

NOW RECRUITING

Can YOU keep a calm head in emergencies?

Do YOU know how to 'manage upwards'
while maintaining a client-centric attitude?

And are YOU ready to make the choices that
will determine the future of human civilisation?

Then there may be an entry-level position
waiting for you at the United Nations'
Department for Continuity (Global).

Send your CV to Susan at
UNContinuityDept@gmail.com

It's been six months since you answered an ad and began your job as a junior officer at the UN Department for Continuity (Global).

Based in a former toiletries supply room on the third floor of UN headquarters, your team's job is to 'prevent the untimely cessation of global activities in any given year', or, in layman's terms, to stop the world ending.

Basically, you are the ones world leaders call when the proverbial shitstorm is about to hit the proverbial windfarm.

But none of that matters right now because it's five p.m. on Christmas Eve and you're heading home for the holidays. Your computer is shutting down and you're just putting your coat on when your boss saunters over with a greasy grin on his face.

'We've just had a Code Red from Pink Camellia.' You recognise the codename for North Korea's Kim Jong-un. 'Something about a missing rocket, I think he said. Would you be a star and pop over to Pyongyang to make sure everything's OK? I'd go myself but I'm on Christmas dinner duties tomorrow. I'm doing a bird within a bird within a bird, have you ever tried it?'

Typical. Quiet all month then this. What do you want to do?

→ **Tell him where he can stuff his three-bird roast. You're not cancelling your Christmas plans for anything. Turn to page 27.**

→ **Spring into action. A nuclear conflagration would spoil the holiday season for everyone. Turn to page 113.**

Abandoning your car, you approach the sinkhole cautiously. Its sides are dauntingly steep, but you want to see what's going on in there first-hand, so you begin to clamber down the rock walls. As carefully as you choose your hand and footholds, the freshly settled earth is loose and you find yourself slip-sliding down the last few metres, landing painfully atop the pile of wrecked SUVs.

It's dark down here. You dust yourself off and switch on your phone's torch.

You're in a perfectly circular tunnel, easily twice your height, stretching off into darkness. The walls are smooth and warm as if freshly dug, and from the darkness ahead, a low whirring sound reaches you. You advance forwards, running the light beam along the walls and ceilings and wishing you had a weapon.

You haven't walked more than ten or fifteen metres before your torchlight picks out what appears to be a gigantic steel drill-bit. Completely filling the circumference of the tunnel ahead, it must be one of Blue Poppy's inventions - maybe some kind of tunnelling machine.

Almost silently, it rotates towards you, causing a glowing red light attached to it to describe circles in the gloom. You gulp.

Somehow you feel as if this colossal machine is watching you.

'Hello?' you say, feeling foolish for trying to communicate with what is probably a bit of inanimate mining equipment.

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A small hatch in the thing opens and a flimsy plastic extendable arm pops out.

It would almost be comical if it were not carrying a pistol that's pointing straight at your head.

→ **Retreat back up the tunnel immediately. You have no idea what you're dealing with. Turn to page 107.**

→ **Whatever this thing is, you don't like it one bit. Fight it mano-a-machine. Turn to page 47.**

At first Kim Jong-un murmurs nonsensical sounds, but like an old radio tuning in he begins recounting his past to the hushed room.

Kim Jong-un remembers being the only kid with a bodyguard at his Swiss school.

He remembers trying to start an epic prank war with his best friend, who didn't dare prank him back.

He remembers the day his dad named him Great Successor but being more excited about watching *Space Jam*.

'Think further forward in time,' you prompt. 'Three years ago, do you remember a code?'

He goes quiet for a while, then resumes.

He remembers his first taste of brie.

He remembers his trousers getting too tight around his middle, and one day finding they'd all been swapped for a larger size.

He remembers the shock of surfing Netflix one night on the nation's only account and stumbling on his dad as a puppet in the movie *Team America*. Pretty funny, he thought.

The hypnotherapist interrupts to tell you that Kim Jong-un should be woken.

'Being under this long could be very dangerous,' she urges.

→ **Snap him out of it. Turn to page 96.**

→ **He still hasn't remembered any kind of code. You have to keep going. Turn to page 9.**

‘I want to save the bees as much as you do,’ you say, advancing with extreme caution towards the demented lab director. Perhaps if you can get close enough, you can seize her handheld detonator. ‘But blowing us both up won’t help the bees. Now why don’t you deactivate the bomb and unlock the door, and we can both go outside and save the bees together?’

‘Don’t come any closer!’ she hisses, brandishing the device in front of her like a protective wand . . . but as you get closer, you realise you have seen one like it before. On your keyring.

Suddenly you laugh.

‘Are you going to shine your pocket torch at me?’ You stride over to the ‘bomb’ and unravel some masking tape and loo rolls. ‘Are you going to blow us up with these toilet rolls?’

She shrugs her shoulders and turns away. ‘You got me. But I’m not sorry. It was the only way to get you to listen.’

It’s a sad scene. She’s used and abused your goodwill and given you quite a fright – but at the same time you can’t help but think how desperate she must be to go to such lengths. If she really believes the world faces an existential threat, can you fault her for going to extremes?

What do you want to do?

→ **Help her save the bees after all. Turn to page 56.**

→ **Get out of here and find a proper apocalypse. Turn to page 116.**

You're being taxied to the runway in an Aeroflot jumbo jet when it all goes to pieces. Perhaps thirty seconds earlier and you'd have made it safely into the sky.

From your seat you cannot see what has caused the plane to stop. Then the brainless horde sways into view and begins scaling the aircraft. You have never seen anything like it. There are hundreds of them, passengers and airport staff alike, swarming up the wheel arches and onto the wings, pulling everything apart with the strength of fanatics. An airport policewoman is popping rivets off the plane with her fingernails.

The pilot tells everyone not to panic but it's far too late for that, because they've pulled off the door, and now steel is being divided into scraps, engines into components, and bodies into bits of flesh, just as elsewhere unions are being divided into members, countries into regions, villages into squabbling families and debating positions into polar extremes, such is the power of this dread meme. It's as though time-lapse maggots are eating the human world, and that's not the sort of thing that goes down well back at the office.

Whoopsie. Perhaps you should have gone to page 105 and headed for the motorway instead.

The End

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You run to the side door in time to see the Falcon 9 spacecraft thundering slowly into the sky. In its windows you can see Elon Musk and all six Uncanny Elons waving goodbye. Evidently they don't fancy their chances against the new virtual overlords of Earth and are going to try life on Mars instead.

This isn't looking good.

→ **Continue to page 69.**

Maybe it's a contrarian impulse but something makes you think you should deal with China first. Your boss gave you the authority to decide and, high off your hat-trick, you choose to go with your gut. You just hope they've got a proper, meaty global disaster for you so you don't have to tell him you made the wrong call.

You sleep for virtually the entire journey, just peeling your eyes open long enough to shuffle through airport security and into the car that's been sent to pick you up from Beijing Airport. When you wake again, the car has stopped, the sun is high in the sky and an energetic Chinese woman in a white coat is shaking you awake and introducing herself as Professor Wu, director of the Ecology Maintenance Institute.

'They finally sent someone,' she says. 'You wouldn't believe how many messages I sent. Follow me and I'll show you the lab.'

With a disconcertingly strong grip on your arm, she steers you to a nondescript plaster building with flowers growing on the roof. You blink groggily and allow yourself to be led.

The feel-good effect of the meme seems to have abandoned you as quickly as it came, making way for a pounding headache.

→ **Follow Prof. Wu inside. Turn to page 100.**

‘Keep remembering,’ you say softly. From his rapid eye movement, you can see Kim Jong-un is drifting deeper into his trance . . . perhaps dangerously deep.

Kim Jong-un remembers the twinkly eyes of his uncle Jang Song-thaek, just after having had the head removed from his corpse.

He remembers bored afternoons bouncing his dad’s Michael Jordan-signed basketball around the Palace of the Sun.

Above all, he says, he remembers what Denmark did – and suddenly he’s leapt out of his chair and is running around like a cannonball, shouting incoherently about Danish fiends and revenge.

The hypnotherapist snaps her fingers and Kim Jong-un comes around immediately.

‘I remember the code,’ he says triumphantly. ‘We can deactivate the rocket. But first,’ he points a sweeping arm at you, *you* are an agent of the Vikings. Seize the invader!’

The bodyguards look at each other and at the generals, as confused as you are, but they aren’t about to disobey. They grab you by the arms and heave you off, struggling.

→ **What the heck is going on? Turn to page 22.**

You need the fastest way out of the city available so you follow the signs for Brussels Airport, twice swerving to avoid the mad shufflers. As you get out of town you see fewer of the meme zombies but you don't slow down until you reach airport drop-offs, where you abandon the car and run into the airport. It's crowded with people, but everyone here seems reassuringly normal.

'How can I help you?' smiles the man at the ticket desk.

Phew, it looks like you're going to be OK.

→ **Continue to page 6.**

Inside the bistro a dozen or so well-coiffed bureaucrats are being waited on with trays of oysters, but despite the opulence of the surroundings the mood is anxious.

‘We’ve set this up as our temporary operations centre,’ your client tells you. ‘Something very strange is happening on our continent.’

You mention your sighting of Angela Merkel and she nods as you take seats in a corner booth.

‘So it’s got Merkel, too? More and more people are losing their minds. Ever since Christmas Day, we’ve had reports of fistfights in national parliaments, sports teams disbanding, old allies turning on each other. It’s as if people are losing all ability to get on with one another.’

‘What could be causing it?’

‘At first it was a total mystery. But we believe we have identified the cause.’

She slides an attaché case onto the table between you.

→ **Attack the case. Whatever this thing is, it needs to be destroyed. Turn to page 16.**

→ **Ask what’s inside. Turn to page 70.**



Trump's reassuring words to the nation are slightly undermined by the fact that he is dressed in a full hazmat suit

It's midday on New Year's Eve by the time you finally arrive at the White House. An ashen-faced page shows you through to a crowded Oval Office and you join the hushed gathering at the rear, though not before grabbing one of the room-temperature Big Macs stacked on a seventeenth-century side table.

The crowd watches solemnly as President Donald Trump addresses a TV camera from behind his great desk.

'Folks, I know you've seen the reports on CNN. They're saying there's a mystery disease called Virus X. They're saying it's killed half the people in Washington already and it's spreading fast. That my whole cabinet is dead. That Donald J. Trump has only survived because of my germophobia. Don't believe it, folks. I hate to use this word, but Virus X is bullcrap. Total bullcrap. They just make this stuff up because their ratings are a disaster. I'm telling you, I'm here in DC and everything is completely normal.'

The president's reassuring words are slightly undermined by the fact that he is dressed in full hazmat, as are several of the officials in the crowd, while others wear facemasks. You're about to ask the man next to you if there are any spares lying around, when you notice he is sobbing softly into his shirt collar.

→ **Quietly ask the man if he's OK. Turn to page 122.**

→ **Keep listening to Trump. Turn to page 33.**

‘Are you calling Elon Musk?’ Prof. Wu asks apprehensively.

‘If anyone can help, it’s him.’

‘We can’t rely on him to solve every problem!’

This is a bit rich after you’ve agreed to help her. ‘I’ve figured out the solution already – robot bees – we just need my good friend Elon to start a company to build them.’

Your call goes to answerphone, so you hang up and try dialling again.

‘I also think the idea of building robot bees is highly arrogant,’ Prof. Wu continues. ‘The bee has been precision-honed to pollinate over millions of years of evolution.’

‘Evolution didn’t do that great a job, though, or they wouldn’t all be dying. Also robot bees could be way better. They could turn into little submarines so they don’t die when they fall into a glass of lemonade. And have tasers instead of stings.’

The call goes to answerphone again. It seems Elon Musk’s gratitude for helping to stop his Really Freakishly Large Drill doesn’t extend to answering your calls.

What do you want to try instead?

→ **Take a look at the bees in the lab. Turn to page 52.**

→ **Try to get hold of President Xi. Turn to page 150.**

A couple of flights and a long layover later, you're approaching the source of Blue Poppy's distress call: a huge desert ranch in Nevada. Your company expense account will only stretch to a hire car in the Super Economy category, and the crappy suspension makes for a bone-shaking ride up the unpaved approach road.

As you get near you see an aircraft hangar-style structure with SUVs parked outside with various company logos: SpaceX, Tesla, The Boring Company, OpenAI. Then there is a KAAWUMPH and all the vehicles are gone, replaced by a billowing cloud of sand.

Whoa! A sinkhole the size of a tennis court has swallowed them up.

As a subterranean thrum passes under you, you stop the car and jump out, wondering what under the earth you are letting yourself in for.

→ **Run to the hangar-like building. Turn to page 38.**

→ **Climb into the sinkhole. Turn to page 2.**