



Futurism

ICSF Fanzine

Welcome from the editor

Welcome to Picocon 34! You are currently reading our fanzine, produced specifically for this year's Picocon. Inside, you will find short works of fiction written by ICSF members. If you are looking for directions/timetables of events or other Picocon related details, check your other leaflet or pick one up from the front desk.

This year, the theme of Picocon is 'Futurism', which is reflected in several of the entries in this fanzine. Stories range from deadpan serious to completely nonsensical (readers of the final story, you have been warned). I very much hope you enjoy your time reading this year's Wyrmtongue! Have a great time at Picocon today.

Robin 'Dobbin' Thomas

Image credits:

- Cover - Zoe Vallis
- Sainsbury's van - www.j-sainsbury.co.uk
- Ocado van - www.harrybromptons.com/harry-in-ocado
- Werther's Originals - en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Werther's_Original

Contents

1	‘Styx and Stones’ by Smitha Maretvadakethope	4
2	‘Weary Spirit’ by Saad Ahmed	10
3	‘Recreational Meteorology’ by Elizabeth Windo	12
4	‘Human’ by Sanchit Sharma	13
5	‘The Enlightened One’ by Jian Li Chew	18
6	‘Delivery’ by Robin ‘Dobbin’ Thomas	26
7	‘The Sleepy Misadventures of Shane’ by ICSF members who were in the library on the evening of the 10 th of Febuary	41

1 ‘Styx and Stones’ by Smitha Maretvadakethope

Beware the contents of this tale,
for in them lies a man so frail
that he does think death is release
and tries to make his own life cease.

Drip.

Silence pervaded the very pores of the city, as the winds did not dare to make even the slightest of squeaks, simply floating imperceptibly over the irregular skylines of modernity. Between the dark crevices of endless buildings, lonesome streetlights flickered, humming only occasionally with surges of electricity. They illuminated potholes, straits of tarmac, and orange cones which waited expectantly for the rabid destruction of the lands they guarded. The lights unveiled dumps of plastic bottles, cans and dried chewing gum within the borders of the city, as they danced together in their unlikely choreographies.

Drip.

Through the city ran a meandering lifeline. A source of hope for many, and the promise of death for others. A once glassy river flowed playfully through it all. The river breathed deeply, rising and falling, ebbing and flowing, being the only constant in a city that changed every day. The lovelorn embankments gave way to their desire to accompany the river as they crumbled slowly, gently, joining its seemingly endless flow in the hopes of finding an adventure.

Drip.

The twinkling stars extinguished in the river’s reflection as her waters tumble over themselves, till each star was naught but a ripple. And yet a single celestial body could not be dimmed despite the river’s valiant efforts to submerge it. The half-moon gleamed defiantly in her waters, gleefully sweeping over the river, and latching onto everything that light may touch. The moon’s light shone through gaps between monuments, from reflections off billboards, and directly onto the river itself. The moon sought out every seemingly unimportant fracture in her nightly quest and always waited patiently for when the sun grew weary.

Drip.

Moonlight swept over the black hair of a man, whose face was marked with glimmering streaks. His lengthy black coat was dishevelled and his dress shoes were caked in mud. A heavy rock scratched his soft hands. A glib drop swelled in his brown eyes and trickled down his face, collecting on his still hairless chin.

Drip.

The tear disappeared into the river, melting into its lively stream. His lips quivered and his body shook as he pulled on the thick rope wrapped around the rock. It tugged on his leg, but remained firm, establishing itself like another limb. He exhaled meekly, colouring the air white. He hugged the rock close like a child clinging to a teddy bear and climbed onto the ledge of the bridge. Goosebumps rose over his flesh, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, as the hollowness began spreading through his abdomen. The cocoon-like layers of clothing did nothing to warm his icy limbs. He did not need to put his hand into his pocket to feel the weight of the innocuous papers that made him long for the bottom of the ocean. When there is no ocean, rivers must do.

Just one step. It will all be over. Just... one... single... step. Then I can be rid of all the pain and troubles and burdens...

A cat weaved through his legs and meowed beside him. Startled, he lost his footing and fell forward. The clocks sped ahead, the years turning to days, the days to hours, the hours to seconds, and the seconds to mere instants, and yet he felt everything in excruciating slowness.

He watched as the rock fell down ahead of him, his body following it slowly as he dove in feet first, breaking the surface of the icy stream. The water gleamed white as it jumped up in response, hailing down once his entire body was submerged.

No! The thought rung out in his mind, clear and crisp as a fresh day. He began flapping his arms desperately and kicked furiously as he struggled to fight the rock which weighed him down.

No, no, I want to live! The thoughts attacked his skull as realisation dawned on him. This world is no fairy tale. There are no swift and merciful endings. It is a dire and ugly place filled with much that is unbearable, but some things cannot be abandoned. *I want life!*

He tugged on the rock, trying to pick it up, but somehow a thick chain of seaweed had wrapped itself around the rock, anchoring him into place. He struggled and pulled, scratching like a ferocious beast at the seaweed, not noticing the pitch-black eyes in the distance.

A series of large bubbles escaped his lips.

Everything grew blurry... darker... unfocused...

No, please... he thought once more, hand outstretched in the direction of the water surface where the moon shone brightly. *No...*

His body began relenting, hope and life draining from him, as he closed his hand around the moon in one last plea.

What...?

Instead of grasping water, a half-moon shaped blade cut into his palm, drawing blood.

How...?

Don't ask questions, Endymion. Save yourself, a voice breathed intimately as if it whispered from beside him.

With his last shred of his strength, he brought the blade to the rope and began slashing at it, gritting his teeth together. It frayed with each uncoordinated stroke, as the stream kept fighting against his hand. Dark, rusty blood fled from the blade as the rope relented at last.

All he saw was water. Dark, murky, twisting, unyielding water which held him down despite every stroke of his legs. It pressed down, pushing him along like a ragdoll. Tossing him over and over, until he couldn't tell up from down, left from right, and lost the blade in the vastness of the river. He stared dazedly into the distance where incorporeal souls lamented; pity and sadness emanating from them. Their translucent selves floated along the riverbed, wandering downstream. They reached up for him and turned their faceless forms towards him.

The light, Endymion. The light, whispered the same strange voice. Blinking drowsily, and unable to focus, he saw the moonlight filter through the waves. But it was too late.

Everything went dark.

He didn't hear the waves. He didn't hear his frantic heartbeat. He didn't hear the blood-curdling scream that shattered the night. He didn't feel the cool, inhuman fingers which wrapped around his wrist. He didn't feel the slap of fresh air as he broke to the surface of the river, to a land that looked nothing like the one he had left behind.

His body resurfaced in the midst of a barren world, with death cradling both sides of the embankment, in the form of rotting trees and parched lands. The skies were crimson blood, and in the distance stood a ferry, made of old well-worn wood, whose polish flaked from its sharp body. Upon the ferry stood a lonesome ferryman holding an oar upon his shoulders, watching intently. His wrinkled face twisted in wry amusement, as he watched with interest.

In Endymion's unconscious state, he did not feel a dozen wraiths wrap themselves around his legs, trying to drag him down. Nor did he feel the soft glow, from the inhuman white hand entering into his forehead, nor feel it spreading into his core and sliding over his skin. The light wrapped itself around his body and illuminated him from within until the wraiths let go, hissing in agony.

Stop that, Selene! He entered the realm of hate, and that makes him my rightful acquisition, an angry voice announced, surfacing upstream. Liquids dripped from the creature's body, spilling like ink from the dark-red dulse which hung from her head. On her head was a crown of young starfish, entangled with several strands of seaweed, crowning her fae-body. A sea lamprey slung tightly around the waist of her knee-length zebra mussel dress, reflecting in the black pool that the river had become. The gills on her upper arm flared briefly, threateningly displaying a luminous green layer beneath her scale shoulder-pads. She glowered, her jet black eyes focused on the glowing, seemingly-immaterial, figure who carried Endymion in her arms, cradling the unconscious form protectively.

He fell by accident, Styx. He was not yours to drown.

I can do what I want to those who attempt to end their miserable existences.

And yet you insisted on trying to kill him even when he had a change of heart. You know as well as I do that this is not his place.

Styx's gills flared again. *You have no right to judge my decisions.* With a flick of her wrist, a wall of water rose from where she stood, piling onto itself until there was a plunging wave that should have dried out any other river but the Styx. With one fell swoop of Selene's wrist, the wave split apart in the middle and crashed down on either side of Endymion.

Do not try to challenge me, Styx. I control the seas, the tides and the winds of this world. You are nothing but a little pawn in Hades' game.

I am no such thing, Styx growled, black eyes wide with fury. Her teeth gleamed as she propelled towards them, breaking easily through the walls of water that sprung up with each of Selene's hand gestures. Styx' tail oscillated frantically, as she closed the distance between them.

Sucking in a sharp breath, Selene clutched Endymion and covered his eyes with her hand.

A bright light burst forth from her body, and pushed Styx back. From below the water surface, the faceless wraiths briefly regained the lights of their eyes

and swam to the surface. They gazed upon the unnatural brightness, tilting their heads in awe before the light dimmed once again. With that, the ones closest to Styx grabbed onto her as they reverted to their previous state, and pulled her into the depths with them.

From the distance, a low, boisterous laugh filled the empty landscape.

“Charon?”

“I must admit this has been a most entertaining night, Selene. Styx shall be furious once she breaks free from the damned.” He beamed at her, as he stood in his ferry, leaning against the oar casually, his blue-green eyes glittering in her remnant glow.

“You do not think she is in the right?” Selene asked, levitating towards him, while never letting go of the prized mortal.

“We both know that Styx’s claim is a true one. The life was forfeit, whether his appearance on my river was by choice or not. But as you have both meddled in his fate this night... I shan’t force you to give this one to Hades just yet.” He smirked at the man, and touched his forehead briefly, creating a small flame which entered into his body. “And as I am now feeling quite genial, I shall even grant him safe passage without payment when the time comes for his true departure.”

“Thank you,” she breathed a sigh of relief.

“There is no need to thank me, young one. There is still much to be learnt by you and the mortal.”

“This mortal is different,” she insisted. “I can feel this one can achieve much among his kind. I have watched them for so long from the skies, and I am certain that greatness slumbers in this one’s bosom.”

“I am sure you are right,” chortled Charon, his shoulder-length grey hair dancing as a light breeze drifted through the wastelands of the underworld. “Forget not, you ought to take him away before Styx resurfaces,” he grinned.

Selene nodded, and her broad lips spread into a smile as they faded away once more.

—

Endymion jolted awake on a park bench, gasping for air. The park was quiet, with only a few birds chirping playfully as they flew around to feed their young.

The pastel sky glowed dimly as Endymion sat upright and covered his mouth to yawn.

“It is a lovely morning, is it not?”

Startled, he looked up to see a white-haired, young woman sitting on the edge of the park bench, her face hidden away behind her broad-brimmed, black sunhat.

“I-I guess. . .”

“I thrive for the nights, but there is something comforting about the knowledge that even the longest nights- and days too- come to an end. It is nearly... cathartic, Endymion.”

“I’m sorry, do I know you from somewhere?” He furrowed his brow and pulled his legs closer to his chest to give her more space on the bench.

“Everyone does,” she laughed brightly, as she stood up, her plain chiffon dress seemingly floating in the soft breeze. “Next time, spend your nights dreaming and your days living them,” she beamed, and her silver eyes sparkled as she beheld him.

A fresh beam of sunlight filtered through the leaves and blinded him. By the time he had raised his hands to block the light, the woman was gone.

He frowned deeply, and looked around for any sign of her, rubbing his eyes and blinking a couple times. He rose from the bench and walked into the meadow, searching for the woman, until a soft luminosity caught his eye. Up above in the sky, the half-moon shone faintly, fading away as the sun took over the heavens.

Before he knew it, he had slung his coat over his shoulder, basking in the early morning light, and walked through the park humming *Claire de Lune*.

2 ‘Weary Spirit’ by Saad Ahmed

Miguel O’Hara sighed and contemplated how far he had come. He looked over to the large building in the distance, with the words “ALCHEMAX” illuminating the night sky. Alchemax was the company with multiple divisions, each designing products for different consumer needs. At its head was Tyler Stone, ruthless corporate head, as well as Miguel’s father. He was also the one responsible for getting him addicted to a potent drug. Miguel was able to rid himself of the addiction, and in the process, gave himself some powers.

Ever since then, he’d taken up the identity of his idol and had decided to take up the good fight. Helping civilians, fighting crime and doing what he could to try and clean up New York city. He did good work, and people noticed. News outlets talked non-stop about him while on the converse, Tyler Stone sent a number of masked freaks to take him down. Whatever obstacles may have arisen, he always gave it his all and came out on top.

And yet . . . he was starting to wonder whether it was all worth. Was it worth stopping one criminal when several others would take their place and still be at large? Large corporations were another matter altogether; they had too much power to be overthrown by taking down a couple of thugs and breaking up some shady deals in the docks. They had too much power, and too much influence. Just some words here and there, some money sent to the right pockets, and they were virtually invincible.

There was also the matter of Miguel himself. How many times had he been beaten, had his bones broken or had bruised his body? He healed quickly sure, but was it worth all the damage and beatings he took? He was an adult in the prime of his life; plus, he was working in one of the top research facilities of the country. He could stop and concentrate harder on his work, and maybe then he could come up with a better way to help people. Heroing was tough, maybe it was the time to quit while he still could.

He closed his eyes and sighed. How long until his luck ran out? One day he could end up crippled, or worse. And what if it wasn’t him but someone he loved and cared about. One slip of his secret identity and all his enemies would be after everyone in his life. There was also the damage control. How much of New York city had been caught in the crossfire of his battles? Not just property damage but civilians too. How many people had been injured; what if one day he wasn’t fast enough, would he be able to live with himself?

“Help!!”

Miguel immediately looked up, trying to locate where the scream came from. He tapped into his heightened senses, closed his eyes and tried to listen hard. His ears found where the scuffling sounds were coming from and he opened his eyes and zoomed in to get a better look. He caught sight of some thugs who were trying to steal a lady's purse.

Miguel reacted instantly; he leaped into the air and began to glide towards the thugs. He shot some weblines to speed himself up. Almost instantly he landed right in front of them.

Two quick jabs disoriented the two nearest ones. A spinning quick dispatched the one running towards him.

“You know you guys really suck. Picking on someone weaker than you. All for a couple of hundred bucks?”

There were only two left who came at him together. Miguel moved swift and fast; he dodged the punch coming for him, grabbed the offender and threw him into his partner. He fired off some web bullets for good measure and stared down at all the thugs groaning in pain.

“You guys better scram! Because right now, I'm not feeling so friendly!”

They all ran off while he caught his breath. Suddenly something slammed into him from behind. Miguel tensed himself until he realized it the woman he had just saved was hugging him tightly.

“Thank you! Thank you so much!”

She sounded a little tearful, and most definitely grateful. Miguel was confused, unsure how to react. He hugged her back lightly, as much as he could hug someone who was behind him. As soon as she relaxed her grip, he leaped up and shot a webline. Five minutes later he was standing on top of the tallest building in the city.

Maybe it wasn't an overnight process, maybe he wouldn't be able to make a dent on the crime rate. But he could keep on trying and fighting the good fight. If he could help and provide small happiness to even one person, one day at a time, then it would be at least be something. He fired a webline and swung off; one day the world wouldn't have Spider-Man of the year 2099 protecting it. But that day was not today; the future was looking bright.

3 ‘Recreational Meteorology’ by Elizabeth Windo

All of us thought the sight so beautiful
The elevators glittering in the clouds
We made a wispy fire and sat beside
I unscrewed Hari’s leg and set her down
We drank.

To things that could have been

At first, it was the checkouts, did you know
A stable economic loop
Once formed, impossible to break
That happened to exclude all touch
From we mere meddling mortals

The left hand bought to feed the rite
Which tore up mountains indiscriminate
in search of cadmium and zinc.
Cities collateral losses

A billion drowned. Neglected dams.
Fallen to disrepair and porous rock.
A billion more to riot and decay
once agriculture sunk it’s bottom line

Some fought, of course. As if you fight a storm.

And when the eyes turned elsewhere, we emerged
from battered hatches, gazing into light
My gods were merciful in sloth
There was no call to terminate the rest
They took up space - it would have taken time.
We no longer had resources it craved
Just crops. Some sticks. At best, a little wine.

We gazed at glittering towers to the sky
These footprints of ourselves would touch the stars
If only we could see it

4 ‘Human’ by Sanchit Sharma

Dr. Stellar

In front of Millar was a disused warehouse. To a passerby who wasn't in the know, it would probably appear identical to any one of the many disused warehouses along this street, but Millar knew better. In reality, it was a clinic run by a razordoc, Dr. Stellar.

Most doctors would refuse to do the kind of surgery that Millar put zirsself* through. Maybe, ze mused, it was because they were afraid of what ze could become. Of how much more ze could become.

They claimed it was for safety, licensing or some other garbage, but Millar knew better. In general, razordocs played relatively fast and loose with the law when it came to such situations. So why would they care so much about zir safety?

No, the truth was that they were afraid of zir.

Still, Dr. Stellar was not one of those doctors. She was even more open than most of these doctors, willing to do any job for the right money, regardless of legality. That made her the perfect doctor for someone like Millar. All ze had to do was keep the credsticks coming, and the good doctor would be more than happy to oblige.

Although ze hadn't checked the credsticks, Millar was pretty sure that the money on them would pay for something fun. Or, at least, something interesting.

Ze gave the secret knock that alerted Dr. Stellar that a customer and not a random passerby was entering, before opening the door and stepping inside.

The clinic was a run-down but fairly clean and tidy affair. Just what you would expect from a good razordoc. It could be a little disorientating getting from the warehouse entrance to the reception at times, but that was the price paid for security.

Millar reached the reception and put zir stolen credsticks on the table.

“Dr. Stellar. How much can I get?”

“Millar! Good to see you again!” The doctor was charismatic, trying to keep zir at ease. Ze wished she wouldn't. It was such a pain to hear the same, boring

* The protagonist of this story, Millar (pronounced mill-AH), is agender. Ze uses ze/zir as pronouns (in place of he/him, she/her or they/them).

conversation over and over again. “How are you? How’s the... Wait, do you even have any family?”

“We do this every time, doctor. Can we skip the pleasantries for once? I have cash, you have cyber. What can I get?”

A little disoriented, Dr. Stellar nevertheless seemed to bounce back quickly. “Of course, sorry! Let me have a look... Hmm, it seems like there’s not too much here, I’m afraid. What were you looking for, anyway?”

“A gun.”

“Ah, implanted gun, very nice but also very expensive I’m afraid. This could certainly cover the surgery, but you would have to find your own implant.”

“I can do that. I’ll be back soon.”

As Millar turned to leave, Dr. Stellar called after zir. “Don’t you want your cred back?”

“I’ll be back soon.”

Is that a Gun in Your Pocket?

Where to start looking? Millar wanted some serious firepower, not some peashooter that ze could find on any street corner. And to get one that could be implanted... That would take some doing.

Where else, then, but the military garrison a few miles down the road? People would probably call zir crazy for even trying it... But since when did ze care what other people thought?

Millar took off down the street at a run, just a blur to the naked eye.

Since ze was on a mission, Millar was running almost as fast as zir augmented legs would allow. Therefore, it took merely ten minutes to reach the garrison. In the meantime, ze downloaded the plans to the complex into zir headware and planned an attack.

It would, of course, be ridiculous to attack the front gate. This was one time that Millar wanted to get in and out as silently as possible.

Rather useful, then, that the plans revealed an unused side entrance. This would probably have at least cameras and maybe even a guard or two checking it, but they would be much easier to take care of than the forces that would be guarding any other entrance.

It was, additionally, a simple enough route to R&D - the most likely place to find some interesting cyberweapons...

The entrance was quiet. A knife thrown in the right direction, targeting dealt with by Millar's headware, took out the power to the cameras. One guard was on duty, and he didn't notice a thing as Millar slipped through the shadows to end up behind him. Ze choked him out and stole his ID.

As expected, the R&D lab was close by. Although the ID card that ze had stolen didn't allow zir entrance to the lab, a friend was on call to help...

"Johnny Mercury? Millar here." Ze called over zir commlink.

"You can call me Mercs like everyone else, you know."

"Whatever. Those plans were good, but now I need into a door."

"You didn't get an ID from some schmuck?" Humans were always second-guessing zir. Of course ze had an ID, it didn't have access!

"Too high security for that. I need your help." Sadly, this was not Millar's area of expertise.

"Okay, but that's another 5k you owe me. And you'd better not get me caught up in whatever crazy plot you've got going on!"

"Sure. In your account now." Millar sent over the money.

A few seconds later, the door clicked open. He wasn't cheap, but Johnny Mercury was one fast decker.

The lab was surprisingly large. This late there were few people around, but the telltale signs of life and work were all around. Scattered pens and paper, various medical-looking instruments, computer terminals blinking... Clearly a lot was going on here.

There were a few credsticks on a nearby desk. Millar pocketed whatever ze saw. Then ze heard a voice. Quickly, ze hid behind a nearby desk and watched.

It looked as though a few techs had stayed behind to test something. They were standing by a desk next to what was clearly some kind of testing room - testing what, though, was unclear from zir angle.

Ze quickly stole up behind the two techs and grabbed one neck in each hand. The two were dead before they hit the ground. Now ze could see what was going on.

And ze quickly regretted it.

Looking back through the, sadly, two-way glass was a cybersoldier. Her hand had flipped down, revealing a small minigun which she had apparently been testing on the firing range. It slowly started to spin as the soldier's expression hardened.

Millar ducked under the desk, hearing the glass shatter above zir. When the sound of bullets stopped, ze jumped over the desk, through the broken window and into the soldier.

She brought a knife up to bear. "DIE!"

Fear was starting to get to Millar. Time to activate zir adrenal implants, which stop ze from having to worry about these annoying human emotions. Dodging out of the way of the knife, ze brought zir own out - a blade that extended from zir arm.

Blood spurted from a wound in the soldier's arm as Millar slashed at her.

"You goddamn fragging PIG!"

Millar was glad not to have to deal with these human emotions any more. They often got in the way.

One more well-placed cut was all it took to sever the gun arm from the soldier. Grabbing it, ze made a hasty retreat before more soldiers turned up. One-on-one ze was in a strong position, but too many more and it would be curtains for zir.

Slipping out the way ze came, Millar lost the soldier quickly. The streets were a good place to hide.

Under the Knife

Millar approached the run-down, disused warehouse that doubled as Dr. Stellar's surgery. Ze gave the secret knock and entered the building quietly.

"Millar! You were quick! Had a spot of luck, I take it?"

It took a moment or two for Millar to realise that Dr. Stellar was talking to zir. Ze looked up from the floor and looked directly into Dr. Stellar's eyes.

"Luck. Yes. I have the parts."

Ze retrieved the charred, meat-covered gun from zir backpack and handed it to the doctor along with a credstick. Dr. Stellar shifted from side to side uncomfortably.

A lot of people seemed to do that when ze made eye contact like that. No matter. The doctor would do her job.

Ignoring the discomfort that was nevertheless showing on her face, the doctor took the parts and credstick. "Great, let's get you prepped!"

Dr. Stellar led Millar to the operating bed and strapped zir down. Most doctors would struggle with a patient like Millar, but Dr. Stellar was always accomodating. She even had an operating table with a gap to allow zir tail through. Ze liked that about her.

She strapped the mask to zir face and turned on the anesthetic. As ze started to drift off, ze thought ze heard her muttering something about being glad to get rid of zir...

No matter. Millar had no need for humans to like zir. After all, ze was better than human.

5 ‘The Enlightened One’ by Jian Li Chew

Sareka walked out of her squalid quarters she shared with her mother, bare feet trudging along the creaky metal walkway, clutching a ragged, shapeless soft toy. Behind her, the mine worked endlessly through the pitch black night, bright lights shining. The endless drone of drilling was punctuated by the occasional explosion. But here at the quarters, far away enough for that not to affect the workers, underneath the dome that maintained a protective atmosphere, she walked towards the small square, where some workers would usually gather to drink or gamble or play games if they weren't too tired. She sat in her dark corner, beneath the large poster of Lord Belzen, gazing up at the gas giant. It was green with stripes of blue, staring into its beauty let her forget the bleak, harsh moon she existed on.

“Life is suffering.” She said to herself. Sareka would know about suffering. She lived in a remote mining facility far away from civilisation. Her father had died in a mining accident soon after she was born, and her only family was her mother, Biyaka. Lord Belzen worked his workers to the bone, who endured backbreaking work, squalor and misery. What little money they made could only be spent in Lord Belzen's store, which charged far too much. Any revolt or dissent was crushed simply by withdrawing their water supply. The only contact with the outside world were cargo ships which ferried out the precious minerals they mined, and the food transport that came once every 15 days. Trapped with no way out, the workers were helpless slaves.

“Life is death, happiness is suffering, love is hate. They are one and the same, for one cannot exist without the other.” Some of the people in the square stopped to listen to what Sareka was saying. Most thought her mad. She and her mother were the outcasts of this society. “It is a cycle. For life gives death and death gives life. The wheel begins to turn. The wheel begins to turn.” Sareka walked back to her quarters muttering the last phrase. She had awakened to the condition of life. Not bad for a ten year old.

Sareka slept soundly on the thin mat after eating her thin porridge. Biyaka looked fondly at her with her haggard eyes. Nothing else in the universe was keeping her alive but Sareka. She had remembered the day Sareka was born. It was a long, difficult labour, taking many hours as the midwife desperately aided her. When she first set eyes on her daughter, her love stronger than no other, she saw how serene her face was. She didn't cry, which terrified the midwife who thought that the baby had died, but she was breathing normally.

Some days later, as Biyaka lay in confinement, her husband Abrehavarna took their child to the Seer at his shrine. The Seer was blind, as was the custom. The Lord wanted only the weak and infirm to do such useless tasks as fulfilling his slaves' religious customs, as all the other strong men worked the mines. The women were servants in his mansion or worked the tasks keeping the settlement running. Abrehavarna brought his daughter and the traditional gifts of food, sweets, milk and soap, as was custom. The Seer lay his hand on his daughter for a long time, as Abrehavarna grew worried. Finally, the Seer spoke. "Your daughter is unlike anyone I have ever seen. Her spirit carries the heritage of countless reincarnations of the highest virtue. Now I am blind, but through my study of the Way, the Universe has opened my Third Eye, so I see more than anyone on this small moon. Her spirit has been lying in wait for the right time to return, and she will arise to teach. She will bring back ancient wisdom lost for centuries. She will break the chains of existence. She will deliver the poor, humble the powerful, bring up the wretched, cast down the wicked. Alas, I shall not be alive to see it."

A single tear fell from the right eye of the Seer as Abrehavarna struggled to absorb this information. He thanked the Seer profusely and brought back Sareka, her name given to her by the Seer. All through the night, the Seer rocked back and forth, muttering: "The light banishes a thousand years of darkness. The light has returned. The light has returned. Blessed am I for I am the first to see the light return."

In the corner of the shrine one of Lord Belzen's henchmen heard this with alarm. His master will not be happy.

In the morning, Sareka woke up and did her chores around the quarters. Her mother made some breakfast and they both ate quietly. Kissing her goodbye, Biyaka then went to work at Lord Belzen's mansion.

Sareka took her soft toy and walked towards the shrine. As she walked, people around her avoided her. Children wouldn't play with her. She didn't understand why, but understood how hurtful it was. Only the Seer welcomed her and was always fond of her. The Seer heard her come in. "Good morning Sareka, and how are you today?" "The same. What will you teach me today?" Sareka smiled at him. "The legends of Old Earth. Once upon a time there was a lush, blue planet. Here, humanity was born. Over thousands and thousands of years it progressed, until it finally learnt to fly to the stars. Large ships carried men and women to new worlds, and a Golden Age of Exploration was born. Eventually, a great Confederation of Humanity was formed. All men enjoyed freedom, liberty, justice, and there was much learning."

“What happened?” Sareka asked. “Then came the Fall. No one knows how it happened, but so much knowledge was lost. The peace and stability the Confederation provided was lost, and amidst the war and chaos, warlords reigned. We lost the ability to travel between the stars for centuries, and almost all knowledge of Earth vanished. Previous little remains from that era. The rest of the story can wait until tomorrow. Now, I will teach you more meditation. . .”

Biyaka was delivering food to some of the guards after her shift in the kitchen ended. She ignored the catcalling and mockery they hurled at her. Far worse was what they said about Sareka. Soon after she was born, rumours spread that she was a witch. She didn't know why anyone would say that about her beautiful child, but she never let Sareka find out. Most importantly, she had to show that it didn't get to her.

She delivered the last pack to Geton, a guard who was also an outcast. His wife died of a mysterious illness and since then the community shunned him. He was nearly 40, very old. He smiled at her like he did every day, but this time, took out a bar of chocolate. “For you.” He muttered. She stared at this luxury longingly, but quickly looked away in disgust. “No. I won't sleep with you.” Biyaka was used to this. Widowed and not unattractive, many men saw her as fair game, exploiting her poverty. She had refused each time, even Lord Belzen. That was why he was so cruel to her. “No I don't want that. I just want to talk. It's lonely you know, being an outcast.”

She sat down and they nibbled on small pieces of chocolate. They talked and talked, and Biyaka was happy for the first in a long time.

Five years had passed. Sareka grew up to be tall and beautiful. She had learnt a lot from the Seer and her meditation deepened. Biyaka and Geton found comfort in each other and became a couple. Sareka sat with the Seer the day before the Coming-of-Age ceremony, where everyone who turned fifteen that year marked their transition into adulthood. The square had been decorated beautifully for the event. “I have taught you everything I know. What I took a lifetime to learn, took you only five years. You must find another teacher on Darys.” The Seer told her.

“But no one can leave this place. No one.” Sareka cried. She had never had such intense bouts of emotion before, but she was so scared. Scared of what they future would bring. She enjoyed being able to sit here and talk to him, but adulthood was frightening. “You have nothing and no one to fear. Did you

know about the day your father first took you to me?” the Seer finally told her the story of how he predicted her destiny, how Lord Belzen had come to him fuming. “I heard his anger and fury, but my Third Eye saw his fear. He feared you, and thus called you a witch and forced everyone to shun you and your mother. He threatened to kill me, and kept me quiet.” Sareka was dumbstruck. It all made sense now, her visions, everything. “But the time has come. You are an adult now, and my time taking care of you is over. Tomorrow it ends. When it’s your turn to speak, tell them what you know.”

The day of the ceremony, the colony was in a festive mood. It was one day to forget the back-breaking work and make merry. Everyone had gathered in the square dressed in their finest clothes. In the front were the reason for the celebration, the fifteen year olds with their parents. Lord Belzen and his two sons made a rare appearance, dressed in garish, jewel-encrusted clothing. Lord Belzen stood and spoke, and the crowd applauded as they always have, but no one listened to him. And then it was the Seer’s turn, to give the usual prayers and best wishes. Only he didn’t. “Fifteen years ago, a great blessing was brought upon us. Children are the light of our lives, the reason for our existence. But also, a greater blessing came to us. The prophecies speak of a great teacher, who shall arise when the world was at its darkest. In the midst of despair, a light will be lit. that light has been lit.” The crowd muttered, confused. The Seer continued: “She will bring back ancient wisdom lost for centuries. She will break the chains of existence. She will deliver the poor, humble the powerful, bring up the wretched, cast down the wicked. She has been called a witch, but she is no witch. She is and will be the Enlightened One. She is Sareka.”

The muttering got louder and louder. Lord Belzen, red and fuming, attempted to stop the Seer, but he froze in his tracks. He simply couldn’t move. “Come forth Sareka.”

Sareka walked towards the stage, resplendent though dressed simply. She glowed radiantly and her step was light, as though she was floating. The audience gasped at this sight. Surely she must be a witch! But a witch can’t possibly be so pure. She stood at the podium as Lord Belzen kept struggling to move, but still unmoving.

“Life is suffering. It is not only the suffering of the body, but the suffering of the mind, the soul. From the very first moment life began to appear, it was painful. Thus, suffering is the very essence of life. Of suffering there are three types, suffering caused by suffering, by change and by conditioning. Suffering

of suffering is caused by pain perceived by our senses. It is the suffering of hunger, of overwork, of helplessness, brought upon you by your tyrannical lord. Suffering of change is due to the impermanence of life. It is not due to change itself but our reaction to change. This is why pleasure turns to pain, love turns to hate, life turns to death, strength to weakness, youth to age, health to illness, life to death. Ultimately all pleasure is suffering, for it is one with suffering, indivisible. One can't exist without the other.

“Last is suffering by conditioning. It is all pervasive, the cause of all suffering. By attempting to avoid the first two kinds of suffering we create this suffering. Our actions build upon themselves. Suffering doesn't end at death. Rather, death is the end of one life and the beginning of another. Our actions lead to suffering in the next life, and are caused by ignorance and delusion.”

The crowd was silent. They couldn't believe what they had heard. She had to be the Enlightened One. One by one, the crowd starting crying, kneeling, praying, until almost everyone joined in. “Blessed One!” “Saviour!” “Forgive us!” “Sareka!” Lord Belzen could finally move and he lunged forward to throttle Sareka, blinded by his rage. “I knew you were a witch! I knew it! How dare you challenge my power!” but as he got close to Sareka his legs gave way and he knelt involuntarily before her. The sight was unthinkable. The workers saw their all-powerful lord kneeling before her. At once, they cheered.

“You are burning. All life is burning. It is the burning of the senses, of the mind, of the soul. It is the burning of suffering, of desire, of change, of the unchanging. It is the burning of passion. You inflict suffering on others to alleviate your own. You deny your own mortality. It is all in vain. The powerful will become weak, the weak, powerful. The young, old, the dead, living. It is change you fear, but you can't stop it. The wheel is in motion.”

It was though the heavens opened up. It was though a million voices cheered, not just those at the small square. Slowly, Lord Belzen stood up, as if he was being carried up. He tried to attack Sareka, but knew that he couldn't. In his rage, he instead went to the Seer. “You. It was your idea to start this. How dare you defy me.” He raged. “I no longer fear you. I exist only to nurture the Blessed One, and she has arisen. Do as you must.” Lord Belzen raised his gun at the Seer's head as the crowd watched in horror, but the Seer, in the face of impending death, was calm. In his final moments, he looked admiringly at Sareka. “Thank you. I have entered the stream. Seven times I shall return, and return no more.”

His body fell limp on the ground. Turning towards Sareka, Lord Belzen bel-lowed: “Throw this witch in prison, and the witch mother as well. Geton!”

Geton walked haltingly to his Lord. “I can’t spare any good guards. You work for me, but I will be watching you!”

Days passed in the prison, maybe weeks. It was hard to tell. They had been starved and were now delirious, though Sareka maintained her mind. Nothing would diminish it. She spent her time meditating to ease her body’s suffering and to deepen her knowledge. The death of her teacher was saddening, but she was heartened by his entry to the first stage of Enlightenment.

Geton snuck in multiple times, bringing them food, medicine, little treats to keep up their spirits, mostly Biyaka. He told them fantastic stories of how the workers had embraced her teachings, of how she had been the first one to defy him and live. They finally had the courage to revolt. Fearful of his people defying him, Lord Belzen had hired many mercenaries, distrusting even his own guards. And though he threatened to watch over Geton, Lord Belzen soon forgot, with too many things to worry about.

The plan had been laid out. Tonight the transport ship arrives to unload its cargo. It was their one chance to leave their prison. Geton had told Sareka and Biyaka to take the side entrance to the dock, while he and fellow conspirators deactivated the alarm and cameras to cover their escape. In the meantime, the workers would riot on signal and finally overthrow their oppressive lord.

“It’ll be alright Sareka. Soon we will be leaving this horrible place. We will have a new life, a new adventure on Darys.” Biyaka comforted her child, realising that she was comforting herself. Sareka had never been afraid. “All shall proceed as the Universe wills.” Sareka said. “It’s time now. Quick, quick. Here, take this.” A masked, hooded man gave them a cloth bag full of cash stolen from Lord Belzen’s safe, which they will need. Another gave them a bag of their meagre belongings. Three men led them out of the prison through narrow corridors and paths. Outside, a rumble, and then an explosion, followed by shouting. The riot had begun.

In the dock, the startled crew of the transport ship were panicking. “We should leave now Captain. I don’t intend to die on this bloody rock!” one of the crew stammered. “But we haven’t unloaded all the cargo yet.” Answered another. “So what? Let’s get out of here!” The Captain struggled to start up the ship’s engine, but it didn’t.

Out in the open, Sareka and Biyaka saw men and women with their tools and makeshift weapons fight against Lord Belzen’s outnumbered mercenaries and thugs. They darted, avoiding the worst of the fighting, finally reaching the

entrance of the dock. It was closed. It was supposed to be open. Shots rang out, killing two of the men. The surviving one took out his gun to fire back, but was killed as well. Lord Belzen and his two sons, along with their bodyguards, appeared, as Biyaka and Sareka huddled on the metal floor.

“So you created this entire mess to escape. My men will soon have this little incident under control and it’ll be all over. They’ll go back to the mines, but you, I should have killed you long ago. You were trouble the moment you were born, you impetuous little witch.” Lord Belzen raised his pistol to Sareka’s head, Biyaka screaming in agony and desperation at her daughter’s impending death. But as he pulled the trigger, a blinding white light enveloped the entire colony. The fighting stopped as everyone gawked at the apparition. It was a person descending from the sky, but it wasn’t a person. His skin was radiant, him clad in shining armour and holding a majestic rifle. “The Light of the Dharma shall not be extinguished. That which has been lost to time has been returned, and the Exalted One will tread on the path of Enlightenment like her predecessors. None shall stand in her way.”

Lord Belzen collapsed, firing his pistol into the figure to no avail. “You cannot injure a Deva. Your reign of tyranny ends now.” The Deva disarmed him and stripped him of his beautiful clothes. Powerless and humiliated, the workers took a good look at the man who oppressed them stripped of all his glory. One after another, they laughed at him, his pot belly, his chest hair, his ugliness, and they finally stopped fearing him. He, his sons, bodyguards and the mercenaries, ran away, never to be seen again. Geton finally managed to get the dock door to open, and they walked towards the transport ship, as the Deva followed behind. The surviving workers also followed suit. Seeing this majestic sight, the crew wordlessly streamed out.

Biyaka attempted to speak, but couldn’t. Geton spoke. “We request travel to Darys. Sareka, this young girl, needs to attain her education. Here is payment for our travel.” Geton took out a wad of cash from Biyaka’s cloth sack to pay the Captain, who in a daze, didn’t take it. “We don’t ask for much, just a small cabin and some food. We’ll also help out with the work around the ship.” The crew immediately picked up Biyaka’s and Geton’s belongings and brought it inside.

The Deva bowed low and the workers and crew followed suit. “Oh Exalted One, go forth on your quest and do not stop until you have reached Enlightenment, that you may relieve the suffering of all beings.” In a flash, the Deva disappeared. A long silence followed. “Thank you for delivering us from the evil Lord Belzen. Please forgive us for our transgressions towards you and your

mother. We knew not our ignorance. And when you have attained Enlightenment, please come to us.” A woman tearfully said.

“I shall break the bonds that tie you to this realm, and break the chains of attachment, and deliver you from this realm.” Sareka said, to the muttered replies of “thank you” and “Blessed One”. Geton, Biyaka and Sareka boarded the ship, leaving the only place they have ever known, going towards a new adventure.

6 ‘Delivery’ by Robin ‘Dobbin’ Thomas

“So, where’s your internship this summer?”

Looking up at Lyra, Ruth’s eyes widened. That question was something she was putting off thinking about. She looked down, returned to pulling the remaining grass from the dirt. “I applied to a bunch of places...”

Luckily, Austin cut her off. “I’m at an insurance consultancy. It should be good, but I forgot to ask for a holiday in the middle. I start as soon as-”

“Ha!” Lyra laughed, “What a noob error. As soon as they offer, you just say, like, ‘I want 4 weeks paid leave on expenses’. Milk them for everything you can get.” She sat up straight, eager to begin a lecture on ‘putting-your-foot-down’, one that both Ruth and Austin had heard before. “I’m staying at Uni in the Shock Physics group! They don’t care when I’m in as long as I answer an email once a week.”

Austin’s familiar sigh was one of defeat. “It’s a bit too late to adjust now. They have client meetings every week from June till September...”

Ruth eyed the yellow grass between her fingers. She hadn’t told anyone yet. It was hard to know how people would react – would they offer condolences? Compliments? They might even be jealous.

Whilst Lyra resumed preaching, Ruth looked across the park, bleached yellow by the sun. The city beyond was lit up in a muddy haze. June was almost over, but the texture of the grass in her hand was more like a dry autumn leaf. It filled Ruth with nostalgia for starting term again – but that meant facing up to what was to come. She breathed out slowly, looked back down and said it.

“I accepted a position at Sainsburys.”

Austin stared in disbelief. Lyra squealed, threw her ice cream aside and rushed to Ruth’s side. “Really? You kept this so quiet! When do you start? What part are you working in? Is it Strategy? Management? Oh, is the pay as good as they say it is?”

It was Austin’s question that made Ruth look up from the pile of twisted grass in her lap. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

Ruth shrugged after a moment of silence. “I suppose. But, you take what you can get, right? Any experience is good experience these days.”

“But,” Lyra said, “that’s not just any experience! It’s so exciting! You must tell us what happens!”

Austin’s tone became much more critical. “How are you even qualified? And I thought they stopped hiring science students, anyway?”

“Well, you can do anything with a Physics degree these days, right?” said Ruth, slightly enjoying his reaction. Both Austin and Lyra were clearly jealous.

“Yeah!” Lyra said, “And that’s rich coming from you, Austin – why is a Bioengineer doing risk assessments?”

Austin rolled his eyes. “It’s an insurance consultancy I said, it’s not just risk assessments. But Sainsburys – I mean, that’s going to be such physically demanding work. Not to mention life threateningly dangerous! What division did you say it was?”

Ruth shrugged, “I didn’t. The only spot they had left was as a Deliverer.”

“No way,” Lyra squealed, “that’s the best pay grade!”

Austin was now aghast. “But that’s the frontlines! What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking it would boost my CV and pay my rent for a year,” Ruth growled, “and don’t judge me – I saw your name on the shortlist as well.”

Austin blushed, “That’s because I was only going for the logistics summer rotation – for that, you just need to wear a bullet proof jacket on your way in. But deliveries?” He shook his head. “If it’s anywhere near any other supermarket territories, you’ll be in constant danger.”

Lyra jumped in to defend Ruth. “She can handle herself! It’s like you don’t even know her.”

“They said they only let me in because I had been playing rugby since year 10. And still I have to take a test on the Supermarket Engagement Levy-Law before I can start.” Ruth’s voice slowed as she spoke.

Austin was finally lost for words. As they all heard ‘Supermarket Engagement Levy-Law’, the situation began to feel much more real. The stale air gave way to a breeze which plucked grass from Ruth’s lap, scattering it into the air.

Lyra watched them go, and then spoke in a stern tone, “if you think about it, that law has done so much for the world today. I mean, who knew that arming supermarkets would lead to ceasefires of all wars, worldwide, within *three* years? It’s just mind boggling.”

Ruth had been reading up on this. “Essentially, all wars prior were in some way driven by the convenience industry. Sometimes not directly, but governments and energy companies would have huge stakes in the big supermarkets. They would push the sides against each other in a hope to damage the other’s stock value.”

“So,” Lyra said, “as soon as you just let them fight in the open...”

“...The wars quickly stopped,” Ruth said, as if reading from a history book. “It’s amazing that the corruption was so deep. Now, it’s in the open, and can be regulated.”

Austin shook his head. “But, at what cost? Now the war is here, in our very streets. And you’re going to be part of it.”

“Statistically, there isn’t much risk to civilians. And when there is, the government has a strict procedure to follow,” Ruth said, in the most reassuring tone she could muster. “It’s like taking the all the intense wars ruining so many lives, and sprinkling them over the whole world in a super thin layer.”

“And taxing it,” Lyra chimed in, the only one of them smiling. “It’s beautiful, don’t you think?”

Austin opened his mouth to speak, but swallowed his questions quickly when he saw Lyra’s scowl.

“It’s okay, really,” Ruth put her hand on Austin’s knee to show she was being sincere. “I sign a NDA for getting to see some of the command centre, but not my soul away with the full contract. I’ll be absolutely fine, I can handle myself.”

“Where are you based, then?” Lyra was keen to get back to her long list of questions.

“Their territory is mostly in the south east, but they put me in Reading.”

Austin spoke again, his voice barely there. “But that’s Waitrose territory. Right? My dad lived there for a few years. They control all the ring roads, petrol stations and have a distribution centre right in the middle.”

Ruth’s stomach sank as he spoke. “Oh – well, that doesn’t seem right for a first timer. Maybe I can ask for a transfer?”

Lyra sank a little too. “Yeah. Just, uh, put your foot down. Go somewhere quiet. Like Slough. I heard it’s quiet there. Maybe Swindon.”

Ruth gazed up at the monolithic sign, slowly reading it again and again. “Sainsburys Reading Command Centre”. Dark figures shifted on the wall above. The solid metal gates were gradually opening, revealing a busy compound, lined by lorries and delivery vans. In the centre was a huge grey building, a concrete block fortified even further with its own guard towers. A helicopter was landing on its roof.

A bump from behind snapped Ruth out of her trance - other workers were barging their way through. She stood aside as a crowd in dark blue boiler suits trudged through the gap in the gate. Not a single one looked up. Ruth reached into her pocket for her ID badge and pinned it to the uniform that covered her Kevlar vest. She joined the end of the line, falling into step with their dirge-like pace.

Once through the gates, the line continued to the security office, which was little more than a brick shack with an open front. She hoped they had got the memo about her arrival. An urgent terror gripped her as she reached the front of the queue.

“Your papers, please,” said the security guard in the shack without looking up. She sat on a swivel chair and thumbed through a long list of staff. The shack was almost completely bare, except for the back wall, on which an automatic rifle was hooked. Ruth held out her ID with a trembling hand. The guard snatched it and squinted at it. “New kid, huh,” she muttered, slowly ticking a box on the sheet. She tossed the ID back over the table, then looked up to meet Ruth’s petrified gaze. “You know what you are doing? Got your tags?”

Ruth nodded, lifting her hand into her shirt to pull out the silver tags which hung on her neck. They listed her name, blood type and organ donor number. Her unique employee number was at the top, the last letter of which stated her preferred funeral procedure, chosen from burial (B) or incineration (I). Ruth had just clicked “I’m feeling lucky” on the form, so it listed both.

The officer grunted and turned back to the personnel sheet. “Says here you’re to report to the delivery bay and get going. First dispatch goes out at six thirty.”

Ruth nodded, picked up her card, and shuffled away from the shack. Her watch said it was already six twenty-five. She broke into a run, kicking gravel high behind her, as she had vowed not to be late on her first day.

The loading bay was under the south corner of the central building. A row of delivery vans was being tended to by swarming workers. Ruth stopped



running when she got to the front van and collapsed on its bonnet to catch her breath. The front was fitted with a reinforced bumper, the sides were thickly plated, and the windscreen was blacked out. On its side was a picture of a basket of blueberries and the words “One-hour delivery straight to your door!”. She looked around for someone in charge, but all activity appeared to be autonomous.

A loud growl startled her as the van’s engine came to life. She looked up at the tinted window and barely resolved a dimly lit figure in the driver’s seat. It made some sort of hand signal at her. Ruth carefully stepped round to the passenger door and it opened before her.

A woman in the standard issue beige delivery uniform stared at Ruth from the driver’s seat. She reminded Ruth of some of the most fearsome fullbacks she had been tackled by in her time. She had one hand on the wheel and the other on the gearstick - in her grip, it looked more like a ballpoint pen.

She spoke slowly in a low voice. “I’m Morgan. You’re Ruth. Get in.”

Ruth stepped almost a meter up into the vehicle and sank into the seat. The reinforcements and adjustments made the interior very small, making her feel like she was being pinned against the window. Morgan flipped a switch on the busy dashboard and the door slammed shut behind Ruth, followed by loud whirr could only have been the lock mechanism. The air smelt of engine grease and Pot Noodle.

Ruth swallowed her fear, strapped in, and spoke in the most determined tone she could muster. “So - what’s the plan?”

“I drive, you watch. We deliver,” Morgan said without delay. She went into

first gear and hit the gas. Within moments, the van was through the gates, its precious cargo rattling in the back.

Their headlights lit the streets in a sickly orange tone. The suburbs they drove through were barren and empty. The two hadn't shared words for minutes.

Ruth took the time to study the instruments in front of her. A green dot blinked on a screen near the centre of a map, showing their location, and an orange line traced their route ahead. Morgan didn't seem to be checking it or even following it, as she had her own clipboard with addresses hanging to her right. Ruth seemed to therefore just be in charge of a communicator, currently buzzing faintly with static.

The silence quickly became unbearable. "Anything I should know?" Ruth asked.

"Hmm," Morgan hummed, either irritated or bemused. "You tell me - what should you be doing right now?"

Ruth had memorised the handbook of procedures. "I navigate. Watch for hostile vans. Unload. That sort of thing." Now that she was locked in the car and on the move, some of the tension had been defused. Morgan seemed experienced, so she felt like she was in safe hands. "Will there be a test?"

Morgan didn't seem to laugh. "It's too late for tests now. Just do what I say."

Ruth nodded, and tried to forget the other jokes she had prepared to break the ice, but they all crammed into her mind at once. Sadly, the melody for 'the wheels on the van go round and round' was really catchy. "Right. Whatever you say. You been doing this for long?"

Morgan didn't respond until they turned onto a busy dual carriageway. Their van towered over the other cars, which almost seemed to part to clear the way, as if delivery vans were emergency vehicles. "Yes. Three years."

Ruth's eyes widened. Three years on this salary was long enough to save for a comfortable life, not to mention pension and retirement.

"Damn, this is new," Morgan muttered as orange roadworks signs began to appear on both sides of the road. "Okay, looks like your first job is to find us a new route. Use the map, and avoid everything south of Oxford Road."

Ruth pulled the screen up and strained her eyes at the mess of moving dots. "Which one is..."

“We are green. Target is the red circle.”

“Uh, right,” Ruth stammered, looking now at the intricate mess of one way arrows on at least half of the roads. She traced a possible route with her finger and the system began to adjust its auto-route for her. “Left here.”

The van lurched left, now going down a side road, just before a wall of idling traffic cut off their original route. Ruth only just managed to keep on track of issuing Morgan with directions, let alone scanning the roads for other vans. “On this round about, third - no, second exit. Second.” Other questions invaded her mind. “What sort of aggression policy is in place here?”

Morgan’s voice gave away how irritated she was getting at the sketchy directions. “Protocol 25 B. You should know what that means.”

“Yes, absolutely,” Ruth replied. 25 B meant that when rival supermarkets met whilst out on delivery, they were allowed to ‘disrupt one another’s activities’, but they couldn’t seek each other out or murder rival Deliverers. Additionally, the only violence allowed was Deliverer against Deliverer – other roles weren’t supposed to interfere or become at risk. The Sainsburys rulebook had explicitly stated the following: “It is still entirely appropriate to shoot hostile Deliverers in these zones, but please ensure shots land on armored areas of the target’s body such that they are not significantly maimed to cause accidental death”. It didn’t really matter to Ruth, because interns were not given guns. Ruth wondered what Waitrose’s handbook said.

The van slowly halted at a red light. Traffic zoomed in front of them from right to left whilst they waited for their turn. Ruth attempted to look for hostile vans, but the murky light, the vehicles became a blurred mass. Paranoia began to grip her too - any remotely large vehicle rang alarm bells as it thundered past, be they bland and white, or carrying other brand names, like DHL or the Post Office.

Morgan tapped impatiently on the wheel as the lights changed again to let pedestrians cross, leaving the junction open. “We better not be late after this. Is it right or straight ahead?”

“Oh,” Ruth said, looking back down at the map, “It doesn’t really matter, because-”

“Damn it,” Morgan snapped, “I didn’t ask for a smart answer!”

“Then go straight!” Ruth shouted - though she didn’t intend to say it so loud. Morgan turned her scowl upon her and opened her mouth to return the favor,

but the red light turned orange in that moment. She returned her eyes to the road and hit the accelerator hard. Ruth turned away in shame to look at the traffic waiting to go at the other lights. She saw a silver blur moving quickly towards them.

They were barely halfway across when it hit them.

Before she could duck down, the window glass shattered over her face. Morgan swerved the wheel to fight against the massive impact, and then bolted from her seat out on the crossing. The van lurched to a halt.

They'd been rammed by another van. Ruth kept her head down, listening to the opposing drivers open their doors. Through ringing ears, she heard one yell, "I'll take the navigator! You get the driver!" She froze up and stared wide eyed at her knees, waiting for the inevitable. It was her fault entirely – that van must have been in view for at least a few precious seconds.

The door was yanked open and she turned to see man wearing an orange hi-vis kelvar jacket emblazoned with the word "Ocado". In the hand not pulling back the door, he was raising a stun baton that sparked with energy. But before it could strike her, a loud bang rang in Ruth's left ear – a gunshot. She blinked and the Ocado Deliverer was down, clutching his chest and groaning.

Morgan stood with a pistol raised at the other van. "Stay down!" she screamed at Ruth, scanning for the second Deliverer – but they were nowhere to be seen. She crept forwards to check all sides of the Ocado van. By now, pedestrians and drivers were watching in bemusement and horror, some with their phones out.

Ruth watched Morgan tiptoe around the back of the van. Cars were honking far away as the morning commute was fatally disrupted for many. As soon as Morgan was out of sight, Ruth felt truly alone, as if the busy traffic and onlookers had faded away.

The missing Ocado Deliverer emerged from behind the front of his van. He made run for the body sprawled in front of Ruth's open door. He didn't even look up as Ruth slowly rose from her seat. He was much more concerned about the state of his co-Deliverer. In a panicked rush, he fell to his knees by the other's head. "Christ, Dave! Are you okay?" he whispered.

The floored Deliverer coughed and nodded slowly. "It's just my rib, my vest caught the bullet", he said weakly, then raised a finger upwards – "Go get the gun!"

The other nodded, then rose. Ruth saw her chance and her instincts flared.



She threw herself from the seat and collided with the now standing deliverer's legs. She hit his shins with her shoulder, and in an instant the fight was over. Most rugby players knew instinctively how to fall – but he just toppled like a tower of cards. The back of his head hit the wing mirror of the Ocado van on his way down. Ruth winced at the sound, hoping it was the glass she heard crack, not his skull.

Morgan came running out from behind the Ocado van to see Ruth standing over the two bodies. “Good job,” she said, “now get back in the truck.”

Ruth didn't need to be told twice. In a flash they were both back in the idling van. Clearly, these vehicles were built for such impacts, as the only signs of damage were paint scratches, a slightly buckled side door and the passenger seat's smashed window. She got into the seat, shut the door and said “I'm sorry – I wasn't looking out for Ocado vans. I forgot that they're partners with Waitrose...”

Morgan jumped into the driver's seat just as fast and revved the engine. If she heard Ruth's apology, she didn't seem to care. “Before we go, hit the button with an ‘S’ on it.”

Ruth nodded grimly, knowing exactly what it did. She pressed it with a shaking hand, making the speaker on the top of the van crackle into life. She glanced at the two Ocado Deliverers groaning on the floor as the classic Sainsburys jingle began to play. “Live well for less” echoed down all the nearby streets, signaling that they had won this encounter. The traffic parted and the van rolled onwards.

The rest of the drive was completed in silence, allowing both Ruth and Morgan to catch their breath. Ruth just had to point to where they needed to pull over to make the delivery – a quiet side road, lined by terraced houses on both sides. Morgan was the first to break the silence once she had finished pulling in. “You know kid, you did good. Real good. I couldn’t ask for more. Sorry I snapped at you at first.”

“Oh, please, it’s okay, I don’t mind,” Ruth said in a flurry, “I understand. Well, of course, I don’t understand, I could never really... I can’t imagine doing this for three years like you!”

“I don’t do that every day, don’t worry” Morgan laughed, “Maybe once a month. There’s plenty of boring to go with the thrill.”

Ruth smiled. “Speaking of which should we, uh, deliver?”

Morgan left the van and pulled open the door to the storage compartment. It creaked on its hinge, a reminder that the previous encounter hadn’t just been a bad dream. “Delivery is for...” she mumbled as she scanned her clipboard, “number 24. This crate.”

Ruth pulled the heavy box out. The order included fruit, dried pasta, cornflakes (Sainsbury’s own brand), and some toiletries. She hauled it to the doorway where Morgan was now standing, hammering the buzzer. Ruth suddenly appreciated how much taller and broader Morgan was than her.

The door sprang open and the face of an old lady smiled back. “Oh, it’s my order! Hello Miss Morgan! Thank you dears, if you could please bring it to my kitchen, follow me, you know, these £1 delivery slots are just a bargain...”

Morgan grunted, “You go in Ruth. I’ll wait,” standing back to let her through. “Heh, three years and I’m no good with customers. Or old women...”

The smell of earl grey filled her lungs as Ruth stepped into the hallway, following the shrill sound of the customer. Knitted doilies in mostly beige colours were draped over the furniture. The carpet was incredibly soft underfoot, as if it was itself carpeted with a thick layer of cat fur. The kitchen was tiny, and the table only just had space for the huge blue crate. However, everything was neat, and once the woman had stopped talking, the serene quiet of being away from the streets was incredibly comforting.

“I’ll give you a hand unpacking,” the old lady said, leaning over the box to grab a bunch of bananas. “Just follow the labels. Fruits on the shelf over there. I’ve not had you come and deliver before, dear, are you new?”

“Uhm,” Ruth stammered, “Yes, I’m an intern. Only for 6 weeks.” She mulled that thought around her head. 6 weeks to go, and even in the first hour they’d already shot someone.

“Oh, you’ll do very well, I’m sure, and get a nice bit of pocket money too. Jill at church has a daughter who’s interning at Marks and Sparks...”

The unpacking took several long minutes, because each item Ruth picked up needed to be cross checked against all the little notes the lady had in her kitchen. Questions stumped Ruth that she hadn’t even thought she’d have to consider in a job like this. Do the Jaffa cakes go in the biscuit or the cake tin?

As the pile got smaller, the old woman changed tone, “Oh, dearest, I’m sorry but I think I’m missing my Werther’s Originals.”

Ruth turned and was lost for words. “Oh. Right,” she said, “I’ll just, uh, check with Morgan.” She put the Jaffa cake box into the woman’s empty hands and dashed out of the room. This sort of situation wasn’t in the manual.

Morgan was standing by the van with a hand on her gun, looking left and right along the street. “Problem?” she asked as Ruth stepped close enough to whisper in her ear.

“Missing something,” she hissed, “Werther’s Originals.”

Morgan gazed back in shock, then turned and slammed her fist on the van. “Damn it! But I checked the cargo myself! You sure they’re missing?”

“Uhm, well, old ladies tend to notice when it’s Werther’s Originals,” Ruth said with a snigger, but instantly regretted it when Morgan turned her angry gaze back.

“This isn’t funny! You know what happens now?” Morgan said in an angry whisper, “I get sent before the line manager! They come down on these mistakes hard. Last time one of the haulers got fired!”

Ruth cowered back, retreating to her mind in the hope of finding a solution. The old lady was standing on the doorstep again, smiling, seemingly unaware of the gravity of the situation. Ruth turned back with a hopeful grin, a plan formed. “Look, we can fix this. We just find a shop nearby that sells them and chuck them in the crate. Nobody at central needs to know.”

Morgan shook her head. “You don’t know the area. There’s no Sainsburys Local for miles. We have 10 more deliveries to do, we don’t have time...”

“But what about another supermarket?” Ruth said, pulling open the passenger door to look at the screen. She recalled there had been a skull-and-crossbones marker very close to this street. “Look, there’s a Little Waitrose just on the next street!”

The old lady piped up. “Yes, there is, but it’s not very good, they have those machines which beep at you when you try to buy loose vegetables. . .”



Morgan leaned closer and gripped Ruth’s sleeve. “No, you don’t get it. I’ve been at this gig far too long. They all know me, they have my picture on file. I can’t go in.”

Ruth looked back in surprise. “Well, that’s fine. I’ll go.”

“No!” Morgan shouted. The old woman stopped talking behind them and backed into her hallway again. “Ruth, I can’t let you. It’s not worth the risk. They might have got your details, they could get you as soon as you walk in.”

“What do you mean? I’ll just take off my vest. How can they know who I am? It’s my first day!”

“I mean, it’s not safe!” Morgan hissed. Ruth could tell there was more to this – Morgan was very easy to read. What wasn’t she telling her? “It’s never safe. Please, don’t do it. I’ll just take the punishment.”

Ruth shook her head. No way would she let Morgan take the heat for this. “I’m sorry. I can’t let that happen. I’ll be back in 5. Just stay here and watch the van.” Ruth tore off her jacket, thrust it towards Morgan, then dashed off down the street.

She ignored Mogan's frantic cries as they faded behind her. "Wait! Don't..."

The 'little' Waitrose was particularly little, nestled under a four-story block of flats on the street corner. It was flanked by two security guards, wearing sunglasses (despite it being 7am and overcast). Ruth was puzzled when she noticed a line of customers trailing out of the front of the shop onto the street, but upon closer inspection, they were all waiting for a spluttering self-service coffee machine to cough back to life. She slowed to a walk and tried to blend in.

She passed the guards with her head down. She didn't raise it again until she was on the confectionary isle, which she found through pure instinct. Maltesers... Double Deckers... Yoghurt-covered raisins... Werther's Originals! She took two bags for good measure and peeked up towards the checkouts.

There were two self-check-out machines, and two staff operated tills. She made for the self-check outs, but she accidentally caught the gaze of a server at the staff tills. "Hello ma'am, can I ring those up for you?"

Ruth looked away, pretending she didn't hear, and went straight to scanning on one of the self-scanners. The machine's screen flickered ominously with the Waitrose logo. She wasted no time scanning the sweets, then searched for her wallet with shaking hands. A loud 'clonk' sound came from the coffee machine – somebody must have kicked it. Ruth scanned her card and watched the screen intently, waiting for the "contacting your bank" message to clear.

...but did it usually take this long? Ruth looked around the room again. The looked back at the staff tills, but the server there was gone. She began to consider running off with the sweets, cursing herself for bothering to pay in the first place. If she made a break for it now, her cover would be blown. Ruth could feel her heart beating in her throat. Finally, the screen finally changed message.

"There is a problem with your purchase. Please consult a member of staff."

Before Ruth could run, a faint 'click' sounded next to her ear. She turned to look down the barrel of a handgun, held by the person who had been running the tills. Her heart dropped and she froze, glaring at the same smiling face.

The server, whose name tag read 'Bridget', kept her gun raised. In the other, she activated a bulky handheld receiver and spoke, "Commander, we've got a Deliverer who doesn't know where she's welcome. Please send up a truck. Cheers, love."

Ruth thought fast. Distraction. She had moments before the guards at the entrance would be upon her. If she was going to move under a loaded gun, it needed to be right at this moment.

Suddenly, a loud smash sounded from the other aisle, followed by cheering from the line for the coffee. Bridget winced, “Oh, blast! Not again!”

Ruth turned to run, but the server was ready. As she attempted to make her second step, Bridget’s leg smashed into her foot, which instantly sent her spinning to the floor. Ruth’s cheek hit the tiles. Bridget knelt with her knee firmly on Ruth’s shoulder and held the pistol at her temple again. “You’re really not smart are you, poppet?” Her receiver buzzed to life, a grainy voice speaking through it, though Ruth couldn’t make out a single word. “Oh, did you hear that, dear? Ocado got your partner. Not smart to park a street away.”

The pain on her face faded away slowly as a wave of coffee trickled towards her. In the other aisle, the door guards were pulling people away from the self-service machine, which was emptying itself relentlessly onto the floor. By the time her blood on the floor mixed with the cold coffee, she had blacked out.

“Ruth! Wake up, damn it!”

Ruth jolted awake to complete darkness and a splitting headache. Her hands were cuffed behind her back, attached to the railing of the bench she was sat on. All around her the walls shook – she was in a vehicle. To her right, a familiar voice barked, “Are you alright? Answer me damn it!”

“Morgan? I’m fine!” Ruth said. She felt a lump on her cheek ache as she spoke. “Tell me what the hell just happened!”

Morgan’s voice shifted closer to be heard over the rumbling engine. “They put us in the Ocado van. The same guys from earlier.”

“I worked out that much! How did they work out our location?” Ruth said.

“They tracked your credit card, and linked you to Sainsburys,” Morgan sighed. “That must have set off alerts everywhere, because the Ocado thugs were hunting us and showed up straight away.”

Ruth sat back, reeling. What a first day. They were silent for a while whilst it all sank in. The pain didn’t get any better. “Wait, Morgan. How the hell did they trace my card?”

With a heavy sigh, Morgan said, “I’m an informant. For Waitrose. Not proud of it, but I do it to survive.”

“What?” Ruth yelled, raising her voice further, “You sold me out?”

“It’s not like that. Let me explain,” Morgan began, “You stay in the game for as long as I have, you get visited by these guys. They call them ‘Bounty hunters’. They find where you live, which is supposed to be top secret, even to the supermarket you work for, then they make you cough up intelligence. It could be employee databases, strategic weaknesses, or trade secrets. If you don’t get the data, they sell your address to some other supermarket who come and take you out. That’s why a lot of people end up with broken legs.”

“That’s. . .” Ruth was lost for words.

“If you do get the data, they sell that to other supermarkets instead, and come back next month for more. And it’s legal because they’re independent – or so the supermarkets claim.”

“... utterly barbaric.”

Morgan managed a small laugh. “Yes, at the very least. But these companies can get away with anything because they’re so big. Too big to fail. Anything that increases their share prices is a price worth paying, and those of us on the frontline pay the price.”

Ruth was horrified. She let her anger out loudly, “We’re just pawns, then! They don’t give the slightest damn about any of us!” You should have shot those Ocado guys dead.”

“NO!” Morgan yelled, “I didn’t kill them because I’m a *decent* human being.” Morgan’s tone changed, as if reciting a promise that she had sworn to herself. “People think Deliverers, shelf stackers, all of us, are just playing along with the cooperate game. They think we don’t deserve respect for what we do, the sacrifices we make. Mindless drones, facilitating capitalism, one falls and another takes their place. But we don’t hate each other; we don’t want to kill one another – we’re just trying not to get fired every day.”

As she finished, the engine noise calmed and the van came to a halt. The driver doors opened and their footsteps could be heard coming to the backdoor.

Ruth whispered to Morgan, though she knew the answer already. “So, where are we now?”

“Their HQ. For questioning. Oh Ruth, I’m so sorry. . .”

7 ‘The Sleepy Misadventures of Shane’ by ICSF members who were in the library on the evening of the 10th of February

This story was written collaboratively, where each writer added a paragraph based only on the previous two paragraphs and details they had previously written into the story.

Captain Spectacular gazed out from the window of the Galactic Flagship. The Grand Armada was lined up in ranks before her, gleaming like little snowflakes on a starry night. She pulled the communicator to her lips and uttered the words of the Great Emperor to be heard by all the Star-Commanders of the fleet.

“Alright you leeches, hopefully your bloozes are all in order. We need to show these cussing leeches that they can’t mess with the fricking Empire or those dolipods won’t know what shleeping hit them. Make your custardly emperor proud you shinky drillbits.”

“62 billion kilometres away”, Shane Carr woke with a start. ‘No more late nights bashing on the screenplays’ he thought to himself. Carr had never been the ritualistic type, but it had become something of a morning custom to start the day by smacking the alarm clock across the room. ‘No more late nights bashing anything, ideally’, continued the train.

Nursing his headache, Shane downed a shleeping bloozeburger. He wished the alarm would stop screaming. Frankly, the train wished it didn’t have to deal with such a violent dolipod aboard.

Snorting, bellowing its way through the carriage, the dolipod cried in fury at its cruel confinement. Its ruby pinpricks of eyeballs focussed on the sweeping landscape passing – a softening of stance, fury cooling. ‘Mother...’ it rumbled as it gazed, lost in memory.

As the landscapes were changing, Shane was becoming more and more sleepy. After several hours of sleep he ended up in Soviet Russia. He got off the train in fancy leather jacket, high heels and pink dress. He had no idea what happened to him. He felt as if someone gave him drugs. People on the street were giving him odd looks. Someone called for the policeman; the Russians were disgusted by Shane. They yelled, “Send Shane to the Gulag!” At this point, the whole world started to drift apart and Shane lost his consciousness.

Shane had a serious case of narcolepsy apparently given how much time he spent unconscious in this story. You see, Shane, our sleepy misadventurer, found himself in a precarious situation, a Siberian Gulag being said situation. Our dear Shane woke up to see a purple dinosaur squatting up and down over a Call Of Duty™ player, holding a Barack Obama action figure in his mouth while shouting “Harambe our saviour!” over and over again. Shane should not have accepted the mushrooms his captors had given him, and they were soon to have him babbling all his darkest secrets about the secrets of nuclear fusion, top secret missile systems, and the bra he stole from his crush in the 6th grade.

Upon the revelation that he stolen a bra from Mary James all those years ago, his captors visibly perked up. They began to question him about the specifics of how and why he stole it, where from, what colour it was, and so on for many hours. After he had told them everything he knew, the only thing he remembered before he woke up back in his cell was an image of Barack Obama and the taste of cherries.

Shane waited another year before the courts allowed him to take parole. In that time, he honed his karate skills and became an ultimate fighter. There wasn't a single piece of wood he couldn't break with his high-jump kick. When he got out, he decided to enroll in lumberjack camp to earn an honest trade roundkicking trees to shreds.

The Captain woke from her crypto-sleep with a jolt. What in the Heron's name was a 'Shane', and how did one individual consume that many psychogenes? Alas, that was the fleet; the frontier had never been kind to ideo-grunts. Thankfully, it was nothing a caffeineoclast wouldn't fix. Emperor's mercy on anyone who tried to make it out here without that crutch. Everyone needs a little help sometimes.

Donning her caffeineoclast, Captain Heron shambled out of the bubble-pod, confident in the knowledge that the neuro-hyperwaves were unable to oscillate past the golden crown. She shuddered a little, the mago-rats were out in full force this morning.

The voice of her emperor, Sha-nei the Sumptuous, echoed down the halls of the refactoring lab. The mago-rats chirped, ears rotating to find this new sound, turning to the small box in the centre of the room which had begun to sprout out prehensile feelers and appraise the surroundings. A single stray rat ventured too close. As Captain Heron watched, the tendril struck – plunging into the side of the rat.

As the tendril flung itself deep into the mago-rat's heart, it let out an almighty squeal that would have made any normal vat-born finch in terror. However

Heron was no mere vat-born, and so looked on with eyes hardened by the Great Warp War as was her duty.

Meanwhile on Earth, Shane was really getting into the lumberjack business. He had gotten up to punching 1,000 trees into paper a day, and could use a shovel to shave chippings directly into printer paper. Suddenly, a rippling sphere appeared before the tree he was about to knee right in the branch. He heard a thrill voice from across the universe calling his name: “Shane! Save me! Enter the portal before you and help us defeat Emperor Sha-nei!”. Shane didn’t have anything on that night so he said, “k 1 min m8”, and jumped in.

He fell. And fell. Coruscating colour whipped around him as the tides of infinity lapped at his mind – the cackling laughter of Sha-nei sawed across his ears: *FOOL! Did you really think it would be that easy?* Shane realised Sha-nei was a cheap bastardisation of his own noble name, and that there could only be one. Jaw tightening, he knew this would be the final confrontation. The portal ending approached, and he fell six metres onto solid concrete; the world went dark as his femurs shattered. He was lucky.

Shane had landed on his back and somehow the collection of assorted Celtic age femurs he kept in his backpack for good luck absorbed the brunt of the impact. He got up and looked around, noting the eclectic mix of architecture styles. Just as he got his bearings, he heard an authoritative, yet nasally voice out of the cloudless sky. “The Museum Planet will be closing in 10 minutes. Please make your way off planet, as trespassers after this time will be vaporised.”

The elder librarian, she surely would follow through with the threat. As he prepared to flee, he caught the eye of a hooded figure. It was Sha-nei, the scrumplous bleper was attempting to flee on a scabrous crawler.

Shane started throwing whatever he could pick up at Sha-nei, a fire extinguisher, the preserved teeth of the great competitive eater, Pacamen, a gigantic modern art sculpture made out of Styrofoam, but Sha-nei ran too fast and boarded the scabrous crawler successfully. With only five minutes left, Shane saw a vehicle. It was small, ancient and falling apart, and the owner was the most putrid smelling creature he’d ever met, with big nostrils and distressingly disturbing, tiny eyes on what would be a human’s chest. He had no option, and boarded it. “Where’d ya wanna go?” said the creature. Turns out he was a Space Uber driver. “Umm, Earth?”

“With the nitrogen and oxygen based atmosphere? You mean all the way in the bleezing Solar System?” Shane nodded aggressively and the driver seemed to understand. He floored the accelerator like he too knew the intensity of the situation. Shane looked to the back. ”Sorry, but I really need to borrow

your plasma cannon”. Without waiting for a reply, Shane immediately got into action; he powered up the cannon, aimed it, and fired at the crawler. Instant explosion and smithereens. Shane finally relaxed and felt as if his problems were at an end. “Rest in pieces...”

The vehicle slowed to a stop, and Shane’s driver turned slowly. “Hold on a minute. I let a stinkin’ head-eye into my shuttle and this is how you repay me? I may not care for Sha-nei, bu’ they got a right to freeze peach too, ya know!” Shane watched the driver awkwardly, his hand drifting towards the micro-hatchet he stored on his left ankle. The horrid smelling being continued, so at a time deemed dramatically appropriate to interrupt the monologue, he struck. Commandeering the craft from the quickly-decomposing driver, Shane headed for low orbit, following a trail of crushed pills and pitted cherries. As he neared his destination, a giant yellow orb with a chomping, toothless maw turned 90 degrees around the Moon and engulfed the craft. The reverberating soundtrack shook open a previously hidden freezer compartment, and as the cabin slowly filled with defrosting apricots, Shane had one last cogent thought – “If I were back in the gulags now, I’d be drowning in free speech!”