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Surely some things should be sacred? Surely. That hardly seems unreasonable. Yet, here I am diving for cover behind a gravestone.

Bullets tear into ancient limestone. Stone shards churn the earth around me. I scramble back, vault a tomb, tumble into a yew bush.

A black shape descends from the cloud-clotted sky. A miniature plane, a shadow with blazing barrels and the intention of making me resemble Swiss cheese. The tomb I'm using as cover caves as bullets chew through the lid. My yew bush gets a drastic trim. I sweat and curse.

Then engines whine. The plane veers away, searches for a better line of attack. I heave out my pistol, push a rogue yew branch out of my nostril, take aim.

I think it's a drone. The sort of thing the US government uses to piss off large portions of Pakistan. Except, I'm not in Pakistan. I'm in Oxford, England.

A drone attack. Here. Now. Nothing is sacred. Because—and I think I can say this with certainty—this is by far the weirdest funeral I have ever been to.

TWENTY MINUTES AGO

Rain falls. A priest mutters somber words. Slowly, with measured movements, I help lower my best friend's body into the ground.

"To tell you the truth, Arthur," says a voice in my earpiece, "it's a bit of an odd feeling, being at your own funeral."

To tell the truth, it is a bit of an odd feeling when a disembodied, digital copy of the man you're burying provides color commentary during the burial.

The body we're sending on a six-foot downward journey once belonged to one Clyde Marcus Bradley. Except it isn't his original one. Earlier in the month, the original was hijacked by alien mind worms, turned into the human equivalent of a fried egg, and then I shot it. Not something I'm overly proud of.

Anyway, Clyde's original body is rather indisposed.

However, for a number of really complicated reasons, we had a back-up digital version of Clyde on an ancient Peruvian mask, and a brain dead body that was lying around. Which, thinking about it, was a fairly fortunate coincidence.

So, Clyde went on a wooden mask. And that was OK for a while actually. Until he developed computer super-powers and might have gone a bit insane, and thought it was OK to overwrite other people's brains with his own. And *then* he got zapped, or broken, or... well, there was a time-traveling Russian magician involved. So Clyde was dead again. And that's why we have a body to bury today.

Where things get really complicated is the point where Clyde made numerous back-up copies of himself. And now they're talking to me at the funeral.

Not creepy at all...

Here and now are neither the time nor the place to deal with that oddness, though. Instead I attempt to shush Clyde—the commentator not the corpse—via the subvocal mike taped beneath my collar.

The difficulty of shushing subvocally should not be understated. My own attempt is met by a stern look from Felicity Shaw. Felicity, my boss. Also Clyde's boss. Also, my girlfriend. Though not Clyde's

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girlfriend. My life is decidedly odd these days, but it's not that odd.

"I mean," Clyde continues, "it's nice of everyone to come. Totally appreciate it of course. The last thing I want is to appear to be ungrateful. That would be terrible. And the flowers... Well, to be honest, I was never really a flowers person. I'm still not. Gosh, it's difficult to work out what sort of tense to talk about myself with these days. But that sort of ties into my point. Because, despite how lovely and touching this is, it does all seem a little unnecessary."

Except, "This isn't for you, Clyde," I point out.

"Well," Clyde replies, "it is *my* funeral."

But unless you're starring in an experimental seventies horror film, the point for helping the corpse usually expired along with it.

The way things stand now, as I understand them, three of the back-up versions of Clyde are active. All are in the possession of MI37, Britain's last line of defense against... well, things like alien mind worms and time-traveling Russian magicians.

MI37 itself consists of me, Arthur Wallace, head of field operations; Felicity, my boss and aforementioned girlfriend (a situation which at the very least rivals Clyde's existence for the most complicated thing I have to deal with on a daily basis); Kayla, a sword-wielding Scottish woman who technically reports to me, but mostly just intimidates me, and who has super-powers and issues; and Tabitha, a Pakistani goth who fills the roles of both researcher and misanthrope.

I, Felicity, and Kayla own versions 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4 of Clyde respectively. He gave them to us on flash drives. Since then they have been downloaded onto and are co-habiting a server back at our office. I believe they're all watching this through a hacked spy satellite.

Tabitha stands separately. Tabitha... The proud owner of Version 2.1, Clyde's ex-girlfriend, and the woman for whom this funeral is really being held.

She stands at the head of the grave watching the coffin make its descent, gently shaking as the sobs wrack her body. As I understand it, goths have never been known for wearing cheerful colors even at the best of times. Today, Tabitha appears to have been rinsed of all color by the rain. Black dress. Black make-up. Black studs in her ears and in her face. The crimson swath of hair

that graced half her head has been shaved away to leave a uniform quarter inch of black. A skull has been etched into the hair on the back of her scalp. The only colour variation comes from her white tattoos, standing out stark against her dark skin.

She's taken Clyde's death hard. I mean, normally if she shows an emotion that isn't frustration I know something is seriously awry. This public display of grief is indicative of some sort of internal shattering.

"Ash to ash," the priest intones. "Dust to dust."

Tabitha's body quakes with another sob. I think about putting an arm around her, but don't for fear that would just make it worse. Tabitha's spent so long keeping everyone at an emotional arm's length I don't know how to respond.

"She's still not talking to me," Clyde Version 2.2 says in my ear. "To any of us."

It would be an overstatement to say that I am completely at ease with the Clyde versions. Clyde is... He is dead. Interacting with a digital xerox of him... Well, the simplest actions take on existential meaning. Do I kill him every time I shut his application down? That's a fun thought to mull over late at night.

My relationship with him, though, is staggeringly functional when compared to Tabitha's. In a nutshell, they cause abject terror in her. We were only able to get versions 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4 onto a work server because she took several personal days after his death. I have a sneaking suspicion that her own version has been reduced to particulate by now.

She sees all of Clyde's more... aberrant behavior writ large in the smallest of the version's actions. In her eyes, they are all plotting the end of humanity, all poised to overwrite every brain they see. In fact, this is the first time in at least a week that I've seen her remove her hat.

Her hat is lined with tinfoil.

She's holding it—a small pillbox affair with a black veil to cover her eyes—but I can see the tinfoil poking out around the edges.

I may not be an expert on the subject, but I think I can definitely class "wearing a tinfoil-lined hat because of your boyfriend's demise" as taking it badly.

She made us all tinfoil hats too. She brought them into the

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office one day. Mine was a black baseball cap with a red anarchy “A” on the front.

“Wear it,” she said, holding it out to me.

I took a moment to examine it. I noticed the tinfoil.

“Is that...”

“Antenna.” She looked at me, her gaze flat and hard, face expressionless. “For a small psi-resistor in the brim. Put it on.”

“But it’s tinfoil, right?”

Tabitha’s gaze remained merciless. “Cheaper and lighter than copper. Easier to hide. Put it on.”

I hesitated. Tabitha met my eye. I have met the eyes of things beyond human ken, defied them, and lived to tell the tale. This was way more intimidating. I put the hat on. It crinkled.

I have to wear it at all times in the office now. We all do. Felicity has a black straw bonnet. Kayla has a trucker hat. If one of us takes our hat off Tabitha freaks out. The hats also seem to disrupt cellphones and the office wireless. I think it’s only a matter of time before Felicity sets fire to hers, Tabitha’s mental well-being be damned.

Tabitha replaces her hat, takes a fistful of earth and scatters it on the coffin. I keep my cap balled in my fist. Tabitha is starting to look at me in frustration. But this ceremonial hat removal has been the first chance to check in with the office.

“Anybody try to blow up the world since we’ve been here?” I subvocalize. It’s been about a week since the last attempt, a surprising dry spell for MI37, and I’m starting to feel suspicious. As if someone’s trying to lull me into a false sense of security.

“No, nothing at all. Everything positively silent on the more-than-mundane front. Even mundane crime seems to be taking a day off. I think the most exciting thing that’s happened so far is that Version 2.3 hacked into Tabitha’s files.”

When you are attempting to surreptitiously chat with an electronic copy of your best friend at his own funeral beneath the notice of his now paranoid ex-girlfriend, this is not the best news to receive.

I make a noise as if an invisible man had just given me the Heimlich maneuver. This in turn causes Felicity to take an anxious step toward me, Kayla to roll her eyes, and Tabitha to grab her hat.

The priest pauses mid-spiel to give me an odd look. I try to pass it off as a sob.

Tabitha is staring desperately at my hat now. Felicity has replaced her bonnet. Kayla's foil-lined trucker hat is in place.

"He did what?" I manage to say beneath my breath.

"He misses her." A pause. "We all do."

Part of me thinks I should be more sympathetic. If this was Clyde, really Clyde, if it was the man in the coffin I would be. But these... versions. I get why they fight Tabitha's point-of-view, but I wish they could do it in a more respectful way. The way I think meat-and-bone Clyde might have done. "If Tabitha finds out, she's going to take an industrial magnet to your hard drive," I hiss.

Tabitha, for her part, is starting to mouth words at me across Clyde's open grave. "Put. It. On."

"It's worse than you think," Clyde tells me. I fail to see how this is possible.

"She's working on a programming code to debug the brains of people telepathically mind wiped by the dead me."

I'm actually relieved. Normally when I see no way for things to get worse, the world surprises me with its resourcefulness and warped sense of humor. This revelation is merely worse for the Clyde versions' chances of reconciling with Tabitha. Me and the rest of the world are emerging remarkably unscathed.

"Do you think that I should send her flowers?" Clyde asks.

"Put. It—"

I can't deal with this. I put the hat on. It crinkles.

This, I think, is probably the weirdest funeral I have ever been to.

I reach down, grab a fistful of dirt, look at the coffin. And even though I just stopped talking to some version of Clyde, I feel the loss. That is my friend lying there. My eyes sting. Saving the world sucks sometimes.

I let the soil drop from my hand, down into the hole.

The lid of the coffin explodes.

What? What just...? What?

For a moment everything is completely still. The priest in the middle of signing the cross. Kayla in the middle of reaching for her fistful of dirt. My hand still out. My palm still open.

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How? I wonder. *How did I manage to make exploding soil?*

Then it comes down at us, swooping, engines shrill, machine guns rattling. Dirt, and wood, and stone fly, mashed into a fine paste of detonating detritus by the oncoming drone.

It drops out of nowhere, hurtles forward. A tiny contrail streams out from one wing.

I fling myself at a gravestone, half somersault over it, land upside down in mud and dying flowers as the drone's machine guns turn the grave marker from holy to holey.

Judging this cover to be, in technical terms, for shit, I lunge across open ground, vault a low tomb, and fall into a yew bush.

The drone comes on. I duck lower, feel the heat and wind of the bullets shredding the world around me. And then the moment passes and I'm still breathing. I grab the pistol from my shoulder holster, try to take aim. The thing is moving furiously fast. I give leading-the-target the old college try, but I might as well be shooting at the moon.

"Wait until it's closer," Felicity yells. She's behind what's left of a cedar tree and a significant amount of bullet-generated wood pulp.

I'd point out that waiting until it's closer significantly ups the chances of my being turned into pâté, but unfortunately I know that Felicity knows that. Not that she doesn't care. At least I assume she cares. The whole dating thing seems rather dependent on the assumption that she doesn't want me turned into flavorful meat paste. But this is a work situation, and with work, the whole avoiding death thing usually ends up taking less precedence than it really should.

I scan for Kayla. It's always good to know where your friend with super-powers is in situations like this. Saving your arse being the optimal place in my opinion.

She appears to be halfway up a tree.

While significantly further from my arse and its proximal saving zone than I'd like, she does have her sword out. I too am the proud possessor of a sword, but I have yet to work out how to conceal it on a daily basis. Along with speed and strength that would make Wonder Woman blink, Kayla also seems to have the skill to hide a three foot katana on her person regardless of the outfit.

The black dot is growing bigger again. And louder. And deadlier. It closes on us. Like a lightning bolt flung by a heavily bearded deity. We are a shooting gallery of targets, all lined up in a row. Bullets chew up the ground, racing toward me. I fling myself sideways, firing blindly. Something terrifyingly hot blows my shoe off. I spin and yell.

I come up, gun still raised, blink mud from my eyes.

Kayla is in the air. Behind her, the tree she climbed sways back, bending from the force of her leap. The drone is coming in low and hard, closing the distance. Kayla's whole body is a curve, sword high, feet extended. An Olympic gymnast committing beautiful, graceful suicide.

Closer. With each millisecond, closer.

She snaps the sword down.

And misses.

For the first time in my life, I see Kayla miss.

The drone dances away, spins down between trees, a defiant barrel roll. Its guns still blaze. Paving a path of bullet holes.

Kayla slams into the ground behind the drone, skids through the dirt, never losing her balance for a second. She stares after the machine in hatred.

I pull up my gun, but my eyes aren't on the drone. I'm looking for Felicity. I'm making sure she's OK.

And there she is, performing a pirouette of her own, as her cedar tree becomes a stump. She comes around the toppling trunk, pistol raised, barrel barking. A beautiful economy of motion.

God, my girlfriend is a badass.

Then the drone speeds by, outpaces her ability to aim, sweeps low. The air cracks in its wake and it banks hard, seeming to skid through the air.

And Tabitha. Tabitha, momentarily forgotten in the confusion. She stands at the foot of Clyde's grave. Frozen there. Staring at the drone devouring the distance. She's got one hand up clamping her hat to her head.

I snap my eyes from Tabitha to the drone. *Lead the target.* Felicity's words echoing in my memory. I've been putting in a lot of time at the range since Clyde died. Failing to save the life of your

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friend tends to cause that sort of behavior. And Felicity is keen for me to not follow in his footsteps. Her voice: *lead the target.*

I lead it. I fire. The gun cracks and jumps in my hand. Again.

Bullets eat the ground before Tabitha. Eight feet away. Six. Four.

I fire again. Again.

Tabitha flings herself backwards, through the air. Down. Down into Clyde's grave.

Three feet.

Again. Again. Three shots until the magazine runs dry.

Two feet.

The last shot leaves my gun.

One.

The path of the drone's gunfire deviates, swings wildly away. The angry chatter of the guns clicks to an abrupt halt. The pitch of the drone's engines scales octaves. And smoke. There is smoke in the sky.

I hit it. Jesus. I actually hit the bloody thing.

It screams out of the air. Less a meteor now, and more a wounded bird. It plows toward a wall, low stone marking the cemetery's boundary. And then it detonates. The percussive blast ripping through the air. Shrapnel scours through damp earth. Fire billows—a phoenix's last flight.

Felicity. My first thought is for her. I move forward. My shoeless foot skidding through the mud.

She climbs up from behind the destroyed cedar tree, grabs me. "Nice shooting, Tex."

I kiss her, heart and pulse hard in my throat. Hold her to my chest. All around us: the wreckage of the attack. Steaming chunks of metal embedded in shattered gravestones. The priest lying in the fetal position praying at the top of his lungs. Me and my girlfriend, holding each other, holding smoking guns in our spare hands.

No question. Weirdest funeral ever.



2

“What, in the name of all feck, was that?”

Kayla is pissed. Well, Kayla is always pissed, but she appears to have slid closer toward the rabid-animal-fury end of the scale than usual.

“A drone,” I say. “It was an attack by an unmanned drone.”

Kayla glances at me, then Felicity. “I honestly do not have a feekin’ clue what you see in him.” To me, “Of course it was a feekin’ drone. Feekin’ why?”

Somehow, knowing that Kayla is on my side is never as reassuring as I think it should be.

I shrug.

Felicity steps away from me, gives us both a slightly suspicious stare. “If either of you pissed off any governments recently, now is the time to come clean.” It strikes me as a little sad that she’s not joking.

I try to clear my head, but adrenaline is still flooding the engine. I want to just shoot or run away from everything. “A malfunction?” I manage to suggest. “Some test gone horribly wrong?” It has to be something like that. Drones don’t just attack people.

Felicity shakes her head. “The government doesn’t test armed drones anywhere near major urban centers.”

Kayla nods. “What Wales is for.”