file formation. When the valet had closed the door after the last of the Ministers, the King started crying uncontrollably. The valet brought the King a glass carafe and a crystal goblet on a tray, poured water from the carafe to

the goblet and left. The King took a small tube resembling a film container from his pocket with trembling hands. From another pocket he fished out a pair of zircon-encrusted tweezers. With these, he took a small white tablet out of the tube, popping it into his mouth and washing it down with a gulp of water. His weeping subsided after a while. The King let out a long sigh.

6 The Cathedral of Nuevo Saunabad

Bulimians liked to think of themselves as a religious eople. In a questionnaire handed out by the Ministry of Census and Demagogy, most of those who bothered to return the form ticked the box that said “I attend church on a regular basis”, even though few of them actually had ever been inside a church, and many didn’t even know what a church was.

In spite of this, it would not be fair to accuse Bulimians of lying. The fact that most Bulimians claimed to attend church often when in fact they did not had a lot to do with the fact that very few of them, especially in rural areas, had ever learned to read. Statisticians at the Ministry of Census and Demagogy had designed the census form to resemble a lottery coupon on purpose, in the hope that they would get at least a few people to take a second look at it. Hence, most Bulimians filled the census form in the vain hope of winning the lottery, ticking boxes just as haphazardly as they would if it in fact had been an actual lottery coupon. Their chances were much the same.

The Archbishop of Bulimia, Intardo Musilicus, was not oblivious to all this. In fact, he much preferred that very few attended his church on Sundays, seeing as he usually took Sundays off to go fishing. As a young priest attending the Seminary, he had had visions of leading the people of Bulimia to salvation by showing them the path of the righteous. As soon

as the drugs wore off, however, he realised that this might prove tricky to do and that in fact he did not care one way or the other. His main reasons for becoming a priest were that he thought the pay was good (it wasn't) and that he'd get free clothes (he did).

Why Intardo Musilicus became an Archbishop had little to do with a generous clothing allowance. The main factor was that there wasn't too much competition, as all the other priests of his generation had either died of an overdose or been defrocked for getting caught in the act of sexual congress with barnyard animals. In fact, it was usually Intardo who dobbed them in. He justified this to himself by thinking that it was the only way he could cover his own tracks, and better them than him.

Intardo Musilicus played the shepherd to his flock, such as it was, at the Cathedral of Nuevo Saunabad. Like the Royal Palace, the Cathedral had seen better days, although it was still an impressive display of Bulimian craftsmen's skill from the days long since gone when the craftsmen hadn't yet figured out how to ferment the milk of a yak. The spire of the cathedral that pointed towards the heavens reached an impressive height of almost a hundred meters. Just below the spire, a clock told the official time for the townspeople. A bell chimed every fifteen minutes. Inside, the Cathedral was as impressive as its granite walls would let one to expect. Intricate stained glass windows filtered the light shining in through them, so that plain sunlight was transformed into bright shades of red, blue, yellow and green. The pews and the pulpit were made of Brazilian rosewood. The massive altar that dominated the front of the Cathedral was made of black marble. Above the altar was a huge oil painting depicting a yak herder defending his yaks from approaching werewolves. The opposite end of the Cathedral was taken up by a massive pipe organ.

The Cathedral stood at the Eastern end of the King

Square, so that the last rays of the setting sun would bathe it in heavenly light. That had been the plan, anyway, up until someone noticed that the Western end of the square was taken up by a five-storey building housing the Ministry of Porn and Propaganda. The Cathedral was built according to the original plan anyway, and while very little heavenly light fell on it at sunset, it was still a very nice building to look at, especially compared to what passed for modern architecture in the capital city.

The Archbishop's official residence adjoined the Cathedral at the back. This was very convenient, as it meant that the sacramental wine stash was stored in a cool cellar only a few steps away from the Archbishop's study. The wine cellar had originally been designed and stocked with the average consumption of a large congregation in mind, so it was a source of constant enjoyment for Archbishop Musilicus to discover nicely aged vintage bottles within the dampness of the cellar. His most recent discovery was a Château Merdasse 1965, an especially good year for the vineyards of neighbouring Somnambulistan.

On this sunny Summer day the Archbishop was feeling happy and relaxed, no doubt largely because of the bottle of Château Bardaque 1968 he had just polished off. He was just about to descend to the cellar for another bottle when the phone rang.

"Hello."

"Hello Sir. How are you today. Could I speak to Mister Archbishop Musilicus please."

"This is he. What do you want."

"Hello Sir I am not trying to sell you anything may I have a moment of your time please."

"Well I am in fact kind of busy at the moment."

"Sir have you thought about the hereafter."

"I am the bleeding Archbishop. Of course I have thought

about the hereafter. Just rewards for the pious. Eternal damnation for the not so pious. Joyful bliss for some. Fire and brimstone for others. Et cetera. What of it.”

“Sir have you thought what might happen to your loved ones when you pass away.”

“Well I should bloody well hope that they mind their own business. Get to the point.”

“Sir is your life insurance in order.”

“So you are trying to sell something.”

“No Sir. Well yes Sir. But it is for a good cause. You see Sir one point half per cent of one point half per cent of the cost of the policy is donated to support the needy.”

“I see. And who might they be.”

“The orphanage Sir.”

“Well they too can bloody well mind their own business so bugger off. Good day.”

The Archbishop slammed down the phone and started his way downstairs while muttering to himself under his breath.

7 Breakfast in Bulimia

Jack Back woke up with a start at quarter to seven. He yawned, emptied his bladder in the commode and dusted off his clothes, or tried to anyway. Having dressed, he left the room and descended down the stairs. The barmaid was standing behind the bar. She was wiping jugs and mugs with a tattered cloth.

“Good morning Sir. Your eggs are just about ready.”

Back grunted and sat down at the bar.

“Could I have the morning paper please.”

“We usually get the morning paper at around six in the evening the following day Sir. I can fetch the day before yesterday’s paper if you wish.”

“Whatever.”

The barmaid disappeared in the kitchen and came back a moment later carrying scrambled eggs on a plate and a newspaper.

“I said sunny side up. These are scrambled.”

“Terribly sorry Sir. The cook only knows how to scramble.”

“Well colour me surprised.”

“Would you like some milk Sir.”

“No thanks. I’m trying to quit.”

Jack made a brief facial expression which the barmaid tentatively interpreted as a grin. Even with her vast professional experience with different sorts of people, she could not be quite sure.

8 The Royal National Herald

The Royal National Herald was Bulimia’s leading newspaper. It was also the only newspaper. Politically active agricultural students had at one time tried to start publishing a newsletter. Soon after, the Royal Secret Police paid them a visit and in no uncertain terms let it be known that it would behoove them to concentrate on their studies instead of subversive activities such as the spreading of knowledge. The editor-in-chief was invited for a tour of the Secret Police headquarters, and was never seen again.

In this particular edition, the front page was taken up by an article praising the efficiency of Bulimian farmers and their unflinching capability to exceed the production quotas set in the five-year plan of the Ministry of Agriculture. The article was accompanied by several photos of smiling muscular farmers posing in front of their tractors, which glistened and gleamed in the sun as if they had just been driven off the assembly line and given a thoroughly polished waxing.

Bulimia did not in fact have a Ministry of Agriculture, nor

did the farmers have production quotas to exceed. The only farming-related activity that was practiced in the country was yak herding. There were no five-year plans. There was, however, a simple explanation for the front page story.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, a group of enterprising former Party members smuggled the Pravda story generator out of the country. By some quirk of fate, the story generator ended up in Bulimia. The Minister of Porn and Propaganda struck a deal with the smugglers, exchanging the story generator for a six-pack of fermented yak's milk and five American dollars. The inclusion of the latter caused some controversy, as the five-dollar bill was in fact an exhibit at the Royal National Museum. Nevertheless, the exchange was completed and the story generator was installed in the basement of the Royal National Herald building in downtown Nuevo Saunabad.

The story generator was an imposing piece of machinery. It was an impenetrable jungle of pipes, valves, vacuum tubes, wires and flywheels, and stood several meters high. Since nobody would have been able to put it back together if it had been dismantled, an annex of the building had to be demolished before the generator could be lowered into the basement with an impressive number of pulleys. The generator was powered by steam, originally produced by burning dried cow dung, but since there were no cows in Bulimia, yak dung had to be substituted. It didn't take long for the newspaper staff to figure out that it would be a good idea to connect the exhaust to the building's chimney and not let it fill up the basement and subsequently the rest of the building.

The output console stood proudly apart from the rest of the generator. It had a typewriter keyboard, several Nixie tubes, and a daisywheel printer which produced the output. Amazingly enough, it could produce output in the Latin alphabet as well as Cyrillic, probably because it had been used

to generate pamphlets for export as well. The generator was used and the console manned on those days when there was nothing much happening in the state of Bulimia. Consequentially, the generator was being used almost every day.

Several floors above the basement, the Royal National Herald's editor-in-chief Benjamin Mousse-O'Leaney practiced his putt on the wall-to-wall carpeting of his office. His goal was to sink the ball into a disposable cup tipped on the floor below a framed portrait photo of the King. Judging by the number of golf balls scattered around the office, his putt could definitely do with some work. Mousse-O'Leaney was just about to swing once again when the phone rang. Undeterred, he hit the ball, which bounced off the cup and rolled under his jacaranda desk. He leaned his putter against the desk, sat down on his chair and answered the phone.

"Mousse-O'Leaney."

"Hello is this the Royal National Herald. Could I speak to the chief editor please."

"Speaking."

"Listen carefully. I am not going to repeat this. There is a bomb in the Cathedral. It will go off in exactly 15 minutes. Good day."

"Hey wait a mi—"

The caller hung up the phone. Mousse-O'Leaney looked at the receiver with a perplexed facial expression and put it down. After a moment of contemplation, he picked it up again and dialed a number.

"Peterson. Listen I want you to get off your butt and go to the King Square right now. Take the kid with you what's his name. Yeah him. Make sure he brings plenty of film. Have him take a couple of photos of the Cathedral. We don't have enough stock photos of it. Well in case he gets lost. Look Peterson just do it will ya. And don't get too close to the Cathedral. I don't want any photos with the spire cut off."

With that, he hung up. Smiling to himself, he reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a Cuban cigar and a lighter. Leaning back, he turned the lighter on and gazed into its blue flame. After what seemed like an eternity, but in actuality was something like five seconds he lit the cigar, leaned back and took a long puff, letting the smoke out in a slow exhale.

9 On the road somewhere in rural Bulimia

The sun had been up for a couple of hours. Every now and then, a lonely mockingbird called out for its mate. Occasionally a lizard would peek from behind a rock and disappear just as suddenly when it noticed the figure dressed in black that was approaching.

Jack Back walked at a brisk tempo in the scorching mid-day heat. He seemed oblivious to the world around him, and the world paid him the same courtesy. In the distance, he could just barely make out the spire of the Cathedral of Nuevo Saunabad, which confirmed that he was heading in the right direction.

10 The Orphanage

Hildegard von Wichsen, the daughter of a German missionary, had been in charge of the orphanage for close to 50 years. Nobody knew her age for certain, and even fewer would have dared to ask. She ruled the orphanage with an iron fist, which she had been fitted with when the surgeon at the Royal College of Medicine Hospital erroneously amputated her hand when she had come in for an appendectomy at the age of 21. The surgeon subsequently fled the country and was rumoured to have moved to Somnambulistan to work as a management consultant.

It would have been an exaggeration to say that she loved children. She didn't particularly hate them either. Managing the orphanage was just what she did, and she knew she wasn't doing too bad a job. After all, very few orphans came back after being released to the society.

Hildegard von Wichsen sat matronly at her desk, leafing idly through the latest issue of the Royal National Herald, when a man in his fifties knocked on the open door. Hildegard nodded and the man entered the room, sitting down in a chair opposite her. The man was none other than Judas Bobrichoff.

"How did it go."

"I think he bought it. He must have contacted the authorities right away."

"And what if he did not."

"Don't be silly Hildegard. Why would he want to have innocent lives on his conscience."

"We'll see. Are the demolition charges in place."

"I placed them myself this morning before dawn. The Cathedral will soon be but a memory."

"Excellent. How much longer now."

"Not much. The timer will detonate the charges in approximately five minutes."

"Would you care for a glass of sherry."

"I would indeed. Thank you so much dear Hildegard."

11 Royal Secret Police Headquarters

The Royal Secret Police of Bulimia, or KSPB as the acronym went in Bulimian, occupied the first floor of the Ministry of Porn and Propaganda building. The penchant their officers had for shiny boots and long overcoats was often ridiculed, though never to their face. KSPB also occupied most of the building's basement. The official story was that the basement was used for storage, although the cries and wails that often

emanated from below the building were suspiciously loud to be coming from file cabinets and obsolete office equipment.

KSPB enjoyed a great degree of autonomy and in theory answered only to the King. The King, however, had a long time ago delegated this power to the Minister of Porn and Propaganda. This made the Minister feared and respected all over Bulimia. The agency itself was led by Horst Hurenschwanz, a distinctly Aryan-looking tall blonde man in his forties, whose father Manfred had come to Bulimia to make his fortune selling marital aids and lewd postcards. Manfred's business flourished for a while, but his empire came crashing down when Osvald II, the current King's father, discovered religion and outlawed pornography including but not limited to pictures of scantily clad women frolicking with German Shepherds. A broken man, Manfred took his own life by smearing whipped cream all over his naked body and breaking into the Royal Yak Stud. His body was found in the morning, mutilated beyond all recognition.

Horst was six years old at the time of his father's death and did not speak for two whole years after the incident. His mother, Hilda, was heartbroken, went insane and had to be committed to an asylum. Horst was brought up in the Orphanage, joined the Royal Marines on the day he turned seventeen and would probably have become an officer, had he not been discharged because he beat another Marine up so badly that the poor fellow would spend the rest of his life as a quadriplegic who could only eat through a straw. In the hearing, it was revealed that the other Marine had made an inappropriate remark about the recent performance of the Nuevo Saunabad Squonks, Horst's favourite yak polo team.

When his career in the Marine Corps came to an abrupt end, Horst had no backup plans for the future. By chance he happened to meet an old friend from the Orphanage, Luigi Scoreggia, who had recently joined the KSPB. Luigi arranged

an interview with his superiors for Horst, and soon he found himself once again wearing a uniform, this time a black one.

Horst's rise through the ranks was lightning fast. He seemed to have a natural penchant for intimidation and torture, to the extent that he was soon handed all the cases that other KSPB officers deemed too difficult to handle. His nickname "The Butcher of King Square" was appropriate, and frankly the only viable choice among all the suggestions that the PR section of the Ministry of Porn and Propaganda came up with, the others being "The Fishmonger of Nuevo Saunabad" and "The Chip Shop Guy of Upper Bulimia".

Captain Horst Hurenschwanz of the KSPB was sitting at his desk when someone knocked on the door.

"Enter."

The door opened and a young man, clad in the pitch-black uniform of the KSPB, entered the room. The young man was junior agent Marcello Finocchio. His crew cut was held erect by a liberal amount of hair cream, and his acne-scarred face was reminiscent of a cross between a rat and a giraffe.

"Finocchio. Come on in. Have a seat."

"Thank you Sir."

"Any news of the CIA agent."

"He was seen yesterday in central Bulimia in an inn called the Spanner and the Cockroach. We suspect he is on his way to the US Embassy here in Nuevo Saunabad."

"Send a unit to watch the Embassy and give them orders to arrest the agent immediately if he shows up. We cannot let him get away this time."

"Yes Sir. There is also another matter. Our phone surveillance unit picked up a bomb threat delivered to the newspaper. According to the caller the bomb is placed at the Cathedral and is going to go off in roughly one minute."

"Did you trace the caller."

"The call was too short. We only know it was a pay phone

somewhere downtown.”

“Thank you Finocchio. Anything else.”

“No Sir.”

“We’d better get out of the room. The windows might get blown in even if they are supposed to be bulletproof.”

“Indeed Sir.”

Horst Hurenschwanz rose, picked up his gloves and followed Finocchio through the doorway. Just as he closed the door behind him, there was a loud explosion on the other side of the square.

12 Let’s go, Hi-Ho

Jebediah Peterson had been working for the Royal National Herald since the current King wore nappies. Rumor had it that this wouldn’t have necessarily meant a period of time longer than since last Saturday, but in Jebediah’s case, it actually meant a few decades. He was a hard-boiled news reporter who could smell a story miles away. He could also smell a whisky bottle miles away, which explained much of the rosy hue on his rather majestic nose. Of course, whisky bottles in Bulimia tended to be refilled with fermented yak’s milk, but Jebediah was usually not too fussy about his drink, as long as it contained at least the minimum percentage of alcohol by volume specified in the Newspapermen’s Union’s ethical guidelines.

Heihachiro Tanimoto, on the other hand, had only been working for the media for a few months. He was fresh out of the Royal School of Photography, and this was his first job. When the position of news photographer at the Royal National Herald became vacant, everyone in his class applied. Heihachiro guessed he got the job because his portfolio had more pictures of naked women than everyone else’s portfolios combined. Artfully depicted, of course. Even though pornog-

raphy was strictly forbidden in Bulimia, there was a certain market for “art” photographs that just happened to celebrate the beauty of the female form. Heihachiro funded his way through photography school by catering to this niche market. It didn’t hurt that he was also occasionally able to secure a date with one of the models.

Heihachiro, or Hi-ho, as his friends called him, had erected his tripod near the Western end of King Square and had already shot a roll of film, when the explosion knocked him and his camera over. It took him a few moments to register what had happened, but he was back up taking photos within seconds. Jebediah, who had also been thrown to the ground by the pressure wave, got back up on his feet with a bewildered look on his face.

“Jesus Christ Kennedy on a pogo stick boy. What happened.”

“It looks like someone just blew up the Cathedral.”

Hi-Ho pointed at the opposite end of the square. Where the Cathedral of Nuevo Saunabad stood only moments ago was now only a pile of rubble and a slowly settling cloud of dust.

“Hot damn. Where the Hell is our Air Force. It must have been a Lobotomian bomber.”

“Lobotomia does not have bombers.”

“It was them damn Lobbies anyway. If I was back in my old unit I would let them have it right now.”

“I didn’t know you were in the Army Jeb.”

“Army. Bah. Sergeant Jebediah T. Peterson of the Royal Bulimian Air Force at your service.”

“When did you serve.”

“Some time ago. You weren’t born. Come to think of it your father probably wasn’t either. But that doesn’t matter. We should nuke those damn Lobbies for what they did.”

“We don’t have nukes.”

“That’s what they want you to think. I have it from a reliable source that Mount Malafya is actually completely hollow and full of nuke parts just waiting to be assembled and put into use. Those Lobbies don’t know what’s in store for them.”

“Last week you said Mount Malafya was full of submarine parts. Which would make even less sense in a landlocked country.”

“Don’t get smart with me boy. Just keep taking them photos.”

Hi-Ho knew when to stop and resumed his photographic efforts. Somewhere in the distance a loud siren was fast approaching the square.

13 Chaos at the Embassy

The US Embassy was located a few blocks away from King Square, so there were no immediate effects from the explosion. The demonstrators, however, ran screaming in all directions, presumably in fear of the Embassy being the next target to go up in smoke.

Inside the Embassy building, Richard Black ran down stairs towards the bomb shelter.

“What the hell is going on.”

“No idea Sir. I’ll try to find out.”

The walls of the bomb shelter were several feet thick and made of steel-reinforced concrete. The only way in or out was using a two-foot thick steel door, which in the event of a nuclear attack would be closed and sealed shut. A storage room full of canned goods, bottled water and other supplies would help the Embassy staff survive inside for at least a few weeks.

Moments after he reached the shelter, the man whom Black had passed while running down the stairs came in.

“It seems someone blew up the Cathedral. It doesn’t look

like a military incident.”

“What’s your take on this. Any effect on us.”

“Not really. Could be separatists from Lower Bulimia. They’ve been quiet for some time but there aren’t really any other groups who would go to such extremes.”

“Back to business then.”

“Looks like it.”

“Still no sign of Back is there.”

“He hasn’t been sighted. We’re keeping an eye open.”

“Keep both. You might need to.”

14 Basement of the Cathedral

Archbishop Musilicus was just about to grab another bottle from a shelf in the wine cellar when the bombs went off. The explosion turned the wine cellar into an echo chamber, making the loud sonic boom even louder. The Archbishop hit the ground and stuck fingers in his ears, but it was already too late. He would never again hear the glorious and mighty sound of the Cathedral organ. Neither would anyone else, of course, as the organ had just been blown into smithereens.

The explosion shook the wine cellar as if Doomsday had come. Bottles flew from the shelves and crashed on the concrete floor, shattering and sending shards flying in all directions. A dust cloud fell from the ceiling, covering every square inch of the cellar in dark gray soot. Miraculously enough, however, the ceiling did not collapse.

Moments later, the Archbishop got up and tried to shake the dust off him. His robe was doused with red wine, which made the dust and glass shards stick to it like napalm. His ears were ringing loudly. When he clapped his hands and did not hear it, he realised he was deaf. He was alone in a pitch black cellar and could not hear a thing. He did not panic, however. He felt around the nearest shelf that had miracu-

lously not tipped over and found a bottle that had been left intact. Hitting the neck against the shelf, he broke it open and poured half of the contents down his throat. He smiled as he recognised the nectar as Château Merdasse 1965.

15 On the road

Jack Back saw the spire of the Cathedral disappear from view and a few seconds later heard the sound of the explosion. He was trained not to jump into conclusions, so he didn't. Instead, he kept on walking towards Nuevo Saunabad as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

16 Chaos on King Square

King Square was in utter chaos. Bits and pieces of the formerly magnificent Cathedral were scattered everywhere. Nearly every building within line of sight had had its windows blown in, with the exception of the Ministry of Porn and Propaganda whose bulletproof windowpanes had not budged. The manufacturer would later make good use of this fact in their promotional material.

A police car arrived at the square, sirens blazing. It screeched to a halt and two uniformed police officers stepped out. Eyeing the surroundings, they soon concluded that the only two people present were the tag team from the Royal National Herald. The officers started walking towards them at a brisk pace.

“You there. Yes you two. You are under arrest. Do not attempt to run.”

“What are you talking about. We just happened to be here.”

“Yeah it was already broken when we got here.”

“Save your stories for the judge. Let's go.”

The only two eye witnesses of the explosion weighed their options and came to the same conclusion. Peterson ran towards the Old Town, whereas Hi-Ho made like an arrow in the direction of the US Embassy.

“Stop or we’ll shoot.”

But neither of them did, no doubt partly because it was common knowledge that the firearms budget of the police had been enough to cover the cost of sidearms for nearly every officer but not enough for the matching ammunition. The two officers considered giving chase, but as both of them were seriously overweight, did not really want to risk a heart attack by actually running.

“Well that’s it then. There’s nobody else here. It’s coffee and donut time.”

“What shall we put in the report.”

“Two suspects fled the scene and could not be apprehended in spite of a long chase. The usual.”

“Fine by me. I believe it’s your shout.”

17 Spies like us

The street in front of the US Embassy was eerily quiet. There was not a single demonstrator in sight. The only people around were the two Marines guarding the Embassy gate. They had not moved from their assigned positions and would not do so until relieved by the next watch.

Inside, the phone in the cultural attaché’s office rang.

“Hello.”

“Would you like to buy a percolator.”

“No thanks I have an espresso machine. Where the hell are you Jack.”

“Not far. What’s the commotion.”

“Someone blew up the Cathedral. I’ll send a car to get you. Just tell me the address.”

"I'm at the Café Olé on Green Dolphin Street."

"Sit tight Jack. Someone will be there in a few minutes. God it's good to have you back."

"Yeah."

Black replaced the receiver and punched a button on the intercom.

"Kozinsky. Get your men and go to Café Olé on Green Dolphin Street. Apprehend Jack Back and bring him back to the Embassy."

"Yes Sir."

"Watch out. If he suspects something he may not come peacefully. You have permission to shoot to kill if necessary."

"Roger that. We're on our way."

18 Royal National Herald

The door to Ben Mousse-O'Leaney's office was thrown wide open and almost fell from its hinges, as Jeb Peterson burst into the office. Catching his breath, he sat in the chair opposite Mousse-O'Leaney's desk.

"Someone blew up the Cathedral."

"You don't say. Did the boy get it on film?"

"Probably. Only problem is I'm not sure where he is right now. A pair of coppers tried to take us in. We decided to split instead."

"When he does turn up I want him to process the films ASAP. And what are you still doing here. Don't you have a story to write?"

Peterson grinned.

"Aye aye Sir."

19 Rendezvous at Café Olé

Bulimia had not yet been invaded by faceless international coffee shop chains. This did not mean that there weren't any faceless coffee shops. Café Olé was just such an establishment. Patrons could have their choice of coffee with or without yak's milk, and that was pretty much it. Regular customers, very few of whom had ever been outside the country and as a result hadn't been exposed to foreign coffee shop standards, didn't fully appreciate what a blessing it was not to have to wade through a swamp of ristrettos, macchiatos, skinny lattes, vanilla syrups and French roasts. Jack Back, being the well-travelled man of the world that he was, wholeheartedly welcomed the fact that he was able to order a coffee and get one without further ado.

Jack was sitting at an outside table and had a steaming mug of strong black coffee in front of him. He wasn't sitting at Café Olé, though. Instead, he was at Café Autodafé across the street. He was reading yesterday's Royal National Herald, or at least appeared to be. His attention was fully on the black Mercury approaching fast from the other end of Green Dolphin Street.

The car screeched to a halt in front of Café Olé and four men stepped out. Two of them entered the coffee shop and emerged only a moment later. One of the men spotted an empty table with a coffee mug and a newspaper across the street. He reached for his walkie-talkie.

"Eagle One this is Eagle Two. The bird has flown. Over."

"Eagle Two this is Eagle One. Copy that. Return to base. Over and out."

The men piled back into the Mercury and drove off. On a balcony two floors above Café Autodafé, Jack Back stood up and holstered his Glock 17.

20 Royal Secret Police Headquarters

Luigi Scoreggia had been with the KSPB for almost twenty years. During that time, he had managed to rise to the rank of Lieutenant. When his old mate from the Orphanage joined the organization and started getting promotions, Luigi started feeling increasingly uneasy. When his mate got promoted to be his boss, he felt positively gutted. After all, if there was any justice in the World, that position would have been his. Then again, as an officer of the KSPB Luigi knew perfectly well that justice was a very ephemerical and flexible concept.

Luigi's speciality was counterespionage. He had been in charge of the department for five years. At first, when he was transferred from Fishing Permit Inspections, he'd been quite excited. He'd had visions of wearing a tuxedo immaculately cut to accommodate his concealed Beretta and driving a rag-top Bentley to the Monte Carlo casino, where he would casually take the house to the cleaners at the baccarat table, then spend the night sipping Bollinger and sharing a multitude of sexual delights with the Countess of Hors d'Oeuvres.

The reality, as Luigi soon found out, was somewhat less glamorous. There weren't too many state secrets in Bulimia worth stealing, so as a result he had yet to encounter an actual spy. He didn't really count the CIA spooks stationed at the US Embassy, partly because they were the responsibility of Superpower Relations, but mainly because they didn't seem to get around to doing much in the way of spy business.

It was therefore not all that surprising that Luigi had developed other interests to keep his most important weapon, his mind, ready for action. He harboured a secret desire of being an internationally recognised poet some day. Whenever his workload allowed, which was quite often, he would pick up his notebook and fountain pen and start composing poems. More often than not, they took the form of dirty lim-

ericks. He was most proud of the one that begun “There once was a lady of Bremen”, although there were days when he preferred “There once was a Siamese duckling”.

Luigi was in the process of composing yet another limerick, this time one beginning “There once lived a man in Kalgorlie”, when Horst Hurenschwanz, his boss, entered the room without bothering to knock first. Luigi threw his notebook and pen hastily in his desk drawer.

“Horst. What’s up.”

“I want you to take up the investigation of the Cathedral bombing.”

“But I do counterespionage. Spy versus spy. This is clearly a matter for the Counterterrorism guys upstairs.”

“I want you to take this case. You’re the only one I can trust Luigi.”

“All right. You’re the boss. It sounds like you have a theory on who did it.”

“Perhaps. If I am right this is about a whole lot more than just a church. However I do not want to bias your investigations. I could be wrong.”

“I’ll get on it right away.”

“Thank you. You are a true friend Luigi.”

With that, Captain Hurenschwanz left the room.

21 His name is Dick

Two KSPB agents were sitting in a beat-up VW Beetle parked a few hundred meters down the street from the US Embassy. Their colleagues in a Toyota Corolla were parked on the other side of the Embassy, so that nobody could get near the front gate without being noticed.

A black Mercury approached the Embassy. The gates opened, and the car glided in.

“Did you see that.”

“Yeah. None of those guys match the description. Those four all work at the Embassy.”

Inside the building, Richard Black was nervously pacing back and forth in his office when the phone rang.

“Hello.”

“What’s with the goon squad.”

“Jack. Jesus. Nothing. I just wanted to make sure you’d be OK.”

“I found what you sent me to find in Arannash.”

“Really. That’s great. Do you have it with you.”

“Maybe. Suddenly I’m not so sure anymore.”

“Don’t play games with me Jack. Come in and hand it over. I’ll make sure you get a nice bonus. How does an all expenses paid vacation in Hawaii sound.”

“Not too shabby. I might not enjoy it too much though with a bullet in my head.”

“Don’t be silly Jack. You’re acting paranoid.”

“I may be paranoid but it doesn’t mean you’re not out to get me. How about we do a trade.”

“A trade.”

“Yeah. You get what you want and I get something I want in return. Something other than a bullet.”

Black’s attention was suddenly drawn by a man appearing in the doorway. It was Special Agent Frank Kozinsky, who mouthed the words “WE’VE TRACED HIM”. A sly grin appeared on Black’s face as he responded with a thumbs-up sign. Kozinsky disappeared from the doorway.

“What do you want Jack. Let’s make a deal.”

“First I want you to call off the goons. Then we’ll talk.”

“You’re not making any sense Jack.”

“You know Richard you truly are a Dick. Catch you later.”

Jack Black hung up the phone and hurried out of the coffee shop.

22 Ruins of the Cathedral

The Voluntary Fire Brigade of Nuevo Saunabad was at the scene of the explosion less than half an hour after the fact. Due to the valiant efforts of the firemen, Archbishop Musili-cus did not have to spend the rest of his days in the wine cellar. He was taken to the Royal University Hospital, where the emergency room was prepared for a major disaster but in fact did not receive any other victims of the blast, because there hadn't been any.

Even though night had already fallen, King Square was full of people who had come to witness the aftermath. An enterprising souvenir stall keeper was already selling commemorative shirts with "I WANTED TO CONFESS MY SINS AT THE CATHEDRAL AND ALL I GOT WAS THIS LOUSY T-SHIRT" emblazoned across the chest. Ashtrays and postcards depicting the Cathedral were sold out in no time flat. Those lucky enough to snap up one of the plastic bubbles with a miniature model of the Cathedral that would emulate a snowstorm when shaken would later go on to sell their bounty on eBay at highly elevated prices. Grilled yak sausages and yak milkshakes were devoured by the metric ton.

Bulimians, especially the debonair urban professionals of Nuevo Saunabad, loved to gossip. They also loved conspiracies. The square was already teeming with theories about who was responsible for the mayhem. A lone Lobotomian bomber on a suicide mission was suggested, uncannily anticipating Jeb Peterson's article in tomorrow's Royal National Herald. According to others it was likely to be Lower Bulimian separatists. This theory was generally discounted, as there weren't too many of them alive given that the separatist movement had last been active around the turn of the last century. Some of the more fanciful minds were absolutely certain that UFOs had arrived and destroyed the Cathedral with a high en-

ergy blast in a display of their technological superiority. There weren't too many of those who supported this possibility, even though it would later turn out not to have been that far off the mark.

Among all the townspeople who had been brought down to the square by their curiosity, there were two people who actually knew who had blown up the Cathedral. One of them had placed the charges himself.

"Would you like a yakwurst Hildegard."

"Thank you Judas but no. I've already eaten. Why don't you go ahead and have one yourself."

"Don't mind if I do. A yakwurst on a roll please. With mustard and ketchup."

"Anything to drink Sir."

"A milkshake. Vanilla."

"We're out of vanilla. How about sauerkraut."

"Very well. How much."

"A ralloed twenty all up. Thank you kind Sir. Here's your hot dog. The boy will draw you your shake."

"Thank you. Hildegard are you sure you don't want one. These are delicious. Mm-mm."

"No thank you. Shall we try to get a bit closer to the ruins."

"Yes let's."

It was not easy to navigate through the crowd, as everyone was eager to see the destruction first hand. Finally, Hildegard and Judas were able to slip through.

"Do you think this will do."

"You did good Judas. I'm sure whatever is left of the Cathedral will not be an issue."

"There's not much else to do but wait then is there."

"No I suppose not. Let's try to find somewhere to sit down."

23 Hotel Excelsior, Rimbaud

Jack Back knew he couldn't stay in Nuevo Saunabad for much longer. After his last call to Richard Black, he knew the Company would try to track him down, and there weren't too many hiding places for him in the city. Something about this whole business did not add up. Why did Black choose him to go to Arannash? What was the purpose of the object he had retrieved there? And most importantly, why was he being greeted by a death squad on his return to the capital?

Jack decided to get out of town as quickly as possible. He hailed a taxi in front of the hotel Titz.

"What's the nearest town."

"Rimbaud. Too far for me though."

Jack took out his wallet and flashed a ten-rallod note at the driver.

"Are you sure."

"Yep. My shift ends in half an hour. The wife is making yak stew."

Jack looked quickly around himself. After making sure that there weren't too many witnesses around, he took his Glock out of its holster just far enough so that the driver could see he meant business.

"I'll give you twenty rallods if you take me there."

"Well if you put it that way. The stew gets better the longer it cooks anyway."

Rimbaud was a small village roughly twenty kilometers outside Nuevo Saunabad. It had a post office, a general store and a hotel, and that was pretty much it. According to the neon sign on the wall, the hotel was called Excelsior. Jack gave the taxi driver two ten-rallod notes and entered the hotel. The taxi took off and drove into the sunset.

Even the most unscrupulous real estate agent would have struggled to say anything positive about the decrepit state of

the hotel lobby. A renovator's dream it was not. Behind the counter was a stout man in his sixties. He eyed the stranger silently with detached curiosity.

"How much for a night."

"Would you prefer a blonde or a brunette."

"Just a room."

"You're in the wrong place mate. You want to sleep go somewhere else."

"How much for a night with the brunette then."

"Fifty. Up front."

"You must be joking."

"You won't be disappointed."

"Does that include clean sheets. And a clean towel."

"But of course. We're very proud of our hygienic standards here at the Excelsior."

"Very well. What about breakfast."

"I'm sure you'll get to eat something if that's what floats your boat. Ho ho ho."

"Right. Here."

Jack handed the clerk five ten-rallod notes. He counted them, checking the watermark on each, and nodded.

"Suzy. There's a gentleman waiting for you."

A tall, voluptuous brunette emerged through the doorway behind the clerk. Jack guessed her age as between 25 and 30. She wore a deep red nightgown that had seen better days. She smiled at Jack as she took a key from a hook on the wall and headed towards the stairs. Jack followed suit.

Upstairs, the girl opened a door and stepped into a room. Jack closed the door behind him. The room was as seedy as he'd expected. There was an armchair, a lamp on a small table, a potted plant and, of course, a queen-size bed. On the wall hung a framed reproduction of Manet's Luncheon on the Grass. Someone had stuck a chewing gum on the naked girl's right nipple. Suzy slipped out of the slinky dress and started

removing her bra.

“I just want to sleep.”

“Whatever. Your money your choice.”

Suzy removed her bra anyway, along with her stockings and knickers, and dived between the sheets. Jack did not disapprove of what he saw. His mind was soon full of impure thoughts. He considered briefly asking her to hold on to his scrotum with both hands while he slept, but ultimately decided against it.

Jack took off his clothes, removing the Glock from its holster, and flicked the light switch. The neon sign outside cast a faint glow in the room. Jack climbed into the bed, slipped his pistol under the pillow and closed his eyes. Soon he was snoring.

It was already light outside when Jack awoke at quarter past seven. The girl was asleep and had her arm across Jack’s chest. He didn’t mind in the least. He tried not to wake her up when he got up to go to the toilet, but didn’t succeed. Suzy opened her eyes and yawned.

“Good morning.”

“Morning stranger. You’ve had your sleep. Now what.”

“Now I’m going to take a shower, get dressed and go for breakfast. If that’s an option in this town.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to do anything to relieve your stress. You seem awfully tense. Plus you’ve already paid for it anyway.”

“How long have you been doing this.”

“Long enough to be good at it. Trust me.”

“I suppose you could wash my back.”

“If you like.”

Jack went to the bathroom and turned on the shower as he stepped into the bathtub. It took ages for the water to get warm. Suzy grabbed a sponge and a bar of soap and followed him. She started to rub his back with the soapy sponge, mov-

ing her hand slowly in a broad arc.

Downstairs, two KSPB agents entered the hotel lobby. One of them showed the clerk a photo of Jack.

“Have you seen this man.”

“Maybe. We get a lot of guests.”

“Maybe you’d like to accept our invitation to jog your memory at the Royal Secret Police headquarters. We have good coffee.”

“He’s upstairs. Room 6. There’s a girl with him. Don’t hurt her.”

The agents climbed up the stairs, both drawing a 9mm Makarov from its holster on the way. Unlike the ordinary police, KSPB’s budget covered ammunition.

At the door of room 6, one of the agents pulled a lock pick out of his pocket and started working on the lock. It only took him a few moments to unlock it. He turned the knob slowly and kicked the door wide open. One after another they burst into the room, pistols at the ready. The shower was running in the bathroom. One of the agents motioned for the other to go and check it out.

When the agent opened the bathroom door, he saw that the shower was empty. In the same instant he was hit on the head with a heavy flowerpot. At the same time, his colleague who had remained in the room fell to the floor. Jack, who had been hiding behind the door, had used his knowledge of Kung Fu to incapacitate the agent with a technique known as the Ancient Green Dragon Grip of Death. The name was a slight exaggeration, as it only knocked the recipient out for a good half hour. He would awake later with a searing headache, much like the other agent who was now lying unconscious on the bathroom floor.

Suzy, who was only wearing a towel, picked up the weapons of the KSPB agents.

“What should I do with these.”

“You shouldn’t be handling those. They can be dangerous.”

Suzy smiled.

“Dangerous is my middle name.”

“Get rid of them somehow. Thanks for your help Suzy.”

“Anytime stranger. You know my first and middle name. What’s yours.”

“Jack.”

“Nice to meet you Jack.”

“Likewise.”

Jack, who had only had time to put on his trousers, picked up his shirt, holster and jacket and put them on as well.

“It would probably be a good idea for you to get out of town for a while. Same goes for your boss. These fellows might not be too pleased when they wake up.”

“I could do with a vacation I suppose. Would you like to come with me.”

“Some other time. I’ve got unfinished business.”

“A pity. See you later then.”

“Yeah.”

Jack walked up to Suzy, kissed her on the lips and left. Suzy picked up her clothes, dressed and also left the room, closing the door behind her.

24 Lake Waycanbayck

Archbishop Musilicus did not have to spend too long at the hospital. As he had no injuries except the loss of his hearing, and there was nothing that could be done about it, he was dismissed and sent home. Because his church had been blown to bits, he was able to devote his full attention to his favourite pastime, fishing.

The day was bright and sunny. The Archbishop was out in his boat on Lake Waycanbayck some thirty kilometers north of Nuevo Saunabad. The lake was known for its big pikes and

generally as a good spot to catch a fish or two. A duck swam by and a dozen ducklings tried to keep up with their mother. Somewhere in the distance, a lonely mallard was calling for its mate. Suddenly the sun was obscured by something.

The Archbishop had just been about to put a worm on a hook. He turned to look and saw a gigantic torus floating a few hundred meters above the lake. The torus was light gray, with no features on its surface, and maybe half a mile across. It remained stationary in the air, rotating around its axis at roughly one revolution every five seconds. If the Archbishop hadn't been deaf, he would have heard a loud low-frequency hum.

Had the Archbishop been a religious man, he would have probably clasped his hands and prayed. He wasn't, so he was content to stare at the floating torus with his mouth open. It occurred to him that the flying object that he had not been able to identify could be an alien spaceship. That, or a promotional campaign by a really enterprising ad agency. Maybe it was an ad for car tyres, or something. Floatation devices maybe. Suddenly he felt a craving for donuts.

25 **Headline news**

Jeb Peterson waved a stack of typewritten sheets triumphantly at the editor of the Royal National Herald.

“Here it is Boss. If this came out in America it would be a shoe-in for the Pulitzer Prize.”

“Any sign of the kid.”

“He's making himself useful in the dark room.”

“Fantastic. Let's see it. The Cathedral of Nuevo Saunabad was built yada yada yada. Yesterday evening yada yada yada. Huge explosion, lots of rubble, Lower Bulimian separatists suspected, and so on et cetera. I think this will do nicely. Especially if the photos are any good. Goes without

saying this will be the front page tomorrow. How do you like CATHEDRAL DESTROYED BY TERRORISTS for the title.”

“I’m partial to LANDMARK BLOWN UP — THOUSANDS FEARED MISSING myself.”

“Isn’t that a slight exaggeration. You yourself are saying in the article that only the Archbishop is likely to have been in the building at the time of the explosion.”

“It’s hardly as catchy to say AN OLD DRUNKARD FEARED MISSING now is it.”

“No it’s not but us journalists have an obligation to deliver the objective truth to the public. I think I read that somewhere.”

“How about CATHEDRAL OF NUEVO SAUNABAD DESTROYED IN EXPLOSION. Or is that too long.”

“Let’s keep it simple. CATHEDRAL DESTROYED IN EXPLOSION. It’s not as if there are any other cathedrals in the country.”

“I’m fine with that.”

“Good. Take this down to Typesetting along with a few of the kid’s photos. Maybe a before-after kind of thing would work here. He did take both didn’t he.”

“I’m sure he did. Do we have anything else for tomorrow.”

“The Squonks lost. Again.”

“Better crank up the old generator then.”

“Will do. Cheers.”

26 Private investigations

Luigi Scoreggia was giving his overworked brain cells a bit of fresh air. He was sitting at the Café Olé, having a cup of black coffee and a tall glass of lukewarm yak’s milk on the side. His frustration was mounting. Nobody seemed to know anything about the explosion. Everything he’d come up with

was hearsay or conjecture. It seemed that absolutely everyone in town had come up with an original theory, but none were even remotely plausible. The most preposterous one had to do with extraterrestrial UFOs demonstrating their superiority by blasting supersonic death beams across the night sky. Given that the Cathedral exploded in broad daylight, he didn't think this one was it.

He hadn't even been able to interrogate the Archbishop, who had mysteriously disappeared after being discharged from the hospital. Luigi wasn't expecting to gain much insight from him anyway. According to the rescue workers, the Archbishop had been in the wine cellar when the Cathedral blew up. It certainly didn't sound like he'd had anything to do with the explosion. Surely even he would have had enough sense to be anywhere but inside a building that was about to be blown up, if he'd known it was going to happen.

The only lead so far had to do with a renegade CIA agent, who had been sighted in downtown Nuevo Saunabad on the day of the explosion. Luigi hoped that he was the one who did it, because he wasn't looking forward to making any arrests on an alien space vessel.

His train of thought was rudely derailed by two KSPB agents, whose Daihatsu Charade came to a screeching halt in front of the café. The agents got out of the car and walked up to Scoreggia, then stood at attention and saluted.

"At ease boys. What's up."

"We found the suspect in a hotel in Rimbaud Sir."

"And."

"He got away."

"Jesus Christ boys. What do you get paid for. Passing gas and holding each other's dick it seems. Do you have any idea where he could be."

"We know he hasn't left the country. Border guards have been issued with his picture."

“Well keep looking then. I’d say he’s pretty unlikely to give himself up on his own accord.”

“We also need you to sign this Sir.”

“What’s that.”

“A requisition form for new sidearms Sir. The suspect stole ours.”

“You two bozos must have practiced quite a bit to reach your level of incompetence. There you go. Now get out of my face. I don’t want to lay my eyes on you two again before you’ve caught him.”

“Yes Sir. Thank you Sir.”

The agents saluted, got back in the Daihatsu and left in a hurry.

27 Audience with the King

It was quite obvious to even a casual visitor that The Royal Palace had been decorated by someone with more money than taste. That someone had been Osvald I, who in the years before the revolution had made his living running a whorehouse in Rimbaud.

The library was no different from the rest of the palace. The walls were covered in dark red velvet. The ceiling was a reproduction of that in the Sistine Chapel, to scale of course. Every two meters, a crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, one of them suspended by God’s forefinger. A painting of dogs smoking and playing poker dominated one of the walls. Another wall was taken up by a portrait of Elvis, painted in garish day-glo yellow on black velvet. The windows were mosaics of lead and coloured glass, each depicting a naked woman of a different skin colour on a leash.

On the wall opposite the windows hung a huge portrait of Osvald I. He was pictured wearing a Napoleonic-era military uniform complete with a three-cornered hat, wielding a

sabre and riding a winged unicorn which was trampling peasants into the ground. According to art historians, the artist had painted himself as one of the peasants, which was quite fitting considering that he never got paid for the commission.

Right below the portrait of Osvald I stood a comfy chair upholstered with pink velour. A portly bald man of an indeterminate but definitely advanced age occupied the chair. Silvio Cagadero, the Minister of Porn and Propaganda, was taking advantage of the library collection by leafing idly through the first issue of Playboy featuring a naked Marilyn Monroe on the cover.

Cagadero had first been appointed to the cabinet by Osvald II, the current King's father. He'd hung onto his position through turbulent times, forging alliances and getting rid of his enemies, and was widely considered to be the most powerful man in Bulimia. In fact, the only person in Bulimia who did not believe this to be true was the King. For his part, Cagadero was more than happy to let the easily manipulated King believe he was in charge.

Suddenly, a valet appeared through a doorway.

"The King will see you now in his study Sir."

"Very well."

Cagadero got up, slipping the magazine nonchalantly in his briefcase, and followed the valet down the corridor and up the stairs.

The King's study was slightly smaller than the library, but otherwise displayed a similar disdain towards good taste in its decor. The room was oval-shaped, with windows that opened to the balcony and gave a nice view of the Palace garden. Two alabaster statues, one of Zeus, the other of Leda, flanked a massive granite fireplace. Instead of a fire, which would have been quite unnecessary in the middle of the scorching Bulimian summer anyway, there was a large plasma TV playing a video recording of a fire. On the floor in front of the fireplace

was a yak hide. A pale blue grand piano dominated the opposite end of the oval-shaped study. A heavy silver candelabra with seven candles in a matching shade of pale blue stood on top of the piano. The walls were adorned by still life paintings, most of which featured apples and oranges in a bowl.

Osvald III was sitting in front of the windows at his desk, which was completely made of mammoth ivory.

“Your Highness the right honourable Minister of Porn and Propaganda is here.”

“Thank you Salvatore. We are not to be disturbed.”

“I will see to it your Highness.”

The valet left and closed the door behind him. The King motioned at a pair of rococo armchairs near the fireplace. Between the chairs was a coffee table made from a wagon wheel.

“Why don’t we sit down and you can tell me all about what’s going on in my kingdom.”

“As you wish your Highness.”

Cagadero followed the King’s lead by sitting down. The King opened a rosewood desk humidor and chose two slim panatellas, giving one to Cagadero.

“Your Majesty is far too kind.”

Cagadero pulled out a diamond-studded gas lighter and first lit the King’s cigar, then his own. Both men leaned back in their chairs and took a big toke from their cigars.

“Your Majesty I have bad news to tell you. It seems a group of terrorists has blown up the Cathedral.”

“What. Impossible. This is an outrage. An outrage I say. My dear father and grandfather are buried in the crypt.”

“I’m afraid the crypt is no more your Highness.”

“The terrorists are to be executed immediately. Have them quartered and hung. We cannot tolerate this sort of behaviour in Bulimia. Such insolence. What will the neighbours say.”

“Your Majesty at this point we haven’t been able to appre-

hend the perpetrators. However the best men of the Royal Secret Police are working night and day on the case.”

“I am shocked. Truly shocked. Keep me posted on any developments. How dare they.”

“I agree your Highness.”

“Would you care to join me for a glass of malt whisky Silvio.”

“Your kindness knows no bounds your Highness.”

The King clapped his hands twice. A valet appeared through a doorway, carrying a tray with a crystal carafe and two glasses. The valet placed the carafe and glasses on the table between the King and the Minister and poured a generous shot of whisky for both.

“Thank you Salvatore. That will be all.”

The valet bowed and left, walking backwards through the door he came in. The King raised his glass. The Minister of Porn and Propaganda did likewise.

“To your health Silvio.”

“And to yours your Highness.”

Both men took a sip. This made the King’s face contort in the manner of someone who had just swallowed sulphur acid.

“What do you think Silvio. Do you like it.”

“Very nice your Highness. From the Isle of Lucy I believe. I can taste the peat and the fresh Highland breeze.”

“You are correct of course. I’m blessed to have such a man of the world in my cabinet. This is an eighteen year old single malt from the Glendanzig distillery.”

“Didn’t an arsonist burn down the distillery back in the Sixties your Highness.”

“Quite so. I was able to negotiate the purchase of the last remaining bottles on my recent trip to Scotland. I believe the Prince of Wales was quite irked when he heard this.”

Both men indulged in a hearty guffaw that was overheard as far as the palace kitchen.

28 KSPB armoury

The KSPB armoury was located in the basement of the Royal Secret Police building on King Square. It was mainly stocked with pistols and assault rifles that were found in the basement of the old Soviet Embassy after it was abandoned when the Soviet Union fell. Attempts to re-establish diplomatic relations with Russia had not been successful, in part because the Embassy had been squatted and converted into a bingo hall in the meantime.

A KSPB sergeant was sitting at a desk in the armoury front room, cleaning a stripped down AK-47, when the door opened and two agents came in.

“Well dip me in honey and throw me to the Lesbians if it isn’t Special Agents Dumb and Dumber. To what do I owe this honour.”

One of the agents handed the sergeant the requisition form that bore Luigi Scoreggia’s signature.

“We need new sidearms. Lieutenant’s orders.”

“My oh my. You boys should really take better care of your weapons. I’m not so sure I can afford to give you new ones. Based on your track record I’m afraid you might lose them before you get upstairs. They don’t grow on trees you know.”

“Just hand them over.”

“Yes Sir. Right away Sir. Will there be anything else Sir. Can I for instance polish your boots and iron your uniforms Sir. Perhaps a haircut or a pedicure Sir.”

The two agents knew better than to reply. The sergeant got up and disappeared in the backroom. He returned a few moments later with two 9mm Makarovs.

“Here you go boys. Two mighty fine specimens of classic small arms design from the good ol’ USS of R. Merry Christmas. Hang on to these won’t you. At this rate we’ll run out of pistols before we’ve gone through a box of cartridges. Sign

here. And here.”

The agents signed the form, holstered their new weapons and left without saying another word. The armoury sergeant couldn't resist yelling after them one last time.

“Pleasure doing business with you gentlemen. Y'all come back soon you hear. And don't forget to write.”

29 The alien spaceship

The aliens aboard the spaceship hovering over Lake Waycanbayck observed the Archbishop and his boat with detached curiosity. The Archbishop, for his part, stared at the spaceship in disbelief. Soon, a beam emerging from the alien vessel bathed both in radiant light. The boat carrying the Archbishop rose up in air and started to float towards the spaceship.

For the Archbishop, this was a bit too much. The events of the past few days had taken their toll on his physique, which wasn't much to write home about to begin with. He felt a searing pain in his chest and collapsed in a heap on the bottom of the boat. The pain made it impossible for him to breathe. By the time the boat reached the spaceship, the Archbishop was already dead.

On contact with the spaceship, the boat carrying the Archbishop's lifeless body disappeared in a brilliant flash of light. An infinitesimal instant of time later it reappeared inside the spaceship in a large hall. The hall was brightly lit, although there were no light sources in sight. With its concave ceiling it looked a lot like an aircraft hangar.

It would not have been entirely accurate to say that the aliens were caught unawares by the Archbishop's death. Being the intellectually superior and technologically advanced master race that they were, they had already solved many of the questions that Man would not be in a position to even

start to contemplate for millennia to come.

The Archbishop's inanimate corpse was lifted out of the boat by a tractor beam similar to the one that had grabbed both and carried them to the spaceship, although a far less intense one. The corpse was placed on a tablelike structure floating nearby. Once the corpse hit the table, a faint glow covered both. The Archbishop's body started to shiver and tremble on the table. Sparks flew as flamelike arches of light seemed to devour what was left of the Archbishop. Slowly, his body began to reappear as the flames died off. After a few seconds, the Archbishop opened his eyes.

It took the Archbishop a few moments to realise what had happened. In fact, he didn't have a single clue as to what had happened, except that his ears were no longer ringing and that his clothes felt quite loose for some reason. He sat up and looked around him. There was nothing else in the hall except his boat and the floating table he sat on. The walls, the floor and the ceiling were a matt gray colour that made the hall look like it was just a void inside a storm cloud. It occurred to him that this was what a gigantic hollow metallic doughnut might look like from the inside.

"Hello."

The Archbishop's voice echoed around the hall, but there was no response. The table started to lose altitude and his feet touched the floor. He stood up. When he did this, the table disappeared.

30 Leaving through Verlaine

The Tourist Board of Bulimia puts out a glossy four-page brochure every other year. The brochure describes the joys and delights awaiting a tourist, should he or she happen to choose Bulimia as a holiday destination. Apart from those with a compulsion to visit every country on the planet, how-

ever, very few tourists ever came to Bulimia. Even the country point collectors tended to be satisfied with just a stamp in their passport.

The brochure was due to be revised the following year, and given that the front page featured a large photo of the Cathedral, it was probably for the better. For every revision, the tourist board tried to find a new set of three tourists to interview about their experiences in Bulimia, which restaurants they'd recommend, and so on. The board would probably consider themselves lucky if they could find three tourists among whom they did not have to include Jack Back.

Jack was sitting in a bar in Verlaine, a sleepy town at the Transvestitian border, passing time by idly leafing through the Tourist Board's brochure. He noted without much interest that Lake Waycanbayck was a popular holiday destination among sports fishermen and that the lake was famous for its large pikes. He wasn't much of a fisherman himself.

The pack of local cigarettes that Jack had bought when he finally gave in to his nicotine addiction was almost empty. The brand was called Trovator. The label had a picture of a yak herder in traditional outfit blowing on a horn, along with a greeting from the Surgeon General. Apparently the Surgeon General didn't recommend smoking Trovators. Jack knew what he was talking about. The filterless Trovators tasted like yak shit and probably also contained quite a bit of it. Jack fished the last cigarette out of the pack and lit up.

Jack was trying hard to get rid of the wad of Bulimian ralloids that was burning a hole in his pocket, as he'd somehow managed to drop his Zippo in the pocket without putting it out first. He'd considered his options, and very few of them mandated staying in Bulimia. Jack was more than happy to leave the sorry excuse for a country behind him, hopefully forever. The only thing in Bulimia that he did not positively loathe was Suzy. He missed already her lithe body, her supple

wrists, her perfectly round ...

The waitress woke Jack up from his reverie.

“Would you like another coffee Sir.”

“Yes please. And this time hold the yak’s milk.”

“Very well Sir.”

The other thing that was burning a hole in his pocket was the mysterious object he’d risked his life to obtain. It was warm to the touch, glowed faintly in the dark, emanated a low-frequency hum and small birds would occasionally fall out of the sky whenever he took it out of his pocket, but in all other respects it was just like an ordinary rock.

He wasn’t any closer to understanding what the rock was. It had to have a purpose, that much he knew. The Company wouldn’t have sent him to get it otherwise. Well, whatever it was, he’d definitely hang onto it, if only to have a bargaining chip when the time came. He knew it would. The Company was not given to letting loose ends hang, and Jack knew first hand just how good they were at tracking people down eventually.

The events that took place in Nuevo Saunabad were enough to prove that he was holding the key to some puzzle that Richard Black and whoever was pulling his strings wouldn’t want him to solve. Jack didn’t mind that. He wasn’t into solving puzzles. What he did mind was the fact that he would have probably been gunned down if he’d been less careful. He had a kind of a personal guideline not to stay in the employ of anyone who was in the habit of having him shot.

The waitress arrived with a fresh mug of coffee. Jack smiled and gave her a five-rallod note.

“Keep the change. Buy yourself something nice.”

“Thank you kind Sir. You are very generous.”

“Don’t go spending it all at once.”

“No Sir.”

Jack took a sip and looked at his watch. The border would

be open for another fifteen minutes. It was time to travel. He took another sip and headed for the bathroom.

31 Bridge to Hospodar

The border between Bulimia and Transvestitia ran right down the middle of the Rio Puta. The river flowed down from Lake Waycanbayck and used to be an excellent spot for catching salmon, up until roughly ten years ago, when a fertiliser factory was built on the Bulimian riverbank a few kilometers upstream from Verlaine. The state of the present-day river was enough to make grown men cry, mainly because of the noxious teargas-like vapours that rose from the sludgy stream and stunk to high heaven.

Verlaine was connected to Hospodar, the Transvestitian border town, by a narrow cantilever bridge. Near the bridge on the Verlaine side, a small shack passed for the border station. It was occupied by two officers of the Royal Bulimian Frontier Guard, who sat idly at their desks. One of them was leafing through an issue of *Penthouse* they'd confiscated from a Mongolian yak farmer some time ago.

"Do you reckon these Letters to the Editor are true stories."

"Of course they are. Why would they print them if they weren't."

"Listen to this. I was working as a waitress in a cocktail bar when a handsome dark-haired man in his late thirties came in. He ordered a Martini and a can of whipped cream and before I knew it he was spraying—"

"Shh. We have a customer."

An elderly man with a bowler hat, a monocle and a moustache walked up to the window doubling as a counter. He was carrying a battered brown leather suitcase and an umbrella.

"Good day Sir. Could I see your travel documents please."

The man presented his passport to the border guard.

“What was your business in Bulimia Mr. Borge.”

“I am a travel agent. I was exploring possibilities to arrange holiday travel from my native Denmark to your beautiful country.”

“Are you carrying any antique items Mr. Borge.”

“Not really. I do have a bottle of fermented yak’s milk if that counts.”

“Would you step inside Mr. Borge. I’d like to take a look at your luggage.”

Mr. Borge, however, had other plans. He dropped his suitcase and started running across the bridge like he was being chased by rabid dogs, which he was as soon as the border guards got over their surprise.

The Dobermans unleashed by the border guards were closing in fast. Mr. Borge looked over his shoulder and saw that the guards were aiming at him with assault rifles. Soon, he heard bullets flying left and right, but miraculously wasn’t hit. Transvestitian border guards watched the rapidly escalating incident from the safety of their brand new border station made of concrete and steel. Several bets were made, with most of the guards putting their money on the Dobermans. When Mr. Borge got to the middle of the bridge, he leaped on the railing and jumped into the murky depths of the river.

The border guards reached the point where the dogs had forced Mr. Borge to jump off the bridge and looked down. Below them, the water was as black as time itself.

32 Chasing the humpless camel

One of the buildings that suffered superficial damage when the Cathedral blew up was the Royal University Library. It was an impressive stone structure on the Northern edge of King Square that would probably be featured in the next

printing of souvenir postcards now that there was no longer much point in having pictures of the Cathedral. Inside the library were five floors full of books, manuscripts, maps, drawings and other printed matter that had at one time or another played their part in the curriculum of this or that study program at the Royal University.

The main entrance hall of the library was dimly lit and spanned three floors. In the middle of the floor, a glass-topped mahogany display case contained the rarest book in the collection. It was a first edition of “Fungi of Bulimia and Neighbouring Countries”, written and illustrated by the Swedish botanist Carl von Linné during his field trip to Bulimia in the 16th Century. It was said that von Linné had been so fascinated by the mushrooms he found that he spent five years in Bulimia instead of the intended three days, roaming through the yak pastures in search of yet another species unknown to science.

The book was open at the spread featuring *Psilocybe vittuanus*, a mushroom species endemic to Bulimia that had long since become extinct. Von Linné’s watercolour illustration, in which the characteristic concave cap and crimson gills were quite visible, was at once both delicate and magnificent. According to the description, the spores of the species had to pass through the digestive tract of a humpless camel before they could germinate. As there were no more humpless camels, the last breeding pair having been barbecued at King Osvald II’s coronation reception, the mushroom hadn’t been spotted in Bulimia for decades.

Professor Hans Drövel was sitting in the Library reading room, oblivious to the outside world, reading the latest issue of the Journal of Gastronomical Mycology. He had been at the Royal University for most of his life, starting as a lowly undergraduate, and had now held the Biology chair for over 40 years. Sometimes, after he’d had his customary glass of

sherry before retiring for the night, he reflected on his life and on what might have been, had he not missed the Medical School entrance exam by two days because he was held up by a game of whist. He had no regrets, though. Biology was his life, and one that he enjoyed quite a bit.

Professor Drøvel was no stranger to *P. vittuanus*. His doctoral thesis had been titled “On the Metasymbiotic Aspects of *Macrauchenia platydorsa* Digestion”. In the chapter on fungal interactions, he elaborated on von Linné’s description and gave a thorough explanation as to why the spores could not germinate in any other conditions. He also postulated a then-controversial theory that if the spores were preserved in pure alcohol, they would remain viable forever, or at least a good thousand years or so. He received the highest possible marks for his thesis, and did not face any significant competition when his predecessor was decapitated in a bizarre gardening accident and the Biology chair became vacant.

On the surface, the Professor was a gentle old man who, like many scientists, was sometimes prone to make those in his company fall asleep with his overly detailed stories about something utterly fascinating he’d come across in his research, but otherwise was quite harmless and probably wouldn’t hurt a fly.

Few knew, however, that Professor Drøvel had a secret.

33 KSPB Canteen

In general, it was difficult bordering on impossible to find a decent cup of coffee in Bulimia. The two agents who had almost caught Jack Back at the Hotel Excelsior weren’t lying, however, when they had praised the coffee served at the KSPB canteen to the desk clerk. The canteen coffee very rarely contained any rat excrement to speak of, at any rate.

Marcello Finocchio, a junior agent of the KSPB, was sit-

ting at a table, browsing through the latest edition of the Royal National Herald. At the opposite end of the canteen, Luigi Scoreggia was pouring himself the sixth mug of coffee of the day. His hands were visibly shaking. Scoreggia picked up his coffee and walked up to Finocchio.

“What’s up Marcello.”

“Same old same old. Have a seat.”

“Don’t mind if I do. You know this Cathedral case is driving me nuts.”

“That reminds me of a joke I heard. There was this guy who had a squirrel sticking from his fly.”

“I’ve heard that one.”

“You have. Well do you have any leads.”

“None to speak of. I should have listened to my Mom and become a doctor.”

“Of what.”

“Of anything really. I’m pretty sure she meant a medical doctor though.”

“My guess is she was hoping to be able to score free amphetamines.”

“Don’t be so cynical Marcello. My mother was a sweet and kind woman.”

“Who would never have indulged in Mother’s Little Helper.”

“Not that I know of anyway. Which case are you working on.”

“Some stupid special assignment from the big boss. Seems that for some reason he just has to know what this biology professor gets up to in his spare time.”

“And what does the good Professor get up to.”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing. He sits and reads. And not fiction either. Mushrooms. Scientific papers about mushrooms. I can only imagine how exciting it must be. I’m not sure if you can imagine how exciting it is to watch him do it.”

“I think I have an idea. I was a junior agent once.”

“Anyway I’ve got to get going. The Professor finishes his lecture at three.”

“Have fun.”

Finocchio got up and left, leaving the newspaper with Scoreggia. He glanced at the front page. It said CATHEDRAL DESTROYED IN EXPLOSION in big bold letters.

34 Adrift on the river

The banks of Rio Puta were quite steep. This was the result of a geographical quirk that took place millions of years ago. Back then, the basin of Lake Waycanbayck formed the crater of a huge volcano. The volcano spewed hot liquid magma, which flowed in a canyon created by a fissure in the bedrock. When the volcano became inactive and the magma cooled down, rainwater began to fill the crater. At some point, the crater overflowed and water started to run along the magma channel. Slowly but surely, the magma was eroded away, leaving nothing but the channel in the rock which lay just below the surface of most of Bulimia.

This fascinating natural phenomenon was of no consolation to Jack Back, who was helplessly drifting towards the ocean, carried by the flow of Rio Puta. He’d lost most of the “Mr. Borge” disguise, with only half a moustache still stuck to his upper lip. He’d been able to grab and hold on to a piece of driftwood, which gave him some extra buoyance.

The water was freezing. The piece of rock he had in his pocket provided some warmth to his nether regions, for which he was grateful. Other parts of his body weren’t doing nearly as well. His face had turned a shade of blue, and he was starting to lose feeling in his toes. His Kung Fu training only went so far in fighting hypothermia.

Jack was drifting in and out of consciousness, thinking in

his more lucid moments that if he fell asleep and let go of the driftwood, he definitely would not make it. He was aware of the cold, but could no longer feel it. I'm too old for this shit, he thought.

Suddenly, he hit something. The impact made him lose his grip on the piece of wood. His brain tried to send his hands an order to get back to grabbing the wood, but to no avail. He sunk under the surface and passed out.

35 The Voice is recruited

The Archbishop had seen a thing or two in his time, but now he knew that this was something else altogether. Even though he did not believe in pixies, ghosts, spirits or, indeed, extraterrestrial beings, he had to admit that if alien spaceships did exist, then this was what they could quite plausibly look like from the inside.

There was nothing to be seen except his boat. The floor was somewhat tangible, but everything in the distance, such as the walls and the ceiling, were sort of hazy and insubstantial.

He was just about to take a piss on the floor, when all of a sudden he heard a voice inside his head.

“...do not be afraid...”

That's it, he decided. I am finally going nuts.

“...we have come in peace...”

Well, if one must have a voice in one's head, then it might just as well be a pleasant one such as this, he thought. He just hoped there weren't more of them coming up.

Another voice, more masculine than the first one, piped in.

“...take us to your leader... be our voice...”

What the fuck. I've got aliens talking inside my head. And I'm on an alien spaceship. He cleared his throat.

“Now listen whoever you are. I don't know where you get

off tormenting an old man like this but the joke stopped being funny some time ago.”

“...you died...”

“Huh?”

It was then that he remembered. The boat floating above the water. The donut pulling it closer. Him having a heart attack.

“...we revived you...”

“Jesus.”

Remarkably enough, this was the first time ever that the Archbishop evoked the name of any sort of deity.

“...he’s not with us... but he sends his regards...”

“What. You guys are quite something. OK so let’s pretend for a moment that you really are aliens and this is an alien spaceship. How am I supposed to take you to my leader whoever that might be. You live in a bleeding donut. It’s going to be tricky parking this baby.”

“...we will land where your church once stood...”

“Ah ha. So you’re the bastards who blew it up. I’ll have you know that wasn’t a nice thing to do. Not a nice thing at all. My job security blew up in smoke with it. Good thing you didn’t demolish the cellar as well. In fact I’m probably going to head down there as soon as you guys drop me off somewhere.”

“...we will land and you will take us to your leader...”

These alien dudes are probably used to having their way, the Archbishop thought. Might be profitable to stay on their good side. In fact, being the spokesman for extraterrestrial beings just might turn out to be a far better gig than being the Archbishop ever was. Certainly more glamorous. It went without saying that he’d have to get a whole new get-up. No more frocks for him.

36 Suite Transvestitia

The sun's first rays peeked through the cracked window, bathing the room in dawn's early light. The first thing that Jack Back saw when he opened his eyes was the wallpaper, which was beyond garish. The blue and orange paisley pattern reminded him of the bouts of migraine he used to have as a child.

At first, he had no idea where he was or what had happened. Then he remembered. Dogs running after him. Jumping off the bridge. The river. His clothes were folded neatly on a chair nearby. Someone had washed them. His Glock sat on top of the pile of clothes. The contents of his pockets were carefully laid out on the table. Everything was there — except the rock.

Being the CIA-trained killing machine that he was, Jack did not panic. His every instinct told him to, though. Did he drop it while running, or did it end up on the bottom of Rio Puta? He had no idea.

In the same instant, the door opened. A rugged man wearing greasy overalls came in carrying a tray.

“Morning. Here’s some breakfast. Figured you could use a bit of nosh.”

“Where am I.”

“In Transvestitia mate. Roughly three miles downstream from Hospodar.”

“How did I get here.”

“I was out on the river fishing. You hit my boat. Biggest catch I’ve ever had.”

“Thanks.”

“Anytime. A little bird told me you had a disagreement at the border.”

“Something like that.”

“They call me Og.”

“Jack.”

“I’ll leave you to your brekky then Jack. I’ll be downstairs if you need anything.”

“Thanks Og. I owe you.”

Og shrugged his shoulders and left. Jack couldn’t remember when he’d last smelled anything as wonderful as the coffee and buttered toast Og had brought. Then he remembered the perfume Suzy had worn before they got in the shower together. It wasn’t easy for him to shake the mental image and concentrate on the breakfast. In fact, it was quite hard.

37 Luigi and the depths of despair

News of the incident at the Transvestitian border had barely reached Luigi Scoreggia, when his boss confronted him in the corridor.

“What’s the situation Luigi. Where do we stand on the Cathedral case.”

“We have a suspect. An American. He works for the CIA. His name is Jack Back.”

“So he’s behind this too.”

“I didn’t know he was behind something else as well.”

“You didn’t hear me say that. Sorry Luigi. I’m afraid that information is on a need-to-know basis.”

“How do you expect me to do my job if I don’t have access to all the relevant data.”

“Because I have faith in you Luigi. Trust me.”

Horst Hurenschwanz patted Luigi on the shoulder and continued on his way. Luigi knew better than to say out loud what he was thinking.

He returned to his office to examine the cardboard folder he’d been handed a bit earlier. It contained the case report from the border guards along with the passport of Victor Emanuel Borge, Danish national, who bore an uncanny resem-

blance to Jack Back. According to the report, “Mr. Borge” was assumed to have drowned in the river. The body had not been found.

Luigi wanted to believe that Back was dead. He also wanted to believe that Back was behind the Cathedral bombing. Unfortunately for him, he did not believe either of those statements to be true. Something in the case just did not add up. Why would the CIA blow up the Cathedral? Even if they had a reason, why would they choose to do it now? And if they didn’t do it, who did? What other reason would his boss have to want to see Back caught? Luigi buried his face in his hands and tried to think. He decided to go back to the canteen for some more coffee to kickstart his brain. This was definitely a case where nothing short of a caffeine overdose would do.

38 It’s Gainsbourg time in sweet Transvestitia

Jack finished his breakfast, put on his clothes and went downstairs. Og was busy putting up new paneling in the lounge. His nail gun had a hard time keeping up with his frantic tempo. When he saw Jack, he paused for a moment.

“Care for more coffee. There’s some in the thermos.”

“No thanks. I could use a cigarette though. Especially if they’re not made in Bulimia.”

“I know what you mean. You have to be born a Bulimian to be able to smoke those yak shit ciggies. There’s a pack in the kitchen. Third drawer down.”

“Great. Thanks Og.”

Jack wandered to the kitchen and found the cigarettes. His trusty Zippo lit up on the first try. He’d been without a proper smoke for so long that the first lungful hit him like a piledriver. It occurred to him that he could have also tried to quit since he already had a head start. He figured he’d do it

some other time. Maybe on a day when he hasn't just been rescued from certain death by drowning after escaping from the jaws of a dozen attack dogs and a volley of full metal jacket bullets.

He returned to the lounge. Og was done with the paneling and was sitting on a case of Gainsbourg, Transvestitia's world-famous export beer, just finishing off a bottle.

"Isn't it a bit early for that."

"It's always beer o'clock at the Hotel Og. Want one."

"When in Rome. Haven't had one in a long time."

"It can be tricky to come by a decent brew in Bulimia."

Og pulled out another Gainsbourg and opened it between his molars. He handed the bottle to Jack and got a fresh one for himself as well. Jack noticed that the brand's slogan was "Most Thrilling When Drunk!" He had no doubt that that was probably the case.

"Cheers mate."

"Cheers. I know it's kind of a stretch but did you happen to see a small rock in my pocket when you removed my clothes."

"Yeah. First I thought you'd tried to off yourself by putting weights in your pant pockets and jumping in the river. Then I figured you would probably have had more rocks if that had been the case. In a backpack or something."

"Would you happen to know where the rock is now?"

"I must have thrown it out. Probably in the yard somewhere. Was it important."

"I'm not sure. I think it is."

"You're not sure."

"It almost got me killed."

"The border guards shot at you because you had a rock in your pocket."

"Not the border guards. Before that."

"You sure seem to be an accident-prone fellow."

“It does look like that doesn’t it.”

Both men raised their bottles and emptied them in one swig.

39 A pile of Drøvel

Marcello Finocchio knew Professor Drøvel’s schedule better than he himself did. The Professor would leave the University at ten past three and walk to his apartment. It would take him fifteen minutes to do so. This meant that Finocchio had plenty of time to refuel the brown Corolla he’d signed out of the KSPB garage.

Finocchio pulled in at the nearby Turmoil station. A gray-haired attendant in green overalls was waiting at the pump. Finocchio remembered driving to the station with his father in their old Peugeot 404 when he was a little boy and being served by the same attendant.

“Good day Sir. Regular unleaded I presume.”

“Yeah. Fill her up. Charge it to the KSPB account. And check the oil while you’re at it.”

“Certainly Sir.”

Finocchio was already bored out of his skull. The Professor would get home and work on a journal article or a conference paper. At 6 o’clock, he would have dinner, which he’d prepare by heating a can of spaghetti Bolognese in the microwave. After dinner, he’d make himself a cup of herbal tea, sit down in his favourite chair and read scientific journals until nine o’clock. At nine, he’d pour himself a glass of sherry and continue reading until 11.30. Then he’d brush his teeth, turn out the lights and retire for the night. He would get up to have a pee between three and four in the morning. His alarm clock would go off at 7:30, after which he would move his bowels, take a shower, have breakfast (scrambled eggs on toast and a cup of tea) and leave for the University at 8:30.

Finocchio knew all these details courtesy of the video surveillance equipment they'd installed in the Professor's apartment. Once at the University, the Professor would teach, read, teach some more, go home and do it all over again.

The attendant was finished. Finocchio signed for the fuel and drove off. He was at the Professor's apartment in two minutes and looked at his watch. The 17-jewel Vostok was a present from his late father, who used to work as a translator at the Soviet Embassy. The Professor would arrive in two minutes. He got out of the car and went down to the cellar to sit at his makeshift surveillance station, which they'd set up in one of the storage cupboards. It was moldy and damp. Finocchio was sure the pungent stench came from a rat carcass rotting between sheets of wet asbestos. He sincerely hoped that the Professor would somehow get a violent brain seizure and die, so he wouldn't have to waste his life away any longer in a hell-hole such as this.

40 Smoke gets in your eyes

Things were getting out of hand, Richard Black thought. The only thing that had gone according to plan was that Jack Back had found what he was sent to find in Arannash. His failure to deliver it to Black was when things started to go horribly wrong.

A yellow light started flashing on his desk phone. Black would have preferred not to pick up the receiver, but he knew he didn't have a choice.

"Black here."

"Do you have it."

"No."

"Where is it."

"I don't know."

"When are you getting it."

“Soon.”

“I hope so. For your sake.”

The line went dead. Black replaced the receiver and started rummaging through his pockets for a pack of cigarettes. He did this for a few seconds until he realised that he'd given up smoking two years ago. Two years, thirteen days, six hours and twelve minutes ago to be exact. Black hit a button on the intercom.

“Kozinsky. Get your ass in here.”

A moment later, Special Agent Frank Kozinsky appeared in the doorway.

“What's up Richard.”

“Gimme a cigarette.”

“I thought you'd quit.”

“I did. Now give me that cigarette before I go postal.”

“You'll regret it. And that's as far as I'll go impersonating your mother. Here.”

Kozinsky threw Black a pack of cigarettes. Ronald Reagan used to be the poster boy for these, Black remembered. He wondered if Reagan ever offered Bonzo a smoke. Black stuck a cigarette between his lips and gave the pack back to Kozinsky, who was already leaning over the desk with his lighter. Black drew his lungs full of smoke, held it in for a few seconds and exhaled.

“Thanks. What's the scoop on Jack.”

“He was last seen trying to cross the border to Transvestitia on a fake passport. He escaped though. Jumped in the river. The Bulimians think he drowned.”

“What do you think.”

“The water's mighty cold in that river. Even at this time of the year.”

“Let me tell you a story about Jack. And in case anyone asks you didn't hear this from me. He escaped from GRU interrogators at an air force base in Kazakhstan. Stole a Sukhoi

jet fighter and flew it to Iceland with the whole Soviet war machine on his tail. Almost made it to Keflavik but the plane had been shot to pieces so he had to eject five miles off the coast. The USS Pharris picked him up hours later. The Navy doctor who examined him said there was no way he should have survived. Five bucks says he did not drown.”

Black started blowing smoke rings.

“I’m not taking that bet.”

“Wise man. Have you informed the boys next door.”

“They are keeping an eye out for Jack. I imagine he’s going to try to fly out of Apollinaris. It’s the only international airport in the country.”

“Good. God I hate this place.”

Kozinsky did not disagree.

41 You ain't seen nothin' yet

Jack knew he’d have to get moving. It was just a question of time when the Company spooks stationed in Transvestitia would come looking for him. If he kept moving, there was a chance that he’d stay ahead in the game.

“Og. Do you know how I can get to the airport.”

“There’s a bus from Hospodar to Apollinaris. Stops at the airport. I can give you a ride to the bus station.”

“Thanks Og. When do you think we could get going.”

“I can see you’re in a hurry. Let me just go change my clothes and we’ll go.”

Og disappeared upstairs for a minute and came down wearing exactly the same kind of overalls he’d worn, only this time they were ever so slightly cleaner.

They went outside, Jack following Og’s lead. Og opened the doors to the barn. Inside was a car under a brown tarpaulin. Og grabbed a corner and pulled the tarp off.

“Wow.”

“1964 Studebaker GT Hawk. One of the most advanced and certainly the most desirable passenger car of its day. Straight-six 3.5 liter engine. Synchronised gearbox. Central locking. Air conditioning. Electric windows. Safety belts. They only made eight after this one. Then the whole factory shut down.”

Og’s Studebaker looked like it had just rolled off the assembly line. The metallic champagne gold lacquer was immaculate. The brown vinyl interior looked like no-one had ever sat in the car. Og got in the driver’s seat and started the car. The engine purred like a cat who’d just eaten the biggest mouse ever. Jack got in the car and they drove off.

“You don’t see one of these every day.”

“Nope. Bought her from a pig farmer years ago. There was barely more metal than rust. Took me ages to get all the missing parts and put her back together. Now she runs better than she did when she was new.”

Og pushed a button and the AM radio came alive. It was tuned to an oldies station. Bachman Turner Overdrive’s “You Ain’t Seen Nothin’ Yet” was playing. Jack sincerely hoped that wasn’t the case.

The road to Hospodar was narrow and windy. There was no other traffic to slow them down, so they covered the distance in a few minutes. The bus station was a stylish art deco building covered almost completely by vine. A few people sat on a bench outside the station, obviously waiting for the bus.

“Thanks Og. I owe you big time.”

“Bullshit. You can send me a postcard when you get home. Just put ‘Og, Hospodar, Transvestitia’ on there and I’ll get it.”

“Will do. Take care.”

“You too Jack.”

Og turned the car around and started making his way back to the house. Jack sat down on a bench and waited.

42 Walk into light

Intardo Musilicus had no idea what was going on. It didn't feel like the alien spaceship was moving. His experience with interstellar space travel, drug experiments in the Seminary notwithstanding, was basically nonexistent. Hence, he didn't have a clue as to whether you were supposed to feel the spaceship move or not.

The voices in his head returned.

"...we are here..."

"And just where would that be if I may ask. Or is that a display of rare philosophical insight in the vein of 'no matter where you go there you are'."

"...at the landing site... about to land..."

Apparently the spaceship can move just fine without passengers noticing, Musilicus thought.

"Fair enough. Don't put her down too fast. You don't want to crush the cellar."

"...cellar not important... only life important..."

This space alien dude is high as a kite, he thought. He made a mental note to find out what kind of dope they smoked and to try to get some. At that moment Musilicus felt a shift in the gravity. It was like ripples on the surface of a pond, and he felt caught in a ripple.

"...we are here..."

A hole started to emerge from the grayness of the wall. Sunlight flooded in through the hole.

"...take us to your leader..."

Musilicus took that as his cue to walk towards the light. He was feeling a bit uneasy. He tried to recall the name of a movie he once saw. It had something to do with evil spirits and a little girl, communicating through the static on a dead TV channel. He wondered whether he was about to enter or exit the TV set.

43 Apollinaris International Airport

The bus from Hospodar came to a halt at the Apollinaris airport. The international terminal was quite modern. It was an impressive structure made of timber and steel and looked like it had been designed by some young hot-shot Scandinavian architect with a goatee and a black turtleneck sweater. Jack Back got off the bus and headed into the terminal.

Inside, the air-conditioned terminal building was full of life. Japanese tourists, most of whom wore a bucket hat, were being herded by a young Japanese girl who probably went through the same ritual every day, but still managed to keep a polite smile on her face at all times. A retired American couple was queueing at check-in, the husband wearing sandals, shorts and a souvenir T-shirt that had a picture of a crying chipmunk and said "I LOST MY NUTS IN TRANSVESTITIA", the wrinkled wife almost collapsing under the weight of her hairspray, make-up and jewelry. Jack spotted the Delta Airlines counter at the far end of the hall. He started walking towards the counter, when he spotted a man in a black suit and wearing dark sunglasses talking into his lapel. There was another identically dressed man behind him, and they were both heading in Jack's direction.

Jack ducked into the toilet next to him. There were six stalls inside, only one of which was occupied. The occupant flushed the toilet and unlocked the stall door. At that same instant Jack pushed at the door with his whole weight, making the person inside lose their balance and hit the back wall. Jack wasted no time. He used a Kung Fu blow on the side of the neck to knock out the man, noting to his satisfaction that they were of roughly the same build. He checked the man's pockets and got out his wallet and travel documents.

The man was a Russian by the name of Sergey Fukov. According to his boarding pass, he was on his way to Moscow via

Frankfurt. Perfect. Jack spoke passable Russian, but not well enough to be able to pass for a native at Sheremetyevo. He wasn't planning on flying that far anyway. He just needed to get out of the reach of the two spooks waiting for him outside. He pocketed the wallet, passport and boarding pass and lifted Sergey on the toilet seat. After that, he locked the stall from the inside and climbed over the wall. He was just about to leave when he remembered something. Walking back to the garbage can, he removed his Glock from its holster, dropped it in and threw a few paper towels on top for good measure.

At the toilet door, Jack took a deep breath. He opened the door and without looking to his sides, he started to run towards the security check between landside and airside. He didn't look over his shoulder, because he already knew without looking that the men in black suits would try to catch him. There was a long queue to the metal detector. Jack ran right past the queue, all the while shouting PRIORITY! C4! EXCUSE ME! PRIORITY! C4! which had the effect of everyone standing back to let him pass. He passed the detector without a beep. On the other side of the detector, a security guard stopped him.

“What's C4.”

“Damned if I know. It never fails to work though.”

The security guard smiled and let him pass. Next stop was passport control. At this point he allowed himself to look behind him. The two men in black suits were standing at the metal detectors. One of them was talking into his lapel. Jack smiled to himself and joined the queue. Ten of the booths were manned by border guards, so there was no queue to speak of. When his turn came, Jack presented the passport and boarding pass of Sergey Fukov. The border guard stamped the passport without saying a word and handed both documents back to Jack.

The Lufthansa flight to Frankfurt was due to leave in

twenty minutes. A nearby monitor displayed the flight status as “GO TO GATE”. Jack could see that the passengers at gate 34 were only starting to board. He stopped to buy a magazine and walked up to the gate.

After a few minutes he boarded the 747 and found his seat. A luxurious blanket and a pillow were waiting on the seat for him. Jack was glad Sergey’s employer obviously thought quite highly of him, since they’d splurged for First Class. Perhaps Sergey was the owner.

A smiling flight attendant walked down the corridor. She was a tall, busty German girl in her late twenties or early thirties whose body was complimented by the uniform. Her long platinum blonde hair was rolled up in a bun. According to her name tag, her name was Helga.

“Welcome aboard Herr Fukov. Can I get you something to drink.”

“A gin and tonic please. And a pair of eyeshades. And earplugs.”

“You’ll find the shades and plugs in your seat pocket Herr Fukov. The á la carte menu is also in the pocket. I will bring your drink in just a moment.”

“Vielen Dank Helga. Sie sind ein Engel.”

Helga smiled and went back to the galley. Jack couldn’t help noticing that her attractive undulating posterior matched the front in a way not all female fronts and backs quite managed to match.

44 Not cleared for take-off

Jack was halfway through his gin and tonic when two Transvestitian police officers entered the First Class compartment. He didn’t have to be a psychic to be able to tell that his game was up.

“Mr. Fukov. Would you please come with us.”

“There must be a mistake. I have to be on this flight. My mother is very sick.”

“This way please Mr. Fukov. It won’t take long.”

Jack considered taking them both on, but he realised that his Kung Fu skills might not be a match for their bullets. One of them would be able to take a shot no matter what, and it would be impossible to miss at such a close range. He decided to play along for the time being. An opening might come up later on.

“Very well. I must let you know I’m filing a complaint.”

Neither of the officers saw fit to comment. They escorted Jack out of the 747 and down the stairs. Outside, a black limousine was waiting. A door opened and Jack was shoved in, none too gently, by one of the officers. He made a mental note to really file a complaint.

The limousine drove off as soon as the door slammed shut. The two men in black suits who Jack had met briefly in the airport terminal were seated in the back.

“How nice of you to join us Jack.”

“Do I know you.”

“My name is Mr. Smith and this gentleman here is Mr. Jones.”

“Ha ha. Tell Black he’s an asshole.”

“Why don’t you tell him yourself.”

“You bet I will. Not that he doesn’t know it already.”

The rest of the ride went by in silence. Jack didn’t feel like chatting with his former colleagues. The two CIA agents weren’t interested in chitchat either.

45 Shroom service

The demise of the Cathedral was no longer front page material. Lobotomian tanks hadn’t rolled over the border, so even Jeb Peterson had to admit it probably was someone else’s

handiwork. The crowds that had gathered on King Square much like people everywhere do when there's potential for seeing carnage had long since dispersed and gone home. The yakwurst stalls were all closed.

The enormous donut that was sliding effortlessly across the sky towards the Nuevo Saunabad city centre did not, however, escape the attention of the townspeople. It didn't take too long before the square was again teeming with people, although not quite as many as after the explosion, and the yakwurst peddlers were conspicuous by their absence. Only two people had never left the square. The two were Hildegard von Wichsen and Judas Bobrichoff, who now sat on the University Library stairs.

"Looks like it might be time."

"It does doesn't it."

Judas stopped a young boy who was passing by.

"Excuse me. Do you know why the people came back?"

"There's an alien spaceship headed this way. And it's huge. More than a mile across."

"Ah. Thank you my dear boy. Run along now."

The boy did as he was told.

"We'd better get ready Hildegard."

Hildegard opened her purse and took out a small pouch. She opened it and offered it to Judas, who reached inside and picked a small dried mushroom. Hildegard did the same.

"Down the hatch."

"I wonder what they taste like."

They started chewing on the mushrooms.

"Quite rubbery. What do you think of the flavour Judas?"

"Not exactly my preference. Still could be worse."

"Yes I suppose so."

"Do you remember how long Professor Drövel said it would take?"

"He said we should be feeling the effects in five minutes."

46 Jack in the box

Jack was starting to get seriously bored. The room was small and had no windows, only a one-way mirror covering most of one wall. A light fixture with a 60 watt bulb that had no shade hung from the ceiling. There was a table and two uncomfortable chairs, and that was it. They'd given him a jug of water and a cup. Plastic, of course. He had asked for cigarettes as well, but the request was denied. One of the Mr. Smiths said that it was the Surgeon General's orders. Jack did not laugh.

The door opened and Richard Black walked in. He sat down on the vacant chair facing Jack.

"Good to see you Jack."

"Fuck you too Dick."

"Care for a cigarette."

"Does the yak take a dump on the plains."

Black tossed a pack and a matchbook on the table. Jack caught them in mid-air and lit up before anyone had the chance to say "a cat".

"Where's the stone Jack."

Jack took a long puff from the cigarette. The acrid smoke filled his lungs. He exhaled, deliberately trying to engulf Black in a gray cloud.

"I lost it."

"Where."

"It's on the bottom of Rio Puta. Feel free to go snorkeling."

Black banged his fist on the table, almost tipping the water jug over.

"Goddamn it Jack. You have no idea what it was worth."

"No because you never told me. Anyway that's where it is. Now can I go home. This hotel isn't exactly my preferred accommodation."

"I'm afraid we can't let you go just yet Jack."

“Is that so. I had an interesting conversation with the two orangutans you sent to pick me up.”

“Uh-huh.”

“We all agreed you’re an asshole.”

47 Steppin' out

Intardo Musilicus stepped out of the alien spaceship onto King Square. He wasn't exactly sure how that actually happened, as there was no hole in the spaceship hull. He just walked towards what looked like a hole in the gray wall, and suddenly he was on the outside. He felt dizzy.

“...take us to your leader...”

“Yes yes. Hold your horses.”

The crowd looked at Musilicus like he was an alien himself. To be fair, not everyone knew the former Archbishop by his looks, so it was only natural to assume that whoever flew a huge donut and landed it on its edge in the middle of Nuevo Saunabad would probably be a genuine space alien.

48 Eggs, lies and videotape

Marcello Finocchio noticed with a certain amount of satisfaction that Professor Drøvel was about to hit the hay. That meant he too could have a well-deserved nap of roughly eight hours. For his report, he would make an educated guess at the times the Professor got up to pee, like he did every day. Finocchio set the alarm on his watch to go off at 7:25, which meant he would have plenty of time to get up to witness the excitement of the Professor's morning routine.

What Marcello Finocchio did not know that even with multiple camera video surveillance, things were not always as they seemed. Even though Finocchio and his men had been very discreet, the Professor eventually found the equipment

planted in his apartment. One night, when the Professor was supposed to be sleeping, he got up in the middle of the night to let a man in. The man was a colleague of Drøvel's from the University who specialised in video technology. Drøvel had, quite rightly so, calculated that whoever was on the other end of the camera feed would be fast asleep. The video expert disconnected the cameras one by one and spliced a VCR in between each camera and the cables leading downstairs. Once they had taped a whole day's worth of the Professor's activities, they were ready to disconnect the cameras and play the tapes as if the Professor was doing a repeat of that day's activities. Today was the day of the re-run.

While Finocchio watched Professor Drøvel have tea and scrambled eggs on toast, in reality the Professor was on his way to King Square. Night had fallen hours ago, and the streets of Nuevo Saunabad bathed in the curious yellow light of low pressure sodium floodlights. The Professor was carrying a leather satchel, clutching it against his breast as if he was afraid to break whatever was inside.

49 KSPB or not to be

Horst Hurenschwanz was watching the events unfolding on King Square from the safety of his office. He had a ring-side view of the crowds gaping at the huge metallic donut standing on its edge where the Cathedral once stood.

Captain Hurenschwanz picked up the phone and dialed the number of his boss, Minister of Porn and Propaganda Silvio Cagadero. He could hear the phone ring on the other end.

“Hello.”

“Sir it's Horst Hurenschwanz. I'm sorry to disturb you at home at this hour but I think you'll want to get back to the Ministry.”

“Why is that Horst.”

“An alien spaceship just landed on King Square.”

“You’re joking of course.”

“I’m afraid not Sir.”

“Send me a car.”

“Right away Sir.”

Hurenschwanz replaced the receiver and pushed a button on the intercom.

“Yes Sir.”

“The Minister needs a car at his residence. Now.”

“I’ll send one down Sir.”

“Thank you.”

The chief of the KSPB pulled out a bottle of whisky and a glass from his desk drawer, poured himself a stiff drink and emptied it in one gulp. Next, he poured another one and continued observing the square through his window.

50 Tripping with the Alien

The arrival of the alien donut had not escaped the attention of Hildegard von Wichsen and Judas Bobrichoff. They had waited for years for this to happen.

“I think the mushrooms are starting to work Hildegard.”

“Yes I think so too. I just saw an alien spaceship land over there.”

They both giggled. Judas got up and offered his hand to Hildegard.

“It’s time to go and meet them.”

“How wonderfully exciting.”

They started walking towards the spaceship. Their gait was a bit wobbly, but somehow they managed to hold their course and navigate through the crowd. Intardo Musilicus was standing a few meters from the spaceship. Nobody had yet had the courage to approach him. Hildegard and Judas did.

“And who are you two then.”

“I am Hildegard von Wichsen. This here is Judas Bobrihoff.”

“At your service Sir. We are both devout members of the Church of the Latter Day Aliens.”

“What’s that then.”

“Surely you must know. Being an alien yourself.”

At this point Judas pulled Hildegard’s sleeve and leaned to whisper in her ear.

“You know what Hildegard. For an alien he looks an awful lot like the Archbishop. Only a lot younger.”

Hildegard and Judas erupted in uncontrollable laughter. They giggled and pointed their fingers at Musilicus. It took some time before they were again able to speak.

“We have done as it is written in the Holy Scriptures. We have taken the sacrament of the Holy Mushroom.”

“Yes. We have shared the holy bounty of Mother Earth. We are ready to join you.”

Intardo Musilicus was perplexed, to say the least. He didn’t have a clear vision of what his role as an alien spokesman would entail, but he certainly hadn’t anticipated having to deal with religious nuts who were also shroomheads.

51 Driving Mister Silvio

Silvio Cagadero sat on the back seat of his official Cadillac in deep thought. He didn’t have a clear picture of what to do. Alien invasions weren’t exactly an everyday occurrence in Bulimia. He was afraid he’d have to call in the Army. He wouldn’t have minded a display of military firepower to show the aliens that Bulimia was an independent country not afraid to defend its territory. The problem was that the Royal Fusiliers might not impress the aliens too much with their fusiliering. The main function of the Army was to man the guard posts at the Palace, and even that was more to keep the King in than to

keep any invading troops out.

The Cadillac arrived at the Ministry. Cagadero caught a glimpse of the crowds and the alien spaceship at the other end of King Square before the car dived down into the garage. He took the elevator up to his office and placed an intercom call for Horst Hurenschwanz to join him.

Hurenschwanz knocked on the door promptly.

“Come in Horst.”

The captain of the KSPB entered, saluted the Minister and joined him at the window.

“What do you make of this.”

“I don’t know Sir. We haven’t prepared a battle plan for this particular scenario.”

“Do you have someone down there.”

“Yes Sir. Three agents are in plain clothes among the crowd.”

“Has contact been made with whoever landed that thing there.”

“I have been informed that someone resembling a human came out of the spaceship and is now standing among the crowd.”

“Get him. It is imperative that we retain him for questioning before he has a chance to talk to the people out there. And have the police cordon off whatever it is that now stands there.”

“As you wish Sir.”

Hurenschwanz hit a button on the intercom.

“Duty officer.”

“This is Captain Hurenschwanz. Apprehend the person from the spaceship and bring him in. Do not use deadly force. Repeat. Use of deadly force is not authorised.”

“Right away Sir.”

After that, Hurenschwanz got on the phone and conveyed the Minister’s instructions to the Nuevo Saunabad po-

lice. The wheels of government were finally in motion.

52 The spiders and the fly

The KSPB agents in plain clothes got their instructions via their radio earpieces. They started to close in on Intardo Musilicus from three directions. Musilicus was still talking to Hildegard and Judas.

“What do you mean by Holy Scriptures.”

“The Scriptures told us what to do. They told us when to prepare the landing site for your Second Coming. As it was written, so it was done.”

“So you blew up the Cathedral.”

“We blew up the Cathedral in your glory.”

Musilicus did not know what to think. Apparently the aliens had already been on Earth to pass on a handbook on how to prepare for an alien encounter. He wondered why he hadn't heard of the Church of the Latter Day Aliens before.

“You guys haven't exactly been shouting the message of joy from the mountaintop have you.”

“The Holy Knowledge has been passed on from generation to generation by true believers. Those who do not believe need to see with their own eyes. They see you now.”

“...take us to your leader...”

“...we have come in peace...”

Here I am talking to two shroomheads with two aliens chatting inside my head, Musilicus thought. I would definitely rather be fishing.

The KSPB agents reached Musilicus almost simultaneously.

“Sir could we ask you to come with us.”

“Where to. And who are you anyway.”

One of the agents flashed a KSPB badge at Musilicus.

“Please come quietly and nobody will be harmed.”

“Well you’ve got a nerve haven’t you. I just arrived on my spaceship. Haven’t even had time to take a shower and change.”

“This way Sir.”

Two of the agents grabbed Musilicus by the arms and started leading him through the crowd across the square. The crowd parted before them as if Moses himself was walking across the Red Sea. Hildegard and Judas followed a few paces behind.

When they reached the Ministry of Porn and Propaganda, one of the agents stopped Hildegard and Judas from following Musilicus inside.

“You’re not invited.”

“We have to follow our Master.”

“You’re not coming and that’s it.”

The agent went inside and slammed the door in their face.

“What now Hildegard.”

“Now we wait.”

Hildegard and Judas sat on the stairs of the Ministry in deep thought. In the distance, they saw two police cars arrive at the landing site.

53 The Minister in his war room

Silvio Cagadero was no longer in his office. He was in the war room, which was located in the basement of the Ministry. The room was austere, dimly lit by subdued indirect lighting. One of the walls was covered by a map of Bulimia. The KSPB photographer had blown up a huge enlargement of the spaceship, which now hung on another wall. A mug shot of Intardo Musilicus was pinned on the wall next to the spaceship photo.

The long conference table was flanked by thirteen office chairs upholstered in black leather, one for each member of the Cabinet, plus one each for the KSPB chief and the com-

manders of the Army and the Air Force. Cagadero sat at the head of the table, waiting for the others to arrive.

Horst Hurenschwanz was the first to join Cagadero in the war room. He had changed his clothes and was now wearing the black dress uniform of the KSPB. Hurenschwanz sat in his designated chair. Soon after, other members of the Cabinet started to arrive. General Jesús Iglesias, the commander of the Army and the commander-in-chief of the Bulimian Armed Forces, was the last to come in. He saluted Cagadero and sat down at the table. The Security Council of Bulimia was now in session.

Cagadero addressed the solemn congregation.

“Gentlemen. Thank you for joining me here today. I apologise for the inconvenience but as you shall soon see we have a crisis on our hands. I’ll let the chief of the KSPB fill you in on the situation. If you please Horst.”

“Thank you Minister. Esteemed members of the Cabinet. General. As you may know an alien spaceship landed on the former site of the Cathedral at about 1800 hours this evening. You can see a picture of the spaceship over here. An alien who came out of the spaceship is now in the custody of the KSPB. We also have a picture of the alien right here.”

The General was the first to speak.

“He looks a lot like the Archbishop. Quite a bit younger of course.”

“At this stage we haven’t been able to confirm his relationship with the Archbishop.”

The Minister of Insults, Röövel Ööbik, piped in.

“Has the alien been interrogated.”

“He refuses to speak to our interrogators. He demands to see our leader.”

At this point, everyone except Ööbik turned to look at Cagadero.

“I see. Has the King been informed.”

Cagadero interrupted before Hurenschwanz had time to answer.

“The King does not as of yet know about this incident. I will brief him when the opportunity arises.”

It was obvious that Ööbik wasn't happy with this answer. He didn't, however, pursue the matter further.

54 Alien ambassador

The interrogation room was Spartan, to say the least. Musilicus sat on a folding chair that creaked like it was about to fall apart at any moment. He was alone in the room. Well, almost. The voices in his head kept him company.

“...take us to your leader...”

“...we have come in peace...”

“...be our voice...”

“Yes yes. All in good time. I am no happier to be here than you are. Hopefully this situation will be sorted out soon.”

The KSPB agents behind the one-way mirror watched Musilicus seemingly talk to himself with bemused looks on their faces. On one hand, they had no preconception of how an alien would behave when isolated for questioning. On the other, it certainly seemed like this particular alien was about to lose its marbles.

The door opened and Silvio Cagadero stepped in.

“I am Silvio Cagadero the Minister of Porn and Propaganda. I was told you have expressed a wish to talk to someone in upper management.”

“Hell yes. First of all I want out of here. This place gives me the creeps.”

“Might I ask your name Sir.”

“I am Intardo Musilicus. Formerly the Archbishop. Now speaking on behalf of the occupants of the interplanetary craft you must have seen out there.”

“I see. First of all I would like to extend my condolences on the loss of your Cathedral. I must also say you look quite a bit healthier than you used to. Not to mention younger.”

“Let’s cut to the chase shall we. There are quite a few practical issues we need to resolve ASAP. We as in the aliens I represent demand an office from which we can conduct our business. Something suitable for an alien embassy. Big. And impressive. I’m thinking on the lines of the Royal Palace here.”

“I don’t think the King would approve. I understand he’s quite fond of his dwellings. I’m also not sure the people of Bulimia would like that.”

Musilicus was getting into his role so completely that he had already started to think of himself as an alien.

“We’re flexible Silvio. After all we are a superior intellect.”

The Minister of Porn and Propaganda was weighing his options carefully. This whole alien incident could be just the thing needed to put Bulimia on the map. He wasn’t exactly sure what it would mean to have an alien embassy in the middle of Nuevo Saunabad, but he remained optimistic. The tourism trade would definitely pick up. A permanent seat on the UN Security Council would be a given. If he played his cards right, it was also likely he’d get nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his achievements in bridging the interspecies communication gap. He’d have to come up with a cunning plan not to have to share it with Musilicus, though.

“Could you tell me a bit more of your alien masters Mr. Musilicus. Or would you still prefer to be addressed as the Archbishop?”

The voices reappeared.

“...we have come in peace... we live in a time and place of harmony and co-operation...”

“...our wish is for mankind to join us to make the universe a better place...”

“How about the Ambassador. After all that’s what I am.

They're three meters tall. Bug-eyed. Green. Hermaphrodites. With really long fangs. They can use their powers of telepathy to make your brain boil from a distance of several hundred meters. The spaceship carries weapons powerful enough to evaporate the Earth sixteen times over. Now can we get on with the business."

"I will see what we can do about the embassy. In the meantime you are welcome to use one of the offices here at the Ministry."

"I hope you're not talking about this chicken coop."

"There's an office two floors up. With a nice view over the square. And a balcony."

"I'll also require a secretary. One who can type. And has big tits."

"I'm sure that can be arranged. Now if you'll excuse me I have a Cabinet meeting to attend. You will be shown to your temporary office shortly."

Cagadero extended his hand towards Musilicus and they shook hands. The door opened and Cagadero returned to the War Room. Soon after, Musilicus was escorted upstairs to the office of Horst Hurenschwanz.

55 No proper authorization

It was well past midnight, but people just kept on joining the crowd on the square. Professor Drøvel almost walked past Hildegard and Judas before he recognised them.

"Hildegard. Judas. What are you doing here."

They giggled as they recognised their names, but notably less than they giggled at Musilicus. The effects of the mushrooms were slowly wearing off.

"We followed The One as far as we could. We were denied entrance. Now we wait."

"Did you do as you were told."

“Yes Professor. We took the Holy Sacrament. However The One did not speak to us except with his voice.”

“How peculiar. According to the Holy Scriptures you should have been able to communicate easily with telepathy. I will have to investigate this.”

The Professor left the two to sit on the KSPB stairs and made his way towards the alien spaceship. The police had cordoned off an area surrounding the vessel and two officers with German Shepherds were guarding the perimeter. The Professor stepped under the cordon and was promptly stopped by one of the officers. His dog growled menacingly at Drøvel.

“Please step back Sir.”

“Excuse me. I need to get closer to the spaceship.”

“This area is off limits.”

“You don’t understand. I am Professor Drøvel from the Royal University. I need to examine the spaceship.”

“This area can only be accessed with proper authorization.”

“Where do I get this authorization.”

“You can apply at the nearest police station during office hours.”

“I need to examine the spaceship now.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible Sir. We have orders not to let anyone in this area without proper authorization.”

The Professor sighed and ducked back under the cordon. He knew it would be useless to argue any longer.

56 Jailbreak

After the visit by Richard Black, Jack was transferred to a room that was almost as featureless as the one used for interrogation, with the exception that this one had a bunk bed in it. He pretended to sleep, knowing full well that he was being watched by a video camera hidden somewhere in the

ceiling. He had no desire to look for the camera, even though he knew it wouldn't take him too long to locate it. He would have done so if he'd had any chewing gum, though, just to piss them off.

It was becoming painfully obvious that he needed to get out. There was no telling how long they'd keep him there, and there were no guarantees they wouldn't think of something even worse. The Company had well and truly let him down, not that he was all that surprised. It's the nature of the game, he thought to himself. On reflection, he realised that it wasn't The Company who had let him down. Richard Black had. Jack guessed that the business with the rock from Arannash was something Black had come up with outside the official curriculum. This didn't necessarily mean that the Godfather behind Black's operation wasn't some CIA official higher up the food chain. It just meant they were doing this, whatever it was, for their own personal gratification rather than to protect the interests of the people of the United States of America.

Jack knew it wasn't exactly uncommon for CIA agents to do a little bit of business on the side. The Company had a long tradition of operatives doing whatever they thought they could get away with. Most of the time, they did. Clandestine deals with Medellin drug lords were commonplace. Another popular pastime was gun-running in the Middle East, often with both parties of the conflict at once.

His experience told him patience would be the key. An opening would come, and he would take it. He was about to try to get some sleep when the door opened and one of the Mr. Smiths came in.

"Put your clothes on Jack. We're going for a ride."

"Where to."

"Gilligan's Island. Get dressed."

Jack did as he was told. They went down to the garage and got in the same car that had brought Jack in. The other

Mr. Smith came down the stairs and sat in the driver's seat.

They had been driving for a few kilometers, when a beat-up van ignored the red light and hit the front right corner of their car. The impact was powerful enough to spin the car 180 degrees. A tall and muscular man of Middle-Eastern appearance got out of the van. He had a large gash across his forehead. Blood was oozing out of the gash. The driver did not have time to react before the guy opened his door and dragged him out of the car, yelling strange insults at the top of his lungs.

The Mr. Smith who had been sitting in the back of the car got out to help his colleague, forgetting for a moment that they had a prisoner in the car they weren't supposed to let escape. The moment was longer than Jack needed. When Mr. Smith realised his mistake, Jack was already gone.

57 Drøvel remembers his mentor

Professor Drøvel was back at his apartment. There was still roughly half an hour's worth of videotape left. The KSPB agent in the cellar, however, was the least of his worries right now. He knew there was no time to lose. If things kept on going horribly wrong, the aliens might take off and return to their home planet at any moment, and that would be it. There would not be a Third Coming.

The Church of the Latter Day Aliens had, by necessity, been a clandestine underground organization for generations. Ever since the founding fathers wrote the Holy Scriptures, the members of the Church had known that they could not afford to let outsiders know what they knew until the time was right. If their secrets were ever revealed, they would be hunted down, imprisoned and, depending on the prevailing social atmosphere, tortured and killed because of their faith.

Professor Drøvel had been a member of the Church since

he was a freshman at the University. He was recruited by Professor Antonov, by then already on the graveyard side of 80, who was at the time lecturing the Elementary Cell Biology course. Antonov soon noticed Drøvel's talent and passion for all things organic, and he became Drøvel's friend and mentor. One evening, when they were out for a walk in the University courtyard, Antonov asked whether Drøvel believed in life on other planets. Drøvel replied that while he of course couldn't be certain, he thought it extremely unlikely that the vast cosmos would not contain another planet with conditions such as those on Earth. With the right conditions, Drøvel continued, it was almost inevitable that life would emerge.

Antonov was pleased with his young protégé's answer and told him something he would never forget.

"I have absolute proof that life outside our planet does exist."

"I am not sure if I understand."

"I said I can prove that there are beings out there whose origins are not on Earth."

As a young biology student, Drøvel was understandably quite astounded by Antonov's statement, although he was also afraid that Antonov had simply become senile. On the off chance that his teacher was actually telling the truth, he asked Antonov to elaborate on what he'd just said. Rather than explain, Antonov told Drøvel he'd show him the proof at his house later that evening. No amount of prodding would make Antonov tell more about what he was going to show. Drøvel had no choice but to go and have a look at whatever it was that Antonov considered to be proof of extraterrestrial life.

Drøvel knocked on Antonov's door at exactly six o'clock. The old man opened the door and motioned for Drøvel to enter. They sat down in Antonov's study, where he offered Drøvel a glass of port. Drøvel declined the offer.

"Dear Oleg. You said you had proof of life outside Earth.

I would very much like to see it.”

“Ah the impatience of youth. Very well. Just a moment.”

Antonov went to his desk and opened a drawer, pulling out a wooden box. The box was made of Brazilian rosewood and had a glass lid. Antonov placed the box gently on the table next to Drøvel.

Drøvel leaned over the box to see what was inside. The box contained a small butterfly. Its wings were a grayish shade of brown. It definitely wasn't the most impressive butterfly Drøvel had ever seen, and as far as he could tell there was nothing extraordinary about it.

“Why is this butterfly proof of extraterrestrial life. As far as I can tell it's just another specimen of the genus *Lepidoptera*.”

“It does look quite ordinary. However in actual fact it is anything but. This butterfly species became extinct about two hundred million years ago. This specimen was recreated from a fossil imprint.”

“What do you mean when you say ‘recreated’?”

“I mean that it was created from scratch using the fossil as a blueprint. With technology that is about a million years ahead of anything mankind has invented.”

“I don't understand. Are you saying that aliens from outer space came down on Earth and used some sort of wizardry to bring a prehistoric insect back to life as a display of their technological prowess.”

Antonov smiled. That's it, Drøvel thought, the man has definitely become senile.

In time, however, Drøvel came to believe Antonov's wild story. The old man confided in Drøvel and told him that there was an organization whose purpose was to act as spokesmen for the human race when the aliens returned. The organization was called the Church of the Latter Day Aliens. Drøvel was made a member of the Church in an elaborate ceremony

which involved the ingestion of psychedelic mushrooms. The mushroom trip, during which he was reborn as a beam of pure energy and travelled with aliens to the far end of the universe on an astral plane, convinced Drøvel that Antonov was right and aliens with butterfly makers actually did exist. As time went by, Drøvel was introduced to more and more of the Church's holy writings that had been passed on from one generation to the next.

It had been eight years since Drøvel was anointed as the head of the Church. Their numbers had dwindled, but a small group of hardcore believers still kept the faith. Recent converts, such as Hildegard von Wichsen and Judas Bobrichoff, were made privy to a small subset of the Holy Scriptures. Drøvel was the only person to be familiar with all of the secrets of the Church.

He opened his desk drawer and looked at the wooden box that was sitting there. Oleg Antonov was on his deathbed when he gave the box to Drøvel. The butterfly's wings were frayed and torn. It was Drøvel's most treasured possession. He had promised Antonov that he would be prepared for the Second Coming. He was not about to break that promise.

58 Hit the road, Jack

When Jack saw that his moment had come, he got out of the car and ran as fast as he could. He did not stop when he turned a corner and the car was no longer visible. Only when he reached a shopping mall two blocks down and ducked in did he allow himself the luxury of catching his breath.

This was a situation that would test Jack's ingenuity. He had no money and no passport. Every policeman and border guard in the country had certainly been issued with his photo. Probably that of Mr. Borge as well, not that he any longer had even half a moustache of that particular disguise. He could

only trust one person in the country, and his place was an hour and a half away by bus. Since he couldn't come up with a better plan, Jack decided to pay Og another visit.

The only problem with Jack's plan was that he could not afford a bus ticket. Again, this dilemma called for some lateral thinking. He could always have robbed an old lady, but he did not wish to upset his Karma balance any more than he had to. The lack of recent good deeds meant he was already running a bit low in the Karmic stakes. He would have tried to pawn his watch, if only it hadn't been taken from him when he was paying a visit to the local CIA torture chambers. He had absolutely nothing of value on him. Nothing, that is, except for his gold tooth. Jack decided to make an appointment with a dentist.

The dentist had his office on the second floor of the mall. The door said "Dr. ANDERS MULQVIST, DENTAL PRACTITIONER" in big bold letters. The receptionist sat behind her desk giving her nails a new coat of polish and looking generally very bored.

"I need to see the doctor."

"Do you have an appointment."

"No."

"We can fit you in next Wednesday at 9AM."

"I'm in great pain. It hurts so much you wouldn't believe."

The receptionist looked at Jack with disbelief. Jack stared at her. Finally, she gave in.

"I'll ask the doctor if he can help you. Just a minute."

She disappeared into the dentist's surgery and came back a moment later.

"The doctor will see you now."

Jack smiled and went in. The dentist's surgery was painted pastel green. A faded Mickey Mouse poster stared down from the ceiling at the hapless victim in the reclining seat. Dr. Mulqvist, a tall, bald man in his early fifties greeted Jack.

"I'm Dr. Mulqvist. What seems to be the problem."

"I need you to pull out one of my teeth."

"Are you in a lot of pain."

"There's no pain. I just need to get the tooth out."

"I don't understand."

Jack pulled at his lip, exposing a golden incisor.

"This one. And while we're at it how much would you pay for it."

"Are you serious."

"I am a bit strapped for cash at the moment."

"I see. Well if you have exhausted all other avenues—"

"I have. How much."

The dentist considered Jack's proposition.

"I'll give you a hundred shekels for the tooth."

"Does that include extraction."

"But of course. With anaesthetic."

"And nitrous gas."

"Unfortunately I don't have a nitrous tank. I'll give you an injection. You won't feel a thing."

"A hundred and fifty."

"Done."

"All right. Let's get on with it."

Jack sat down on the dentist's seat. The dentist pressed a pedal with his foot, making the seat recline. Jack noticed that the Mickey Mouse poster on the ceiling was advertising the opening of Eurodisney.

The dentist got out an injection needle and squirted something in Jack's gums. The area surrounding the tooth felt like an overinflated tyre. Next, the dentist grabbed a pair of pliers and took a firm grip on the gold tooth. Jack was a bit concerned about the crunching sounds, but he was happy to notice that the good doctor was a man of his word and it did not indeed feel like anything.

After a bit of work, the tooth came loose. The dentist

dropped the tooth in a vial containing disinfectant solution. Jack wondered what would happen when the anaesthetic wore off. He would have asked Dr. Mulqvist, but his mouth was in no condition to voice anything except moans and groans. The dentist stuck a wad of cotton where the gold tooth once was.

“I’ll give you a couple of painkillers to go. It might hurt a bit in a few hours.”

“hhaaankshh”

Dr. Mulqvist removed his blood-covered latex gloves and took three 50-shekel notes from his wallet. Jack took the money and the painkillers and left Dr. Mulqvist’s surgery one tooth poorer and 150 shekels richer. It was more than enough to pay for his bus ride back to Hospodar.

59 No sleep 'til Hospodar

The bus ride back to Hospodar was as uneventful as the one he’d taken out of there a few days earlier. Jack tried to get some sleep, but his mouth felt like someone had exploded a stick of dynamite in it. He’d already swallowed all the painkillers Dr. Mulqvist had given him, with negligible results.

Finally, the ride was over and the bus rolled into a bay at the Hospodar bus station. Jack jumped off and looked for a pay phone. He spotted one on the far end of the station building. Jack hoped Og would be home. Then he realised he hadn’t asked Og for his phone number. He also didn’t know his real name. Jack didn’t think he’d be listed under “OG” in the phone book. Then he remembered what Og had said about the postcard. Sure enough, there he was listed as “OG’S PLUMBING”.

Jack called the phone number given for Og’s Plumbing. The phone rang.

“Og’s Plumbing. And what can I do for your pipes today?”

“aaakkk eerree”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t quite catch your name.”

“aakkkk.”

“Jack is that you.”

“eaaa”

“Where are you Jack. What happened to you.”

“oohhooaaarr.”

“How did you get to Zanzibar so fast. Oh. You’re back in Hospodar.”

“eaaa”

“Are you at the bus station.”

“eaa”

“Sit tight Jack. I’ll be there in just a moment.”

“eaaa”

Jack replaced the receiver and sat down on a nearby bench. It didn’t take long before he saw the unmistakable shape of Og’s Studebaker. Og rolled the window down and looked at Jack with disbelief.

“It is you Jack. I must say I wasn’t exactly sure. You sounded a bit weird on the phone.”

Jack pointed at his missing tooth.

“oohhh”

“I see. No wonder your diction is a bit off. Let’s head back to the base. You could probably use a bit of rest. Things aren’t exactly going your way are they.”

Jack shook his head in agreement. Og lifted his foot from the clutch and the Studebaker was on the road once more.

60 Og comes clean

The house Og lived in would not be receiving prizes from home improvement magazines any time soon. It looked like it had last been given a new coat of paint when Moses was in diapers. The few gutters that the house still had looked like they would fall to the ground at the slightest sign of rain. The

yard was littered with tractor parts and used tyres.

Og parked the car, pulled the tarp over it gently as if tucking it in for the night and locked the barn doors. Outside, the air was fresh and crisp. It was unusually cool for summer, even at that time of the night.

“It’s starting to get a bit nippy. What do you say we go inside Jack.”

“eaaa”

“You probably wouldn’t be too interested in a sandwich. How about a beer then.”

“eaaa”

Og went foraging in the kitchen while Jack sat on the couch. He could certainly use a bit of rest. First things first, though. Og returned carrying a bottle of Gainsbourg in each hand. He handed one to Jack, who was happy to notice that the bottle was freezing cold.

“Cheers.”

“sheesshh”

“Jack I have to confess something.”

“uh huh”

“The rock in your pocket. The one I said I’d thrown away.”

“uh huh”

“It didn’t look like an ordinary rock. I figured I’d keep it as my reward for fishing you out of the river. You didn’t look like you’d mind much. Not in your condition. Sorry for bullshitting you.”

Og looked like a cat who had just been caught trawling in the fishbowl. Jack shrugged.

“noohh oorrriieesshh”

“Sit tight. I’ll go and get it for you.”

Og disappeared upstairs and came back a moment later with the stone from Arannash in his hand. He placed it on the coffee table. This is turning out to be my day after all, Jack thought.

61 Wake up and smell the coffee

Horst Hurenschwanz wasn't too pleased when he heard that the Minister had given away his office without bothering to ask him what he thought. He barely had time to lock away all his sensitive documents before Musilicus stormed in like he owned half of Bulimia. There wasn't much he could have done, though. Cagadero was the boss and there was nobody to complain to about his antics, not that Hurenschwanz would have deemed it proper to do so in any case. A public servant who wished to hang on to his job until retirement day was usually patient enough not to question the wisdom of his superiors too eagerly.

There was no way of knowing how long Musilicus would occupy the office. The Minister said he'd make sure it wouldn't be too long, but he wasn't the one who now had to make do with a table in the canteen. It wasn't all bad, though. The walk to the coffee machine was a lot shorter. Hurenschwanz was in the middle of reviewing the case files of Jack Back when Luigi Scoreggia came in.

"What's up boss."

"I guess you've already heard about the alien visitors."

"Yeah. Gives me the creeps. I also heard we are holding one of them."

"Not quite. We have invited their spokesman to stay with us."

"He's not alien then is he."

"Depends on what your definition of an alien is. It's the Archbishop."

"No shit. I didn't know he was best chums with Martians."

"He seems to have struck some kind of Faustian deal with them. He's a young man once again. Lost a lot of weight as well. Any news on the CIA agent."

"He hasn't been seen in the country for days. He could be

anywhere by now.”

“Keep an eye open. I have a feeling he will turn up somewhere soon.”

62 **Memoirs of an ambassador**

It didn't take long for Musilicus to feel right at home in the former office of Horst Hurenschwanz. A stenographer from the KSPB typing pool had been appointed as his personal secretary. Musilicus sat on the chair with his feet on the table. He was dictating his memoirs.

“And then I gave her a pearl necklace. Got that.”

“Yes Sir.”

His secretary was, as he had requested, quite a good typist with a bosom that defied gravity. Her name was Ingrid.

“Let's have a break. Why don't you go and get me a cup of coffee. Two lumps of sugar. No milk.”

“Right away Sir.”

Musilicus leaned back on the chair and let out a long sigh. He was definitely enjoying the perks of being an alien ambassador. The voices inside his head returned.

“...we wish to speak to your leader again...”

“...we have a proposition...”

“He's busy right now. I'm sure we'll get a chance to chat again soon. Patience my friends.”

The view from the office was quite a sight. King Square was still full of people, the souvenir stalls and yak-wurst peddlers had returned. Now, the T-shirts said “MY OTHER CAR IS A SPACE DONUT” and “INTERSTELLAR SPACE LOVER”. The enormous space vessel looming on the other end of the square was a sober reminder to everyone that a new era had begun.

A new era of what? Nobody knew, but as always there were lots of inventive theories. The most popular one was that

the aliens had come to colonise Earth and enslave mankind. There was no shortage of people who were glad to welcome their new alien overlords. According to another theory, the aliens were in fact humans from the future who had returned to their past to share their advanced technology. This one was generally discredited as far too preposterously philanthropic. Yet another theory stated that the alien spaceship was collecting specimens from different planets for an intergalactic zoo somewhere in a galaxy far, far away. It would later turn out that this one wasn't that far off the mark.

63 Gentlemen, no fighting in the War Room

The Security Council meeting in the War Room was starting to heat up. Not everyone shared Silvio Cagadero's enthusiasm towards the unexpected alien visitors. The members of the Council were divided in two factions. Cagadero could rely on the support of the Minister of Fisheries and the Minister of Pugilism. It went without saying that Horst Hurenschwanz was with his boss as well. Röövel Ööbik, the Minister of Insults, was the opposing faction's ringmaster. Ööbik's cohorts included the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Yak Herding. The commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces was an unknown quantity who liked to play with his cards close to his chest, and it was safe to say that the Air Force commander would side with him whatever the side would turn out to be.

The Minister of Insults looked like he was about to explode. His skin had turned red, and veins were bulging on his forehead.

"This is just not on. Would we accept such behaviour from any of our neighbours. If the Lobotomians had bombed the Cathedral to bits and then landed their bombers right on King Square I'm sure none of us would side with them."

"This is a very special situation. Lobotomians are not from

another planet. This is also a historical moment. I am sure that our beloved country can only benefit from this.”

Umbopa Tsutsu, the Minister of Yak Herding, piped in.

“I don’t trust these aliens. Who knows what they will come up with. Maybe they’re here to harvest us.”

“What do you mean by that.”

“Maybe mankind was brought from the stars to Earth thousands of years ago. Perhaps this planet is just a big cattle farm. Maybe the aliens eat humans.”

At this point, Tsutsu’s voice was drowned by various members of the Security Council shouting at each other. Insults were traded, and the situation looked like it would escalate into fisticuffs, when Cagadero banged his oak gavel on the table so vigorously that the handle broke.

“Gentlemen. Absolutely no fighting is allowed in here. This is the War Room.”

The yelling mellowed down into a slightly dissatisfied murmur.

64 The Minister is summoned

Acting as an ambassador for an alien species from a faraway galaxy isn’t something you can study for. Very few universities offer courses in intergalactic relations, for one. Intardo Musilicus had a headstart over most prospective candidates, being a graduate of the Seminary where the curriculum had at least a tenuous link with otherworldly beings. Like most things in his life, however, this had very little bearing on why the aliens chose Musilicus and not someone else. The former Archbishop just happened to go fishing on the right lake at the right time.

As he sat in his office, both feet on the rosewood desk, a slightly unsettling thought crossed his mind. Right before he’d been taken to the KSPB headquarters, he’d met two rep-

representatives of some church he'd never heard of. Even though the two were drugged out of their minds, they still managed to babble something that made at least halfway sense on occasion. They said the church had something to do with aliens. If that was so, why would the aliens choose him over someone who probably could be trusted to devote themselves to the cause wholeheartedly? He made a mental note to ask the aliens the next time the voices appeared in his head, which they did a moment later.

"...where is your leader..."

"...we need to meet him now..."

"...do not let us down..."

"Chill out guys. Geez. You'd think that space aliens who have come from lightyears away would have a modicum of patience. I'll see what I can do. He's a busy man though."

"...we need to meet him now..."

"Got that the first time. Geez. It's not as if I have the choice of not listening to you guys."

Musilicus got up and went out to the corridor, where a junior KSPB agent was posted — purely for protection, of course.

"I need to speak to the Minister."

"I suggest you contact his secretary Sir. The Minister is a busy man."

Don't I know it, Musilicus thought.

"And how do I get in touch with his secretary?"

"Try the phone. There's one on your desk."

Musilicus tried to think of a snappy retort, but couldn't. Fuming, he returned to the office and slammed the door shut.

Leafing through the Ministry phonebook, he found the entry for the Minister. The secretary's number was listed beneath. Musilicus dialed the number and waited. The phone rang.

"Hello."

“Can I speak with the Minister please.”

“Unfortunately he is in a meeting right now. Shall I ask him to call you back.”

“Is that the best you can do.”

“I’m afraid so Sir. Who shall I say called.”

“Intardo Musilicus. Spokesman for the aliens.”

“Why didn’t you say so Sir. I will patch you right through. Just a minute.”

And lo, the phone rang once again.

“Cagadero.”

“It’s Musilicus. Would you be available for a little chat. The aliens are getting impatient.”

“I see. If you’ll give me a moment I’ll wrap up the proceedings down here.”

“Don’t take too long. They are not used to waiting.”

A little white lie never hurt anyone, Musilicus thought to himself.

65 Blackjack

Jack knew better than to phone from Og’s house. Once again they got in the Studebaker and drove down to the Hospodar bus station. Jack entered the phone booth and dialed 9 for the operator.

“Hello.”

“I’d like to place a collect call to the States.”

“What is the number please.”

Jack gave the number.

“And your name please.”

“Mr. Smith.”

“Just a moment.”

The operator went offline to call the number Jack had just given, while Jack listened to soothing pan flute music courtesy of Telekom Transvestitia. “Raindrops Keep Falling on my

Head” was playing when the call got through.

“Hello.”

“Foxtrot five six bravo charlie nine lima zulu.”

“Patching through.”

Jack could hear the phone ring on the other end.

“Hello.”

“Hello yourself Dick. How’s it hangin’.”

“I was waiting for you to call Jack.”

“Really.”

“I figured you’d get around to it eventually. How’s Transvestitia.”

“The beer’s a hell of a lot better than over there.”

“It can’t be any worse that’s for sure. What can I do for you Jack.”

“Let’s do a trade.”

“I doubt you have anything I could possibly want. Not since you lost the stone.”

“Maybe I found it again.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Come on Dick. We both know you want to believe.”

“Suppose I did. What would you want to trade for it.”

“You can have it for ten million.”

“Let’s not beat around the bush Jack. What do you want.”

“I just said it. Ten million.”

“That’s a lot of money Jack.”

“I know.”

“There’s no way I could get that much together even if I wanted to.”

“I think you can. If you want that stone hard enough.”

For a moment, there was nothing on the line but static. Jack was sure it was the sound of gears turning inside Richard Black’s head.

“Five.”

“Done. I’ll call you again the day after tomorrow. Have

the money ready.”

Jack hung up.

66 Q: Are we not men? A: We are aliens!

Silvio Cagadero arrived to meet Intardo Musilicus less than five minutes after he'd called him. Musilicus was thoroughly enjoying the fact that he could make the most powerful man in Bulimia jump at his say so.

“I am sorry for the delay. You said that the aliens wanted to have a word with me.”

“Yes. They are discussing things among themselves right now. They will contact me telepathically when they are ready. In the meantime can I get you something.”

“A cup of coffee maybe.”

“Ingrid. Two cups of coffee. One with two lumps of sugar. How do you take yours.”

“Black please.”

“One with two lumps and one without. Off you go.”

“Yes Sir.”

The two men sat down as Ingrid left the room.

“How do you find the office.”

“It'll do for now. What about the embassy.”

“The Ministry of Yak Herding would be happy to offer their premises for the aliens. They are also located on the square opposite the Library. You can see the building from here. It's the one with the flag of Bulimia flying on the roof.”

“It looks awfully tiny.”

“The Ministry of Yak Herding only employs two people. I'm afraid it's the best we can do at such short notice. I though you would appreciate being located at a building that's such a fine specimen of classic Jugend architecture.”

“Well it is kinda nice. All right. When can we move in.”

“The Ministry will start moving out in the morning. I ex-

pect them not to take more than a day.”

“Good.”

Ingrid returned with the coffees.

“Thank you love. Now run along. We have business to talk.”

The men drank their coffees in silence. After a few excruciating minutes, the voices returned.

“...take us to your leader now..”

“He’s here. What is it that you want.”

Cagadero followed the one-sided conversation with a concerned look on his face.

“...we have come to save you...”

“From what.”

“...from total and permanent destruction...”

“...we want to help...”

“Go on.”

Musilicus was getting a bit uneasy with the end of the world references. He wasn’t too sure he liked the direction the conversation was taking.

“...we want to take some of you with us...”

“Where to.”

“...to our home world...”

“...we will take a hundred people...”

“...people of fertile age...”

“What. Are you planning to breed people.”

Cagadero was starting to get anxious. He still didn’t have a clue what was going on. He was also starting to suspect that Musilicus had simply gone crazy. He had been seen coming out of the spacecraft, that much was true. Maybe the aliens had done medical experiments on him and he’d lost his mind as a result.

“...we can only take a hundred... we want you to remain viable...”

“So you are planning to breed people.”

“...we want to help you survive...”

Musilicus realised it would have been better to have this discussion without Cagadero present. Unfortunately the aliens hadn't even hinted at their motives beforehand, so there was no way of knowing they'd launch into an Armageddon rant once the country's most powerful man was ready to listen. He'd just have to play it by ear.

“What do you wish to tell our leader.”

That should rack up a few points with Cagadero, Musilicus thought.

“...we want him to understand...”

“...we want him to help us...”

“To do what.”

“...to convince those hundred to join us...”

Musilicus drew a deep breath. He couldn't think of a way to personally benefit from the intergalactic Noah's ark scenario, but decided that he'd come up with something later. He'd definitely have to keep some aces up his sleeve, though.

“Here's the deal. The aliens want to take a hundred people to their home planet.”

“What's the purpose. Why do they want to do that.”

“They want us to establish a colony there. To help us continue our peaceful coexistence.”

“I see. That's certainly an interesting idea. Did they say who in particular they would like to join them on whatever their planet is called.”

“They have some restrictions. The women have to be of childbearing age.”

And they must have big tits, Musilicus wanted to add, but thought better of it.

“What about the men.”

“They have to be virile. And upstanding members of the society.”

“That is certainly an interesting proposition. Let me think

this over. If you'll excuse me I'll get back to you shortly."

"By all means."

Cagadero got up and left the room. Musilicus felt dizzy. He had had no idea that the aliens would want to breed humans on the other side of the galaxy. He also had conflicting opinions about the whole matter. On one hand, this could be his big break. He was sure he could convince the aliens to take him as one of the hundred. Once on the far side of the world, he would inarguably become the leader of the human colony. As supreme leader he would be judge and jury and, in particular, could make sure he'd be able to enjoy the company of a different female each night. Visions of hedonistic carnal delights filled his head. His would definitely be a reign of debauchery.

On the other hand, deep down he didn't really trust the aliens all that much. Sure, they'd brought him back to life, but then they'd killed him in the first place, so it was really the least they could do. What if their motives weren't all that altruistic? It could all be an elaborate ruse to catch livestock to satisfy their hunger for human flesh. Maybe they just wanted to stock their incubator in order to have a continuous supply of gourmet humans for their fast food restaurants. Perhaps the alien hamburger chains didn't really use all that much beef.

67 Black goes in the red

The US Embassy in Nuevo Saunabad was busy as ever. Bulimians queued for visas, some of them having been there for days. The Marines at the gate made sure everything happened in the proper order. On the second floor, Richard Black was trying to put off making a call he knew he had to make. He lit up a cigarette and dialled a number that he was only supposed to use in a real emergency and waited.

"Hello."

“Black here.”

“I know who it is. Do you have it.”

“I know who has it. He is willing to make a deal.”

“How much.”

“Five million.”

“That can be arranged. Make sure you get every cent back after you’ve killed him.”

“Of course.”

The line went dead. Black drew his lungs full of smoke and started blowing smoke rings. He knew he wouldn’t have to wait for long.

Three hours after the call, a man in a dark suit carrying a suitcase arrived at the Embassy. The suitcase was handcuffed to his wrist. He was shown to Black’s office.

“Mr. Black. I have to ask you for the passphrase.”

“O come all ye faithful.”

The man placed the suitcase on the table, undid the handcuffs and left without saying another word. Once he had left, Black dialled the combination he knew by heart and opened the suitcase. It contained five million US dollars in used banknotes.

68 Trippin’ the light fantastic

The fact that the two acolytes had utterly failed in making first contact with the long-awaited aliens all but trashed Professor Drøvel’s careful plans. Being one of the sharpest minds in Bulimia, he was already halfway through formulating his backup plan. He wasted no time in chiding himself for his arrogance and ill-founded trust in the original scheme. There would be plenty of time for that in case everything fell apart.

The Professor knew he could not risk a second attempt by anyone else. He’d have to try to make contact himself. This time he did not care whether the ghost in the basement saw

him leave or not. He grabbed his battered leather satchel and headed in the direction of King Square.

News of the alien landing had already been picked up by international news agencies. There was a continuous flow of buses from the Apollinaris airport in Transvestitia carrying journalists, UFO fanatics and just plain curious people. The sudden increase in the number of tourists was creating problems left and right, as the tourism infrastructure of Bulimia was geared for a number of yearly visitors in the single digits. Nevertheless, as the famous economist sir Thomas More might have once said, supply and demand drive each other even in Bulimia. The souvenir stalls of King Square were no longer selling Cathedral souvenirs, which were yesterday's news anyway. Instead, signs saying "BED & BREAKFAST" were becoming a hot item. Almost every apartment in downtown Nuevo Saunabad was doubling as a guesthouse. Even Rimbaud, definitely outside the Nuevo Saunabad metropolitan area, was filling up quickly, although the hotels still charged by the hour.

Professor Drøvel, however, was not tempted by additional income. His mind was focused on one thing and one thing only: fulfilling the prophesies of the Church. He had to make contact with the aliens. Absolutely everything depended on that.

It was much harder to get close to the spaceship than before. The Professor had to elbow his way through a thick crowd of onlookers, most of whom spoke a foreign language; locals had already seen the new attraction and were now busy relieving tourists of their hard currency. Once he got to the cordon, he didn't even try to brave the dog patrols. Instead, he sat down on the cobblestone paving and took out a small oil-skin pouch from his satchel. He opened the pouch and looked at its contents for a brief moment. It was full of dried mushrooms. Even in their desiccated state, a trained mycologist

would have instantly recognised them as *P. vittuanus* specimens.

Nobody seemed to be paying any attention to the Professor when he took half a dozen mushrooms and put them in his mouth. He chewed on the rubbery mushrooms for quite some time, then swallowed down the lot in one big gulp.

Professor Drøvel knew what to expect. During his postgraduate studies, he had done extensive empirical research on this particular species. Not all of his research ended up in his doctoral thesis. As a *Psilocybe* species, *P. vittuanus* was commonly — in mycological circles anyway — known to contain trace amounts of psilocybin, a potent hallucinogen. However, the general consensus was that one would have to ingest about twenty truckloads of *P. vittuanus* to get the amount of psilocybin one would receive from a single specimen of the more potent species, so it hadn't received much attention in this regard.

An aspect of Professor Drøvel's research that he had chosen not to share with the scientific community at large had to do with other compounds that were present in the mushroom. Besides psilocybin, *P. vittuanus* contained a minute yet significant amount of psilocistin. This alkaloid was similar to psilocybin, but instead of getting hallucinations, whoever ingested even a single mushroom would become telepathic. Professor Drøvel had just eaten six of them.

69 Suzy Q

The bridge over Rio Puta between Verlaine and Hospodar was the only way to cross the river. The banks were too steep and the flow was too strong for a swimmer to get across. Even with a boat, it would be extremely difficult to climb the bank on the other side. There was, however, another way. It wasn't marked on any map, but all the locals knew of the spot slightly

upriver from Og's house where you could moor your boat and disembark safely. This was known as Smuggler's Crossing, so named because of the lively trafficking in contraband that used to, and occasionally still does, take place between Bulimia and Transvestitia. Back in the day, cigarettes and hard liquor were the most popular items. Today, most explicit magazines and daring video tapes found their way to Bulimia over the crossing.

As Jack had lost Mr. Borge's passport to the Bulimian border guards and his own to the river, he couldn't even have attempted to enter Bulimia legally. Instead, Og was kind enough to take Jack across the river on his boat and let him off at Smuggler's Crossing. He was travelling light, to say the least. The only things he had were the clothes he wore, a fistful of Transvestitian shekels and the stone that Richard Black wanted to get his hands on so much. Jack knew he was probably imagining it, but it seemed like the stone had grown heavier since the last time he had it in his pocket.

It took Jack an hour to walk to Verlaine. By the time he got there, the last bus to Nuevo Saunabad had already left. He had no option but to find a place to stay for the night. Across the street from the bus station was a seedy-looking watering hole. The weathered sign outside said "BAR EXAM". Jack decided to try his luck.

The bar reminded Jack of the CIA interrogation room he'd visited in Apollinaris. It shared the same charming ambience of a maximum security penitentiary on a desert island. Jack figured that the two interior decorators must have been beaten up with the same belt when they were kids. A few locals who looked like they'd dropped in after work about 30 years ago and never left eyed the newcomer with suspicion. Jack didn't let that bother him. He walked up to the bar and caught the barman's attention.

"What'll it be."

“Do you know where I can get a room for the night.”

“Right here if you like.”

“Do I have any other options.”

“Not really unless you go to Hospodar. And the border is closed.”

“How much.”

“Five ralloods. Including clean sheets and a towel.”

Prices have gone up, Jack thought.

“All right. Do you serve breakfast.”

“That’ll be a rallood extra.”

“Two eggs sunny side up. On toast. And a mug of black coffee. At 7 o’clock.”

“7 am it is. Would you like something to drink.”

“I don’t suppose you have any beer.”

“Of course we have Gainsbourg. Hospodar isn’t that far.”

“A Gainsbourg then.”

The barman handed Jack an ice-cold bottle of beer. What a sight for sore eyes, Jack thought.

“Do you take shekels.”

“How do you think we pay for the Gainsbourgs. That’ll be one shekel for the room, the breakfast and the beer.”

Jack threw a one-shekel coin on the bar. The barman reached behind him and handed Jack a key.

“The room is up those stairs. The bathroom’s in the corridor. Would you like anything else.”

“I’m fine thanks.”

“We have a fine selection of pretty girls.”

Jack found that a bit hard to believe, having seen the clientele.

“Really.”

“You don’t have to take my word for it. Cheryl come here.”

A door behind the barman opened and a brunette walked in. Jack was shocked to realise that “Cheryl” was Suzy. He played it cool, though, as did she, even though she was just as

surprised to see Jack.

“What’s the going rate.”

“Seventy-five. Or twelve shekels if you prefer.”

Jack reached into his pocket and fished out a wad of notes. He paid the barman and addressed “Cheryl”.

“Shall we go upstairs love.”

“With pleasure.”

Suzy followed Jack upstairs. When the door was shut behind them, they fell into each other’s arms and kissed passionately. Jack was the first to speak.

“What are you doing here.”

“I should be asking the same. You’re the one who told me to get out of Rimbaud.”

“And you said you’d take a vacation. It seems more like a working holiday.”

“A girl’s gotta do what a girl’s gotta do.”

“I noticed the price has gone up as well.”

“Lots of Transvestitian tourists come over to live it large.”

“I thought your name was Suzy Dangerous. Not Cheryl.”

“It was getting a bit too dangerous being Suzy. What with all the run-ins with the Secret Police and all. You can still call me Suzy if you like.”

“What’s your real name.”

“It’s as real as any other name.”

“Fair enough. Good to see you Suzy.”

“Likewise.”

They kissed once more. Jack reached to turn out the light. Outside, a cat was moaning in heat. How appropriate, Jack thought.

70 Alien embassy

The Ministry of Yak Herding had finished their move from their building on King Square. The two employees were now

conducting their business from the KSPB canteen, much as Horst Hurenschwanz had been doing for a while. He would get his office back, though, as soon as the alien spokesman took over the new premises that the Government of Bulimia so generously provided.

Intardo Musilicus did not waste time once he heard that the Embassy he requested was finally available. He left Ingrid to gather his few belongings, consisting mostly of the manuscript for his memoirs, and all but ran to inspect the new premises. While he would have preferred the Royal Palace, the former Ministry was more than adequate for what he had in mind. The impressive architecture was sure to lend credibility to any half-assed scheme spouted in a press conference there.

His devious masterplan was still some way off from being even half-assed, though. It had been hovering around the quarter-assed mark for quite some time now. Musilicus was adamant about finding some way of profiting from the alien visitors, even if he wasn't sure anymore that he'd care to board the spaceship for a trip to the far reaches of the universe. He had been thinking of negotiating an exclusive deal to import alien engineering to Earth. Aeroplane manufacturers would probably pay a pretty penny to be able to licence the levitation technology used in the space donut. It probably wasn't the key to riches he needed, though. The more he listened to the voices inside his head, the more he became convinced that once the donut would take off, the aliens would not have any more contact with the inhabitants of Earth. It would hardly be conducive for even a meaningful correspondence relationship if the correspondents were thousands of lightyears apart.

Musilicus found the former Minister's office and noticed that all the furniture had been left behind. He wasn't a big fan of rosewood and burgundy leather, but he wasn't going to push his luck any further for now. There would be time

to redecorate later. When Ingrid arrived with the reams of foolscap that Musilicus hoped would some day be edited into a multi-volume epic retelling his heroic rise from rags to riches, he was already waiting to get started with dictating the next chapter.

“There you are. What took you so long.”

“I’m sorry Sir. There was a lot of paper as you can see.”

“Very well. Let’s get started. Which chapter is the next one.”

“Chapter twenty-six Sir.”

“All right. Chapter twenty-six. After my heroic return to the Seminary, I told the Headmaster he could kiss my—”

The voices inside his head returned.

“...when can we be ready...”

“...have you started to look for volunteers...”

“You guys don’t ever take a nap do you. And this is not part of the memoirs so stop taking notes. We’re working on it. You already heard that our leader needs to consult his minions.”

“...we don’t have much time...”

“Don’t tell me Armageddon is tomorrow. I still have at least thirty chapters to dictate.”

“...tomorrow not important...”

“Yes yes. I know. Life and all that jazz. Well you guys will just have to hold your horses. It’s not exactly easy to convince a hundred people to just get up and go.”

In fact, Musilicus knew perfectly well that it would have been trivial to find a hundred people who were crazy enough to grab any chance to take a trip on an alien spaceship without any preconditions. What he wasn’t quite sure about was finding a hundred people who would fit his grand scheme, especially since it wasn’t quite finished just yet. He definitely needed some time to get all his ducks in a row.

71 Journey to the centre of the mind

The cordons surrounding the alien spaceship had been replaced with genuine riot barricades, on loan from Transvestitia just for the occasion. There were now five dog patrols instead of two, and each policeman had been issued with bulletproof vests, helmets and other paraphernalia intended to intimidate anyone who wanted to get closer to the spaceship than the authorities had deemed proper.

Professor Drøvel wasn't quite sure if he'd been able to get close enough. He hoped that the sixfold dose of mushrooms he'd just taken would be enough to compensate for the distance. The clock on the Cathedral tower was no longer there to tell the time, but the Professor didn't need an external reference to tell him that five minutes had passed since ingestion and the shrooms were starting to kick in. The first sign was swirling patterns in his peripheral vision. He was already starting to feel empathic towards passers-by, and it would not be long before he could sense their feelings and thoughts. He wasn't interested in tourists, though. His mission was to make contact with the crew of the enormous space vessel that loomed over his head.

"...hhhhooooo..."

It's working, the Professor thought. He would have punched the air and shouted YES! had he not been too exhausted to move.

"...whhhhoooo..."

I am Hans Drøvel, he thought. High Priest of the Church. Your Church.

"...whhhhhaaaatttt..."

I am here to help you fulfill the Prophecy. The Prophecy laid down in the Holy Scriptures that You gave the Founding Fathers millennia ago. I have come here to become Your Voice.

“...we have found our voice...”

What. Impossible. That can't be true.

“...we are speaking through our voice to your leader...”

The Professor felt like being in a rollercoaster that was gyrating wildly around all three axes. He was running a fever, and his hands felt like two balloons. His mind was racing in all directions at once, and he did not even attempt to keep up. In spite of this, he saw the implications of what the aliens had just communicated all too clearly. His careful preparations had failed utterly and completely. He could not fulfill the Prophecy. Someone else had already taken his place as The Voice.

When he started to convulse and foam at the mouth, the tourists who had politely ignored him so far started to pay attention. It didn't take long before everyone had moved at least three meters away from the writhing Professor whose eyes were bulging and rolling wildly. Finally, someone had the good sense to call an ambulance. By the time the paramedics arrived, most of the violent convulsions had subsided and he was just moaning quietly. His face and clothes were covered in snot and vomit. The paramedics got him on a stretcher and wheeled him away. Most of the tourists took snapshots of the receding ambulance.

72 Let's go, it's time to travel

The alien landing was front page news all over the world. Religious leaders hurried to give conflicting statements about the meaning of the events in Bulimia. Some of the more astute ones, such as the Pope, decided to stay put and see how things would unfold before taking any sides.

The UN General Assembly had been called together to discuss the appropriate reaction to this. Prior to this, the Security Council had already met and stated as their opinion that

the aliens did not pose an immediate military threat to Bulimia or any other country. This did not, of course, prevent the US from planning a pre-emptive nuclear strike on Nuevo Saunabad in the event that the aliens were judged to be about to misbehave. Aircraft carriers started moving to strategic positions, and attack submarines were given new target coordinates. When confronted by the French over this, the Americans simply said that it was all part of an exercise that had been planned months before anyone had even heard of the aliens. Surely they couldn't be expected to call off an expensive military exercise just because a bunch of little green men had been sighted in the vicinity.

The Bulimian ambassador to the UN was not entirely happy with this turn of events. Up until now he'd been content to sit in the back and pretend to be listening to whoever was talking on the podium. Now he was expected to take active part in discussions. If only the aliens had landed in Transvestitia instead, he thought.

He had been briefed by Silvio Cagadero on the meeting with the alien spokesman. Now it was his turn to let the world know what the aliens wanted.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Our government has met with the aliens. They have come in peace and wish to return to their home planet as soon as possible. They have only one request."

The ambassador paused for a moment.

"They are inviting a hundred people from Earth to go back with them."

At this, the general assembly burst into an agitated murmur. The chairman had to do his best to quiet down the hall, banging on his gavel and issuing repeated requests to quiet down. When the noise had settled down a bit, he motioned for the Bulimian ambassador to continue.

"The aliens have specified that there should be an even number of males and females. The women should be of child-

bearing age. The males should be virile.”

This statement was enough to send the general assembly into chaos. It took several minutes before the ambassador could again be heard over the noise.

“No other requests or demands have been issued by the aliens. The government of Bulimia suggests that we comply with their request. The government also suggests that each member of the UN choose a male and a female candidate and that the final selection be done by lottery from among the candidates.”

The reporters who were following the session were already busy typing on their laptops and talking on their mobile phones. The alien landing had already been the scoop of the century, and the story was only getting better.

73 Audience with the Ambassador

The line to interview Intardo Musilicus reached halfway down the Square. Journalists from almost every national newspaper and TV channel in the world were queuing to have an audience with the man through whom the aliens spoke. KSPB agents posted at the Alien Embassy made sure that everything happened in proper order and the safety of the Ambassador was not compromised. As it had become obvious that the aliens were behind the Cathedral bombing, the case was declared closed and Luigi Scoreggia was reassigned to take care of the security arrangements at the Embassy. He wasn't particularly happy to be babysitting Musilicus, whom he thought to be a pompous asshole, but as an officer of the KSPB he knew his duty and took the assignment without questions.

The former Ministry of Yak Herding was a bit problematic to keep secure, as it only had two floors and the buildings on three of its sides were quite a bit taller. An attacker could have easily dropped a bomb on the roof from

any of the dozens of offices in the surrounding buildings that had windows facing the Embassy. Likewise, an attack team could abseil and land on the roof without too much trouble. Scoreggia's solution was to place guards on the entrances of the neighbouring buildings and make sure only people with proper ID were allowed to enter. This was done more to placate his boss than anything else, as it didn't really go too far in preventing, for instance, properly trained Special Forces operatives from doing their thing.

Scoreggia decided not to worry about the SAS or the Navy Seals going after Musilicus too much. Based on international reactions, it didn't seem like the British or the Americans would want to interfere. If they did, they'd probably nuke the whole of Nuevo Saunabad to Kingdom Come, and then Scoreggia would not really have to worry about the Ambassador's safety too much. By contrast, it was more than likely that a single crackpot would want to claim his 15 minutes of infamy by posing as a reporter and shooting Musilicus point blank with a concealed handgun. As a result, the reporters had to pass through a metal detector — on loan from Apollinaris airport, courtesy of the Transvestitian Board of Tourism, who were absolutely thrilled at the surge in popularity of flights to and from Apollinaris — and swear on their mother's grave they wouldn't do anything nasty while with the Ambassador.

The first journalist to be granted an audience with the Ambassador was from CNN. Their team had arrived not long after the landing by helicopter, which was a notable occurrence in and of itself as the only helicopters in Bulimia were the one at the US Embassy and the one that the KSPB used on occasion. Yak herders raised their fists and yelled obscenities when the CNN chopper flew over, as they were afraid the milk of their cattle would run sour. At first, the CNN team had been reporting live from King Square every fifteen minutes, but as there was very little action concerning the alien

space vessel, they were now concentrating on digging up every bit of background information they could get their hands on. Their problem was that most Bulimians were more than happy to divulge their opinions and theories, but few of them actually knew anything about the landing that was not blindly obvious to anyone who had seen the spaceship standing on the ruins of the Cathedral.

For his part, Musilicus was more than happy to grant CNN the privilege of the first media audience. He'd been a big fan of Wolf Blitzer ever since the Kuwait invasion. He wasn't as happy to hear that the interview would in fact not be conducted by him, but he didn't mind it too much. After all, this was his chance to get on international TV and be seen and heard all over the world.

"Ingrid. Go and tell the thugs at the door that I will see the CNN crew now."

"Yes Sir."

Ingrid did as she was told and the CNN crew, consisting of a reporter and a cameraman, came in.

"Good evening Sir. Thrilled to meet you. My name is Susan Stills and this is my cameraman George Buttgerit."

"Good to meet you Susan. Have a seat. Can I offer you something."

"No thanks. Shall we go straight to the interview."

"If you wish."

The cameraman erected his tripod and gave Susan the OK sign.

"Good evening. I'm Susan Stills for CNN reporting from the office of the Alien Ambassador Intardo Musilicus. Mr. Ambassador to start off with would you tell us what made the aliens choose you as their spokesman."

"A good question Susan. The aliens approached me and told me they needed someone to represent their interests on Earth. As you may know the aliens only communicate via

telepathy so they couldn't for instance have done this interview with you Susan. Har har."

"When did you first hear from them."

This could get tricky, Musilicus thought. I'd better not contradict myself. Wouldn't make me look too good.

"Quite some time ago. We go a long way back. I was sworn to secrecy until the time was right."

"Before becoming the Ambassador you held the position of the Archbishop of Nuevo Saunabad."

"That is correct."

"The Cathedral was destroyed a few days ago in an explosion and the alien spaceship landed on the ruins soon after. Is there a connection to your former position."

Damn it, Musilicus thought. This chick is good. She's very well prepared.

"By mere coincidence the Cathedral was built on the landing site the aliens had already used on their previous visit to Earth. They returned to the exact same spot."

"So this is not the first time the aliens have been here on Earth."

"That is correct. The previous visit was more than ten thousand years ago. Nuevo Saunabad wasn't quite the metropolis it is today back then. Har har."

"Bulimia's ambassador to the UN gave a speech at the general assembly yesterday. In the speech he said that the aliens wish to take a hundred people with them when they return to their home planet. Did this information come through you."

"Yes it did. The aliens wanted me to inform the government of Bulimia of their intentions. The government then passed the message to other nations via the UN ambassador."

"The aliens have additional requirements. They want equal numbers of both sexes. The women have to be of child-bearing age and the men have to be virile. Is this correct."

"Yes. That is the message they wanted me to convey."

“Did they say why?”

“You must understand that we are dealing with a civilization that is perhaps a million years or more evolved than ours. Communication with them is challenging to say the least.”

“So their motives are not clear.”

“I didn’t say that. I think it is obvious that they want to help the human race to live on after life on Earth becomes impossible.”

“Is that what they communicated to you.”

Goddamn it, Musilicus thought. Do I lie or do I tell the truth. Well, I’ll just have to remember to stick to the story.

“Yes. Their message was that they are here to help mankind. They are afraid we might not come up with a solution ourselves.”

“You said that the alien civilization is more than a million years ahead of ours in terms of evolution.”

“Yes.”

“Presumably that means that their technology is equally ahead of ours.”

“It is.”

“If the aliens want to help us why don’t they share their technological achievements. They have obviously mastered interstellar flight. Wouldn’t it be better to help mankind forge its own destiny by colonising distant worlds on its own.”

She must have spent a lot of time drafting that line, Musilicus thought. CNN probably has a bunch of really good scriptwriters assigned to this shebang. Let’s give them something to chew over.

“The aliens do not wish to interfere too much with our evolution. According to them it’s against interstellar regulations.”

Musilicus hoped Susan Stills was gullible enough to swallow that one whole. He also hoped she wouldn’t press the point too much.

“So they are not the only extraterrestrial lifeform out there.”

“No. There are hundreds if not thousands more. Not all of them as advanced though.”

“What do the aliens call themselves.”

What indeed. They had never bothered to introduce themselves.

“They don’t use names like we do. However they told me to call their home planet Orange.”

“Is that because of its colour.”

“I couldn’t say. I’ve never been there. Har har.”

“Are you planning to be one of the hundred to go yourself.”

“I am hoping to find out more about the requirements. If it would serve the interests of mankind then yes.”

And that’s a very quotable line aimed straight at the Nobel Peace Prize committee, Musilicus thought. Oslo, here I come.

“When are the aliens planning to go back to Orange.”

“As soon as we have finalised who are the hundred to go with them.”

“Who will have final say.”

“Well Susan as you know the candidates will be chosen by every nation from Earth and the hundred will be selected by lottery. However the aliens wanted the government of Bulimia to form a committee to ensure that the final result conforms to the aliens’ wishes. The committee will have final say.”

“And who is on that committee.”

“His Royal Highness the Prince of Lower Bulimia. The Minister of Porn and Propaganda Silvio Cagadero. And myself.”

At that point, the Ambassador’s secretary Ingrid appeared at the door to signal that the time was up. Musilicus was glad it was over. There would be more interviews to come, but they probably wouldn’t be as tricky as this one was.

“It seems Ingrid is telling me that we should be wrapping

up soon. We have time for a last question if you have one Susan.”

“Apparently you are the only human to have been inside the alien spaceship. What do the aliens look like.”

“They look very much like humans. However they cannot breathe in Earth’s atmosphere and their eyes are extremely sensitive to light. That is why they must remain inside the spaceship and cannot present themselves to us.”

“Thank you very much Mr. Ambassador.”

“Thank you Susan. It was a pleasure.”

“We have been interviewing Intardo Musilicus the Alien Ambassador. This is Susan Stills for CNN signing off at the Alien Embassy in Nuevo Saunabad Bulimia.”

The cameraman turned off the bright spotlight that had been shining on the interviewer and the interviewee.

“That’s a wrap.”

74 National media awakens

Ben Mousse-O’Leaney was busy as ever practicing his putt when Jeb Peterson stormed in. The ball missed the plastic cup by almost three feet.

“Don’t you ever knock.”

“We have a lead Boss. It seems the aliens want to take humans with them to wherever it is that they come from to start a farm.”

“What did you say just now.”

“They want to breed humans.”

“Where did you get this.”

“The Ambassador is giving interviews. Had to wait in the queue for a long time. The boy got some good photos too.”

“Great. I want the story on my desk in an hour.”

“You got it Boss. What do you want to call it.”

“I’ll think of something. Now hit the typewriter and make

me proud.”

“Aye aye Boss.”

75 On the road again

The knock on the door woke up both Jack and Suzy.

“Your breakfast is ready.”

Jack heard the barman go back downstairs.

“Would you care for some eggs.”

“I’d love some. If you’re buying.”

“I am. What next.”

“What do you mean.”

“I mean do you want to stay here or come with me.”

“Where to.”

“Anywhere you like.”

“That’s a tall order. I’m not so sure you can afford that.”

“I can soon. I’ve some business in Nuevo Saunabad to take care of first.”

“You are serious aren’t you.”

“Serious is my middle name.”

Suzy smiled. They dressed and got downstairs for breakfast. The eggs were sunny side up as promised. That’s a first, Jack thought.

It only took Suzy five minutes to pack up. On the way to the bus station, they stopped to pick up the latest edition of the Royal National Herald. The front page screamed “ALIENS TO BREED HUMANS IN OUTER SPACE” in big letters. Jack shook his head.

“Whatever will they think of next.”

Suzy grabbed the newspaper from him.

“Let me see. It says here that the aliens want to take a hundred people back to their home planet.”

“What aliens.”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t heard.”

“Heard what.”

“About the aliens. About the huge spaceship parked in the middle of Nuevo Saunabad.”

“I’ve had other things on my mind.”

“Well now you know.”

At the station, Jack exchanged the rest of his Transvestitian shekels into rallods. He didn’t care too much about the abysmal exchange rate. Soon, he would have real money instead of bongobucks. Lots of it.

The bus to Nuevo Saunabad stopped at each and every cowshed and barn on the way, or at least that’s how it seemed to Jack. Hours later, they were finally in the heart of the capital of Bulimia.

76 Black is Black

The phone rang in Richard Black’s office.

“Yes.”

“Avon calling.”

“Where are you Jack.”

“Somewhere over the rainbow. Do you have the money.”

“It’s here. Do you have the stone.”

“Never leave home without it. Here’s what I want you to do. Put the money in a suitcase and bring it personally to Café Olé. Maybe you remember where it is. It’s the one you tried to have me killed in some time ago.”

“You’re exaggerating as always Jack. I know where it is. When.”

“Right now would be a good time. You have ten minutes. And tell the Neanderthal brothers to stay home. Give them something to keep them busy. A coloring book or something.”

“I can’t make it in ten.”

“You’d better if you want your stone.”

The line went dead. Black reached into his desk drawer

and pulled out a Glock 17, exactly like the one Jack dropped in the trash at Apollinaris airport. He holstered the weapon, put on his jacket and headed down to the garage with the heavy suitcase full of US dollars. On the way down, he reached for his VHF radio.

“Eagle Two this is Eagle One. Do you copy. Over.”

“Eagle One this is Eagle Two. Read you loud and clear. Over.”

“The bird is back at the coop. Repeat. The bird is at the coop. Catch the bird on the corner when he flies. Over.”

“Copy that Eagle One. Over and out.”

There was no way that Jack could get away this time, Black thought.

77 Black pulls a fast one

Green Dolphin Street was full of life. Tourists who had flocked to Nuevo Saunabad were stretching the capacity of every bar and bistro in town to the limit. Richard Black double-parked his black Mercury in front of Café Olé and went inside with the suitcase. One of the waitresses noticed him and handed him a note. It said: “Go back out and look for a blue Toyota Corolla, license plate OU812. The trunk is unlocked. Open the suitcase and toss the contents in the trunk. Close the trunk and you’ll get your stone. Guess who.”

Black went back out and spotted the Toyota. He opened the trunk, emptied the suitcase in there and closed the trunk. When he did this, a young boy on a skateboard approached him, gave him another note and skated off. The note said: “Congratulations, we have a winner. The stone is under the green Subaru down the street. License plate VH5150.”

Black started looking for the green Subaru. It didn’t take too long before he saw that there were three cars between it and the Toyota. He almost ran to the Subaru and kneeled

down. Jack had been a man of his word. There it was, the stone from Arannash. There was no mistaking the eerie glow.

At the same moment, he heard the Toyota's engine start. Black grabbed the stone, stuffed it into his pocket and drew out his Glock. He ran to where the Toyota had been parked only to watch it disappear around the corner. He grabbed his radio.

"Eagle Two this is Eagle One. The bird is in flight. Blue Toyota OU812. Over."

"Copy that Eagle One. We'll get him. Over and out."

Black got into his car and drove off. He was surprised how easy it was to get the stone from Jack. He wasn't even worried about the five million dollars. He had a good reason not to be. The money was safe in his office. The suitcase had contained old newspapers — and a bomb on a timer. Black looked at his watch. It should be going off about... now.

At that moment, he heard a loud explosion in the distance.

78 Aspiring astronauts

As soon as the news of the aliens' wishes were broadcast by media, governments all over the world started to figure out how to find the perfect candidates to represent their country. In Sweden, the choice was made by putting the names of all citizens in a hat and picking them out one by one until a suitable man and woman were found. The Dutch selected their candidates with a game show where the last ones left were chosen to have the chance to go. In most other countries, simple beauty contests were deemed proper. The dissenting voice came from Russia, where the winners were chosen by a vodka drinking contest. The two survivors won by default.

The fax machine at the Alien Embassy was spewing the names, pictures and vital statistics of national candidates from all over the globe. Ingrid, the Ambassador's secretary, had her

hands full keeping up with the facsimile onslaught.

Intardo Musilicus was busy trying to figure out which scheme would benefit him the most. He was kind of partial to going with the aliens and becoming the patriarch of the human colony. The nagging thought of becoming a hamburger was enough to put him off that scenario. His decision to remain on Earth meant he'd have to be a bit more creative about what he was going to do. The aliens would not return during his lifetime, that much was certain. It was obvious that his ambassador gig would be history soon after blastoff. He was fairly certain that his memoirs would sell quite well, if he didn't take too long to choose a publisher among all those who were sure to jump at the chance. He also knew that however well the memoirs sold, it still wouldn't be enough to support the lavish lifestyle he fully intended to lead now that he was truly and utterly out of the Archbishoping game.

He was almost happy to hear the voices return. That meant he could take a break from figuring out his pension plan.

"...are the hundred ready..."

"Not yet. We're working on it. Should be done fairly soon."

Suddenly, he had a brilliant flash of thought.

"Since you guys are going to get up and go how about leaving a little memento behind. I'm sure there are some gadgets aboard that donut that could prove quite useful down here."

"...our technology is very advanced..."

"Isn't that kind of the whole point. If you were a bunch of Piltdown Men we wouldn't be even having this discussion now would we."

"...very well... we will leave you something to remember us by..."

Musilicus almost jumped with joy. What would the aliens leave him? A mind-reading machine? The gizmo with which

they brought him back from the dead? The all-powerful tractor beam?

“...go to the spaceship now..”

Musilicus didn't waste any time. He got out on the square and ran to the riot barricade.

“Hello. I am the Ambassador. I have an appointment with the aliens.”

“I am sorry Sir. You need proper authorization to enter the perimeter.”

“What. Don't you read the papers. I am the Alien Ambassador Intardo Musilicus. I demand access to the spaceship this instant.”

“Please step back from the barricade Sir.”

Musilicus was fuming. He wasn't too happy about the KSPB agents who were watching his every move at the Embassy. Now the regular police was trying to keep him from getting what was rightfully his. He was just about to have an apoplectic fit when the voices returned.

“...we will transport you...”

Musilicus didn't have time to formulate an answer before he disappeared in a blinding flash of light. The German Shepherd on the police officer's leash barked at thin air where Musilicus had stood a moment ago.

79 Back in the donut

A shimmering beam of light became more substantial second by second, as the transporter reconstructed Intardo Musilicus deep within the confines of the alien space vessel. When the reconstruction was complete, Musilicus opened his eyes. The transporter room was empty, except for the pedestal he stood on and the operating console, which was unmanned.

“...go through the door...”

A hole appeared in the wall. Musilicus stepped down from

the pedestal and went through the hole. He was back in the large hall where he'd been resurrected on the floating table. He felt like it had happened years ago, even though it had only been a few days. So much had happened in the meantime. The table was still there, floating in the middle of the room. He approached the table.

When he got closer, he could see that there was a small object on top of the table. He picked it up. The object looked like a pocket calculator. The keypad had a 4 by 4 grid of buttons with strange markings. He picked one at random and pressed it. The display became alive and showed three distinct symbols, each one as strange as the ones on the buttons.

"What is it."

"...it's a calendar..."

"A calendar."

"...a fisherman's calendar..."

"...you can use it to tell when it is a good time to go fishing..."

Musilicus was dumbfounded. Here he was, in the belly of an alien space donut, and the aliens were giving him a silly trinket for all his troubles. After everything he'd done for them. He turned the calendar upside down to check whether it said "MADE IN CHINA" on the bottom. It didn't. He suppressed the urge to throw the calendar at the floor with all the force he could muster.

"Well thank you very much. It must have been quite taxing for your superior intelligence to come up with this. I am at a loss for words here."

"...we are happy you like it..."

"...please keep it to remember us by... and it does work very well..."

Musilicus was indeed looking forward to the time when he could go fishing once again. He was starting to get fed up by all this alien spokesman business. It didn't seem like there

was any money in it. Just fisherman's calendars. Certainly no job security as the aliens would be heading home in just a few days. He wondered whether the Cathedral's wine cellar would still be there after the spaceship took off.

80 The King and the Crown Prince

By now, even the King had gotten wind of what went on in his realm. Oswald III wasn't too happy about being kept in the dark. He would have much preferred hearing about the alien landing from one of his Ministers, who were after all working for him. He decided to let them hear what he thought about this at the next Cabinet presentation.

The King was sitting in his oval office, sipping port and contemplating whether to light another cigar or not. At that moment, the valet entered.

"Your Highness his Highness the Prince of Lower Bulimia wishes to have a word with you."

"Very well. He may enter."

The valet opened the door for the King's eldest son, Crown Prince Umberto. He was a tall young man whose tanned complexion was very much the result of spending almost all his waking hours doing his favourite sports, yak polo. The King motioned for the Crown Prince to sit down in the chair next to him.

"Good to see you son. Care for a cigar."

"No thanks. I'll have a beer though."

The King didn't have time to respond before the Crown Prince clapped his hands and a valet brought him a bottle of Gainsbourg.

"I assume you have heard the news."

"I had a meeting with Cagadero yesterday."

That's it, the King thought. I am always the last to know about anything that happens in my kingdom. There'll be some

changes made.

“And what did the esteemed Minister of Porn and Propaganda have to say?”

“He wants me to be the chairman of the selection committee.”

“Selection of what?”

“Selection of the hundred people to go to the stars.”

“Can you be a bit more specific.”

“I thought you knew. The aliens have requested that a hundred people from Earth join them on their return trip to Orange. Their home planet.”

“I didn’t know there was a planet by that name. Is it near Pluto.”

“No. It’s in the Platypus nebula. Roughly thirteen thousand and five hundred lightyears away.”

“Oh. That’s quite a long way I believe.”

“It is. The pyramids in Egypt hadn’t been built when they started their journey to Earth.”

“How will humans survive the trip.”

“Apparently their technology is quite advanced.”

“I see. And what was your answer to the dear Minister.”

“I agreed to do it. Didn’t sound like it would involve that much work. Apparently they’ll be chosen by lottery. We are just to oversee the process.”

“Very well. You have my blessings.”

I didn’t know I came here to seek them, Crown Prince Umberto thought.

81 A-hunting we will go

Uncharacteristically for him, Intardo Musilicus woke up at dawn. His quarters were on the top floor of the former Ministry of Yak Herding. He dressed and went down to his office, where he poured himself a whisky from the Minister’s liquor

cabinet and proceeded to finish it in one gulp. Having kick-started his day, he went out to the balcony to admire the sun rising from behind the giant space donut on the other end of King Square.

Ingrid, his secretary, came to work a few minutes before 8 o'clock. Soon after, she knocked on the door.

"Come in."

"Good morning Sir. Here's your coffee and the morning paper."

"Oh. Thanks."

Musilicus sat down at his desk and started to peruse the latest edition of the Royal National Herald. He had just finished reading the comic strips when Ingrid came in again.

"Sir. The King's valet brought you this."

"What is it."

"It's an invitation to go hunting with the King this afternoon."

"Really. Well well. Does it say where."

"No. It says the King will send a car to pick you up at noon."

"I see. Thank you Ingrid. Go and buy me some hunting clothes won't you."

"Yes Sir."

Musilicus was a bit surprised by the King's invitation. He was the Alien Ambassador, true, but even so, he did not expect the monarch to take an interest in the whole alien landing business. He didn't even consider not going, not because it would have insulted the head of the state, but because he knew that going hunting invariably meant not only a good meal but also a free drink or two.

The King's Rolls Royce was in front of the Alien Embassy at exactly 12 o'clock. Ingrid had bought Musilicus an impressive tweed outfit and boots to match. Dressed in the outfit, he looked like someone who had been hunting foxes all his life.

The King's hunting grounds were located a bit outside Nuevo Saunabad, near a village called Baudelaire. Musilicus was happy to notice that the Rolls Royce was equipped with a bar, so he made the most of his trip by hitting the King's whisky stash as hard as he could. The drive to the hunting grounds only lasted half an hour, so Musilicus was a bit disappointed to notice that he'd only gotten through six shots of whisky before it was time to go out in the fresh country air and slaughter an innocent animal or two.

The King arrived in another Rolls Royce a moment later, followed by his entourage. The hunting party consisted of six people not including the huntmaster and the servants. In addition to the King and Musilicus, the King's youngest son, the 14-year old Prince Vadim, was one of them. The others were Röövel Ööbik, the Minister of Insults, Umbopa Tsutsu, the Minister of Yak Herding, and General Jesús Iglesias, the commander of the Armed Forces. Musilicus had not met any of them, but he recognised them anyway, having seen all their faces in the newspaper at some point.

"Your Highness. It was very generous of you to invite me."

"I am glad you could make it. May I introduce my son Prince Vadim."

"It is an honour to meet you Your Highness."

"Get stuffed."

"Excuse me."

"I said get stuffed."

"Now now Vadim. The Ambassador is an important man. Mind your manners."

"Get stuffed."

"If you don't stop this instant you don't get to kill any bunny rabbits. That's more like it. May I also introduce the Minister of Insults Röövel Ööbik."

"A pleasure to meet you Ambassador."

"Likewise."

“And the Minister of Yak Herding Umbopa Tsutsu.”

“So nice to finally meet you Ambassador. I hope you are enjoying my Ministry.”

“It’s not too bad. The interior could do with a fresh coat of paint.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“And finally General Jesús Iglesias commander of the Bulimian Armed Forces.”

“Mister Ambassador.”

“General. A pleasure.”

“Well then. Now that we’ve all met how about going hunting.”

The King’s huntmaster handed everyone a shotgun. Musilicus had never handled one before, but he wasn’t too worried. He’d seen one being used in a movie years ago. As far as he could tell, it was just a matter of pointing the pipes at the animal and pulling the trigger, preferably twice just to make sure.

The hunting party started walking toward the forest. The air was fresh and the sun was shining. What a perfect weather for senseless slaughter, Musilicus thought. He could hardly have been happier.

“Do you go hunting much Mister Ambassador.”

“Not as such Your Highness. However there’s a first time for everything isn’t there.”

“Indeed there is. I am sure you’ll like it once you get the hang of it.”

At that moment, a lonely pheasant took flight near the edge of the forest. The King propped the stock of his shotgun against his shoulder, aimed and pulled the trigger. The pheasant’s flight was cut short when a lethal cloud of buckshot hit it. A dog released by the huntmaster ran to fetch the dead pheasant. The King’s performance was praised with subdued applause.

“Excellent shooting Your Highness.”

“Your Highness is truly a marksman without equal.”

“Thank you gentlemen. Now that the first shot has been fired perhaps I’ll let someone else have the next one.”

The party kept walking. As they reached the forest’s edge, another pheasant tried to escape its inevitable fate. The Minister of Insults made sure that the pheasant would not have to make any further plans with a carefully aimed shot.

As the day went on, everyone except Musilicus had already shot at least one pheasant. Most had also killed a rabbit or two. The young Prince was especially proud of his tally. Pheasantwise, the King was in the lead, having shot down three birds by himself. The hunting party was already on their way back to their vehicles, when Musilicus spotted something moving in the distance.

“I’ll get that one.”

Before anyone had a chance to react, Musilicus fired a shot at one of the King’s hunting dogs. Fortunately Musilicus had no idea what he was doing, so only two pieces of buckshot hit it in the behind. The dog protested with a loud whimper. The huntmaster took the shotgun from Musilicus before he could get another shot off.

“Now now Mister Ambassador. That was my dog you just shot at.”

“My apologies Your Highness. It did look a bit like a pheasant from a distance.”

“Don’t worry. The dog will survive. And I believe we have enough pheasants even without your contribution. Gentlemen I believe it is time to retreat back to the Palace. You are all invited to dine with me.”

“Thank you very much Your Highness.”

“It is truly an honour Your Highness.”

Back at the Palace, the shooting party, minus the young Prince who preferred to play Nintendo and order pizza in-

stead, convened in the Library. The valet's were kept busy by requests for different types of hard liquor.

"Gentlemen. Can anyone guess what Salvatore has just poured you."

The two Ministers and the General took a sniff at the golden brown liquid in their glasses. Musilicus didn't bother with the ritual, but instead downed the whole glass in one go. General Iglesias was the first to respond.

"It's definitely a fine brandy from Cognac Your Highness."

"Can anyone hazard a more educated guess."

Umbopa Tsutsu was next.

"This must be an XO Your Highness."

"Indeed it is. I am still waiting for someone to pin down the brand. How about you Mister Ambassador. What is your guess."

"Well Your Highness. I don't have a clue but I wouldn't mind another go."

Salvatore, the King's valet, didn't need further instructions. He poured Musilicus another shot of brandy, this time quite a bit more generous one than the first time around.

Röövel Ööbik offered his opinion next.

"Your Highness. The bouquet is quite unmistakable. This wonderful brandy is so good that it would be easy to believe it comes from Cognac. However it is an example of the skill that our neighbours in Somnambulistan have honed in their quest for the perfect brandy. If only it were possible to practice viticulture in Bulimia. I am quite convinced this is Merdasse XO."

The King clapped his hands, visibly delighted.

"Bravo Minister. You have nailed it. I share your wish. It would be magnificent to have a domestic product of similar nature and quality."

"Dinner is served Your Highness."

"Thank you Salvatore. Gentlemen shall we."

Everyone followed the King to the dining hall. The long table was covered in white tablecloths. Three large crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling over the table. Six places were set for diners, each with a selection of fine porcelain, silver and crystal. The walls were decorated with oil paintings that shared a common hunting theme. Dead pheasants and other carnage had obviously been an inspiration to the painter. As the diners sat down, Musilicus motioned at Salvatore for another refill.

The first course was bouillabaisse, which Musilicus thought to be a bit too common a dish to be served at a Royal dinner, but he somehow managed to keep his thoughts to himself even though the alcohol in him worked hard at setting the thought free. Still, as fish soup goes, it actually isn't that bad, he thought.

"Mister Ambassador. I hear you're quite a fisherman yourself. What do you think of the bouillabaisse?"

"Just like Mother used to make Your Highness."

Everyone laughed politely at this comment.

The main course was, of course, pheasant served on a bed of fresh asparagus and mashed potatoes. Throughout the meal, conversation was light and polite. Musilicus didn't offer many comments, mainly because he was starting to get drunk to the point where it was incredibly difficult to follow any train of thought.

The dessert was a soufflé filled with something that Musilicus did not recognise. He didn't care too much what it was either, because he had already decided to concentrate on the subsequent coffee and brandy. He was hoping the coffee would help him sober up. He was also hoping that the brandy would ensure he wouldn't sober up too much.

When the coffee and brandy had been served, Röövel Ööbik addressed Musilicus directly.

"Mister Ambassador. Would you tell us a bit more about

the aliens.”

“Sure thing Röövel. Whaddoya wanna know mate.”

Everyone’s eyes and ears were on Musilicus.

“We have heard that they are planning to invite some guests for their return trip. Is this correct.”

“Yea mate. Sure they are.”

“What will happen when they get back home.”

“What do you mean. I’m sure they’ll have a hell of a party. Wouldn’t you. I sure would.”

“I mean what will happen to the humans who go with them. We have heard some disconcerting rumours.”

“Oh yea. Rumors. Yea. Here’s what will happen. They will all get nekkid and lie in a great big pile. Aliens on top.”

At that moment, Musilicus passed out and fell face forward on his soufflé.

82 Back up

The remains of the blue Toyota were still burning when the CIA agents in their black Mercury arrived on the scene. It was obvious that nobody could have survived the explosion. The black Mercury glided right past the burning vehicle.

“Eagle One this is Eagle Two. Come in Eagle One. Over.”

“Eagle Two this is Eagle One. Status report. Over.”

“The bird has been blown to bits. Over.”

“Copy that. Return to base. Over and out.”

Richard Black was already driving towards the US Embassy. He was humming along to the radio that was playing “It’s Not Unusual” by Tom Jones. Everything had gone according to plan. Jack Back was dead. He had the stone. He also had the five million dollars that supposedly went up in smoke along with Back.

Once Black got back to the office, he was just about to call about the successful retrieval of the stone when the phone

rang.

“Hello.”

“You’ve been a very naughty boy Dick. Go to your room without supper.”

“Jack. Jesus.”

“You’ve got to pick one Dick. Don’t hedge your bets.”

“I’ve got to hand it to you. You’re good.”

“I like to think that the taxpayers got their money’s worth. Not that I’m working for them anymore.”

“So you’re alive. Good for you. But I got the stone.”

“Why don’t you take a closer look. I don’t know. Maybe scratch the surface with a pocket knife or something. Just a hunch.”

Black grabbed the stone from his desk and scratched it with his letter opener. The phosphorescent paint on the stone came off easily.

“Are you still there Dick.”

“I’m gonna kill you Jack.”

“It would disappoint me if you didn’t try. Your track record hasn’t been too good so far though.”

“Did you call just to taunt me or do you have something else in mind.”

“I would have called just to taunt you. As it happens I do have a business proposition as well.”

“What is it.”

“I have no use for the stone. You can have it just like we agreed. Only the price has just gone up. It’s now back to the original asking price. Ten million.”

“What makes you think it’s worth that much.”

“It wasn’t too difficult to get you to agree to five was it. I imagine you’ll be able to go double or nothing.”

“Suppose I say no.”

“Then I’ll throw it in the river and we’ll both go our merry ways.”

"I'll have to discuss this with someone."

"I wasn't expecting you to come up with the other five yourself. I'll call you back in two days. Sayonara."

Jack hung up and got out of the phone booth. King Square was full of people. Suzy was waiting for him at a table outside the bar nearby.

"How did it go?"

"We'll see. It seems we'll have to hang around for a few days more. I hope you don't mind."

"I'll be happy to leave whenever we can. I am not a particularly patriotic girl."

Jack gave Suzy a little kiss and flagged down a passing waitress.

"A black coffee and another one with milk. And two croissants please."

"Two coffees one with milk and two croissants. Coming right up."

83 Anyone for dinner?

The fax avalanche at the Alien Embassy had died down, as all countries had already chosen their representatives for the Orange colony lottery. Only Switzerland had declined the invitation to take part, preferring to remain neutral in this matter also. Intardo Musilicus wasn't too concerned about the Swiss. They could keep on perfecting the art of making cuckoo clocks for all he cared. His current preoccupation had to do with nursing his hangover, which surprisingly enough was not world class for once. He was also trying to figure out the fisherman's calendar the aliens gave him. He wasn't making too much progress. The door opened and Ingrid came in.

"Here's a summary of the candidates Sir."

She handed him a stack of typewritten sheets stapled together at one corner.

“Thank you Ingrid. Now get me a cup of coffee please.”

“Right away Sir.”

Ingrid disappeared through the doorway and Musilicus started studying the candidate summary. He didn't really care too much who would get to go. His interest towards the whole matter had considerably waned after he decided to stay behind. Even a postcard saying “We've just arrived, it's lovely, wish you were here, the Colonists” would take more than 25000 years to arrive from Orange. Musilicus doubted he'd be alive by then. He wasn't sure there'd be any humans at all on Earth after that time. If nothing else, the next Ice Age would surely come and wipe away civilization as we know it. He suddenly realised that that might just be why the aliens returned in the first place. They knew mankind would not survive on Earth for too long and that the only hope for survival would be somewhere else. The only question was: why would they care? It wasn't as if mankind itself seemed to care all that much.

Musilicus shrugged and decided to concentrate on more pressing matters, such as his plan for continued and hopefully increased prosperity. He could always become a management consultant. Being a former Archbishop and soon a former Alien Ambassador, he certainly had the credentials for it. He also had the prerequisite total lack of conscience. On the other hand, management consulting didn't sound like too much fun. Boardrooms and executive summits would probably bore him out of his skull in no time at all. If nothing else, he'd at least try to flog the fisherman's calendar to some Far Eastern electronics company. They'd surely have the knowhow and patience to reverse engineer the gadget. If it really worked as well as the aliens said it would, every fisherman on the globe would have to have one in his pocket. The royalties just might be enough to provide him with a comfortable lifestyle, although he'd probably have to kiss his private

Lear Jet dreams goodbye.

Ingrid returned with the coffee. In the same instant, the phone rang.

“Hello.”

“Could I speak to the Ambassador please.”

“This is he.”

“I have the Minister of Porn and Propaganda on line for you. Just a moment.”

Musilicus heard a click, and then the familiar voice of Silvio Cagadero.

“My dear friend Mr. Ambassador. I hope you are well Sir.”

“I am. How can I help you.”

“Have you received all the applications. The Crown Prince is anxious to get started.”

“I believe we have. Perhaps you can book a cabinet at a suitable restaurant for us. I imagine we’ll be able to finalise the list over a nice meal. And port and cigars.”

“But of course. I’ll ask my secretary to contact you about the dinner reservation. Shall we do it already tonight. Provided it suits the Crown Prince of course.”

“I don’t see why not. Best not keep the world waiting for too long.”

“Indeed. I will see you at dinner then. Good-bye.”

“Bye.”

This Ambassador gig isn’t half bad, Musilicus thought. A free meal is always a free meal.

84 Dinner at Il Cazzo Grandissimo

When you’re the most powerful man in the country, it’s not too tricky to get a dinner reservation even if the town is teeming with news crews and tourists with money to burn. The most prestigious restaurant in Nuevo Saunabad was Il Cazzo Grandissimo, an Italian restaurant located in the heart of the

Old Town. The restaurant had been run by the Dellamorte family since the late 19th Century. During that time, the restaurant had only moved once, when the original premises burned to the ground due to an unfortunate flambéeing accident during the First World War. The two-storey stone building on Bourbon Street had housed Il Cazzo Grandissimo ever since.

The head *chéf* and the patriarch of the family was Pierluigi Dellamorte. He was famous for his flambéed yak steaks, and it was a testament to his abilities that the Fire Brigade had only visited the restaurant sixteen times since he took the reins soon after WWII. He was rarely in the kitchen anymore, preferring instead to devote his time to watching daytime TV and letting his son, Pierpaolo Dellamorte, run the kitchen as he saw fit. However, when he heard that the Minister of Porn and Propaganda was going to dine in his restaurant with the Crown Prince and the Alien Ambassador, Pierluigi Dellamorte wasted no time in getting back to the kitchen. It was a matter of pride for him. It was still his restaurant, even if he knew he'd have to let go and hand it over to the next generation sooner than later.

Intardo Musilicus was the first to arrive. He was shown to the cabinet on the second floor, where the head waiter was still making sure that the table was being set according to protocol.

“Welcome to Il Cazzo Grandissimo Signore Ambassador. Benvenuto. It is truly an honour to have you as our guest.”

“Isn't it just. Get me a gin and tonic won't ya. Easy on the tonic.”

“Right away Signore.”

The head waiter snapped his fingers at the waitress who was placing the dessert spoons on the table.

“Amanda. Pronto.”

Amanda almost ran out of the room to get Musilicus his drink. The head waiter excused himself and left Musilicus

to gaze at the decoration. The walls featured historical photographs from Nuevo Saunabad as it was decades ago. He felt a sudden pang of nostalgia when he saw a picture of the Cathedral as it was being constructed in the early 1910s. Fortunately for him, Amanda arrived with the gin and tonic just in time so he could drown his nostalgia with a stiff gulp.

Another photograph was apparently taken during the Revolution. It showed a group of stern men with huge moustaches, each standing at attention with a single-action rifle on their back. The silk ribbons on their lapels meant they were Royalists, and as history would later show, they won. As was the custom at the time, the black and white photograph had been coloured with crayons, so that the ribbons were the correct shade of blue.

Musilicus was inspecting a photograph of a men's gymnastic team dressed in leotards forming a human pyramid when Silvio Cagadero came in.

"Minister. Good to see you."

"Good to see you too Mister Ambassador. I am sorry for being late."

"Not at all. I've enjoyed the photographs on display here."

The waitress who had brought Cagadero piped in.

"Can I get you something to drink gentlemen?"

"I'll have another gin and tonic. And this time don't drown it in tonic. What'll you have Silvio?"

"Gin and tonic sounds like an excellent choice."

"Won't be a moment gentlemen."

Cagadero saw that Musilicus was eyeing the gymnasts.

"That's my grandfather there. Second from the left on the bottom."

"You don't say. He looks like a strong man."

"He was. The Bulimian champion in arm wrestling three years in a row."

"How wonderful. He must have been quite a hit with the

ladies.”

The waitress came back carrying the drinks on a tray. The head waiter followed her.

“Gentlemen his Royal Highness the Prince of Lower Bulimia has arrived.”

The head waiter kept the door open for the Crown Prince, who walked in wearing the dress uniform of an Army colonel. He had in fact only served in the Bulimian Army for a fortnight before deciding that he'd rather play yak polo, but he still liked to dress up on occasion.

“Minister. Ambassador. Dear friends. I am utterly delighted to be able to join you to perform this historical duty.”

“And we are privileged to have you with us your Highness.”

The head waiter was truly on top of his game and brought the Crown Prince a gin and tonic on his own accord.

“Cheers gentlemen.”

“To your health your Highness.”

“Cheers.”

The three men sat down at the table. They seemed to have a tacit understanding that business would only be discussed after the dinner. When it was time for the main course, Pierluigi Dellamorte himself came up from the kitchen to flambée their yak steaks at the table. He was delighted to no end when the Crown Prince said that he'd never had a better yak steak, and he'd definitely eaten some yak in his time.

After dinner, the head waiter brought the gentlemen port and cigars. Once they were again by themselves, the Crown Prince was the first to bring up the matter which had brought them to Il Cazzo Grandissimo.

“Now then. I understand that Mister Ambassador has a list of the candidates.”

“I do. Here you go.”

Musilicus handed the list to the Crown Prince.

“How many names are here.”

"I don't know. Two from every country. Something like three hundred."

"And who do we have from Bulimia."

"I don't remember. You'll find the entry under 'B'."

The Crown Prince leafed through the list, until he found the entry for Bulimia.

"Egmont Imbiss. 27 years old. Yak farmer from Upper Bulimia. And Madeleine Biglietto."

Cagadero piped in.

"Isn't she the reigning Miss Bulimia."

"I believe she is. 23 years old. Student. Studies international marketing at the Royal University. Gentlemen I have an announcement to make. I have decided to represent Bulimia on the alien spaceship."

Cagadero and Musilicus looked like he'd just said he was going to elope with a yak.

"I beg your pardon your Highness. Do you mean you wish to go to Orange with the aliens."

"That is correct. I shall join Miss Bulimia along with 49 other couples to take mankind to the stars. My younger brother shall inherit the crown of Bulimia when the time comes."

"We were supposed to pick the winners at random."

"Nonsense. Are we not the committee who has final say. Well this is mine. I am going and so is miss Biglietto."

"Does the King know about your decision your Highness."

"I will tell him before the final list is published. Now then gentlemen. Shall we get on with the rest of the list. There are still 98 seats to fill."

"I don't know about you two but I'm going to get a refill."

Musilicus pressed a button on the table. The head waiter appeared in the doorway in an instant.

"You rang Signore."

"Yes. Bring me an espresso. On second thoughts let's

make it a double. And a bottle of grappa.”

“Very well Signore. Would the other gentlemen like an espresso as well.”

“We would. Thank you.”

The head waiter bowed and disappeared, returning minutes later with three double espressos and a bottle of Grappa di Moscato.

85 Back 'n' Black

The phone rang in Richard Black's office.

“Hello.”

“Is this room service. I'd like to order the ten million dollar burger with a side of asshole to Room 602.”

“Very funny Jack. You should consider being a comedian.”

“Well seeing as I don't have a day job anymore it's actually not such a bad idea. Do you have the money?”

“Yes.”

“Here's what I want you to do. Get in your car with the money and drive to Rimbaud. The concierge at the Hotel Excelsior will give you further instructions. This time leave the Sasquatchs in the playpen for real or Uncle Jack will be very angry. And forget about playing Unabomber as well.”

“Is that all.”

“For now. Have a nice drive.”

The money was packed in two large suitcases. Black threw both in the boot of his Mercury and headed out on the highway. The drive only took him fifteen minutes. He parked the car in front of Hotel Excelsior and walked in. The concierge handed him an envelope before he had time to say anything.

“You must be Mr. Dick. This is for you.”

Black returned to the car and opened the envelope. Inside was a hand-written letter. It said “Dear Dorothy, drive to the parking lot on the other side of the hotel. See you soon.

Cordially yours, Santa Claus”.

Black started the Mercury and turned it around. The parking lot was almost empty. The only parked vehicle was a gray Toyota Corolla that had seen better days. Soon after, Black found himself staring at the business end of a 9mm Makarov from a range of three feet. The man holding the pistol was Jack Back.

“Good to see you Jack. Since when is the Company issuing Soviet sidearms.”

“This isn’t a Company gun. It belongs to the Royal Secret Police. I’m just borrowing it. Get out slowly and keep your hands where I can see them at all times.”

Black got out of the car. Jack kept the pistol pointed at him.

“Now remove your jacket slowly. Good. Pick up the gun with two fingers and throw it here.”

Black did as he was told, throwing his Glock on the ground.

“Where’s the stone Jack.”

“All in good time. Where’s the money.”

“In the trunk.”

“Good. Open it.”

Black opened the trunk, making the suitcases visible.

“Take both suitcases out and open them.”

He did, revealing the stacks of 50 and 100 dollar bills inside the suitcases.

“Now open the trunk of the Toyota.”

He did this also.

“Start shoveling. Only with your left hand though. Keep your right hand behind your back at all times.”

“It’ll take a long time to do that with one hand.”

“I don’t have anything else planned for tonight. Do you.”

Black started throwing the banknotes in a few stacks at a time.

“Tell me something Jack.”

“Yes Priscilla Santa Claus does exist. I’m afraid I have bad news about God though.”

“How come you didn’t get blown up with the car.”

“A good magician never reveals his tricks. However you’ve been a good boy so far so I’ll indulge you. As soon as I turned around the corner I stopped the car and ran like hell. Figured you’d probably try to pull a fast one. Plus I knew you’d sick the hounddogs on my tail.”

“So you would have ran away from five big ones.”

“I had someone watching the car from a safe distance on the off chance that you were playing it straight. However I knew it was pretty unlikely that you would. Isn’t it sad that there’s no trust in the world anymore.”

“So why get in the car in the first place.”

“Well there was that one chance in a million that you actually would have done as you were told.”

“In which case I would have been five million in the red and holding a worthless rock.”

“Keep shoveling. I would have mailed the stone to you.”

“Yeah right.”

“There really is no trust left in the world. Oh tempura oh morays. Isn’t that what the Romans used to say.”

“I wouldn’t know. I didn’t go to Catholic school.”

“Since we’re sharing would you mind telling me what makes the stone worth ten million.”

“It’s a dilithium crystal.”

“A what.”

“A dilithium crystal. That’s what they use to run the engines on the alien spaceship.”

“So how come it’s so precious.”

“Dilithium doesn’t exist in our solar system. The aliens left some behind on their last visit. The stone is from that stash. Scientists at Lawrence Livermore have figured out a

way to harness its power. A power station running on that stone alone could provide as much electricity for fifty or sixty years as a dozen conventional nuclear reactors running on uranium.”

“Where’s the rest of the stash then.”

“Nobody knows. That stone is the only crystal known to exist on Earth.”

“If that’s the case how come the spaceship hasn’t been taken over already. The aliens must have a shitload of dilithium onboard if they’re planning to sail that mother back to the other side of the universe.”

“I’ve no idea. I wouldn’t be surprised though if there were plans to do that. I’m not privy to every bit of information inside the US Government.”

At that moment, Jack heard a noise coming from the Hotel end of the parking lot behind him. He turned to look and saw Suzy standing there. One of the CIA agents was standing behind her with his arm around her throat and pointing a gun at her head. Black stopped loading the money and got up.

“Well well. Isn’t this a happy reunion.”

“How did you find out about her.”

“We’re the goddamn CIA in case you forgot. Drop the gun.”

Jack dropped the Makarov on the ground and brushed it with his foot towards Black. He did the same with Black’s Glock. Black picked up both pistols, put the Makarov in his pocket and pointed the Glock at Jack.

“Where’s the stone Jack.”

“In my pocket.”

“Get it out. Carefully.”

Jack reached into his pocket and took out the stone. This time it was the genuine stone from Arannash. Black pointed at the boot of the Mercury with his Glock.

“Throw it in there.”

Jack threw the stone in the boot.

“Now it’s your turn to shovel. Don’t bother with the suitcases. Just throw the money after the stone. Maybe we’ll even get your girlfriend to help you.”

Black motioned to the CIA agent who was holding Suzy hostage. They started walking towards the two cars. Once they reached the two, the agent shoved Suzy forward so strongly that she fell on her knees on the pile of money. Jack put his arms around her.

“Sorry about this Suzy.”

“Don’t worry Jack. Shit happens.”

Black was quick to interrupt the tender moment.

“How about you two sweethearts keep on shovelin’ the money. We ain’t got all day.”

Suzy and Jack started throwing the money into the boot of the Mercury. When there was no more money on the ground, they continued with the stacks that Black had thrown into the boot of the Toyota. It didn’t take the two too long to finish the job.

“Well thank you Jack. And of course thank you to your lovely bride as well.”

“Fuck you asshole.”

“You should tell your bride to hold her tongue in the presence of gentlemen Jack. It’s not proper for a lady to use such language.”

“She was speaking for the both of us.”

“I don’t doubt that at all. But time flies. I’m afraid this is where we say good-bye.”

Black pointed his Glock at Suzy. At that same instant, a black helicopter appeared from behind the hotel. A searchlight was quickly pointed at the four people on the ground. Someone addressed them using the helicopter’s PA system.

“Drop down your weapons and raise your hands above your head. This is the Royal Secret Police. Do not try to es-

cape.”

Black pointed his Glock at the helicopter and got off a few rounds before a burst of machine gun bullets hit him and he fell down dead. The CIA agent who had been holding Suzy hostage dropped his gun and raised his hands in the air. The helicopter landed on the parking lot and three men in black combat uniforms got out. One of them snapped handcuffs on the CIA agent and started walking him back to the helicopter. The other two walked up to Jack and Suzy. They were Lieutenant Luigi Scoreggia and Junior Agent Marcello Finocchio, both of the KSPB.

Scoreggia pointed his Makarov at Jack.

“You’re under arrest. Get up slowly. You too Miss.”

“I had no idea that some day I’d be glad to hear those words.”

Finocchio snapped handcuffs on them both.

“Before we go would you mind shutting the trunk of my car. I’d hate to lose the contents to vandals.”

Finocchio slammed the boot of the Mercury shut and started to walk them towards the helicopter. The rotor blades turned wildly, raising a cloud of dust off the ground. The noise the helicopter made was remarkable. Suzy had to shout at the top of her lungs as they got closer.

“I’ve never been on a helicopter before.”

“Enjoy the ride then.”

The third KSPB agent was behind them, dragging the lifeless corpse of Richard Black along the asphalt. Once Suzy and Jack were sitting inside, Finocchio helped the agent put Black’s remains in a bodybag and lift it into the helicopter. They were airborne as soon as the door slammed shut behind Finocchio.

86 Milking the occasion

The final list of the lucky winners to go to the stars, as approved by selection committee, rested safely in the desk drawer of Intardo Musilicus. Assuming everything went to plan, there wouldn't be a whole lot more for him to do in his role as Alien Ambassador except perhaps wave goodbye to the receding spacecraft. While the list was not public, however, he enjoyed an aura of importance and prestige. The ceremony where the list would be announced was arranged to be held on the square in the afternoon. A crew of men was already busy putting together the stage for the occasion. Musilicus had insisted in reading out the names himself. He liked to think of the ceremony as his private Oscar gala.

The only thing that detracted from his enjoyment of anticipating being broadcast live via satellite TV to millions of homes all over the globe was his mounting hangover. The selection triumvirate had been swift enough in drafting the list. There was some discussion about the relative merits of different ways to do it, but in the end they took the easy way out and chose the winners at random as advertised, except of course for the Bulimian couple. After that, the three started on a sentimental journey down the wine list of *Il Cazzo Grandissimo* and got in fact quite far before they had to concede defeat at dawn. Luckily, Musilicus was able take the edge off by hitting the liquor cabinet so thoughtfully left behind by the Minister of Yak Herding.

Musilicus didn't know what time it was or, indeed, what planet he was on when Ingrid came to let him know the ceremony was about to begin. He had dozed off, floating into that faraway mystical land of strawberry fields and marshmallow skies, where everything is permitted and nothing is taboo. Heavenly clarions sounded by a metric shitload of cherubim and seraphim signalled the anointment of His Excellency In-

tardo Musilicus as the Archfornicator of Canterbury. He was just about to fold his wings and perch on a custard apple tree branch, when he was cruelly awakened from his slumber.

“Sir. Wake up Sir.”

“nnnggggghhhh”

“Sir. The ceremony is in half an hour. You should get dressed.”

Musilicus sat up, stretched and yawned.

“Thank you Ingrid. Bring me my good suit.”

The square was, as recently had been the case every single day, full of people. This time, however, there were even more camera crews than usual. Every newsmedia worth its salt wanted a piece of the action. The stage was heavily guarded by the police, most of them in riot gear. Yakwurst sales went through the roof and of course donuts, both glazed and unglazed, were selling like hotcakes. The T-shirt slogans now read “MY PARENTS LEFT WITH THE ALIENS AND ALL I GOT WAS THIS T-SHIRT”, “COLONISTS DO IT IN OUTER SPACE” and “I’VE GOT A DOUBLE BERTH TICKET TO ORANGE — WANNA SHARE?”

The proceedings started with a horn sextet in traditional costumes playing the Bulimian national anthem. The ceremony organisers had thoughtfully arranged for the lyrics to be displayed on a video screen, as it was likely that few of the tourists had heard it before.

Our country of Bulimia
you’re girt by land, not sea
and misty mountain majesties
make you the place to be
Bulimia, Bulimia, it rocks, just ask the yaks:
It may not be that beautiful, but there’s no in-
come tax!

All hail the King, he's young and strong
so handsome and aloof
His Majesty can do no wrong
and that's the simple truth
The kingdom of Bulimia will last a thousand
years
as long as just one citizen has wax left in their
ears!

Yak herders who live on the plains
tend to their flock all night
They love their yaks and take great pains
to hug and hold them tight!
In wonderful Bulimia it's all right to love yaks,
for it is them who give us food and clothing on
our backs!

How touching, Musilicus thought. If that doesn't bring in foreign tourists by the bucketload, then nothing will.

The ceremony was MC'd by the Minister of Porn and Propaganda, who was so anxious to get to the stage that the national anthem had hardly stopped playing when he was already busy tapping the microphone. Once he was satisfied that his speech would be not only transmitted live across the planet, but also caught on videotape for posterity, he began the oration that he had carefully crafted.

"My fellow countrymen. People of the Earth. Today King Square here in downtown Nuevo Saunabad is the scene of an unprecedented historic event. An event that will be forever forged in the hearts and minds of all those who are able to witness it whether it be here in our beautiful Bulimia or everywhere else via the wonder of modern technology that is satellite television. We really must get this TV thing happening in Bulimia as well. But I digress. This historic event is

the start of a new era. A beginning of an age when mankind is no longer bound by the shackles of this Earth. And what a beautiful planet it has been. But our future lies in the stars. The entire universe awaits us. It is there to be experienced and explored.”

“Our alien visitors have granted us a rare gift. The gift of space travel. The hundred lucky winners whose names the honourable Ambassador Intardo Musilicus will soon announce will be able to go to the stars not only in spirit but in flesh as well. They will join our guests on their trip back to their home world. The world which they call Orange. That strange world which no man has laid eyes on will soon no longer be a mystery to mankind. These one hundred brave people who will share their long journey will be able to see and hear the sights and sounds of a distant world. They will breathe the air of a distant planet.”

If there is any, Musilicus realised. Now that is a disturbing thought. I wonder whether anyone bothered to check this little fact with the aliens.

“The advanced technology that our visitors possess is a mystery to us as well. What wonderful method do they employ when hopping from star to star while remaining safe inside their space vessel for thousands of years at one go. We do not know. We are not sufficiently advanced to understand the powers that they have harnessed. It is all the more graceful of our guests that they have extended us this generous gesture. A gesture that will enable mankind to live on even if the light of life is one day extinguished here on Earth. Yes my fellow inhabitants of Earth. We have to be prepared for the eventuality. We cannot let the human race die out.”

“We Bulimians are a humble people. Our land is largely not arable. We cannot grow mulberries or aubergines like some of our neighbours do. Nor can we grow olives or pineapples. Beetroot is right out. But we have something else. Some-

thing even better than that. Our land is full of grass growing wild. Grass that yaks eat so that they may grow and give us milk. The yaks know that one day they will have to make the ultimate sacrifice. They have to give their lives so that we may enjoy succulent yak steaks and delicious yaksursts and other sundry yak meat products which by the way are available for reasonable prices at the stalls on the far side of King Square.”

“And so it is with us humans. We do not eat grass. At least not as a habit. But we too must one day die. Yet even though each one of us will some day kick the bucket. Hang up the apron. Miss the last bus. Even though that is our destiny we have hope. The soldier may fall but the battle rages on. It is our destiny to go to the stars. Mankind will one day conquer the universe. We shall prevail.”

He’s gone off his rocker, Musilicus thought. I hope he doesn’t start outlining any plans to kick the aliens out of Orange. They might not appreciate that.

“My fellow Bulimians. Dear countrymen. And everyone else who is here on King Square with me on this day that will be remembered for generations to come. And of course all of you there in TV land who are joining us in virtual reality. Let us now all join to sing the last verse of the Bulimian national anthem to thank our generous guests for this unique opportunity.”

If one day it should come to be
that you should wake up dead
At least you’ll have the memory
of dying in your bed
in wonderful Bulimia, the land of yaks and soot

In afterlife I hope you will become a bandicoot!

There wasn’t a dry eye among the Bulimians who raised

their hands in the customary 90 degree angle greeting and wiggled their fingers while singing the anthem. This was indeed a great day for them, if for nothing else, then for the fact that they would no longer have to live in the shadow of the huge donut. Whatever else its significance, it wasn't exactly a sight for sore eyes.

“And now without further ado I will step down and let the honourable Ambassador Intardo Musilicus take the stage to read the winners' list. Let's all give a big hand to Mister Ambassador.”

Musilicus climbed on stage to thunderous applause. He had to admit he was quite enjoying himself. Back in the days when he used to be the Archbishop, even if there was someone at the Cathedral when he happened to be giving a sermon, they didn't usually clap their hands.

“Thank you Minister. It is my great honour as the Ambassador for the aliens to now read the names of those who will join our guests on their long trip to the far edge of the universe. I will start off—”

At that moment his voice was drowned out by the commotion on the square. It was obvious that someone or something was making a beeline for the stage through the crowd. Musilicus did not recognise him, but that someone was Professor Drøvel, the High Priest of the Church of the Latter Day Aliens.

Musilicus was not too worried. He knew that the dozen police officers dressed in their best riot uniforms who were guarding the stage would not let any lunatics get through. They would probably whip out their nightsticks and give the perpetrator a good old-fashioned beating. He was a bit annoyed that the television cameras were no longer pointing at him, but instead they were trying to capture the mysterious shape in the crowd.

“...let him through...”

What's this, Musilicus thought. The voices had been silent for a long time. Why would they be piping up now?

"...we want him to speak..."

"No way. This is my show."

In the heat of the moment, Musilicus completely forgot that he was in the middle of a world-wide TV broadcast and that his microphone was still open.

"...he is with us... a friend..."

"Look. I don't know who that guy is but he's not coming up here to mess up the whole ceremony. Tell your pal to bugger off."

"...you will do as we tell you... you are our servant..."

"Your servant. Look pal. I didn't sign up for this gig. And I haven't been paid a single kepock so far. I don't think I would recommend you guys as an employer."

Musilicus was going to continue, but suddenly he could no longer get the words out of his mouth. He felt like something was constricting his throat so he could no longer breathe. He was suffocating. Nobody was paying much attention to him, though, as Professor Drøvel had just reached the perimeter guarded by the police and was about to climb on stage when he was stopped.

"You can't go up there."

"I have an important message for mankind."

The police officer who had confronted the Professor started to say something, but he too felt something grab his throat. Musilicus had already passed out a while ago and collapsed in a heap. The police officer joined him. The other police officers looked like they might have tried to stop the Professor if they hadn't been paralysed. Unstopped, Professor Drøvel climbed on stage. He was dressed in a flowing purple robe that was embroidered with golden threads. The Professor stepped up to the microphone that Musilicus had been using.

“People of the Earth. I have an important announcement to make. You have been deceived. The aliens are trying to deceive you. Do not do what they tell you. Do not go with them.”

The square fell silent as everyone pondered what the Professor had just said. Most were expecting the Professor to go on.

“My name is Hans Drøvel. Almost fifty years ago I joined a religious organization. The organization is called the Church of the Latter Day Aliens. I am the High Priest of the Church. The secrets of the aliens have been passed within the Church since their first visit on Earth thousands of years ago. I know what the aliens want. I want you all to understand why nobody should get on that spaceship.”

“The aliens are an ancient race. Their civilization is more than a million years older than ours. They started out resembling humans. Evolution has molded them so they no longer bear any relation to us. They are as different from you or I as the Moon is from the Sun. They both share the same sky. Yet there is almost nothing in common between them. One orbits the other. One is a cold piece of rock. The other is a molten fireball.”

“Dear friends. The aliens are no longer corporeal. They exist only in thoughts and images within the cold machinery of their spaceship. Their home planet is not and never has been able to support life as we know it. The atmosphere is made of methane gas. It is bombarded by lethal radiation from nearby stars. It is a cold and dark place. Put simply it is as close to Hell as we can possibly imagine.”

“The aliens want to experience what it is like to exist in flesh and blood. They can no longer remember the time that they themselves were like us. Their only hope is to invade our bodies and minds and to take them over completely.”

“The aliens just want to survive. That’s what we as hu-

mans want to do as well. But our survival depends on what we do. Not on how clever an illusion we can conjure up to save ourselves from dying of boredom. The aliens want to become parasites. They want to take the volunteers with them to Orange and start a colony within a desolate underground cell only kept barely inhabitable by their mad machinery. A colony whose only purpose is to breed so that there is a constant supply of fresh bodies for their kinsmen. They want to walk and breathe as we do. Their minds in our bodies.”

The square had fallen completely silent. There had been rumours about the aliens’ ulterior motives, but most people had taken their announcements in good faith. Now they didn’t know what to believe. The prophet of Doom on the stage seemed convincing enough. There was no doubt that Professor Drøvel sincerely believed every word he uttered. Whether he was telling the truth was another thing.

Musilicus was starting to regain his mobility. He didn’t know what to think. He couldn’t understand why the aliens would have helped Drøvel to deliver his message. If Drøvel was telling the truth, surely this would spoil the aliens’ plans once and for all. If the aliens were motivated by something other than a desire to get a renewing supply of surrogate bodies, it didn’t make any sense for them to let Drøvel say so. I could definitely do with a drink, Musilicus thought.

87 Story of the year

Professor Drøvel’s announcement made quite an impression on people following the ceremony on King Square. Jeb Peterson, always the consummate reporter, was busy jotting down notes in shorthand. He knew that the Pravda news generator would definitely not be needed for tomorrow’s edition of the Royal National Herald. There was enough meat on the bones of this story to feed a medium-sized African country on the

brink of famine.

Jeb's only problem was that his photographer was nowhere to be found. They'd left the office together, and Jeb had assumed Hi-Ho would keep up with him. When he thought to check, Hi-Ho was nowhere to be seen. He hoped Hi-Ho was still somewhere on the square, taking pictures of the crowd and the alien spaceship. There were lots of astonished faces around that would look good next to his story.

88 Let's make a deal

Captain Horst Hurenschwanz was having a field day. The squatter in his office had been evicted, so he no longer had to hold court in the canteen. What pleased him even more was that his crew had finally made a breakthrough and arrested the renegade CIA agent Jack Back, who was now being held in an interrogation room a few floors below. He started to make his way down to interrogate the prisoner right at the time when Professor Drøvel took the stage.

The interrogation room was similar to the one Jack had been in when the CIA retained him in Transvestitia. Jack was no stranger to such surroundings, of course, having sat on the other side of the table a number of times.

"Good day Mr. Back. I am Captain Horst Hurenschwanz. Please excuse this inconvenience. We'd like to ask you some questions. I hope you don't mind."

"I don't have much choice do I."

"Not really. Can I ask you your whereabouts on the 28th of June this year?"

"I don't remember."

"You were in Arannash weren't you."

"If you say so."

"According to eye witnesses you entered the Temple of Syrinx a few minutes before midnight. Somehow you were able

to circumvent the security system and replace the sacred stone on the altar with an ordinary rock of roughly the same dimensions.”

“Really.”

“Really. The theft was noticed the following morning when the early shift priests arrived to work. By then you had left Arannash on a stolen motorcycle. We found the motorcycle a few kilometers down the road. You really should have refueled before making your getaway.”

“Hypothetically speaking I’d have to agree.”

“Where is the stone now.”

“Supposing I knew where it was. What would be my motivation to tell you.”

“You could avoid an awful lot of torture.”

“I see.”

“For the both of you.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Do we have a deal.”

“How about safe passage out of the country.”

“I think that would be mutually beneficial.”

“And a passport for her.”

“I’m sure that can be arranged.”

“I think we have a deal.”

Hurenschwanz and Back shook hands.

89 No valet parking at the Excelsior

The setting sun was bathing the surroundings in wonderful hues of red and orange, as the KSPB van rolled into the parking lot of Hotel Excelsior. Jack’s beat-up Toyota was still there, as was the black Mercury in which the Richard Black had arrived. Hurenschwanz and Jack got out of the car. Jack took out the keys that had been found in Black’s pocket and opened the trunk. The ten million US dollars were still there.

He fumbled around in the pile of banknotes until he felt the stone from Arannash in his hand. He took out the stone and slammed the trunk shut.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you Mr. Back. As far as I am concerned you are free to go. In fact I would prefer it if you left Bulimia by midnight and didn’t come back.”

“I don’t think that will prove to be a problem.”

Suzy got out of the van and walked up to Jack. Together, they watched Captain Hurenschwanz drive off.

“What now.”

“Fancy a trip abroad.”

“Can’t wait.”

Jack took Suzy in his arms and kissed her. All of a sudden a thousand violins started to play, or so it seemed to them. It soon became apparent that in fact there was only one violin, played badly by a young girl practicing her scales with her window open.

The Mercury started on the first try. They drove off in the direction of Verlaine and the border of Transvestitia. Jack swore to himself he’d never eat yak nor drink fermented yak’s milk again.

90 They must be destroyed

The proceedings on King Square were being watched by almost everyone on the planet who had a TV set. One of the places where close attention was being paid was deep within the heart of Pentagon. A group of high-ranking military officials was gathered in a meeting room, following the events that took place in faraway Bulimia with mounting anxiety.

“What are our options.”

“Intelligence reports indicate that the spaceship may not be vulnerable to conventional weapons.”

“In other words you want to drop a nuke on Nuevo Saunabad.”

“No use doing a half-assed job.”

“The President would never approve it. He’ll be running for a second term soon.”

“We could try hitting it with a couple of cruise missiles carrying a conventional payload. It’s a big enough target and a direct hit will do plenty of damage. Probably more than enough to keep the spaceship from taking off.”

“How do we spin the story.”

“We could always use the good old weapons of mass destruction yarn. People always fall for it. Never failed yet.”

“What’s your plan for retrieving the dilithium.”

“We’ll send in troops under the pretense of humanitarian aid. They can remove the dilithium from the wreck while they pretend to be looking for people trapped inside.”

“Let’s do exactly that.”

91 Pandemonium before take-off

After Drøvel’s announcement, it was clear to Musilicus that it would not make much sense to read out the list. The crowd on the square was quite confused. They had come to celebrate mankind going to the stars, and now they were being told that in fact the brave candidates weren’t being taken aboard as fellow travellers but instead as livestock for a farm far far away.

“...now you speak for us...”

“What. I don’t believe this. You guys have pretty much blown the game now haven’t you. What can I possibly say after that announcement.”

“...step up to the microphone...”

Musilicus felt his legs moving him towards the microphone left vacant by Drøvel, who had already stepped down from the stage.

“People of the Earth.”

Musilicus was surprised to hear his own voice. He was speaking to an audience of millions without having any control over what came out of his mouth.

“What you have just heard is true. Our wish is to start a colony of humans. A colony that is fruitful and will multiply. Your time on Earth is running out. Your weather will cool down. What once was fertile farmland will be covered under a thick cover of ice. The planet will no longer provide food and warmth for mankind. You will die out one by one. The last human on Earth will die alone. Cold. And hungry. That will happen soon and you have no way of avoiding it.”

“Life will not be extinguished. The oceans will still be teeming with life. But many species will not survive the coming Ice Age. The Earth will no longer be ruled by humans because you will cease to exist. Perhaps one day there will be another species as advanced as you are now. Who knows. But even if that happens they will not be humans. Your only chance as a species is to join us.”

“It is true that we also wish to gain from this arrangement. Our wish is to become corporeal once more. You can help us do that. You can provide us with the bodies we need to shed the shackles of our insubstantial existence. In return we will grant you life beyond the confines of this Earth. With our help mankind can reach the stars.”

At that moment everyone turned to look at the source of the loud noise that was making its way towards King Square through the sky. To most of the people, it looked like a really fast aeroplane that had very tiny wings. Those with military training recognised it instantly as a cruise missile that was on impact course with the alien space vessel. It didn't get too close to its target before exploding in mid-air in a brilliant flash of light. The shockwave of the explosion shook the buildings and ruptured a few eardrums with its thunder-

ous sound. Another cruise missile followed and met the same fate. Three more missiles tried to reach the spaceship and failed just as miserably. Then all of a sudden it was quiet once more. Musilicus had ducked when the first missile blew up. He got back on his feed, dusted off his suit and continued the alien speech where he left off.

“We have started preparations for take-off. Our ship is ready to accept the hundred travellers who wish to join us. We will take onboard the first fifty viable males and fifty viable females who touch the ship.”

This announcement made the crowd go wild. The police dog patrols were helpless against the thousands of people who stormed the riot barricades, toppling them over. As soon as the first people started to reach the spaceship, some of them disappeared in a flash of light. It didn't take long before all hundred had been beamed inside. There were a lot of disappointed faces among the people who didn't get near the spaceship in time. The TV crews had a busy time trying to catch as much as possible for the pleasure of viewers across the globe.

Crown Prince Umberto, who had been watching the ceremony with Miss Bulimia from the side of the stage, was furious. His plan to be the first Bulimian in space had gone horribly wrong. Now, it seemed he was doomed to follow in his father's footsteps and bore himself to death on the throne one day. Still, it wasn't all bad. Miss Bulimia seemed to be enjoying his company, and he didn't mind feasting his eyes on her curvaceous body. He also had plans to try other appendages on her before the night was through.

As the spaceship started to vibrate and emanate a loud hum, the crowd receded. The hum crescendoed until the alien space vessel rose a few feet off the ground, then the noise died down. Without a sound, the giant torus kept climbing straight up. The people on the square saw the alien spaceship gain speed and disappear through the clouds. It would take them

thousands of years to return home travelling at the speed of light. The aliens, being non-corporeal, would just while their time away in deep meditation within the machinery of the spaceship. The humans would be in a state of stasis for the duration of the trip. They would eventually wake up thinking that no time at all had passed since they were beamed inside the spaceship. By then, they could well be the only human beings in existence.

Musilicus stood on the stage, still clutching the microphone. He watched the spaceship gain altitude until it disappeared into the distance, fully aware that his services as the spokesman for the aliens would no longer be required. It was definitely time to find another line of business. He started making his way through the crowd towards the site where the giant alien spaceship had stood only moments ago, hoping that the wine cellar in the ruins of the Cathedral would still be intact.

92 Hi-Ho lets go

Hi-Ho had only been working for the Royal National Herald since March, and already he was well on his way to becoming the most celebrated Bulimian photojournalist in living memory. His photos of the Cathedral explosion were snapped up by international media as soon as they found out about the link to the alien landing. Now he would be able to wrap up the whole alien incident by getting shots that no-one else would be able to take. He wanted to capture the spaceship from below as it took off and left Earth for the stars. To do this from an angle that would do the alien space vessel justice, he had bribed the police to turn a blind eye while he positioned himself inside the riot barricades.

He was practically under the giant donut, snapping away with his trusty Leica and oblivious to the commotion on the

square, until the riot barricades fell. Hi-ho was instantly swept away by the crowd. There was little he could do. He was being pushed towards the spaceship. Hi-Ho tried to guard his expensive equipment as well as he could. As soon as he touched the spaceship, he found himself transported to another place.

At first, Hi-Ho felt a bit disoriented. It didn't take long for him to realise that he was no longer under the donut. He was actually inside the alien spaceship. His professional instincts did not betray him. He was quickly back at work, taking shots of the interior of the spaceship as well as of the other people that appeared one by one in a blinding flash of light near him.

Hi-Ho didn't stop to think what all this meant. He just knew he had been handed a once in a lifetime opportunity to put together an award-winning story. He still had a few rolls of unused film left in his pocket. What he didn't know was that he would have to wait for quite some time to get the film rolls developed.

93 No reply at all

Professor Drøvel was disappointed, to say the least. He, like Musilicus, was now out of a job. Even though he still had his position at the University, the Church of the Latter Day Aliens was no longer a viable concept. Not for him, at any rate. He didn't understand why people would still want to get aboard the alien spaceship even though he had just told them they'd be treated like livestock. He was starting to realise that there was no underestimating human stupidity, nor the innate need for a moment in the limelight, no matter how brief and illfounded. It was all in the past now anyway. The spaceship was on its way back home, carrying the hundred passengers they'd come to pick up. The aliens would never return. Not in his lifetime anyway. He didn't much care what might happen after the next Ice Age.

The Professor was just about to head back home, when Judas Bobrichoff and Hildegard von Wichsen reached him. They both looked as if their pet bunny rabbit had just been run over by a cement truck.

“Professor. What happened. Why did you say those things. What about the Scriptures.”

“Leave me alone. I want to go home.”

“It can’t be true what you said about the aliens. That they want to farm people.”

“Oh yes it is. That was the ultimate secret of the Church. Now that you know it too feel free to declare yourselves High Priests if you wish. I quit.”

The Professor removed his purple robe and handed it to Judas. He was only wearing briefs and a T-shirt under the robe. Judas and Hildegard watched dumbfounded as Professor Drøvel walked past them in his underwear and headed home.

94 Back in Transvestitia

Jack and Suzy were glad to leave Bulimia behind them. As they cleared immigration on the Transvestitian side of the border and arrived in Hospodar, Jack thought of something.

“I’d like you to meet a friend of mine.”

“I didn’t know you had friends in Transvestitia.”

“I have friends where it matters. Let’s go.”

Og was busy waxing and polishing the Studebaker when Jack and Suzy arrived.

“Well if it isn’t Jack. Good to see you mate. And who’s the lovely dame with you.”

“Og. Meet Suzy. Suzy this is Og.”

Og and Suzy shook hands.

“Do you guys want to come inside for a beer or something.”

“No thanks. We’re on our way to the airport. I just wanted to give you a little memento.”

Jack opened the boot of the Mercury and took out a green duffel bag. He handed the bag to Og.

“What’s in here.”

“Something that will help you keep the Studebaker running.”

Og opened the bag and saw that it was full of stacks of green banknotes. His expression was one of a child at his birthday party who had just been given the pony he’d always wanted.

“Are you pulling my leg.”

“Well will that get your carburetor fixed or not.”

“This would get me at least five complete cars mate.”

Og hugged Jack.

“Thanks mate. Much appreciated.”

“No problem. You saved my life. I haven’t forgotten that.”

“Anytime. Where are you two off to.”

Jack looked at Suzy.

“I’m not actually sure. Where do you want to go Suzy.”

“How about Paris. I’ve heard it’s wonderful this time of the year.”

“Paris it is then. We’ll send you a postcard Og.”

“Cheers mate. You know the address.”

Jack and Suzy got in the car and drove off as Og watched the two disappear in the distance. A benevolent sun gazed down at them. It was definitely not angry, probably even felt a sort of compassion. What a bunch of rascals.

Afterword

In case you're wondering, this book is entirely fictional. The only exceptions are a few brand names and trademarks here and there, all of which remain the property of their respective owners. The appearance of a particular brand name is not intended to imply endorsement in any way, shape or form.

Bulimia and Transvestitia were originally two countries in an adaptation of *Some Like It Hot*, in which I had the pleasure of participating while in high school. Neither has a direct counterpart in real life. The CIA is obviously a real organization, although in reality probably nothing like the fictitious CIA depicted in the book.

None of the characters are avatars for real people. Nearly all of them, however, are intended to portray some of the human traits we observe in others and ourselves every day. The aliens, of course, do not necessarily belong to this group, although I'd like to think that at least some of their motives are surprisingly familiar.

There are numerous pop culture references littered throughout the book, some more obscure than others. The opening and closing of the book, in particular, are intended as loving hommages to two authors whom I admire and respect very much. I hope you've enjoyed an inward smile of recognition while coming across some of the references.

The unorthodox punctuation within quotations may well have been puzzling at first. Suffice it to say that the wonderful works of J.P. Donleavy have been a huge inspiration for me. Two other authors that I've enjoyed and who have influenced my writing and views on life quite a bit are Roald Dahl and Philip K. Dick. Your friendly neighbourhood library is sure to have some of their books.

As you may have already picked up, there isn't all that much fornicating, arch- or otherwise, in the book, and it

doesn't take place anywhere near Canterbury. I came up with the title while sitting on a Virgin Blue flight from Nadi, Fiji to Brisbane, fuelled by caffeine and the antics of Beauregard the stand-up comedian slash "customer service representative", as I believe members of the cabin crew are called these days. I jotted down a few rough character sketches and possible scenes as well. None of the other ideas made it into the book, but the title stuck.

Coincidentally, it appears I have come up with a word that didn't exist in the English language before – Google doesn't seem to know of any pages unrelated to the book with "arch-fornicator" in them. Perhaps that will be my legacy.

The first draft of this book was written in November 2006 as my NaNoWriMo¹ entry. If you've ever found yourself thinking along the lines of "I'd really like to write a book someday", I suggest you check out the website. November is just around the corner, even if you're reading this in December.

Finally, I'd like to thank you for getting this far, and I hope you enjoyed reading the book. I certainly enjoyed writing it. As Steve Jobs said in his famous commencement address at Stanford in 2005, "Stay hungry, and stay foolish."

August 2008

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¹ <http://www.nanowrimo.org/>

Colophon

Some technical information...

The book is set in Hoefler Text, an OpenType font that comes with Mac OS X. The chapter headings are set in Fertigo Pro², a freely available font by Jos Buivenga.

The first draft of the book was written using LyX³. The paperback version was created by turning a plain text version into a PDF file using custom scripts and Xe_{La}TeX, which is a part of the MacTeX⁴ distribution and is also available for other operating systems. The front cover picture was created using POV-Ray⁵.

² <http://www.josbuivenga.demon.nl/fertigo.html>

³ <http://www.lyx.org/>

⁴ <http://www.tug.org/mactex/>

⁵ <http://www.povray.org/>

JACK BACK WILL RETURN IN THE ARCHANGEL OF KALAHARI