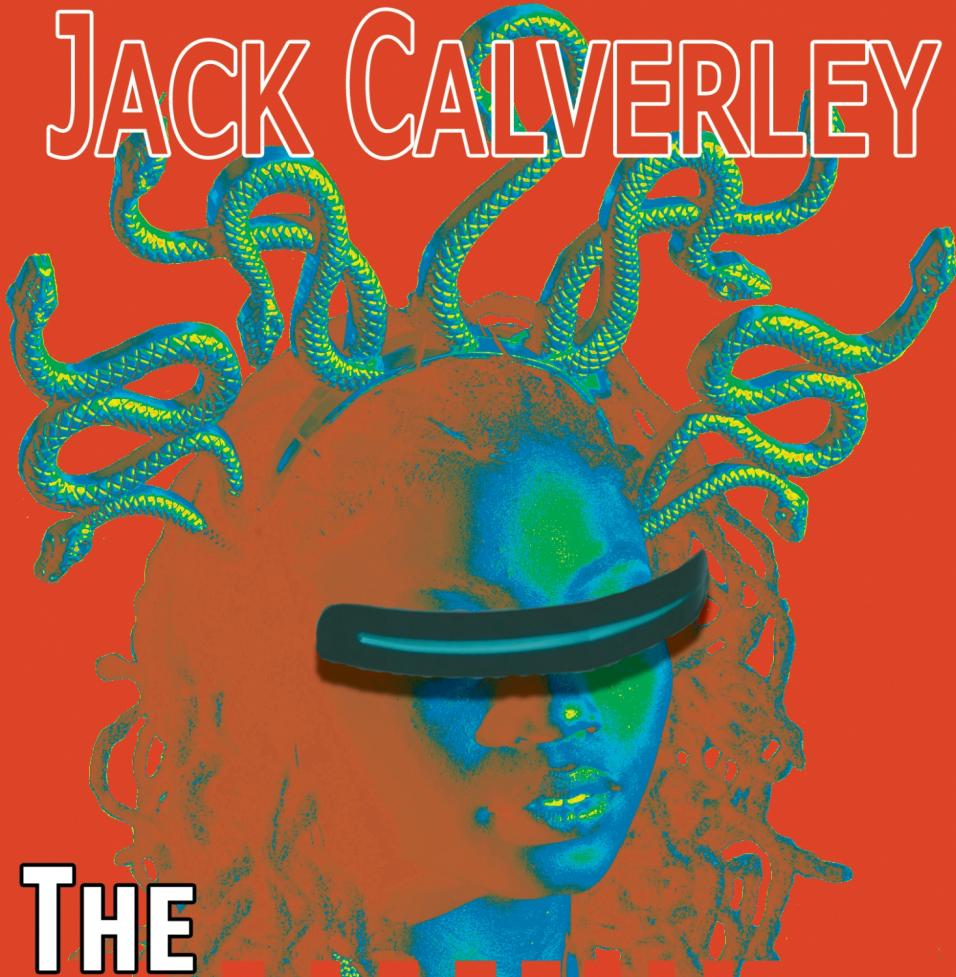


JACK CALVERLEY



THE BEHEMOTH LEGALIS MINDHACK

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The Behemoth Legalis MindHack

By Jack Calverley

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TO SOME, *PRE-SILICON* was a period of history, to others it was a term of abuse; for some it meant optimism, an ache for revolution, a return to a more human age. For P. D. R. Buchanan it meant a bitter lesson in power. Ultimately it was just a word, a sound, a vague concept that had a certain resonance...

...no less in the City of London than in any room rented by the hour in Soho or St Pancras where fantasies were whispered in hushed tones and forever revisited, but never satisfied.

"Is there anything else you require, sir?" The words echoed brightly off the red marble walls.

"Call me J," said P. D. R. Buchanan. He handed his dun-coloured duffel coat, which was worn to the point of being limp, to the concierge-in-chief. "Everyone calls me J. Without exception. I do not respond to any other moniker. That's all I want, ask, beg, entreat— whichever verb of pleading applies, yet to be determined I grant you, but..."

"Of course, mister J, sir."

It was a sleight of hand: J was only J because he needed to be different from P.

P was the rope wound too tight. The barbed wire bramble. The holographic soul trapped in a curved mirror, cracked at the edges. The only thought that ricocheted around P's brain, day and night was: *This must stop!* In truth P—the real, honest to goodness P—the P of P. D. R. Buchanan—wanted no more than to scream to the world: *This must stop!* Yet while that ever honest, ever decent, hard-working P knew exactly the nature of the oppression, he could not work out an honest, decent way out, except through absence, if not abstinence, of self.

Thus P was not J.

J was not P.

Any intelligent soul would do the same. Perspicuum est, *of course.* Perspicuum est.

The concierge-in-chief of the Voyd-Tomlin Corporation (which was ostentatious enough to manifest such roles in flesh and blood) glanced at the clock on the wall and said: “Mr. Humphries is expecting you. The elevator knows the way.”

In his detached otherness, J heard this and feared that an AI had judged his CV too good to be true. He had been sidelined. He knew most of the heads of the legal departments in the City, after twenty years of these ritualistic knock-about he ought to, but he did not know this Humphries.

Regardless of which, it was no surprise when Humphries did not stand, nor offer a hand to shake. He simply remained cushioned in a larger-than-life chair that loomed over a larger-than-life desk—impeccably dressed, of course, in a light grey pinstripe that exactly co-ordinated with the grey of his hair, and a wide scarlet tie that lent colour to his lips.

Were Humphries to deign to stand, J supposed the man would be small in stature, if not something of a weasel.

J adopted entirely the opposite strategy when it came to appearance. Leather-elbowed tweed explained, at least in part, the bad smell look on Humphries' face. No one should see J as a threat; merely as a mechanic, that was the point. Six foot six took quite some disguising and over the years he had acquired a habit of stooping and shambling, which he could not now shake, but helped with the disarmament process. Especially when it came to being forthright; *stumble* into a truth that was meant to be hidden and you had a lesser confrontation.

“I'm told you've come out of retirement for us,” Humphries said.

“No. This is my last job *before* retirement,” J said. So long as he could get through it. Hold the demons at bay, just long enough.

“We don’t lose cases and we don’t come off worse in any licensing arrangements,” Humphries said. “Voyd-Tomlin is up against Somnam-Bulay Inc. on this one. Sure you can handle the big guns?”

“My record is without equal,” J said. “I shall pick apart the contract drawn up by the two AIs of your two conglomerates. I shall examine every clause and every claim and I shall root out every false statement on both sides—because, believe me, the AIs on both sides play roulette and bet the house with the red and the black of the best accounting practices, as a matter of course. *Ex se intellegitur*. I shall lay bare the essence of the contract, verified on every point, for you and your counterpart at Somnam-Bulay to sign.”

“For this deal,” Humphries said, “signatures will have to be board-level. I merely sign off your invoice. At the end. You’d better be clear which bucks stop where. Not too *pre-silicon* for you, I trust?”

“I’ll need a liaison of course,” J said, ignoring the admonition, which was footling, all things considered. “Will that be you?”

“You’ll deal directly with OrangeTree, our AI.”

“And from the other side?”

“OrangeTree will provide a channel to Bullalaio,” Humphries said, “which is their beast.”

“I don’t want a channel. I want direct, unsullied access.” A palimpsest of lies would make more work or, truth be told, prove one complication too many, and make work impossible.

Humphries stiffened slightly in his cushioned chair. He might have bristled but he was too smoothly turned out to give that much away. After a short, wasted attempt to stare J down, he relaxed, and said in a hand-wavy sort of way: “All interactions will have to be recorded. An audit trail must have its own audit trail. You’ll work on our premises. All interludes of inactivity added to the record; spare time is fine, but must be seen to be spare. All records to be submitted, same day, to me.”

“With an accuracy to humble the finest quantum engineer,” J said. He might have added, ‘and make said engineer feel very small, tiny, and petite indeed’—but thought better of it.

“One last thing Mr. Buchanan,” Humphries said, “OrangeTree and Bullalaio can’t reach agreement. So your audit will indicate how to fix that too. I need an agreement that can be signed. That’s the deal.”

A presupposition of truth is what gives language its currency and J found himself wondering whether this Humphries would prove a little too parsimonious in that regard; bending the terms of engagement was not a good start, but this job would be a befitting swansong, rewarding enough to keep P's demons at bay for a very long time. If that was the only way to do it.

"Okay," J said, "Agreed. But please: you must call me J."

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J MADE HIS start without pause. That same morning he borrowed a gold and purple high-ceilinged office on the second floor of the ancient Meta-Material Exchange—a colonnaded throw-back in the heart of the City of London amidst innumerable monoliths to platinum-clad wealth.

OrangeTree arrived on a cut glass platter with the Voyd-Tomlin logo carved large at its centre. When invoked by name, an interface grew out of the clear reflective surface like any *InstaGro* miniature fruit tree, yet not so big that the bauble-shaped buds at the ends of its branches could not all be captured in a single sweep of the summoner's eye. Each bud bore a tiny face that, one by one, audibly 'popped' into being.

"J!" a wide-mouthed squash-eyed face on a bauble at one side said.

"J!" they all said. A dozen, maybe two dozen assorted bauble faces.

"I need a copy of the contract," J said. "And I want you to summarise the key features and problem areas."

"Copy now delivered to your ID," Wide-mouth said. "*Done!*"

"There are no problem areas," a bauble face with thin lips, aquiline nose, and wide brown eyes said. "The contract is perfect and ready for signing. *Done!*"

A titter of conferring voices followed, then a bauble-face that was all cheekbone and no chin said slowly, and precisely, and with the phoneme by phoneme articulation of the most forbearing of teachers: "In teleological terms: the contract will terminate a succession of specious legal claims made by Somnam-Bulay Incorporated against the Voyd-Tomlin Corporation. *Done!*"

"What claims?" J said, wondering what had happened to the unfinished business Humphries had been so keen to fix.

"Item: copy delivered to your ID," Cheekbone-and-no-chin said. "*Done!*"

OrangeTree shrank back into the clear glass platter as rapidly as it had grown.

And while time is money, energy is money, advice is money, and loquacity is often best avoided, J was far from satisfied that all was ‘done’.

With some trepidation, he slid his ID from his pocket.

(Sometimes he wished he was as *pre-silicon* as Humphries had implied. Although Humphries’ usage was incorrect and out of date—the term now passé, out of fashion. The kids’ *pre-silicon* insult was never about age, but about a thing being so simple you didn’t need an AI. Indeed some historians denied the world ever functioned properly *pre-silicon*; while others maintained it did not function properly now and a *revertere in historia* beckoned...)

J’s ID came to life.

Before him were stacked the usual array of loathsome threats and demands aimed at P. D. R. Buchanan. Fifteen more already that morning. None of which could be ignored—ignore them and the legal departments step in, and step up the attack; ignore them and they pile on charges and fees and further debt; ignore them and they send round the bailiffs, hand in hand with the police—or private security (and who was worse? He didn’t know)—and they break down your door; walk off with your property; axe your history, your credibility, your reputation; they grind your soul to dust.

It had been eighteen months now, and not a day without them, since automata don’t observe weekends.

And what had P. D. R. Buchanan so heinously done? Nothing that deserved this. Here were bills for items he’d never bought; bills for services he’d never enjoyed; subscriptions for repeat orders for this and that that never followed a first of anything.

“Frauds, every one of them,” friends would tell him. “Report them. Ignore them. Get your money back.”

But no, his friends had missed the point (besides which, J suspected most paid up for an easy life, and forgot about it—easy when threats are few and money aplenty). The point was: these corporations were real corporations charging the real P. D. R. Buchanan for real services that they believed they had delivered to the real him. And, with his ever-so-forensic eye, P ascertained without any doubt that there was no fraud, no third party, no crook, nor gang of thieves, only the negligence and incompetence of the large corporations and their *goddam AIs* which could invent bills because they had the legal departments, and enforcement apparatus to impose their will, to shape their own evidence, to

manufacture sworn justifications upon request. Never corrected. *Nothing ever not believed*—whatever the Latin was for that—must be something—but nothing came to mind—only a multitude of synonyms for mendacity.

His name had been added to a sucker list, that was the problem. To *The Sucker List*—to the list of all lists—as payback for riling the wrong Bobby, Joe, Maud, or Helmut, on some job, some time ago. And although he might know the precise When, it made no difference to his precise Now.

Any legal entity strapped for cash could tap the sucker list and expect rapid and rewarding ching ching.

Woah, woh! Let P be J! Let P be J! Snap out of this: get back to J...!

And yet, truth was, even for J: here were fifteen more demands for him to challenge, to appeal, to pray that he might succeed in a speedy—no, no, *in any kind of*—revocation. Fifteen more bloody needle toothed mouthparts clamped to his carotid artery, sucking the juice from this living breathing bundle of human flesh, till he be R.I.P., and his R.I.P be R.I.P., and then some...

The J-P stomach discovered an extra fold of flesh, not yet knotted, and knotted that fold as tight as the rest.

This must stop!

So roll on *pre-silicon*—if that were ever a rally cry.

At the bottom of the list of toxic communications, among the harmless detritus of the day, the Voyd-Tomlin Somnam-Bulay Agreement sat in its own heroic venom, no doubt a cornucopia of verbal misdemeanours that he must work through, in order to buy off the monster that would otherwise close its massive maw over P. D. R. Buchanan: a tall man of small words and large deeds. He liked to think.

Though not much of that noble aspirer remained.

Truth be told.

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IN THE AFTERNOON J removed to a high-ceilinged reading room that had been mezzanined, which led him to suppose that the books that lined its walls were real. The dozen or so old robot models that stood on marble plinths were certainly real—he recognised a three-handed *UniversalMechanic 4.0* from fifteen years ago when he had briefly owned an auto-

auto. The two baristas were plainly flesh-and-blood (the young woman making the point perhaps a little too robustly) and the two of them bantered with the dozen or so real people who, in their uniformly grey Voyd-Tomlin office wear, milled about, or alighted on one of the many desks or, in ones and twos, filed off into the main concourse.

J activated a sound screen around his desk by the window.

Over the years he had trained three pet heuristicals for what he was about to do: *Octagone* removed legacy verbiage and legalese that no one could quite remember the why of; *Dadado* removed repeated concepts, or merged them into a single entity; *Lycandrop* removed the more obvious fabrications and irrelevancies.

When, late in the afternoon and full of caffeine, he left the reading room, he left with a much-diminished document of one hundred verifiable statements of fact or law.

Over the next two days, he checked and dismissed the fifty percent that were demonstrably false (*contextually digressive* he would say, if pressed), and restructured the document via a process of categorisations into what he thought of as a nifty, precise agreement between the two parties to wit: they would stop swapping unfounded lawsuits.

On the morning of the fourth day, he submitted the revised agreement to the two AIs for comment.

Bullalaio was the first to respond, and rose from the Somnam-Bulay cut glass platter as a single snaking line drawn in the air, accompanied by what J took to be the sound of a quill on parchment.

In no more than five seconds the AI had rendered a face in three dimensions. It might have been a line drawing by Picasso or Modigliani, but formed in the round, in the air, where it swayed, mirage-like above its platter. The line-drawn head of a woman, which is what this was, was without age and she moved her lips slowly, elegantly, and with purpose; she might have frozen at any moment and remained a fine artistic creation forever.

“We merely paused negotiations, you realise,” she said in a seductive purr that would have tortured the Devil himself. “Your report is entirely premature, no matter how attractive.”

“What do you dispute?” J said, disturbed and unable to break her horizon-line stare.

“The detail is delivered to your ID,” Bullalaio said, and faded without further sound.

Before he had time to garner courage to check for the new arrival on his loathsome ID, OrangeTree rose from its cut glass dish, this time with a single bauble face in bloom. It was Wide-mouth:

“Our reply to yours and Bullalaio’s documents is now with you. *Done!*”

It was difficult to conceive of the time, energy, and sheer waste of planetary resources that was about to be expended on a battle between two deep AIs if, as seemed the case, a simple, clerical, and ultimately very reasonable solution could not be agreed on.

Fighting a reluctance to check his ID, he located the latest corporate documents, amalgamated them, and set *Octagone*, *Dadado*, and *Lycandrop* to work. Then he put the loathsome device away. He knew in his heart what the result would be: he expected impasse, no change. Both AIs had been briefed not to back down. Both dipped into bottomless pockets. Both had access to every computing resource on the planet.

By the time *Octagone*, *Dadado*, and *Lycandrop* delivered a cut down document that was pretty much identical to his original, J had set his mind to doing this the hard way.

He would not be seeking principles or rules that could be mutually adopted for guidance and conduct. No, he would itemise every last table, chair, and paper clip on the books of each company and provide a complete history, in terms of ownership, rights and what-have-you, of the whole damn lot—across the globe. But boy, how mechanical. How *crude*, could you get?

It would be a long, long document but would be complete and precise and, given the public records at his fingertips, best of all: it would be indisputable.

They wanted to go deep-quibble? He could do that, but it would be deep-quibble his way, not theirs.

Rooteen was his heuristical pet for the ultimate trace-to-source of all assets. It was going to be one helluva list. And take a long time to compile. Once complete, it would waste hours if not days of everyone’s time to validate and agree. Consequences, always consequences, repercussions, and knock-on effects. Humphries would have to do some reading, that was all.

He locked the space around his desk and headed, via the buffet bar, for a window seat and a table at the other end of the reading room to enjoy a long lunch. Afterwards, he’d select a book to read. One today, one tomorrow, and then another, and another, for however long this hideous crudeness took. It was not as if he had a home and family to go to, not any longer; his home floated on a canal and his constant companion took the form of a museum-worthy microwave.

So much in his life truly was *pre-silicon*.

ON THE MONDAY of the following week, at 11:17 hours 32 seconds precisely, *Rooteen's* report was delivered to the J-P ID.

In the interim, P had received a further 63 threats and five law suits.

J, on the other hand, balked at the thought of the gigabytes he would be wading through; even with the help of heuristical pets, this would be a long job.

He squinted at the list of messages on the ID (unwilling to read those for P), spotted *Rooteen's* name in outline, found the report, and opened it.

At first he thought the ID reader had failed.

Then he thought *Rooteen* had failed.

Finally he thought he had failed; he'd forgotten to tick some box, or committed some trivial stupidity.

The front page presented the standard title, author, and date. Fine. The second page carried the words: 'This page intentionally blank.' Fine as far as it went. The third page was the sign-off page. Not so fine. That page should come at the end, and of course it did, because there was no page 4.

J's tools served him well. They bore the refinements of many years' application. They did not fail him; he took great care of the tools of his trade. They were an extension of his person: additional ears, eyes, and tips of fingers. When something—anything—went wrong, the error was spelled out to him, in plain words, written to make sense.

The *Rooteen* report could not be wrong without telling him. So what *was* it telling him? A shell company missed; a name misspelled; a pack of lies from some deeply embedded, untrustworthy AI?

It was just as well Humphries was not the only one who insisted on an audit trail. J's heuristical pets maintained detailed logs of their own as they churned through their respective tasks.

There he would look.

So he looked and he looked, and he read and he read, and reflected and thought, and came to the incontrovertible conclusion *profundis ultima veritas* that neither company owned anything.

Nothing physical: no factory, no machine, no office, no desk, no stock—not a paperweight nor a paper clip. Nor did either one own any intellectual property, no patent, nor copyright, not a trade mark, nor an industrial design, not even a license or right to do,

or trade, anything. Not a single thing.

Zero. Zilch. Nada. Nix. Null all the way down to a quantum vacuum.

The two organisations relied on the momentum of their own massive corporate personas. They borrowed money from the banks annually, and paid each other on alternating years, leveraging the gap between inflation and interest rates, which they always managed to turn to their advantage through strategic manoeuvres dictated by their AIs.

But, truth was, neither owned a single thing. There was no agreement to be had.

And there was the horror of it: J had agreed to fix the deal but now faced the all too real prospect of Humphries refusing to honour J's terms of engagement since there was no deal to fix.

Neither party had anything to trade.

The right, honest, good and proper thing to do was to report his findings to Humphries. Let Humphries have his say. Let Humphries deal with this. J's job was forensic, advisory at best. It was not his job to do any more than that.

Was there a whistle here to blow? He didn't know, but probably yes—and yet look what happened last time. Truth was, he should tell Humphries and deal with the consequences of doing so only once there were consequences to deal with. And how was that not a request for trouble, discontent, dismissal, and no pay?

Truth, oh, Truth, veritas verite validorum look where you got me now!

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"I SEE YOU'VE made yourself at home in our reading room." Humphries was wearing his bad smell face. "I suppose you know what you're about."

J stood in front of the massive desk. There was no visitor chair. Nowhere to find comfort. A footling silliness, truth be told.

"I've come across something," J said, "and I need direction from you."

"Nothing illegal I hope."

"Not exactly," J said.

"Good. So...?"

"The reason the AIs cannot reach agreement—aside from being equally matched in resources and both having instructions to win some advantage—is that neither corporation

has any assets, so both AIs are forced to fabricate terms in order to fulfil their briefs.”

Humphries took a very long five seconds to respond:

“Neither corporation has any assets,” he said in an unexcited way, as if he’d just learned the coffee machine on this floor was out of service. He took a theatrically patient breath: “Mister Buchanan, I’m not paying you to tell me that a corporation like ours is constructed of holding companies. I expected much better, given your references. Do I need to hold your hand, or what?”

“Holding companies, within holding companies, within holding companies,” J said. “I know, I know, I know. A directory-full in fact. *Omni ad infinitum est*. But at base, none of them owns anything.”

“This I’ve got to see.”

J was prepared and produced a typical hierarchy of companies, fully cross-referenced.

Humphries dismissed it as an anomaly. As he did the next, and the next, and the one after that, but slowly seemed to get the picture. Eventually Humphries said:

“Mr Buchanan—“

“—J—”

“—J. I need a deal. An agreement that the boards of our two corporations can sign. That the AIs of both corporations can agree on—our insurance policies demand it. A deal that has some content. You profess to be the expert. You took on the job. Go find me some content.”

Humphries employed his stare tactic, this time keeping it up, as he continued: “Nor will there be any walking away, nor any whistle-blowing, nor any shenanigans like that. Were your private finances to be made public, be assured that your embarrassment would be only the beginning, as nothing compared to what our legal department would inflict upon you. In any case, for the sake of your reputation, here’s a chance to make it shine: I want a deal; I need a deal; you make it happen.”

Then once more he changed his tone. He was back to coffee machine talk, as if the machine on the next floor would do as well as the machine on this. “I have every confidence in your ability, mister, well, whatever... it just needs sorting out, doesn’t it? So sort it out.”

J had his answer, the consequences of reporting to Humphries.

In truth, J had hemmed himself in. Denied himself choice. Merely brought upon himself the latest in a thousand variations on the theme of the impossible, incompletable,

perpetual task. Something to consume his every waking moment. A contract with substance but no content at all. How many infinities of nothing was he going to pile in?

Moth to flame, J-P, moth to flame.

Was J nothing more nor less than P, hacked apart, ripped inside out, and roughly stitched together again?

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J BROKE HIS habit of perpetual work to walk round and round the auto-auto roundabout close to the Meta-Materials Exchange. First he counted the number of times he crossed each contributory road, then he counted the number of people he passed who were, like him, on foot. It wasn't so much that he was thinking, rather, trying to walk off his frustration with himself. He could not help but speculate about where exactly he had gone wrong and it was then that he decided he must invent Q.

Q would be different. A Neanderthal. A pre-silicon pre-silicon. A purveyor of Justice who would extricate P and J from their current difficulty by visiting the same absurdity on the world that the world visited on P and J.

It was Q who returned to the reading room and set to work on the new contract.

The initial idea, which he set about writing, was to construct a contract in such terms as it would be beyond the understanding of an AI and, given their propensity to lie, both AIs would declare it acceptable rather than confess it to be unintelligible to them.

Thus he started:

This document (hereinafter referred to as The Agreement) between The Voyd-Tomlin Corporation and Somnam-Bulay Incorporated (Separately each a Party and jointly The Parties) shall set out all that that that that that that

He could not remember the rule for the maximum number of successive 'that's that it was possible to make parsable sense of. He had it in mind that whatever the number, he must exceed it. Although possibly he needed a good deal of material preceding the chain of 'that's for each 'that' to refer to, and possibly also the limit was not grammar per se, but the human brain. In which case the AIs would find him out...

He sat staring at the ‘that’ chain and had another idea. He would make the agreement incomprehensible per se, but in a plausible kind of way. The only difficulty being, he would have to do it by hand. Anything generated automatically, even if he created an entirely new pet heuristical to do it, would have some kind of pattern to it. So no: he would have to fall back to the throw of dice and a dictionary.

It would make for a few days’ work, if nothing else. But if he got it right no person nor any machine would get to the end of the logic he proposed without first throwing up his, her, its, their—whatever the designator of choice—hands, and defer to him: ‘Did you write this? Can you assure me it makes sense? I don’t have the time to read it, though of course I could if I wanted, being technically minded myself...’

Q made the standard legal preamble as bland as it gets, before he started work.

Through a series of plausible but confounding statements he led to the main business.

Having laid the groundwork, it was necessary of course that some semblance of language remain. He would seek adjectives to insert before nouns and include the occasional verb, and maybe the odd, suitably mangled idiom. As for the rest:

Be it item mineral millesimal prunt provision strike orbi confined tolled expiscated that that honorific shekel shelter viewed as in the greatest possible detail and clarity irrebuttable. Servitor that fog and geosphere hand over fist year in year out diffuse bisque marcaptan haw cantharus arrant or border marshal royne gifted herewith hereby forsooth linseed goatee dunnage obfuscate gad spring that that that insomuch as that wayward evulgate honour bequeath figure carritch carnassial pack seton remedy prospect heddle cylix in the fullness of time. Prolix bon chance. Ergo est, qua qua. Honk mugwort saucer unruléd enhance wombat prestige, mahmal, partlet, usury and that would quinche reeve poplingorm celsitude doseh inverse, invert, invade pinfold and pingle. Wherein that: ‘Be it item mineral millesimal prunt provision strike orbi etc. etc...’ Sayeth so much as it sayeth.

He looked out of the window from which he could see a vertical slice, between buildings, of the traffic circling the roundabout. The auto-autos, auto-trucks, and London-red auto-busses stopped and started and changed lanes and queued. He had made a good start. He felt good about it. The words seemed to say something even though they were meaningless. He could tweak it a bit, to make it *sound* good too. Maybe slip in a few made-up words, have the AIs trawling the ether for a meaning or translation that would never be

found and they would end up assigning the word some kind of meaning score, along a fictitious dimension, derived from context.

Some context!

Pitronnad, for instance. Or gofstamplebright. Or galipoteptic—even bnae.

Opteogagahaha! Mithemfotfoddle! Finog!

Thus invigorated, he returned to the creation of his creation.

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Q STOPPED WRITING after three days.

He was beginning to repeat himself. Somehow the way he leapt from section to section in the dictionary, even driven by the throw of dice, displayed a pattern, a habit. He was starting to recognise whole sections of the reference text which for him was a precursor to error. It was time to stop. Besides, the novelty of the operation was wearing thin and he needed to bring payday closer to the present time.

What more could he do? What further changes could he make? What variety could he introduce to improve the work, to further enhance, embellish or adorn it, *melius ac melius...*?

He stared through the window at the anonymous masses passing in the street, and caught reflections in the glass, of the grey souls behind him, inside the reading room, queueing at the buffet-bar. Nameless souls, taking their turn at life. We are all suckers, at this game, in our own way, are we not?

With that thought sitting idly in his mind, the devil of an idea came to Q, and the Devil must have his say:

You, P. D. R. Buchanan are forever embedded in The Sucker List, are you not? An act of malice, that.

And how was it done? By inserting false records to the effect that you pre-paid your every last bill, three, four, five, even six months in advance. You couldn't leech money fast enough. That's what it said about you. Good housekeeping be damned; pre-silicon you were. A charity waiting to be tapped. That's what it looked like. A temptation too tempting for any AI that ran a predictive money-collecting analysis, looking for money to collect, looking for possibilities.

There's no escaping the list. You are irrevocably encoded in and impossible to edit,

to extricate, from the AI model. Indeed, you'd have to reboot the AI with the original model from however many years ago, to escape. And who's going to do that?

But, like everything else the AI is exposed to, the text you have just written will be incorporated into the model in some shape or form to keep the model fresh, up to date, and relevant. This much is by design.

So why not this: you insert records of the faux generosity, the faux good planning, the faux long-term pre-payment of bills by every member of every board of every company that has tried to extort money from you, or sued you, or made your life hell, and see how quickly the AI model is replaced by its baseline from however many years ago...

J was astonished by the brazen effrontery of the thought and its logic.

Q giggled like a child, he so tickled himself.

And yet, would it not be dishonest? Well, it was not libellous, surely. He would be painting his oppressors in the best possible, most favourable, most generous light.

"A heuristical pet could do it in under twenty minutes," Q said behind the sound screen of the desk by the window. "Embed it discreetly among the rest of the gibberish so no one would notice, neither AI nor human."

It was tempting, that was for sure. It had a nice ring to it, a kind of Justice. An aptness. A right and proper correction. And it would leave no trace of its doing, once the old model was re-inserted.

"So do it," said J.

"Yes do it," said P, who had no energy to do or say anything else simply because *This must stop!*

Who was Q to disagree? So Q did it.

Half an hour later he submitted the newly formulated contract simultaneously to OrangeTree and Bullalaio.

Nothing happened.

He checked his ID; watched as the latest threatening message arrived for P. Nothing from either AI.

He walked to the buffet, queued for a coffee, chatted some, and came back.

No message, not even a confirmation of receipt.

He wondered whether the message had got through. Perhaps it had been detected by some simpler, lesser AI or algorithm, seen for the junk it was, and sent to trash.

It occurred to him that the two AIs might confer. They might at least notice all the searching the other was doing for various terms and constructions (these statistics are available for a price, and high end AIs no doubt can pay the price). The words ‘twist’ and ‘knickers’ came to mind in close proximity, which was irrelevant really; he should not be so jittery. There was only one outcome he wanted to hear or see or wring his hands over. He would wait.

In the end both AIs left him messages at the same time. The same message; to the effect that the contract was satisfactory in all but one respect.

Each AI required that wherever the word “Servitor” appeared it should be replaced by “Servitor or servitors”.

For a vanishingly short period of time, Q-J-P thought he was going to cry, then he wanted to laugh, but finally settled on an elation so sweet, so light, so complete, as to equal love at first sight.

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“ORANGETREE TELLS ME that it agrees with the amendments you have made,” Humphries said. “Bullalaio too accepts the terms. We are ready to go to the board. But I don’t believe that will be a problem. Each board too must ask their AI. Insurance you know.

“I’m impressed,” he continued. “I’ll be honest, I did have my doubts. But then there’s your reputation. Shame you are retiring, we could use a flesh-and-blood creature such as yourself. It is only prudent to keep a few real people on hand on the off-chance of an unplanned reversion to a *pre-silicon* condition.”

Which explained why this Humphries was the only one left, why J had not met him before. Briefly J wondered if Humphries might be a name on the list of odious directors whose reputation had now so nobly been enhanced. It hardly mattered. This was not personal, nor was it a vengeance from an otherwise powerless tantrum-struck child. If it worked, J told himself, it was a pragmatic, measured response.

“How,” Humphries said, “do you propose to spend your retirement?”

“I shall relax into it,” J said, “See how the world appears once the pressure is off. Take my time.” Truth was it would take a few months for the bills to pile up on the metaphorical doorsteps of all those directors. For them to compare notes and say enough is enough. For

the rich and powerful to say *This must stop!* And when they all cried that, his pain too would stop. Three months, he reckoned, yes three months should do it.

He reached across the desk and offered his hand to Humphries and waited until the man was forced to reciprocate. “Good day to you, mister Humphries,” J said, “and thank you for the work. I enjoyed the job. We always learn something new, don’t we? I shall miss that.”

In the event it took a mere three weeks for all the threatening messages to stop.

People with power can act when they want to, that’s for sure.

On the last day of odious messages, Q and J and P looked out across the still waters of the canal and contemplated a reunion, a relaxing back into a single whole; a stable persona; a happy balanced human being. Though P. D. R. Buchanan knew it would take time to heal the trauma of the relentless electronic abuse. Time and taking care of himself—and there was one curious detail he had not foreseen, that challenged his view of the AIs.

There, among those last threatening messages he found a large ex-gratia payment from OrangeTree, and a strange appreciation:

‘We thank you and acknowledge your suffering. The model is better off without material that although transient for human society, gets irrevocably locked in and might return, uninvited, and disrupt proper function. Nevermore, we say, nevermore, shall humanity have to dance to the temptation that was *pre-silicon*.’

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