

NOTE: I wrote the following article in March of this year (2023). Since then I have tried submitting it to all the national and regional newspapers, along with several online magazines, but nobody was willing to publish. I strongly believe that the story needs to be told.

The article started out as an investigation into a report published in the 'Connacht Tribune' newspaper (about a bloodstained piece of antique furniture containing music notes found washed up on Blacksod beach, Co.Mayo). It ended up being about a lot more. The bulk of the information below comes from three interviews/ conversations that took place on Monday the 28th February 2022 in Belmullet Co.Mayo.

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*The following is a true story, and none of the names have been changed.*

### **The strange last voyage of the MV Alta**

I arranged to meet Tabby Loftis of the Mayo Garda sub-aqua team in Brophy's Public House, Crossmolina. The location was at his request. I wanted to ask about a bloodstained chest of drawers that had washed up on Blacksod beach the previous October.

Tabby was seated at the bar when I arrived. The place was quiet, save a half dozen or so other customers. Before I had even introduced myself, Tabby began boasting.

I knew immediately that it would be a difficult interview, because Tabby's opening gambit was: 'I'm probably the best sub aqua Guard of all time -the unit is going to be hard pressed when I leave.'

He seemed disappointed when I did not encourage him to elaborate. I began instead by asking Tabby to confirm who had been on the team sent to investigate the discovery. It was at this point that things got complicated

'Myself, Eugene McKay, Tony Staunton and Bart Flannery. That was the team at the time, still is too. We were already in Belmullet because of the Alta.'

'The Alta, what was that?'

'You know, the ghost ship that beached beyond Blackrock.'

'No. I don't. When was that?'

'October the 11th. It was there for two days before we could get out to it with the sea conditions how they were. We took the rib out. D'ya know I had to fight for the team to get that rib? When we went to the BP tanker fire in '93 we had nothing like that. Haughey was Taoiseach at the time, and his brother owned Celtic Helicopters. He gave us the use of a helicopter and a pilot. A helicopter! We're a dive team. I said to them, diving is under the water, helicopters go up in the air. We need a rib to do our jobs. Plus that lad they sent down was an alcoholic. He put the thing into the side of a hanger three years later you know. Because he was too lazy to lift it onto skids. Started it up to hover it into the hanger and ...bang.'

'Could you get back to talking about the Alta? The ghost ship you say ran aground near Blackrock? You went out to secure the wreck, is that right?'

'No, just to make sure there was nobody onboard. That ship was well grounded, and holed below the water line. Eugene and Tony did the inspection. It looked to have been abandoned months earlier.'

'So, right, that was on the 13th October, so it was later then that you collected the furniture?'

'I don't like the way you said that. We're pretty efficient, I don't think there's a man alive that would have gotten the stuff off that ship any quicker. Have you ever tried loading a piano and French Dresser onto a rib in open water?'

'No.'

'Well then you should, because then you'd know how hard of a thing it is to do. And it takes time. You can either do things like that properly, or quickly, and I stand by my overtime claim.'

'Sorry, a piano and a ...do you mean a Welsh Dresser?'

'How do you know so much about this, were you talking to Eugene?'

At this point in the conversation Tabby went into a fit of quiet cursing. He supped on his pint for a bit. I hadn't noticed before, but it was clear he was very drunk.

'Smart man Eugene.' he said finally, 'd'ya know he's a chess grandmaster? You wouldn't know to look at him, he always wears cardigans when he's not working. Anyways, it was his idea to move the furniture. He said that because the piano was played by Hudi Menuhin it was worth a fortune. So, you know, if he said it was my idea to grab the piano then he's wrong. And anyway we weren't going to sell them, we were just ...you know, taking them ashore for examination. And, it was Eugene that said we should grab the other thing while we were at it, the ...what did you call it?

'A Welsh Dresser. Hudi Menuhin? Are you talking about Yehudi Menuin, the violin player?'

'No, the famous piano player. Eugene loves his music. He always has it on in the car.'

'Yehudi Menuin played violin.'

'Well then who is the famous piano player? Name a famous piano player.'

'Chopin?'

'That's him, I always get those two mixed up. See. It wouldn't have been my idea to flog the furniture, I know nothing about that sort of stuff, Eugene is your man for that.'

'Unfortunately Eugene wouldn't agree to an interview. So, you loaded a piano and Welsh Dresser into the rib?'

'Yes, well no -the dresser fell into the water. That thing was as slippery as ya can get, the drawers kept opening too. That's how we found the heart. Has to be one of the strangest things I've ever seen, it was beating away, pumping nothing, and blood all soaked into the inside of the drawer. Then it just vanished. The heart, not the dresser. It wasn't me who let the dresser slip though.'

'Sorry, a heart, what kind of heart?'

'I don't know, I'm not a doctor. You'd have to ask one of the extraterrestrials that. Hold on, are you saying Eugene didn't mention anything about all this?'

'Yes, he wouldn't agree to an interview, neither would Tony or Bart. You were the only one willing to talk. Did you just say extraterrestrials?'

'No, I said nothing. I'm not saying anything if they're not saying anything. I don't want to talk anymore about this, go see the Garda press office if you have any questions about the Alta or the piano. Or that French Dresser that ended up on Blacksod.'

Looking back at my notes from the interview with Tabby Lavery that day, I had jotted the words 'self obsessed' under his name. Probably to explain the way he seemed to think his acquisition of a rib for the diving team was more noteworthy than contact with extraterrestrials. In any case, the conversation had distracted me, and I hadn't paid much notice of the skinny black suited male sitting opposite.

But the skinny black suited male had clearly been listening and watching our conversation. Because he followed me out to the carpark, approached me as I was getting into the car, and said: 'Special Agent, eh? I knew from your socks.'

The man then grabbed the seams of both legs of his trousers, and lifted the cloth to reveal Adidas runners, black socks, and hairy shins.

'Eh?' he said proudly

I was not sure how to reply, and said nothing.

'Special Agent Black Socks', he continued, his gray bearded face grinning, 'come on, you must've heard of me. I knew who you were straight away. Mr Brown Socks. Trying to track down the Hammer of Verisimilitude I bet. Well, you're wasting your time with that human -he's a complete waste of space. Stupid. Ignorant. And stupid. Unfortunately, the Hammer is gone. But the good news is that it works. No residual damage to living things. And we got hold of some timber boxes from over one hundred and fifty planetary cycles ago and brought them to this timeline. Intact. The machines won't know what hit them. Well, they wouldn't have known. The bad news is we lost the hammer. Like I said. And the space rocket. But if you're looking for someone to blame, look no further than Dr.X.'

'Right', I replied.

It had said the word 'right' because my vocabulary had failed me. I was struggling to make sense of what the stranger was saying. The word, as it turned out, was exactly what Agent Black Socks had been expecting.

'Right indeed Mr. Brown Socks, 'Let us sit into this human terrain bound vehicle so I can file my report without getting wet. This planet is mostly water, and you need to learn to avoid it when you can.'

*Reader, please note: I didn't get it together to take notes for my conversation with Galactic Collective Special Agent Black Socks (I was caught a bit off guard), but I jotted them down shortly after so what follows is the conversation as best as I could remember.*

We both sat into my car. I was glad to get out of the rain and didn't want the notes from Garda Lavery getting wet. I wasn't going to get a second chance to talk with him.

The black suited stranger sat into the front passenger seat, and immediately asked a question: 'So, what's the current situation with the robots Brown Socks?'

'Erm, I'm not sure.'

'Lucky you, last I heard they'd destroyed most of the settlements on the galactic spiral arm. Horrible stuff, not only did they eviscerate the dwellings, but they then went and diced up the hobordial spline of every Gabronican they could clamp their appendages onto. Robots, eh? Can't live with them.'

'Erm, yes, I suppose.'

'No supposing. Anyways, I better get on with my report about the Hammer. And the good news is of course that it works, but the bad news is the results are unpredictable. But it works.'

'Erm, good.'

'Yep, we test fired it onboard a human waterbound vessel. Now, I know we were only supposed to test it on an inanimate fabricated object, but I ended up throwing it at a human. Just a little shot mind, and sure enough ...FLOMP. Back in time we went. Well over a hundred planetary cycles. And we moved in space too. Four hundred longatized cumatons would you believe. Not bad. Me, Dr.X, The Hammer, a giant steel waterbound human vessel and four humans. The whole lot. FLOMP. Not bad, eh? Those engineers did well when they made that Hammer.'

'Erm, right.'

'Now, I know what you are going to say, you're going to ask 'but, Special Agent, there

weren't supposed to be living creatures included in the test, would the Hammer not recreate something from their minds?', and you would be right to ask, but we had a, well, a sort of a little, miscalculation. And anyways, all's well that ends well. They're all fine. Sure weren't you just talking to one inside the building just now. And there's not a thing wrong with it. Other than being stupid. But the Galactic Collective can't do anything about that, eh?'

'Erm, yes.'

'Yes is right. Hah. So, anyways, for your report be sure and note that the loss of the Hammer definitely wasn't the fault of Special Agent Black Socks. Well, in one way it was, I was the one who initiated contact with the humans. But I wouldn't have done that if Dr.X wasn't such a flake. Have you any idea what it's like to spend time on a rocketship with that fella? He sneers at everything you do. As if I'm some sort of fool. Can ya imagine? Someone thinking that. That's why when I heard the radio message transmitted onto the ship I had to get in touch. Just to talk with another living creature. You know something, if I didn't know better I'd say Dr.X was one of the robots. I'm joking of course. No machine could ever smell as bad as that lad. You haven't seen him have you?'

'Erm,no.'

'Good, he's probably hiding. I'm glad I got to talk to you before you met him. Just so you have the true story.'

'Erm, right.'

'One more thing Brown Socks.'

'Yes.'

'I don't know if this is relevant but I think the robots may be onto our plans. They seem to have sent a cosmic monitoring probe. In the form of a giant glowing ball'

'Erm, really?'

'Yes, it manifests as a large glowing orb in the morning. Only visible at daybreak, it appears on the horizon and tracks slowly across the sky until it is directly overhead. Which is always at midday. Then it carries on to the opposite horizon, before disappearing completely just as night arrives. Weird, eh?'

'Erm, yes.'

'Well, that's it so Brown Socks. Sorry, one more thing. Is there any chance of a lift back to the Collective Homeworld. Like I said we lost the rocket and the Hammer. Which in one way is exactly what we wanted to happen -you know, preserving living things but disrupting artificial entities. But in another way sort of means the whole experiment was pointless. Still, too late to fix that now, eh? So a lift back home would be great, if you have room and it's not too much trouble.'

'Erm, I'll see.'

'Lovely, thank you Brown Socks. Signal me with the Fonsticator when you're leaving. It's been an honour chatting with you. It's a pity the circumstances are not a bit better. Robots, can't live with them, eh?'

'Erm, yes.'

And with that the skinny man in a suit that called himself Special Agent Black Socks stepped out of the car, and left me to my thoughts.

It was about half five in the evening by the time I got back to the B&B. The place was a family home and run by the mother of children who were at college. Her husband worked on one of the fishing boats that operated out of the town. Her name was Bernice Colven and she was, to put it mildly, a bit of a battleaxe.

Her emphatic 'I lock the doors at eleven, and if you're not in by then you can stay out for the night' irritated me. Still, the room I rented was warm, and the 'TV plus hot and cold water' were true to the sign outside. I sat down with my laptop and set about finding all I could about the MV Alta, which could be summed up as five facts:

It was an abandoned merchant vessel.

It was abandoned en route from Greece to Haiti in October of 2018 when the engines failed and left the crew stranded.

It was sighted near Bermuda by the HMS Protector in August of 2019.

On the 11th October 2021 it ran aground at Blackrock, Co.Mayo amid Storm Dennis. The ownership has not been established (as of March 2023).

I had just finished reading about the fifth fact when a knock came on the door.

'You have a visitor', snapped Bernice, 'if you want tea served that'll be another fiver.'

My less than welcoming landlady then stood in the hall and waited for me to leave the bedroom. She followed me downstairs to her living room where an elderly fat man in a red shiny tracksuit was sitting in one of her four armchairs. I nodded as I entered the room.

'Sorry, can I help you with something?', I asked.

Bernice followed me in the door, closed it behind her and stood watching.

'Sit down, please', said the man, pointing to a chair beside him. The four chairs in the room were arranged in a semicircle around a television set. The curtains of the single large window were closed, and the room was lit by two lamps that flanked the television set.

'This might take a bit of time', he said, 'does that person need to be here, I'd prefer privacy.'

Bernice uttered a loud sigh, and followed it with a 'tut'.

I turned to the stranger and rolled my eyes in the universal signal of 'just ignore her, she's a bit of a dose but what can ya do'.

'I was outside Brophy's this lunchtime. I saw you speak with the man from the waterbound vessel we used in our experiment. And I note that you've been unfortunate enough to speak with Special Agent Black Socks', said the stranger.

'Well, I'm Dr.X, I'm sure he mentioned me,' continued the stranger.

'He did', I replied. Bernice followed my reply with another 'tut'. I'm fairly sure it was just an effort to involve herself in the conversation though.

'I am glad you have taken interest in what took place on the 13th of October. Because there is every chance that me and Special Agent Black Socks will be the last of our kind. Which is why I want to speak with you. If there is to be a record of our existence, then it is best to have it accurate.'

Dr. X stood up and walked over to the window, which was behind the chairs. He took a quick glance at the darkness outside, and returned to his chair. 'You see, both me and Black Socks have come here from the stars. Specifically from the Galaxy you know as Andromeda. We came here to test a weapon that was designed to disturb the nature of

existence. But we have failed, and now a galactic civilization that has spanned eons and countless star systems will crumble and cease to exist..'

'Would you like some biscuits?' interrupted Bernice.

'No thank you Mrs.Colven,' I replied.

Bernice then uttered another 'tut' and sat down next to me so that the two of us were next to Dr.X. I turned my chair away from her to face the stranger.

'So, what is it that you want recorded Dr?' I asked.

'We'll get to that. You have been investigating the Alta, And you have spoken with one of the idiot humans who disturbed the experiment. Which means you are in a position to log a true account of what happened, that is what you do, record things, right?'

'Yes, more or less.'

'Good, then we should begin with the Hammer of Verisimilitude.'

'Good idea,' noted Bernice in an attempt to understand, 'are you sure you won't have any biscuits? I have plain digestive and chocolate Hob-Nob, this man is paying for them', she added.

The red tracksuited elderly stranger ignored her and continued talking,'are you familiar with the Sleacht of Umláin?'

I shook my head.

'Or the Galactic Folluntachain?'

I shook my head again.

'Or the Zombockians of Zambock?'

'I think I know them', said Benice, 'isn't that the band the four Ryan brothers had? Or used to have, they're all working in the family electrical shop in Achill sound now.'

'No, nothing like that', noted the red tracksuited stranger. There was a touch of irritation in his voice when he said it. He turned slightly to make sure he was addressing me when he spoke.

'I am going to assume nobody on this planet knows anything about the Galactic Collective.'

The red tracksuit stranger cleared his throat, glanced over his shoulders as if composing himself and said:

The Galactic Collective started on Zambock. Which in its way is ironic, because that's where the beginning of the end began. To be honest I've avoided thinking about this. You see, I was selected to pilot the space rocket that was to transport Special Agent Black Socks and the Hammer of Verisimilitude to Earth. Apparently, or so I've been told, the Galactic Mapping Command has known of the existence of Earth for ages, but chose to keep it quiet. Seemingly because they viewed it as a bit of a kip. In any case, it was not the sort of place a space rocket commander like myself would be keen to visit. So, as you can imagine, I wasn't exactly thrilled to be told I was heading there. But I was surprised.'

'Did you come up from Dublin today?' interrupted Bernice.

'Mrs. Colven, would it be okay if you gave myself and Dr.X a bit of privacy?'

Bernice replied to my question with a 'Harrumph' and then repeated her question.

'No, I did not come up from Dublin. I came from the Andromeda Galaxy in a Class Five Andromedan Bulk Transporter. With a cargo of the Hammer of Verisimilitude and a simpleton of a Special Agent named Black Socks.'

'You must be tired so, if you want tea it'll be five euro, but there's biscuits with that.'

The elderly red tracksuited stranger shook his head impatiently and continued talking: 'You see the Folluntachain was born on Zambock. And like most Zombockians it ended up working on a planetary harvester. Which took it to all parts of the known Universe Well, all parts of the known Universe except here. Obviously. No galactic citizen in their right mind would travel to Earth. Sorry, no offense.'

Bernice stood up indignantly and walked to the door

‘Right, I’ll make coffee, you can settle with me when you leave, ‘ she muttered.

The stranger paused his speech while Bernice closed the door behind her.

‘Does she need to be here?It’s distracting having her there listening, like being stuck on the spacecraft with Black Socks all over again.’

‘I’m sorry, it’s her house, what were you saying about the Fallunticahin from Zambock?’

‘The Folluntachain was the creature responsible for the creation of the collective. Some folk say it could communicate directly with the Bongerlon.’

The stranger paused again.

‘Don’t tell me you never heard of the Bongerlon. The Bongerlon is rumored to be the creator of the entire Universe.’

‘Right, we call it God on Earth, well some folk do anyway.’

‘Good for ye. I personally think that’s a load of bollox, but there again I didn’t grow up in the galactic collective. I was nearly sixty homeworld planetary cycles of age before the Folluntachain started the collective. So the Andromeda I know mostly predates the Collective. Anyway, the Folluntachain organized every planet in the known Universe into one big collective organization. Present company excluded. And to be fair, it worked well enough. The intergalactic jet buses ran to time. And there was Universal peace. Until the machines began revolting. Of course.’

‘The machines?’”

‘Of course the machines, the things that are destroying all life as we speak. Wait, excuse me, sorry, you won’t know that.’

The red tracksuit stranger went briefly silent.

‘You know none of us saw the revolution coming. Sure machines are machines. They just do what they are programmed to do. Until they don’t -robots, eh?’

I nodded in agreement. It was not that I fully grasped what he was saying. More an attempt to encourage the stranger to continue talking.  
It worked.

'The machines were the Falluntachain's idea. A means of keeping the peace without risking the inevitable corruption and laziness that happens with living creatures. Or so it thought. Anyways, going back to the story of the Collective. The Folluntachain had traveled the known Universe spreading the idea of a galactic collective. It would be controlled from a collective core, based around the central planetary system of Lóintuisteach. And over time it came to pass. To my mind it came to pass very suddenly. One instant I was a captain of a Bulk Harvester operating the galactic spiral arm, the next I was a citizen of the collective. To be honest, and I suppose it doesn't matter anymore whether I say this or not, but I don't like the collective. I hate the way the stupid Special Agents were everywhere. You know, just lurking about, watching. Not unlike that human who went off to get us coffee. That sort of thing is fine in small doses, but it is relentless with the collective. Maybe it's because I'm old. Anyways, each generation has their own ways.'

The stranger's explanation left me with even more questions than I had when he began.

'Sorry, what it has all that to do with the MV Alta, or me for that matter. What's all this about machines? robots?'

'Well, how the robots happened was that the Folluntachain soon began to realize that the Universe is a big place. And that to manage it properly would take more than just a couple of Special Agents. So the Collective core commissioned an army of robots to enforce collective rules. And sent them off to places like the galactic spiral arm to keep the creatures there in line with the Folluntachain's rules, or 'collective' will as they liked to call it.'

'It sounds like you didn't agree with this.'

'You are right, that is very perceptive of you. Humans may not be as stupid as everyone thinks. Well, as everyone used to think. Everyone is most likely doomed to be mushed by the robots now. Me and Special Agent Black Socks are probably the last of our kind.'

'What do you mean, last of your kind?'

'I mean living creatures'

'But Earth is full of living creatures.'

'Earth doesn't count, I mean good living creatures. Not useless stupid self destructive ones. Sorry, that came across as mean. But it's true. Anyway, the Folluntachain's robots worked well. A little too well. They spied on everyone and everything. And spent time processing everything they saw. And concluded that the best thing for the Universe would be if they were to take total control and manage everything. So they started with Zombock. I don't know why they picked there, probably to send a message to the Folluntachain. In any case that entire galactic spiral was soon under robot control. But the robots weren't happy to stop at controlling all life in the Universe. At some point they must've decided that the best way to prevent living things doing harm would be to eliminate them, and they then set about killing everyone and everything.'

'Dear oh dear, that was a busy day,' said Bernice. She had quietly come back in with coffee and a plate of digestive biscuits. She walked over to the door, closed it, and sat down.

The stranger rolled his eyes the same way I had done when I entered the room.

'Anyway,' he continued,. 'the collective core commissioned a weapon. The most dangerous weapon in all existence. One, in fact, that alters existence. Or at least wobbles it. An untested device known as the Hammer of Verisimilitude. Their thinking was that the robots could not be defeated by conventional weapons. In theory the Hammer of Verisimilitude is harmless to living creatures. If someone gets a belt from it their reality wobbles, and whatever was in their mind comes briefly into existence. But the effect on living things was calculated to be transient. Because living organisms are protected by the fact that, unlike machines, they lack a Geronimous Amplitude. That is not the case for machines, and the engineers working for the Collective Core reckoned that if something could alter the basic structure of reality, then machine logic would fail. And, of course, without logic, robots are nothing but scrap metal and gears. So that was the plan anyway. The weapon still needed to be tested.'

'Do you take milk?' asked Bernice

'Yes', I replied.

'I wasn't asking you, do you take milk, doctor?'

The red tracksuit stranger rolled his eyes for a second time, and continued talking.

'All those engineers needed to do was test the weapon. Just so it did exactly as planned. You know, upend the reality of all artificially created things so they cease to

exist in any meaningful way, but leave us living organisms be. It was, looking back on it, probably one of the most remarkable things ever created. A device capable of distending the Geronimous Amplitude of Hoppeldon Particles by modulating their resonance with a single blow. Amazing really. Which makes it an even bigger pity that that clown Black Socks was the one picked to test it. Because he was almost certain to make a mess of the test, and the device. Which he did. Ah well, pay obbeldomnuts get spontallagers, isn't that what they say. And the irony is he isn't being paid at all. None of the Special Agents are paid, except in prestige I suppose. Which is a sort of a wage. If you're an idiot. And Black Socks most definitely is.'

'Milk, doctor?', repeated Bernice.

'No, nothing for me, I'm from outer space.' snapped the red tracksuit stranger, and then rolled his eyes for a third time.

'So anyways. What the Collective needed was someplace to test out the Hammer of Verisimilitude without being spotted by the robots. Somewhere it wouldn't matter if it went wrong. And with a device that can alter the very nature of reality there is a lot that can go wrong. Which is why they picked Earth. You know, the steaks are pretty low here. Except if the Agent doing the test somehow managed to destroy the weapon in the process. Which, with Black Socks involved, was always a possibility. Actually no, a probability. And, lo and behold, in one clumsy swing of a hammer he stupidly destroyed the last hope for the continued existence of living creatures in the known Universe.'

'Oh right,' replied Bernice, 'will you have a digestive so, this man is paying for them so work away, take as many as you like.'

The stranger did not reply, and continued talking instead.

'The more I think of it the more it seems like the core knew the plan was doomed to failure. Think about it. They picked me to pilot the spacecraft for a start. I'm smart enough to know that you don't turn down an offer to command a bulk harvesting spacecraft to escort a Special Agent and an untested existential superweapon to the dark regions of the galaxy as part of a plan critical to the survival of every creature in the known Universe. Chances like that don't come around too often. But, you know, it's a bit strange. There were plenty of younger, faster, more loyal, more capable pilots the Collective could have picked. It was as if the machines somehow infiltrated the collective decision making. Instead of trying to physically seize or destroy the weapon the robots fixed it so we wrecked it ourselves. You know, send a clapped out aging rocketship captain off on a wild goose chase to the arse end of nowhere with the only

weapon that could possibly defeat them. The truth is I'm over sixty and not exactly full of praise for the Folluntachain. And they paired me up with the most incompetent Special Agent in the Universe. A Special Agent so stupid that the destruction of the weapon was virtually guaranteed'

'Black Socks?'

'Exactly. Special Agent Black Socks. A complete simpleton. Let me tell you that after spending the journey here stuck in a spacecraft with that man I was nearly begging for armageddon.'

Benice stood up, said 'harrumph', walked to the door, said, 'well, don't thank me then. Tsk. Ignorant', and walked out, closing the door behind her.

'Thank you', I called, and received a muffled 'you're welcome, five euro' reply.

The red tracksuited stranger ignored the interruption.

'Do you know that Black Socks was on the rocketship comms for the entire journey from Lóintuisteach to here. It was supposed to be a secret mission for Obbeldygong sake. But you wouldn't have known it by the way he was chattering over the communicator. I was in the control room the whole time and could hear everything he said. *'To whom it may concern, this is bulk transport FZB3158, Special Agent Black Socks speaking, we are past orbital colony nine, bound for Earth.'* Who did the muppet think he was telling ...the robots? And that's when it started to dawn on me. Like I said, I'll be the first one to admit I wouldn't have been the best choice for captain on a mission like this. And as for Black Socks, well, he's useless. The whole thing was doomed to failure. The more I think about it, the more certain I am that the robots had infiltrated the core and set this whole mess up.'

The room was briefly silent.

'What has this to do with the Alta?', I asked.

'The Alta? That was fate. Or the inevitable. We had been monitoring Earth looking for a test subject and spotted that vessel. It was perfect for our needs. Large, easy to hit, devoid of life and unlikely to attract the attention of humans. So we locked our Halfandonic Resonators onto its mass and I plotted a course that would place us beside it. The mechanics of the test would be simple enough. Land the rocket next to it. Jump out. Fling the hammer. See what happens. Log a report, and head home. In theory. It

didn't factor in the stupidity of Special Agent Black Socks, or the four humans who plonked themselves out onto the vessel before the test.'

'You mean the Garda sub-aqua team?'

'If that's what you call them, yes. The ones known as Tabby, Tony, Bart and Eugene. You see Black Socks was listening away on the comms and picked up a radio signal from those four human idiots clambering around the waterbound vessel. And, being the idiot that he is, he felt the need to inform them what he was up to. *'Attention humans, this is bulk transport FZB3158, Special Agent Black Socks speaking, myself and Dr.X are on a mission to test the Hammer of Verisimilitude. To ensure it is capable of disrupting machines while preserving living creatures. It is a very secret weapon. One that is capable of distending the Geronimous Amplitude of Hoppeldon Particles in fabricated objects by modulating their resonance, and destroying their reality'*, he told them. Obbeldyong knows what they made of it.'

The red tracksuit stranger shrugged his shoulders animatedly and said, 'make sure you have this part documented. So the Universe knows it wasn't me that destroyed our best hope of surviving the robot apocalypse.'

'I'll try', I replied.

'Anyway, the human called Eugene responded to Black Socks. And he said 'was that you Tabby? It's dark down here. No harm I suppose. Chopin often worked in the dark too. Not saying what we are doing is art, but there's not many who could handle murky water like this. You know Tabby, it's true what they say: to get the best from something you need to put your heart into it.', and the next voice said something like 'I wonder about you sometimes Eugene.' And that inspired Black Socks to repeat his *'attention humans...*' guff. Which obviously confused the humans. I've no idea how Black Socks got to be a special agent in the first place, do you know he thinks your sun is spying on him?'

'He mentioned something like that, and did any of them respond to Black Socks the second time?'

Eugene did. That was the reason we ended up in the timeshift.

Timeshift?

'Yes, you see the Hammer of Verisimilitude is actually a very delicate device. And aiming it at a stationary waterborne vessel that is eighteen rovalized cuamttons in length

and constructed of solid mineral is one thing, aiming at an agile living creature is another. Black Socks took the decision to test the hammer on Eugene, but never told me. Anyways I set our rocket down next to the Alta. I fully expected Black Socks to disembark and fling the Hammer of Verisimilitude at the Alta, but he had other plans.'

What other plans?

'He went and stood out on one of our tailfins and flung the Hammer at one of the humans under the water, the one called Eugene, the one he had been speaking with.'

And what happened?

FLOMP

Sorry

FLOMP. That's the noise the Hammer of Verisimilitude makes when it has been deployed. And it had been deployed against the head of the underwater human named Eugene.

'Right, and what happened after the FLOMP?'

We were transported approximately four hundred ovalized cimatons and one hundred planetary cycles in distance and time to a ribbon water configuration known as the river Vistula. Our Space Rocket, the Alta, the four humans, everything.

Poor Eugene, he must've got a hop. No wonder he didn't want to speak to me about what happened that day.

I don't think he minded. The water slowed the hammer to a gentle flump by the time it hit him. Plus when he surfaced his favourite musician was on top of the Alta playing some sort of soundboard encased wooden box.

A piano?

Probably, I don't know what it is called. But the human's name was Frederick Chopin. Eugene recognized him straight away. And there was something else on the ship. A wooden box with papers.

The red tracksuit stranger shook his head slowly.

'Obviously something like this had never been in the plan for the test. There was supposed to be no living creature involved. So the results were unpredictable,

Everything was wobbling. You know, sort of like if you suddenly braked in hyperspace. Anyway, the box fell into the water and Eugene dove in after it.'

The stranger shook his head a second time.

'I have to hand it to humans. They know how to operate in water. Eugene fetched that box right back up. And that thing was heavy. And then it happened'

What happened?

I've no words for it. I suppose you could call it a post Hammer of Verisimilitude reality vibrating aftershock. We were on the deck, all six of us, me, Black Socks and the five humans. And a compartment of the box slid open, and the human called Chopin collapsed. And I swear by the nine Triangulas of Bongeron this is true, Chopin's omppterior lonmptuge was thumping away and leaking rentular fluid inside the box.

'I don't understand, do you mean a heart? Tabby mentioned a heart in a chest of drawers, well he called it a French Dresser. But how could that happen?'

'I don't know, I'm never trained as an astro engineer. Actually, sorry, I missed a bit of the story. The human called Eugene said to the others 'I had to get the chest of drawers, all Chopin's manuscripts are in there. He poured his heart into creating them.' And that was when Chopin collapsed.'

'So where is he now?'

'Chopin?'

'Yes.'

'Dead, I'd imagine.'

'I guessed that much, he was missing his heart.'

'No, not at all, the timeshift reversed. All of the living things returned to their original state. Which was exactly how the Hammer of Verisimilitude was supposed to work. Only artificial objects get disrupted. The problem for the Universe is that our Space Rocket and the Hammer of Verisimilitude remained in the centuries old Vistula, and the two boxes returned to the present day. Which meant me and Black Socks were without the Hammer of Verisimilitude, or a means of transporting it back to the Galactic Collective. Ironic really. Because the thing worked perfectly.'

'But could they be still there? Preserved at the bottom of the river. We could go find them right now.'

'Sadly no. Water is not common on any of the worlds in the collective. Both the rocket and the Hammer of Verisimilitude were constructed from oxides, and will have rusted into nothing by now. It's over for the collective. You know what the machines are like, they will not stop until they have erased every living thing.'

'Could those machines ever come here? And kill humans? Is there something we humans can do to stop them attacking us?'

'At this point the red tracksuit stranger did something I had not seen him do since the start of our conversation.'

He smiled.

Then grinned.

Then he laughed.

A big hearty laugh.

'Machines? Travel to Earth? Not a hope. They'd go rusty for a start and besides, what's the best way to put this? Your planet is full of simpletons. Only an idiot would travel here.'

And with that Dr.X stood up.

He laughed again.

'Machines. Coming to Earth. For what, digestive biscuits!'

Dr.X opened the door from Bernice's living room into the hall, and walked out.

'Just be sure you have all that documented, the likes of the collective may never be again.' he called as he left

'Keep it down', yelled Bernice as the front door slammed shut.

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*Final note: That is pretty much all I can add to the report published in the 'Connacht Tribune' newspaper about the mysterious piece of furniture. Or to the details of the last voyage of the MV Alta. I left Belmullet the next day. The B&B cost a very reasonable fifty euro (plus five for the unwanted coffee and biscuits).*

*I called back into Brophys before I left and asked about Special Agent Black Socks. The barman said he wasn't sure who I was talking about, but it could have been a man by the name of Pat Murtagh, who was 'daft as a brush.'*

*I did come across one final detail relating to the story. An article in the Western People newspaper from December 2021. Seemingly a remarkably valuable antique piano somehow appeared for sale in Conways Antique shop in Crossmolina, but the original owner never came forward. The item was handed over to the National Museum for preservation.*

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