

## Chapter One

I had spent most of my working life as a drone. A well-educated, high performance drone, to be sure, but a member of the hive nonetheless. My prime directive had always been to blend in, to participate, to conform. This required a high level of attention to the details of others. The needs of *others* was my call to action.

Nothing was impossible. For a dedicated programmer in the state's Federated Alliance for Increased Learning—a monolithic disturbance on the genitalia of corporate indifference—a request was nothing short of an order, failure not an option. The User's need was my personal challenge.

Programmers can do anything.

Any task can be automated.

How things changed that fine spring day.

Let me start at the beginning.

Mr. Randolph walked into my cubicle, my ten by ten grey enclosure, in much the same fashion as on any other day. He assumed the official State Worker position, leaning against my pretend office wall, right arm bent rigidly at a ninety-degree angle, coffee cup suspended at cooling distance.

“How's it going?” he asked, the familiar routine now part of his genome.

My answer should have been something like “Great” or “Okay.”

Instead I said, “Can you be more specific?”

It was unexpected.

As in not the anticipated response. Sort of like the blue screen of death, only not quite as dramatic. Windows may be the most popular operating system, but it's not the most popular operating system.

If you know what I mean.

Mr. Randolph was perplexed at my answer, which was really a question.

Wrapped up in an attitude.

“Well,” he said.

And that was it. I had deviated, and his internal behavioral program lacked the flexibility to adapt. His face contorted mildly as he hesitated, started to say something else, then awkwardly retreated from my cubicle. I sat staring at the place he had vacated, admittedly somewhat bewildered.

I was puzzled at his reaction, a little. But I was more intrigued at my own response to his initial query. I had answered his question with a question, and a pretty esoteric one at that.

My own behavior had departed from the norm.

Why?

I know now that it was the beginning. The process of awakening had begun, even then, but I was still too numb to realize it. Years of toiling in the obscurity of Kyuboria inexorably dulls the patina of enthusiasm. A shining beacon of zeal is ground into a nub of apathy, which prevails for a long time, perhaps until retirement.

At which time it festers until overtaken by death.

The cube dweller becomes not entirely indifferent, but rather dronish, working regularly and endlessly to advance the cause of receiving a paycheck.

It's not what you'd call a noble pursuit, but it is a pursuit.

Dogs chase their tails.

This, too, is a pursuit.

After many years they still chase their tails, only more slowly, and with the knowledge that they will never catch their tails.

It's what they do.

In rare cases—very rare cases—a different course is followed. How it happens, or what triggers it, is not known.

Cannot be known.

It is the mystery of Kyuboria.

Somehow, some way, the slumber ends.

There is an emergence, the chrysalis of conformity left behind. As the new creature clears the mucous of rebirth from its infant eyes, the world takes shape anew.

This was me.

Then my phone rang.

“Uh, yeah?” I'm still looking at my empty cubicle door.

The gateway to Kyuboria.

The interior space of my cubicle.

The collective of all interior cubicle space.

The voice on the phone is female, not quite screeching, but not calm, either. In a strange way it reminds me of that guy in England.

You know—I think he was from Dover. Anyway, for six months someone is stalking him, sort of. He's getting tons of email, and he keeps responding because whoever is sending them seems to know all kinds of really personal stuff about him.

Stuff only he himself would know.

Like why he broke up with his first girlfriend.

How he once secretly made his little sister eat a worm by putting it in her spaghetti.

Certain personal hygiene issues that he never mentioned to anyone.

We all have them.

Turns out he had a split personality, and he was emailing himself with one identity, and responding with the other.

Pretty bizarre. I think they ended up paying him overtime.

“Is the system down?” yodels the semi-hysterical woman. In self-defense I hold the receiver away from my ear. She always shouts on the phone. In person her volume is normal, but for some reason on the phone she becomes Blaring Bertha, Mistress of the Shriill. Holding the phone a constant six inches from my ear is all I can do.

“No. I don't think so. I don't know. Why?”

“I can't get in the system. Is it down? When will it be back up?”

The lady on the phone is a legend. She's been with our organization for over ten years, and has worked for virtually every department. Not that she's popular. Everyone gets rid of her as soon as they can. She has a history of issues. We all have issues, and hers are no worse than others.

Doesn't matter.

The issues are just an excuse.

One time she fell asleep in her car during lunch, and didn't return until someone woke her up.

Three hours later.

She claimed she just dozed off.

The blanket and pillow were a tad difficult to explain.

Like many others she's an expert at computer solitaire—what you might call Virtual State Work. Her solitary skill improves steadily, while the travel vouchers sit untouched next to the King of Hearts.

You might call it a window of opportunity.

She makes the rounds, working for a few months here, a year there. Transfers are a simple enough matter when you work for the State. If you possess no critical skills, they can always find a place for you. Fair is fair, and if you're incompetent, no one department should have to tolerate you forever.

Just move along. There's nothing here to see.

I quickly look at my monitor and bang a few keys. "System's up. What happens when you try to log in?"

This is where I make my first mistake. As a drone my actions are above reproach, but that doesn't make them right. Doesn't make them wrong, either. It just makes them unassailable.

I could have passed this request along to someone else.

"It won't let me past the box thingy," she says.

Although I'm in the throes of personal change, I haven't yet completely lost my desire to serve. I guess that's why I try to help, even though my heart's not really in it.

That special tingly feeling is losing its effervescence.

Or maybe it's just gas.

Running out.

"Is it the main system login box, or the Windows login?"

"It just won't let me in. I tried twice. Does my hard drive have to be reformatted?"

I'm forced to smile. Why? Who knows? I guess I'm still blissfully dronish. It amuses me how users will pick up little scraps of information and use them to impress tech people.

Try to, anyway. "No, I think your hard drive is fine. It's probably your Windows log in. Have you changed your password recently?"

She hesitates. "Um, no. Yes, a couple days ago."

"Okay. You need to use the new password."

Passwords can be set to never be changed, and to never expire, and for certain users I wish this would be done. Maybe for all of them. I've become an advocate of Open Systems. To technoids this means a kind of programming universality. That's not what I mean. What I'm talking about is total freedom of information, or TFI. If all the information in an enterprise were freely available to anyone, we wouldn't need passwords or security. What do we have to hide? God knows everything, anyway.

"I did," she says. "Wait a minute. It's working now. You did something, didn't you?"

"No," I reply, with little more than residual courtesy. I can feel myself disengaging further with each passing second. "Just remember to use your new password." My voice trails off in a quiescent gurgle of disinterest.

"I did."

"Anything else?"

"No. Stupid system..."

Soon I will find myself agreeing with her entirely.

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“Yo wuld nah eef to brrrin tat vey.” Rupert was asking me something, or telling me something. They raise darn good programmers in India, but you can’t understand a thing they say.

I’m surely not a racist, except maybe I like NASCAR, but damn.

“Rupert, are you telling me the program is ready?”

“Nat wuf ten ya go hafta.” He laughs at his own joke.

Whatever it is.

I smile and nod. “I think you should run that by Mr. Randolph.”

I don’t really think this, but I also don’t feel like dealing with work issues at the moment, and I take a certain visceral pleasure in the knowledge that Mr. Randolph will be unable to deal with Rupert.

It’s not that I dislike my supervisor. Mr. Randolph has simply become a symbol for all that I resent about life in Kyuboria. The conformity, the rigid inability to think creatively or to take decisive action, and the slogging inertia of systematic immobility are an intolerable drag. I crave more, yet am constrained.

Rupert leaves to seek out our supervisor, who is standing in his own cubicle doorway, the traditional cup of coffee dangling. I watch as Rupert engages him, then duck out the back way.

Had this been a month earlier I would have taken the time. I would have cared. It’s been at least a month since I cared, and twice that time since I’ve done any real work. I stopped writing programs weeks ago, and I can already feel myself getting rusty.

I smile to myself when I think of that. Rusty. He’s one of the other programmers, and he’s a nice guy, but he has one small problem. He’s a sleeper. Wherever there’s a place to rest his head, there you will find Rusty. At his desk, in meetings, even, I am told (though no one has ever substantiated this) in the men’s room.

There was once a loud crash from inside the bathroom, and a minute later Rusty walked out, appearing dazed and confused. Was he sleeping in there, only to fall unceremoniously in a heap next to the commode?

We may never know.

He doesn’t sleep secretly, like the guy in shipping who used to hide beneath layers of cardboard near the loading dock. That went on for a couple years until someone tried to pick up the cardboard with a forklift.

Can you say Workers Comp?

No sir, Rusty has no fear of getting caught, and that’s what really freaks me out.

Not that he has no fear of getting caught.

That there’s no such *thing* as getting caught.

Which has led me to a sobering conclusion: you can do anything here, short of committing a crime, and nothing will happen.

You won’t get fired.

You won’t get demoted.

You won't even get talked to.  
Everyone is afraid to rock the boat.  
This is State work. One step above welfare. It's Workfare.  
Decent pay. Great benefits. Little actual work.  
And I can't take it any more.  
Let me start at the beginning.

I was hired as a computer programmer five years earlier by the Federated Alliance for Increased Learning. The Alliance, as it is commonly known, is a state agency that supports the higher education industry. It is a funnel, of sorts, that serves the purpose of directing college-bound students into our state's collective of universities and colleges. The Alliance itself is not a school at all. It simply guides the masses into the state's network of higher education institutions.

We are the educational equivalent of a cattle chute.

The more students that enter the system, the better we are perceived to be doing our job. Reporting exactly how many students enter the system each year is critical to evaluating our performance, and the Alliance is very picky about how such reports are compiled. Thus, they need computer experts to maintain the systems and software that makes generating such reports possible, and for other tasks, as well.

Prior to my Alliance gig I worked for a different state agency, and in all that time my work ethic was exemplary, my performance topnotch. I was what you might call a moderate. I followed the rules, did my job, aimed to satisfy.

As a programmer, I hated to say 'no'. If someone wanted something automated, I simply wouldn't believe it couldn't be done. I gave it my all. It made folks jolly. My supervisors were happy with my efforts.

It was all good.

And there's nothing wrong with that.

For the others.

When I came to work for the Alliance, I was still a moderate. I brought my positive attitude and work ethic with me, and went about the job of assimilating into my new department.

Somehow it just never took.

Maybe it was the water.

At first I used the water from the bathroom sink, or the drinking fountain. But then I heard about the old plumbing in our building, and started noticing brown stains in my water cup. That's when I started bringing my own water from home.

Lugging a watermelon-sized jug into work every day became tiresome, and twice it leaked down the front of my pants, so I joined several others in pressing for an office water cooler. It seemed to me that fresh, clean drinking water was a reasonable expectation in the workplace.

The water cooler committee agreed.

They were an assemblage of wise and experienced managers.

But they wouldn't pay for our water cooler.

Apparently raising a ruckus so soon after I was hired marked me as an agitator. My actions were seen as a sure sign of rabble-rousing, and everyone knows that no good can come of such things. The water had been just fine until I came along and started making a fuss, and no way was the committee going to reward the actions of an agitator. The chairman of the committee, I was later told, actually referred to me as an agitator several times.

"He is an agitator, that one. Mark my words; no good will come of this. He is an agitator."  
Something like that.

Of course, I was blissfully ignorant of all this, and wanted nothing more than the occasional glass of water, maybe even some tea if we could manage a cooler with the extra valve for hot water.

*Agitator.*

Other departments had their water coolers paid for, but the committee felt that we should be an exception. The cost of the water cooler was many times less than what they paid the committee to decide to not pay for it. We took up a collection and paid for it ourselves, with subsequent monthly contributions for water delivery.

My coworker and friend Lyle refuses to pay, but won't drink the suspect water from the building, either. He also gets thirsty a lot, so he brings water from home, just as I used to. He has no problem breaking most other rules, but for some reason he won't use water he hasn't paid for. I suspect it's a lingering psychological issue, probably related to bedwetting as a child.

In an "unrelated" story, Lyle once claimed that someone had urinated on his work chair. While it is true that there was urine on his chair, they never caught the perpetrator. Whoever mysteriously piddled on Lyle's chair simply vanished without a trace. In a strange coincidence, on that same day Lyle wore two different pairs of pants. He claimed it was because of a meeting he had to attend, although nothing was scheduled, and no one else knew of any meeting.

I suppose anything is possible.

Anyway, we're sort of kindred spirits. I guess we both realize the lunacy that is our workplace, and in an effort to survive—psychologically—we gravitate towards the same quirky thought processes. His office is one floor below mine, and represents an opportunity to temporarily escape cubicle purgatory. On this fine morning I lack the will to deal with work-related issues, so I head there now, taking a circuitous route that will avoid contact with Mr. Randolph. I pass several other workers along the way, but they all ignore me, and I am content to wander anonymously past.

I arrive unseen.

A comfortable chair sits in the corner of Lyle's windowless concrete enclosure. He doesn't have a cubicle, exactly. It's more like a prison stateroom without the free meals or complimentary in-room toilet.

Not that it matters.

I take up residence in the comfy chair, which is a most excellent piece of seventies-era furniture. It's shaped almost like a cubicle, although I doubt this was by design. The soft velour cushion has been compacted to a third of its original size from years of use. The armrests, threadbare but serviceable, are placed at the perfect height in relation to the elbow, allowing one to comfortably rest one's chin in one's hand for a moment of ponderous thought. I sit now, and as the cushion receives my posterior with a soft whoosh, Lyle pointedly ignores me.

Perhaps that's too harsh.

He does not acknowledge me.

I lean back and gesture towards him with my cup of pristine, sparkling, water-cooler water, the plastic aftertaste a sure sign of freshness. "Morning."

"Hand me the Spam," he says, nodding towards the decade-old can that sits on the edge of his desk. It serves as a paperweight and decorative piece.

"No can do." It's my policy that once the cushion has conformed to my behind, I will not move for at least ten minutes. Some claim the time to be closer to an hour.

I won't quibble. Anyway, the Spam is just beyond my reach.

Lyle gives me a disdainful look and stands up to retrieve it himself. “You think I don’t have better things to do with my time?”

“I’m sure you’re a very busy man.” I slurp my water, louder than necessary.

“Please don’t make disgusting noises,” he says.

“Sorry. So what do you think of my idea?” A day earlier I had told him of an idea that I have for a new company, but before we had a chance to discuss it someone’s laser printer jammed, so Lyle had to go home sick. Right now my question doesn’t seem to register, as he is entirely preoccupied with grooming his Spam. Using his shirtsleeve he cleans off the can, replaces it proudly on the edge of his desk, and sits back down. He eyes the can critically, then stands up again and moves it an inch or so to the left. This pleases him immensely.

“Did I ever tell you the history of Spam?” he asks.

I know pressing him right now about my idea would be futile. “No. Tell me about Spam.” I sip my water again, and feign interest.

A distant expression fills Lyle’s cherubic face as he recounts the glorious details of his favorite meat product. “It all started in nineteen twenty-six,” he begins. “The recipe called for a mixture of pork and some other stuff. I have it written down somewhere.” He begins opening drawers.

“That’s okay. Just tell me what you know.”

He nods and bangs a drawer closed. Inside something heavy falls down.

More Spam, I suppose.

“It wasn’t originally called Spam,” he continues. “That happened later, in the mid-thirties, when they had a contest to give it a better name.”

“What was it called before that?”

Lyle has to think about this. “Canned meat, I guess. Anyway, the winning entry in the contest was, of course, Spam, and that’s what it’s been called ever since.”

“That’s nice.”

“Khrushchev said Spam saved the Russian Army in World War Two.”

“What’d they do, throw it at the Germans?”

“It’s a very international product. The Koreans give it away in gift packs.”

“The meat product for all occasions.”

“Indeed. Of course, the seven-ounce cans didn’t become available until nineteen sixty.” He smiles at me contentedly. The lesson is over. “You asked me about something?” he says.

“Right. I wanted to know what you think about my idea for a company.”

He doesn’t say anything for a moment, and I can see he’s reading an Instant Message on his computer screen. Finally he mutters, “Stupid idea,” and types a response to the message.

“What’s stupid about it?” I don’t know whether he’s talking about my idea or the message he just answered.

He looks up from the screen. “So tell me again. This company, what would it do?”

Few ideas have lodged themselves as firmly into my psyche as this one. I’m so sure it would work, if I could only get financial backing. “Here’s the deal. I create an office—the space, administrative support, computer infrastructure, everything. Then I recruit people who have ideas that they believe in. I give them the opportunity to make their idea work. I provide them with a salary, a place to try their idea, and whatever support they need. If they’re successful, they become a division of the company. If not, at least they had their shot.”

I lean back and sip my water. How could anyone not love this idea?

At first Lyle doesn't seem to be paying attention, and I get a little irritated as he bangs on his keyboard. Finally he stops typing, and nods. "So what if they all flop? You know, not everyone has crackerjack ideas."

"I think tons of people would want to try, and I'd have to pick the best ones."

"The best ideas, or the best people?" he asks.

"Case by case."

He rubs his chin, considering. "And who would pay to get this started? How much would it cost?"

"Yeah, that's the problem. I figure about two hundred large for startup, and maybe a hundred a year for a few years after that. But who's going to loan me that kind of cash?"

"And once you start making a profit, you pay back what you borrowed?"

"Right. And hopefully continue to grow. As more entrepreneurs join, the company becomes more diversified. There's a built-in level of enthusiasm with continuous new blood and new ideas."

Lyle laughs. "Not quite the model that our organization embodies."

"Precisely. What do you think was my inspiration?"

"A company based on the opposite of the Alliance. It would have to succeed," says Lyle. Then he adds, "I'm hungry."

"Want to vendify?"

The vending machine is in another part of the building, and represents an opportunity to socialize with a broader group of people. Bored cubicle workers are naturally drawn to caffeine and sugar.

Little Debbie with a mocha chaser.

Smooth.

We sometimes retire to the vending area when we grow bored with each other. After twenty minutes or so we generally cease to amuse ourselves, and thus require audience replenishment.

The others will laugh at almost anything.

Not that they're stupid, but when you've been sitting in a cubicle sorting invoices all morning—or all life—even a lame joke is a welcome break.

"What about Mr. Randolph?" asks Lyle. "Won't he miss you soon?"

I start to rise. "Rupert will keep him busy for a while. He won't be looking for me yet."

And as we leave Lyle's office, I realize that I don't care, anyway.

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The only other person at the vending machine is the department secretary. She's a vivacious redhead with a sense of humor that can only be described as morbid.

Or peculiar.

Or perhaps sublime.

We joke around with her as she buys a cup of coffee, and make fun of her when the cup fails to dispense. She watches the brownish liquid pour unabated into the drainage area.

"Crap," she says, holding the plastic door up as the steamy froth slows to a dribble.

Lyle is very sympathetic, and offers to buy her some candy. She accepts and we all share a bag of sugarcoated fat lumps with emblazoned letters.

It's the best.

For fifteen minutes we share gossip and make each other laugh. Not that any of our material would be worthy of Letterman, but pent up cubicle energy is a powerful force, and our topical humor strikes close to home.

There is even dancing, of a sort, as Lyle attempts to River Dance. As he tries a particularly difficult high kick, his share of the candy spills across the floor. Though he tries valiantly to avoid it, he steps on several pieces, crunching them into oblivion. The jocularity momentarily suspends as we stand in a small circle observing the crushed particles.

Lyle is devastated. "My children!" he yells, and drops to his knees.

"At least my coffee had the good sense to self dispose," says the secretary.

"I'm disposed to agree," I offer.

Lyle is frantically scraping at the brown smudges and colorful speckles on the floor. "No, no, no," he says.

"You shouldn't dance and eat at the same time," I say.

Lyle stops scraping and looks up at me pathetically. "It was a *River Dance*."

"Whatever it was, you shouldn't do it while you eat. You might get cramps." The secretary nods seriously at her own warning. Her cramps are the stuff of legend, to hear her tell it.

We often hear her tell it.

"Cramps, shmamps," I say, knowing this will get her going.

"Hey. Cramps are nothing to joke about. If you had to go through what I have to go through you wouldn't be so insensitive about it."

"I'm hurting here," says Lyle. He's no longer pawing at the hopelessly mangled candy. The secretary reaches down to coax him to his feet.

"It's okay," she says, motioning towards the candy. "They're in a better place now. Come on, stand up."

Lyle accepts her hand and slowly rises. "As I'm sure you can imagine, I'm feeling a little sad now," he says. "If you don't mind, I'll just go back to my office." He turns and leaves without waiting for an answer.

The secretary and I exchange glances. "He'll get over it." I say.

She nods. "We should clean this up." She motions towards the floor, and we work together kicking the crushed candy under the vending machine.

"So what did you do this weekend?" she asks.

"Nothing much. I went into town to price some mulch."

"Mulch?"

"Yeah, you know. Chopped-up wood particles."

"I thought you lived in an apartment."

"I do."

"So why were you pricing mulch?"

"Just curious."

She nods and kicks the last piece of candy under the machine. "We're supposed to get a lot of rain this week."

"How do you feel about that?" I ask.

"I hope it kills the bugs," she says, with great emotion. "I hate bugs, especially ants. I hope the rain comes and drowns them all to death." She stares blankly into space after she says this,

and I'm pretty sure it's not a normal reaction. After a few seconds she recovers, and gives the floor a final once over to make sure we didn't miss anything.

"Looks good to me," I say.

"Did I tell you about my dream?" she asks.

"No."

"I was in a car, lost, going somewhere, but I can't remember where. I think I was in Canada."

"That's odd."

"Yeah. So anyway, I have this old map, like one of those treasure maps, and I'm driving and looking at the map, but it keeps blowing into my face."

"Is the window open?"

"No, I'm in a convertible. Then in the back seat someone sits up. He had been lying down. It's Rusty, and all he says is 'take a left,' then he lies back down. This happens several times, and suddenly I'm at a drive-up restaurant, one of those old-fashioned ones with the girls on roller skates. What do you think it means?"

"Did you order any food?"

"Not that I recall."

"So you weren't hungry, but maybe Rusty was, which is irrelevant. The convertible indicates a latent desire to be topless, apparently with Rusty."

"That's sick."

"It was *your* dream."

She concedes the point with a tilt of her head. "Maybe I should hook up with Rusty."

"Based on your dream?"

"Sure. Could be we'd hit it off."

I find that I'm not especially interested, except it's curious to think that a girl might actually sleep with you based on something as nebulous as a dream.

I decide not to try to understand. "Are you busy today?" I ask.

"My boss is in meetings all day. He always leaves me plenty to do. How about you?"

"The usual," I reply, not really knowing what this means. Small talk is small talk. She simply nods, and we both start back. It's time to return to Kyuboria, so we chat amiably about nothing until we reach her workstation. We say goodbye, and I head for my cubicle.

When I arrive, a morsel of candy coating lodged irritably between two back teeth, on the bottom, Mr. Randolph and Rupert are waiting for me. There's only one extra chair inside my enclosure, and Mr. Randolph now occupies it.

Rupert stands dutifully by his side, blocking the entrance. I gesture with my head for him to move, which he misinterprets as a respectful half bow. He smiles and bobs his head, obviously pleased at my deference.

"No, Rupert. You're in the way."

He backs towards Mr. Randolph, tripping over his outstretched leg. I reach out and grab him by the arm, restoring his balance.

"Tanks. Tanks beri mush." He bobs again.

"Yeah." I release his arm and snuggle into my chair. This cubicle was not built for meetings. I nod towards Mr. Randolph. "So what's up?"

This is going to be interesting, because I know that Mr. Randolph has no idea what's up. Rupert may know, does know, but it's knowledge he'll never be able to impart to Mr. Randolph. In the past I've acted as a sort of intermediary, since I understand most of what Rupert says, and

I understand the project we are working on as well. Mr. Randolph understands neither, and now I'm about to stop functioning as his interface. He doesn't know it yet, though the evidence is there if he cared to look, but my attitude towards work has become like a year-end special.

I have zero percent interest.

No one knows yet that I've stopped caring. I'm aware that changes are taking place, but I have not yet fully grasped their significance. It's sort of like when you can tell you're going to get a headache, but it hasn't really taken hold yet.

Maybe it's more like when you stand up too fast and get dizzy. You think it will go away, but then you almost faint and have to sit back down. The dizziness subsides.

Maybe it's nothing like that at all.

Some things are difficult to pin down.

Lately I've been going through the motions with Rupert and Mr. Randolph, but I've been on cruise control, not really paying attention as the trees race past, if you know what I mean. We're working on a massive update to our software because someone high up in the food chain decided that we should replace our existing system with something different.

Not better. Just different.

And expensive.

A vendor was chosen after a rigorous process of screening out the most qualified companies. Our part of the project is to make sure the vendor's program is interfacing correctly with our local system. No one is happy with the progress we're making, and increasingly I have dumped much of the work on Rupert. As I said earlier, Rupert is an excellent programmer, and he has a great attitude. You just can't tell what he's saying. I can, because I seem to have some kind of linguistic gift. Not with actual languages. For example, I can't speak French or Spanish, but I have a natural ability to guess what foreigners are trying to say in English.

I'm an English to English translator.

Of sorts.

Mr. Randolph depends on me to help him with Rupert, but now I've become not so dependable, and Mr. Randolph can't understand why. He can't ask, either, because that would rock the boat, just a little, and that's the last thing he wants to do. Mr. Randolph has learned that the wait and see attitude is always the safest.

Wait and see if someone else takes responsibility.

Wait and see if no one notices you.

Wait and see if the problem just goes away, because everyone else is just waiting and seeing. If you don't make a decision, you can't be faulted for doing something.

For doing anything.

Nothing is better than something.

If you do nothing, you can't possibly be responsible.

For anything.

So why do they keep you here?

Because they never fire anybody.

Don't get me started.

I'm in the middle of trying to not think about anything when Mr. Randolph surprises me.

"Rupert has indicated that—well, go ahead and tell him, Rupert."

Rupert beams. Obviously he has told Mr. Randolph something about the project, but Mr. Randolph has no idea what Rupert is talking about. By engaging me directly with Rupert, Mr. Randolph expects to receive a usable translation. This is a very clever ploy.

For his part, Rupert is highly enthusiastic. He considers it an honor to be called upon for this important task, but just as he is about to start talking we are joined by another coworker.

Gert.

Gert is matronly, of indeterminate age, but old, very old. In her sixties, at least, which is ancient when you work for a tech department. But I like her because she reminds me of my grandmother when I was younger. She's nice, but doesn't have a clue about technology.

It doesn't matter, though. At least I don't think it does. She doesn't actually do anything technical. She used to compile reports for various other departments, but now they use technology that she never bothered learning. I don't know why she is here.

Gert makes great coffee.

They never fire anyone.

"Are we having a meeting? Maybe we would be more comfortable in the conference room."

Gert is always concerned about everyone's comfort. She's constantly messing around with the thermostat, making it colder in the summer when someone complains, and then changing it back as soon as someone else makes the opposite complaint. Same thing with the heat in the winter. Half the women in our office think they're having hot flashes the way the temperature goes up and down.

The men just think they're nuts.

When they think at all.

"No, we're fine here," says Mr. Randolph. He obviously intends for Gert to move along. She stays put, smiling matronly, waiting to make someone more comfortable.

Mr. Randolph lacks the ability to issue an order, or a strong suggestion. So now there are four people in my cubicle. That's three people between me and the door.

Not that I'm claustrophobic. But damn.

I decide to have some fun and pick up my phone, dialing four digits. Brenda, the thirty-something workhorse of the department, answers immediately.

"Hi, Clint. What's up?"

"We're having a meeting in my cubicle. Can you and Rusty come down?"

The pause that follows is what I expect. I know she will agree. The pause is interpreted as, "Why are you involving me? I don't want to participate. Leave me out of this."

"Sure," she says.

I know Rusty is asleep, or at least dozing, but Brenda rouses him and shortly they arrive at my door. Rusty is around fifty-years-old, with wavy blond hair and an earring on the left side. Rumor has it that he's quite the lady's man, which may be why he sleeps during the day. His nights are—busy. He has no idea what the impromptu meeting is about, and without a place to sit he is forced to stay awake.

As everyone gathers around my cubicle Mr. Randolph tries to make eye contact with me, to ask silently the question that must be screaming inside his skull: "*Have you flipped out?*"

I refuse to look at him. "Rupert," I say. "Could you summarize where we're at with the project?"

Rupert has now been asked by two senior people to represent.

He's definitely down with that.

He tries to position himself so he's facing everyone, but in doing so he ends up with his butt in my face. I have nowhere to go, and can't even push my chair back far enough to stand up.

In the background I hear a toilet flush.

Rupert begins. "Da dater eesred farrin trada kshunin das eestem."

No one says anything, but everyone sort of glances at me, looking for a cue. Or a clue.

I offer a blank stare.

Rupert continues. “So det vey laking weefta bout ta ken mebbe.”

I chuckle and correct him on a minor point. The others lean forward, trying desperately to glean some meaning from my quietly uttered comment. They are disappointed.

Brenda interrupts. “Is this going to take long?”

Mr. Randolph looks at her, then at me, a glint of hope in his eyes.

I indicate for Rupert to continue, and as he does, I notice that I have received a new email. I peck away at my keyboard, Rupert’s droning pushed further and further to the back of my mind as I read an astounding message.

Part of my job is to provide technical support for the Grants department. They deal with all manner of state, federal, and private funding streams for both students and university staff. You can get a grant for almost anything if you don’t mind jumping through significant hoops. The Grant department specializes in hoop navigation.

It’s a routine matter for me to receive email concerning available grants, and I usually skim through them, curious as to what silly projects are considered worthy of taxpayer or foundation funding. I quickly peruse the list, and nearly delete the file, when my eyes fixate on the second to last line.

It reads: “Entrepreneurial Startup Grant”.

I think instantly of my idea for a company, and read further.

The grant is to “establish employment opportunities in economically depressed areas” (as defined under certain government guidelines). Projects to be considered include “incubator cells for companies designed to promote the expansion of enterprise zones utilizing entrepreneurial skill sets”.

I can no longer hear Rupert.

I read further.

“Grants shall be for no more than four hundred thousand dollars, with subsequent renewal amounts at one third of initial grant for three consecutive years.”

*Holy crap.* Can this be true? I have yet to read the small print, but it makes sense. We can’t get a water cooler, but there’s money for—whatever this is.

I have my own idea.

There’s more. It seems that the grant is only available to individuals who have been fired from the technology sector in the current fiscal year. The grant application is quite specific about this. If you *voluntarily* separate from your employer, you are excluded.

Downsized is okay, or laid off.

Quitters need not apply.

So they’re looking for fired tech people, so they can give them several hundred thousand dollars to start new companies—to hire fired tech people?

It’s got to be a government idea.

I like it.

Suddenly I realize that my cubicle has become silent, and everyone is looking at me. They are expecting—something.

“What?” I ask, of no one in particular.

Rusty walks away.

Mr. Randolph stands up and nods towards me. “Could you write up a summary of what Rupert reported?”

“I wasn’t really paying attention,” I say.

Everyone freezes. Over the top of the cubicle I can even see Rusty’s head sort of jerk back as he pulls up short. My admission is like a bucket of cold water.

Down the front of your pants.

No one knows what to do, least of all Mr. Randolph.

My statement necessitates a supervisory response, although it wasn’t my intent to force such a drastic measure.

I was simply telling the truth.

Mr. Randolph mumbles something under his breath, then sort of rocks back and forth a few times. He grasps his finger with the opposite hand, twisting it, and glances furtively at the ceiling. He’s not quite apoplectic, but there is significant agitation.

Finally he mutters “Okay” and slowly backs out of my cubicle. As the others scurry back to their desks like so many frightened ants, I read again about the grant. The candy is still wedged between my teeth, but it feels like it’s about to break loose.

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Lyle’s office is becoming a more frequent refuge, which is only possible because he doesn’t have a real supervisor. He has a manager that he reports to, but as long as Lyle doesn’t elicit complaints from the people he supports, the manager is content to let well enough alone. Lyle does just enough work to prevent anyone from saying anything negative about him. Truth be told, Lyle doesn’t care what they say *about* him, as long as they avoid talking *to* him.

“Mr. Randolph has been following me,” I say, walking into Lyle’s office.

“Right now? You’re dodging him?”

“No, not right now. I mean in general. Lately he goes wherever I go. Whenever I leave my cubicle he follows me.” As usual I’m carrying my cup of water, and I spill a little on the floor as I sit down.

“Clean that up.” He nods towards the miniscule puddle of water. “He *is* your supervisor. What does he say when he catches up to you?”

“That’s just it.” I rub my foot over the water, smudging it into the tiled floor. “If I stop to socialize with someone, he just stands nearby. It’s like once he ‘catches’ me, he doesn’t know what to do.”

Lyle is intrigued. “That’s odd. He follows you, but never says anything?”

“Yeah. Whenever I stand up to leave my cubicle he comes after me.”

“How’s he know?”

“What?”

“When you leave. Your cubicle.”

“My chair squeaks when I stand up. I guess that’s his signal.”

I don’t tell Lyle that I’ve been messing with Mr. Randolph. How I’ll stand halfway up, just enough to make my chair squeak, and then sit down quietly. Sure enough, Mr. Randolph will round the corner within fifteen seconds, and quickly glance in my cubicle to verify that I have left. He pulls up short when he unexpectedly sees me sitting in my chair.

Then he's stuck. His conversational skills lack spontaneity, so he'll just sort of nod at me as if I'm the one busting in on *his* party. His mouth might open and close, but no sound will come out. It's kind of like what a guppy might look like if it tried to talk.

He is speechless with guilt.

Total Apparent Guilt.

TAG.

It's the ultimate role reversal, because he has every right to be there. He *is* my supervisor. He just doesn't like getting caught doing his job.

This is how I amuse myself.

Well, it passes the time. But I shy away from telling Lyle. I've only been hanging out in his office for a few months.

Not that I don't trust him.

"Sounds like he's been told to keep closer tabs on you," says Lyle. "That can't be good."

I nod my agreement. "I have to tell you about my grant."

"Huh?"

"There's actually a grant that could fund my company. You know, the 'idea' company that I told you about."

Lyle doesn't seem to retain details of past conversations very long. Or maybe he isn't listening in the first place.

"The company, right. What grant?"

I tell him about the email, and how the grant would be perfect for what I want to do.

"So why don't you apply for it?" he asks.

"I can't. You have to be unemployed, but if you quit your job, you don't qualify. You can only apply if you were fired."

"Why?"

"I guess they don't want people quitting just to get the grant. Also, there's probably the empathy thing. Maybe they want people who can relate to the jobless."

Another Instant Message pops up on Lyle's screen, which he quickly answers. His online friends always get an immediate appointment.

"Sorry," he says. "So what are you going to do?"

"About what?"

"The grant, stupid." He shakes his head, upset that I'm not keeping up.

"I told you. You have to be fired. Ooh."

"What?"

"I had a piece of candy stuck in my teeth. It just popped out."

"Congratulations."

"Thanks." I probe with my tongue just to make sure. "Unfortunately, they never fire anybody here."

"Don't get me started," he says.

I stand up to leave. The candy is definitely gone.

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Back in Kyuboria, the world around me doesn't yet know better than to bother me with their problems, and I'm considering changing the automatic message on my voicemail.

Something like: "Your message is important to me. Please press star, and hang up now."

Instead I make the mistake of picking up the receiver when the phone rudely interrupts my second straight hour of web browsing. Thirty seconds into the call I long for a pop-up.

"No," I say into the phone. "You have to save the document. It doesn't do it automatically."

The same lady who earlier had trouble logging into the system has been using word processing programs for years. Suddenly everything is a mystery to her.

"I did save it," she says. "But I can't find it now."

I'm supposed to care.

"Check your history."

"What's that?" Her voice is becoming impatient, not to mention irritating.

I'm not the one who forgot to save the file.

"Click on 'File'. There should be a list of recently used documents." I wait for her to respond.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"On the menu."

"What menu?"

"The bar across the top of your screen. Does it say anything?"

She hesitates. "I'm not at my computer right now."

No one is home, for sure.

"Call me when you are." I hang up, not waiting for a response. I know this may cause me some grief, but it makes the voice go away.

Immediate relief from daily frustrations.

I think how I wish I could just walk out the door without saying a word.

It occurs to me that nobody would notice.

I almost wish they would fire me. Which reminds me of the grant.

I *do* wish they would fire me. Then I could apply for the grant, leave this place, and start my dream company. But there's one problem.

They never fire anybody. I shake my head at this depressing thought and continue my web browsing. The great thing about the Internet is that it never runs out of interesting sites to visit. I spend several minutes investigating the history of Elvis sightings before I am again interrupted.

"Hey Clint. Could you come here a minute?" Mr. Randolph calls me from his cubicle, about twenty feet away. I'm expected to dronishly report to his side, which bothers me for no particular reason.

"Yeah, I'll be right there." I count quietly to ten, slowly, just to avoid the impression that I'm instantly responding.

It accomplishes nothing.

Mr. Randolph looks up as I enter his cubicle, and gestures for me to sit down. In accordance with State regulations, his cubicle is fifteen percent larger than mine, because of his higher pay grade.

"Clint, I just got a phone call. Did you hang up rudely on anyone in the past few minutes?"

"No. I just hung up."

"Well that's strange. Mrs. Jenkins in the secretarial pool says you slammed the phone down, and she thinks maybe you swore."

This irritates me. I did sort of slam the phone down, because it was deserved. But I didn't swear.

I swear.

Mr. Randolph is smiling a little, because we both know that this conversation isn't really taking place. If it was, and if Mr. Randolph was going to give me an *official* warning—which I've never seen happen to anyone, for any reason—it would require a burst of supervisory initiative. He's simply reporting the allegation as a courtesy.

Disciplinary action is out of the question.

Don't rock the boat.

Wait and see if anyone else rocks the boat.

They won't.

"Well I didn't. I tried to help her with her file, but she wasn't even at her computer."

"Okay." He turns back to his own computer, not satisfied, but that wasn't his goal.

Some cogs aren't connected to anything.

Doesn't mean they're not cogs.

Doesn't mean they are, either.

As I enter my cubicle and plop down in my chair with a satisfying squeak, I'm struck full force with a dazzling revelation. For the first time in many weeks, in a single, brilliant flash, my life has attained meaning.

I have found a purpose.

I know what I must do.

It will set a precedent. It may create a legend. It won't be easy.

I must get fired.