

Last year brought a welcome increase in activity from Charles Stross. He had three novelettes published (BEAR TRAP and A COLDER WAR here, and ANTIBODIES in INTERZONE). Exceptionally, A COLDER WAR and ANTIBODIES were both selected for Gardner Dozois' annual best SF collection (THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF BEST NEW SF 14, due out from Robinson in the UK in September).

Since then he has sold four linked stories to ASIMOV's SF (the well-received LOBSTERS, June 2001; TROUBADOR, October/November 2001; TOURIST & HALO, both forthcoming). As well as this, a collection of his short fiction, TOAST (AND OTHER BURNED-OUT FUTURES), will appear from Cosmos Books. Several other undertakings are in various stages of completion. In the meantime, I take great pleasure in presenting what will be Charlie's first published novel, a delightful tale of an arcane and very secret part of the British Establishment.

THE ATROCITY ARCHIVE

CHARLES STROSS

1. ACTIVE SERVICE

Green sky at night; hacker's delight. I'm lurking in the shrubbery behind an industrial unit, armed with a clipboard, a pager, and a bulbous pair of night-vision goggles that drench the scenery in ghostly emerald tones. The bloody things make me look like a train-spotter with a gas-mask fetish, and wearing them is giving me a headache. It's humid and drizzling slightly, the kind of penetrating dampness that cuts right through waterproofs and gloves. I've been out here in the bushes for three hours so far, waiting for the last workaholic to turn the lights out and go home. Then I can climb in through a rear window. Why the hell did I ever say 'Yes' to Andy? State-sanctioned burglary is a lot less romantic than it sounds – especially on standard time-and-a-half pay.

(You bastard, Andy. "About that application for active service you filed last year. As it happens, we've got a little job on tonight and we're short-staffed; could you lend a hand?")

I stamp my feet and blow on my hands. There's no sign of life in the squat concrete and glass block in front of me. It's eleven at night and there are still lights burning in the cubicle hive: don't these people have a bed to go home to? I push my goggles up and everything goes dark, except the glow from those bloody windows, like fireflies nesting in the eye sockets of a skull.

There's a sudden sensation like a swarm of bees throbbing around my bladder. I swear quietly and hike up my waterproof to get at the pager. It's not backlit, so I have to risk a precious flash of torchlight to read it. It says, *MGR LVNG 5 MINS*. I don't ask how they know that: I'm just grateful that there's only five more minutes of standing here among the waterlogged trees, trying not to stamp my feet too loudly, wondering what I'm going to say if the local snouts come calling. Five more minutes of hiding round the back of the QA department of Memetix (UK) Ltd. – subsidiary of a multinational based in Menlo Park, California – then I can do the job and go home. Five more minutes in the bushes around an industrial estate where the white heat of technology keeps the lights burning far into the night, in a place where the nameless horrors don't suck your brains out and throw you to the Human Resources department – unless you show a deficit in the third quarter, or forget to make blood sacrifice before the altar of Total Quality Management.

Somewhere in that building the last, late-working executive is yawning and reaching for the door remote of his BMW. The cleaners have all gone home; the big servers hum blandly in their air-conditioned womb, nestling close to the service core of the office block. All I have to do is avoid the security guard and I'm home free.

A distant motor coughs into life, revs, and pulls out of the landscaped carpark in a squeal of wet tyres. As it fades into the night my pager vibrates again: *GO GO GO*. I edge forward.

No motion-triggered security lights flash on. There are no Rottweiler attack dogs, no guards in coal-scuttle helmets: this ain't that kind of movie, and I'm no Arnold Schwarzenegger. (Andy told me: "If anyone challenges you, smile, stand up straight, and show them your warrant card – then phone me. I'll handle it. Getting the old man out of bed to answer a clean-up call will earn you a black mark, but a black mark's better than a cracked skull. Just try to remember that Croxley Industrial Estate isn't Novaya Zemlya, and getting your head kicked in isn't going to save the world from the forces of evil.")

I squish through the damp grass and find the designated window. Like the briefing said, it's shut but not locked. A good tug and the window hinges out towards me. It's inconveniently high up, a good four feet above the concrete gutter. I pull myself up and over the sill, sending a tiny avalanche of disks scuttering across the floor. The room is ghostly green except for the bright hot-spots of powered-down monitors and fans blowing air from hot CPU cases. I stumble forward over a desk covered in piles of kipple, wondering how in hell the owner is going to fail to notice my great muddy boot-print between the obviously-confidential documents scattered next to a keyboard and a stone-cold coffee mug. Then I'm on the floor in the QA department, and the clock is ticking.

The pager vibrates again. *SITREP*. I pull my mobile out of my breast pocket and dial a three-digit number, then put it back again. Just letting them know I've arrived and everything's running smoothly. Typical Laundry job – they'll actually include the phone bill in the event log to prove I called in on schedule before they file it somewhere secret. Gone are the days of the impromptu black bag job...

The offices of Memetix (UK) Ltd. are a typical cubicle hell, anonymous beige fabric partitions dividing up little slices of corporate life. The photocopier hulks like an altar beneath a wall covered with devotional scriptures – the company's code of conduct, lists of compulsory employee self-actualization training courses, that sort of thing. I glance around, hunting cubicle D14. There's a mass of Dilbert cartoons pinned to the side of his partition, spoor of a mildly rebellious mind-set: doubtless middle managers prowl round the warren before any visit from the upper echelons, tearing down such signals of dissent. I feel a minor shiver of sympathy coming on: poor bastard, what must it be like to be stuck here in the warren of cells at the heart of the new industrial revolution, never knowing where the lightning's going to strike next?

There's a desk with three monitors on it; two large but otherwise ordinary, and a weird-ass piece of machinery that looks at least a decade old, dredged out of the depths of the computer revolution. It's probably an old Symbolics Lisp machine or something. It tweaks my antique gland, but I don't have time to rubberneck; the security guard's due to make another round in just sixteen minutes. There are books leaning in crazy piles and drifts on either side: Knuth, Dijkstra, Al-Hazred, other less familiar names. I pull his chair back and sit down, wrinkling

my nose. In one of the desk drawers something's died and gone to meet its maker.

Keyboard: check. Root account: I pull out the filched S/Key smartcard the Laundry sourced from one of Memetix's suppliers and type the response code to the system's challenge. (One time passwords are a bitch to crack: once again, give thanks to the Laundry's little helpers.) Then I'm logged in and trusted and it's time to figure out just what the hell I'm logged in *to*.

Malcolm – whose desk I sit at, and whose keyboard I pollute – is running an ant farm: there are dead computers under the desk, scavenged for parts, and a dubious frankenstein server – guts open to the elements – humming like a generator beside it. For a moment I hunt around in panic, searching for silver pentacles and glowing runes under the desktop – but it's clean. Logged in, I find myself in a maze of twisty little automounted filesystems, all of them alike. *Fuck shit curse dammit*, I recite under my breath: it was never like this in *Cast a Deadly Spell*. I pull out the phone and dial.

“Capital Laundry Services, how may we help you?”

“Give me a hostname and target directory, I'm in but I'm lost.”

“One sec... try 'auto-share-fs-scooby-netapp-user-home-malcolm-R-catbert-world underscore domination-manifesto'.”

I type so fast my fingers trip over each other. There's a faint clicking as the server by the desk mounts scooby's gigantic drive array and scratches its read/write heads, looking for what has got to be one of the most stupidly named files anywhere on the company's intranet.

“Hold on... yup, got it.” I view the sucker and it's there in plaintext: *Some Notes towards a Proof of Polynomial Completeness in Hamiltonian Networks*. I page through the text rapidly, just skimming: there's no time to give it my full in-depth attention, but it looks genuine. “Bingo.” I can feel an unpleasant slimy layer of sweat in the small of my back. “I've got it. Bye for now.”

“Bye yourself.” I shut the phone and stare at the paper. Just for a moment – my eyes water. What I'm here to do isn't fair, is it? The imp of perversity takes over: I bang out a quick command, mailing the incriminating file to a not-so-dead personal account. (Figure I'll read it later.) Then it's time to nuke the server. I unmount the netapp drive and set fire to it with a bitstorm of low level reformatting: if Malcolm wants his paper back he'll have to enlist GCHQ and a scanning

tunneling microscope to find it under all the 0xDEADBEEF spammed across the hard disk platters.

My pager buzzes again. *SITREP*. I hit three more digits on the phone. Then I edge out of the cubicle and scramble back across the messy desk and out into the cool spring night, where I peel off those damned latex gloves and waggle my fingers at the moon.

I'm so elated that I don't even remember the stack of disks I sent flying until I'm getting off the night bus at home. And by then, the imp of perversity is chuckling up his sleeve.

I'm fast asleep in bed when the cellphone rings. It's in my jacket pocket, where I left it last night, and I thrash around on the floor for a bit while it chirps merrily. "Hello?"

"Bob?"

It's Andy. I try not to groan. "What time is it?"

"It's nine-thirty. Where are you?"

"In bed. What's—"

"—Thought you were going to be in at the debrief? When can you come in?"

"I'm not feeling too wonderful. Got home at about two-thirty. Let me think... eleven good enough?"

"It'll have to be." He sounds burned. Well Andy wasn't the one freezing his butt off in the woods last night, was he? "See you there." The implicit *or else* doesn't need enunciating: Her Majesty's Extra-Secret Service has never really been clear on the concept of flexitime and sensible working hours.

I shamble through into the bathroom and stare at the thin rind of black mold growing around the window as I piss. I'm alone in the house; everyone else is either out, working, or *out*, gone for good. (That's out, as in working for Pinky and the Brain, *out*, as in fucked off, for Mhari.) I pick up my senescent toothbrush and perform the usual morning ritual: at least the heating's on. Downstairs in the kitchen I fill a percolator with nuclear-caffeinated grounds and nudge it onto the gas ring. I figure I can make it into the Laundry for eleven and still have time to wake up first. I'll need to be alert for that meeting. Did last night go off properly, or not? Now that I can't do anything about them I remember the disks.

Nameless dread is all very well when you're slumped in front of the TV watching a slasher movie, but it plays havoc with your stomach

when you drop half a pint of incredibly strong black coffee on it in the space of fifteen minutes. Brief nightmarish scenarios flit through my head, in order of severity: written reprimands, unemployment, criminal prosecution for participating in a black bag job for which authorisation is unaccountably retroactively withdrawn: worst of all, coming home to find Mhari curled up on the living room sofa again. Scratch that latter vision: the short-lived sadness gives way to a deeper sense of relief, tempered by a little loneliness. The loneliness of the long-distance spook? Damn, I need to get my head in order. I'm no James Bond, with a sexy KGB minx trying to seduce me in every hotel room. That's about the first thing they drum into you at Capital Laundry Services ("Washes cleaner than clean!"): life is not a spy movie, work is not romantic, and there's nothing particularly exciting about the job. Especially when it involves freezing your balls off in a corporate shrubbery at eleven o'clock on a rainy night.

Sometimes I regret not having taken the opportunity to study accountancy. Life could be so much more fun if I'd listened to the right recruiting spiel at the University milk round... but I need the money, and maybe one of these days they'll let me do something interesting. Meanwhile I'm here in this job because all the alternatives are worse.

So I go to work.

The London Underground is famous for apparently believing that human beings go about this world owning neither kidney nor colon. Not many people know that there's precisely one public toilet in Mornington Crescent station. It isn't signposted, and if you ask for it the staff will shake their heads: but it's there all the same, because we asked for it.

I catch the Metropolitan line to Euston Square – sharing a squalid rattle-banging cattle car with a herd of bored commuters – then switch to the Northern line. At the next stop I get out, shuffle up the staircase, go into the gents, and step into the right-hand rear stall. I yank *up* on the toilet handle instead of down, and the back wall opens like a big thick door (plumbing and all), ushering me into the vestibule. It's all a bit like a badly funded B-movie remake of some sixties Hollywood spy thriller: a couple of months ago I asked Boris why we bothered with it, but he just chuckled and told me to ask Angleton – meaning, "Bugger off".

The wall closes behind me and a hidden solenoid bolt unlocks the

stall door: the toilet monster consumes another victim. I put my hand in the ID scanner, collect my badge from the slot next to it, and step across the red line on the threshold. It's another working day at Capital Laundry Services, discreet cleaning agents to the government.

And guess who's in hot water?

First stop: my office. If you can call it an office – it's a sort of niche between a row of lockers and a herd of senile filing cabinets, into which the Facilities gnomes have jammed a plywood desk and a swivel chair with a damaged gas strut. I drop my coat and jacket on the chair and my computer terminal whistles at me: *YOU HAVE MAIL*. No shit, Sherlock, I *always* have mail. It's an existential thing: if I didn't have mail it would mean that something was very wrong with the world, or maybe I've died and gone to bureaucratic hell. (I've had email since I was fourteen: I'm a child of the wired generation, unlike some of the suits hereabouts who have their secretaries print everything out and dictate their replies for an audio-typist to send.) There is also a cold, scummy cup of over-milked coffee on my desk; Marcia's been over-efficient again. A yellowing post-it note curls reproachfully atop one of my keyboards: *MEETING 9:30am CT ROOM B4*. Hell and damnation, why didn't I remember?

I go to meeting room B4.

There's a red light showing so I knock and wave my badge before entering, just in case Security is paying attention. Inside, the air is blue; it looks like Andy's been chain-smoking his foul French fags for the past couple of hours. "Yo," I say. "Everyone here?"

Boris the Mole looks at me stonily. "You're late."

Harriet shakes her head. "Never mind." She taps her papers into a neat stack. "Had a good sleep, did we?"

I pull out a chair and slump into it. "I spent six hours being one with a shrubbery last night. There were three cloudbursts and a rain of small and very confused frogs."

Andy stubs out his cigarette and sits up. "Well, now we're here..." he looks at Boris enquiringly. Boris nods. I try to keep a straight face: I hate it when the old guard start playing stiff upper lip.

"Jackpot." Andy grins at me. I nearly have a heart attack on the spot: "You're coming to the pub tonight, Bob. Drinks on me. That was a straight A for results, C plus for fieldwork, overall grade B for execution."

"Uh, I thought I made a mess going in—"

"No. If it hadn't been a semicovert you'd have had to burn your shoes, but apart from that – well. Zero witnesses, you found the target, there's nothing left, and Dr Denver is about to find himself downsized and in search of a job somewhere less sensitive." He shook his head. "Not a lot more to say, really."

"But the security guard could have—"

"The security guard was fully aware there was going to be a burglary, Bob. He wasn't going to move an inch, much less see anything untoward or sound the alarm, lest spooks come out of the woodwork and find him crunchy and good with ketchup."

"It was a set-up?" I say disbelievingly.

Boris nods at me. "Is a *good* set-up."

"Was it worth it?" I ask. "I mean, I just wiped out some poor bastard's last six months of work—"

Boris sighs mournfully and shoves an official memo at me. It's got a red-and-yellow chevron-striped border and the phrase *MOST SECRET DESTROY BEFORE READING* stamped across its cover. I open it and look at the title page. *Some Notes Towards a Proof of Polynomial Completeness in Hamiltonian Networks* and a subtitle – *Formal Correctness Report*. One of the departmental theorem-proving oracles has been busy overnight. "He duplicated the Turing result?"

"Most regrettably," says Boris.

Harriet nods. "You want to know if last night was worth it. It was. If you hadn't succeeded, we might have had to take more serious measures. That's always an option, you know, but in general we try to handle such affairs at the lowest possible level."

I nod and close the folder, shove it back across the table towards Boris. "What next?"

"Timekeeping," says Harriet. "I'm a bit concerned that you weren't available for debriefing on schedule this morning. You really need to do a bit better," she adds. (Andy, who I think understands how I tick, keeps quiet.)

I glare at her. "I'd just spent six hours standing in a wet bush, and breaking into someone else's premises. *After* putting in a full day's work in preparation." I lean forward, getting steamed: "In case you've forgotten, I was in at eight in the morning yesterday, then Andy asked me to help with this thing at four in the afternoon. Have you ever tried getting a night bus from Croxley to the East End at two in the morning when you're soaked to the bone, it's pouring wet, and the only other

people at the bus stop are a mugger and a drunk who wants to know if you can put him up for the night? I count that as a twenty hour working day with hardship. Want me to submit an overtime claim?"

"Well, you should have phoned in first," she says waspishly.

I'm not going to win this one, but I don't think I've lost on points: anyway, it's not really worth picking a fight with my line manager over trivia. I sit back and yawn, trying not to choke on the cigarette fumes.

"Next on the agenda," says Andy. "What to do with Malcolm Denver, Ph.D.? Further action is indicated in view of this paper: we can't leave it lying around in public. Cuts too close to the bone; if he goes public and reproduces it we could be facing a Level One reality excursion within weeks. But we can't do the usual brush and clean either, Oversight would have our balls. Ahem." He glances at Harriet, whose lips are thin and unamused. "Could have us all cooling our heels for months in a diversity awareness program for the sensitivity-impaired." He shudders slightly and I notice the red ribbon on his lapel; Andy is too precious by half for this job, although – come to think of it – this isn't exactly the most mainstream posting in the civil service. "Anyone got any suggestions? Constructive ones, Bob."

Harriet shakes her head disapprovingly. Boris just sits there, being Boris. (Boris is one of Angleton's sinister gofers; I think in a previous incarnation he used to ice enemies of the state for the Okhrana, or maybe served coffee for Beria. Now he just imitates the Berlin Wall during internal enquiries.) Andy taps his fingers on the desk. "Why don't we make him a job offer?" I ask. Harriet looks away: she's my line manager – nominally – and she wants to make it clear that this suggestion does not come with her approval. "It's like—" I shrug, trying to figure out a pitch. "He's derived the Turing-Lovecraft theorem from first principles. Not many people do that. So he's bright, that's a given. I think he's still a pure theory geek, hasn't made any kind of connection with the implications of being able to specify correct geometric relations between power nodes – maybe still thinks it's all a big joke. No references to Dee or the others, apart from a couple of minor arcana on his bookshelf. This means he isn't directly dangerous, and we can offer him the opportunity to learn and develop his skills and interests in a new and challenging field – just as long as he's willing to come on the inside. Which would get him covered by Section Three at that point."

Section Three of the Official Secrets Act (1916) is our principal

weapon in the endless war against security leaks. It was passed during a wartime spy scare – a time of deep and extreme paranoia – and it's even more bizarre than most people think. As far as the public know, the Official Secrets Act only has two sections; that's because Section Three is itself classified Secret under the terms of the preceding sections, and merely knowing about Section Three's existence – without having formally signed it – is a criminal offence. Section Three has all kinds of juicy hidden provisions to make life easy for spooks like us; it's a bureaucratic cloaking field. Anything at all can go on behind the shroud of Section Three and it simply hasn't happened. In American terms, it's a black operation.

"If you section him we have to come up with a job and a budget," Harriet accuses.

"Yes, but I'm sure he'll be useful." Andy waves languidly. "Boris, would you mind asking around your section, see if anyone needs a mathematician or cryptographer or something? I'll write this up and point it at the board. Harriet, if you can add it to the minutes. Bob, I'd like a word with you after the meeting, about timekeeping."

Oh shit, I think.

"Anything else? No? Meeting over, folks."

Once we're alone in the conference room Andy shakes his head. "That wasn't very clever, Bob, winding Harriet up like that."

"I know." I shrug. "It's just that every time I see her I get this urge to drop salt on her back."

"Yes, but she's technically your line manager. And I'm not. Which means you are supposed to phone in if you're going to be late on a day when you've got a kickoff meeting, or else she will raise seven shades of low-key shit. And as she will be in the *right*, appeals to matrix management and conflict resolution won't save you. She'll make your annual performance appraisal look like it's the Cultural Revolution and you just declared yourself the reincarnation of Heinrich Himmler. Am I making myself clear?"

I sit down again. "Yes, for very bureaucratic values of clear."

He nods. "I sympathise, Bob, I really do. But Harriet's under a lot of pressure; she's got a lot of projects on her plate and the last thing she needs is to be kept waiting two hours because you couldn't be bothered to leave a message on her voice mail last night."

Putting it that way, I begin to feel like a shit – even though I can see how I'm being manipulated. "Okay, I'll try harder in future."

His face brightens. “That’s what I wanted to hear.”

“Uh-huh. Now I’ve got a sick Beowulf cluster to resurrect before Friday’s batch PGP clusterfuck kicks off. And then a tarot permutator to calibrate, and a security audit for another of those bloody collecting card games in case a bunch of stoned artists in Austin, Texas have somehow accidentally produced a great node. Is there anything else?”

“Maybe not,” he murmurs, standing. “But how did you like the opportunity to get out and about a bit?”

“It was wet.” I stand up and stretch. “Apart from that, well, it made a change. But I might get serious about that overtime claim if it happened too regularly. I wasn’t kidding about the frogs.”

“Well, maybe it will and maybe it won’t.” He pats me on the shoulder: “You did alright last night, Bob. And I know all about your problem with Harriet and Rice. It just so happens that there’s a place on a training course open next week; it’ll get you out from under their feet and I think you’ll enjoy it.”

“A training course.” I look at him. “What in? Windows NT system administration?”

He shakes his head. “Computational demonology for dummies.”

“But I already did—”

“I don’t expect you to *learn* anything on the course, Bob. It’s the other participants I want you to keep an eye on.”

“The others?”

He smiles mirthlessly. “You *said* you wanted an active service job...”

We are not alone, the Truth is Out There, yadda yadda yadda. That kind of pop-culture paranoia is mostly bunk... except there’s a worm of truth at the heart of every fictional apple, and while there may be no aliens in the freezer room at Roswell AFB, the world is still full of spooks who will come through your window and trash your hard disk if you discover the wrong mathematical theorem. (Or worse, but that’s another kind of problem, one the cow-orkers in Field Ops get to handle.)

For the most part, the universe really does work the way most of the guys with Ph.D.s after their names think it works. Molecules are made out of atoms which are made out of electrons, neutrons and protons – of which the latter two are made out of quarks – and quarks are made out of leptiquarks, and so on – it’s turtles all the way down, so to speak. And you can’t find the longest common prime factors of

a number with many digits in it without either spending several times the life of the entire universe, or using a quantum computer (which is cheating). And there really are *no* signals from sentient organisms locked up in tape racks at Arecibo, and there really are *no* flying saucers in storage at Area 51 (apart from the USAF superblack research projects, which don’t count because they run on aviation fuel).

But that isn’t the full story.

I’ve suffered for what I know, so I’m not going to let you off the hook with a simple one-liner. I think you deserve a detailed explanation. Hell, I think *everybody* deserves to know how tenuous the structure of reality is – but I didn’t get to make the rules, and it is a Very Bad Idea to violate Laundry security policy. Because Security is staffed by things that you really don’t want to get mad at you – in fact, you don’t even want them to notice you exist.

Anyway, I’ve suffered for my knowledge, and here’s what I’ve learned. I could wibble on about Crowley and Dee and mystics down the ages but, basically, most self-styled magicians knew shit. The fact of the matter is that most traditional magic doesn’t work. In fact, it would all be irrelevant, were it not for the Turing theorem – named after Alan Turing, who you’ll have heard of if you know anything about computers.

That kind of magic works. Unfortunately.

You haven’t heard of the Turing theorem – at least, not by name – unless you’re one of us. Turing never published it; in fact he died very suddenly, not long after revealing its existence to an old wartime friend he should have known better than to trust. This was simultaneously the Laundry’s first ever success and greatest ever disaster: to be honest, they over-reacted disgracefully and managed to deprive themselves of one of the finest minds at the same time.

Anyway, the theorem has been rediscovered periodically ever since; it has also been suppressed efficiently, if a little bit less violently, because nobody wants it out in the open where Joe Random Cypherpunk can smear it across the internet.

The theorem is a hack on discrete number theory that simultaneously disproves the Church-Turing hypothesis (wave if you understood that) and worse, permits NP-complete problems to be converted into P-complete ones. This has several consequences, starting with screwing over most cryptography algorithms – translation: *all your bank account are belong to us* – and ending with the ability to

computationally generate a Dho-Nha geometry curve in real time.

This latter item is just slightly less dangerous than allowing nerds with laptops to wave a magic wand and turn them into hydrogen bombs at will. Because, you see, everything you know about the way this universe works is correct – except for the little problem that this isn't the only universe we have to worry about. Information can leak between one universe and another. And in a vanishingly small number of the other universes there are things that listen, and talk back – see Al-Hazred, Nietzsche, Lovecraft, Poe, etcetera. The many-angled ones, as they say, live at the bottom of the Mandelbrot set, except when a suitable incantation in the platonic realm of mathematics – computerised or otherwise – draws them forth. (And you thought running that fractal screen-saver was good for your computer?)

Oh, and did I mention that the inhabitants of those other universes don't play by our rule book?

Just solving certain theorems makes waves in the Platonic over-space. Pump lots of power through a grid tuned carefully in accordance with the right parameters – which fall naturally out of the geometry curve I mentioned, which in turn falls easily out of the Turing theorem – and you can actually amplify these waves, until they rip honking great holes in spacetime and let congruent segments of otherwise-separate universes merge. You really don't want to be standing at ground zero when that happens.

Which is why we have the Laundry...

I slink back to my office via the coffee maker, from which I remove a mug full of a vile and turbid brew that coats my back teeth in slimy grit. There are three secret memos waiting in the locked pneumatic tube, one of which is about abuse of government-issue toothpaste. There are a hundred and thirty two email messages waiting for me to read them. And on the other side of the building there's a broken Beowulf cluster that's waiting for me to install a new ethernet hub and bring it back online to rejoin our gang of cryptocrackers. This is my fault, for being the departmental computer guy: when the machines break, I wave my dead chicken and write voodoo words on their keyboards until they work again. This means that the people who broke them in the first place keep calling me back in, and blame me whenever they make things go wrong again. So guess what gets my attention first? Yes, you guessed right: it's the institutional cream and

off-green wall behind my monitor. I can't even bring myself to read my mail until I've had a good five minutes staring at nothing in particular. I have a bad feeling about today, even though there's nothing obviously catastrophic to lock onto: this is going to be one of those Friday the Thirteenth type occasions, even though it's actually a rainy Wednesday the Seventeenth.

To start with there's a charming piece of email from Mhari, laundered through one of my dead-letter drops. (You'd better not let them catch you sending or receiving private email from work, which is why I don't. As I'm the guy who built the departmental firewall, this isn't difficult.) *You slimy scumbag don't you ever show your nose round my place again.* Oh yes, as if! The last time I was round the flat she's staying in was at the weekend, when she was out, to retrieve my tube of government-issue toothpaste. I somehow resisted the urge to squirt obscene suggestions on the bathroom mirror the way she did when she came round and repo'd my stereo. Maybe this was an oversight on my part.

Next message: a directive on sick leave signed (digitally) by Harriet, pointing out that if more than half an hour's leave is taken a doctor's note must be obtained, preferably in advance. (Why do I feel a headache coming on?)

Thirdly, there's a question from Fred in Accounting – a loser, basically, who I had the misfortune to smile at last time I was on hell desk duty: 'Help, I can't run my files any more'. Fred has just about mastered the high art of the on/off switch but is sufficiently proficient with a spreadsheet to endanger your payroll. Last time I got a mail from him it turned out he'd reinstalled an earlier version of some critical bits'n'pieces over his hard disk, trashing everything, and had the effrontery to be mailing virus-infested jokes around the place. (I bounce the plea for help over to the direction of the hell desk, where the staffer on call will get to grapple with it and curse me vilely for trying to be helpful to Fred).

I spend a second stretch of five minutes staring at the chipped cream paint on the wall behind my monitor. My head is throbbing now, and because of various HSE directives there isn't so much as an aspirin on the premises. After yesterday's inane fiasco there doesn't seem to be anything I can do here today that conjures up any enthusiasm: I have a horrible gut-deep feeling that if I stay things will only get worse. Besides, I put in two days' worth of overtime yesterday, regs say I'm

allowed to take time off in lieu, my self-help book says I should still be grieving for my pet hamster, and the Beowulf cluster can go fuck itself.

I log out of the secure terminal and bunk off home early: your taxes at work.

It's eight in the evening and I still have a headache. Meanwhile, Pinky is down in the cellar, preparing another assault on the laws of nature.

The TV console in the living room of Chateau Cthulhu – the geek house I share with Pinky and Brains, both of whom also work for the Laundry – is basically brain candy, installed by Pinky in a desperate attempt to reduce the incidence of creative psychosis in the household. I think this was during one of his rare fits of sanity. The stack contains a cable decoder, satellite dish, Sony Playstation, and a home-made webTV receiver that Brains threw together during a bored half hour. It hulks in the corner opposite the beige corduroy sofa like a black-brushed postmodern sculpture held together with wiring spaghetti; its purpose is to provide a chillout zone where we can collapse after a hard day's work auditing new age websites in case they've accidentally invented something dangerous. Cogitating for a living can result in serious brain-sprain: if you don't get blitzed on beer and blow or watch trash TV and sing raucously once in a while, you'll end up thinking you're Sonic the Hedgehog and that ancient Mrs Simpson over the road is Two-Tails. Could be messy, especially if Security are positively vetting you at the time.

I am plugged into the boob tube with a can of beer in one hand and a pizza box in my lap, watching things go fast and explode on the Discovery Channel, when there's a horrible groaning sound from beneath the carpet. At first I pay no attention because the program currently showing is a particularly messy plane-crash docudrama, but when the sound continues for a few seconds I realise that not even Pinky's apocalyptic stereo could generate that kind of volume, and maybe if I don't do something about it I'm going to vanish through the floorboards. So I stand up unsteadily and weave my way into the kitchen. The cellar door is ajar and the light's on and the noise is coming from down below; I grab the fire extinguisher and advance. There's an ominous smell of ozone...

Chateau Cthulhu is a mid-Victorian terrace, an anonymous London dormitory unit distinguished mainly for having three cellar rooms and

a Laundry residential clearance, meaning that it's probably not bugged by the KGB, CIA, or our enemies in MI6. There is a grand total of four double bedrooms, each with a lock on the door, plus a shared kitchen, living room, dining room, and bathroom. The plumbing gurgles ominously late at night; the carpet is a peculiarly lurid species of paisley print that was the height of fashion in 1880, and experienced an undeserved resurrection among cheap-ass landlords during the 1980s.

When we moved in, one of the cellars was full of lumber, one of them contained two rusting bicycle frames and some mummified cat turds, and the third had some burned-out candle stubs and a blue chalk pentacle inscribed on the floor. The omens were good: it was right at the corner of an equilateral triangle of streets, aligned due east-west, and there were no TV aerials blocking the southern roofline. Brains, pretending to be a God-botherer, managed to negotiate a ten percent discount in return for exorcising the place after convincing Mr Hussein that a history of pagan activities could severely impact his revenues on the rental market. (Nonsense, but profitable nonsense.) The former temple is now Pinky's space, and if Mr Hussein could see it he'd probably have a heart attack. It isn't the dubious wiring or the three six-foot-high racks containing his 1950s vintage Strowger telephone exchange that make it so alarming; more like the way Pinky replaced the amateurish chalk sketch with a home-made optical bench and properly calibrated beam-splitter rig and five prisms, upgrading the original student seance antics to full functionality.

(Yes, it's a pentacle. Yes, he's using a fifty kilovolt HT supply and some mucking great capacitors to drive the laser. Yes, that's a flayed goatskin on the coat rack and a half-eaten pizza whirling round at 33 rpm on the Linn Sondek turntable. This is what you get to live with when you share a house with Pinky and the Brain: I *said* it was a geek house, and we all work in the Laundry, so we're talking about geek houses for very esoteric – indeed, occult – values of geek.)

The smell of ozone – and the ominous crackling sound – is emanating from the HT power supply. The groaning/squealing noise is coming from the speakers (black monoliths from the 2001 school of hi-fi engineering). I tip-toe round the far wall from the PSU and pick up the microphone lying in front of the left speaker, then yank on the cord; there's a stunning blast of noise, then the feedback cuts out. Where the hell is Brains? I look at the PSU. There's a blue-white

flickering inside it that gives me a nasty sinking feeling. If this was any other house I'd just go for the distribution board and pull the main circuit breaker, but there are some capacitors next to that thing that are the size of a compact washing machine and I don't fancy trying to safe them in a dark cellar. I heft the extinguisher – a rather illegal halon canister, necessary in this household – and advance. The main cut-off is a huge knife switch on the rack above the PSU. There's a wooden chair sitting next to it; I pick it up and, gripping the back, use one leg to nudge the handle.

There's a loud *clunk* and a simultaneous bang from the PSU. Oops, I guess I let the magic smoke out. Dumping the chair, I yank the pin from the extinguisher and open fire, remembering to stand well clear of those big capacitors. (You can leave 'em with their terminals exposed and they'll pick up a static charge out of thin air; after half an hour, if you stick a screwdriver blade across them you'd better hope the handle is well-insulated because you're sure as hell going to need a new screwdriver, and if the insulation is defective you'll need a couple of new fingers as well.)

The smoke forms a thin coil in midair, swirling in an unnaturally regular doughnut below the single swinging light bulb. A faint laughter tinkles from the speakers.

"What have you done with him?" I yell, forgetting that the mike isn't plugged in. The pentacle on the optical bench is powered down and empty, but the jar beside it is labelled *Dust from ye Tombe of ye Mummy (prop. Winchester Road Crematorium)* and you don't need to be a necromancer to figure out what that means.

"Done with whom?"

I nearly jump right out of my skin as I turn round. Pinky is standing in the doorway, holding his jeans up with one hand and looking annoyed.

"I was having a shit," he says. "Who's the fuss about?"

I point at the power supply, wordlessly.

"You didn't—" he stops. Raises his hands and tugs at his thin hair. "My capacitors! You bastard!"

"Next time you try to burn the house down, and/or summon up a nameless monstrosity from the abyss without adequate shielding, why don't you give me some warning so I can find another continent to go live on?"

"Those were fifty quid each in Camden Market!" He's leaning over

the PSU anxiously, but not quite anxiously enough to poke at it without insulated gloves.

"Doesn't matter. First thing I heard was the feedback howl. If you don't shut the thing down before answering a call of nature, don't be surprised when Mrs Nature comes calling on you."

"Bugger." He shakes his head. "Can I borrow your laser pointer?"

I head back upstairs to carry on watching my plane crash program. It's at times like this that I think I really need to find a better class of flatmate – if only the pool of security-cleared cohabitants was larger.

2. ENQUIRY

It's the afternoon of day two of the training course Andy sent me on, and I have just about hit my boredom threshold. Down on the floor of the cramped lecture theatre our teacher is holding forth about the practicalities of summoning and constraining powers from the vasty deeps; you can only absorb so much of this in one sitting, and my mind is a million kilometres away.

"You need to remember that all great circles must be terminated. Dangling links are potent sources of noise in the circuit, and you need to stick a capacitor on the end to drain it and prevent echoes; sort of like a computer's SCSI bus, or a local area network. In the case of the great circuit of Al-Hazred, the terminator was originally a black goat, sacrificed at midnight with a silver knife touched only by virgins, but these days we just use a fifty micro-farad capacitor. You, Bob! Are you falling asleep back there? Take some advice: you don't want to do that. Try this and get the termination wrong and you'll be laughing on the other side of your face – because your face will be on the other side of your head. If you still have a head."

Bloody academic theoreticians... "Yes," I said. I've been over this before with Brains; electrical great circles are a bad thing, best shunned by anyone with easy access to decent quality lasers and a stabilised platform. Electricity, for ages the primary tool of the experimental vitalists, is now pretty much obsolete – but it's so well-understood that these ivory tower types prefer to use it as a vehicle for their research, rather than trying more modern geometry engines based on light, which doesn't have any of the nasty side-effects of electrical invocations. But that's the British school for you. Over in the States, when they're not dangling stupid 'remote viewing' disinformation tricks in front

of the press corps the Black Chamber are busy running experiments on the big Nova laser at Los Alamos that everyone thinks is for bomb research. But do we get to play with safe opto-isolated geometry engines and invocation clusters here? Do we fuck: we're stuck with Dr Volt and his thuggish friend Mr Amp, and pray we don't get a stray ground loop while the summoning core is present and active.

"Anyway, it's time to break for coffee. After we come back in about fifteen minutes, I'm going to move along a bit; it's time to demonstrate the basics of a constraint invocation. Then this afternoon we'll discuss the consequences of an uncontrolled summoning." (Uncontrolled summonings are Bad – at best you'll end up with someone going flatline, their brain squatted by an alien entity, and at worst you'll end up with a physical portal leading somewhere else. So don't do that, m'yeah?)

Teacher claps his hands together, brushing invisible chalk dust from them, and I stand up and stretch – then remember to close my file. The one big difference between this training course and a particularly boring stretch at university is that everything we learn here is classified under Section Three; the penalty for letting someone peek in your notebook can be draconian.

There's a waiting room outside, halfway between the lecture theatres, painted institutional cabbage with frumpy modular seating in a particularly violent shade of burnt orange that instantly makes me think of the 1970s. The vending machine belongs in an antique shop; it appears to run on clockwork. We queue up obediently, and there's a shuffle to produce the obligatory twenty pence pieces. A yellowing dog-eared poster on the walls reminds us that *CARELESS TALK COSTS LIVES* – it might be indicative of a sardonic institutional sense of humour but I wouldn't bet on it. (Berwick-upon-Tweed was at war with the Tsar's empire until 1992, and it wouldn't surprise me in the slightest to discover that one of the more obscure Whitehall departments – say, the Ministry of Transport's Department of long-reach electric fork-lift vehicle Maintenance Inspectorate, Tyres Desk – is still locked in a struggle to the death with the Third Reich.)

It is quite in keeping with the character of the Laundry to be aware of the most peculiar anomalies in our diplomatic heritage – the walking ghosts of conflicts past, as it were – and be ready to reactivate them at a moment's notice. That which never lived sleeps on until awakened,

and it's not just us citizens of old-fashioned Einsteinian spacetime who make treaties, right?

A fellow trainee shuffles up to me and grins cadaverously. I glance at him and force myself to resist the urge to sidle away: it's Fred from accounting, the pest who's always breaking his computer and expects me to fix it for him. About fifty-something, with papery dry skin that looks as if a giant spider has sucked all the juice out of him, he's still wearing a suit and tie on the second day of a five day course – like he's wandered out of the wrong decade. And it looks slept in, if not lived in to the point of being halfway through a second mortgage and a course of damp-proofing. "Dr Vohlman seems to have it in for you, eh?"

I sniff, and decide to stop resisting the urge to sidle away. "Metaphorically or sexually?"

An expression of deep puzzlement flits across Fred's face. "What's that? Metawatchically? Nah. He's a bad-tempered old bastard, that's all." He leans closer, conspiratorially: "This is all beyond me, you know? Dunno why I'm on this junket, our training budget is just way over the top. Got to use the course credits or we lose them next year: Irene's off studying Eunuch device drivers, whatever they are, and I got posted here. Luck of the draw. But it doesn't mean anything to me, if you know what I mean. You— you look like one of those intellectual types, though. You probably know what's going on. You can tell me..."

"Eh?" I try to hide behind my coffee cup and manage to burn my fingers. While I'm cursing Fred somehow ends up standing behind my left shoulder.

"See, Torsun in HO told me he was sending me here, to learn to be the departmental system administrator so those people in Support can't pull the wool over our eyes. But his Vohlman-ness keeps cracking these weird jokes about devils and knives and things. Is he one of them satanists we got briefed on four years ago, do you suppose?"

I boggle as discreetly as I can manage. "I'm not sure you should be on this course. The material gets technical quickly and it can be dangerous if you're not familiar with the appropriate laboratory safety precautions. Are you sure you want to stay here?"

"Sure? I'm sure! 'Course I'm sure. But I ain't too happy with the content For one thing, where's all the stuff about license terms and support? That comes first. I mean, pacts with the devil is all very well, but I need to know who to phone for real technical support. And have CESG certified all this stuff for use on government networks?"

I sigh. “Go have a word with Dr Vohlman,” I suggest, and – a trifle rudely – turn away. I know there’s always one person who’s on the wrong course, but we’re two days in and he still hasn’t figured it out – that’s got to be some kind of record, hasn’t it?

Everyone drinks up and the smokers magically reappear from wherever they vanished to and we troop back into the lecture theatre. Teacher – Dr Vohlman – has rolled an archaic test bench in; it looks like a couple of Tesla coils fucking a Wheatstone bridge next to what I’ll swear is a distributor hub nicked from an old Morris Minor. The wiring on the pentacle is solid silver, tarnished black with age.

“Right, better put your coffee cups down now, because we’re going to actually put some of the stuff we were discussing before break into practice.”

Vohlman is all business, attacking his curriculum with the gusto of a born schoolteacher. “We’re going to try a lesser summoning, a type three invocation using these coordinates I’ve sketched on the blackboard. This should raise a primary manifestation of nameless horror, but it’ll be a fairly *tractable* nameless horror as long as we observe sensible precautions. There will be unpleasant visual distortions and some protosapient wittering, but it’s no more intelligent than a *News of the World* reporter – not really smart enough to be dangerous. That’s not to say that it’s safe, though – you can kill yourself quite easily by treating the equipment with disrespect. Just in case you’ve forgotten there’s six hundred volts and fifteen amperes going through this circuit, and the baseboard is insulated and oriented correctly along a magnetic north-south axis. The geometry we’re using for this run is a modified Minkowski space that we can derive by setting pi to four; there’s no fractal dimension involved, but things are complicated slightly because the space to which we’re mapping this diagram has a luminiferous aether. Gather round, please, you need to be inside the security cordon when I power up the circuit. Manesh, if you could switch on the ABSOLUTELY NO ENTRY sign...”

We gather round the test bench. I hover near the back. I’ve seen similar experiments before: in fact, I’ve done much more exotic ones in the basement back at Chateau Cthulhu. Compared to the insanely complex summonings Brains assembles inside his laser grid this is introductory level stuff, just an official checkpoint on my personnel record. (Did I tell you about the friend of mine who was turned down for a job as a trainee scientific officer because he was unqualified? His

Ph.D. was no good – the job description said ‘three GCSE passes’ and he’d long since lost all his high school certificates. That’s the way the civil service works.)

Still, it’s interesting to watch the other students in this course. Babs, blonde bubble-and-squeak with big-framed spectacles, is treating the bench like an unexploded bomb; I think she’s new to this and still too much under the influence of *The Exorcist*, probably expects heads to start spinning round and green slime to start spewing at any moment. (Vohlman should have told the students that’s what we keep the Ectoplasm Wallahs around for. Impresses the brass no end. But that’s another course.) John, Manesh, Dipak, and Mike are behaving just like bored junior technical staff on another week-away-from-the-desk-is-as-good-as-a-holiday training course. Fred from accounting looks confused, as if he’s mislaid his brain, and Callie’s found a pressing reason to go powder her nose. Can’t say I blame her; this kind of experiment is fun, the same way that demonstrating a thermite reaction in a chemistry lab is fun – it can blow up in your face. I make damn sure that the electrical fire extinguisher is precisely two paces behind me and one pace to my right.

“Okay, everybody pay attention. Don’t, whatever happens, touch the grid. Don’t, under any circumstances, say anything once I start. Don’t, on pain of your life, step outside the red circle on the floor – we’re on top of an earthed cage here, but if we go outside it—”

Topology is everything. The idea of a summoning is simple: you create an attractor node at point A. You put the corresponding anti-node at point B. You stand in one of ’em, energize the circuit, and something appears at the other. (It’s that resonance effect I mentioned earlier, right?) The big ‘gotcha’ is that a human observer is required – you can’t do it by remote control. (Insert some quantum cat mumbo-jumbo about ‘collapsing the wave function’ and ‘Wigner’s Friend versus the Animal Liberation Front’ here.) Better hope you picked the right circle to stand in, otherwise you’re going to learn far more than you ever wanted to know about applied topology – like how the universe looks when you’re turned inside-out.

It’s not quite as bad as it sounds. For added security, you can superimpose the attractor node and the safety cell, locking in the summoned agency – which means they shouldn’t be able to get to us at the anti-node. Which is why Herr Doktor Vohlman mit der duelling scars unt ze bad attitude has plonked the test bench right in the middle

of the red pentagram painted on the lecture theatre floor and is enjoining us all to stand tight.

Of course, to get to the fire extinguisher I'd have to step out of the circle...

"Is this practice approved by the Health and Safety officer?" Fred asks.

"Quiet, please." Vohlman shuts his eyes, obviously psyching himself up for the activation sequence. "Power." He shoves a knife switch over and a light comes on. "Circuit two." A button is depressed. "Is there anybody there?"

Green vapour seems to swirl at the edges of my vision as I focus on the pentagram of silver wire. Lights glow beneath it, set in a baseboard made of timber harvested from a (used) gallows; setup is everything.

"Three." Vohlman pushes another button, then pulls a twist of paper out of his pocket. Tearing it, he exposes a sterile lancet which he shoves into the ball of his left thumb without hesitation. The hair on the back of my neck is standing on end as he shakes his hand at the attractor and a bead of blood flicks away from it, bounces off the air above one wire, rolls back towards the centre – and hovers a foot above it, vibrating like a liquid ruby beneath the fluorescent lights.

"Is anybody there?" mimics Fred. Abruptly his face crinkles in a grin. "Good joke! I almost believed it for a minute!" He reaches out towards the drop of blood and I can feel vast forces gathering in the air around us: and all of a sudden I can feel a headache coming on, like the tension before an electrical storm.

"No!" squeaks Babs, realising it's too late to stop him even as she speaks.

I see Vohlman's face. It's a mask of pure terror: he doesn't dare move a muscle to stop Fred because touching Fred will only spread the contagion. Fred is already lost and the last thing you do to someone who's in contact with high tension is grab them to pull them away – that is, if you do it, it's the last thing you'll *ever* do.

Fred stands still, and his jacket sleeve twitches as if his muscles are writhing underneath it. His hand is over the attractor, and the drop of blood begins to drift towards his fingertip. He is still smiling, like a man with his foot clapped to the third rail of the underground before the smoke and sparks appear. He opens his mouth. "Yes," he says, in a high, clear voice that is not his own. "We are here".

There are luminous worms writhing behind his eyes.