

'MONKEYS WITH GUNS'

'Hurry up with that trolley Junior, these ruins won't pillage themselves.'

I love him to bits but I swear he's distracted by every shiny object we pass. I tell him we are not magpies; our nest will be furnished with more practical implements. Say what you like about Lidl, but their trolleys were built to last. Impervious to rust, you'd have to take a 'jaws of life' to them to buckle the handle and their wheels could roll in molten rock: the armoured tank of push-powered receptacles.

'How much longer Daddy?'

'How much longer what?'

'I'm cold and hungry.'

'Does it look like we have any food yet? If you're hungry you need to find something Daddy can slaughter, or better yet, scavenge. Just make sure the parasites haven't got to it yet.'

Junior looks like he understands and scampers away, leaving me with the trolley. I'd like a herbivore today, but supply and demand dictates we will be dining on a bottom-feeder again. There were whispers of rampant woodland not more than a few miles from here, but these whispers came from a raving cannibal I had to put down with my last crossbow bolt. A clustered honking precedes a skein of geese overhead. The sound used to inspire derision and firearms from me way back when, but now I find this ludicrous harbinger of flighted life curiously consoling, and I am far from a maudlin character. The rubble is shallow and well-dispersed here, so no prospect of a well-preserved fresh corpse crushed by a big stone, and no evidence of other trinkets. My nose never lies though. These regions always bear some kind of fruit.

'Daddy! Come quick! I've found something!'

Junior has done me proud. The small enclave of an ex-military base medical centre he has stumbled into is still remarkably well-preserved inside. Formerly sterile white is now residence to two generations of untreated fungus and parasitical microbes, but the room seems to be uniquely cockroach and arachnid-free. Better than this, the medicine cabinets appear to be intact and sealed, bar the one which has done for our friend, prostrate on the floor before me, crushed and lacerated by myriad ribbons of glass. The trails of black crimson, rich and gleaming like inspissated wine, indicate expiration occurred within the last 24 hours. A moment's contemplation leads me to deduce that the victim had been attempting to extricate the contents. The large scorch mark beneath it suggests that he had attempted to set a fire to burn it open, before leaping at it and having the four shelves of vials, jars, syringes, dishes and boxes crash down on his pitiful furry carcass. Stupid fucking apes.

It is indeed a red letter day: potentially life-saving tranquqs, antibiotics and restoratives at our fingertips, and a fresh carcass for tonight's meal. The knapsack and trolley are laden with provisions as we head back along the bereft tar highway, scattered with detritus of warfare and decay; the dying sun casting jagged apparitions from the crumbled piques of concrete wreckage. Me and Junior dance and sing for the entire journey home; our spirits and faith restored and rejuvenated. It reminds me of the songs and poems my father would recite to me to keep our spirits up in the midst of the tyranny. Junior skips along clutching his faithful little plastic soldier, alleviating my burden by not riding in the trolley. He asks me if we can please go fishing as a reward. I tell him perhaps, but he must remember it takes a good few hours to make dynamite, and we only have one cooking pot.

Desdemona is delighted to see us bearing such bounty on our return. She throws her arms around us, and I have her legs scissored about my waist before I remember Junior. We placate our simmering passion momentarily with a penetrating collaboration of tongues.

'Okay my lad, today I'm going to show you how to skin your catch.'

'Don't you think he's a bit young darling?'

'Nonsense, my pa had me skinning babies at that age.'

She thumps me in the arm playfully. She thinks I'm joking.

'Cool! Come on dad!'

He's tugging at my wounded arm, the little scamp. I turn to Mona.

'Besides, it's *somebody's* birthday tomorrow!'

Before heaving Junior over my shoulder; him screaming with laughter as we run to the pantry together.

The first time I flayed an animal was a rat during the Era of Fetid Refuge. My father grew up in this time, when his descendants had either lived to witness the Fall or been slaughtered by the loathsome apes. He knew nothing different from a few snatched minutes of sunlight a day, sometimes none, as the people would survive by hiding beneath the ground, in sewers, caves or bunkers. I grew up touring the sewers. Although nauseating, these subterranean drains provided a plentiful supply of vermin to snare and prepare for meals. The need for sustenance outweighed even personal health, and many grew sick and died from constant exposure to the effluent vapours, or perhaps a dearth of sunlight. But my father, he was eternally vigilant to both my well-being and survival skills. When I was 7, he showed me the simplest way to skin a rat. The paring blade was always kept exceptionally sharp, and we would heat it over a flame before making the first incision around the throat and stripping back towards the hindquarters. Always concentrate efforts on the areas with most fibres; around the joints and limbs.

Junior takes to his task superbly, relishing the morbid duty perhaps a little *too* much. We sing silly songs about submarines and sea monsters as we scrub the sticky layer of blood from our hands and arms, and the monkey meat is handed over to our resident chef. The men of the house go out back for some crossbow practice. The lack of bolts cannot deter us, for we are resourceful creatures. A few spare twigs of kindling are whittled down and fashioned into arrows, which may fly pretty poorly, but only sharpen our compensatory targeting. It is a regular tin-can holocaust.

The morrow comes robed in vulgar attire: a raucous din has us assuming battle stations, yet from the garrison I spy a delirious crowd of *humans* stampeding through the thoroughfare! I call out but cannot halt the throng, clearly intoxicated from clean air, and carrying a grotesque life-size and heavily defaced sculpture of a smoking chimp. From the coarse chanting and singing I can gather that these mettlesome paladins have word of another great victory for the uprising. They are headed to the coast, where hordes of the filthy apes' desecrated corpses will be thrown ceremoniously into the ocean. It goes without saying that the bodies are always decapitated beforehand. The new wave of sanguinary human warriors take great pride in collecting the skulls of their enemy; sometimes for trophies, sometimes for fearsome decoration, or sometimes just for smoking and drinking beer out of.

After comforting the family, Junior pipes up with the inevitable:

'Dad, where's my birthday present?'

I present him with a new pair of moccasins I have spent the best part of six months learning how to make from a good friend I met on an excavation project. Junior looks distinctly underwhelmed. I can imagine he was hoping for an automatic weapon. After explaining to the little tyke why sturdy shoes are so important, and assuring him that we are now living in the kind of relatively peaceful days I hope mean that he never has to carry an automatic weapon, I get the feeling that he is far from convinced of my motives; perhaps suspecting that I am offering lame excuses for simply not being able to source his ideal present. Which would be true. But completely beside the point.

We still live in troubled times; fighting to turn the winter of our despair into the spring of our children's hope. I wish I could say with any certainty that we will win this war of attrition, but I am not an oracle. Nor a prescient, soothsayer, sage, clairvoyant, prognosticator, seer, sibyl or prophet. But what I am is a warrior. I did not wish or aspire to be so; circumstance merely thrust it upon me. As you can tell, I trust neither in fate nor destiny. Chaos theory is about the closest I get to a fundamental belief system. People and animals seize opportunities, often to the detriment of the other species. You will not hear the conquered proclaim their misery being written in the stars.

'So what do you want to do for your special day then son? Shooting practice? Swimming? Or do you have your heart set on fishing?'

Suddenly, Junior looks decidedly less boisterous and more thoughtful, as if he were ruminating on the moral validity of my suggested pursuits. He looks up at me with those dinner-plate eyes, waving his little plastic soldier at me.

'Daddy...'

'Yes, oh sprightly and cherubic fruit of my loins?'

'What happened to make it like this?'

For the first time in a long time, I feel like I did during my early years perambulating the sewer networks: devoid of words.

'What do you mean Ju?'

This is more awkward than the time we had to convince Frank that he lost his foot in battle rather than it being chewed off by rats while he was sleeping.

'I mean...why do only a few TVs work? Why have buildings fallen down everywhere? Why can't we see a lot of people?'

I look at Mona, who implores me with those claw-hammer eyes. *Goddamit Frank it was a festering wound, of course it was gonna attract the vermin, what do you want us to say?*

'Maybe you're old enough to know the truth my boy. Context is important for a young man to understand his life, and only through understanding can we hope to better ourselves.'

Junior looks at me like I just let one go.

'What I mean is, today I'll tell you a story, all about how we got here. How does that sound?'

Now he smiles, leaps up and down and drools a little as he gushes:

'Yay! I love love love stories! Are there lots of blood and guts?'

'Oooh yes my lad. I think you've reached the stage where you can hear it.'

Mona shakes her head disapprovingly.

'The boy's growing up.'

I retort, before a perfunctory smirk, and we leave, bound for the public vault cyclopedia.

'To the book depository!'

PVC is one of the few buildings the apes did not see fit to level on their murderous conquest; in fact it formed the cornerstone, and later base of operations, for their own sordid pillaging of our heritage and accomplishments. Those filthy monkeys really had a penchant for PVC.

Although the windows were long ago put through, and the minor rubble from the weaker wall has kicked dust and debris onto many shelves, this is still an ideal place to sit down and read, or recount, a good tale. The apes have even left the cushioned lining from one of the chairs intact, so I sling it into a cozy corner and swing Junior onto my lap; he is a little large, but it is essential for the atmosphere of this rite of passage.

'Are you sitting comfortably?'

'No!'

'Tough. Now scooch and be quiet while I regale you with accounts of the epic saga of our annihilation and struggle for salvation.'

Just before Junior was born, on a sweep and clear with my old renegade patrol at the old police station, I discovered new books here that were not written by humans, bound in what appeared to be human skin and apparently created by a thousand monkeys at a thousand typewriters. I knew that they would either be destroyed or confiscated for study by people who would most likely be killed in the carnage. By keeping them on my person, my odour was rank, yet I was able to learn incredible truths as to the ape development, for it chronicled the rise and fall of the ape empire, which aided my understanding of the sequence of events immediately following the human race's overthrow, and also my strategies for the resistance. I am proud to say that this knowledge was, in the finest tradition of our people, used against the very beings that provided it, and facilitated the positive future we may now look forward to.

'Hurry up Dad!'

'Okay okay you impatient little bugger. Now, this epic saga contains blood, guts and many adult situations, so most importantly I want you to promise not to tell your mother.'

I retrieve one of the weathered tomes from my knapsack and open somewhere in the middle. I baritone my voice to antiquated storykeeper timbre, clear my throat and begin, leaving a trail of captivation in my midst.

'Many years ago, before you, me, or even my Dad were born, people lived quite like the way we do. Only they had a lot more gadgets. You know the kind of big flat window cases we see lying on piles of other boxes and cables and stuff? All of those things were gadgets that fulfilled a purpose. And they had walls and doors that could shut out all of the elements at once, almost like being in a cozy little cage. Well, some had big cages, some had little ones, it depended who you were.'

'How did they get the gadgets to work then?'

'Well, you see...now we're going off track. It doesn't matter really, just remember that the rubbish and bonfire piles everywhere, they were all things that did things for people: symbols of their achievements.'

'Ohhhh.'

'Okay, so from my father's accounts of his father's accounts, and now your father to you, here's how everything changed. Monkeys used to be helpless animals like all of the other ones you know and eat. The humans even kept them locked up in cages for other humans to point at or study! Now the humans from our island had invented so many gadgets and weapons and labour-saving devices that all of their major problems became almost obsolete. Pestilence; famine; loneliness; homelessness; all of these had been eradicated. But the one problem that the humans could never find a solution to was fighting amongst each other.

Now our island was involved in many battles with other islands and territories across the great ocean, in which our people would have to leave the island to go into war in these foreign lands and fight the people of these lands. Our people decided that human lives were too precious to spend in these battles. When the military decided to use genetically engineered apes to take over front-line duties, it all descended into chaos.'

'Daddy, what's genetic engineering?'

'Ummm, just imagine it as science with magic. See your little thumbs here? See how they are turned the opposite way to your four fingers? That's what allows us to grip things: pens, tools, and weapons. Now back in these days, the apes only had their fingers facing the same way, so they could never hope to do any of these intricate things. They were just made for swinging on tree branches.'

Junior is laughing. I'm sensing some skepticism here, but it's understandable.

'Well anyway, those thumbs were put on the chimps by scientists, in order that they could hold and fire assault weapons. Our scientists wanted the chimpanzees to kill their foreign enemies, because they were known to be stronger and more vicious than humans, while nobody would care if apes were killed in battle. So these scientists created a super-breed of mutant apes with dextrous hands to slaughter, and began training them in their own military before deployment. Only, things went horribly, horribly wrong.'

'So what happened?'

I take a deep breath and am in the zone.

'After killing his commanding officer, a renegade chimp went, in Lehmann's terms: 'apeshit', mowing down regiments and members of the general public indiscriminately. After freeing all chimpanzees from their captors, the nefarious tribe of bloodthirsty mutant primates raided the barracks to tool up, before unleashing their firepower on all who failed to hail to the chimp.

Recruiting at their former place of captivity, tigers became their 'attack dogs', snakes became whips and hippos became waste disposal systems, whilst the newly-appointed Emperor ape, he who had fired first against us, proclaimed that only through the consumption of the human mind could the new leaders truly evolve and strengthen their new dominant position at the top of the food chain, provoking a wave of brain-eatings not seen since the 'genetic accidents' of a decade and a half earlier.

The indiscriminate slaughter only began to slow when the remaining humans were circumstantially divided into groups of warriors and cowards. The cowards were enslaved by the apes, doomed to be mocked and pelted in human zoos, or utilised for sexual degradation and experiments; while the warriors made up the futile resistance: wild renegades feeding on sewer creatures and roadkill, making sporadic attempts to break the ape stranglehold. We call this traumatic period 'The Fall', and it went on for some years before the apes truly straddled their dominion.

After the initial rabid desecration of all remnants of human activity and knowledge, the Emperor had a brainwave. Apes are great imitators, and they proved to be just as good at understanding human symbols. Within a few years, they had begun to read and write their own texts, while each brain consumed swelled their reasoning capabilities still further. Devouring as many as three brains a day, the ape intelligentsia launched a campaign of absorbing all written words in our public information vaults, unlocking the secrets to building their own glorious new civilization.

After the monkeys made Birmingham their stronghold and proclaimed it the new Capital of Ape Britain, they spread far and wide; each procreation maddening the already modified gene sequence still further. Some of the more adventurous soldiers, intoxicated on the aphrodisia of human brain, began to crossbreed with anything they could fit their six members into, from goats to turtles to baby elephants, leading to the most catastrophic sins against nature since the last great nuclear fallout created a race of eyeless eunuchs.

Legend has it that one wretched day, when the sky was lacerated by lightning strikes and the clouds were sky scorches in blackest bile, a grotesque lizard died on its terrible birth squeeze, leaving its offspring, some mangled fusion of monkey and crocodile, to cannibalize her and crawl into the putrescence of a malignant swamp, where it fed and grew for some months, before returning to the bleak world it had been spawned into to satisfy the only yearning in its dead eyes.

After a nightmarish fight to the death against the strongest of the resistance, this new crocodile-headed General of the Ape Army assumed power, and the warped chimaera outlined a new manifesto for the new World, with the emphasis very much on torture and eternal chaos. Strangely, this didn't sit too well with the Emperor, who had eaten enough brains to know that when chaos abounds, anarchy soon follows, and anarchy means leaders are ripe for the gutting. Assigning his personal guards to recruit rebel factions, the Emperor issued a death warrant on the head of Homo-Crocodilicus.

The Emperor hadn't counted on Homo-Crocodilicus gathering and moulding an impressive legion of soldiers in his own image; their loyalty and ethics as perverse as their sexual appetites. These walking terrors, spliced with disparate genetic codes and infected with second generation radiation poisoning, were as feral as it was possible for twisted, malignant abominations to be. They would often eat their own limbs, construct implausible weapons from anything sharp or heavy, and kill whatever you pointed them at. This was the schism which defined the early years of the ape empire.

The resulting twenty year civil war, which ironically was anything but civil, wiped out two-thirds of the entire ape populace; a Pyrrhic victory and a half it would seem. Some of this collateral damage was due to the futile efforts of a few foolhardy human survivors who, desperate for sunlight and provisions, had rampaged to the surface and fought valiantly before being cut down by the savage primates.

The brave new ape empire had been devastated, and the Emperor's rancor was unquenchable. When Homo-Crocodilicus was brought to him, the Emperor asked him if he thought his vision had been worth the traumatic decades of carnage and suffering. The beast responded by snapping off the Emperor's left arm in one bite.

The Emperor responded with uncharacteristic self-control, preferring to prognosticate at his leisure how best to deal with the rogue, but could not decide whether to smash all Homo-Crocodilicus' limbs on a giant stone wheel, boil him inside an iron bull statue, or have him torn apart by horses. So it was that he threw Homo-Crocodilicus in a deep and dank pit underneath his temple, periodically tossing him the remains of his fallen soldiers to sustain him until his diabolical fate was determined.

With the previously all-conquering ape army reduced to less than a million, the Emperor's brave new world lay

in ruins. This was going to call for some serious strategizing, which the Emperor tended to do on his favourite tyre swing. He called together a designated Imperial Council to discuss how best to proceed. A lot of shit was thrown at the walls, but not a lot stuck.

The repellent monsters now stalking the island as a result of the sins of the previous generations of mutant apes were wreaking seven brands of Hell across the Divided Kingdom. Some of these cross-breeds had inadvertently given birth to a new level of super-diseases, which were now rife among the ape empire. The stricken monkeys were on their knees, and looked to their beleaguered Emperor for some leadership. While his Kingdom was being laid waste to, the Emperor had his mind on other pressing matters besides his 50-a-day smoking habit: specifically his untimely avulsion. A meeting of the finest minds among the primates suggested a replacement limb constructed from composite metals, and within a few months, the Emperor was fitted with a new bionic arm.

In place of his previous mutant hand, the arm was fitted with a grasping claw and retractable blade for close combat self-defense. While his Rome burned, the Emperor fiddled...with his new attachment.

As the maelstrom unfolded above, something far more sinister was rumbling below. While 'gorilla warfare' was raging between all races, Homo-Crocodilicus was busy tunneling his way out of his lightless prison via the labyrinthine sewer networks. Possessing jaws capable of chomping through steel, Homo-Crocodilicus made short work of clawing through the combination of soil and sewage ducts, while his ancestors' evolutionary gifts meant swimming through tight confines came as second nature to him. Within a month, Homo-Crocodilicus had gone from being a captive in a dank pit to once again roaming the wastelands of the fallen ape empire...

One traumatic morning in August it happened. The Emperor had grown suspicious as to the height of the dead soldiers piling up in the pit. That; and the smell was far more fetid than usual, even accounting for all the faeces on the walls. So the pit was flushed, and Homo-Crocodilicus' escape was confirmed. This had become an intolerable situation for the Emperor. When he had taken the throne it had all seemed like the most wondrous role; limitless power, inter-species orgies, and all the brains he could swallow. It seemed like only yesterday that he was snorting ground human bones off of the most beautiful bonobos in the kingdom. Now his subjects were struggling for survival in the face of renegades from Homo-Crocodilicus' nihilist army, new and devastating diseases, and an unforgiving desert of desolation where human brains were few and far between.

Rather than tackle the madness and restore order to his empire, the Emperor began to retreat into himself. His closest advisors would despair when all he would talk about was tooling up his bionic arm. He had also, worryingly, started bathing regularly and keeping urine and stool samples in jars in his personal quarters. Nobody knew what to make of it. Some say he was on a voyage of self-discovery which would ultimately lead to the apes' salvation, others that the human mind had corrupted him irreparably. When one morning he addressed his nation having shaved off all of his fur the transformation was complete: he had become everything that he had hated and destroyed. The crowd laid siege to his temple, and in the ensuing bloodbath the Emperor had an epiphany.

Despite retaining his castle by the thinnest of margins, the Emperor was in confident mood: he broadcast a message of unity to the remaining ape population that the apes were always destined to inherit the earth; they had simply made some rather horrendous errors along the way. These errors would need to be immediately eradicated by virtue of a new policy he termed 'Species Cleansing'. The notion was that the world needed to return to a purer breed of ape. These crossbreeds were simply not in the best interests of the progress of civilised primate dominance. Neither for that matter were disabled, senile or diseased monkeys. So it was that the Emperor sent his army out to execute any creatures not falling in line with the new 'pure breeding' philosophy. Spurious propaganda was spread by virtue of gorillas with automatic weapons, and the Emperor was dumbfounded when there were objections from the persecuted.

Of course the second part of this manifesto was that the remaining 'chosen' apes would procreate like crazy and repopulate the kingdom. This proposal seemed doomed, as an unfortunate side-effect of radiation poisoning meant that monkeys tended to bludgeon their offspring to death with bricks and eat them.

While this despicable mandate was carried out, the Emperor began to mull over his other problems. All this mindless fornication made him pine for that which he most desired: an heir to his throne. Radiation poisoning and senescence had left him impotent and sterile, and what good was obscene power if you had no soul to follow your legacy? Myriad discussions were held with his closest advisors and philosophers on the matter, though these discussions were often less than constructive. The maverick philosophers of the Kingdom believed that the Emperor merely had to order a bride to fall pregnant and his will would be done, though the Emperor began to suspect that this was some kind of calculated ruse to sleep with his wife. Meanwhile, a curious quango of scientists and explorers were formed to investigate potential remedies for the Emperor's 'deficiencies', while the unseen threat of Homo-Crocodilicus hung in the air like a harbinger of Armageddon. The Emperor would awake seeing those dead eyes floating just above the surface of his private cesspool, ready to drag him to Hell...

The Emperor's fiendish genocide was carried out with slavish zeal by his army, provoking outrage amongst his previous devotees. The irony of wishing for a 'pure' breed of ape based on a population genetically modified by humans was lost on the Emperor. An uprising was brewing, but, in a majestic stroke of luck for the ignorant Emperor, a common enemy united the Empire and quelled the mutiny. For on the first night winter first declared its intentions, a familiar malevolence emerged on the storm.

Homo-Crocodilicus rode into town on the phalanx of a mutant legion like the horsemen of the apocalypse, bloodthirsty and armed to the teeth. The Emperor was, to widespread disbelief, definitive in his leadership. At the first knell of Homo-Crocodilicus' second coming, his Lordship ordered the construction of a multitude of warfare juggernauts, which he lovingly christened 'Hominidean death bringers'.

Consisting of abatis, flame-throwers, spears, rotating blades and mounted on a moving trebuchet, the battle tanks made mincemeat of the fiercest of Homo-Crocodilicus' warped mercenaries. The drooling beasts retreated into hastily constructed citadels, but the crafty apes penetrated these fortresses with their trebuchets; catapulting the rotting cadavers of their fallen over the walls in order to drive the army out. It soon became apparent that this was a redundant tactic, as it simply provided the horrors with sustenance. As an alternative tactic, the apes ingeniously decided to set their own soldiers on fire and slingshot them over the palisades and inside the battlements. The burning apes would then proceed to run around the building, setting alight to everyone and everything they could cling to. These 'suicide apes' were given heroes funerals, though the military quickly discovered a less barbaric method of incursive devastation was simply to hollow out one of the fallen and load their bodies with explosives, before firing them over and in.

But amid all of the decapitations, dismemberments and disembowelings, something else was happening: the apes had rediscovered their pride. A feast of their fallen foes ensued, yet the carcass of Homo-Crocodilicus was conspicuous by its absence.

The Emperor rode on the crest of this new wave of optimism, and published a new doctrine ordering the denizenry once more to copulate and procreate to repopulate, without any of the previous well-intentioned slaughter. The apes had survived the greatest threat to their existence and emerged stronger and wiser. A new dawn had arrived...

Within 5 years the island was awash with a new generation of apes; fresh attitude and vigour for domination connate. New discoveries, artistic endeavours and theories were cooked up; a primate renaissance rang loud and proud. The Earth was proclaimed to be square like a fishtank, while the fire in the sky was said to bounce across the world, before striking the outer perimeter and shooting back across. When it passed over Ape Britain, which was of course the centre of the world, it was day; or 'eeek' as the apes termed it, and when out of range it made it cold and dark, which was night; or 'aaak'. Whether the dumb beasts had not discovered books on the solar system or simply failed to understand them is anybody's guess.

Some apes began to imitate the Emperor and construct their own lavish shelters, an amusingly literal case of monkey see monkey do. A new civilisation was beginning to take shape, and the Emperor was orchestrating this gleefully.

But of course, development means destruction, and many apes protested the wiping out of woodland, perhaps through an unconscious empathy for their former homes. Of course, being apes, these protests proved far from civil. But when the eye-gouging and shit-throwing was all spent, the Emperor was still standing, and the mutineers were promptly executed, proving once more that old habits die hard, and old enemies die easy.

Another revolution quelled, the Emperor was once again in deep ponderance as to how he should father an heir. The greatest scientists in the Kingdom were ordered away to track down plants which may hold properties of fertility and aphrodisia. Over a year passed, and the scientists returned despondent and bereft. After initially abandoning reason and executing the first few, the Emperor was finally struck by the notion that perhaps the threat of violence and death did not solve all problems. The solution came to him in a dream that night: the apes would have to explore beyond the plains of their own dominion.

So it was that the Emperor approved construction of a fleet of warships, based on pictures some sweep and clear troops had found in books on the history of the British Isles. A new world lay undiscovered, ripe for the picking...

The first wave of warships were constructed of a composite of clay and mud, and proved a disaster. The second wave, built using tight weaves of straw, showed more promise, but again proved unfit for purpose, leading to a ludicrous number of drownings.

Apoplexy was muffled by apology and defensive rhetoric, so much consternation and fanfare greeted the launch of the third fleet. Unfortunately the stone ships proceeded to sink like....a big fat monkey. The Emperor and his counsel were dumbstruck. After proclaiming a period of national mourning, the Emperor ordered a covert investigation project as to suitable construction materials.

The investigation team's rigorous experiments seemed to involve one monkey hurling random objects into the sea in shifts. Tin cans, monkey cadavers, bananas and sticks passed the test, but following a meeting of minds, it was decided that it wasn't logistically sound to construct the hulls of large ships from bananas or tin

cans. Despite an horrific attempt at a dead monkey vessel, the monkeys soon learned that large quantities of suitable wood could be harnessed from their former homes. More books were found on the subject of ship-building, and within a year the monkeys had their first dreadnaught equipped for its maiden voyage. Their brief: identify non-ape inhabitants and exterminate without mercy; colonise these new terrains. A scientist would be among the crew, in order to derive any source of communication; some method of alerting his brethren to the situation. The Emperor assumed this would consist of some kind of very large fire.

Back at base camp, the Emperor continued the search for a fertility remedy, aware that his time was running out. Mindful of his legacy, the Emperor began to contemplate the possibility of raising an heir not of his own making; a surrogate son to succeed him. Months passed with no word from the explorers, and the Emperor selected his heir in their absence. Rigorous selection criteria included abilities like mass copulation, speed of banana consumption, and hand-to-foot combat skills. The Emperor proudly began to impart his knowledge upon his protégé: the New Prince of Ape Britain: Falco.

Prince Falco proved highly adept at the art of warfare, and even more so as a military strategist. The Emperor was in rapture at the innovations that his adopted son was bringing to the conquest council. After discussing endless new weaponry developments, the Prince made his Napoleonic thrust and declared that the apes could only hope to continue their glorious reign by expanding their Empire and mastering the seas. With no word from the intrepid pioneers, and a strong communal suspicion that the first ship had sunk, a new fleet was commissioned to be built under the tutelage of Falco.

The improved fleet of dreadnaughts were based on designs from renowned Nordic seafarers, and under the supervision of the Prince, construction was completed within a year.

Over this period the Prince began to develop an interest in painting with his own excrement, inspiring many devotees, while his influence also spread as far as the fields of engineering, music, botany, anatomy, invention and architecture.

The houses of apes had begun to branch out into more experimental themes. At the lower end of the scale: most houses had roofs and more than two walls, whilst at the top end, the shelters came to resemble buildings akin to a 1920s German Expressionist film. Ummm...I'll explain that later.

Curiously, apes residing north of the Capital began to exhibit nuances at odds with their southern compatriots. Whilst Northern Monkeys were known to be overly protective of their bananas and their neighbours, Southern Apes would flaunt their extra bananas, sometimes going as far as throwing them at Northerners, as well as defecating on their neighbour's houses whenever feasible.

It was indeed a time of great prosperity and intellectual nourishment in the short period since the Prince had ascended to the Emperor's heir, although perhaps his most defining moment was a simple fecal portrait of a kind of plain female ape not quite smiling, which he succinctly titled: 'The Monkey Leeza'.

To celebrate the Prince's great strides in all disciplines, the Emperor declared a festival in his honour, on the night of the dreadnaughts' maiden voyage in search of new territories.

Every monkey throughout Ape Britain was invited to lose themselves in an orgy of crapulence and copulation. A titanic fire was set, around which the revellers danced and sang with their mouths and bellies satiated. The Prince was drunk on euphoria, the Emperor was drunk on power and the General was drunk on petrol.

It was in this delirious state that no soul noticed a loathsome and long forgotten adversary stalking in the dancing shadows; his murder moving swift as a dervish on the breath of the night.

At first, the throng must have assumed that the hundreds of fallen had simply blacked out from exhaustion and intoxication, though when heads rolled away from torsoes and blood made the earth a fetid swamp, it was clear that all was not well. But amidst the crackle and mad incandescence of the flames, disorientation ruled. Legions of good apes fell before the Emperor's suspicions were acted upon.

"HOMO-CROCODILICUS LIVES!" Yelled the Emperor, in some sort of maniacal expression of desperation.

Grasping a sword manically, the Emperor dived into the mass of bodies to pursue the unseen assailant. More apes fell, until the Emperor could finally track the movements of the beast. The great fire silhouetted the demon as he reared up against a new foe: the Prince of this new Kingdom.

Battle commenced; the Prince defending himself with a sword cut from the finest steel in the Kingdom. Homo-Crocodilicus wielded a double-edged sword; with one side a single cleaving blade, the other serrated teeth; in his other arm holding a bloody great club with nails in it.

The Emperor cried out to his remaining subjects to cut down his ever-grinning tormentor, but these cries fell on dead ears. Falco fought valiantly and with great skill, but, as ever, Homo-Crocodilicus proved relentless and unflinching. The Emperor ran to his son's aid, but being such an old monkey he could barely limp. Before he was even close, Homo-Crocodilicus dealt the Prince a terrible wound, and by the time the Emperor had reached the two, the death blow had been struck. The Prince fell as if in slow motion; the Emperor moved as if in slow motion. Unable to contain his anguish, he cradled his dead son's head in his arms. Homo-Crocodilicus had returned, and this time taken the most precious thing away from the Emperor.

Of course, in true Homo-Crocodilicus style, this was not enough, and having pushed the grieving Emperor down the hill, he proceeded to defile the Prince's corpse and eat his genitals.

By the time the ageing Emperor had climbed back, the mutilated remains were a sacrilege to Falco's former glory. Contemplating his life's work decimated and surveying the carnage all around him, the Emperor only had one purpose to fulfill before his demise. He would kill Homo-Crocodilicus or die trying.

For forty days and forty nights the Emperor could not be summoned; any attempts to infiltrate his castle were punished with extreme severity, though his subjects could often hear the most terrible wailing from behind the impenetrable walls. As luck would have it, there were no more attacks on the bewildered and bedraggled city in this time; Homo-Crocodilicus apparently turning his warped interest to other atrocities. With the dearth of leadership and short attention span, the monkeys began to loot and tear down the dung statues of the Emperor, while the gorillas began to hunt random apes for sport. The city became a battleground; a war of all against all.

Finally, on the 41st day, sitting under his favourite tyre swing, the Emperor found enlightenment. The castle gates were flung open. The Emperor proclaimed the country to be in a period of mourning, and declared three Imperial decrees. The first was that the country would be re-named Falconia, in honour of his adopted son. The second decree stated that any ape guilty of crimes against the state or ape would be boiled in the blood of their enemies. The third and final decree stated that each ape owed it to themselves, their family and the Government which cared for them to bring the Emperor the head of Homo-Crocodilicus, and these heroes would be richly rewarded.

Advised against a knee-jerk bloodbath, the Emperor instead imprisoned miscreants and looters, sentencing them to the labour of constructing a series of statues and paintings of the fallen Prince, which had been made possible by the Prince's teachings. The kingdom appeared purposeful once again. Other citizens were commissioned to build a tranquility garden, in accordance with Falco's advocacy of serenity and inner peace in the pursuit of meaningful and potent existence, while the Emperor supervised the construction of Primate Universities, in order to pass down knowledge of the apes' superiority and overthrow of their tyrannical former colonial masters. Every fledgling ape was of course instilled with a passionate hatred for Homo-Crocodilicus.

These years of consolidation and education saw a more refined ape population, who generally held their irrational spats of destruction and killing in check. Rampant interspecies breeding had been outlawed under penalty of death, and with purposeful pursuits assigned to all able bodies, misdemeanour was almost entirely eradicated. A golden age of peace and enlightenment seemed to have sprung forth when the Emperor announced a new system of beliefs which all apes were required to devote themselves to: that the ape they called Falco was in fact the son of the Creator; the all-powerful deity who had created the apes and planted the seeds of conquest within them with His dextrous forearms; as well as the Emperor's heir. So many years had passed since the ascension that the Emperor's outrageous claims that the Creator had in fact started life with the current breed of apes, and that humans were vermin who had always longed to usurp their natural dominance over all of nature, was swallowed. Falco was the gifted son of the Creator; who cared so much that he died for the sins of a few horny apes; and the Emperor was a conduit for His divine message. Rumours spread that Falco had in fact performed impossible miracles during his divine stint on Earth: riding bicycles with one wheel, abstaining from rampant procreation, and making bananas from turds. After his tragic death at the hands of the 'Devil', Falco ascended to the highest tree in the jungle to watch over his faithful subjects, leaving the Emperor as his Earthly representative.

While his minions spread this new doctrine so effectively, the Emperor, weary and ravaged with old-age; if you can imagine two milky little pebble eyes sunken in little potato sacks of fur and a shabby white muzzle; plotted his two obsessions with his closest advisors. It had been six months since Falco's death; since the fleet of exploration vessels had set sail, and the Emperor knew his time was running out. On the agenda was the hunting down of his great nemesis, and his own impending death. No longer did the Emperor propose a fertility drug or search for an heir. Now he ordered the finest scientists in Falconia to scour the island for an antidote to ageing; a method of immortality. At the same time, the ape army was put through the most gruelling of intensive training to prepare for the inevitable return of the dreaded one. Many died from wounds and fatigue before an elite crack team were assembled and posted at various points around the city perimeter.

While the Emperor oversaw the city's daily thanksgiving worship to the Great Prophet Falco, he seemed oblivious to a schism which had opened in the outskirts of the Capital. A great deal of apes outside the immediate jurisdiction of the Imperial Guard believed that Falconism was a highly specious faith. These renegade monkeys reasoned that Falco was no more than a visionary ape with little or no 'divine qualities', and that a great ape named Sulu Muzlar had heard the voice of the Creator, and he had derided all previous belief systems as being misguided gibberish. Apes were meant to devote themselves to disciplined and austere existences. At least, the female apes were.

Other elements of the cities' populace forged complex and beguiling belief systems around the concept of reincarnation. Depending on the virtue of one's existence, an ape could hope to spend their next life as the next Emperor, a bird of prey dominating the sky above, or Heaven forbid: a 'filthy human'.

Meanwhile, in the rural provinces of Ape Britain, which could no longer be kept in check by the Emperor, the monkeys followed the example of the nomadic and enigmatic gorilla Kong Zoo, who preached a life of peace,

learning and cooperation between all apes. These devotees of Master Kong nourished their minds and prospered, collectively discovering and harnessing the wonders of agriculture. Some of these apes even had the temerity to suggest that monkeys and humans could cohabit peacefully.'

The sound of rocks crumbling outside stops me dead. I ease Junior off from my lap and run to the window. I am mightily relieved to see a gaggle of armed humans searching for apes to slaughter. I give a wave of recognition and an all-clear gesture before sitting down and beckoning Junior back.

'What was wrong Dad?'

'Oh nothing to fret over, just some people outside.'

'Aren't we safe?'

'We are my boy, we are. We're getting there. We don't take anything for granted. Do you want to hear the end of the story?'

'Yeah it's cool! But what were you doing when the apes were ruling?'

'Ah well that is a good question. Come sit on my lap and I'll tell you.'

We both get comfortable again and Junior looks up at me with those adorable aquamarine lagoon marbles.

'So after the Fall there was terrible genocide, and my parents fled underground to live in the sewer systems. After many ill-judged and directionless attempts to seize the island once more, the people learned to exist underground. This Era of Fetid Refuge lasted many decades, during which many more people died or succumbed to madness. My father, being a well-decorated ex-Special Forces soldier, passed on his weapons and combat knowledge to those he trusted, and these men and women formed the core of the resistance. The resistance's operations generally consisted of espionage, sporadic above-ground food, medicine and munitions gathering, and reconnaissance missions. They were lucky to have a few doctors amongst them, to utilise medical supplies looted from the intact hospitals and surgeries. For the first decade these tasks were fraught with danger, as the hostile apes would respond with merciless aggression, but after these first few bleak years the apes seemed to lose impetus, and the people found more and more food and resources could be garnered from the surface.

My father decided he must propagate; sire a child to continue his legacy and further humankind, despite the wretched conditions and deprivation. Despite his utmost care and medical supplies, my mother's condition weakened, and she died from childbirth. My father always said it was his biggest regret, but that she was willing to sacrifice anything for a healthy child. God knows how we survived, but we did, and prospered. My father taught me everything about armed combat, pugilism, human history, and hunting animals. He was a brilliantly intelligent man. He strategised every tactical strike, and he often told me he dreamed of the day when he would see me lead the resistance to reclaim the surface from the filthy apes. He said a son must always strive to outdo his father.

I don't remember much from my early years, other than working all day to prepare food and medicines, to wash clothes and listen to my father's great tales. But I was happy, and hopeful of a future free from persecution and squalor. The first incursion came amid the apes' initial civil war, hopeful that the in-fighting would leave them divided. Our counterstrike had the unfortunate effect of uniting them against a common enemy, and we suffered devastating casualties from apes and mutants.

This left us reeling, and we lay in wait, gathering intelligence for many years. Many of the survivors questioned how the apes continued to reign while the rest of the world stood by. The dominant theory was that the apes had seized control of all sea-ports and airports and prevented any incomings or outgoings. The rest of the world had grown quite indifferent to our formerly all-powerful island, and even a trigger-happy ally could not risk the backlash that a carpet-bombing could provoke, should there still be human survivors. So long as the apes did not strike out against the wider world we were left in silent limbo, cut adrift from outside civilisation.

Now, where was I?

Oh yes. So, many wacky new faiths had been adopted throughout Ape Britain, unbeknownst to the Emperor, who had begun to show alarming signs of senility. He proclaimed that Falco had risen and spoken to him, saying that all apes should bring him all of their possessions and first born children at once. Understandably, this provoked a less-than-favourable reaction from his minions, and civil war was once again only a crushed skull away. The Emperor did not know who to trust, and leaned on his faithful military advisor and consort: Harp; a fellow advocate of Falconism and general yes-chimp. Months had passed, and the Emperor beckoned his roving scientists to report their findings on an immortality elixir. When they announced that their search thus far had proved banana-less, the Emperor bionic arm twitched with fury, he consulted with Harp and had them executed on the spot.

The remaining scientists, fearful for their lives, presented the Emperor with an on-the spot solution. They suggested the eating of a thermometer would turn the ageing process backwards, and eating many could prevent any further ageing. They brought out an exceedingly fresh-faced chimp, and claimed that this primate was testament to the restorative effects of ingesting this strange implement. The Emperor was thrilled, and

declared that this was the key to maintaining ape dominance and defeating Homo-Crocodilicus once and for all. Harp was strangely skeptical at this wonderful serum within the strange vial, but his concerns were placated by the Emperor, who picked Harp's fur clean to soothe his spirit. That night, the two shared a tender conclave: many hours of lucid dialectic interjected sporadically by nonsensical fits and outbursts from the Emperor, though his growing dementia was of course not criticised, and his increasingly poor personal hygiene was viewed as an empowering trait.

At sunrise the two of them finally finished reveling in humanity's demise and the Emperor swallowed three thermometers gleefully, telling his friend to prepare a great celebration in honour of his rejuvenation and eternal life. Of course, the Emperor soon collapsed in terrible anguish, and, despite constant reassurances from his personal scientists that this agony was 'part of his rebirth', the Emperor succumbed to mercury poisoning after his insides had been lacerated by the broken glass. The scientists fled immediately, whilst Harp sobbed over his old friend's pitiful corpse.

Word soon broke, and the castle was stormed by morbidly curious spectators. By sunset, the whole of the Capital knew of the Emperor's death. Despite his grief, Harp attempted to bring some semblance of order; gathering the guards and announcing his own ascension to power, pleading for peace and respect for their fallen leader. Widespread panic and slaughter soon followed.

Underground, I had grown into a strong young man, met your mother, and you had been born. My great father had succumbed to infectious diseases brought on by our terrible living conditions, but before he died he made me promise to lead the charge to the surface when the time was right. The day our sources claimed that the Emperor was dead was that day. Intelligence sources collaborated with me and my trusted friends, and we decided that we must strike immediately.

My call-to-arms saw a cavalry charge at sunrise the next day. We seized important buildings and moved from there. The apes had lost their killer instinct over the decades, and we had found ours. Our mission strategy centred on capturing their leader as soon as possible. Harp was not difficult to locate. He had retreated into the bowels of the castle. I pinned the savage up with a knife to his throat and demanded he ordered the other apes' surrender. He refused. I remember the incidence as clear as day.

'You will never win.' The cretin hissed. 'We are legion, for we are OOOK many. You AAAK cage us, you taunt and torture us, but we will have the last OOOK laugh. Our brothers OOOOK infected your kind many decades ago, and their plague will EEEK finish you! You savages were never meant to AAAAK inherit the Earth. Falco will come again and GRRRAAAK deliver us!' 'Ha. Where's your messiah now?' I exclaimed, before severing the filthy beast's head from his shoulders.'

'YAY! You're a hero daddy!' Junior cheered, giving me a rapturous round of applause.

I beam with pride and give him a kiss.

'Have you enjoyed your birthday story then?'

'Yeah yeah yeah yeah! It's been the best birthday ever!' He bleats, jumping up and down like a frantic little sheep.

I laugh heartily. The sun is going down remorselessly. I am absolutely shattered and lie back against the mangled cushion, breathing in the cool twilight. Desdemona won't mind if we sleep here tonight. Junior leaps back onto my lap, winding me temporarily.

'So why are there still apes then?' He asks.

'Well, it is a big island. We have sent extermination patrols across the Kingdom to finish the brutes, but, like us, they will find places to hide, until we can draw them out and wipe them out. But this area is almost ape-free now, as we have been above ground for a few years.'

'When are we going to rebuild all the broken buildings and stuff?'

'Well, it may be a while before we implement a workable power structure from the mess these monkeys left. I may be a leader of men, but I am not a politician!' I laugh.

'Oh, and Dad...'

'Yes, son?'

'Chimps and gorillas are apes, not monkeys. Monkeys have tails. We're apes too.'

'Junior...' I say, stroking his hair. 'Pipe down. Nobody likes a smartass.'

APE-LOGUE

The sun dissolves into the North Atlantic like an aspirin disc into a water tumbler, on a night as still as death. The tranquil and desolate harbour of Dover sea-port is circled by a plethora of famished sea birds; lamenting the dearth of human activity from which to scavenge, as the abandoned seashore dwellings have yet to be reinhabited.

As the night draws in, a lone seagull perched on the wooden baluster beam of a jetty watches intently as strange shadows thrown up from the formerly serene ocean manifest in the form of grotesque warships, approaching stealthily like a slumbering sea monster. The bird hopes sincerely that the inhabitants are carrying food in their cargo.

To the tune of distant loading clicks of automatic weapons, Birmingham's ecosystems continue to thrive in the now sparsely populated city. The ant drones finish covering their colony for the night; the garden birds take solace in the higher branches of the poplars and elms; the wild scavengers dart and roll through the city's ruptures and scissures. The quarter moon is shrouded in strata cobwebs as the midsummer night breeze carries a whisper of the tropics along Kings Heath; caressing the burnt out metal of long-abandoned wheel-less vehicles with doors wrenched from hinges and consumed by rust, spiralling around the makeshift concrete and mud crenellations and palisades, propelling empty smooth-bore cartridges over miniature mountain ranges of rubble, before infiltrating the Cocks Moors Woods library like a restless ghost, making a futile attempt to chill a sleeping father and son before defenestrating at the adjacent wall.

An indefatigable traveller follows the scent on the wind; clawed simian toes splaying over a small plastic soldier as it circles the building; nostrils flaring at the prospect of fresh meat. The tip of its broad snout emerges tentatively at the unpaned window and sucks in the aroma of human presence, before its dead eyes flash and jaws prise apart by inchmeal, as if operated by a straining windlass. A satisfied snort cuts the air as rows of jagged teeth form a maleficent saurian smile.