



PRIMORDIAL SOUP

4,853 words

This was another story originated by my writing partner, Michael Cope. It unlocked a whole universe of characters and ideas that we spent hours creating and had lots of fun with.

The concept of evolved animals, complete with all their idiosyncrasies, is ripe for ideas.

It is very much like a Terry Pratchett/Red Dwarf crossover style comedy which certainly has the potential to become a novel and, if fact, has a few trial chapters written already.

Maybe one day.

PRIMORDIAL SOUP

The cockpit of the space freighter *The Millennium Canary* was dark, the only light coming from a small holographic display in the central console, a silvery light produced by a miniature galaxy spinning slowly on its axis. These three dimensional cosmological representations were known as navigation tanks and under normal circumstances were extraordinarily sophisticated pieces of technology used by spaceships to navigate the vast swathes of interstellar space. This particular tank, however, was about as sophisticated as a fish tank.

“This ‘ere av tank,” the seven armed, three headed Altairian salesman had enthused, “is yer basic twenty fird century state-of-the-art navigation system, and I'd be cuttin' me own froat, guv, if I let you 'ave it for anyfink less than a monkey.”

An Altairian is a kind of cross between an octopus and a slug, hailing from a system 16 light years from Earth. The fact that this extraterrestrial being was talking to Ethan Jones in a broad cockney accent should have seemed suspicious. What Jones failed to notice was that this questionable piece of space technology was about 99% space and only 1% technology. Even when Jones unwrapped the nav tank, he didn't think the ‘*Made in Taiwan*’ sticker was odd. The incongruous addition of an arrow with the dubious text ‘YOU ARE HERE’ arbitrarily pointing to the edge of one spiral arm certainly should have alerted him to the doubtful authenticity of his purchase. Unfortunately, Jones, owner and pilot of the *Canary* and erstwhile inhabitant of that small insignificant planet known as Earth, wasn't known to be the brightest star in the cluster.

As the freighter bore through the interstellar void, Jones was reclining in his special pilot's chair snoring happily, his *Mars Mets* baseball cap tilted over his eyes. Several empty beer bottles

littered the floor around his chair; Black Hole Bitter, heavy gravity beer. He had once got his little finger stuck in the end of a bottle and due to the time dilation effects, his nail was five years younger than the rest of him.

In the co-pilot's seat was a large ginger tomcat, about twice the size of a normal domestic cat. He was also asleep and his legs were twitching to the rhythm of his dream. He had taken to wearing his own baseball cap backwards to fit with the revival of the early twenty first century fashion adopted on Earth by an intellectually subnormal species of the period. The slogan on the front of the cap announced: 'I LOVE PUSSY.'

The single metal door at the back of the cockpit slid up into its roof recess with a dull metallic thud. Neither of the cockpit's recumbent occupants stirred at the sound. Moments later a huge nine-foot tall insectoid creature reminiscent of a cockroach crept from the shadows. Its black carapaces gleamed in the half-light as its gnashing mandibles produced an ever-present mucus which cascaded onto the floor in pools of drool. As it progressed towards the two sleeping figures, its multitude of spiny protuberances scraped against the bulkhead in a syncopated rhythm with its bony feet clicking on the metal floor plates. The sound was not unlike a jazz percussionist using brushes on a snare drum.

The cockroach eventually arrived at a point between the two seats and, without waking either cat or human, reached out its long jointed arms. Its mandibles extended in anticipation of its prize as a length of drool dangled from the mouthparts and hung precariously over the cat's head. The insect edged another inch further to grab the object it sought and in so doing caused the silvery thread to detach itself and fall on the cat's head. The cat jerked awake and looked up into the big

black eyes, snapping mandibles and agitated swishing antennae of a very large intimidating arthropod.

“Jesus, Ralph,” the cat growled. “Are you trying to give me a coronary?”

The cockroach made a strangled sound and then, in a synthetic voice not unlike the British actor Noel Coward, said, “Apologies, my dear Red. Didn't mean to dribble on you, old boy!”

The cat noticed the cockroach was holding a joint in his claw. One of *his* joints. He hissed angrily at the insect. “You've been thieving my special smokes again.”

“I say, steady on there, old chap,” Ralph said, taking a slight step back.

The sight of a nine-foot insect retreating before the wrath of a three-foot feline seemed almost comical to Jones who had been woken by the commotion. And if the spectacle of a giant cockroach named Ralph with a theatrical bent arguing with a big domestic ginger cat named Red with a superiority complex seemed in any way out of the ordinary, he didn't show it.

“What have I told you about smoking my chuffin' cigs?” Red snapped. “Insects don't smoke.”

“Oh classic pot/kettle juxtaposition vis-à-vis the monochromatic accusation,” Ralph said, haughtily. The cockroach placed the cigarette into a long ebony holder. “Anyhow, I like to pose with them. Part of my actor image, dear boy.”

Jones tilted his cap back. “Hey, it's a roach smoking a roach,” he teased and dissolved into a fit of giggles.

Ralph snorted. “Oh Jones, you're so bally, well... unevolved.”

Ralph and Red were products of late third millennium technology. Ralph was an evolved arthropod with an actor/lovey complex and had begun his new life treading the proverbial theatrical boards. It was his mission to bring Shakespeare to his multilegged cousins.

His *Macbeth* had been a triumph; *'Is this a fly swat I see before me?'*

His *Julius Caesar* was magnificent; *'Beetles, dragonflies, cockroaches, lend me your spiracles.'*

However, his interpretation of the Shakespeare sonnets for dung beetles was his ultimate achievement. *'Shall I compare thee to a pile of shit?'*

Red lit one of his joints with a lighter they had wired into the freighter's console. They had rescued it from a 1986 Ford Mustang. The cat had drawn the line at the Garfield soft toy stuck to the window. He had said it was demeaning to his species.

The whole of the ship was an eccentric mixture of influences stretching back eight centuries. Jones was a big fan of that particular tasteful style on Earth known as late twentieth century tat. The cockpit was a collection of leopard skin print seat covers, flock wallpaper and tacky velvet lampshades. The directional mechanism had been replaced with a 1970's steering wheel from a Dodge Challenger and from the ceiling hung two deeply spiritual symbols of the era known as furry dice.

Red held his joint between two extended claws. "Hey, Jones, how long till I get that bloody opposable thumb, anyway?" he asked.

Jones activated a computer screen in the console and brought up a graph entitled *Cat Evolution at Standard Evolvin Dosage*. "About another six months."

"Six chuffin' months," the cat complained, his ears pricked in annoyance.

"Oh, come on," Jones said. "You're a talking cat, for God's sake. A year ago you were just an ordinary ginger tom."

The cat blew a smoke ring and jabbed a paw at Jones. "I was *never* just an ordinary ginger tom," he said. "Not only do I talk but I know more about quantum physics and astro navigation than you'll ever know. If I wasn't on board you'd never get this rust bucket off the ground."

Jones smiled and said, "Ten percent Siamese, one hundred percent arrogant bastard."

"Ten percent chimpanzee," Red countered, "one hundred percent witless white ape."

"Hey," Jones protested, jabbing a finger back at the cat. "It was us witless white apes who invented this Evolvin. If it wasn't for us you'd still be licking your own genitals."

"I still *am* licking my own genitals," Red said, laughing. "Face it, Jonesy, you'd be licking yours if you could."

Jones hated cat laughter. There was just something so condescending about it. He wasn't entirely sure that he would still like Red in six months. But, then again, he wasn't entirely sure that Red would like him either. Evolvin™ would take the cat to the top of the feline evolutionary curve and evolved cats were generally an arrogant, racist bunch.

An opposable thumb was a dangerous thing and the point of no return for any evolved creature attaining sentience. Evolvin, the evolutionary accelerator, could bless animals with all manner of evolutionary knick-knacks. Unfortunately, they retained definitive elements of their animalistic nature. For example, getting a treadmill at the gym was a virtual impossibility because of the evolved hamsters and tortoises monopolized most of the public transport jobs. Evolvin, was a banned substance in the galaxy now but that didn't stop Jones, Red and Ralph smuggling the stuff.

"Hey, you could up *your* dose of Evolvin, Ralph," Red told the insect. "You might evolve mouthparts that can smoke."

“Oh yes, you'd love that wouldn't you?” Ralph responded, tersely. “Last time I overdosed I devolved, it took you a week to get me out of the waste system and another week for me to get rid of the taste of Jones' poo.”

Jones laughed. “And remind us what you eat now, Ralph.”

Ralph's mandibles trembled with indignation. “For your information it happens to be vitamin enriched mulch.”

“Roughly translated,” Jones said. “Shit!”

“Hey, vitamin enriched mulch happens,” Red said, laughing.

Jones opened a small door in the bulkhead that turned out to be a fridge compartment with an assortment of cool beers. He selected a bottle of Saturn ale. It was so called because it was cold, gassy and left rings under your eyes the following morning.

“That reminds me of the day my brother came home to find that his wife had overdosed on Evolvin,” Jones said. “It's tricky stuff. One gram over the prescribed dose and bam! Devolution - ten million years of evolution undone.” He grinned at the memory. “Oh God, was she positively simian?” Ralph asked.

“Simian? She was practically Liverpudlian. How would you feel if you came home to find your vintage collection of Penthouse magazines being eaten by a twenty stone orangutan singing, ‘*Ferry cross the Mersey*’?”

“Well, if the magazines had centre-spreads of hornets with sexy antennae and their ovipositors engaged, I'd be sorely disappointed,” Ralph said.

“*WARNING!*” The nav tank suddenly announced. “*WARNING!*” The lights in the cockpit flashed blue and a loud claxon sounded. “*Destination achieved. Dropping out of warp. The external*

temperature is a mild 273°C below zero with a light cosmic precipitation. Have a pleasant axial rotation period.”

Red hated the new navigation system. The grating voice reminded him of the robot in an old Earth show, *Lost in Space*. *“Danger Will Robinson, that repetitive action will seriously impair your eyesight.”*

“Jesus, Jonesy,” Red complained. “Couldn't we have just bought a Galaxy A to Z instead of this pile of junk?”

“Hey, this is state of the art,” Jones retaliated.

“High tech nav tanks are rarely sold out of suitcases by shifty looking Altairian octoslugs with cockney accents.”

“Well it got us here, didn't it?” Jones said, activating the view screen. Ahead of the ship was a huge letter W suspended in space, one hundred miles long and fifty miles high. Beneath the letter was a counter counting up rapidly from ten million. On an equally massive sign below the counter were the words:

NUMBER OF WING YIP RESTAURANTS IN THE KNOWN GALAXY

“Their fried rice is legendary in three thousand systems,” Jones told them.

“They invented the time travel fortune cookies, dear boy,” Ralph said. “The cookie travelled forward in time to see what would happen to the customer and then returned with the information. It didn't work though. Predictions like: *Your husband is going to leave you for an evolved sheep named Doris, or You're going to lose a physical extremity in a mincing machine*

accident, were not conducive to a healthy appetite. They went back to the comforting vagueness of, *You're going to meet a tall dark stranger*.

"So Jonesy," Red began, "Why are we smuggling Evolvin to the Wing Yip restaurant chain?"

"Well, I should think bigger chickens would be a definite advantage," Ralph suggested.

"It's not merely a case of bigger, Ralph," Red explained. "You should know better than that. Evolvin will make them smarter too. Complete with..." Red waved his paws around trying to think of the right word.

"Idiosyncrasies?" Ralph offered.

"Yeah, those too," Red said. "Remember the goldfish problem. Evolvin made them bigger and smarter but did nothing to help their memory span which is about five seconds."

It had made all the newscasts at the time. Thousands of goldfish had gone on a protest march.

"What do we want?"

"Longer memories."

"When do we want them?"

Then they all just stopped mid chant and stared blankly at each other.

"When do we want what?"

"Damned if I know."

"Why are we here, holding these placards?"

"Beats me. What does the placard say?"

"Something about memory span."

"We could certainly do with longer memories."

"Perhaps we should protest for it."

“Good idea.”

“What do we want?”

“Longer memories.”

“When do we want them?”

“When do we want what?”

“Damned if I know.”

And so it went on.

It was the same for evolved chickens. The JFC fast food chain wanted them for their chicken boulders, but evolved chickens, because of their previously mundane factory farmed existence, became radically hardcore. They just wanted to do drugs, snowboard and BASE jump all the time.

“I should imagine in the case of evolved chickens that incipient sentience tends to resist slaughter,” Ralph speculated.

“You're wrong, my six-legged friend,” Jones said. “Slaughter wasn't the problem. The chickens were accidentally killing themselves all the time, but they were just mashing themselves up, and Jupiter Fried Chicken were finding so much draw, zine, and hammer in their systems that their chicken boulder meal was a Class A controlled drug on a hundred worlds.”

“Which brings me back to my original point,” Red said. “What does Wing Yip want with it?”

Jones was shuffling in his chair, looking decidedly guilty about something. “Lads, I have a confession to make.”

Before he had time to come clean, another alarm claxon cut in. This time red light flooded the cockpit as the nav tank announced – *WARNING! WARNING!*

“I am assuming a red light in this instance relates to a potentially hazardous development in our mutual circumstances,” Ralph said, clicking his mandibles with agitation.

Jones began frantically throwing switches and jabbing at buttons on the console, punctuating each action with a curse and a prayer. Just as he managed to silence the first alarm, another alarm started in, filling the cockpit with a cacophony of noise.

“I recognise that alarm,” Red cried.

“No, no, it's not what you think,” Jones said. “It must be a short circuit.”

“In a ship where a long circuit is a rarity, old bean,” Ralph drawled, sarcastically.

“Jonesy!” Red hissed. “It's the shark alarm. What the hell's the shark alarm going off for?”

Jones laughed nervously. “Don't be ridiculous. The shark alarm is completely different, kinda goes wee-woo wee-woo. This is more phenarr phenarr phenarr.”

The sharks had been Evolvin's biggest failure. Most evolved animals were eccentric but generally well-adjusted. There were a few exceptions. Ants, despite giving them a planet of their own, still insisted on illegally squatting in people's kitchens and eating their sugar. Evolved spiders had taken to pulling the legs off humans in retaliation for thousands of years of abuse. However, sharks were a different proposition altogether. To a species disposed to eat just about anything that wasn't nailed down, the term well-adjusted didn't apply. Evolved sharks were like serial killers with lots of teeth and absolutely no sense of humour.

Because of their violent nature the sharks had been exiled from Earth, but they were still out there, in the galaxy. There were probably only a million of them, but they were at the apex of their evolutionary curve, and really, really pissed off.

Jones had managed to stop the claxons and exchange the red light for a more pleasing yellow but before he could bluff his way out of the situation the nav tank burst into life again.

“Sorry about this but, WARNING! WARNING! Shark dreadnought approaching off the port beam and activating its weapons systems. It is very probable that the ship will be blown apart and you will find yourselves floating in space. Fortunately, the external temperature is a mild 272 degrees below zero and the background radiation is moderate. I would advise a factor four thousand sunscreen.”

Ralph scratched at one of his antennae. “What are the sharks doing in this region of space, old boy?”

“They started a network of gun-running, drugs and protection rackets in the area after becoming obsessed with twentieth century gangster films,” the cat said, crossing his arms and glaring at Jones. “Jonesy, Wing Yip really don't want twenty tons of Evolvin, do they?”

Jones shook his head sheepishly.

The three smugglers watched in fascination as a huge space dreadnought shaped like a 1930's Cadillac grew on the view screen.

A light flashed on the console. “They're hailing us,” Red said.

“Ignore them,” Jones said. “Maybe they'll go away.”

“As a general philosophy,” Ralph began, “I think you'll find that line of thinking is flawed.”

Light exploded around the freighter as several laser blasts scarred the hull.

“Point taken,” Jones said. “Best we answer them.”

The heads of three evolved sharks replaced the image of the space ship on the screen. They were wearing trilbies and pinstripe suits. The one in the middle was evolved from a great white

and obviously the boss. He wore sunglasses and was sitting in a high backed chair. The one on the right was evolved from a tiger shark. He had a cigarette sticking out of the corner of his mouth and a noticeable eye tick. The one on the left was evolved from a hammerhead shark and having a head shaped like a hammer meant he was probably the thug of the three.

The one in the centre opened his mouth, displaying a row of gold teeth as he spoke. "Dis is da sharks. Dey call me Whitey. I'm da boss. My coyllagues 'ere are. . ."

"Don't tell us," Red interjected. "Tiger and Hammer."

"Hey, youse hear dat?" Whitey said. "Dey heard of youse boys."

"I see sharks don't possess a sense of irony," Ralph said.

"Face it, Ralph, irony was never going to be an evolutionary imperative for a shark weighing a ton with a million teeth and a nondiscriminatory appetite," Red said.

"I see your point, old chap," Ralph said.

"Prepare to be boided," Whitey said.

"Did he say boided?" Ralph asked.

"Dat's whadda said, youse fargin cocker-roach," Whitey growled.

"I think you'll find you mispronounced my species, sir," Ralph said.

Tiger took the cigarette out of the corner of his mouth and brandished it at the screen. "Hey, youse gotta watcha youse mouth, youse maggot farmer."

Ralph's antennae bristled at the implication. "I'll have you know I am a respected thespian and do not engage my talents with the agricultural cultivation of the larval stage of my arthropod cousins."

Whitey turned to Hammer. "Whad he say?"

Hammer shrugged, which for a species that doesn't possess shoulders was no easy task. "Dunno boss. I t'ink he's toykin' cocker-roach."

Tiger's eye twitched. "Hey bug, youse bedder start showin' some respect or we gonna pay youse family a visit, unnerstan'?"

"I say, that would be awfully sweet of you," Ralph said. "But I feel I must mention that the scale of your task would be somewhat prohibitive due to the fact that I have approximately six million brothers and seven million sisters. Still, it's the thought that counts, what!"

Red slapped his head in disbelief. "I hate to break up this heartwarming exchange but shouldn't we be trying to escape."

Jones punched a button and the freighter lurched away from the shark ship only to be brought to a grinding halt, throwing the three of them off balance.

"Too late," Jones said. "They've engaged their tractor." Back on the screen was the shark dreadnought and emerging from its trunk was a huge agricultural machine from which a grapple line reached out to the Millennium Canary.

"Jesus," Red said. "It really is a tractor. Sharks are way too literal."

Jones suddenly jumped up and ran through the crew's quarters towards the cargo hold at the rear of the freighter. The cat and the roach followed closely behind. In the cargo hold there were the three large vats that supposedly contained the Evolvin.

"I think now is the time for that confession," Red said. "I have a sneaking suspicion that those tanks do not contain Evolvin."

Jones lowered his head shamefully. "Soup."

The cockroach tilted his head at the human. "Why would Wing Yip employ us to smuggle soup? I mean it's a freely available commodity and..."

"Ralph! Shut up," Red growled, his tail swishing angrily. "There's more. Go on, Jonesy."

"It's a special kind of soup," Jones explained. "Very rare. Worth a fortune."

"More than Evolvin?" Red said.

"Much more," Jones said. "Ironically, Evolvin has driven the price of this particular soup through the roof."

"How can soup be such a sought after merchandise?" Ralph wanted to know.

"It's very difficult to come by," Jones said.

"Tell me it's the kind of soup that sharks like," the cat pleaded. "And this is nothing more than a simple hijacking."

"It's not exactly made *for* sharks," Jones lamented. "It's kinda... er... made *out* of sharks."

"Good heavens," Ralph groaned. "You mean shark soup?"

"Oh no, nothing that bad, just shark's fin soup," Jones clarified.

"Oh that's okay then," Red shouted, sarcastically. "Not dead shark soup, just dismembered shark soup. For a moment there I thought we were in real trouble." Red buried his head in his paws. "We are so dead."

"Not if I can dump the stuff first," Jones said.

Before he could open the valves to space, there was a heavy thunk of metal on metal against the hull of the freighter as it was pulled alongside the shark's dreadnought. Moments later the door of the freighter's hold exploded inwards in a shower of sparks. Making a dramatic entrance the three sharks waddled in looking very big, very mean and very cross.

Ralph clapped his claws. "I say gentlemen, excellent entrance, reminds me of my part in the insect war blockbuster, *An anthill too far*. There I was with Sir Alec Guinness. Roll-me-one Kenobi we used to call him, well there we were..."

"Ralph!" Red hissed. "Not now."

"Sorry Red, old boy, I get carried away." The cockroach took a tentative step backwards. Something suddenly occurred to him. "Perhaps I could offer my services as diplomatic liaison between ourselves and the sharks, re: the extraction of our good selves from present perilous predicament. I'm sure they are reasonable fellows."

"A reasonable shark is an oxymoron, Ralph," Jones whispered.

The cat shook his head wearily. "Ralph, we're dead anyhow, if we let you represent us they'll probably torture us first."

At the mention of torture, Hammer brightened. "I like da sound of dat. Hey boss, can I bite der legs off?"

Whitey slapped Hammer's head. "Whad's wrong wid youse, dummy. We're evolved now, moron, we don't do dat Jaws stuff no more. We gotta chain saws for dat."

"Gee, sorry boss."

"Tiger, check out da soup," Whitey said.

"Sure t'ing boss." Tiger waddled over to one of the vats and lifted the hatch. He frowned, an expression that only another shark would recognise because to everyone else sharks look like they're constantly frowning.

"Er boss, dis like shark's fin soup, looks a liddle fishy to me."

Ralph whispered conspiratorially to Red. "I would say that that was the whole point, old bean, wouldn't you?"

To the horror of the other sharks, Tiger dipped his fin into the soup and tasted it.

"It, y'know, er, tastes like chicken. In fac', it's priddy good, like my momma, y'know, yusta make. I mean, it don't look good wid, like, da liddle fins, like, y'know, swimmin' abowd innit."

Red sprang up to a platform over the tank to take a look. There were little fins gliding around the surface of the soup. "Jones, you halfwit, I can't believe you thought shark's fin soup actually had little fins swimming around in it. I'm guessing you got this soup from the same source as the navigation system?"

"No," Jones said. "Well, not exactly... okay, yes."

Red reached down into the tank and lifted one of the fins from the soup. Attached to the fin was a gerbil in an aqualung and flippers, his legs still paddling away in the cat's grasp. Red fixed Jones with an accusing eye. "You are going to get us killed for twenty tons of chicken soup filled with gerbils in fancy dress."

Realising it was no longer in the soup, the gerbil stopped paddling and removed its mask. "Who's paying us for this, pal. It's union rates, you know, double time for weekends, and all the toilet roll tubes we can chew."

In the background the sharks were laughing hysterically. Jones decided he didn't like the sound of shark laughter either.

"Whadda we goin' to do wid em boss?" Tiger asked.

"You let us go," Ralph said.

Whitey stopped laughing and eyed the cockroach menacingly. "An' why would we wanna do dat, bug?"

Ralph produced a folded slip of paper. "It says so here."

"Whad's dat?"

"I had a meal at a Wing Yip restaurant last week," the insect explained. "I was entertaining a fan you know, have to maintain contact with my public."

"Ged on wid it, bug," Tiger growled.

"Of course, forgive me, dear boy," Ralph said. "You know they do the time travel fortune cookies."

"Whad abowd it."

"The point is I had this time travel fortune cookie." Ralph unfolded the paper. He took out a pair of half-moon glasses and propped them on what would have been a nose had he been any other species. "Let me see, it says... *Attacked by three very scary yet strikingly handsome and I dare say famous sharks.* That would be you three gentlemen?"

"Uncanny," Whitey said, smoothing his lapels.

"There's more," Ralph said. "*Shark Fin soup is really chicken soup containing gerbils with stick-on fins swimming in it.* Yes, I would say that adequately explains this present fiasco would you not agree gentlemen?"

"Hey, yeah," Tiger agreed.

"Dat's priddy accurate," Hammer said.

Ralph raised a claw. "There is one last line. It says... *Sharks feel sorry for dumb smugglers because they are too stupid to kill and at least they gave the sharks a great laugh so they decide to*

let them go. Ralph took off his glasses and folded the piece of paper. "So you see, gentlemen, this came from the future after you had already let us go. If you don't, you risk causing a universe ending paradox."

"Dat's trully amazing," Whitey said. "If we already let youse go in da future den I guess we bedder led youse go so we avoid this pair of socks thing youse spoke of."

"Hold it, boss," Tiger intervened. "Dey connin' you."

Ralph's ever gnashing mandibles froze mid gnash. Red's tail suddenly became very bushy and Jones, being a human and not having such outward expressions of fear simply squeezed his buttocks a little tighter.

"Youse t'ink youse so smart, huh?" Tiger said. "But I'm more smarterer. I knows and youse knows it ain't de future yet."

"Hey, yeah, good t'inking, Tiger," Whitey acknowledged. "It ain't da future till I says it's da future." The three smugglers relaxed except Jones who was afraid to relax too much. For the next ten minutes the smugglers and sharks stared at each other. Ralph was patiently tapping his foot on the deck plate.

"Hey, bug?" Whitey prompted.

"Yes sir."

"When is it da future?"

Ralph looked at a wristwatch on one of his arms. "In ten seconds... five, four, three, two, one. Okay it's the future now."

"Okay, youse can go now," Whitey said. "But only cause we already led youse go in the future unnerstan' otherwise we woulda had to eat ya like."

“Of course, dear boy,” Ralph said. “Goes without saying.”

The sharks left the freighter and presently the dreadnought sped off into space leaving the freighter alone.

“Great going, Ralphy,” Red said. “But I don’t remember you having a meal at a Wing Yip restaurant last week.”

The cockroach flipped open the blank piece of paper. “Sharks may be known for their teeth, dear boy,” he said, and mimicking the boss shark, he added. “But dey ain’t known for der smarts.”

Jones, almost weak with relief, said, “Chicken soup anyone?”

As Jones took a good slurp, Red said, “I’ll pass. I don’t like croutons.”

The gerbil said, “What croutons?”

Jones looked up, his pallor abruptly pale. “Then what are these little chewy round things?”

Realisation dawned on Jones’ face just as the gerbils erupted into laughter. God, how Jones really, really hated gerbil laughter.

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