Town and Gown

Cambridge, 2050 CE

Professor Harry Gunnar, of the University of Cambridge Biochemistry department, had not had the best of days. Sitting alone, hunched over his double Gin and Tonic, at a corner table in the RAF bar of the Eagle pub he felt the day's, and indeed his lifetime's, failings weighing heavily on his shoulders. It was here, almost a century ago, that his intellectual forbears Watson and Crick had announced to the world that they had 'discovered the secret of life', whereas he was struggling with what it felt like should be easy.

Now that energy and population worries had been solved, or at least deferred, food production was the hot button topic of the day and Gunnar found himself thrust, reluctantly, into the vanguard of the field. The difficulty was solving the problem in a way which those who were not interested in it would be happy with. Standing behind every bleeding-heart liberal who would quite happily shovel down any tasteless, textureless rubbish so long as it was basically nutritious and had a miniscule carbon footprint, were several dozen who insisted that if a meal did not have at least a few chunks of actual cow in it, then it wasn't really food. While the switch from coal to He-3 power went almost entirely unnoticed by the population, and it was very easy to switch seamlessly from petrol- to hydrogen-powered cars once the infrastructure was in place, people tended to be a bit fussier over their food. These two between them had sufficiently cut carbon emissions and the demand on the dwindling oil reserves to allow intensive farming methods a few extra years of life, but another way to feed the still growing, earthbound population had to be found and time was running out.

This unenviable task fell to Gunnar and his team, and they were starting to flounder. Whoever found a way to make tofu genuinely delicious would obviously be immediately awarded a Nobel Prize but until that time either something had to be found which Joe Public could accept without noticing, or a radically new method of farming would have to be developed.

Pincer-like, his team had been tackling both problems simultaneously. Early hopes that stem cells could be used to create edible muscle-mass indistinguishable from actual meat had fallen by the wayside, even if they had found a way to make perfectly decent *fois gras*. But aside from that, and the realisation that there were only so many cows you can watch explode before a) it stops being funny and b) you have to accept that there really is no way to genetically modify cows to emit less methane, they were precisely nowhere.

He sighed, staring at the lemon slice perched like some citrus Amundsen on the little mound of ice in the bottom of his glass, and contemplated whether it might be more comfortable swimming about in his third G&T of the evening.

Elsewhere, in the bar, Zac Tunn was also on a low. It was his fortieth birthday and had not been a good one. He was having a party at the weekend, so aside from a few salutatory texts from friends and relatives, along with the obligatory voicemail message from his parents, it hadn't been a particularly social day. And to cap it all he found that he didn't have enough carbon-ration coupons to buy both the steak and the imported bananas he wanted for banoffee pie so he couldn't even have the dinner he wanted.

It didn't help that his wife was now nagging him for another solar panel: if he could get his hands on the fellow who had managed to market them as the desirable household accessory for the chattering classes which they had become he'd ring his neck. Now he was a guy who got to have his cake and eat it - posing as one of the heroes of the low-carbon era, whilst positively raking it in at the same time.

On the plus side, his household bills were virtually zip and he even made a bit of extra on the side by selling back his summer surplus to the national grid. Similarly, transport costs were next to nothing: with almost every house in the country equipped with at least a half-dozen super-efficient iSun Panels, and the low costs of He-3 production (after the initial set up cost which was quite literally astronomical), meant that the electric, high-speed railway infrastructure could take one from London to Edinburgh for less than the cost of a bacon sandwich. Having said that, you could buy almost anything for less than the cost of a bacon sandwich these days.

So, if he looked on the bright side, which he seldom did, Zac was rolling in it but of course his wealth was worthless because he burned through his carbon ration at a rate of knots at the beginning of each month and then had to wait until the new credits were loaded onto his card in order to get anything worth having again. Fortunately, the Eagle stocked some pretty decent locally produced lagers, so he could drink to forget without worrying about any unpleasant emissions. Well, not until he had to go to the bathroom anyway.

A few of yards away, Gunnar was feeling a bit better. He couldn't deny that this was partly because of the accumulative effect of what was now a sextuple measure of gin, but it also had a lot to do with the fact that he had decided that none of this was his fault. He had decided, as men who find themselves put upon often do, to blame the government. It was they who had put an end to undirected scientific research, they who decreed that unless a line of reasoning or experimentation could be justified with cost/benefit graphs and quantified with success/failure criteria then it could not be followed.

This legislation, though popular with much of the electorate who were tired with 'Scientists Discover That Slippers May Cause Brain Tumours' type headlines, had a devastating effect on the scientific community. And while a few prominent government advisors had publicly raised objections at the time, they had found himself as janitors in former polytechnics before their words had even stopped being reprinted in editorials. After that most had kept their grumbles to themselves and started brushing up on their Powerpoint skills

so they could wow the Quangos to whom they now reported into leaving them the hell alone.

Even though it was only partly the truth, therefore, Gunnar found it very easy indeed to blame government interference for his lack of success. And this he found to be comforting. Although the gin helped. The gin helped a lot and he was starting to think that he might be able to take even more comfort in the incompetence of public servants if he were to buy another round of gin. He mulled the idea over in his mind, while simultaneously moving towards the bar and summoning the barman, just in case it turned out he needed him.

Meanwhile, Zac was fast coming to the same conclusions about the nation's illustrious leaders. The problem was, he felt, that they allowed themselves to be led by a minority of scientific advisors rather than the will of the people they were supposed to represent. Altogether too much time was spent worrying about cutting emissions - the so called 'War on Carbon' - that not enough was invested in making sure people had a good quality of life. Public transport might now be cheap, fast and reliable (at least compared to the standards of the beginning of the century), and he had money in his pocket, but who gave a damn about that?

They had even sent almost a million EU nationals into space in partnership with twelve other European nations to begin the first asteroid-based offworld colony. His brother had gone with them, volunteering in a fit of rash behaviour caused by a roughly equal combination of redundancy, a bad break-up and alcohol. It was a strange thing to think of: his brother living on a tiny chunk of rock, whizzing round the sun - so tiny it couldn't be seen with the naked eye.

Not like the others. You could look up at the moon and see the glittering of the massive biodomes of the Indian and Chinese offworlds - the source of the vast majority of the worlds He-3. One could even track the progress of Mars as it travelled through the sky each night, and imagine the US, Indian and Chinese colonies tussling for room on that red speck of light - already sending out probes to Jupiter and the outer planets. But the first European forays into space matched its stunted ambitions. Unlike the three genuine superpowers it had set its eyes on an invisible chunk of sky no one else wanted and without a great deal of fuss had established a twin for itself - now there were two places in existence where you could get a decent croissant and people gave a damn about the Euro. Big deal.

About one sixth of the Earth's population now lived in artificially created atmospheres and although the citizens of each new world shared far more in common with each other than with their parent nations they remained fiercely patriotic: it was said that every one of the US-Martians turned out to watch Super Bowl together - 'LIVE with only a one hour delay!' - and that the Indo- and Sino-Lunars were in serious competition with the scale of their Moon-day celebrations.

One billion humans in space, he thought, that must have cut carbon costs, surely. And still he couldn't get a banana! All that science and he was still hungry. When would all these professors get off their arses and do something. There was one in the corner - what was the man doing calmly drinking Gins and Tonic when he should have been solving his banana problem?

As all but the most fervent social revolutionaries must one day do, Gunnar had given up trying to blame the government for his problems. Instead, he had moved on to other candidates for his increasingly inebriated ire.

For a short time he had given serious thought to blaming his academic peers - but in his heart of hearts he knew that this impulse was driven entirely by jealousy. Professionally he had made a skill of never being in the right place at the right time and had moved from the biochemistry department at Imperial College London to his current post, just months before they, partnered with Harvard/MIT, Beihang University and the University of Delhi, had been given the multi-billion, multi-government biodome research contract. For six long years, he had watched as former colleagues and their new partners had won all the Nobel prizes every year except those for Literature (who gave a damn about that?) and Peace, although they'd even won that one year too. His own work, which had been among the best of his career had gone unnoticed and now that the smoke had cleared and they'd started awarding the damn things to other people he'd hit his intellectual nadir.

But even though all of this was, quite obviously, ludicrously unfair, it was not the fault of the scientists involved. Perhaps he could just blame everyone in general. One of the problems he had always thought, with the atheistic humanism he had always espoused was that it became difficult to blame God for your problems; it had never occurred to him that if in deism you could blame your deity, in humanism you could apportion blame equally among your fellow humans.

The public had never really understood the science of climate change, the difficulty of solving problems which they had caused: the over reliance on oil - now all but gone; the pumping of untenable quantities of CO2 into the atmosphere, long after science had told them that they really ought to stop; above all, the apparently ceaseless procreation. And science had solved these problems. They had invented Lunar He-3 mining, super-efficient solar panels, vegetable based plastics, offworld biodome technologies to enable a massive exodus into space, not to mention reliable contraception. Opposable thumbs be damned - if evolution had done one thing for *Homo Sapiens* it had given them the extraordinary ability to contrive solutions to problems - an ability which put humanity far beyond the reach of random evolution. Invention had usurped adaptation and one thing was certain: the next time the species evolved the process would be devised, planned and executed by its own hand.

Except the public would never wear it. They seemed to neither realise nor care how difficult all of this stuff was to do. And once done, failed to accept the provided solutions,

ploughing the furrow of their own folly until it was too late. All the solutions so far found had merely deferred the inevitable, but Gunnar was sure that global catastrophe could be averted. There would be a way. But if science couldn't win the hearts and minds of the public humanity would die clutching the unused tools of their salvation in their cold dead hands.

And a million years hence, higher civilisations would discover their remains and know that there but for the grace of good PR would go they.

Gunnar looked up from his bleary inner ravings and saw a man drinking pints at the bar and decided that maybe it could be all his fault.

The landlord of the Eagle had been watching two of his patrons closely - one in an ordinary suit of clothes, the other in academic robes - both getting quietly hammered. It was when he nipped into the back for a moment to help a colleague manoeuvre a barrel around the difficult bend in the corridor that he heard shouting and re-entered the bar to see the two men drunkenly swinging their fists at each other and falling over the furniture.

"Why can't you take a bit more responsibility?" the academic was shouting furiously to responses of "Why can't you just sort everything out?"

The landlord sighed and threw the two brawlers out into the street. He hated those university types. But, then again, he neither was he well disposed to those who lived in Cambridge without any affiliation to the university. That was his personal tragedy. He went back into the pub, turned the tables and chairs back into an upright position, and called time.

Meanwhile, Harry Gunnar and Zac Tunn staggered back to their respective homes. An evening's drinking had solved nothing. The next morning they would awake with headaches, their problems deferred, but compounded rather than solved and with dawn still a long way off.