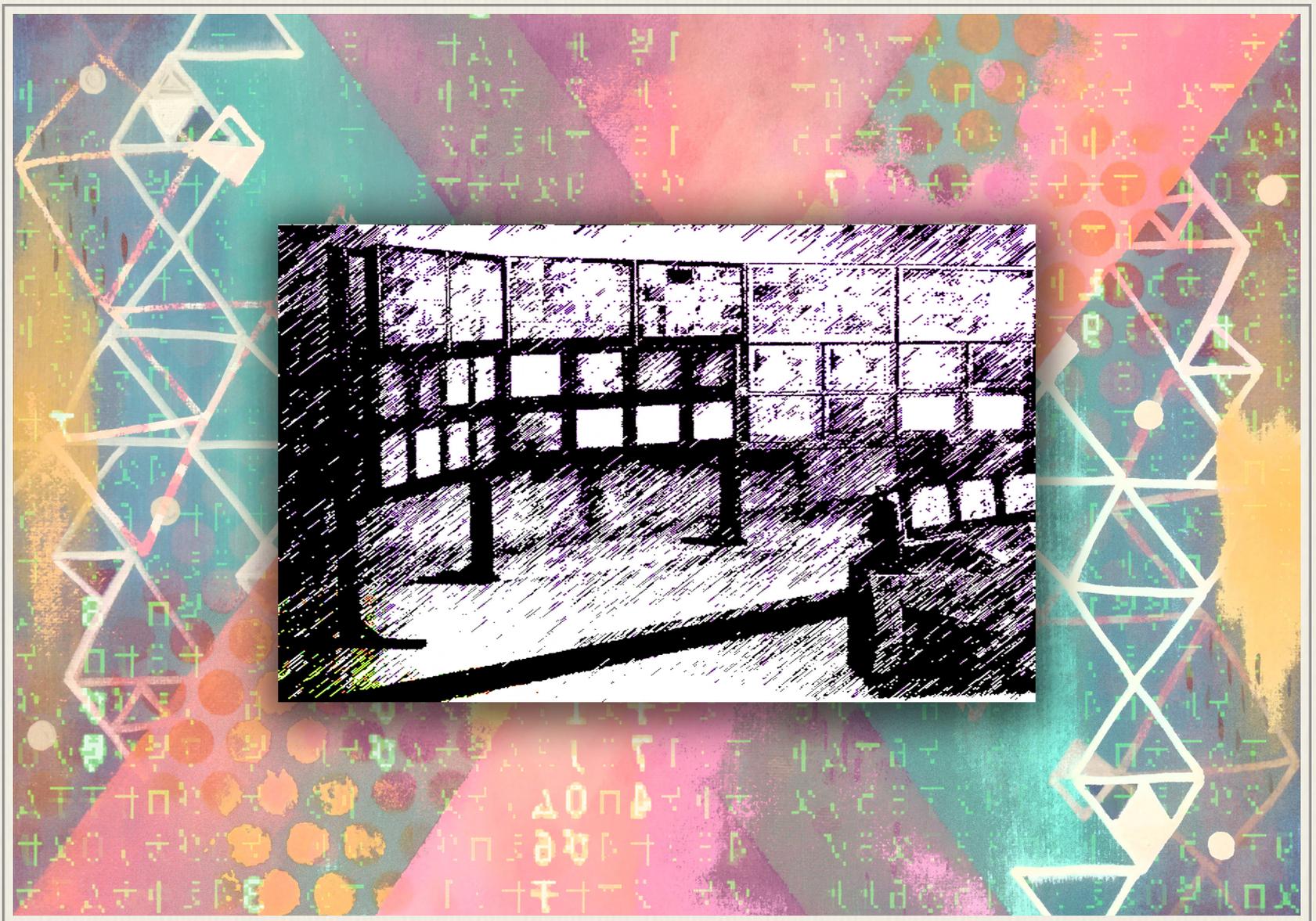




Qishu



I was wrong about that. There was a third and unforeseen reaction.

“That is so coooooool.”

I wasn't really sure how to take it. I had fortified myself with an extra, preliminary shot of Perz while wedged between two protoroid-ripped Slavic dudes at Junkies front bar, before returning to our tiny slice of window rail with our proper

drinks. So, I had been fairly ready in case Cullaine took a swing at me. This response was unexpected, and hurt a bit. It surprised me.

“That's it?”

Fortunately, she had a really great habit of taking my self-pity as humor, and she threw her head back and laughed.

“You're such a fuckin jag, Minor. You get to go into space.”

“But what about you and me?”

“Do you hear yourself? You sound like an eighth-grade girl. “

She was right. If anything, she was giving me a few school years of credit. I sounded more like a fourth grader. On the surface, her honest, immediate happiness at my imminent departure should've been only slightly unsettling. But there was something in her reaction that upset me, not in a petty way, it was way deep down below, where words couldn't go. I wasn't sure why I had such a sense of foreboding. I tried to shake it off.

“You're right, Cull. It's not forever.”

“I mean unless you're dumping me. Wait...is that what this is? The lamest breakup in modern history? “

She squinted at me, searching...but then couldn't hold it, and started laughing. I leaned across and kissed her. And she kissed me back, and I felt her hand gently grab my collar and hold me there. I'd never met anyone like her. Cullaine Tsuh. I couldn't fathom what insane luck allowed it, her becoming my girlfriend. I did, eventually, find out. But right then, at this moment, you could've broken me in two, I wouldn't have noticed. All that existed were her lips, and the smell of her hair tumbling perfect and haphazard out of clips, and those beautiful, amazing blue-black eyes. She tilted back, studying my injured eye socket, which was already improving under some kind of specialty nanopore butterfly strips that Dr. Kanaka had put in place.

“How long?”

“I don't know. I don't really know anything about it yet.”

“Well alright. I guess we better stock up.”

“Stock up? On what?”

“On fucks.”

She grinned at me sweetly, and disappeared into the crowd, toward the bathrooms. Amazing. I scanned the talent, which was pretty thick for this early on a Thursday night. Might have been one of their weird contests or something. They were always doing raffles. Junkies was one of those throwback hipster joints that were all the rage that year. Bartenders with the de rigueur idiosyncratic-iconic facial-hair-with-man-bun, earrings or gauges in their ears, plaid short sleeves, or cardigans over plaid - lotta plaid - strategically worn-out pegged jeans and vintage sand boots. Cocktail waitresses all with the asymmetrical shaggy 'dos and headbands, the chunky bracelets and bead necklaces, striped short sleeves showing a lot of ink, and denim mini-skirts over black leggings and pointy colored heels. Not surprisingly, due to the chronic destabilization of certain regions of the world economy, most of the girls were from Spain, and the guys were Czech and German, so it was a bit strange; American nostalgia presented by displaced Europeans. The place was three years old, but wanted to make you think it was from the old days, so everything looked like shit. Threadbare red upholstery, deep red lighting so you couldn't see anything, graffiti encouraged on all surfaces. It was our favorite place.

In keeping with the throwback aughts theme-park stylings, way up high on the walls were mosaics made of ancient flatscreen televisions incongruously playing old Nat Geo TV footage from the African veldt - life and death on the savannah, from back when there was one - wildebeests and gazelles and cheetahs and lions and hippos.

I noticed Gretelgain's mashup of Jean Gould's (L)eaves suddenly thumping over the speakers. I looked up and Cullaine was dancing back this way, hands bobbing toward me over the top of the crowd, fresh double shot of Perz in each. Considering how the day had started, this was a notable improvement.

“I got DB to play it!”

She had to shout over the music and the dense noise. I met her on the floor, we downed our shots and started dancing. Well, she danced.

(L)eaves was her favorite song. She'd been obsessed with it ever since we'd been mesmerized in bed one night by an amazing KūltūrToob about Gould's life, and she couldn't understand how such an obvious Mozart could have been eclipsed by so many less talented, yet more highly promoted “mouth-breathing morons,” as she put it.

We were suddenly besieged on the dance floor by a mini-mob. The two women were Kayzo, and 4Gaia, Cullaine's best friend. Beautiful Kids all of them, not a one with verifiable employment or even a visible means of support, yet somehow always decked in absolutely up-to-the-minute fashion; Vallarts popping his Neo-Shotokan katas to the beat in out-of-the-box glowing Klarvek fighting shoes, RJ in his jangling hoop necklaces, and glittering row of ear studs, Gilly in his ubiquitous multiple wound-metal and textile bracelets - as he told me more than once “they're guaranteed to block radiation and prevent three different types of cancer including aggressive melanoma!”

My town, P-Con, (carrying on the fine tradition of its progenitor, The Motor City) has always had a well-established, thriving illicit substance market, so I assumed that's where this posse's cash flow was derived, and didn't pry. In retrospect, given recent criminal history, perhaps I should have. Anyway, all our friends were pretty much her friends. And these were the Starting Five. With Cullaine, they formed a perfect three-plus-three boy-girl chain. Which I always felt acutely at moments like this, when suddenly there's a mini-party and I'm the obvious, slightly older, seventh wheel.

DB Scout, the resident mixmaster, gazed down from his smoky-windowed capsule tucked way up high in the front corner of the place. I could see his hazy shape, toasting us with a shot glass in both hands. As the last of her favorite tune morphed into the next thumping dance track, I found Cullaine and dipped down to her ear.

“You must rate, he hates to change his precious playlist.”

Cullaine smiled and spun around in a twirling circle.

“You paid for his shots.”

“Well, you can't take it with you,” I shouted.

The irony of the statement was unavailable to me for some time.

#

Cullaine's naked body sitting up, over me, silhouetted against flickers of images on the wall screen. The Perz had fogged me out. I recall bright glimpses of Cullaine eating some kind of greasy street food and then me yelling at aggro panhandlers on the stagger home. Cullaine was doing her best to start “stocking up,” but she could always outdrink and outdrug me, and she was proving it once again. It was unfair, I really wasn't getting to fully enjoy our carnal frolic - and who knew how many or how few we had left - my drunken mind transfixed by the wall of images behind her, the last West African giraffes finally reaching extinction. I kept trying to get the remote globe to shut it off, but my fingers were dumb blunt instruments and all it did was make the volume louder. Cullaine laughing at me, and the soft, mournful, incongruously loud voice of the British woman announcer “...as yet another of the most noble creatures on earth takes its final breath...” My last thought before I passed out was 'I can relate.'

#

One of the immediate repercussions of my impending departure was the demolition of my really quite leisurely schedule. I was rudely thrust into a constant state of tardiness for one meeting or another, had more correspondence with corporate functionaries than I could keep up with, and homework. Lots and lots of homework.

My third day, having spent the first two on medical examinations and eye tests and filling out tax forms and psychological questionnaires, I was finally allowed ac-

cess to Level 7. I wore my usual plisto¹ - my Level 5 Programmer badge - which hung around my neck, and a brand new, additional, top-secret graphene plisto under my shirt. I was under explicit orders never to allow that one to be seen, even its existence was not to be shared with any other MitsukoTek employee. The scanner which housed our unit read the plisto through my shirt in combination with an optical scan and handprint. I entered a long corridor, and was led by a congenial Chinese fellow with a mole under his eye or maybe a really stealth tattoo tear, to a second scanner, which repeated the triple scan. I entered a short antechamber with no attendant, and it had three doors, the one in the center with a small wire mesh window. Over the windowed door was a sign which read simply “7.” I looked in through the window, and a Chinese American kid I didn't recognize smiled from across the room and ran over. The door swung open and the kid stuck his hand out. I shook it, and he pumped it excitedly.

“Phillip Kwan, so so SO stoked to meet you, Dave. Gonna be so fucking fun.”

“Cool. But...nobody has said, I mean I have no idea what--”

“Take it easy kid,” he cut me off, despite the fact that I was at least a few years his senior, “we'll get you on it quick. Guys, everybody, hey!”

He whistled and heads starting popping up over partitions and from behind screens. Mostly Asian, quite a few women. I could see that this bullpen led to a maze of other rooms and offices and labs and who knows what. It was the hub, evidently.

“Level 7 welcome to Dave Minor, Harvard '28, Post Doc in M-Theory and QG at CERN, he's joining the squad. You're all supposed to have read his thesis by today, add that.”

A chorus of whistles and laughs and a few Bronx cheers greeted this. Nothing elicits more derision from international, hyper-educated, type A achievers than being confronted by someone who's supposed to be smarter than most of them. Not the intro I would've chosen.

“Sir, please follow me,” Kwan chirped in semi-military-slash-surf-dude fashion. I followed him into a beautifully lit corridor with clouded windows on both sides.

I caught a glimpse overhead of beaded metal strands in barely appreciable motion, bathing the ceiling, and the whole hallway, in an ethereal blue. Nice. We had basic halogen strips down in 5, this was a whole different scene, and I am a sucker for quality lighting.

Kwan opened the last door on the left, stood back and swept his hand into the room, magisterially. I couldn't yet figure out if his whole game was sarcasm, or humor, or what. But I knew I would, shortly.

“Your cave.”

It was a perfectly basic, state of the art office. Designer metal and glass desk, tasteful built-in bamboo shelves (empty) along the opposite wall. I walked around behind the desk and sat down in a brand new Regwan chair. It seemed to breathe lightly as it took my weight and set itself at the requisite height for my feet, knees and desktop. I could feel it going through its “new owner” initialization, as Kwan stepped in and closed the door. He set a hand on one of two quite comfy looking guest chairs, and leaned forward.

“I just want to let you know before we sit down with the team at 3:15, you have to watch out for Siggy. Just trust me, don't tell her anything you don't want everyone to know in ten minutes.”

He made an exaggerated duck quacking motion with his hand. I had no idea who Siggy was, but was now fairly interested in finding out.

“Thanks for the tip.”

Kwan moved to the door.

“You can take it easy for a while if you want. Or grab a snack, we have our own kitchen up here, it's open.”

He stopped with his hand on the doorknob, momentarily troubled.

“Kinda semi-serious about Siggy. I know you must think this is strange, since you don't really know what's going on yet, but really don't say anything to anyone in this unit about what you do here, except for Dr. Yu, or me, for the time you're here. For your own sake.”

And he was out. The door clicked shut behind him. I sat there, perplexed. Having worked on many a team over the years, I was no stranger to internecine warfare, but in my experience, it took a while before you ever realized you were engaged in it. This was my first day. How fun!

I set down my beat-up first gen rhombus on the desktop and brought up the docs I'd been tasked with studying first. I took a few minutes to adjust the array in the space around me. I had to relocate a few of my animats away from the clouded window, which had a strange digitized opalescence that caused them to moray. I moved them so they hovered against the background of the empty far wall, instead.

Finally settled, I expanded the last thing I was studying. It was titled: Statite Propulsion Vectors in Vacuum. Evidently, S9 was the first satellite to employ a technology that had been promised some twenty-plus years before. It was the brain-child of turn-of-the-century physicist Robert L. Forward, who imagined a more permanent solution to the problem of satellite movement in space. Traditionally, it was done by one or another kind of onboard propellant via a thrust-creating mechanism, both items adding weight and taking up precious space. The beauty and elegance of the statite was that it was both a solar sail and collector, allowing it to capture and store energy, which it then used to catch a ride on the solar wind, anywhere it wished. The structure of the gold nano-mesh it was made of, developed by a subsidiary of MitsukoTek in Germany, a company called Österreich, was a sight to behold. I zoomed into full mag, and marveled at how fine the instruments must be that could machine something this delicate, yet sturdy enough to withstand the exigencies of a lifetime in space. It was beautifully integrated into the design of the satellite housing, it made you think of angels, or other mythic winged beings. An animat spun up and Kwan's head appeared.

“You're officially in the fridge, Davey.”

“The what?”

“We call it the fridge. Level 7 network is individually insulated. I took the liberty of entering your basics, you can personalize and protect it later. Just a heads up, gotta start the meet at 3 cuz of Dr. Yu's sked. See you at the theater in a few.”

Kwan's animat vanished with a puff of sparkling dust and left behind a lazily rotating, empty text field. I grabbed it and pinned it to my shelf to deal with later. Time to see what was really going on.

#

Not five minutes into Dr. Yu's welcome, I was reminded of something Tevin Brother had said back in the interrogation room. It had barely registered at the time. When he was telling me the ins and outs of the deal, he said “you'd be relocated to the station” and then “...you'd go on a PSC...” As in you would be relocated, you would go on a Personal Service Contract, which of course, as a conditional, indicated an if as opposed to a when. I had just written it off as verb tense mix-up due to the guy's carefully buried German thing. Turned out it wasn't accidental at all. It now also made sense why Charsu had used the word “candidate,” as Dr. Yu finished his introduction with a similar descriptive, addressing us as MitsukoTek's “top aspirants for this assignment.”

Yeah, aspirants. Right. So, this sure-to-be-life-wasting, off-planet position that they practically blackmailed me into wasn't even mine yet. In classic Chinese fashion, they were also going to make it a contest. It wasn't bad enough in the current market for overqualified and underpaid physicists-cum-computer-programmers, they gotta make you do tricks and beat somebody out for a job as a glorified space janitor, too.

I, apparently, was the only one who didn't know this going in. I wondered what my other two compatriots here had done to deserve it. Oh well. “In for a dime, in for a dollar,” as my dad had been fond of saying.

Dr. Moses Yu was the head of the original Beijing-based design team that had cooked up Satellite 9, and evidently a corporate bigwig way up the chain at MitsukoTek. Still, he brought to mind a giant panda. Neat salt and pepper beard and moustache, with perfectly symmetrical patches of black and white hair over each

ear, under a sun-tanned, shiny bald pate. He wore a lab coat over a round midsection, and seemed to teeter like he might fall over every time he moved one direction or the other. He had an engaging, ever-present, knowing grin, and his eyes burned with excitement. He loved what he was doing, which was more than I could say for at least one of us in there with him. Which was me, Kwan, and a strikingly attractive young Finnish woman, a postdoc named Aino Järvinen. She had approached as soon as I walked in and introduced herself. After our initial chit chat, just as Dr. Yu had entered, she flashed a disarming smile.

“You can call me Siggy. Everybody does.”

I noticed Phillip give me a private jerk of the head, like, watch it.

The three of us were seated in the front row of a fairly small, semi-circular bowl of steeply raked seats, all facing a raised stage, which seemed to be made of some kind of polished bamboo - “the theater” as they called it. It was brand new, and very expensive looking, as was just about everything in this division. As Dr. Yu took his position at the center of the little stage, the lights went out and we were plunged into the deepest black that I've ever experienced.

A pin-prick of light appeared above where Dr. Yu was standing, and expanded until it began to take on a recognizable form. It quickly grew into Satellite 9, free floating in black space, sunlight and lens flares glinting off its golden surface. It turned, slowly, suspended overhead.

Dr. Yu went into a very impressive and well-rehearsed monologue extolling the myriad capabilities of the unit, synced with exploded animats of various newly created onboard technologies, and cascades of all sorts of the kind of technical jargon that science geeks love, and which I will kindly spare you for the moment. But as he went on, I started to hear not what he was saying, but what he wasn't. Which was pretty simple. He wasn't telling us what was wrong. Finally, after I'd lost touch with exactly which design feature Dr. Yu was rhapsodizing about, I couldn't keep my mouth shut.

“So, what's the problem?”

I felt a distinct unease from everyone in the room, particularly Dr. Yu, that I was not following some unspoken protocol of reverence for the master. But it was too late to backtrack.

“This all sounds like a product pitch to the junior sales team. I get it, I'm impressed, it's bitchen tech, what's the problem?”

Dr. Yu actually looked at me for the first time. His bright, flashing eyes immediately became heavy with seriousness and concern. Clearly not a guy who suffers fools, and he seemed to be weighing me for a long moment. I didn't notice him move or say anything, but suddenly the Satellite 9 animat was replaced with another one.

It was a cascade of numerical characters and letters that were clearly source code, but as I tried to read it, I found that it was a code I'd never seen.

“As you all know, MitsukoTek's satellite division has employed the same code that's been in use since the Chinese Lunar Space Exploration program first launched the Chang'e lunar probes over two decades ago. A very serviceable and sturdy code they've used for every launch since, right up to the Tiangong Space Station. Hasn't changed noticeably, during that time.”

This was the code we wrote in Level 5, a modification of classic code widely used in the satellite business, called C++ (that's cee plus plus, for the non-geek). Our version hadn't changed much since it was updated in 2017, hence its current extension, C++17, even now, 18 years later. It's what MitsukoTek used to communicate with, and operate, Satellites 1 through 8 of the Da Vinci Array.

“This... “

He indicated the animat above him.

“...is Qishu. Qishu is a new, proprietary code, developed by MitsukoTek, and used exclusively for command and control of Satellite 9. Each of you will have supervised access, and a very short time to learn it.”

I was astounded. Our entire division had not only been left out of the loop on the creation of this new code, but even as to the very existence of it. Dr. Yu's eyes

came to rest on me, and I saw that he had anticipated my reaction. It seemed as if he was speaking directly to me now.

“I remind you that you have already signed quite onerous non-disclosure agreements to ensure its confidentiality. Your discretion is imperative. Even, and especially, during all interactions with any other employees of MitsukoTek who are not currently in this room.”

I noticed Kwan nodding his head with a deeply serious look on his face, as if he would take such a revelation personally. He was already starting to bug. I was beginning to think about what I could tell Siggy that would upend his game, whatever it turned out to be, when Dr. Yu finally got around to the point.

“There have been unaccountable dumps, numerical responses showing up randomly in otherwise quite standard communications from the satellite.”

A new animat sprang to life, and started to scroll like rain. Numbers, or I should say, perhaps more accurately, a number. One entirely uninterrupted number ten columns across scrolled past for a solid minute before anyone made a noise. It was Kwan. He sort of exhaled, his chest tight. I could also see the whites of Siggy's knuckles clutching her arm rest, although she was much better at camouflaging her terror. This was a complete curve ball to them.

I knew in that instant that the game, whatever it might be, was mine. This was my bailiwick, you see, because I had a secret weapon.

I unsuccessfully tried to hide my arrogant glee.

“Do you know if it's an ordinal?”

Dr. Yu again looked directly at me, but this time there was a flash of the joy he had shown while describing his precious satellite. And also, a distinct tightening of sphincters in my seated comrades.

“No. There are no ordered sets, no partial sets, at least none that we've been able to identify.”

“Isomorphs of any kind?”

“Beyond what appear to be random repetitions, none.”

Siggy cut in.

“I assume you've tried to establish cardinality.”

She wasn't giving up without a fight. Good for her. But kind of schoolbook obvious, and encompassed in my original question. Poor Kwan was over there trying to look like he was pondering something deeper. He was toast.

“Yes. Irrelevant.”

Dr. Yu said it to me, disregarding Siggy entirely.

“Your task is clear. Each of you will learn Qishu, and once adequately versed in it, will separately review all the source code used in Satellite 9 to determine if there is, as we fully expect to find, human error at the root cause of this ongoing issue.”

“Can I ask a question, Dr. Yu?”

“Yes, Mr. Minor.”

“Is the satellite functioning properly?”

“Flawlessly. Which is what makes this assignment so intriguing. Good luck.”

A door buried deep in the back wall hissed open, and a severe looking Chinese woman with tightly bound hair emerged. She waited as Dr. Yu exited past her. Neither of my colleagues dared venture a glance in my direction. They calmly collected their things. The woman walked across to us, and stood there, with three slender rectangular boxes in her hands.

“You'll have 72 hours to familiarize yourselves with Qishu, starting now. These linksets only function within the walls of this division, so you can't scan out with them. Any attempt to do so will be considered theft, and handled accordingly. When not in use, store them in your office coldvault.”

I stepped up and took the top box. It was fairly light, unmarked, and shrink-wrapped in cello. Kwan and Siggy took theirs. We all tucked them into our packs. The severe woman turned crisply and exited through the same door as Dr. Yu. It sealed after her, leaving smooth wall. Cool.

“So...anybody up for a beer?”

Kwan looked at me with the kind of look he might've given a rabid, feral cat crawling out of his toilet. He glowered, and smashed out the side exit. From behind me:

“I am.”

Ahh, that's more like it. Siggy was going to play.

Almost an hour in, Siggy was a stone. She easily deflected my attempts to wheedle out any insider scoop on Level 7, while she was like a laser boring in on me, probing and trying to find my strengths and weaknesses. My arrogant ordinal question had tipped her off to the possibility that I might be more than an applied mathematician and thus a grave threat to her winning the “space monkey contest” as I was now openly calling it. Absurd as it may be, we were all - in classic A student fashion - now burning to win the shitty thing. But my third icy-cold Castle-black Mod was starting to bring my defenses down, diverting my attention to tantalizing flashes of the bare underside of her right breast (I somehow didn't notice how or when she had unbuttoned her blouse) which was insanely perfect, and perfectly, knowingly exposed.

Before you judge though, realize that this was all totally new to me. This female thing. I had never spent much time worrying about having sex, because the possibility had been so remote back in the years BC - Before Cullaine. But she changed everything. She had created a monster. And evidently it was now on the loose.

“Well...the one thing I will say about Kwan...is that he is a terrible kisser.”

“What?!”

I barely avoided spraying beer all over her. Aha! No wonder Kwan was working against her. It came down to the most basic warfare. Romance. It was almost disappointing. Siggy took a big pull on her beer - hand-crafted creamy French lager - and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and her eyes twinkled.

“It's true, what can I say?”

We were at Keller Tap, the diviest bar on this side of town, which was saying something. A tiny rectangle barely twenty feet square, it was a cinderblock and sheet-metal shanty (which I had tried, unsuccessfully, to keep a secret) run by JB Keller, a brewmeister from Scotland. Now you had to come in at like 4:30 in the afternoon, like this, to even have a chance before he ran out. It occupied a prime spot, tucked in a row of unpermitted storefronts and open air stalls affectionately known as “Shanghai Boulevard” in the shadow behind our Mitsuko Tower 5, which itself was built, not without irony, atop the iconic long-ago corporate headquarters of General Motors.

“Ya gah a move off, Minor.”

Whatever possibilities had suddenly opened up regarding indiscretions with Siggy were quickly iced down. I looked up at JB Keller's scowl from across the counter - a sheet of grimy plywood over railroad ties.

“D'ya spy that lot out there? Let's geh a step.”

I glanced outside to see that the ubiquitous line of potential inebriants had indeed grown quite impressive, and the sun was barely set.

Siggy was already on the move. She smirked.

“I gotta get to work anyway. Mitsuko needs a space monkey.”

I tailed her through the crush of waiting patrons, a few of whom were already scuffling over our vacated stools.

“Yeah. I'm sure Kwan's already made a set of Qishu flashamats.”

Siggy chuckled as we made our way into the maze of carts and grimy merchants and their equally hard-bitten customers. I noticed only a few recognizable vegetable-type items, some sort of zebra squash that looked old, no fruit of any kind. Lots of bread. Glad I didn't have to rely on this place, as so many did, for their sustenance. The best perk of being a contractor was that I could buy whatever hydroponics I craved straight off the MitsukoTek server, something I never

lost appreciation for, having learned from experience what it was like to be subject to the whims of these streets.

“Qishu. I wonder if the name means something.”

“It means we're all fucked for the next three days.”

Siggy shot me a glance, then took off running. I didn't know why. I gave chase, and three minutes later we were huffing and puffing and stamping, hands on hips, before the big glass doors on the ground floor of Tower 5.

“What...what...was that all about?”

“Just get...the blood pumping...lot of work...to do.”

Siggy flashed her plisto and the doors slid open.

#

I had barely dropped my bag in my office chair when Kwan wheeled in. He looked me up and down, hard. My cheeks felt like they were burning extra hot under his jealous examination.

“Jesus.” He shook his head, disgusted. “That was fast.”

He spun back out again, just as quickly, and it suddenly dawned on me that there was more to our little mad dash than Siggy let on. I envisioned Kwan watching me tail her into Level 7, both of us slightly out of breath, cheeks flushed, barely concealed smirks on our faces, and it didn't take much imagination to understand what he was thinking. It threw the whole little beer-tryst under a different light. Siggy was sharper than I'd expected, and clearly, in certain realms of gamesmanship, a step ahead of me. Weirdly, I was going to have to take Kwan's advice.

I tapped my rhombus to life, and set about securing my Fridge parameters to keep Kwan from further unannounced pop-ins. I reprogrammed my office door lock while I was at it - one can't be too careful with helpful colleagues. That fin-

ished, I brought up my coldvault animat. I punched in Fermat's Last Theorem (my favored password since like fifth grade, I thought I was so cool) and spun around to the wall to retrieve my new linkset.

It was another quirk of MitsukoTek's corporate design - favoring pressure plates and seamless nanopolymers - that many entrances and exits and private storage were secreted in walls, and accessed over cryptnets. A small rectangle appeared on the wall, as the coldvault door exhaled open. I extracted the box I'd been given in the theater, and tapped the door shut again. It disappeared like ripples in a pond. I never got tired of stuff like that.

I opened up the box. Inside of it was a small, shimmering black cube, and a pair of wireless glasses. They reminded me of the pair Dr. Kanaka wore. I put the glasses on, and placed the cube atop my rhombus. Immediately all my animats disappeared, and I took a look around the quickly unfolding Qishu interface. Pretty spare and basic, very familiar to a programmer such as yours truly. I swept aside the introductory globes that lined up to welcome me, and tested the density of some of the deeper orbs - it always struck me as fruit on a tree - until I found the heaviest one. I punched it open and a cascade of unrecognizable letters, symbols, super and sub script filled my field of vision. Ick, just like the giant blob of hieroglyphs Yu had unleashed on us earlier.

My plan had been pretty simple, in my mind, anyway. I figured that I would essentially do a one-to-one substitution to translate the code into the C++17 vocabulary, and memorize it, memory-palace style. The problem was, I needed space, three dimensional, unencumbered by physical backgrounds to fit something that large - I needed to see Qishu and C++ side by side, top to bottom. I needed a ski-ball for that.

I opened the network globe and found Kwan's head. I tapped on it.

“Hey, you got a ski-ball on this floor?”

Kwan's little disembodied head stared up at me with open hostility.

“Why don't you ask Siggy?”

“Phil, come on. We had a beer. And you were right about her, I'm gonna heed your advice.”

I made a motion of zipping my lip. His expression softened.

“Down in one of the test labs, they're working with the prototype gonzoy version, I think they're gonna call it the bulbus, or glow-ball or something else really stupid.”

The Standing Kinetic Interface™ - instantly nicknamed ski-ball by gamers world-wide - was still, at that time, the state of the art for immersion games, as it had been since the moment of its appearance on the market in 2022. Telluric, the Swiss company that pioneered the technology, continually upgraded and improved it - the current version was the SKI 6g - but it was still pretty much the same big glass ball that every serious gamer climbed up and strapped into for the past decade and a half. That was something that MitsukoTek obviously sought to change with its new tech.

“Are we allowed to check it out?”

“Why? You don't have enough work to do?”

What Kwan didn't seem to consider was one of the other excellent attributes of the ski-ball. While it was used predominantly as a 360° immersion gaming console, there were a small number of us - surprisingly small, I'd found - who had also learned how to exploit this hidden design feature. With a little bit of hacking, not even much skill required. But if Kwan wasn't already an initiate, I wasn't about to clue him in.

“You're right. I better get to work.”

I tapped him out.

Fortunately for me, though, I had - as I mentioned earlier - a secret weapon. And that weapon was its own realm, impervious to human demands. Its name was mathematics.

¹ So-called in honor of the famous French rectangular cartoon cat, Plisteau, which was a favorite of MitsukoTek CEO Ken Mexing Giong, during his early childhood in Paris.

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