

REBOOT: FAILED

It had been a particularly heavy night. So much so that it was now the morning after the morning after and I was still barely lucid as I squeezed through the ticket barrier and stumbled down the escalator. My head was splitting, my mouth tasted like a body builder's armpit, and my clammy hands glued themselves to the rubber handrail. Of their own accord my feet joined the flood of commuters along the bleak and seemingly endless subterranean tube that led to the Northern Line.

The raunchy notes of a saxophonist inveigled themselves into my scrambled brain, but he was there on the same pitch every day, so at first I paid little attention. As I approached, however, I glanced up and frowned. The busker seemed far smaller than I remembered; unfeasibly

small in fact. Come to think of it, I didn't recall the horns either; small, stumpy ones protruding either side of his forehead. I stopped then and stared, causing a gangling, emaciated, man in a purple gown to thud into my back. The man was wearing a tall, pointed, hat, and on his shoulder was a tiny, winged, creature that looked for all the world - to my increasingly befuddled mind - like a miniature dragon. The man picked up the smartphone he had dropped during the collision, muttered a few expletives, and rejoined the torrent of travellers. Slowly, it began to dawn on me that things were not right. Not right at all.

For the first time, I looked around at my fellow travellers. Most were on their phones or listening to mp3 players, but cloaks rather than suits seemed to be the order of the day, and the variety of body shapes, sizes and colours was way

beyond that expected, even of early 21st century multi-cultural London. Standing stock still in the centre of the thoroughfare, I was by now causing a bit of a log-jam, and attracting approbation, vitriol and looks of open disgust from those whose journey times I was increasing by seemingly vital seconds. When something that looked, to my untutored eye, like a small but very beefy troll, thrust his warty face into mine and muttered a few less than endearing terms regarding my ancestry, my mother's occupation and my general appearance, I decided it was time to move. Rejoining the throng, I considered the options. One: I was still asleep and this was all a dream, albeit an extraordinarily richly observed one. Two: I had toked something I shouldn't have and was still hallucinating? Three: I was in some sort of coma - maybe even dead. I ducked just in time as a miniature crone astride a lavatory brush skimmed my cheek

and weaved her way above the heads of the crowd. I shook my head in disbelief. It must be a dream, I decided. In which case, I thought, I might as well hang loose.

The winding, tile-lined, tube finally ended and, along with hundreds of others, I was vomited out onto the platform. The usual silver tube train clattered out of the blackness and I was propelled into an already rammed carriage by the crush from behind. Face squashed up against one of the interior glass panels, I looked into the eyes - all three of them - of a spiny creature that put me in mind of an overgrown, upright, porcupine. It's eyes were unblinking and I got the feeling they were looking into me rather than at me. I shivered and turned my face to the left, where the prospect was only marginally less unnerving. The train crawled into Warren Street station and as the doors opened I was popped out onto the platform

like a shelled pea. A couple of packed escalators took me to street level, where I turned right and joined the crowds heading south on Tottenham Court Road. I felt the need to take stock, so eased my way across the flow and found shelter in the doorway of a small shop that I didn't remember having seen before. It's bay window was lined with shelves stacked with bottles of variously coloured liquids and powders and what looked like dried body parts - of what I hated to think. An orange neon sign above announced 'Peregrine's Proprietary Potions'.

I examined the other shops that lined both sides of the busy thoroughfare. Gone were the banks, the furniture emporia and the supermarkets; replaced by small, independent shops whose curious and miscellaneous wares spilled out onto the pavement, transforming it into a series of chicanes that pedestrians needed to be

nimble-footed to negotiate. The continuous stream of commuters that strode, hopped, shambled and flew past me was no less extraordinary than that on the tube and again I was astonished at the enormous richness of what I was still telling myself was a dream.

A blaring horn drew my attention to the road traffic, which was equally outlandish; the usual buses, cars and trucks fighting for space with carts and carriages drawn by horses and other more exotic quadrupeds. There were no traffic lights and crossing the road required a sufficiently critical mass of pedestrians surging into the traffic, bringing it to a temporary halt and attracting a blare of irate hooters, horns and cries. Leaving the doorway, I joined one of these surges and made it to the far side. A narrow alley took me to a second busy road, where I attached myself to what I rightly

guessed was another surge in the making. Wedged into the heart of the throng I was frog-marched across the road and deposited high and dry outside the black, wrought-iron gates of the university. At least this hadn't changed; the great portico and dome above dominating the vista.

As I moved to enter the front quad, some sort of hulking humanoid half as tall again as me, stepped on my foot in passing. The pain was excruciating and I hopped about a bit in agony for a time. It struck me while doing so that the torment was very much real and ergo so was everything around me. It wasn't a dream, I contemplated through my tears. But if not.....what? When the pain had subsided to a dull throb, I hobbled into the quad and headed for a wooden bench. It felt as though my foot had been reduced to mush and I wanted to take off my shoe and sock to check that my toes were still in

working order. They were - just about.

Numbed into inaction by my unexplainable predicament, I sat there for a bit, rubbing the life back into my foot. The sun had by now emerged above the surrounding buildings and I raised my face to the Spring warmth. The blue sky was criss-crossed by vapour trails and a steady stream of large jets headed west, making for touchdown at Heathrow Airport. At least that all seemed normal. I sat there for a bit longer, overwhelmed by the extraordinary sights and sounds that enveloped me, before I became aware of a hissing noise coming from the direction of the next bench.

'Psst'. A small man - at least he seemed at first glance to be a man - was trying to attract my attention. He was cloaked and hooded so that I could barely see his face, but the large bushy beard

looked familiar.

'Psst, Simon, over here'.

I peered closer. 'Adam is that you?' The man pulled his hood back a little and I could see that it was. I limped over and sat down next to my colleague. I didn't wait for him to speak.

'What the fuck's going on, Prof?' I waved an arm in the direction of the bustling menagerie around us that was now the student body. 'We seem to be in a world of Harry Potter meets the 21st century'.

Adam pulled his hood back and his shock of white, wire-like hair sprang out as if released from a long captivity. Along with a ruddy complexion, twinkling eyes and an impressive white beard meant he was a dead ringer for Santa Claus, and

he certainly didn't look out of place in the new reality. In fact, he was making a very good fist of impersonating some friendly wizard or sage. Going by the long, thin-stemmed pipe he was smoking, it was a role he seemed to be playing up with some relish.

Professor Sir Adam Osmaston Miles, lauded physicist and Nobel Laureate, waved the stem of his pipe in my direction. 'Ah, Simon, my boy, so you've survived the transition too? Last time I saw you, you were in such a state I had my doubts about whether you would live to see the next day'.

'Well, as it happens'. I said. 'I didn't. I woke this morning with the mother of all hangovers. Must have slept round the clock'. I looked about me to satisfy myself - for perhaps the hundredth time - that the world hadn't reverted to

normal. It hadn't. 'Seems like I missed all the fun. When did it happen?'

Adam shrugged. 'Not sure to be honest. I was pretty far gone too on Tuesday night and didn't surface 'til lunchtime yesterday. Window cleaner woke me. I knew when I saw the four arms scrubbing away at the glass that something was amiss. Jolly efficient though'.

'You don't seem very surprised'. I said.

'Nor am I. It had to happen'.

'What?' I said. 'What had to happen, exactly?'

Adam's face crinkled with pleasure. 'Why, we have been rebooted'.

I examined my boss closely for any

hint of horseplay. There was none.

'Pardon?' was all I could say.

Adam took a draw on his pipe and sat back looking smug.

'Rebooted. Our world; our whole universe - well our entire reality actually - has been rebooted; reset'.

I must have looked bewildered, so Adam went on.

'I know you planetologists think that all theoretical physicists are away with the fairies, but even you must be aware of the proposal that what we perceive as reality is just a simulation; that our lives and loves are in actual fact acted out within some astonishingly complex version of a Playstation game?'

I nodded. 'Well, of course I know of it, but I just filed it away amongst all the other wacky theories you lot are always coming up with'.

'Ah, but that's where you're wrong. It's a theory that is actually testable'. Adam paused for effect and looked, if that were possible, even more smug. 'And we tested it'.

'Explain'. I said.

'Well, it's quite simple really'. He broke off to resuscitate his pipe with a match, puffing out clouds of fragrant blue smoke, while I took time to study a pair of extraordinarily tall and thin beings that flitted past on huge diaphanous wings'.

'Yes. It's very straightforward'. the Nobel laureate continued. 'You see. If our

reality is simulated then there has to be physical evidence'.

Adam was now in full lecturing mode. 'Rather than being continuous, the universe we see and measure would be made up of building blocks; an artificially constructed lattice structure a bit like that in a crystal, but on an unimaginably small scale. And if the universe is a lattice, then the form of the lattice must affect the behaviour of stuff that passes through it'.

I thought I could see where this was leading. 'Like radiation?' I suggested.

He jabbed the stem of his pipe at me. 'Exactly! Such as?'

I thought for a bit while admiring a sylph-like maiden wearing very little who drifted past on the arm of a tall, black-

haired man with a very pale face and protruding front teeth. 'Well, something pretty pervasive that can be detected and measured relatively easily would fit the bill'.

I cogitated further. 'Cosmic rays?' I suggested.

'Spot on, Simon. Cosmic rays. We'll make a theoretician of you yet'.

The Prof stood suddenly. 'Shall we head to my study and I'll show you the data?'

We crossed the quad, working our way around groups of ghouls, gremlins and other beasties, clutching folders of notes, chatting and laughing. A pair of impressive double doors in the far corner took us to a grand stairway, which we climbed to the second floor. At the end of

a long corridor, the Prof opened a door to an anteroom where a diminutive hag was tapping away at a laptop. She looked up as we entered, peering at us through bottle-glass lenses that made her rheumy eyes look like big shiny pebbles and offering a largely toothless grin.

Adam smiled back and turned to me. 'Simon. I don't think you've met my new PA? Mabel - Simon. Simon works in the exoplanet unit'. Mabel nodded distractedly in my direction and returned to her tapping.

The Prof ushered me into a study panelled in dark wood, wherein every single surface was buried at least half a metre deep in journal papers, computer printouts and general crap.

'Grab a chair', he gestured vaguely. 'There's one under that lot somewhere'.

Adam shoehorned his bulky frame into a seat behind a large desk and relit his pipe. He puffed away while rummaging about amongst a pile of printouts. Meanwhile, I relieved a battered armchair of its load and manhandled it closer to the desk.

'Ah here we are'. Adam tossed a batch of printouts in my direction. It all looked gibberish to me and I said so.

'OK', said Adam. 'These are data on cosmic ray velocities gathered from the CREAM.' I looked blank and the Prof looked exasperated. 'The Cosmic Ray Energetics and Mass experiment' he sighed. 'It's been operating on the ISS for the last couple of years'.

'Fine.' I said. 'Just cut to the chase. What does this lot.....' I waved a hand at the reams of printout, '....show'.

Adam leaned back in his chair, blew smoke, and framed his words carefully. 'It shows that the pattern of cosmic rays is not uniform. It shows that they travel more easily in certain directions than others. It confirms that their passage through space is controlled by the axes of a lattice'.

He looked me in the eye. 'In short, it means that nothing; you, me - everything around us - is real. We are in a sim. One that has just been rebooted'.

I was incredulous, but in the absence of any other explanation, it was an interpretation I was prepared to accept, although I still had questions.

'So why haven't I heard all this before. Surely it's big news - the biggest'.

Adam shrugged. 'We only crunched the data a month ago. We had a paper written and due out on arxiv tomorrow. Then...' He stretched out his arms expansively. '...This!'

'A bit of a coincidence, don't you think?' I said.

'Oh, without doubt!' Adam exclaimed. 'The probability of the two events being unconnected is virtually zero.'

'So are you saying that whoever or whatever is running the sim knew about your findings and rebooted in response?'

'Well, I can't think of an alternative explanation. If you were running a sim and the cast - if that's the right term - found out, what would you do? I have no idea what the purpose of the simulation might be, but rebooting would

seem to me the only option'.

'But surely they or it can't be constantly monitoring everyone and everything in the sim all the time, so how could they know about the paper?'

The Prof jabbed the stem of his pipe at me. 'Agreed, but it would be straightforward to build in software agents tasked with watching for key events that might expose the sim and flagging them to the builders'.

Adam stood and patted his roomy abdomen. 'Anyway. Let's carry this on over lunch. Hair of the dog?'

My stomach showed signs of rebelling at the mere thought and I must have blanched.

Adam grinned at my discomfort. 'Let's

go'.

At first glance, the Senior Common Room didn't seem to have changed much. The clientele was, of course, far more outlandish than on my last visit, and the selection of food and drink on offer somewhat more exotic than I was used to. Gone was the university bitter; in its place a frothy, blue concoction that nonetheless seemed to have a similar effect on the imbiber. Adam ordered a pint and quaffed half of it with some enthusiasm. I was relieved to find that orange juice was still on the tariff and plumped for a small glass. I wasn't quite sure what to make of the food offerings. It could have been my imagination, but at least some of the dishes appeared to be moving. In the end, I followed the Prof's example and went for a plate of anaemic looking sausages.

The place was humming. Gone were the toned down whisperings of academics on a working lunch and the place echoed to the sound of laughter and merriment. Most of the noise came from a large group of dwarves in the far corner. Adam spotted the focus of my attention. 'Department of Art History' he said.

'You're joking' I replied. Art historians were not renowned for their lunchtime drinking or joviality - at least not before the reboot.

We sat quietly for a minute or two, eating our sausages, which were actually delicious, and soaking up the infectious atmosphere of a transformed common room. I broke the silence.

'It's a bit of an odd reboot isn't it?' I ventured. 'I mean, it's neither one thing nor the other'.

Adam finished the last of his sausage, took a swig of his drink and dabbed a frothy, blue, moustache from his upper lip with a napkin.

'That's because it hasn't worked. At least not properly. There's been some sort of glitch, so we seem to have an amalgam that merges a new reality with the remnants of the old. Wizards with smart phones; crones operating laptops; dwarves teaching art history; cars, jet planes and all the rest of our technology apparently unchanged'.

I gestured around me. 'But why are so many of the new cast familiar to us; witches; fairies; ogres and the like'.

'Ah'. said Adam. 'I've been thinking about that. My guess is that they are from a sim that's been run before and that we

somehow still hold racial memories of'.

'So maybe all the old fables and fairy tales were actually rooted in something real?' I suggested. 'Perhaps the brothers Grimm were holdovers from another sim - just as we are - I said, only half jokingly'.

Adam drained the last of his drink and peered pensively into the bottom of his glass. 'The thing is', he observed, 'it's not likely to take the sim builders long to spot the glitch and put it right'.

It was something I hadn't considered until then, and the thought that I could blink out of existence at any moment in a puff of code sent a shiver down my spine.

'How long do you think we have?'

Adam shrugged. 'Your guess is as good

as mine. It depends on how subjective time within the sim compares with the real time of the builders. It is perfectly possible that our entire lives could pass while the operator is reaching for the reset button'.

'Well. At least it'll be quick'. I said.

'Indeed', said the Prof, stretching out his legs and looking pretty relaxed about the possibility of a sudden and unheralded demise. 'All I can suggest is that we just go with the flow. You can start by getting me another pint. I'm getting to rather like this stuff!'

As I made to stand, Adam leaned forward again and spoke quietly out of the corner of his mouth. 'And may I make a suggestion?'

'Of course'. I replied.

'For God's sake old chap, get a new wardrobe and try and blend in a bit. Everyone's looking at you as if you're some sort of weirdo'.

I thought this was a bit rich, but agreed that while my jeans, T-shirt and leather bomber ensemble may have impressed the freshers in our now-vanished world, it didn't quite fit the bill in the new one.

Professor Simon Bleasdale opened his front door and sucked in a lungful of icy air. The cars that lined the north London street were white with frost and the watery sun hanging low above the red brick villas added light but no warmth to the scene. Simon tugged his deep red gown closer, exhaled a cloud of vapour and grinned. It was a big day. His first as

Head of Department, and later that afternoon he would give his inaugural lecture as the new professor of exoplanet dynamics. He still missed Adam, a year on from his death at the ripe age of 95, but the old rogue's passing had done nothing but good for his career path. A celebration was certainly in order for later. He would call Sylvia, the wonderfully imaginative nymph with whom he had become physically involved in recent weeks.

Simon reached in his pocket for his smartphone and swore as he fumbled and it fell to the ground. Reaching down to pick it up, everything blurred for a moment and he felt a strange quivering inside as if his organs were being rearranged. Standing again, Simon shook his head to clear it.

Shedrak shook his head to clear it. 'That was odd', he thought. 'Hope I'm not

coming down with something'. He shook his head again. That was better. 'Must have been someone walking on my grave'. Shedrak cradled the tiny bat that had fluttered out of his hand onto the ground and attached a minuscule paper scroll to a small leather collar around its neck. He was likely to be a bit late for dinner that evening and needed to let Sylvia know. Whispering her name into one of the bat's long ears, he launched it into the air and watched as it did a couple of circuits above his head before heading east.

The snorting of one of the unicorns drew his attention. Four of the powerful black beasts shuffled and pawed at the ground, hankering to be on their way. Shedrak's retainer, the ancient and grumpy Goiwyn, held the door to the carriage open, foot tapping with impatience; single eye swiveling this way and that. But Shedrak wasn't to be rushed. Not today.

In a couple of hours he would address the conclave of the magi; his first speech since his induction into that august assemblage. Drawing his purple, gold-trimmed, gown closer against the early morning chill, Shedrak looked out across rolling hills towards the distant peaks; everything bathed in the glow of the giant red sun that hovered just above the horizon. Barabel and its two attendant moonlets huddled together high overhead; three blood-red crescents set against the pale blue dome of a flawless Spring sky. It was going to be a wonderful day; a day to remember.

REBOOT: SUCCESSFUL

THE END