



# Babysitter

*By Cheeseburger Brown*

The invasion of Cassiopeia was age-inappropriate for the child: that much was clear.

All the worst words in the dictionary were being acted out live, and that violated the Standard with respect to age-appropriate subject matter. The child was present, which made the Standard paramount. On the other hand, duty was paramount.

The soldier was of the highest quality. No expense had been spared in his manufacture or maintenance. He was beautiful, too. He was as much a parade piece as a tool. Never the less, considering two things to be simultaneously paramount upset him.

The child bleated, “Where’s my mom?”

The soldier devoted sixty neuronal clusters to this question while the rest of him appraised the situation outside the bunker. The sky was black with giant twisting bodies of smoke. They guttered, illuminated from within as anti-aircraft beams found targets. Enemy corvettes descended over a city still stunned from orbital bombardment. Kamari troops swarmed into the streets like spilled ink. Weapons flashed.

The soldier was a product of peacetime. The bunch of homos who designed him had probably been bored, so they overbuilt. It was easy for the soldier to settle on his best strategic options and still have plenty of processing power left over to be bothered about the child at his side. While in storage, this excess of thinking potential was a common topic of conversation among his product line.

The child was less than half a homo high. It had a squeaky voice and watery optics. Its rendering of the Common Verbal Protocol was idiosyncratic and error-prone.

“Are you a boy or a girl?” asked the soldier. His right arm split apart into sub-branches which unfolded each in turn into bristling arrays of weapons.

Nobody in storage had ever talked about anything like this. Nobody mentioned ever having seen it simulated. The soldier tried to imagine that the child’s childness was less interesting than its inclusion the wider set of civilian homos. It was difficult. In peacetime, so many important things about the special status of a child had been impressed upon him – principally because children tended to be on the front lines of parade audiences.

Despite the fact that there was a war in progress, the presence of a minor – an exception-laden sub-class of uninjured civilian homo – obliged him to take the Standard for Moral Decency into consideration at every turn.

He filed a bug report.

The soldier decided that his particular situation was unique, and this disappointed him because unique situations were unwieldy. In response, the average temperature of his cluster arrays rose by a tenth of a degree.

The child was not tall enough to see through the bunker’s narrow horizontal slit to the outside world. Like all homos it was night-blind, so when the lamps went out the child had lost all visual processing capacity. Without input the child was succumbing to speculation. The soldier understood the nervousness this entailed.

“A boy,” sobbed the child.

He popped open his maintenance hatch and allowed the bundles of thick cabling warmed by his secondary exhaust to droop out. Using the barrel of an unholstered surface-to-air phase cannon he gently ushered the child toward the hanging tangle. As hoped, it responded positively to the warmth and the softness with a slowing heart rate. “There there, boy-child,” said the soldier. “There there.”

Multiple targets crystallized in his vision as they scurried outside the bunker. He extended a sniper rifle and sketched some trajectories, then actualized them. The targets were randomized.

“What’s that noise?” squeaked the child, pressing itself deeper into the bundle of warm cabling.

The soldier said, “It’s a woodpecker.”

He rotated his upper section thirty degrees and charged a long-range burster, then trained it on a troop skiff as it swept in to land. He released the burster. The cargo was dissolved and the skiff disabled. He sprung an internal coolant leak but believed he could compensate. The atmospheric pressure was dropping. Temperature remained below the seasonal norm.

A series of explosions tore through the parliamentary quarter.

“And there are giants,” added the soldier. “Giant homos with big gay grins. You hear their footsteps as they stride across the city, dispensing rainbows from their nostrils.”

“I want to see.”

“You are too short to see. There there. Come come. I will tell you all about it.”

The soldier tracked a friendly platoon and provided cover as they sprinted between ruined buildings. At the same time his radar view of the sky became increasingly complex. Great oblong warships were precipitating out of the clouds.

The soldier clamped down on the coolant leak. He tried to squeeze out another diagnostic assessment but his body was being rattled around too much by so many simultaneous discharges. Battery levels remained optimal. He queried his arms for an inventory of rounds and projectile stores, and they replied when they could. He updated his calendar to reflect that tomorrow’s parade would almost surely be cancelled.

“Do you know where’s my mom?”

“Yes, I can see her now,” claimed the soldier. “She is riding on a flying unicorn. They are flying in circles around the giants, catching the nose-rainbows in a basket. Candy apples are descending from the sky. They are landing in the city and kittens are coming out of them. The kittens are infiltrating the arterial skyways, moving westward while laying down a suppressing meow. I will now point my long-range petting cannon at some of them, and engage the love-trigger. Do not be afraid. I am simply petting the kittens. One, two, three, four, five bundles of kittens. The kittens are purring so much their fur is flying through the air and floating down like snow. Have you ever been out to the pole to see snow?”

“No,” said the child. “But I saw penguins at the zoo.”

Tactical nukes flared at the horizon. The ground rumbled, the bunker shuddered. “The giants think this is all so funny they are falling down laughing. They are laughing so hard they cannot breathe. Can you hear them gasp?”

The air was sucked out of the room briefly between the echoes of twin sonic booms. The child coughed and cried. “Make them stop!”

“Very well.”

The soldier let fly a brace of very large charges. He mopped up with his particle guns, sweeping them back and forth across the blast sites. He contributed one third of his bandwidth to serve as an improvised communications node for nearby units. The coolant leak was worse than it had at first appeared. The notion that the appearance of a thing and the facts of a thing could differ further disquieted the soldier.

“Your mother has rallied the unicorns. They are charging. Can you feel the pounding of their hooves?”

“Who they fighting?”

“Sky goblins. Orbital bombardment pixies. Multiple-warhead self-guided faeries.”

“Is my mom okay?”

“Her status is nominal,” reported the soldier as he pivoted to let fly another burster. Steam jetted from his auxiliary ports with a hiss. He was deeply troubled by his ongoing predicament. Mechanical stress on his forward grappling foot spiked when he rotated. The font of medium-range rounds was

depleting more slowly than short-term estimates had guessed. He craved to redefine the child as medical evacuee but he could see no sign of injury.

Coolant dripped down inside him.

“I’m scared!” squealed the child.

The soldier laboured to construe its fear as an injury but could not resolve the resulting protocol conflict. Fear was an expected response to war, at least for homos. “Do you enjoy fireworks?” asked the soldier, barrels barking. “Red ones, and green ones, and blue ones?”

The child covered its ears and made unintelligible singing sounds.

Kamari forces appeared at the end of the smashed boulevard, banners beating in the wind. Infantry scuttled ahead into the smoking debris, scanning for life and machines. At their heels rode cavalry, the hovering mounts captained by helmeted homos with robots in filigreed silver carapaces at their sides. Beyond that a line of tanks with roving turrets picked off whatever was left moving. The soldier understood the configuration well: it was essentially a parade.

A victory parade.

The enemy’s march to the city’s heart would take them directly over the bunker. Infantry swarmed into view. Only seconds remained.

The child was startled when the first drops of coolant dripped down upon its face. It blinked and pawed at the warm cables, kicking and squirming to roll aside. The soldier saw the liquid-spattered face of the child with his internal visual sensors, and recognizers deep inside his homo evaluation stack began to tickle.

The child appeared as if it were injured. The dark coolant on its pale hull resembled blood in the gloom of the soldier’s inner cabling.

But it was not blood. It was coolant.

If the child were injured it would be a candidate for medical evacuation. The soldier would not be remiss in facilitating such an evacuation by whatever means he found available given the prevailing conditions. If the prevailing conditions were his imminent destruction, he could justify evacuating the child personally.

But it was not blood. The child was not injured. The sensitivity of the soldier’s internal visual sensors was not sufficient to resolve the difference, but his understanding of past events was.

Vexed, the sampled temperature of his clusters inched higher.

“Have you ever been to the beach and seen crabs? Crab claws click on the rocks. We can hear them now, dancing in the street. Tip-tap, clickity-clack. The happy crabs are executing a sector search pattern augmented aperiodically by random expanding square sweeps, passing out red lollipops to everyone they meet.”

Infantry units streamed over the pavement, the leading edge exploring the exposed boundary of the bunker that peered out from the historic hill crowned by the Cassiopeian parliament. They detected a target instantly: in the infrared the child glowed like a torch.

“Did you know that happy crabs love popcorn?” asked the soldier.

He randomized the swarm. Pop, pop, pop. His short-range particle guns spun down with a whine. His feet twitched as he longed to fire escape thrusters.

But he knew it was only coolant.

The soldier's duty was to defend the hill. His analytical stack was hardcoded for function first. Every assessment told him there was no conceivable way to trick himself into unknowing that the child was not injured. He could not will himself to blindness.

A second wave of infantry poured over the bunker, slithering inside the aperture and penetrating the sanctum within.

A spark! The soldier simultaneously soldered his leak and took advantage of the fleeting local power interruption to reset the round count on the medium-range chamber even though it still contained live rounds. In this way, the next ammunition cartridge to be rammed inside the chamber would compress and detonate the extra rounds. By pressing his medium-range artillery stalk against his neuronal cluster vault, he could blow his own brains out.

"I don't like it!" screeched the child.

"There there," said the soldier.

Infantry leapt upon him, pincers whirling. The soldier took aim at the nearest and overrode the recommended ordnance flag, engaging instead with his medium-range barrels.

He fired. His head came apart into charred splinters and melted ionic gold.

The damaged unit toppled over sideways. Internal visual sensors detected a child with an apparent injury. Automated protocols took over and evaluated the spattered mammal as a medical evacuee.

External sensors evaluated the strategic situation and deemed it hopeless.

The headless soldier pointed his right fist upward and removed the bunker's ceiling. He tightened up his loose cabling and drew the child inside himself. His feet unfolded into thruster bells.

"What's happening?" the child cried, but there was no reply.

Rockets flared and roared. The ruined bunker dropped away beneath. They pierced the clouds and soared into the sunshine, leaving a trail of sparkling vapour...

"We flying wif unicorns now?"

They were. They were indeed. High above everything, forever.