
KILL THE GHOST, STEAL THE FLOWER, SAVE THE WORLD
EXTREMOPHILE
IAN GREEN

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Head of Zeus Ltd
First Floor East
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WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

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Charlie

Chekhov's clathrate gun



WE ARE HORSE THEORY THANK YOU!

Parker yells into the mic but the bass is still wailing as I push it at the amps and I don't know if anyone hears them. By the time I can hear anything past my own heartbeat and the feedback there is no more applause, if there was any. I don't look at the crowd when I'm playing – freaks me out. I look at the bass or at Parker or a spot on the wall and don't notice the blood on my fingers where the strings have shredded through the calluses until well after, until it is all over my shirt. I'm slick with sweat – the space behind the old fish factory and the abandoned flats is open to the night, but the air is hot in London, even on a winter evening. It feels hotter than last year.

The band before us were a punk three-piece, all fast tempo and choppy guitar, so our distortion-bass laced with industrial synth and Parker's poetry was a tidal shift. I'd hoped for a tidal wave, but a quick glance shows the crowd is already back to their drinks, their conversation.

You good, Charlie? Parker asks and I wipe sweat from my brow and nod and start to pack up. I can hear the party again; the sound dude has amped up the tunes and the murmur of people speaking and yelling and laughing is back. My heartbeat is still properly amped, full juice mental after a tight fifteen-minute set. We were early enough in the set-list that the dancefloor was half-empty, even though the bar is crowded. I get my bass packed and on my back and then head to the makeshift bar, where Parker is already surrounded by meticulously disarrayed scene punks, retro studded belts and patches *just so.*

One has a glitz shirt that keeps scrolling profanities across the thread, every four-letter you can think of with the occasional ACAB thrown in for good measure. A bit try-hard. Most don't even glance at me; the one who does takes in my look and immediately dismisses me. *Just the bass player*. I can read his thoughts in the faint crease at his forehead, the diffident set to his lips. *Fuck that guy.*

What does HORSE THEORY mean? one asks but Parker waves them off with a smile and gets two beers from the mullet manning the beer pile, who passes them on with a *good set* mumble. Parker is sweat-wet as me, grinning, and the 20-key modded Casio is back in their satchel, slung low at their hip like an oversized six-shooter. We fade to the back of the crowd and drink the beers and share a joint from Zoot's hothouse. It's bad weed. It smells like a burning roll of fox piss and the only impact is a faint thrumming behind my eyes, as if the wasps in my skull are waking up. We watch TERMINAL MORAINE play twenty minutes of noise but their new guitarist is a showboat and I'm not digging it. Too noodly – guy is shirtless and strutting about.

I check my onyx – I've got a lens in so it doesn't light up when I tap it through my pocket, just fires the top alerts straight

to the heads-up display on the contact. Eleven new orders for ZODIAC CODE, with raw sequence files attached. *Idiots*. Who gives their DNA to a fucking *astrology* website? A few quick blinks and flicks of my eyes and I check the bank account to find the orders have already cleared – we have cash to burn. Beer at the show is stolen or donated or whatever, but I need gear for the lab and Parker needs new shitkickers.

I down my beer and flash the confirmation onto the onyx display to show the orders to Parker and they whoop and then we're dancing – TERMINAL MORAINE finally finish and then it is the excellent INJURY DETAIL. Dudes with a lot of tatts and heavy beards – they shred. The drummer is absolutely crushing it, the double-bass pedals thrumming so fast it's more like a reverberation, the thrum in the heart of a colossal hive of mega-bees instead of rhythm or any distinct hits. Makes me want a drummer, almost. I drink five more beers but they barely touch the edge – the metabolism booster I spun up last summer has its pros and cons. I spot my ex-girlfriend dancing with her three new partners in a little tangle across the room, head buzzed, stupid geometric face tattoos catching the light. I turn away swiftly, because nothing there is worth looking at.

With five beers I have to piss so often that I should switch to spirits, but the beers are cold and free and it is sweltering and the graffiti on the cubicle walls in the pisser is the only reliable way to stay on top of the zeitgeist. I down another and light a cigarette – this gig is in theory a warm-up for some protest march so the sound dude spends a long time between sets droning about Green vs. Blue, but whenever I stop moving I only feel Black so I stare out the rolltop doors of the warehouse at the sunset, a plane tree with scabrous fungi growing up it silhouetted by the streaking purple light. I tap my fingers on my legs.

Say what you want about the end of the world – the dead

soil and ash in the air makes for a pretty sunset. We aren't close enough to any of the big sulphur dioxide projects to get the really wild sunsets like they do on the equator or in Japan, but it's still pretty tight. On the wall beneath the plane tree, graffiti – a stylised crossed hammer and sword, all in green. The symbol of the Heavy Crew. If this were Zone 1 and a corpo saw that, there would be a street team here within the night to cover it over with their own carefully crafted street art, tailored to appeal to the dissolute youth, to offer aspirations of money/sex/vice/escape. If a cop saw it, we'd be spitting tear gas within the hour. I'm feeling Black, so the symbol doesn't get me jazzed. Just feels like more branding.

INJURY DETAIL are followed by some folks with some synthy shit, but good drums again. Maybe I'm just too focused on what we lack. I don't catch the name but the drummer is a guy who was in a band I saw last summer at the venue beneath some arches in Bethnal Green and he was a nice dude, and it is all danceable and so we dance. The fug of sweat and beer is competing with the hot mess of the stagnant canal two streets away and a century of smoked fish baked into the walls of the factory next door. There is a faint acrid chemical smell underlying it all – someone is cooking hard drugs in one of the abandoned blocks of flats deliquescing around us, or in a canal boat, but the Met couldn't give a fuck what happens outside of Zone 1. Everyone worth extorting has already moved north where they can breathe, or is in Zone 1 living high. I've smoked twelve cigarettes since arriving but the buzz is minimal. There's the catch-all metabolism booster I dosed myself with coming into play again, ruining the fun – pros and cons, benefits and limitations. You wanna eat shit forever and stay skinny? I paid the price. I'm getting more beers and checking on my bass, tucked tight in a corner, and then I hear the yell: COCKBRAIN CORPO SONOFABITCH!

I get outside in time to see Parker rolling in the dirt with some fucking scene kid with good teeth and new shoes, a *haircut* in italics. No punches, no knives, just a kind of desperate wrestle. Me and Red Russ drag Parker off and a crowd starts spilling out to watch – we're between sets so everyone is locked on. The kid rolls away and pulls themselves up and with a flash of weak streetlight on metal there is a blade in their hand. It flickers and snakes as he moves his wrist, the blade thin as a screwdriver. He wipes his bloody nose and spits red. Parker scrambles to their feet and grabs a beer from me. Asshole dickless dickhead mother*fucker*! They yell and throw the bottle and it misses by a mile. Recycled glass doesn't smash good so it just rolls off. Anticlimax.

I'll fucking cut you! The scene kid says but Parker just laughs and spreads their arms and takes a step forward. I grab the back of their shirt. Red Russ looms next to us, big fucker that he is, and now there is a crowd and people are yelling – fuck off, kid/beat their ass, Parker/nice ass, the usual mix of shit. I feel Parker settle back on their heels and I reach into my vest pocket and pull out cigarettes and pass them to Russ and Parker. We light up and the kid is just staring, knife swaying, sweat pouring, red-lipped. Alone.

I said—

We heard what you said, I say, and I look down at his new shoes and then meet his eyes. You put that knife away, kid, and you fuck off.

I'm game, Parker says, and Russ is holding them back with one arm across the chest. Parker doesn't even *have* a knife, for fuck's sake, and they are ready to charge in.

The kid opens his mouth to reply but I can feel the weight of the crowd and I don't want conversation. I hold one hand out to Parker to calm them, and then from the back of my belt beneath my AMENRA shirt I pull out a claw hammer, chipped

and scratched, the handle worn smooth with sweat, the heavy end sticky and dark.

Fuck off, kid, I say, and I don't raise my voice. I don't smile, I don't blink, I don't raise the hammer – it hangs limp by my side. The guy has six inches on me at least. My heart is back to full action, and there is an acid tang in the back of my throat. Behind us cymbals crash as the next band sets up their shit, and the kid backsteps once, twice, runs. He yells back, some stuff about assholes. Whatever. We watch him disappear and the crowd slowly fades, headed back to the speakers or the bar.

Fuck was that? I ask Parker, and I slip my hammer back in my belt and take a slug from a beer someone has left on the pavement. Maybe me. Parker wets their lips with that little pointed tongue and wipes sweat from their face, slicks a hand back through their shock of red hair. Fuckin', fucking *kid* said we were *derivative*, Parker spits. Their cheeks are red, hair tousled from the tussle. Good-teeth motherfucker said we were just a JILLING/KILLING copycat. Can you believe that?

Red Russ shakes his head and punches Parker on the shoulder before lumbering off back into the pit. Good guy, Red Russ, Parker says, and we trade the bottle back and forth until it's dead and then Parker hurls it in the vague direction the scene kid was headed. It bounces off to join the others. JILLING/KILLING *are* good though, I say.

There are always fights at the shows, and everyone has a knife, and everyone who doesn't have a knife has a gun. The scene protects itself, and we are within it, part of the family. It's always the new kids or the crazies or the skinheads or some city boys. If someone ends up cut, someone else will take them to the nearest clinic. If someone ends up dead, depending who it is, the canal is close, or plenty of bands have vans for moving their gear.

My eye twitches a little as my heart starts to calm but

then my onyx buzzes and the message comes up on my lens – WHERE IS MY FUCKING MONEY CHARLIE – and the number is a new one but I know who it is, and I blink and flick my gaze to close the lens down for the night and press the heels of my hands into my eyes hard enough to see pinpricks of light.

Chef again? Parker asks, and I just nod, and they shake their head and squeeze my hand. Pay no mind, kid, they say. We head back into the noise.

After the show we walk home along the canal and we have sex and we watch ancient anime on Parker's screen in bed, coiled together. There is no food in the volcano lair but old pizza with vegan cheese, rubber before it even cooled. The night is still so fucking toooooooasty, and the server is spitting heat as it works on the analysis for the ZODIAC CODE orders. The bulk of it is already done – that script took me a minute to think of and an hour to make, a day to perfect. Give me your DNA and your details and we'll give you a custom astrological chart with moons and shit, animations, music. Formatted for an onyx lens or whatever peripheral you want, if you fancy, so it all floats around you in augmented or virtual reality. (I got some software noodle to code that shit in exchange for a weird little augment, wanted to only sleep three hours a night. Weird little software noodle, but they all are.)

ZODIAC CODE is all about aligning your code to your sign, how that relates to the procession of the universe – the epigenetic topology of your genome mapping to the grand procession cycle of the stars, our planet rising and falling in the tides of the galaxy. Smoke enough weed and understand patterns and you can align any two things, as long as you don't care if it's true. Correlation doesn't equal causation but it does equal cash, and everyone loves a bit of pattern. It's how we evolved – pattern recognition is as innate as breathing, probably a bit more. Give someone chaos and they will find a pattern, or seek to impose

one. The program takes a few features unique to each DNA file set and aligns that with a bullshit astrological model some crystal-bitch made and it spits out some numbers. The next script takes those numbers and populates a premade form. It throws the results and some hi-res pics of planets and some line diagrams behind into a file and then another program makes an animated version for the onyx, an immersive version for the VR. I always delay sending it for three days to make it seem we are working hard on it, but the server should have it all spat out by morning. I wrote some good deep nonsense for the website – deciphered from the ancient ruins of Göbekli Tepe! (Göbekli Tepe = 10,000-year-old megalithic ruins in south-east Turkey. Super cool. Dick all to do with DNA. Fucking catnip to crystal nerds.)

> Guanine synastry accords with the procession of mercury. In conjunction with Saturn, beware the impact on your 1st house!
>
> Your fire sign is fixed, but the mutation of c>t muc16 omim606154 will leave you open to water's emphasis…

With the world ending, everyone is looking for meaning. No refunds, satisfaction guaranteed. Most of the clients are in what's left of North America, in their militarised enclaves, clutching geodes and desperation, and the cash clears eventually and spends as good as money from clever people. I order enough lab equipment that what's left of the British government takes an interest once a year (or when they remember), and nothing I do on the genetics side is technically *wrong*. I pull out mutations, copy number changes, whatever. I make a few colourful charts. I file my taxes and fill in all the proper

paperwork, and the land we're on is industrial brownsite, so after the great d-reg pretty much anything goes.

Population still hasn't bounced from the 2038 hit, so not like they're short on space. Maybe the lab inspections make them feel useful, but their real reason for checking is to make sure that I'm not fucking with any corporate IP. If there's one thing the police can be relied on for, it's to protect money. ACAB might not have always been true, but it sure seems to be now. All cops are bastards, all corpos are bastards. Pick your C, it will probably be right. *All people are bastards*, I think, lying in the dark and staring at the ceiling and desperately wanting not to believe it. I feel Black down to my toes.

The punks and the kids say you are Green or Blue or Black. Greens want to save the world – go to the marches, make your own toothpaste. There are hard Greens (direct action, like the Heavy Crew with their hammer and sword) and soft Greens (grind your own quinoa, lament the death of the theatre). Blues don't give a fuck as long as there is profit – the sea will rise, but if you've got money there is always higher ground. Blacks know that the world is fucked and you need to either have a good time or find a bath and a toaster.

Work, Charlie. Work to distract yourself from the end of the world. ZODIAC CODE – the interpretation is all horseshit but the genetics is solid and I stay a clear mile from anything the corporates have a hold on, so most of the feedback I get is astrology crystal-heads trying to point out mistakes in my star charts. I incorporate their feedback when I'm in the mood, and the next customer buys in even more. Iterative design, baby. Eighteen months in and ZODIAC CODE pays the electricity bill and the water bill, and the extra electricity to pump out the fucking floodwater every time the canals burst. Parker doesn't have to steal (they still do, but they don't *have* to – now it's

more for the *point* of the thing). I can afford meds when I need them, reagents for the real work (the stuff the police never see). Tech, drugs, booze, fags. New toys. A multi-pipette, resin for the printer. Every now and then some kid in the scene tries to talk to me about star signs and if I'm sober I quickly leave the conversation and if I'm drunk that's my whole evening.

We sleep. Can you sleep better than after playing a show, getting laid, and getting paid by idiots? Maybe it would be a good sleep, but I dream of the young scene kid shivving Parker in the kidney with that flash of a knife, I dream of watching Parker bleed out. I dream of Chef finding me, chasing me. Catching me. *Cooking me*. I wake up when the power goes, again, and I'm drenched in sweat. I check my onyx but all networks are down – the last notification loaded is a message from Zoot on the latest supposedly encrypted messenger.

we need to talk :)

Below that, flashing, a news notification:

Eastern Siberian subsea landslide fires clathrate gun – emergency UN mee—

The bulletin is cut off. Next to me Parker mumbles something and turns on their side. I turn the notifications off for the news app and press my body to Parker and close my eyes. I can feel them breathing. The world is quiet and I am listening, my mind racing. Zoot would only message with encryption if there was a real job. Not scamming new-agers. Somebody wants to play grown-up games, and already my mind is itching to know what it is. Heist? Hack? Fix? Augment? Augment… for that I'd need my toolkit, and my toolkit needs power. With the power off, the volcano lair is silent, the server still

and dead. The pump on the ground floor normally thrums as it tries to keep the waters back, but with it dead I can hear the marshes outside the high windows, the wind through the endless bullrushes.

I lay awake until the hum of the backup generator kicks in and the server whirrs to life and the sample fridge clicks back on. The pump starts up and through the high windows there is nothing but darkness and heat, but even with the noise returned I can hear a pigeon calling in the night. *Good luck, lad*, I think – same thing my father always said when he saw a pigeon. From the bedside table I grab a melatonin patch and tear it in half and stick half to each side of my neck, the microneedles on the patch scratching at my skin. There are little pictures on the foil packet for the patch showing very clearly that whatever else you do, *DON'T TEAR THE PATCH!* and *DON'T APPLY IT TO YOUR NECK!* The warnings are in a friendly and comprehensible font and there are little pictograms accompanying them.

My pineal gland is fucked anyway. I drop the foil to the floor and close my eyes.