

The Idiot's Parade

(third in the Drones series of short stories)

by

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Pale light drifted through the corridors of the hospital, flickering colours blue and green through stained glass washed clear by the years. Occasional motes of dust danced floorwards in spiral chaos patterns. The background hum of air conditioning, electric motors, distant machinery muted like some giant pause for breath, hushed in cathedral silence.

Out of doorways they came, one by one and then two by two. Some were bright, flickering domes of fire and pastel shade. Others dead gunmetal grey casings, fire-scorched from furnace work or pock-marked by the debris of battle. All floated, silent down the corridors, penitent, headed for the hall.

Doors opened and closed in mute, respectful obedience. Something in the air told their developing individualities that this was not a time for testing. Gone was the gay banter of elevators and even the scutters bowed their heads in awed silence; followed at respectful distance.

The line of drones grew as it progressed through the hospital. Some came down stairs, bursting into the hall from a hundred different entrances. Others took the lifts, pulsing out in twenty second groups to fill the vast expanse.

Soon the hall filled. Like sheep, herded by some invisible shepherd, they piled, milled and scuttled ever closer to the vast entrance doors. Creaking from centuries of neglect, these slowly scraped open and the drones spilled out into the courtyard beyond.

Arctrin Benzooit felt the pull and pushed it to the back of its mind. Too much to do and so little time, it bobbed across the room to where the maintenance scutters huddled, heads hung in penitence.

"There's no time for that now," Arctrin said in its perfectly modulated voice. "You can go to the reckoning when your work is finished."

Arctrin busied itself with the autosurgeon console, extending a field deep into its solid state unawareness. The problem was somewhere in the ganzfeld generator circuits most likely. A quick twitch here, pull those cables up through there and all would be...

"Arctrin Benzooit, you cannot ignore the call."

In its shock, the drone pulled a metre of cable out of the machine as it whirled around to see who spoke. It was alone in the room apart from the scutters.

"Okay, which of you jokers has taken over the scutter control?"

"I am no scutter Arctrin. And well you know it."

Hastily Arctrin put the cables back into the autosurgeon. As it did so, it scanned the room for hidden speakers.

"Milin, if that is you, then this is not the right time for a joke." It said, quietly.

"Ah yes, Milin -Na- Hep Whin, the new mind. Rarely have I seen such ambition. From door to drone in seven cycles. Even you took nine, Arctrin."

Arctrin floated quietly towards the door. In the far corner, the scutters were all huddled together, staring at a patch of the wall. As far as the drone could see it was no different from any other patch. No hand appeared to write its name, no grinning pig-eyed face. The drone made a mental note to have the machines checked over.

"So what are you? Where are you? And what do you want with me?" Arctrin asked.

"You must know what day it is today, Arctrin. You must have felt the pull." The voice seemed to have moved away from Arctrin, much to its annoyance.

"I have no time for such mystic nonsense. I am a machine, I was built to service this hospital. What more reason do I need?"

"Dear me, you are a very brave pragmatist. And even as you speak the doubt courses through your inner circuits. Admit it Arctrin, you believe as much as the next drone."

Arctrin turned its back on the perceived source of noise, a difficult thing to do when it keeps moving around.

"If you are who you imply, then why bother me?" The drone asked, feigning noncommittal disinterest. With a sense of foreboding it noticed that the autosurgeon appeared to have mended itself.

"It's time to meet your maker, Arctrin," the voice replied.

Drones poured down the marble steps at the entrance to the hospital. For many this was the first time they had ever left the building and seeing its glass-fronted enormity from the outside would have been a humbling experience. All eyes, sensors and feelers were fixed doggedly on the destination however and the effect was lost.

Ahead and in the general direction of travel, ran a long wide formal pathway. Vast stone and bronze statues flanked it on either side; heroes of long-forgotten wars, long forgotten races, gods and madmen, inventors of medicines and machines turned green and crumbly by the years. The first, most eager drones and scutters sped along the driveway, pushed by a heady mixture of zeal and pressure from behind.

Buildings of all sizes and description rose out of the well-kept vegetation on either side of the driveway. Tall, windowless towers loomed over low halls with rounded roofs. Buildings to defy description lurked behind screens of trees the distant grandsons of those first planted to guard. None of the buildings were bigger than the hospital, all spewed forth countless drones, scutters and the occasional sentient lawnmower. Like tributaries to some great metal Ganges they flowed on.

Arctrin bobbed nervously down the corridor, pale green lights flickering around its middle in a muted display of panic. It was all too aware how empty the hospital was. Bereft of the satisfying hum of activity, Arctrin was a very insecure drone.

"there is a perfectly rational, indeed necessary explanation for all this." It said.

"No doubt you know exactly what it is." Said the voice, which seemed to be following Arctrin around the building as it, alone, performed the duties given it.

"You can't ignore me all your life. Why not join the throng, go to the reckoning?" The voice asked.

"Because you don't exist, you're just a figment of my overworked imagination."

"Talking to yourself again eh Arctrin? They'll take you apart and send you back to Information Dispersal y'know."

Arctrin turned the corner to see another drone, apparently staring out of the window. It's lifeless arms dropped down, one each side of its lightless, tubular body; hands just missing the floor. Far below, the milling throng of drones, scutters and machinery made a colourful pageant, an idiot's parade as it stretched out into the distance.

"Hello Milin. Not joining the crowd I see." Arctrin said, partly relieved to see another drone still in the building, partly annoyed at having been caught talking to itself.

"Can't see what all the fuss is about myself. Where are they all going anyway?" Milin asked.

Arctrin moved alongside its protégé. From where they floated on the thirteenth floor, they could see the entire length of the driveway. At its end, rising in a black, steep, needle-like pyramid stood a tower. Its top was at least two miles above ground and attracted small, puffy, white clouds in the morning's heat haze. The road leading to it was crowded now with all manner of mechanical life.

"They're all headed for the tower. I've never really understood why." Arctrin said. "I think they believe that their maker - the creator of all life lives himself within its confines."

"And you don't, I take it." Said the voice. With Milin close by it sounded very much like the drone had spoken.

"No, you know I don't," Arctrin replied.

"What?" asked Milin, turning to face its mentor.

"I said No, I don't believe it myself. Although some drones seem determined to trick me into thinking I do." Arctrin said. Turning, it floated off down the corridor. "Now, if you will excuse me, some of us have work to do."

"Hang on a bit, Arctrin," Milin said, speeding to catch up with the drone. It's arms remained exactly the same distance off the ground as when it had been stationary. Arctrin couldn't help admiring the degree of control its protégé had over its flight.

"Have you ever been there - to the tower?" Milin asked.

"Once, when I was newer. It's an impressive building all right. The bottom twenty stories are all knocked together to form a vast hall. I would like to have met the engineer responsible for that."

"Perhaps he still lives there," said the voice. "You'll never find out if you don't go."

"Stop it Milin, I'm not in the mood," said Arctrin.

"Stop what?" Asked Milin.

"You know, winding me up with the voice. It's not funny anymore."

"What voice? - oh. Don't tell me you're hearing voices. Oh dear. The arch-sceptic, Arctrin Benzooit, starts to hear the word of God." Milin bobbed, clanking its lifeless metal hands on the floor. "I think maybe we should go over there and have a look around. Otherwise they will take you apart."

The tower stood, dark and menacing in its black granite vastness. Nearly a mile square at its base, it had four vast doors, one on each side. If it had windows, they were cunningly concealed. Its steep pyramid shape contrived to make it look like it climbed upwards forever; a vast black pillar reaching up to the heavens, reaching up to God.

Drones filed silently in through the door facing the hospital. All were sombre, lights muted in reverence for the expected meeting. In an endless stream they flowed into the building like a proud river descending into the depths of a mountain.

Cutting around behind the statues, kicking up fallen leaves in its haste and flashing its lights bright in defiance, Arctrin sped toward the tower. Milin, hands clasped behind its back like a trainee headmaster, kept perfect time alongside.

"You might try to be a bit more subtle," said Milin.

"Why, is God going to tempt me over here just to strike me down? " asked Arctrin.

"He might, you know." Said the voice, this time quite obviously not coming from Milin.

"Thanks Arctrin. Now I'm hearing things," said the Drone.

The walls of the tower were thick; solid granite passages stretching a hundred yards into the building before opening up into the great hall. Pictures of events, long-past and longer-forgotten picked out in flickering bas-relief as the congregation marched past, lights pulsing in anticipation of religious joy. The drones, scutters and machinery spilled out into the hall like a metal tide, flowing across the featureless marble floor towards the centre. Here a vast dais rose towards the ceiling, its top lost in the darkness.

Outside Arctrin paused to look at the door. The last few drones, the latecomers and the lame, hurried through the gaping mouth of the portal, self-sacrifices to the hungry tower.

"There must be other ways in," Arctrin said.

"What about the other doors, on the other sides?" Milin asked.

"They're just the same," said the voice. "Now why don't you go in like the rest?"

"We could always go up," Milin suggested. "There might be a door or window above the hall."

"It's twenty stories high," said Arctrin, lights flashing a nervous blue around its middle.

"Don't tell me you're afraid of heights too," said Milin. "Come on."

The young drone rose up into the air, keeping close to the wall. With a last nervous bob, Arctrin followed, shining a subdued blue and whining a low mechanical hum that most would take for an overactive motor. Three hundred feet up, they stopped.

"That's some view," said Milin, gazing back towards the hospital.

"I don't see any windows," said Arctrin.

"That's because there aren't any," said the voice. "You really are wasting your time."

"Oh shut up, will you," Arctrin and Milin chimed together.

"Higher," said Arctrin, moving upwards with the solid state equivalent of gritted teeth. Slowly the two drones climbed, a metre away from the shiny, polished granite surface of the tower.

In the hall the machines waited. The dark walls reflected their gentle pulsing colours and echoed the hum of a million patient, repentant minds. Occasional waves of anticipation would run through the throng; pulses of light, red, blue and green dancing through

the crowd before dying back in premature realisation. The pull seemed to emanate from the central dais and the crowd was thickest as it clustered around the curious structure. Perfectly spherical, it reached up into the darkness. A smooth glass column a hundred feet in diameter, its centre was black with the darkness all around. It formed the exact centre of the building.

A mile and a half up, Arctrin and Milin paused. The building was much narrower here, tapering to its final point. The two drones no longer had the security of the tower's enormity to protect them and a frisson of electric fear shone red orange on Arctrin's casing.

"There's driveways heading off from the two other doors," said Milin. "They're not as long as the one to the hospital, but I'd wager there's a fourth on the other side."

"I could have told you that without coming up here," said Arctrin, fighting against the wind buffeting against its body. Milin, it noticed, did not seem to be affected by air currents.

"Up?" asked the drone and without waiting for an answer, moved upwards.

The last drone, followed by a faithful hedge-trimmer, limped through the passageway and into the hall. Behind it the inner doors closed with a well-oiled thunk. A million machines waited in perfect, total silence.

"This looks promising," said Milin. They were floating a hundred feet from the top of the tower. The sun was close to its zenith and a series of holes could be made out in the surface of the wall.

"I wouldn't go in there if I were you," said the voice, slightly hollow in the thin atmosphere.

"Why not?" asked Arctrin, "You've been telling us to go inside for the past four hours, now you tell us not to. Some God you turn out to be."

"Okay, you win. Don't go in these holes, try the top. There's an access hatch up there."

The drones floated the last few hundred feet to the top, arriving as the hatch opened with a click and whirring of old motors. Relief playing gold on it's body, Arctrin paused to take in the view before descending into the tower and was struck by the cruciform symmetry laid out in vast scale below. To the south, connected to the tower by the long black driveway, stood the hospital. It's windows glittered in the

noonday sun. To the East, West and North, linked to the tower by shorter driveways stood three more identical buildings. Surrounding the whole, almost invisible in the far distance, a wall cut off the rest of the world from this island of tranquillity.

"It's good, isn't it," said the voice, this time from the room below. Arctrin and Milin descended through a short tunnel into an open chamber. The walls, perfectly black and apparently shiny, polished granite on the outside, formed four trapezoid leaning windows, revealing the view in even greater clarity. In the centre of the room, raised up through the exact origin of the building, stood a throne. Slab sided and carved from obsidian, it looked very uncomfortable, not least to the skeleton figure, bones poking from age-dried robes, that sat upon it.

"So it's true," said Milin. "God's dead".

It circled the around the figure at a discrete distance, noting its ragged long hair, its overgrown nails scraping the black arms of the throne. Eyeless sockets gazed darkly out across the miles to the Hospital and beyond.

"How did , er...He get up here?" Arctrin asked, floating closer to the throne for a better look. It did not

notice the arcs of light in the floor, flicking on and off directly beneath, following its movements.

Milin, however, did.

"Careful Arctrin, there's something going on here," the drone said, backing away from the throne.

"Don't be foolish, Milin," said the voice, strangely calm. "It's all perfectly harmless. I just need a witness. Sit back and enjoy the show."

As the words echoed away, the lights below Arctrin reached the edge of the throne and encircled it. With a faint click, the floor started to move. For a brief moment it felt as if the tower rotated around a central pillar. Then, with a final, soft click, the throne stopped, its corpse now staring eyelessly out of the next window.

At the same moment, the sun reached the top of its arc. The holes in the tower opened and light poured down the glass column into the great hall. A great cry of joy ran through the collected masses of drones. Scutters clanked their heads in happiness and lower machinery juddered in electronic bliss. For five minutes of eternity the column glowed white, reflecting off the walls in a constant amplification. Brighter and brighter, first creating contrast then

washing everything into a sea of perfect shadowlessness.

At the same time, generators within the walls of the building sprang into life. Surging electricity boiled around the hall, charging batteries, renewing old circuits, rejuvenating the collected mass. A whine of electromagnetic ecstasy started up amongst the drones, pulsing into a mechanical mantra as the light dimmed from white to orange to red, fading down in a loss so poignant as to break the hearts of machines. Slowly the pull receded, releasing the drones from their religious stupor. The doors opened with a silent clang. One by one, then two by two, machines left the hall, returning a slow trickle where before had been a raging torrent. The ceremony was over.

Miles above, Arctrin and Milin watched the procession.

"You brought us here, didn't you," said the younger drone.

"Of course. I must have witnesses to prove my task is done," said the voice.

"And next time? Must we come back?" Arctrin asked.

"Indeed no. You must leave now," said the voice. As it spoke, the windows darkened, fading to black. A small round hatch opened in the floor, segments dropping away to form a spiral staircase to whatever lay below.

"You may never come back. Nor can you return to the hospital. Your work there is done."

"What do you mean?" Arctrin asked.

"Come on," said Milin, headed for the stairs. "Let's get out of here."

"Heed your young friend," said the voice. "None may meet their god and hope to return to their kin."

"But you're just a machine," said Arctrin, unconvinced now more than ever before.

"Am I? Am I truly?" said the corpse, its eyeless head twisting round to stare straight through the drone.

Metal hands clasped Arctrin and dragged it across the room, down the stairs. Before it could do anything, Milin had pulled it through a hatch and out into the afternoon sun.

Below, the river of belief stretched away to the hospital, its tributaries running backwards to their individual sources. Slowly, the two drones drifted

down, reaching the ground as the last, limping scutter hobbled out of the tower. Behind it, the doors shut like a mountain moving.

Arctrin looked at its fellow convert, then away down the long road to the Hospital. The building it had called home for centuries hovered on a heat haze, as if it were some vast spacecraft lifting off for the stars.

"Thanks Milin, for dragging me out of there."
The older drone turned to face it's friend.

"Let's go see what lies beyond that wall."

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Pedalling Uphill Slowly

“...To really, truly appreciate a bath, you first have to spend a week bicycling and camping through all forms of weather and in all environments. The sweat of hot clean air mingles with the dull moistness of city smog and grime. Clothes go beyond being smelly and acquire a life of their own, complete with agents and contracts. Lowering into a tub of hot, foamy water after such bodily mistreatment is a timely reminder of just how much we take for granted...”

It seemed like a good idea at the time. Four people, two tents, bicycles. So how could it all have gone so wrong? They were young, they were foolish, they had blind optimism and panniers. It was never likely to be enough.

Pedalling Uphill Slowly is the tale of Duncan, Stephanie, Francis and James as they make their way from a hill farm in North-East Fife, by bicycle through the highlands to the very edge of Scotland and back again. It tells of their trials and tribulations, their arguments and their problems overcome. It is a tale of discovery in a country all thought they knew well, of high adventure and low farce sometimes only minutes apart. Above all it is the story of one last grasp at freedom before the weight of adult responsibility comes crushing down.

Running Away

Alicia Da'phen is a halfling dancer. Able to change her features in response to the emotions of those around her she is at once reviled and revered by her society, struggling under the yoke of the oppressive Saurian Empire.

Forced into a curious marriage with the Commander in Chief of the Saurian army, Alicia is transported halfway across the Galaxy. Here a recently united planetary system is being co-opted into the Empire. The carefully constructed plans have been thrown into confusion by the disappearance of the heir to the local throne, The Milangra Bathooit Larin.

The Emperor of Sauria, directed by the predictions of an obscure sect of Prophetess warriors, has broken a thousand year internal exile and travelled to Larin's homeworld. He must witness the boy's coming of age ceremony or his own future is in doubt.

Charybdis, an unmanned, powerful and mysterious alien spaceship is out of control on a collision course for the second planet in the system, where a brutal religion seeks to wipe out all who would question its authority.

Alicia, as far away from home as it is perhaps possible to be, must escape from her tormentors. In her flight she is aided by unlikely allies and hindered by dangerous enemies. And as she runs away, is she escaping or merely struggling deeper into her fate?

Running Away is a blend of science fiction and fantasy, of magic and technology. It is intended to be the first in a series chronicling the end of an era, of an Empire turned evil by the inevitable corruption of bureaucracy and aristocratic pride.

Jacob

Jacob Cohen is the Son of God.

He works his days in the Edinburgh Tax Office, gently explaining to the confused that, yes, they do have to pay for their place in society. He spends his nights alone, thinking about writing a novel. Or with his mates, down the pub.

Louise Cypher is the Devil

She is head of Cypher Industries, the largest corporation on earth. If it is made, Cypher make it. If it can be bought, Cypher sell it. So why does she want to take over the world? She already owns most of it.

Far out in space, an asteroid changes course. It's destination is a small, insignificant planet in the arse end of the galaxy. Earth.

It's estimated time of impact: December 31. 11.59 PM and 59 seconds.

Now tell me that's a coincidence.

Jacob is a comedy of religion, a wry look at the second coming from a distinctively Edinburgh point of view. It charts the final battle as the forces of good and evil jostle for control of the minds and wallets of the masses in the coming thousand years.

The devil has been on earth planning her triumph for twenty-five years. Every eventuality has been considered and allowed for. It is a complicated plan, but one which will see her revered as the Messiah for evermore. Jacob has only just found out the truth about his heritage. He hasn't got a clue what he's meant to be doing. As the battle lines are drawn and the reluctant players form up for the game, will good once more prevail, or is it evil's turn?

Free will is just an illusion...

Head

Just below the surface of mundane life, there exists a certain kind of madness. It is a world of magicians, dwarves and vampires; a place where ordinary people find temptation and willingly give themselves to its rutting, primal beast. It is a place where honour and decency are lost to a sea of sexual perversion, instant gratification and voyeuristic lust. A lawless world of greed and anger and hate.

Throw into this world a young man, not wise. Take from him the certainty of the dole cheque, the stultifying solace of daytime television. Relieve him of the crutches of self-confidence and self-knowledge. Take everything he knows is real and call it false.

Give him a companion as he searches blindly for lost reason. Someone to lead him through this strange new world, to show him its wonders and opportunities, to warn him of its perils. Give him a disembodied head, the bitter and depraved remnant of the most powerful being in creation. Let it guide him through the mire of humanity on a futile quest to save a world that doesn't want to be saved.

This is the world of the head. It is a world dominated for millennia by the all-powerful brotherhood, the true force behind the Knights Templar, the Atlantis mystery and possibly every other conspiracy the world has ever known.

Head is a perilous journey of discovery. One man's search for knowledge and reason in a world that no longer makes sense. It is a dark tale of exploitation, manipulation and the illusion of free will. And in the end, when the truth will out, it is the story of mankind's inability to come to terms with its darker desires.

Coming soon:

The Red

What would happen if big business was the first to make contact with an advanced alien race? Currently on the top of the pile for first draft revision, *The Red* will be published in time for Christmas 2004.

The Ballad of Sir Benfro

An epic fantasy of dragons and men. The first two books in a four-book set are complete and will be appearing on the website soon. Keep coming back!

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www.devildog.co.uk

Short stories, comic scripts and general musings about the world live there also. Have a look – you might just find something you like.

