

00 Slowmo Scikungfi

After he assassinated the Nowhere Man, the Ministry of Applied Pressure told Vincent Prague to go to hell. Subsequently he was appointed to the position of Anvil-in-Chief, the catbird's seat of special agents. "If he can off Nowhere, he can do anything," was the Ministry's belated logic.

Two MAP agents snuck into Prague's conapt to deliver the news. They wore standard MAP attire: Casablanca fedoras, photoelectric razorshades, sharply defined beetledream suits. They raided the refrigerator, set up a system of wiretaps, and tiptoed into the bedroom. Prague slept naked atop the covers in a fetal curl. His lips quivered like divining rods.

"Wake up, Mr Prague," barked an agent, chewing a piece of ginger broccoli. The other agent turned on the lights.

An alarm went off.

The alarm triggered an antigravity shockwave that lifted all bodies and objects not nailed to the floor into the air. Vincent Prague remained asleep. He didn't wake up until an agent hurled a throwing star at the alarm, silencing it in a plume of blue sparks. The star had been rigged to disavow the room's cavoritic conversion.

"Who's there?" said Prague. He bumped into the ceiling. "The lights are on."

The agents traded confused expressions. One droned, "Put us down, sir."

Prague smiled a crooked smile. "The lights are on," he reiterated.

Confusion slipped into consternation. The agents had never met Vincent Prague. But they knew of him. Skinny fella. Tall fella. Good killer. Shitty attitude.

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The agents' names—SAMSA 066 and SAMSA 067—scrolled around the belts of their fedoras in a pulsing LED libretto. Hanging comfortably in the air, SAMSA 067 clenched his fists. His knuckles cracked like popcorn. SAMSA 066 grinned and rearranged the nub of his tie. “We’re trained for combat in non-gravitational spatialities,” he said. “Hard or easy, Mr Prague. Either way you’re coming with us.”

Prague scratched an armpit. “Non-gravitational spatialities? What’re you, my grandmother?”

“Hard, then,” said SAMSA 067. SAMSA 066 flexed his jaw. “Have it your way.”

Lack of gravity rendered the consequent scikungfi fight a decidedly slow motion affair. The agents converged on Prague, swinging their arms in wide circles and using floating pieces of furniture, books, bongos, televisions for leverage. They moved forward like unmanned zeppelins. Arms neatly folded behind his back, Prague waited for them to get closer. At one point he snatched a graphic novel that floated by and thumbed through it.

Half a minute later the agents were almost within reach. Antennae and fossorial legs sprouted from their beetledream suits as they prepared to strike. They could kill him if they saw fit. They could even cut him into pieces. The MAP would reanimate and stitch his body back together. Prague had already been reanimated twice, once after being gunned down by a rival assassin, the second time during a friendly water balloon fight that went sour and turned into a hydrochloric acid war. Briefly he adopted a third-time’s-a-charm sensibility. But reanimation was a messy, tiresome business; he couldn’t be bothered with it. And he hadn’t scikungfi fought in antigravity for years.

“I’ll give you dipshits first crack,” Prague said. “Be nice now. I’m still half asleep.”

SAMSA 066 attacked with a snap kick. Prague didn’t move, didn’t even flinch—he let the kick land on his jaw. His head ricocheted off his shoulder and bounced back into place as the agent leisurely somersaulted by...

SAMSA 067 lashed out with an antenna that crackled and fizzed with electricity. The antenna sliced through Prague’s flesh like butter, claiming his right ear lobe. Toiletbowl blue globules of Victory brand gin floated out of the wound.

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Prague let it bleed.

“This is no way to treat a man in his birthday suit,” he said. Gripping the blade of a ceiling fan for support, he swung a knee into SAMSA 067’s groin. The agent squealed and slapped him across the face with an insect leg. Prague grabbed his balls and squeezed...The agent writhed, growled. They were eye to eye and his breath smelled of stale gasoline. Prague winced, released his balls and delivered two sharp fists to SAMSA 067’s chest. He pinwheeled away just as SAMSA 066, who had gained momentum by springing off a wall, returned for a second assault.

The agent pulled a Weird Science gat. Prague had seen the model before: a shiny steampunk raygun in quasinautical motif with radiator fins and Babbage bulbs. Brain-melting hardware. Possibly a zombification tube. Either effect suited him. As a teenager, he and his friends spent most of their time shooting themselves in the heads with rayguns. Better than sex. Better than pharmaceuticals. Almost better than virtuality. It took some getting used to, and a few friends permanently lobotomized themselves—Timmy McFarlin accidentally suicided, morphing his thinkball into a mushroom omelet. But generally the boys acclimatized to the neuroviolence. Prague took a special liking to it. He couldn’t function unless he shot himself in the face with an aether oscillator for no less than ten seconds eight times a day. A few stints in rehab cleaned him up. He wished he could go back, though. He’d do it all over, just the same.

“Put your hands up, Mr Prague,” said SAMSA 066.

“And if he doesn’t answer?” said Prague.

“Let me see those hands, Thin Man,” said the SAMSA.

“And if he still doesn’t answer?” said Prague.

SAMSA 066 frowned philosophically. “I simply say...^fBaby, oh baby, my sweet baby, you’re the one...^f”

Prague shook his head. “You silly asshole. Nobody puts Baby in a corner.”

When the agent floated within range, Prague snatched the gun from his hand and nailed him on the forehead with the handle, shattering the LED screen of his fedora. He hurled the gun at SAMSA 067, who languished in

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a ceiling corner. The weapon drifted end over end and innocuously bounced off of the agent's hip.

As the agents struggled to rally, Prague took a time out to dress his wound. He swam down to the floor, pulled himself across shag carpet to a mini-fridge and removed a spare ear, custom-made for his physiology and DNA. He kept spares of most of his external body parts in the mini-fridge. He had three more ears, two extra noses, a chin, fingers and toes, eight sets of genitals (male and female), several eyeballs, several eyebrows, and a handful of mouths. All costly items, but nothing that couldn't be negotiated by massive financial debt, ensuring that countless members of the postcapitalist universe were as good as Mr Potato Head.

In order to replace the sliced off lobe, Prague needed to hack off the remainder of his ear. He used a monofilament saw that cauterized the wound it made as the damaged ear curled off of his head like the skin of a pear. Teeth clenched, he held the replacement ear to the wound and waited for its minute, hungry roots to sink in...His brain became a worm farm. A torrent of flashbacks besieged him. A life passed before his eyes... He saw himself spit from the bearded mouth of a womb like a pinch of tobacco...He saw himself devouring a birthday cake and tearing through a jungle of crepe paper...He saw times tables, Sea Monkeys®, superscreens, monoliths...Yul Brynner in *Westworld*. His face fell off to reveal...legion of soldiers with goat heads goosestepping down the streets of City City...There was a deep, unrecognized, unprecedented kiss. He could hear the kiss over the screaming of the worms...Subtitles formed beneath his feet. He wore a pharaohic graduation gown that metamorphosed into a seersucker lounge suit. The subtitles read: *Sha na na na, sha na na na na*...Prague sitting behind a desk. Prague observing a pencil. Prague clocking out. Prague sailor-diving into a lake of fire...robotic drill sergeants and starship troopers and Continental Ops...mosaic of warzones from different time periods. Scikungfi fighting from here to eternity...image of a dimly lit red lamp in a motel room. In the bathroom, a toilet flushed...vista of Nowhere. The man fell to his knees and burned like a scarecrow...

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...the wound sealed over. Prague shook his head. Mnemonic vestiges broke apart, dissolved...He touched the ear. Tugged on it. No pain. No problem.

He stood.

Not only had the agents regained their composure, they were right behind him, reaching out for him. He could smell their oiled extremities.

Prague clapped his hands. The room flooded with gravitons.

Everything fell. The agents slammed into the floor like sacks of clay. SAMSA 067 was incapacitated by a television that landed on his head, cracking his skull. Heavy and dense as a boat anchor, the television was an old, refurbished '59 Silvertone Suburbanite. SAMSA 066 dizzily got to his feet. Kinked legs folded back into his suit. He took off his razorshades. He looked at his partner. He looked at Prague.

“One of these days I’ll have to get a futuristic TV,” said the Anvil-in-Chief. “Thing is, I only buy vintage.”

SAMSA 066 blinked. “What happened?”

“It’s the clapper. New twist on an old hat. But you ain’t seen nut’n honey.” Prague clapped his hands again, twice.

Realtme slipped into fasttime.

SAMSA 066 had limited experience in fasttime. To become an agent of the Ministry of Applied Pressure, he endured countless hours of requisite irrealtime training. But that was long ago, and he had never been in a fasttime fight on the job. He resembled a crash test dummy in a windstorm as Prague rained blows all over his body and the agent twitched groaned flailed and Prague attacked with an arsenal of martial arts moves karate tae kwon do kung fu jeet kune do judo aikido escrima hapkido muay thai t’ai chi ninjutsu all the major styles were represented including a few esoteric forms vale tudo capoeira krav maga dim mak pankration mu tau shootboxing all reinforced by a staunch wuxia ethos and he concluded with a Mr Miyagi sandblaster followed closely by a token Bruceploitation punch and finally a *daikaiju* blaster which hit SAMSA 066 like a big rig in maximum overdrive and the agent’s ribcage fractured into hundreds of pieces the blow was so devastating and hideous and his body hit the floor and spun around and

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around and around and the agent squeaked something and then everything was still and silent and peaceful for a second or two.

A vidphone rang like an Uzi.

Prague clapped fasttime back into realtime. The ring slowed down. He pushed an audio button on the vidphone console. "This is a recording," he said, and hung up.

He surveyed the bedroom. What a mess. He was a neat freak with the vaguest touch of OCD and the *mise en scène* didn't sit well with him. Leave it to the government to exacerbate a citizen's god-given disorder.

"Underwear," he intoned. A pair of pinstripe boxer briefs tumbled out of a closet. They scuttled across the floor and up his legs and snarled into place.

He took SAMSA 066 by the arm and dragged him into a corner, trying not to get the toothpaste that the agent bled on his skin. SAMSA 067 bled electric ants. In the universe of fashionized ultraviolence and reanimation, virtually everybody had swapped their blood for something chic, or at least something that wasn't blood, which is to say, something that didn't look like blood but contained all of its essential ingredients (with the addition of sundry varieties of Hamburger Helper). Many citizens had surrogated their organs with inanimate objects, too, ranging from fruits and vegetables to sand and stuffed animals. Prague wondered how SAMSA 067 afforded the ants. Posh dialysis by anyone's standards. A Victory gin martini was the best Prague could do on his embarrassing income. One day, in his own private Idaho, he hoped to upgrade to Hammer blood, the voguest artificial brand on the market. Or at least a martini mixed from Steinhäger.

SAMSA 066's mouth was a serrated hole. "You killed my partner," the hole wheezed. "You killed me."

Prague clicked his tongue. "They can rebuild you. They have the technology."

SAMSA 066 swore. And died.

The vidphone rang again. Prague watched it ring.

Fifteen rings later he answered the call.

Rabelais. Commodore Ronald Rabelais. General Assistant Managerial Choreographer of Mortal Affairs for the Ministry of Applied Pressure's

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Department of Anthropologism. He fizzled into view in the guise of Marvin the Martian. Prague's vidphone had a catatonic converter that portrayed callers as Looney Toon characters on its screen. What Looney Toon character it was depended on one's physiognomy, physique and personality, all of which were gauged by the teleanalytic finesse of the vidphone's Transparent Eyeball. Callers were cartoonized based on which character they looked and acted like the most. With Rabelais it was a no-brainer. Except for being Caucazoid, he sort of resembled Marvin the Martian in real life with his thin limbs, big eyes, and round head. He was a small man, too—a hairdo's breadth away from Lilliputian. And as long as Prague had known him, he had, like the Martian, always demonstrated a cosmic death drive and a steel-toothed love of thanatopsis.

"Ah, Vincent," chirped Rabelais in a muffled, kazoolike voice. "There you are." He stood center-screen in token broomhead hat, kilt and sneakers. Apropos his skin was jet black.

"Here I am," uttered Prague.

"Well then. I trust you're on your way out the door? They're waiting for you at the slaughterhouse. I hope my boys haven't given you any trouble. Boys will be boys."

Prague looked over his shoulder at the ramparts of the SAMsAs. "I don't think your boys'll be home for dinner, Pops."

Cdre Rabelais nodded gravely. "I see." He lifted his chin. He scratched his chin. He started to pace back and forth across the north pole of the little red planet beneath him. "Reanimation is a costly affair. Reanimation is a costly affair." He kept saying it.

Prague sighed. "Look. Spit it out. I'm out of one-liners and it's time for breakfast. Eggs and bacon. No toast." Was the Commodore really sore because he put two measly functionaries out of their misery, if only temporarily? Or was it the usual exhibition of short man's syndrome? Prague couldn't tell. He could never tell what was eating Rabelais. But he knew better than to assume a short man living under technopatriarchal constraints wasn't bitter to the core.

"It's OK, it's OK," said the Commodore dryly. "I promise not to cry."

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“I cry. I cry all the time. Have you seen my wardrobe? It’s a burlap factory in there.”

Cdre Rabelais stopped pacing, faced Prague, and forced a plastic grin. “At any rate, you know what this is about, yes? The MAP needs you. You’re back in. I need your magic, as the Bearded Walrus says. No questions asked. Figure it out.”

“What if I don’t want back in? I killed Nowhere. What did I get in return? Tupperware. Walking papers. A dick in the ass.”

Cdre Rabelais ripped off his hat and hurled it into space. His black, bald head disappeared into the onyx backdrop. “Get the fuck in here!” he exclaimed. “Do it! Do it! Do it! Do it!” Rabelais paused, collected himself. And in a soft voice: “Since I have you on the line, Vinnie, we might as well talk about a name. A codename, to be precise. New case, new name. Any ideas? There’s a team of ghostwriters brainstorming as we speak. We can’t have you walking around like a plebe with your real name. You need an artificial name.”

Prague stuck out his lips. “I’ve got an artificial name. Call me...Prague. Call me Codename Prague. My real name will be the mark of my artificiality—the ultimate disguise.”

Fighting off another outburst, Rabelais closed round white eyes. “Right. Hm. I’m not sure if that sobriquet does the trick. Identity is a delicate matter. Let’s not rush the matter. Let’s—”

Marvin the Martian disappeared. THE END, read the grey screen of the vidphone.