

ED LARK



reverb

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*The son arrived first at the bombed factory. His breath was hot and dry and desperate in his throat as he ran and searched amongst the toppled walls. The night was hot and the building still burned and looking up through the blackened rafters he saw that the moon was orange, seemed coated in fire like the earth.*

*He found them both, their cleaners' uniforms melted across their chests and arms. A girder lay kinked across his mother's neck and his fury tried to lift it. But he could not make the girder move and the metal cut his hand.*

*The villagers came and they dragged the son from the factory and still it was hot and the fires were in the rubble and still the moon was orange and high.*

*The son fell forward, fell to his knees, and they stood him up and they dosed him with brandy and then passed the bottle around. The click of the insects seemed nervy and sharp and the people cried and they pressed shabby bank notes to the son's bloody hand.*

*Some villagers turned away and moved off sadly through the brush; others stayed and coaxed the son to return with them. But he stood still and said nothing; he stood so long that reluctantly, in time, all save one of the villagers departed.*

*The villager who stayed was called Jane. She called the son by his name and asked him to leave with her, to come to her home. But the son just stared ahead.*

*The son felt alone at the broken factory. He felt hungry and numb and the air was peppery with dust.*

*He stared at the rubble.*

*Grief crashed down on him.*

*A man stood up from inside the rubble. He was short and heavy and dressed all in black. The man turned his head until he saw the son and he pointed at him and then began to walk slowly away, across the mounds of brick towards the brush. The son wanted to follow the man but he did not move and instead watched him walk into the brush.*

*Moving off in the direction of the city, the man disappeared.*

*The son looked again at the factory. The rubble was moving again. A hand emerged from beneath a pile of brick. Then quickly a figure; a laughing giant*

*holding a huge sack, a flamboyant codpiece jutting from his flowing harlequin trousers. The giant blinked and grinned. Another figure stood up from the rubble; this one smaller, a spade of beard jutting down from a stern philosopher's face to rest against the neck of his harlequin frock coat.*

*The giant turned and slapped the bearded figure heartily on the shoulders, lifting much dust from his frock coat. Two more figures emerged from the rubble: a woman, tall, knife-thin with a sullen face, wrapped by a dark harlequin cape; then a man, small, bespectacled, wearing a three-piece harlequin suit topped with a bowler hat. The small man smoothed the woman's cape with agile fingers as she stared into the night. A black tulip swayed out from the crown of the small man's bowler hat.*

*The harlequins did not see that they were being watched. The giant harlequin even looked straight at the son, but still he did not see him. So the son watched the four harlequins unobserved.*

*The son saw the small harlequin point into the brush in the direction of the desert, the opposite route to that which the first man had taken. A small animal appeared from the rubble. It had a cat's body, a girl's face and a huge, plumed tale. It shook the dust from its coat and leapt towards the giant.*

*The harlequins moved across the rubble: the giant ahead with his cat, both of them skipping side-to-side, and the woman at the rear, silent and lean and swaddled in her harlequin cape.*

*The son watched them go, and still he felt alone.*

## 1

I was early. Maybe the trains were faster, the track smoother, the city closer. Yes, maybe the city was closer. Though it had seemed far away all my life. But now I was here. And here I stood in Waterloo Station watching the people move past me. They were so white, the blood hiding deep inside them. The bandage on my left hand uncurled and flapped down against my bag. The hole in my palm began to throb. I felt hot. I looked at the people and I began to feel light. Adrenaline skipped into my stomach and up into my throat. I bought cerecives from a woman who looked at me, then forgetives from an old man who did not. I felt that it was time to walk and headed towards the exit. At the top of the steps I looked East, seeing the lip of the Colosseum glide above the shops and offices. More people.

I paused for a moment, watching the people sweep past me. I smiled. Finally I was where I had wanted to be. But I had nowhere to go. Out of the throng a man stepped towards me, he was short and heavy and dressed in black. A white letter A danced on his shoe. He handed me a scrap of paper and walked on. The paper had some writing on it which said *Come and join the Crystal Realm*. An address was written below those words. I read the address and put the paper into my pocket. Already, fresh to the city, already I had an invite.

I walked into the streets. My movement was out of step, village-slow, clumsy; I banged into the city-fast people. Then I relaxed, relinquished I suppose, and took their strides. I was happy and vacant and alone. I walked for a long time in this way. The greatest of all walkers they used to call me... But none of that now. Now I was here. The streets were packed, side streets and main both full with people moving fast. Above them all, nets strung between the buildings. Here the past was dead: there was no *why* in this city of orphans, just now. And now I had an invitation to join the Crystal Realm.

When I grew tired of walking, I hailed a cab, climbed inside and it took me across the city. We arrived, and because I was young and because I had red country cheeks the driver charged me too much. I let him, he had nice hair. I climbed from the cab and stood outside the house for a while. A cat walked towards me then slinked around

my legs. It was always the same: I was a magnet for animals and imbeciles. I rang the bell and waited. I looked around me, noticing the huge cars and bay windows of a wealthy area. I felt a fumbled pressure in my head then a voice said, "Hello." The door clicked open and I walked in. A complex spiral staircase twisted up above me; sleek marble stairs and wrought iron banisters, like money's DNA. I walked it, checking the numbers on the doors. I found the flat and knocked. The sound of my knuckles on the real wood scared me. I waited for a while then the door opened – a beautiful face with question marks for eyebrows.

"Hi, I'm Juan."

"You're early."

We walked down the hall. She was wearing excellent trousers. I asked her name.

"What are you going to do with it?"

"Call you it."

"Not too much?"

"Not too much, no."

"Keeku. I'll get Sarah."

"Sarah?"

"You're in her flat."

I sat down on the sofa, facing towards a window covered by a slatted blind. The room was huge and cream and four more doors led off from it. I stood and walked to the blind. Lifting it, the city's neon brushed my eyes. To the West of the flat rose the honed white limbs of King's College chapel, and behind that the lawns and squares of the Tuileries gardens and the drear hulk of the Pergamon museum, into which all history had rushed, to make itself available. I came round, into this flat. Keeku was moving from room to room. Too busy to smile, precious and serious. She was stupid with self importance. But what did I know? She'd only just answered the door to me. Who did I think I was? Calling a girl with excellent trousers stupid? I was the one who was stupid.

I watched her trousers some more, then turned to see that another woman had entered the room.

"Hi, I'm Sarah, I'm holding out my hand so you can kiss it. Or you can kiss my cheek if you prefer."

I kissed her cheek.

"You are young though. Did Alex send you here?"

"Who's Alex?"

"He wears an A."

"Oh yes, it was him. Alex sent me here."

"So like him. Always talent spotting. Did he find you at the airport or at the station?"

"The station."

"Well, Alex must think you are gifted. He only sends me people who are special. I'm glad you came. It is early for you to be here though."

"The journey was quick. The city's closer than they said."

"Yes. It is. The city's getting closer all the time. It's moving in, folding up like a scrotum in the sea."

"I've never seen the sea."

"I'll take you Juan."

Good. I wanted to be taken, wanted to be accepted.

Sarah disappeared out into the hall and I looked across to see Keeku still moving in and out of doorways, still busy with things I did not understand. She paused for a moment, "I'm going to change. Let Bob in when he comes."

I sat for a while and found that I was thinking. I stopped and searched for the visuals. War most channels: well-dressed air strikes. Clean footage. Slick movie. Then faces. I flicked. Medical channel, an operation: green sleeves in red holes. Better. Flick. Sport. Crabs sidling across roads. Ancient Egypt. Car crashes. I kept flicking. Then a strange pressure in my head, like someone trying to reach me, some agitation, and then the door bell rang. I guessed this was Bob and walked over to answer it. The screen showed a man with a very big nose. He was dressed impeccably so I buzzed him in the door and a few moments later into the flat. He glanced around the room to see if anyone else was there, then he nodded at me in a way suggesting he was unsure if I was a guest or a servant. He went over to the drinks table, his left leg twisting strangely as he walked.

"Where's Sarah?"

“She’s around.”

I turned away and heard him move over to the table and fix a drink. I heard the poured water swerve round shoulders of ice, moving to the bottom of his glass and I looked out of the window, picturing the cork of his Adam’s apple bobbing with the movement of the water. He limped towards me and sat down on the sofa. I turned the visuals off.

“So...”

“... Juan.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“I only arrived today.”

“Organic meat. Keeku will be pleased.”

“She didn’t seem to be.”

“Indifference is her seduction technique.”

“What does she do?”

“She’s an artist?”

“What type?”

“Sex and sculpture.”

“So,” I thought I’d better ask him, “what do you do for a living?”

“Crack new markets.”

I must have appeared puzzled because he huddled in towards me, adopting taut and eager mannerisms, “We asked ourselves what was left in abundance that hadn’t been colonised. We came up with three latent niches, all woefully under-marketed: unemployment, schizophrenia and impotence. And we’ve just opened up some innovative flanks in the incontinence market. We deal in stalkverts a lot too, but mainly we pass things around and time things.”

“Are you telling the truth Bob?”

“Yes. Say, Jono, you’re unemployed aren’t you? Can you get it up?”

“I’m not for sale Bob.”

“Sure you are. Come into the office, might have something for you.”

He moved a small silver baton across my eyes and I felt his numbers move into me, “Think me. Let’s do some.”

Keeku emerged, she was wearing a bicycle dress, its wheels curled

around to cover her nipples and the saddle was jacked up in front of her pubis. She came over to us and smiled at Bob, saying his name almost silently. He blinked and gave a small nod. Then she held out her hand to me, “Juan, come into the plastic room. We’ve arranged a welcome present for you.”

We walked across the lounge and into the room nearest to the kitchen. It was huge and empty except for a large reclining chair and two naked people.

Keeku turned to me, “They’re plastics, you’re going to get your face done. But I’m first.”

She sat down and the plastics moved towards her, “Nose work,” she commanded.

I saw that their palms were glowing silver. She closed her eyes and they placed their hands in a stack on her face. The silvery glow increased until it covered all of Keeku’s face. The plastics were smiling in a way I disliked. They raised their hands slightly and then quickly pulled them away. Keeku opened her eyes and stood. A mirror appeared in the wall, she walked over to it, and examined her nose. Her nostrils had been stretched. She turned and smiled and guided me over to the chair, “He’d like his eyes done, that green doesn’t match his hair. And make his skin whiter, the red makes him look like a farm hand.”

When it was over I walked to the mirror. My eyes were blue now, the blue of shark stars. I liked them. My skin was white. I liked it also. Keeku placed her hand on my shoulder and turned me to face her. She scrutinised my face. I couldn’t tell if she liked the changes, but she took my hand, leading me into an adjacent room.

Keeku said, “Begin,” and what I thought were walls turned out to be screens. Rippling blue images filled the room and my body began to feel light. I looked over at her.

“It’s an image pool. Move your body or you’ll drown,” she said, as she moved hers. I felt a little stupid but pushed out with my arms. My feet came off the floor and I moved forward. Then I kicked my legs out behind me and moved forward again. I reached the end of the room and stopped, turning my back to it and kicking gently with my feet. My clothes began to feel wet. I looked at Keeku, she was smiling.

"I'm swimming," I said to her. "Swimming."

I began to feel good. And now Keeku swam to me and her breath tasted and her skin felt like ever. She pulled away from me and said, "Change."

The blue screens rolled; a lighter blue with patches of white. My clothes were dry now and they rushed against me. I looked down and the city was beneath me, rushing, rushing upwards; the neon glow and the old and the new towns pushing up to me and getting closer. Because the blue was the sky and the white was the clouds and I was falling.

I felt something above me. Then Keeku floated down level with me, and we were together – attached to nothing, floating in the bubble of the Crystal Realm. Me with my new eyes and my plastic city pallor and Keeku beside me, suspended in nothing by nothing. I reached into my pocket with my one good hand and felt for my cerectives.

I awoke early in a huge bed. I was alone and light came in from a picture window. The night before twisted through my mind and excited me. Sarah came in.

"Morning Juan. News just thought me that the beach has arrived. Get up, I'll take you."

"Is Keeku coming to the beach?"

"No. She has some business."

"Sarah, why are you being so kind to me?"

"I'm kind. No suspicions. You're Crystal now."

We left the flat and walked down the staircase and out of the front door. It was very hot. We took a cab and drove through the city.

"Where is this beach, lady?" asked the driver.

"Near the Sagrada Familia."

A mile beyond the Sagrada, a line of skyscrapers moved into view, curling in a semicircle around what we guessed was the beach. The cab got snared at lights and the driver flicked his windscreen to visuals. More war. I suggested to Sarah that we walk the last part of our journey. She turned to me with apprehension, "Do you think it will be alright?"

I reassured her, and thrilled and decided she said, "Okay, I'll try it."

We paid and climbed out of the cab. The pavement was hot, and although it was morning, the sun was directly overhead – it looked like the beach had it fixed at midday. Sarah slipped her mind in mine and I thought I heard it flutter. She placed her hand in mine also. I felt happy at the slenderness, the weakness I suppose of her knuckles and I squeezed her hand twice.

Above the streets, nets were strung between buildings. I looked up at them and Sarah said, "It's monkey netting. Crystals use it to swing the city."

A single road pushed straight through the scrapers and down to the beach. Kids bounced past in kangaroo boots. Shops lined the road selling beach paraphernalia and pro- and anti-sun products. We walked down and came level with the scrapers which curled against the lip of the beach. Then we made the sand.

The sea fanned out forever and yet found time to roll into the shore. The sand was soft and sieved and felt fine on the bottom of my feet. It was too hot. We moved to a patch of beach with cooling. Aqua vendors crawled out of the sea and Sarah bought two red waters. I felt good. We took off our clothes and went into the sea. The water was not as fresh as it had been in the image pool. It was drier and less realistic. Still, it was good to be here with Sarah. The waves crashed over us and Sarah didn't seem to think of her hair. The owners of the beach had provided some fish and they swam between us. I began to love Sarah.

We walked back onto the beach and Sarah was laughing as she lay on her towel. She looked good. I told her. She laughed again and told me I was yesterday, but I could see that she was pleased. A tinted bubble pushed up from the sand and covered us. We could see out onto the beach still, but now could not be seen ourselves. Sarah explained, "It's a courtesy bubble, for Crystals. It's protection. The beach must pick up who's euro'd and who's not," Sarah pointed across the beach to a dishevelled group of people crouching in a circle near the water's edge, "like those Intrans."

A couple of Crystals came over to see if we wanted a screw. Sarah declined and they made their way down to the sand to join a group of friends.

"They're going to have a body glut," Sarah explained. "They all

multi-task. They'll do anything to anyone. Anyone who's Crystal."

I watched them for a while as they began to contort and ebb into a ball of pleasure. I wanted to join in. Sarah looked bored as she watched them.

An old woman approached our bubble and sat next to us on the sand. Sarah looked over to her, "She's an Extra, looks safe enough though, let's talk to her."

Sarah popped the bubble and turned to the old woman, "What can you do?"

"I'm not your normal Extra, busking to the Crystals, love."

Sarah laughed, "So you can't do anything."

"I can read your fortune."

"You're in finance?"

"No, I tell the future."

Sarah looked scared, "Then tell it to leave. I know the future; thousands of moments like this, but different from this. Thousands of moments that have nothing to do with each other, nothing to say to each other. The future is now, only then."

The Extra stood and shrugged and walked off.

We lay back on the sand in silence. It was time for a shark feed and a couple of Extras were dropped from a boat by two women wearing municipal uniforms. The sun was way too hot so Sarah brought it down for us. I asked her to take it right down. I thought a sunset might cool her off. Maybe it would make her happy. The old Extra had walked off with Sarah's smile.

"Look at the sun, Sarah." But she didn't so I did. It moved slowly down onto the water, bleeding on it. I wanted to be like Sarah so I got bored of it too.

"Shall we go and get some food Juan?"

Outside the restaurant, Sarah euro'd the driver. A cat came up to me and I stroked it. We went inside. A man greeted us and took us to our table. We sat down and a screen hovered over while we waited. It was trimmed with orchids and tuned to battle. Sarah excused herself and I did some war. She returned from the toilet with different hair which I said I liked. I wanted to ask Sarah about the Extras and the Intrans, but didn't know if I should. Was it bad for a Crystal to be interested in them? I asked her anyway.

"Extras are disposable, broken people. They are mad, alone, practically useless. If it wasn't for their menial functions we'd call them all."

"And the Intrans?"

"The Intransigents are a little different. They're pretty useless too, but they've got reason, or think they have. They're not broken like the Extras, they could seriously euro if they wanted to but they choose not to. Can be dangerous. They have grudges. I've met some very smart Intrans who could have been Crystal, but they won't let go. They say they're against the city, but in most cases, they're only against themselves. There are far more Extras than Intrans. To be an Intrans is too hard, it makes you bitter and angry. I mean how could you oppose the city, what could you do? We've offered to make the Intrans fashionable. They just don't want it."

I asked Sarah if that was it: Extras, Intrans and Crystals? She explained about the Shapers, "The Shapers are above the Crystals. The Crystals move with the city, but the Shapers move faster than the city and they make it. Alex shapes. I would have thought the Shapers brought the beach."

"And what was I when I arrived in the city – I wasn't a Crystal then, was I an Extra or an Intrans?"

Sarah blinked at me in surprise, "I thought you knew Juan. When you arrived, you were nothing."

We sat in silence for a while. She had changed.

"Juan? Are you going to get some work?"

"Bob said he'd get me something."

"Good because Alex will send some new down soon and we'll need your room."

The food arrived but Sarah didn't touch it. She said she was going to go back to her flat.

"Have I done anything wrong Sarah?"

"No Juan, I'm ill. We all are. You can find your way back?"

I nodded. She stuffed some euros in my hand and left. After the meal I paid and walked outside, in the direction of the old district. My hand began to hurt. A small drop of blood appeared on the bandage in the centre of my palm. I looked up. Beyond the monkey netting, the moon had been placed quite high and was almost full.

I walked down a wide straight road with spaced sodium and pockets of vendors' neon, then I turned into an alley and the lights began to snake more, to move in curves. Small side streets led quickly into each other. I was in the old town. It was darker here, the air was sweet and weary.

I walked past the Colosseum and through the Grand Place. I felt I knew where I was going. The greatest of all walkers they used to call me... Alleys bred. Extras moved around me; alone, walking slowly alone. A woman's form picked out by the light, leaning back against a building, curving her back to its shape. She began to mumble and cry, staring at the moon, eyes full of solace and rapture. I too looked upwards, then moved into the shadows and leaned against the stone. I began to think of my home. I felt the stone against my back, sucking me in, pulling me down, deeper into memory. A cry rose into my throat. A cab rounded the corner, rolling sleekly through the slender streets. It passed me and for a moment I saw inside; two Crystals, laughing and drinking water. I saw my reflection on the car window.

I moved away from the wall and walked down the street, following the cab.

## ONE

The sun was already hot when it rose above the dunes. Alberto was awake, the tulip in his hat turning slowly to face the sun as he kindled the embers of the previous night's fire. He lowered a coffee pot onto a stone in the centre of the fire. Louis awoke and brushed sand from his beard, squinting at the rising sun and steadying himself as he prepared to sit up. Sansu awoke and shivered, deep scars visible on her arms before she wrapped a harlequin cape around herself. The giant Gargantua opened his eyes and let out a lion's yawn which pulled the growing flames towards his mouth. The girl cat crawled out from his shirt and stretched in the sunlight. He pulled its feathers and kissed it.

Gargantua walked behind the dune and in a moment his happy voice boomed out, "I'm pissing a river Alberto. You could drown three midgets in my stream."

Louis exhaled long-sufferingly. Alberto smiled as he pushed a stick into the fire and fished out the steaming coffee pot. Sansu stared into the desert, smoking and smiling distantly. She produced a small, black book from her cape and began to scratch tiny words on an empty page. Gargantua came back and they all sat down to drink coffee. The giant poured a large dose of brandy into his tin mug and laughed. Louis scowled at him. Alberto set about preparing breakfast; he boiled some water, took some rice from Gargantua's sack and added it to a cooking pot.

"Well Alberto, what do we do today?" asked Louis.

"We walk, we find Juan."

"We would be better served raising an international army of workers," asserted Louis in rehearsed, indignant tones.

"More coffee," demanded Gargantua.

Alberto poured and turned to Louis, "No, one by one, we agreed." He turned to Sansu, "Sansu, will you eat today?"

She didn't respond.

"Sansu, I ask you."

She nodded but continued to look out across the dunes.

They finished their meal and cleared up the camp; Alberto

kicking over the ashes of the fire while Gargantua did many press-ups and laughed, the girl cat sitting on his back. They set off to walk – climbing over dunes and rolling down them, Louis at the back, debating with himself, and Sansu at the front, moving with loping, elegant strides. The sun leered down in their faces as they followed it across the sand. Gargantua chatted with Alberto about space travel. He claimed to have designed a rocket which was powered by eggs. The girl cat purred on his shoulder. Alberto put the realistic case to Gargantua, but it made no impression.

Vapours of heat lifted from the sand, like adders charmed from baskets. Two palm trees appeared on the horizon, inviting them to shade. Gargantua did a somersault, as did his cat, which landed neatly back on his shoulder. Sansu reached the trees first and saw a small pool of water curling between them. Two camels drank at the pool. They were wild and hissed as the travellers approached. The troubadours rested for a while in the shade and ate the remains of what they had cooked for breakfast.

Louis sat on his own, reading a thick old book. Gargantua moved over to him and asked him what he was reading.

“Of man’s inhumanity to man,” replied Louis.

Gargantua nudged him hard in the ribs, adding to it, “There’s another page for you, beardo.”

Louis hit the giant who laughed and picked Louis up by the coat, swinging him round. Louis spewed oaths until Alberto intervened and coaxed the giant to cease revolving the philosopher.

“Why do you study this?” Asked Gargantua when Louis had recovered from his dizziness.

“It is the condition of the world,” replied the stern philosopher. “The worst always govern the best. It is what we must overcome,” he added, clenching his fists with intense defiance. Sansu and Alberto looked at each other and smiled. Gargantua stood up and assumed his debating posture, his codpiece jutting threateningly forward.

“No, I put it to you that the world is splendid and full of joy. People eat, they make love, babies are born. There is kissing and music. People drink and they piss. It is simple. We have our bodies, they are made for pleasure. To each is available happiness; all seek and sin and learn. That is the condition of the world, my stupid, morbid friend.”

Louis stood up, smacking his lips with his tongue as he readied them for rhetoric, “No, my naive friend, some live in prisons created by others. Many toil while few take the fruits of that toil. To few are available the joys of happiness. Some men are dogs. Others are kings. Look around you.” Louis wafted his hand, invoking the gravitas of the horizon.

“I see only sand, you buffoon.”

Louis snorted through his nose and his beard quivered for a moment in his nostril breeze. He rushed at Gargantua, his face screwed up with anger. But Gargantua put out his arm and placed his hand on Louis’ head, keeping him at a safe distance. Louis swung many blows but all missed. Gargantua improvised a song as he restrained the raging philosopher:

*Oh he reads so much,  
And he gets it wrong,  
He is so weak,  
I am so strong.*

Alberto whispered to Sansu who stood and walked over to the camels. She knelt close to them and again they began to hiss. Sansu looked into their eyes and began to move her hands in front of her face, miming the scuttle of the scorpion. The camels grew still. She roped their necks and brought them over to Alberto. He pushed his spectacles flush to his nose, “Gentlemen, your attention.”

Louis stopped swinging at Gargantua and the giant lowered his hand.

“I propose a test.” They eyed him warily. “A camel race. You see those dunes over to the West?”

They both looked, turned back to Alberto and nodded.

“Race round there and back. If Louis wins, the world is black, if Gargantua wins, it is white. Whoever cheats cooks for a week. Agreed?”

They again both nodded and reluctantly walked towards their camels. There was a squabble over who got the healthier looking beast which was settled by Sansu who suggested that Louis had it because he was less likely to win.

“Pah,” cursed Louis with faux indignance. But he did not refuse the camel. They mounted and Alberto shouted, “Go.” The giant and the philosopher made off and Alberto and Sansu sat down.

“Peace,” sighed Alberto and he and Sansu laughed. They began a game of chess.

The great philosopher took an early lead, his frock coat flapping out behind him and his body bouncing up and down on the rolling hump. The giant was behind, his cat clinging to his left shoulder and his legs dragging along the ground and slowing his camel. He leaned forward and whispered in the camel’s ear and it picked up speed a little. His codpiece jolted into the camel’s neck and he grimaced. In a few minutes, they rounded the first dune where Gargantua knew Alberto could not see him. He whispered to the plumed cat and it made a huge leap and landed, its claws sticking deep into the flank of Louis’ mount. The camel veered off course, running away from the dune. Gargantua laughed loudly, which was a mistake because Alberto heard this and smiled, “He’s cheating.”

The cat jumped from Louis’ camel and scuttled back towards Gargantua’s, leaping back on to his shoulder, its feathers pluming out behind as they increased the pace. Gargantua began to enjoy the ride, but as he came behind the second dune, he was deftly struck on the back of his head. He looked down to see a book falling to the sand, then behind him to see an angry Louis and an angrier camel gaining ground on him.

“Ha, you fool. Getting what you deserve,” shouted Louis.

“He’s cheating as well,” said Alberto. “Excellent, no cooking.”

The camels were level as they appeared from behind the dunes. Gargantua and Louis bobbed and swayed atop their mounts and the camels ran faster and faster. They were both out of control now, and still level. They made the oasis and could not be stopped, rushing right past Sansu and Alberto. They appeared again some minutes later, both without their camels. They were arguing and slapping each other. They arrived beneath the palms.

“I was first by three hundred and seven metres,” said Gargantua.

“Alberto, it was plainly I,” asserted Louis.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t looking,” said Alberto and he and Sansu

giggled. “I’m sure it was a draw.”

“It wasn’t,” they both said and turned to face each other.

“I am the better man,” said Gargantua.

“You fool, it is I,” replied Louis.

Alberto entered the fray, “Well, I don’t know who the better man is. But you both cheated.”

They looked at Alberto, ashamed, briefly in sympathy.

The argument raged all afternoon as the four harlequins walked through the desert. The philosopher and the giant were up ahead: “Life is a garden”... “No, it is a prison”... “To own is a blessing”... “No, it is theft.”

Alberto and Sansu walked behind and Sansu sang to the gentle one. Her voice was sweet and moved out across the desert, slipping for miles across the bare shoulders of the dunes. Alberto turned to Sansu, hesitancy detectable in his small face, “Do you think we’ll find him, Sansu?”

She nodded and continued to sing, her voice as old as the sand. They spent that night at another oasis, sleeping beneath four tall palm trees.

## 2

Bob was already at the office when I arrived, “Good morning Juan, looking good.” I wasn’t. I didn’t look at all spectacular. My clothes were out of fashion until lunch, but until I was earning I couldn’t afford to dress pure Crystal.

“So Bob, where do I start?”

He nodded towards a Crystal working at a desk in the corner of the room, “Tony runs our trading division. He is going to spend the day showing you around, so you can make a real start tomorrow. We’ll see what area you respond to.” And with that, Bob hunched off, and Tony stood and walked towards me.

Tony was a try-hard Crystal; not quite there with the clothes, not full enough of indifference to be a real contender, but he was definitely making an attempt. His face was plastic in many different ways and his hair was feathered. He had the remains of a hole in his neck from when tracheotomy was fashionable, and a huge watch inlaid into his right palm. His left hand was missing. I liked Tony – he wasn’t competition. But I could tell Tony didn’t like the look of me.

“Let’s start with the hostage trading. Think you can handle it?”

I lost control of my face and glared bitterly at him. I didn’t know what hostage trading was, but if Tony could handle it, I could handle it. I would succeed. It was what I wanted. I was on my way, I was living the Crystal life.

“Now,” Tony continued, “I’ll run through all this pretty quickly and then if you’ve got any questions, you haven’t been listening. Nearly every day a Crystal or sometimes even a Shaper gets taken by one of the terrorist groups we might be in the process of eradicating, or by the opposition in one of the wars we might be winning. It’s unfortunate, but it’s business. Once taken, these hostages are stashed. Usually it’s not bad for them, even the lamest terror has good war hospitality. But that doesn’t matter, the point is to get them home and more importantly, to be seen to get them home.

“So *the enemy*, as we call them, usually waits for a few hours till we put our information out: ‘Ten taken hostage in terrorist swoop!’ They give us time to begin the concern process, the stickiness and breadth

of which increases with the worth of the hostage. Okay. They’ve got the hostages, the public’s involved. If they’ve got a Shaper they might cut him and mail a bit round. They’ll get a good plastic in though and the hostage usually has some say over what’s removed. So, if he’s never liked his nose...

“Then they send their price in. The terror guys have got good accountants and they usually get it right. Now we get in touch with our stalkvert department. We let the stalkvert boys know how much we’re looking for. What we’ve got to raise to get our boys home.

“Our stalk people have a look at the Hostage Index to see what they’ve got to do. Say our boy is worth three thousand euros, that’s what they’ve got to raise. So they start to look at the terror people, they might be Sastrians or Slavs. Let’s say they’re Sastrians. You look at the Index and it tells you that your average Joe Sastri, your non-rich, non-diplomatic Sastrian on the mat is worth one thousand euros. We’ve got to raise three Sastrians at a thou’ each to get our Shaper back to us – plus of course whatever the terror boys are charging in holding fees. So the stalk boys get three verts ready, set them, and send them out. There are some ground rules. It’s bad form to stalk a temple – it’s rude, like taking a golfing Shaper. Bumps up the hostage price. Compensation.

“So the verts are out, they find their targets. They get inside them: the targets start buying booze, bikinis for their daughters, doing war. The verts are taking them over, reducing difference, making them like us. So although these guys can be in their homes, they are pathologically similar, we’ve got them. We don’t even have to deal with war hospitality. When we’ve got three thousand euros of Sastrian all minded up, we invoice the terror and set up an exchange. They send us our boys, we call off the verts, everyone gets publicity, and we charge the government a fat commission. You follow?”

I nodded and Tony moved over to the next section of the office, “Guys, this is our new Crystal.”

The guys turned round to look at me and waved. They were both impeccable young Crystals, peacocked up in all the new male garb.

“This is Bernard and this is Tissy, they’re our Traders, you’ll be working with them,” he paused, “if it pans out for you here. They’ll explain how it all works.”

Tony walked off into the next office.

“Sit down Juan,” said Bernard. I did.

“So,” Tissy launched straight in at me, “here we trade schizophrenia, impotence and unemployment. They’re innovative markets. We’re just picking off niches where we can, and putting them in long kennels. The unemployment market’s a tricky dog to walk. Example. We get a call from a Crystal with a bulk unemployment order. Woof. Woof. Great order. But you’ve got to be careful. Everyone loves to be a hero, but you don’t want to sell too much – if we did then no one would be working. And if no one’s working, no one’s buying. Don’t get me wrong, we love the short term here, but this could scratch up the woodwork. The schizophrenia market is small but growing. It’s good for sales in general, keeps people in the present, keeps the fleas biting. We’re working on some ‘Buy’ voices at the moment, should make an attractive implant for a lot of companies. The impotence market is mainly poodle-sized orders. Example. A repulsed wife flops her husband. But mostly you’ll just be making things up.”

“Fine.”

Bernard and Tissy turned back to their screens and I stood behind them for a while, watching them work. Their heads were ringing and their phones were busy. I remembered all I’d been told, filed it all away. Tony came over, “Okay boys, take a break. Bob says you should take the new boy out to play.”

Bernard and Tissy stood up from their screens and turned. They walked past me and I followed them out of the office. I noticed that Bernard had some difficulty walking. We hit the top of the stairs, slipped into our monkey arms, came out onto the roof and swung up for the netting.

“Where we going?” I shouted to the traders who swung quickly ahead of me.

“Thought we’d do some war down at the Traders’ Palace.”

As we swung over the Alhambra, Bernard pointed out West and I got a great view of Vesuvius, its sides steep and even, vines climbing over its Northern side. We moved towards the river. It was swollen. Two dead Extras floated across its surface. A huge blue building came into view and we swung into its forecourt. A cat ran across the paving slabs to sniff at my feet and I paused to stroke it.

At the entrance to the Palace, Tissy and Bernard were met by a

doorman who handed them each a long grey coat and a sabre. As they pulled their coats on, the doorman asked them a question which I couldn’t quite hear. They nodded and he quickly scanned their faces with a small silver baton. After a few moments, I was also handed a coat and a sabre and the doorman asked me if I was going to fly. I looked at Tissy and he smiled and nodded. I told the doorman that I would and he scanned me. I put the coat on and slipped the sabre into my belt.

“What is this place?” I asked.

Tissy turned to me and grinned, “Traders’ Palace. The Tsar’s old winter palace in St Petersburg. After the revolution, an art gallery. Now it’s here. Fine kennel.”

We went into the Ice Room and drank from the vodka fountain, then moved into the War Room. I looked around me, the ceiling was high and vaulted, its arches moving down to touch the tops of soaring windows. Paintings hung on the back wall. The bar was an old tank. Tables dotted the floor and around thirty traders lolled around the room in various states of drunkenness. The walls not covered with paintings were screens. They were all tuned to war. In the corner, two ex-generals sold punditry. We sat down at a table, the glass top of which was war; techno scenes, faces kept out of it. Tissy explained, “We only get the hardware shots. No refugees, no close ups. They keep it sporty in the Traders’.”

Stats rolled onto the screens, indicating excellent warage from our pilots. Cheers ripped through the room and some traders stood and rattled their sabres. A pundit announced that ground troops were going in at 3:10pm next Monday and not at 2:30 as he had been previously informed. There were more cheers from the traders. “We are victorious,” shouted one as he threw his sabre at the wall. There was drinking.

“It’s nearly time,” Bernard said as he stood up from the table and practised a golf swing with his sabre. Three joysticks rolled up from the table and Tissy told me to grab one. All the screens went blank apart from the largest on the front wall of the War Room. It now displayed thirty or so small jets, hovering in a line, a face on each of the wings. The planes were above a desert in which it was early morning. Tissy pushed forward on his stick and turned to me, “Fly Juan, fly.”

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I began to move my stick and a plane with my face on its wing flew forward, “What do I do?”

“There’s four people in the desert. Whoever hounds them out first gets to fly for real.”

Tissy explained as he moved his plane forward: in return for investment from the Traders’ Palace, the government let the traders fly a sortie everyday; a real sortie. This was the way of deciding who got to fly it.

I looked up to the screen, seeing my plane lagging far behind the others. All around the room, traders shouted and whooped as their planes moved out. A couple of traders who’d been in the Ice Room a little too long started a dog fight with each other, they swung around and fired, missing their targets but taking out some of the other planes. A brawl started to my left but quickly collapsed over furniture. It occurred to me as the other planes vanished from view, that the target didn’t have to be ahead of me. I slowed my speed and swung my cross-hairs round and down onto the sand. I saw a small pool of water ringed by four palm trees, wagging slightly in the desert breeze. I looked closely and saw a foot jutting slightly out from beneath the canopy of palms. I dropped height and flew back round. I made out four sleeping figures dressed in harlequin costumes. Cross-sights appeared in front of me, and with a flick of my wrist the figures were caught within them.

“Hey, Juan’s found them,” shouted Bernard as a bunch of planes wheeled back towards me. My palm began to throb as the figures slept in my sights. Bernard and Tissy were staring at me, waiting for me to act. I pulled my hand away from the stick and stood up from the table, running towards the toilet.

In the privacy of the cubicle I continued to sweat. I breathed deeply, failing to control the alarm of my pulse.

Some time later I came out and sat next to Bernard and Tissy.

Tissy turned to me, “What happened Juan? You had them in sight. Bernard took them out. He’s flying for real now.”

I looked towards the front of the hall. Bernard’s cross-sights settled on a small, dark block, his thumb twitched and the missile moved outwards, impacting on the factory with near-simultaneous explosion.

Bernard altered the course of the plane, sat back and lit a cigarette. The ex-generals re-commenced their punditry.