

He wouldn't know it, but in condemning himself to house arrest, this by means of penance for his actions, Philip's headmaster Mr Hubert Sneak had placed himself in a room that would fit perfectly into a post-apocalyptic thriller. With the furniture-barricaded front door visible down the hall, Hubert sat amidst a scattering of crumb-besmirched plates, dirty sheets and general detritus, not even in his chair. For once his face was unshaven. For once his attire was not prim and proper. As always he was afraid.

Between his unwashed fingers spun the warm disc, its path around his digits random except for the fact it would not deviate from his grasp. And just like he had on the disc, depression had held a tight grip over his mind ever since the last time his mistress had visited him here however many weeks ago, as had the words she had left him with. She had told him that she had plenty more planned for his group. Looking down in...he didn't know how he was supposed to feel about it, Hubert realised that so long as he had this circle of plastic his job would never be over. This had been his fate for over the last half a century, a seemingly eternal state of servitude. When did he not regret...

The chair. The chair. That's where his attention was directed now. The chair. Where else but the chair? That's where she'd come last time, facing what was supposed to be his own seat, with its back to the long-unlit fireplace. Even the disc, like his heart, remained frozen in that most apprehensive of moments. What would it be this time?

With a creaking that Hubert had learnt to find horrific the lines and knots of the wood across the surface of the chair began to squirm, rearranging themselves with taunting slowness into the outline of a woman sitting bolt upright, her coalescing expression already stern. Once in position they pulled, all of the lines as one, lifting themselves off the furniture entirely with powerful elegance.

Mierdi's effigy stood imperiously at the heart of Hubert's nest of leavings, her wooden eyes raking over her surroundings with disapproving dismay.

"A lack of work appears not to suit you, my dear Sneak," she remarked, stepping over to a clear spot before his huddled form, this time her words coming directly from her constructed mouth rather than from the hearth, "but perhaps I should just consider it a part of your chastisement."

Perhaps it was because he had finally broken that for the first time he directly demanded, however weakly, of his mistress, "How am I to learn from what I do not know? Why am I being punished? Last time we spoke you said I had done well, yet still my purgatory is the same as it ever has been."

Mierdi paused, having rightly not been expecting such a rebuttal from her underling, "It won't do you good to ask such things."

Mierdi's spirits were troubled even further when she caught sight of the ahnee disc she'd provided him with at the start of their journey together, or what could pass for a journey when a human was your prime co-conspirator. How far she had fallen since her glory days at the height of Murorviosp's power...Was this what she was left with,

a few grovelling apes in lieu of warriors, claustrophobic rubbish heaps instead of (broken-into) palaces? For those few seconds the room returned to its recent state of silence, that was until Mierdi was reminded of her reason for coming down to this nuisance of a planet, a chore for her even in avatar form.

“But this is a time for celebration. This is what we have been working so valiantly towards. We have braved Andromeda through its recent turbulent times, you and I, if separately, and countless irrelevant trials brought on by our Brethren fellows. And yet here we are. You should feel honoured that I’ve chosen you to join in this momentous occasion. Rejoice.”

Hubert wasn’t sure how to take this. If it wasn’t for the fact that his mistress was typically such a strict and serious individual, he was certain from the buoyant inflections in her voice that she would be positively skipping, not that it would pay to tell her that. At last he slipped the disc back into his pocket. Standing somewhat stiffly, Hubert moved himself very slightly so that he could now spy the front door whilst not being seen to do so. How quickly could he un-barricade it if things went sideways? Would it be better to go for a window?

“I saw the boy on the news,” Hubert recalled. “He was wanted for something to do with a plane. Was that part of your plan?”

“No, events did not go as I had anticipated. But no matter, I was able to retrieve my heirlooms regardless, hence we are here today.” Mierdi’s effigy spotted the nervous look on Hubert’s face and smiled, “Don’t worry. It wasn’t your fault, or the fault of any of your group. It wouldn’t be the first time people like me have failed to take Chaos into account when devising our stratagems. If you just wait, you will see that I am in no way angry at you. You have done well, more than you know.”

If he was to run, it would surely have to be soon, before she did whatever it was she was going to do. But all thoughts of probably-futile escape attempts were driven from his mind as the lines across the effigy’s surface began to change once more. To be clear it wasn’t that they moved, rather they grew brighter, as though heating up from the inside.

Mierdi looked down at her vessel, also watching the transformation occur, “Do you know what? I feel this warrants a personal touch. Wouldn’t you agree? Not just any body will do...”

No time was allowed for this statement to be comprehended, for a moment later the avatar exploded, fragments of wood flying in all directions in amongst a cloud of dust.

Hubert opened his eyes, following which his first impulse was to check himself for injuries. He was covered in tree shrapnel but there appeared to be no cuts or bruises. Movement in the corner of his eye drew his gaze up once more. In the middle of the room, in the exact position the effigy had been in, stood the real Mierdi in all her glory. Today was certainly full of revelations for Hubert. Having never seeing her in the flesh,

he could not have imagined the inhuman green of her skin, the brilliance of her yellow eyes, the visible sharpness of her fangs and nails. The folds of her cloak rippled as their wooden counterparts could not have.

Mierdi let out a long relaxing breath, cricking her neck as she murmured, "It's been a long time since I've done that."

After flexing her fingers a few times the alien woman knelt down to pick up one of the slightly-charred shrapnel fragments off the dirtied carpet, much to Hubert's amazement and confusion. Pinching the wood between two of her nails, Mierdi rolled up the sleeve of her robe a small way, exposing a chrome flat box strapped to her forearm. She placed her selected fragment onto a translucent patch on the top of the box, causing it to flicker an electric blue.

"We must of course make this place presentable for our master."

Across the room, on the walls, ceiling and furniture, the debris left behind by the eviscerated effigy were hopping about on the spot, becoming more and more skittish, moving with increasing energy. Wherever they landed as they bounced along their gradual ways the contacted surfaces were altered, some developing a fizzing skin, others disappearing entirely.

"Just as you should be made presentable."

On hearing this, Hubert went from staring horrified at his abode being attacked in this manner to staring down at himself, realising that he too was covered in wood. Instinctively his hands flew to his torso, trying feverishly and in vain to brush himself clean. This achieved nothing, with the wood chips proving themselves immovable as they clung onto his clothing. That being said, this in no way stopped him from trying.

"I would have so liked to have done this before," Mierdi told him, paying no attention to his distress, "but I wanted to get rid of some people first. There are these beings, you see, who think themselves so high and mighty that they don't even need a name. They're just Entities, they just exist...and they shouldn't. They were the ones who started all this. They, along with the Polanzias, took my people and tore them apart, breaking them down all the way to their constituent elements. And for what? A few crimes on a few worlds. The injustice of it! But now, after all these years, I shall have my revenge. My plan to have two sides of this war wipe each other out may have been postponed, but it will still come to fruition, only after my master's return."

The thud of Hubert stumbling to the floor as he subsequently struggled with his own personal swarm interrupted her flow of speech only fleetingly.

"Then of course my servant had to go and lose my hard-gotten seeds. You were there, not on the front lines of course, but there all the same. You saw what it was like in the tachyon field, you must realise what I had to go through to retrieve them. If only I hadn't needed to go in that moment, but to ensure that the Entities didn't see what I was doing...some gods they are, if they can't see through a tachyon barrier...but I'm rambling, lost in memories that don't matter now..."

Personally Hubert wouldn't have minded if she'd continued to ramble as she was. It might have distracted her enough for him to crawl out of the room and far away. But of course he couldn't while in this state. If she could just call these...things back...even through his clothes he could feel their tiny 'bodies' vibrating left, right and centre, as though he had been dipped in a vat of fiery insects. Their incessant prickling would soon drive him mad with itching and general grief, were he not possibly insane already. Every time he moved the distribution of prickling shifted, exposing him to new orientations of discomfort, essentially starting it anew. Why was he being punished so? Had she not again said he'd done well?

And just like that it was over. Even before he realised it the wood was slipping lifelessly off him, as it was all the surfaces of the room. When this fact did dawn on him, Hubert slowly sat himself up, shaking slightly, propping himself against a wall. Now no longer in the thralls of blind panic, he could see that his mistress had produced a chest made from precious metals, some of them extra-terrestrial, no bigger than a microwave oven. She had placed it on a chair and was at this moment lifting its lid, a very ceremonious precision guiding her movements. A reverential look haunted her eyes which immediately locked onto the exposed contents of the container. Not taking her eyes off whatever was inside, Mierdi placed the lid on the clear floor. The *clear* floor. It hadn't been before. Hubert realised now what those living wood chippings had been doing. While they were being a discomfort to him they had been reverting the room to its usual pristine conditions, making it 'presentable'. His collections of strewn papers, sheets and plates were gone. The stains had vanished from the walls. The chairs were back in position. It wasn't long before Hubert noticed that his suit was sharp-as-new and his face was well-groomed.

"Here," Mierdi held out a neatly-folded parcel of silk-like material for him to take. "I've attempted to recreate the original in material and design as best I can. He'll want you to be wearing it."

His eyes met the piercing yellow of Mierdi's. Hubert felt he could do nothing other than comply. In locking with them few could disobey with ease.

Having taken it from her outstretched hands, Hubert let the robe unfold, dangling from his fingers. It was all shades of dark, a complex picture of blacks, blues and greens which wound itself around the back and down the elbow-length sleeves. More notably, it was mesmerising. But the implied instruction from Mierdi prevented him from staring at it all day. Pulling the robe over his head, he found that it was a perfect fit. Of course it would be; Mierdi had surely made it with him in mind. She might have made it to not have such a subtle cold touch to it though.

Mierdi next withdrew a stone goblet from the chest, along with a cork-stoppered bottle filled with a peculiar liquid that didn't appear able to make up its mind about what colour it was. As Hubert fiddled with the hems of his robe, he watched Mierdi

raise the bottle to her lips, kissing it, whispering some faint chant before and after doing so.

Presumably his neighbours and anyone else who saw him would take him as having gone off the deep end if he was to somehow make it outside at this point, dressed as he was in these unfashionable garments. Would that matter anymore? Surely that was a reasonable price for getting out of his home right about now. Yet she would just as surely follow, and that could put more people in danger. The whole reason he'd locked himself away was so that he didn't bring pain on anyone else through his association with his mistress. On the other hand, if he helped her with her plans, that might also lead to the harm of others too...

With great precision and care Mierdi was pouring the strange liquid into the goblet. Once the surface of the drink was licking the inside of the brim she passed it to Hubert, proffering it with just as much relish as she had when giving him his robe. He for his part however treated the cup with much more suspicion. The buzz he received as the rough curved stone was pressed into his now-pristine palms did nothing to assuage this hesitant feeling. His body had had enough of being subjected to these sensations today. Besides, who knew what this liquid would do to him?

"It's not poison," Mierdi reassured him, noting his lack of enthusiasm. "We definitely wouldn't want to harm you. Drink up, you should enjoy it while you can."

Not seeing any window of opportunity to escape now, Hubert lifted the goblet to his lips. Consciously having to keep his breathing under control, he took in a sip.