

We arrive at the same time, though not together. Furtive glances are exchanged, secret signs flashed. We each know the other to be a threat, though we are united in the urgency of our purpose, and for this reason we set aside our fears and speak plainly of our terrible designs. Before we can but introduce ourselves, we are interrupted by a flash of light in the distance. Once, twice, three times; our contact has bid us approach. Through coarse sand we trudge from dune to dune, until nearly we stumble into the half-buried mouth of a cave. Quickly we are surrounded, bound and gagged, and blindfolds are placed over our eyes. Our guide utters words in an unfamiliar language, and firm hands lead us to what may be our doom.

The passage is narrow. We descend for countless paces, and I begin to suspect that time has little sway in these reaches. After what could be minutes or hours, the blindfolds are removed and our bonds cut. We are somewhere unknown, a place long forgotten by the living world. Shadowy figures linger at the fringes of the room, illuminated by the flickering of some dozen candles. As we approach the dark altar the air grows still, and the figures step forward one by one to bear mute witness to this macabre sacrament. A sacrifice has been prepared this night, an offering to consummate our joining into this unholy sect.

(The room smells of... cuddlefish? Curiouser and curiouser...)

The leader approaches, his face and form shrouded beneath a cloak of darkest night. There is a worshipful atmosphere now, though the subject of this reverence is not entirely clear. From the voluminous folds of his robe the Prophet produces a simple sheet of parchment. This he lays on the altar, angled such that its contents might be examined by all. *A couple, nondescript – though one is obviously female – face one another across a table set for two. The female’s chair rocks forward as she scribbles frenetically, perhaps on paper. The crude illustration leaves much to the imagination. Words sprout from the mouths of these person-forms. At the bottom is an inscription, at the top a one word title: Date.*

The Prophet C’arl turns to address us. “You who would be found worthy: here is your victim.”

“May it suffer well”, the audience intones.

I take the lead, offering what little comes to mind. “Well, first off, he shouldn’t have titled it Date. That’s the most obvious thing. I mean, where else is the humor supposed to come from? You see the couple, they’re talking about what their kids might look like, right? And I guess that’s funny because at the end you realize they’re biologists, and this is their first date, and isn’t it crazy that this is what they’re talking about? But the title ruins it, because from the start you know they’re on a date, and not married or something.”

(As one the crowd murmurs, a susurrus of ill portent. Happily, I am not eviscerated on the spot.)

I press on. “The dialogue isn’t bad. I mean, it flows pretty well, except for this one part. The girl, she uses the word ‘make’ in reference to having children. Most people would say ‘have children’. Even really socially awkward people would say it that way. It’s just a natural construct.”

A voice issues forth from the surrounding throng. “Come now! Perhaps this is intended to be humorous. They are biologists; could it not be that they intend to literally *make* life? This is not poor dialogue, it is good dialogue in disguise! You are all blind to the subtle wit of Lord Rand-”

As if from nowhere a dagger appears in his chest, and his blasphemy is cut short. He falls to his knees with a groan. Two guards grasp his arms and drag his body from the room. I try to swallow, but my throat has gone dry.

My companion steps in, eager to avoid the dead man’s fate. “*Everything* is wrong with this! Look at them, they’re floating out of their goddamn chairs! Nobody would ever have this conversation. He says that thirty percent of biologists do this. That’s *bullshit*! It’s a stupid made up number, and he made it up because he’s stupid! I bet the girl is Megan, and he’s supposed to be the guy, because that implies they’re going to have sex. Isn’t that a disgusting thought? I bet he’s masturbating furiously to it right now! And gods above, Punnett squares?? Punnett squares are probably the lamest thing in the entire fucking universe! If I had parents this lame, I’d have better-than-even odds of fucking killing myself!”

(Dead silence. Then, someone speaks. To my surprise, I discover that it is me.)

“Well, I guess you could think that, but aren’t you reaching a bit? It could probably be worse. Like the one I heard about last week, with all the butts and boobs. At best, this one’s mediocre.”

“It’s doesn’t offer anything good!” His voice has become a shout. “If it were mediocre, it would at least make you glad you’d seen it! This is nothing but a disgusting, *worthless pile of shit*!”

My companion’s hand has gone to the hilt of his knife. I notice that mine has done the same. The room has become a spinning blur. At the edge of my vision I see the crowd begin to encircle us, and I realize that the rite is nearing its completion. I let out a howl of rage as the two of us charge blindly at one another. In a moment, one of us will be dead. The other will join the fold. Before my bloodlust consumes me completely, I wonder which is the lucky one.