

## **Everynowhere**

*Peace. Quiet. Not one non ripple out of sync. A perfect, perpetually revolving non spiral. So overwhelmingly smooth the tiny non blots here and there barely register.*

*In a realm so removed from human comprehension that their languages won't describe it, the entity that translates as Central Awareness Tensor savors the blink of bliss.*

*Bliss is precious. It never lasts. Any moment now, a subentity will clamor for action.*

*They can't get enough of their silly games. Instead of enjoying to be and feel patterns of what humans call dark matter and energy, or the dark fluid, Central Awareness Tensor's charges are obsessed with light, and anything reflecting it.*

*"It's nothing but a residue. Garbage. Dirty. Boring. To be ignored", Central Awareness Tensor would point out. "Why bother?" he'd ask. "Why can't you leave the Big Bang junk alone?"*

*To no avail. Central Awareness Tensor's charges don't do that kind of rationale.*

*Upper Lateral Entropies will perform the equivalent of a polite nod, and come up with their next junk plot anyway. It's guaranteed to involve a star, and lead to a bang. A small one, of course. The big ones are too disruptive, even Entropies accept that. But a bang is a bang. Disturbance. The opposite of peace and quiet. Sure to cause asymmetry.*

*Central Awareness Tensor hates asymmetry.*

*Lower Lateral Entropies don't do polite. They're interactively even more disruptive than Upper Lateral Entropies. But at least they prefer the more subtle kind of junk games. They only threaten to trigger astral flares, to watch light space entities go wild in response.*

*Very nice to have, the Lower Lateral Entropies kind of action. So subliminal it barely registers, across the texture of the body galactics.*

*Central Awareness Tensor considers forgiving blunt for the sake of smooth.*

*He quickly discards the thought. Bad language can't be rewarded.*

## **Strasbourg**

Oh no, not again. Jesse tries hard to ignore what he can't help hearing. With two cinemas to go, at one twenty in the morning, the last thing he needs is a failing vacuum cleaner.

Not that particular noise, not again. This is probably just a kind of echo, due to the hollow acoustics here in the hall. The vacuum cleaner engine sound will switch back to normal as soon as Jesse reaches the next theater.

Having comforted himself into ignoring the kettle-whistle-like noise, Jesse proceeds.

It's a good day, floor conditions wise. It has been drizzling on and off, the best of weathers for his trade. If it's too dry, people will bring in dust. If it's too wet, their boots will be muddy. Only a light drizzle delivers a carpet clean enough to forgive superficial vacuum cleaning.

Helpful weather can save you an hour of the kind of physically strenuous labor no one is keen to perform, in exchange for a wage that barely buys you the basics.

Instead of covering every square centimeter of the surface, Jesse is advancing fast, only targeting discernible spots of dirt. A discarded chewing gum wrapper here. Some leaf that will have dried on a shoe sole and fallen off there. The remains of what must have been two or three crisps.

Jesse's mind constructs a corresponding scene.

A group of teenagers, boys and girls. The fat boy has brought a packet of crisps. He opens it, passes it around, to some jokes that could be called bullying. There's a bit of a rush, to get a helping. There's giggling, from the girls. Some crisps get spilled. No one bothers to pick them up. The teenagers move on, probably to watch "Halloween". No other teenager fare on.

Later on, people walk where the crispy group stood. Their feet crush the crisps.

And now Jesse has to clean up the resulting mess.

The strident noise from the vacuum cleaner is getting harder to ignore. The bag isn't full, Jesse checked that twice already. But the engine sounds totally deranged.

Small wonder. This device looks and feels cheap. It was constructed with a small flat in mind. And an activity rate of two to three hours. Per week, not per shift. You can't blame it for breaking down. But a delay is the last thing you need, at the end of one more hard day.

Jesse sticks with his approach. Ignoring the symptoms of engine distress, he enters the penultimate cinema and quickly closes the door. He'll keep going until the last wheeze of the vacuum cleaner. At this time of night, he can't have his boss noticing the sound of upcoming equipment replacement. Sure way to delay the end of his shift. No way.

Closing the door to the smallish unit VI, Jesse nearly trips over his own feet. Never ever will his sickly machine survive this ordeal. At least two, probably more like three or four XXL boxes of popcorn must have been spilled across the front row alone. The stuff is everywhere. On the floor, on the seats, even on the armrests. Popcorneddon.

Time for Jesse to face the inevitable. He steers his device right into the biggest puddle. As expected, the massive input of popcorn cuts short the agony. With one last hiss, the engine gives up. Noise gone, smell of fried plastic on. So much for getting home at two tonight.

Jesse switches off the defunct vacuum cleaner. He also pulls the plug, as a security precaution. If it's electric, it can go up in flames. He has got no idea why, but they said so, at school.

Heading towards the ticket counter where his boss is doing tonight's sums, Jesse wonders how to break the news. Is there any wording for this kind of situation that doesn't get you accused of having caused the damage? Probably not. Not with this guy.

Jesse will never forget his joke of a job interview. He had barely approached the ticket counter for the first time when the big fat white man behind it yelled at him:

"A, the black guy. And on time, now that's a nice surprise. Bit out of type, are you? Well, make sure to keep that up, and best friends we will be."

Jesse's career at RDRV Cinema started badly, and it didn't get any better since.

Mister supervisor, as his boss insists on being addressed, is a big fan of black service staff, and not shy of explaining why:

"Nothing beats a black man in an impeccable uniform performing humble deeds. Best way to cheer up your average customer. Makes the stupid dicks feel mighty and wealthy. Why spend hundreds on foreign holidays when you can get that same kick of a good feeling for ten bucks, round the corner, with a big screen on top? No plane crashes, no airline strikes, no terrorists. Not even diarrhea. Unless you go for our burgers, hahaha."

No self respecting person should be forced to bow to this kind of clown. But Jesse isn't exactly spoiled for career options.

Selling popcorn and ice cream in a climatized building beats other fast food jobs or delivery gigs. RDRV Cinema are also getting very close to paying the minimum wage, a rare opportunity.

Having to wear a stupid uniform with a bow tie and ridiculously shiny lacquered shoes is a downside. It also turned out that Jesse has to Hoover up some of the popcorn he sells. But he's spared cleaning the toilets. The supervisor only trusts ladies with water and detergent, whereas the guys get to operate the technology.

Overall, Jesse's job is as good as they get, and he's hell bent on keeping it.

"No, mister Supervisor, it just broke down. No advance signs and symptoms, no incident, no nothing. One minute, it was fully functional. The next, it went like wheeeezzzz, and dead."

Jesse is proud of his acting. His voice conveys his innocence well, plus a slight tinge of insulted diligence. But his boss wouldn't be in this role if he was prone to admitting defeat.

The man goes mean instead, insinuating a voodoo component. Not for the first time. Something breaks or goes wrong, the bastard accuses Jesse of black magic.

If only. Jesse once again promises himself, in silence of course, to go search YouTube for a step-by-step guide. He doesn't believe, neither in his mother's beloved baby Jesus nor in voodoo. But in moments like these, he's prepared to give the latter a try. Like with union membership. You guess it won't help much, but trying and failing is still better than no action.

Having inspected the remnants of the former vacuum cleaner and verified that the power switch no longer delivers, Jesse's boss decrees a surprisingly happy turn of events. With no replacement device available, it's shift over. One of Jesse's lady colleagues will collect the popcorn by means of broom and shovel, the kind of back breaking low-tech task better left to the pliable gender.

No comment expected, none uttered.

Having collected his hoodie jacket and backpack from the staff locker room, Jesse finds himself walking home well before two, a rare treat.

The street is gleaming with moisture and the air smells of wet leaves, but the drizzle is very light, more low hanging cloud than rain. A nice night, for early November.

A car speeds by, taking advantage of the empty street and the absence of permanent radar traps. And another one, even faster. Seventy, perhaps even eighty kilometers per hour, that can earn a driver a big fat ticket. Jesse likes the nightly traffic fast. Safer that way.

Slow cruisers, the ones looking for prostitutes or drug dealers, they're danger. They might notice him, potentially in a bad way. He's not easy to identify as black at first glance, always takes care to hide under the hood of his jacket and look down. But if a car moves real slow, and if a passenger not distracted by driving has a good long look, he will notice. Not safe.

Walking briskly, it's a mere fifteen minutes to the bloc Jesse struggles to call home. A nice short commute. The only advantage of what was supposed to be an interim solution.

When he arrived from Gerardmer, armed with his first ever job contract and no clue about city life, Jesse expected to rent a nice little flat, not to end up as a lodger. Turned out the local housing market wasn't waiting for one more young man on a low wage.

Only once did he manage to visit. What was advertised as an affordable one room apartment turned out to be a garden shed.

Jesse has accepted he'll never have a flat all to himself. Even if a proprietor was willing to accept him, the rent would leave him without much food and phone money. A room will have to do, definitely. But not his current one, not forever.

Jesse firmly plans to resume his hunt for his slot in a shared flat. With guys his age. And perhaps even girls, also his age. Or younger. Once this year's inflow of bloody wealthy students is settled, he'll give this mightily important project a second try.

From the outside, the residential block looks good. Six floors, two well lit entrances, with fully functional mail boxes and door bells. No garbage or signs of vandalism. Jesse's non-home displays all the outward signs of proper accommodation. If only.

Getting out his key to unlock the front door as carefully as demonstrated and demanded by Madame and Madame Meunier-Moraire, the owners of the apartment, Jesse gets ready to once again face down the pensioner on the first floor. Obviously nothing better to do past midnight than to wait for Jesse's arrival and chide him for what is practically no noise.

The front door opens with a bit more of a screech than usual. Must be the wet weather. With that much disturbance already achieved and his fate sealed, Jesse steps in without bothering to hold on to the handle to refrain the door from whamming close.

On the fifth floor, Mattoo jumps up from his couch on hearing the familiar razzmatazz. He races down the corridor to meet his nightly entertainment at the flat entrance.

No one else but Tasty Feet bangs open the front door with such force. No one else tramples up the stairs so noisily. Hearing him coming, even an older and more worldwise cat would guess fat man in heavy military boots, not the actual slim fellow in lacquered footwear.

Mattoo has never had the chance to inspect the staircase. He only gets to leave the apartment in a plastic box that smells strongly of his past misadventures. It features air holes instead of proper windows. Really hard to see anything, even without getting bounced around by a carrier oblivious to the strain his unsteady steps inflict on the stomach of a poor cat.

Mattoo doesn't know what the staircase looks like, but he's very familiar with its sound profile.

Both his fridge door operators enter the house so noiselessly he only identifies their steps when they tiptoe up the last flight of stairs. Exact opposites of Tasty Feet, and considerably less noisy than all the other biggies trampling up and down so often a cat feels like crying for freedom.

Whoever enters the house triggers the opening of the door on the left side on the first floor, and a rant from a very bad biggie. That one is smelling so strongly of a poison he once sent Mattoo vomiting. First floor biggie stink, on top of one of those episodes of needle torture Mattoo strongly resents, that was too much, even for a particularly strong and valiant he-cat.

While Mattoo is reliving past traumas, Jesse is making good progress.

The pensioner greeted him with his usual rant, thereby making sure to wake up all light sleepers who had so far managed to overhear his arrival. He answered with his customary "Apologies, sir, no intention to disturb your sleep. Have a good night!", without slowing down.

Stopping is useless. The old drunkard will keep ranting, whatever your reaction. Best to keep climbing the stairs. By the time you reach the fourth floor, the bloody pensioner will have given up, on most days. Occasionally, he will have resorted to ranting so loudly that the trucker on the second floor will have felt the need to intervene. Pretty thick specimen of a guy, in many ways. Seeing him approach shuts up a frail oldie, for a couple of days.

Floor five, destination reached. One more exercise of silent unlocking, opening and closing of a door to get into the apartment. Careful steps around a loudly purring cat to reach the first door in the corridor. Open it, enter the tiny room along with the cat, close the door and sag down on an unmade bed covering nearly half the little space there is. Jesse is non-home.

He didn't put on the light. If M4, as he calls Madame and Madame Monique and Madeleine Meunier-Moraire for short, not to their face, of course, if M4 wake up, again, his most promising course of action is to pretend not to exist.

When disturbed at night, the short stocky tougher half of the couple will pretend to need the bathroom. From the corridor, she'll check if there's light in Jesse's room. If anything signals he's awake, she won't hesitate to come knocking, to administer one more lecture.

"How to unlock a door at night", or any other impromptu speech delivered by an angry old woman in a short chequered nightgown barely hiding differently chequered cotton pajamas, that kind of nightmare shouldn't be inflicted on any innocent young man.

Having gotten rid of his left shoe and one humid sock, Jesse has to reach around the cat to access the other one. Mattoo is a big fan of his feet, for whatever reason.

Each time Jesse comes home and takes off his shoes, the cat insists on rubbing its nose, head and side against his feet. Mattoo's loud purring suggests pleasure, and Jesse doesn't mind. The tickle is bearable, and the cat's fur dries his feet in no time. Better than any towel.

Laying back on the bed in near complete darkness, only the faintest of glows from the street lights down below reaches his window, Jesse once again envies the cat.

Never no work for lucky Mattoo. Comfy place, plenty of food. No worries, no bloody boss, no struggle for sustenance. It must be a wonderful life, a perpetual all-inclusive holiday. No wonder the little feline is so cheerful, always greeting Jesse with purrs.

Mattoo once again loves it. Rubbing himself against Tasty Feet with force, to make sure not to waste any of the precious perfume, his inner eye rejoices at the sight of the wonderful she-cat his marvelous odor is sure to seduce. Slightly smaller than him, with a rounded head and neat dark brown on light brown stripes, she now expectantly raises her tail...

Mattoo has to pause in his rubbing, not to get too excited. Very, very, very bad things happen to he-cats who give in to temptation and lose control. You have to keep the fun mental, you can't go physical. Unless you want to experience the unspeakable.

Older folks on the network won't spell it out, clever young he-cats like Mattoo have to guess what they are talking about. But the rumors are clear enough. In exchange for their services, fridge door operators insist on chastity. Especially in he-cats. Only the bravest or most dumb of male felines will happily masturbate and mark their territory.

Do that, and you will sooner or later end up in that very bad omen of a transport box.

They'll once again carry you to the terrible place full of rabidly yapping predators who'd love to tear you apart. You'll once again land on that hard stinking metal table, in the stranglehold of thickly gloved hands. They'll once again do the needle torture and you'll once again think

"As bad as it gets! Why don't you bastards have mercy and just kill me?"

And then it will all get much worse. Much, much, much worse. The mutilation is so painful and terrible no he-cat will dare think it out loud.

Chastened by the thought, Mattoo resumes rubbing himself against Tasty Feet.

He's one clever cat, not prone to risking his precious balls, certainly not for nothing. If ever he managed to meet a she-cat, the urge would be overwhelming. He would risk permanent disability for one glorious moment of exaltation. But in his current state of seclusion, he'll manage to keep playing it safe. It's getting ever harder, but he'll manage.

Jesse enjoys the quiet. He must have been laying on his bed for at least five minutes by now, judging by how the cat has calmed down. No M4 action yet, he's doing good.

In another ten minutes, it will be safe to risk changing into his night short and shirt. Back home at his mom's, where he had a key, Jesse preferred to sleep naked. Here, there's no means to lock the door. Nor a chair or desk to block it. He has to dress up, just in case.

His non-home has a surface of nine square meters. It's furnished with a bed, a cupboard and a bean bag. All furniture provided by M4 and resolutely retro, as in desperately ugly. Jesse's addition of the current French Football Federation calendar and the Racing Club Strasbourg fan scarf he acquired before finding out that his shift schedule from hell will never allow him to attend a match, those cherished items provide a little ambiance, but cozy this place isn't.

The cat is now resting with its head against Jesse's feet. Pity to disturb the little furry fellow, but Jesse can't risk falling asleep in his uniform. And he suddenly urges for a cold soda from what he calls his private fridge, a camping cooler.

This acquisition caused a mighty fight. M4 tried to prohibit the use of the device. The two old bitches accused Jesse of environmental vandalism and called his fridge a fire hazard, despite the logo on the back confirming it safe. He insisted, for once.

"Any hard working man has a right to a chilled soda, on coming home from his shift," he argued. "This is an inalienable right, calling either for my access to the fridge in the kitchen, at all times, or the permission to operate a fridge in my room," he added.

Jesse had been at the receiving end of this trick many times, but was still surprised to see it work on the M4. Confronted with two unpalatable choices as presumed only possible courses of action they felt compelled to select one of the options. They grudgingly accepted his fridge. A small victory, by global standards, but still a moment of pride.

A fire siren, followed by a police siren. With such strident noise down below, this is the perfect moment for Jesse to jump up and fetch the coke he's craving.

Bad luck for Mattoo who gets himself startled awake by the sudden removal of his nicely scented headrest. He disapprovingly stares at Tasty Feet, to no acknowledgement. As hopeless as ever at night vision, the biggie. But he probably meant no harm. He's just a clumsy brute, incapable of moving smoothly. It's his joints, he doesn't control them properly.

Waiting for Tasty Feet to resume his position on the bed, Mattoo considers one more initiative.

Some of the old guys on the network say it's possible, to communicate with biggies. Rare, extremely rare, but possible. Provided they are gifted, provided you have access to them in the dark and can get them to wind down far enough without falling asleep, they might hear you.

One very brief initial interaction is supposed to be sufficient, to get them hooked. Achieve that first contact, and the biggie in question will make himself available more often than you care talk.

Here he comes. Tasty Feet is back on the bed. Mattoo purrs and rubs his head against the sole of his left foot, deep thinking with all his might:

"Never will you impress a she-biggie if you don't learn more graceful moves, you clumsy he-biggie. Now come-a-come and be a good biggie-biggie, let the cat show you how to do this. Come-a-come, biggie-biggie, this way. This way to get laid. Nicey-nicey she-biggies this way. Come-a-come, good biggie-biggie."

Doesn't get much more stupid, mantra-wise. But this is how the senior cats say you should call out. Vital to keep the message simple and address basic needs, best chance to attract the attention of these very dumb creatures. They're basically one-dimensional, with only the slightest hint of an additional level. Not their fault if they struggle.

Having downed half the can of coke in a few gulps, Jesse enjoys the sugar and coffee rush. Well chilled coke on an empty stomach, really helps your man to see the world more clearly. Virtually speaking of course, he can't even make out his own feet in this darkness. Nor the cat purring furiously. Amazing, how such a tiny fellow can emit such a lot of sound.

Reverting his gaze to the ceiling, nothing to see this way either, Jesse wonders why the cat would love to rub his head against the sole of his feet. The little furry fellow is at it even more vigorously than usual tonight. What the hell can be in this for him?

Jesse tries to imagine rubbing his own head against a giant cat paw, short black curls on paw pads. Would that feel nice?

This is exactly the kind of weird wondering that made his mom call him a stupid dreamer, and a total failure in the making. Well, as she got that prediction so right, he might as well indulge.

Focusing on the purr, Jesse dives into his inner self, reconfiguring his universe in one fraction of a second. What would it feel like, to be a cat and do this?

At first, Jesse doesn't make out words, more feels than hears a faint whisper. But when he focuses on it, the call is suddenly there, loud and clear:

"Come, biggie-biggie. This way to the she-biggie. Good biggie-biggie. Keep it up now, good biggie-biggie. Hey, cool! You're hearing me now, right? Welcome to the world of the grown-ups, Tasty Feet. Now let's turn you into a success. If you want to impress she-biggies, you really need to improve your moves. Let me show you..."

Jesse kind of hears the cat all right, but he doesn't really listen. He's too busy wondering what to make of this very unexpected turn of events.

According to the tales of his teachers, this kind of experience is only supposed to happen under the influence of very illegal and seriously mind altering substances. They always made a point to look at him, the only black pupil in his class, when talking about the subject. They were clearly expecting him to be prone to substance abuse. But nothing in their teachings prepared him for the possibility of getting seriously high by means of a mere soda.

"... it's mostly in the hips, really. For a good, smooth swagger you need to relax, around the hips. Your movements will only ever get fluid and elegant if you become more supple..."

The little furry fellow isn't going to shut up, that much is obvious by now. Jesse just knows, by whichever means, that it's Mattoo he's hearing, and that the cat will keep blabbering until he manages to talk back. He gives it a try, tentatively. At first he doesn't achieve more than a kind of harrumphing. His second attempt works out, and he suddenly hears himself yell:

"What the hell?! Will you shut up for a second, Mattoo, please? What the hell is going on?"

Noticing how this came out more forcefully than intended, sounding borderline aggressive even, Jesse adds in a more level inner voice:

"Sorry for the shouting. I would really love to understand what's going on, Mattoo. This is not supposed to happen, according to what I was taught at school. And this... event, experience, whatever it's called, it feels way too real for a dream. Any clue what's going on?"

Mattoo responds with the mental image of a feline rolling on the floor laughing. Smelling the distress of his new biggie buddy, the cat quickly adds:

"No need to worry, Tasty Feet, zero need to worry. You're doing fabulous, you're really talented. According to what I learned, from the elders, only very few biggies are gifted enough for deep hearing to engage in a real conversation. You're doing great, Tasty Feet. Now, about how to improve your moves, to impress a she-biggie and get yourself laid..."

Jesse lets the cat blarb on. Still trying to get a grip on the situation, he notices how he can defocus and refocus on what he's kind of hearing, just like in a real conversation.

He had never been aware of this sixth sense, if a sense it is, but after only a few minutes it feels like it had always been there. And beyond Mattoo, there are others. An immense multitude of others. Jesse can just make out some kind of gigantic background hum consisting of myriads of conversations. Fascinating. Scary, but fascinating.

"Wow, Tasty Feet, now I'm impressed. You're hearing the others, too, right? That's a very good biggie-biggie doing very nicey-nicey..."

Jesse has had enough. He's not going to tolerate this kind of talking, not from a mere pound of furry feline. With barely an initial harrumph, he goes:

"Stop it, Mattoo. It's Jean-Segun Edun a.k.a Jesse for you. Not biggie-biggie. Not Tasty Feet, whatever that is supposed to mean. Jean-Segun or Jesse, OK?"

Jesse is pleasantly surprised to hear his inner voice sound authoritative in a way never achieved by his throat. Exactly as the bullying prevention counselor had tried to teach him, back in his school days. The approach never delivered with human bullies, forcing him to revert to good old tried and tested running away and hiding during breaks. But here, in this mental exchange with a cat, Jesse is all calm resolve. A proud moment.

Mattoo is way too excited to mind Tasty Feet's disrespectful talking.

He's a mere biggie, a cat can't blame him for lack of manners. Only one aspect counts at this stage: Tasty Feet is available for conversation. This is well worth calling him Jesse, if he so desires. Billions of cats tried and tried and tried, without ever achieving an exchange. Young Mattoo, he did it. Managed to engage a biggie.

And it didn't take him a lifetime of purring and bumping and rubbing. Mattoo started to work on his subject as a juvenile and was done by the time he had barely grown into a young adult. That's going to get him so very, very laid. Some she-cat somewhere will insist on meeting such a hero. She will find her way into this bloody inescapable fortress of a flat.

While Mattoo is busy imagining his future sexual exploits, with the round-headed she-cat once again taking center stage, Jesse slowly settles into his new self.

He has a sixth sense allowing him to hear what appears to be one hell of a lot of cats. Plus something darker. A powerful something, but not threatening. Or would that be not yet threatening? There's a whole lot of whatever it is out there. Far more interesting than a bloody smartphone that is anyway pretty useless these days, courtesy of a failing battery.

For the first time since he landed in Strasbourg, Jesse falls asleep content, without having spent a single minute longingly watching other people's far more interesting lives online.

As usual, he wakes up around seven to the sound of M4 rumbling around the flat to get ready for what they do for a living. Also as usual, Jesse engages in his daily exercise of mind over bladder self control. The last thing he needs instead of breakfast is the sad sight of aging women not yet dressed and made up for public visual consumption.

Bathroom door, shower sounds, always a tricky moment. Kitchen door, bathroom door again. Electric toothbrush, hairdryer, bedroom door, cupboards and drawers. Some talking in the corridor, and clonk goes the door to the staircase. One more tiny minute of self control, to allow for surprise comebacks, and the flat is finally his.

Coming back from the bathroom, Jesse recalls last night's mysterious events. One hell of a dream, or was it? Mattoo is deep asleep on the empty bed, looking every inch the innocent pet. Impossible to believe this ball of fur could have introduced him to .... whatever the place he saw in his dream is supposed to be called.

Intrigued by the clarity of his memories, unlike any dream he ever recalled, Jesse decides to try to revisit what felt like a sixth sense in his sleep. Laying down and closing his eyes, he very much expects to once again feel like a total stupid fool next. But no. Not this time. Not at all. He doesn't even need Mattoo for guidance. The other place is there all right. Wow.

## Karlsruhe

Safo wakes up to the usual three distinct aches. Her left front paw is so sore she has to postpone standing up, it won't carry her weight before some arduous licking. Her full bladder has to wait for it, unfortunately adding to the pressure on the painful lump deep inside her bowels. It is growing ever bigger, probably not a good sign. Last not least, Safo can't wag her tail in irritation. Two of the joints resent even the slightest attempt at moving. Getting old is such a drag.

Safo could do with some cheering up, but this is one of the weeks where the prey fail to show up.

Year in, year out, most weeks bring a steady stream of groups of alluring prey. Safo knows she won't get to catch any, because of the solid glass window indoors and the moat cum electric fence outdoors. But it's still fun to watch them and imagine what it would feel like to jump, grab and sink her teeth into one of the tiny wiggling bodies.

In her youth, back home in the warmth, before her horrible trip to this nuisance of a cold place, Safo lived in a zoo with more charitable keepers. Every once in a while, early in the morning, they would bring a piglet and let it loose in the lion den.

Such wonderful squealing. Such a gorgeous chase, followed by a couple of good bloody bites. Nothing beats meat so fresh parts of it haven't yet stopped trying to run. It's not about the nutrition, not much meat in a mere piglet. But the taste. Heavenly.

The young of the biggies streaming by Safo's cage squeal just like piglets. They're also hopeless at running. Perfectly suitable prey for an old lioness with a left front paw no longer fit for sprinting. Just watching them brings back the taste of blood. Enervating. But not today.

With her bladder about to explode, Safo declares her sore paw sufficiently licked and forces herself up. Having lately added some weight, for lack of exercise, as the relentlessly pacing leopards next door never fail to remind her, doesn't help. But she's still strong, not ready to give up and get her dead body carried wherever the keepers took the elephant. Poor old girl. She had seen it coming, no longer dared lay down. And then she keeled over.

None of this for Safo. Not yet, not today. That's what she tells herself every morning. The nice new she-biggie keeper will come, and she can't be missed. Not only does she bring pretty acceptable if a little too dead meat. She will also apply the magic lamp to Safo's tail and restore her ability to wag. That's important, for a lioness. Not being able to wag your tail is a terrible handicap.

The bloody body part had been stiff for months, and Safo had been seriously depressed. Until one day the new she-biggie keeper arrived.

The old he-biggie keeper, the bloody he-biggie in the white coat often concealing a dream dart and the new she-biggie keeper talked a lot, in front of her cage. They pointed at different sections of Safo's body in a very disrespectful way. She groaned with resentment and turned around to disdainfully show them her posterior.

She was in process of considering to also piss at them, for additional effect, despite hating to soil this section of her cage, when she suddenly felt a marked tailside improvement. The new she-biggie keeper had taken advantage of her position to point a kind of magic lamp at her sore tail. It suddenly felt all warm, and stopped hurting. Marvelous.

Ever since this very positive first contact, Safo looks forward to her by now daily magic lamp sessions with her preferred she-keeper. She even turns around, like a tame circus lion, to present

her tail for treatment. The she-keeper is in turn so impressed by this behavior she has taken to spend more and more time in the restricted access area next to Safo's cage.

Having relieved herself in the loo corner, Safo ambles back to her favorite spot as majestically as her week paw permits. If it wasn't for that scary growing lump, she could be called in very good shape, for her age. A little stiffness here and there, one broken fang, but overall, she's one hell of a lioness. And mentally, she's as alert as ever, on both levels of her brain. Never would she fail to tune in for the news. You have to take an interest, in global affairs.

Today, the network is abuzz with the exploit of a tiny young Siamese. Junior, going by the not exactly flashy name of Mattoo, apparently managed to liaise a biggie.

This hasn't been achieved in a very, very long time.

Safo feels her innards heat up in joyful expectation. Her insights will be in high demand as soon as she deigns make herself available for consultation. She'll be talking about her late soul mate Arkan once again. A white circus tiger who had managed to befriend his tamer. It all ended in mutual insults and tragedy, but while it lasted it was a fascinating experience. Biggies might be sensorily deficient, but outright stupid they aren't.

Still surprising, that a youngster should have been able to initiate a biggie to the art of deep communication. Must have been a very gifted specimen who happened to make himself available under very propitious circumstances. Those are really hard to achieve, in the age of ubiquitous illumination and nonstop entertainment. Lucky the cat who gets access to a biggie just sitting around in the dark, so bored he's open to weird suggestions.

Safo feels a glimmer of an idea burgeon deep inside her second mind. Time to think hard. Something about her new she-biggie keeper. And the current dark season. What the hell does her deep mind try to tell her? Safo purrs at herself for comfort, closing her eyes. Those bloody aches really don't help, with focus. One more effort. And there it is, the flash of insight.

It's feasible, definitely. When the new she-biggie keeper comes check on Safo in the afternoon and treat her sore tail once again to make her comfortable for the night, it's already getting dark. Knowing the place well, the she-biggie keeper doesn't switch on the lights. She just sits there, so close to the cage bars it would be perilous in the presence of a predator with leaner paws, and points the magic lamp at Safo's tail. Not a perfect setting for a first contact, but worth a try.

Safo will growl softly for ambiance, in the friendly, socializing way used for bonding.

The old he-keeper was an idiot. No way to get him to sit still and focus on the tiny spot of interactive talent supposed to be hidden in the depths of what biggies use for brain. When Sofa tried growling softly at him, he did the opposite of calming down. Always reached for his shiny device with the funny birds inside, to point it at her and squeak. Hopeless.

The new she-biggie keeper is far better material. Calmer. More interested. With a little luck, she will tune into the soft growl and let the rhythm help with deep sensing. This will be important, to compensate for the suboptimal lighting conditions.

Deep sensing newbies, be they litter or biggie, are easily distracted by the faintest of lights. With kittens, nature made sure not to provide them with too much eyesight too early. With biggies, getting them to shut their eyes without falling asleep helps. Unfortunately, most of them don't like shutting their eyes in the presence of lions. Their prey instinct hates the proposal.

The network really is abuzz today. Young Mattoo's exploit triggered one more round of frenzied cat talk: "This is it, this must be the kick-off. The next challenge, right around the corner! Are you ready, will you be able to cope? Eat your herbs, get done with your fur balls, the next challenge needs YOU in top shape. Sharpen your claws and fangs, where there's challenge, there's blood."

Safo hiss-growls her annoyance at her cage, sending her leopard neighbors whispering.

Not hard to guess their comments: "Look at the old lady, talking to herself again."

If only. Those two are so obsessed with sex, how to get any, for the he-leopard, how to fend him off, for the she-leopard, that they didn't even know about the dead elephant until yesterday. Only Safo's joke about a serving of meat that was even more too-dead than usual, so bloodless it had turned grey, brought them up to speed.

All those kids, both next door and online, haven't got the faintest. They are so naive. Wishing for a challenge, for excitement. Little do they know! The whole point of a challenge is danger. Mortal peril. For each and every cat, biggie, elephant, and counting. You totally don't want to be generation challenge. And most certainly not at Safo's age. Yes, she has lived, and a good life it was. And is, except for that lump. But hey, why stop now? What if the challenge goes wrong?

All those online hotheads, and the whole bloody gossipy commentariat, they're convinced the next challenge will be met, just like last one. They talk about it like it was one of those harmless trips, where they scare your shit liquid, only to release you into the next nice comfy cage a couple of hours later, with no harm done. Online, they talk challenge into fun:

"There will be excitement. There will be fear. There will be courage. Damn hard it will be, awesomely clever we'll have to proceed, but we will prevail. One more time of heroes, new legends in the making, hurray. Roar forward, Felinity, prove your might once more."

Well, well, well. Even a younger Safo would have chafed at that kind of bragging. So big mane. Really good at roaring, the boys, especially in the absence of competitors of equal weight. But don't expect them to get anything important done, any food down and to the den. For that what counts, at the end of the day, you need she-power. You need brains. You need concertation.

No one knows for sure what exactly happened, on the last occasion. But Safo would be prepared to bet the she-keepers magic lamp that she-power did it. One look at the reminder the biggies built for commemoration tells the tale. She-power, what else?

And the ladies who met the challenge will have hated the ordeal. Waking up for days, or perhaps even weeks, in the knowledge that you might be about to get fried, that's no fun.

"Oh yes, online hypers, I can see it know, all clear. Mortal danger, the potential for imminent doom, that's such a gorgeous change from business as usual. Totally what a feline needs, as background for her daily hustle."

Safo did it again. Grumbling at her cage what she should tell the network. Except more talking won't help. There's only one thing every cat worth her daily meat has to do, if the next challenge really is imminent. Contact. Contact. Contact.

Much easier for pet-sized fellows like this Mattoo boy. But Safo will try. It took cats ready to think how no cat had thought before to survive the last challenge. Her kind of game.

The object of Safo's grand plan is busy sweeping the gazelle enclosure.

"Whiskey," the supervisor had said, to introduce Uzo to her new task, "Whiskey, today learn autumn. Summer, tree, leaves, green, up. Autumn, tree, leaves, yellow, down. You pick up. Now go, go, go. Go, Whiskey, go!"

He always talks to her like that. Without using any of the articles every German noun requires under all circumstances. Exact opposite of Uzo's language instructor. She insists on articles. Her students can make her day by recalling that all German seasons are male, a nice surprise element of consistency. As are trees. Whereas leaves are trans and flowers female.

This week, the supervisor has decided to call Uzo Whiskey. Last week, she was Cognac. Next week, she might be promoted to Vodka, a drink the supervisor does fancy so much he never goes without a flask. "Just in case a war breaks out and we get stuck here, hahaha. No drinking during work, no Uzo here, hahaha. And no drugs, hahaha."

Uzo has only got herself to blame for the jokes. Hearing her supervisor struggle with Uzoamaka Olagundoye, she proposed he call her Uzo. Unfortunately, Uzo sounds exactly like Ouzo, a stiff Greek liquor prized by Germans. The nicknames are her own fault.

As is this nuisance of a so-called integration internship. Uzo had to brag, about her biology degree, and how she excelled at handling the mice and rats processed in the Unilag research lab. She thought she was being clever, and would end up in an internship at KIT, the local university, where she would have ample opportunity to bond with fellow professionals and start job hunting.

Didn't work out. The office organizing the integration internships being a municipal entity, it has preferential access to facilities for garbage collection, street-cleaning, a couple of nursing homes, and the zoo. Not to the university or any other local research facilities.

As far as Uzo is able to assess, refugees are assigned their internships by gender, regardless of qualification, and cleaning is a leitmotiv. The guys typically clean streets, whereas most ladies clean nursing homes. She's the odd one cleaning cages. And gazelle enclosures.

Uzo's task is as simple and mind numbingly hopeless as manual labor can get.

The hillside gazelle enclosure being surrounded by big leafy trees, she can take her metal broom right back to the top left gate once she has reached the bottom right corner. Only question is whether she will have filled three or four of the duvet sized green plastic bags. It would make a lot of sense to just wait for all leaves to fall down and collect the whole lot in one big sweep. Couple of hours, and done. But that's not the local way. The enclosure has to look tidy at all times, otherwise some acrimonious pensioner is guaranteed to complain.

Learning this kind of local mores and must-haves, that's what integration internships are about.

Uzo is enjoying herself anyway. The sun is shining. No supervisor around. The gazelles, especially the young ones, are getting used to her presence. Only a matter of time until the bravest youngster comes nibbling at one of her green bags to check if it's edible.

Uzo does like animals. Back in the days of her lab job at Unilag, she always made sure the mice and rats had a nice comfy life, in return for their contribution to agriscience. You have to test fancy new heat and drought resistant plants for both nutritional value and potential toxicity, and this job is extremely well performed by rodents, at feasible cost.

The animals at the Karlsruhe zoo are more diverse, and most of them bigger, but the basic principle is the same. Make sure to feed them well, provide them with a minimum of comfort and coziness, and they will reward you by looking healthy and breeding forcefully.

Even the ancient lioness, a ferocious killing machine by nature, looks all happy-kitty pleased when the infrared light soothes what must be a very sore tail, judging by the swelling.

Uzo is proud of this idea. A bright moment of lateral thinking, after having seen the invigorating effect of the infrared lamp on meerkats struggling with the chilly local climate. It earned her a positive mention from the zoo's veterinarian, the local authority.

Uzo's supervisor wasn't exactly pleased, to hear the veterinarian praise his black charge's good thinking, and he takes revenge by piling on the liquor jokes, but that's OK. She won't have to endure that trove of fun forever, whereas a letter of recommendation from a zoo veterinarian will get her career going, once she's done with the formalities.

She knew it. Tiny these gazelles might be, and jumpy when startled, but brave of heart.

Uzo takes care to operate her metal broom in smooth, unexcited movements, not to scare the little fellow now probing her bag of leaves. He would be a feast for the lioness, and he knows it. Might even be able to smell her presence, with the wind blowing straight from her cage. But he doesn't care, is too busy nosing around the bag. Good attitude.

Dusk is falling ever earlier. Even a sunny day barely lasts past four in the afternoon. No wonder it gets so freezing cold here in wintertime.

Back in October, Uzo still felt smug, concerning the regional climate. A little chill, that's quite nice to have. You sweat less, activities are less strenuous. Peace of cake, to handle German seasons.

The last couple of days proved her optimism misplaced. Karlsruhe is getting real bad, and fucking Etsenred nuisance of a village is worse.

Uzo was assigned a former holiday home in the Black Forest as her first individual residence, courtesy of her special status as victim of human trafficking. A fully furnished flat, living room with a bedroom alcove, kitchen and bathroom, enough space for a couple and one or two kids. The apartment forms part of the basement of a bright white house surrounded by a meticulously kept lawn and carefully sculpted hedge. Rich kind of nice, if a bit sterile.

All appliances are like new and fully functional, especially the high-capacity central heating. The latter is vital. Etsenred in autumn is a freezer. Temperatures don't hesitate to drop below zero Celsius at night. Uzo's daily excursion to the tram stop down in the valley has turned into a survival drill, involving sophisticated logistics that include minutes of dressing up. Gloves. Ear mugs. She'd really prefer never to have found out why those were invented.

The junior gazelle has lost interest and frolicked off to rejoin its herd. Safety in numbers. The little hero gazes back at her triumphantly, like saying "Gotcha, predator. Me too fast, me too clever, you'll never catch!" His status in the group must have been improved by his daring.

Uzo allows herself one second of longing. If only she could just rush back home, to sit on mom's couch and get herself admired for her daring stunt.

It's not that she doesn't get her fair share of praise. Her social media timelines are full of appreciation, comments like "Lucky you, I'd never have dared."

Or the more ambiguous version "Uzo, in Germany, now really? Wow, congratulations. Never would I have guessed you had it in you. Stay safe."

And of course a multitude of ways of saying "You made it? Great. Now do send some cash. And get me a visa and a ticket, will you?"

These comments make for nice reading, but Uzo can't really savor her new status.

It's stressful, this migration business. To be surrounded by potentially hostile strangers at all times. More often than not, they speak in tongues. She has mastered a little German, people do understand her. But their answers sound totally unlike anything she has learned to interpret in class. Same for English. Local people mostly make sense of hers, if she talks slowly and articulates syllable by syllable. But when they open their mouths...

Uzo misses her home, her friends, the places where they used to meet. How they went one better one each other, about who was more broke, had experienced the worst misfortune and was denied more opportunities. All that silly chatting, never would Uzo have guessed she could miss that. It all felt so narrow, excruciatingly familiar and hopelessly boring.

Boring. Uzo didn't even feel the need yet, to learn the German word for what used to be her chronic state of mind. Her current life is decidedly, painfully void of boredom. But this absence is far less fulfilling than anticipated. It culminates in exhaustion.

Uzo is doing well, according to pretty much everybody.

Folks at home are surprised how such an unglamorous person managed not to fuck up on a trip that called for quick wits and brute lying.

Officialdom here is equally pleased. As her advance research had suggested, punctuality and an unwavering, hands-on commitment to whatever tasks you are assigned is indeed appreciated. Show up on time, with the documents you were asked to provide, go where you're told to go, without asking questions or suggesting alternatives, and you're the darling.

All is going well, in principle. According to her lawyer, Uzo is as good as done, with the all important immigration status definition process. It would now take a big interference, like a major terror attack by Nigerian perpetrators, to derail her application for permanent residency.

But Uzo is suffering. Not one single person around to share her adventures. Such a trove of anecdotes, so many weird people and baffling occasions, she could keep her friends back home entertained for months. So many tales to tell, but no audience.

Uzo grants herself two weekly phone calls, one to mom and one to her sister Orji.

But that's just not the same as real talking. She always ends up bragging. Her exploits are real enough, she's not lying as such. On the phone, she just doesn't manage to convey the stress, the anxieties, the embarrassments associated with fitting in.

Uzo had never been actively aware of being black, because, hey, who isn't? Shades of, of course. And there's always some cousin somewhere praising the ultimate skin lightening cream, no more side effects, guaranteed, one hundred and twenty percent. That's black lady talk, sure, if you think about it. But why would you think about it?

Nothing, no pre-trip worry, no forward research, absolutely nothing prepared Uzo for being black in Germany. A big deal. Sweep the gazelle compound while black, and you can bet on hearing some three year old yell: "Look, momma, the keeper, he's all black!"

This observation can lead to a racial slur too abject to quote. It is best answered by turning away and proceeding with the job. Or a raised middle finger.

The opposite kind of momma will deliver a diversity lecture, in an extra loud voice. She'll tell her kid that we are fine with blacks, and fuck the nazis. Calls for a smile and a little wave.

Those are the better moments. Uzo's presence gets acknowledged, she gets to interact.

Most often, a visibly embarrassed momma will shush her kid and rush it away. That's so weird. And impossible to describe, on the phone.

Having reached her turning point, Uzo looks back up to assess her work.

The gazelle enclosure looks exactly like same stage an hour ago. Covered in leaves up there, slightly less so down here. This internship won't teach her German efficacy and efficiency. It said so on the label, but this mess proves the aspiration won't be met.

Night is falling, Uzo wouldn't be able to complete another round. Only full rounds count, with her supervisor, so it's time to move on. She's got a lioness to pamper, her favorite activity. The backstage area of the predator facility is hidden from sight. For a precious couple of minutes she won't be one of the exhibits.

In the absence of other staff, Uzo can make the fun last half an hour. Who would argue with an intern stating: "Had to wait for the lioness to turn around and provide access to her tail. The old lady was a bit slow going today, must be the cold weather affecting her."

That's how Uzo would say it in English. In German "Lion wrong way round" will have to do. It's a long way, to foreign language proficiency.

## **Strasbourg**

One more popcorn rush hour as good as survived.

Late afternoon screenings, that's teenagers wasting pocket money after school and smaller kids picked up by promise-bound parents after work. Both groups go for the full cinema experience, with popcorn. The queue winds across the foyer.

Jesse's counter is full of pre-made popcorn, salted or sweet. Hand over two euros for the small cup, three for the pint, four for the bucket, and it's yours in a blink.

Life could be easy, for Jesse and his customers. But most of them insist on freshly made popcorn, and on taking a picture to prove it came right out of the machine. They queue, they get tense. The closer to the announced starting time, the more so. Their numbered seats are safe, they'll only miss advertisements. They know it, and get impatient anyway.

During popcorn rush hour, Jesse feels the tide mounting in his shoes.

Horrible black-and white affairs, all plastic. A torture, to spend the day in these. They are mandatory, part of the uniform all RDRV cinema staff have to wear at all times.

The guys are dressed up as butlers. Black vest over white shirt with black bow tie, black trousers and those horrible black-and-white shoes.

The dress code for the ladies suggests maids. White collar and apron over short black dress, black stockings and cheap black stiletto heels. Newbies typically break down crying after the first two or three hours, because their feet hurt so bad.

Up to now, all ladies quit in their first month. Except for Amanda, a resolute Australian.

Amanda insists on wearing the guy uniform, in very approximate French. She's taking the company to court about it. They tried to exempt her from active duty, offered to pay her wages for no work. She shows up in her butler uniform anyway. Not even having to clean the toilets three times per shift changes her mind. A born revolutionary, totally unlike Jesse.

A one hundred Euro note. This guy has two fighting kids in tow and tries to buy one small cup of sweet popcorn with a one hundred Euro note. Quality time all round.

Jesse dutifully crumples his face into service person grief. Like seen in the trailer of the movie *Black Klansman*, when the black waiters discover whom they have been hired to serve.

Jesse is too young for the part, lacks the crinkles to get the face right, but he hopefully does achieve not to look smug while going: "Thousand apologies, sir, this won't work. I mean, I've got enough change. But I assume you won't be keen on a fistful of small notes and coins?"

Poster dad, daughter and son freeze in response. A make or break incident is in process of occurring. They can't watch a movie without popcorn. But dad is the diamond card type, he just doesn't do small change.

Jesse keeps his face aggrieved. This is going to end badly, for him. When in doubt, angry mobs always declare the young black guy the culprit.

Not today. Jesse gets saved by a tightly veiled, Indian looking lady. Three slots back in the line, she had no reason to feel compelled to intervene. But she does. Hands Jesse the two Euro coin with a nonchalant "Sir is invited, you can't always have the right change on you." Cool.

What is left of the queue proceeds smoothly. Ten minutes later, the foyer has reverted into a quiet expanse of red carpet surveilled by the stars on the posters adorning the walls. If it wasn't for the occasional booms and shrieks from the theatre where the "Clock Prophecy" seems to be succeeding in its ambition to scare teens, you could think the place was empty.

Time for Jesse to sort the cash he had to just cram into the drawer at the height of the rush.

Popcorn rush hour accounts for over fifty percent of sales, the rest of the day is peanuts. Jesse won't be needing much change in the evening, so he sorts the bills into envelopes and turns most of the coins into rolls now, not to lose time at the end of his shift.

It's incredible, how much money RDRV Cinema is making with popcorn.

Bought wholesale, the raw material is dirt cheap. The machine is so simple even Jesse manages to fix it. He started the evening with seventy five Euros of change, and by now he stands at over five hundred. If this was his own business, he'd get rich in no time.

How to advance financially has been an obsession with Jesse ever since his school days. No one pokes fun at rich people. They can do as they please, without getting into trouble. Poor people, even if they behave perfectly, someone will always find some fault.

Jesse's desire to get rich used to be a very theoretical affair. Without much education and no talent, he was going nowhere fast, as predicted by his mom, teachers and bosses.

He has always been convinced he could have made a pretty good rich twit, with suitable ancestors, but his family adheres to a strict no-assets tradition.

Great-grandfather's medal for bravery, earned in the Second World War, the occasion that brought him over from his native Benin, is the only item of worth in mom's possession. As her eldest son, he will inherit it, and have to pay for her funeral in return. No twit career for him.

Today, Jesse wonders if there might be a way to riches, after all. He doesn't have the means to buy a popcorn stand, never mind a cinema. But this deep thinking exercise as performed with Mattoo, it might qualify as a talent.

Not Jesse's way, to commit feats. His notorious non-noteworthiness even delivered one of the few proud moments of his non-career at school.

"Jean-Segun Edun", his last teacher said, on their last day, "Jean-Segun Edun, you might not be bright, you might not be a good athlete, not at all, you might not have what it takes to achieve much in life, but you are one good boy, I have to grant you that. Not easy, for a young man of your... background, to stay out of trouble. Keep it that way, Jean-Segun Edun, keep it that way, and you'll make me proud, so very, very proud."

Pretty nice words of farewell from a balding civil servant who had spent years not caring about whether or not Jesse made any sense of what was happening in class. He didn't, but it wasn't this teacher's fault. Jesse had lost track in third grade, after having talked his mom into lots of sick leave, to escape the bullies. He never caught up again.

Being talented has never been Jesse's way.

The new circumstances leave him puzzled. Especially the discrepancy between how vividly he experienced the other universe under Mattoo's guidance and the complete lack of mention of any comparable experience online.

His first thing in the morning, upon confirmation of the non-dream, was of course to consult his smartphone. It's old, it's slow, and the battery is failing. But plug it in and provide it with a good lump of time, and it will deliver search results just like its flashy modern counterparts.

The online space is full of tales of weird experiences. Mind blowing, what happens to some people, with and occasionally without the help of drugs. Search for telepathy, and you'll be served, down to a wikihow teaching you to develop it, in thirteen steps.

Same for telepathy with cats. Big topic, lots of anecdotes available. But taking a closer look revealed that none of those tales matched Jesse's particular experience. None of the other cats engaged in actual talking, never mind romantic affairs counseling. No online mention of the term biggie, even though Mattoo's mental world is awash with biggie talk.

Done with counting his cash and willing to risk being seen idling, Jesse tunes in once more, just to make sure Felinitynet is still there. Without Mattoo's help, he can only listen in randomly, not engage in actual conversations, but it's still impressive. And he's still a hot topic. The name "Tasty Feet" seems to be sticking, unfortunately, but everything else is appreciative.

He's considered a good biggie, as opposed to a large majority of bad biggies, a.k.a car owners.

The invention of the automobile drove a wedge between cats and humans, ruined what used to be a mutually enhancing win-win relationship. Humans kill hordes of cats by means of cars, a felinicide of so many agonizing last meows. No longer relying on cats to kill mice threatening their corn and bread supplies, humans don't care. Bad biggies.

This all makes a surprising lot of sense, once you start thinking about it. But none of it was mentioned in any of the anecdotes Jesse had found online. They were all about humans, only accessorially about the cats.

Assuming he was specially gifted, a big if by Jesse's own reckoning, still left him desperately short of ideas on how to take advantage of this talent.

It's obvious no one would believe this, if he told people. He's not that kind of person, and Mattoo won't turn him into one any time soon.

A young black man talking about being able to communicate with cats, that's easy to explain. He's doing drugs, the taking and the selling, and he's trying to advertise. Generations have been locked up on the basis of far more spurious grounds.

The clever thing is not to mention, that much is obvious. But there should be a way to take advantage, silently.

Jesse can't think of any. Frustrated, he abandons the idling, shuts down the popcorn counter and goes find his supervisor. There's always a new poster to put up, a wall lamp to polish, or the courtyard to sweep, at the end of everything else.

Back at the Meunier-Moraire-&-lodger apartment, as it identifies itself on the name plate, Mattoo is in a much better mood. After a good days sleep, he woke up half an hour ago to even more fame and buzz than he had anticipated.

He'll make feline of the year, that much is pretty clear by now. Barely announcing his online presence, without even uttering the hint of a pun or a grain of wisdom, triggered an avalanche of enthusiastic comments.

Mattoo has become the pride of the same Siamese community that used to ignore him, because of his dubious origins. Bloody fucking hypocrites.

His late mom, may she Rest In Peace and damned be the biggie driver who crushed her to pulp, she was a Siamese all right. Mattoo does also look the part. Light grey body, dark ears, mask, socks and tail, his is a perfectly Siamese coat.

But he lacks proof of a matching dad. No Siamese he-cat was ever recorded mating his mom. None lived in the neighborhood she was able to roam, thanks to a cat flap. Excluding the option of a virgin birth, she must have had sex with a non-Siamese. Her genes prevailed. But if ever Mattoo was to father, his offspring might well look different. Hence yesterday's ostracism.

Today, a selection of exquisite and fully pedigreed ladies are humbly applying for a date. Humbly applying! Mattoo needs all the self control he can muster to avoid soiling the living room. He really needs a way out, while this lucky streak lasts.

Tasty Feet will have to make himself useful. The doors are no obstacle to him, he leaves and comes back as he pleases.

Mattoo will talk Tasty Feet into an excursion. Nothing dramatic. Just a little stroll across the courtyard. A parking lot might not be the most romantic of locations, but it will do just fine, according to Mattoo's balls.

First he'll talk Tasty Feet into it. Then they'll fix a date Mattoo will announce on the network. He'll select one of the she-cats sure to flood in, certainly not a Siamese. They will retreat behind a parked car, for privacy. You really don't want spectators, for your first...

Oops. The fridge door operators won't like the smell of that stain. Time for the premeditated counter measure. Jump onto the buffet, nudge the vase with the bouquet of roses to a spot right above the stain, send it crashing down. Won't fool a cat, should work with biggies. They lack a proper sense of smell. Never will they guess the rationale behind the broken vase. They'll think clumsy cat and Mattoo will end up in kitchen confinement. A small price to pay.

Mattoo retreats to the bedroom. He'll stay under the bed, pretending a malaise. Better safe than bruised. He didn't experience any brutality so far, but who knows, with biggies?

It has been a while since his last mishap, also a vase full of flowers. It got into the way of him chasing a bright pink spider that used to run up, down and across the wall behind the couch whenever the sickly smelling fridge door operator sat on the green velvet stool. An especially ugly piece of furniture Mattoo is doing his best to destroy, by sharpening his claws on it.

There's only so much a lightly built feline can do, about aesthetical insults, but he's on a mission. In one spot, the dark grey stuffing underneath the velvet has become visible. Couple more months of exertion, and the eyesore will be converted into something worth looking at.

With nothing much to do, under the bed, Mattoo's mind quickly returns to those alluring ladies, and how to get Tasty Feet to let him roam, just once. He's a he-biggie, he should be able to understand a particular kind of urgency. Except he doesn't seem to get excited, about the presence of two she-biggies. Two! Well within reach! And how does the stupid half-wit of a biggie react to this abundance of opportunities? By hiding in his room.

Mattoo needs to consider the possibility that Tasty Feet might be gay. No problem. This is a perfectly respectable orientation, in males. In females, it's a waste of potential, of course. But a male restricting his longings to, let's be honest, the superior gender, that's as sign of taste. Won't get your genes anywhere, but full marks for style.

If Tasty Feet is gay, Mattoo will have to explain his different longings by way of analogies. Something on the line of "Look, I'm just like you, in principle. Day in, day out, you go roam to copulate with a he-biggie. Same for me. I need to roam and find me a willing she-cat. We're so similar we could be siblings. Can I call you brother, Tasty Feet?"

The bonding babble is even simpler if Tasty Feet happens to be bisexual. "Wow, both kinds, really now? Impressive. Know what, perhaps I'll turn out to be just like you, when I get older. Currently, I prefer to keep it simple and start with a she-cat. But in the due course of time, once one starts to wonder about what else there is to experience, might well try bi." Mattoo is dead sure that won't happen, but why alienate a friend by calling him weird?

Only one catastrophe scenario scares Mattoo. What if Tasty Feet is an asexual? Self sufficiency is a condition afflicting quite a number of cats. They just don't get it, the fun. A biggie capable of deep thought, he might be unusual in other ways, too. That would complicate things.

The door. Only seconds to go before his crime gets discovered. Both fridge door operators coming home together, as they do on most days. First they go to the kitchen, to unload and operate the fizz machine. A dangerous device. Mattoo vividly recalls how his left front paw ached for days, after he had tried to catch the fizz. Burning hot, the perfidious trap.

First fizz. Second fizz. Heavy steps, mighty growls. The crime scene has been reached.

It doesn't take the fridge door operators long to locate him. There's only this one den available, unless you count the drowner in the bathroom. That one looks and feels good, especially if the odd towel has already been stuffed into it. Dark, just the right size, what's not to like? Cozy, comfy and deadly. Tales of horror abound, about drowners. All youngsters get warned never ever to go there. One moment, a cat is relaxing in the safety of what feels like a good den. Next, the door goes wham and a particularly cruel and slow execution starts. Dreadful.

Both fridge operators on their knees on the bedside carpet, growling at him. Well, it takes more to impress Mattoo. He won't budge. As long as it's only growling, he can take it. His ears are ringing, because hell, aren't they loud. But noise won't suffice to chase him out. Their knees are bound to hurt worse than his ears. Mattoo stares back at them in aggressive disdain.

Looks like they're growling at each other now. A prelude to giving up? Indeed. If you're looking for impatience, you can count on biggies to deliver. Hopeless at stalking. If they had to catch their food, they'd starve to death as sure as cats know how to catch mice.

Nothing much to do, under that bed. Mattoo can't resist the temptation for long, he needs to go back online to check that the ladies are still there, and crazy about his famous person. He won't let himself get carried away this time. Just one look at his fandom, and done.

Mattoo's followership is still expanding, but more slowly now. The mood is changing.

"One more biggie has been initiated to the art of conversation? Cool, well done, Mattoo, wherever and wherever you are. Good to know this is still feasible. Even better to know a mere nobody of a youngster can do it. That is bound to mean plenty of biggies will make themselves available, if and when the need arises. Good news, welcome. Now, about that untimely death of our beloved Nora the spotted. A diva like her didn't deserve to get crushed in her prime. We really need to get the biggies to abandon cars. Now, my idea, a pretty bright one, I dare say..."

The tide was bound to ebb. Mattoo is lucky to have had a pretty long moment in the spotlight, because there wasn't much else happening. He's aware of the news cycle. Life goes on. But...

Mattoo knows he should wait until Tasty Feet is back. It's one thing to get a biggie to talk in the dark of his bedroom, with nothing better to do. Totally different number, to call him while he roams. Chances are he's involved in vital business, perhaps even mating, and will resent the interruption. All true. But sometimes, a cat has to take risks. There is urgency.

"Tasty Feet to be called Jesse, are you there? Any chance we can have a little chat, about an urgent project of mine? Tasty Feet to be called Jesse, nice biggie-biggie..."

"Mattoo, is that you? Hey, cool, I can recognize you, despite all that mayhem out there. Fine to chat, I'm not exactly busy right now. Manning our hotline, for people too dumb to handle the ticket shop by themselves. It's called a hotline, but it has been stone cold dead for months. Normally, Jean-François gets to do this nice cushion of a job, because he's stock French and has a bad back. But today he had to go home early, back worse than ever..."

"Tasty Feet to be called Jesse, would you mind shutting up? I've got like a feeling, a strong feeling, that what you're telling me is much less important than what I'm about to ask you. And you owe me, remember? Without me, you'd still be nothing but one more flat lining biggie. Keeping this in mind, I would like to propose a deal. I introduce you to the network, you introduce me to the outside. Nothing big, just two doors to open. On my way out, and again on my way in. OK, that adds up to four doors. But that's still nothing. And I already delivered my part. OK?"

Jesse leans back on the office chair, the one big perk associated with Jean-François' job. Mattoo seems to consider him even more stupid than he fears himself to be.

Letting out the cat is the one offense M4 are certain never to forgive. They made that clear in his tenancy agreement. In a section titled 'prerequisites' it states that under no circumstances is he to let out the cat. Contravention to this clause leads to immediate eviction. He tried to make a joke, asking how to proceed in case of an evacuation of the building. M4 didn't laugh.

Jesse can feel the cat expect his answer. And that it will balk at his refusal. But a notoriously good boy has to keep it up:

“Sorry, Mattoo. It’s not that I don’t understand you. Must be boring, always to be confined to one flat. It’s bound to feel bigger for you than for me, because you’re smaller and size matters, but still. I do understand you. But your owners, Madame and Madame Meunier-Moraire, or M4, as I call them, they specifically insist I can’t let you out. It’s a rule, Mattoo. Sorry.”

If there’s one interaction Jesse has mastered, over the years, it’s apologizing. He started practicing in preschool, where he never managed to bring the right stuff because his mother couldn’t make much sense of the instructions he brought home. There hasn’t been one day since his very first stuttered apology where he didn’t need to plead non-guilty at least once, and this has turned him into a professional. But he’s no match for a disappointed cat.

“A rule, Tasty Feet? And please do note I’m no longer doing you the favor to call you Jesse. A rule? As in biggies with a grandiosity complex, delusional enough to think they can rule cats? Tasty Feet, you don’t know what you’re talking about.

If Felinity was into religions, this would be blasphemy. You can count yourself lucky cats are such mild-mannered paragons of equanimity. Otherwise, you’d be in big trouble. You might not be aware of it, because you’re a dumb biggie, but Felinity rules your world, Tasty Feet.

This fact only becomes obvious in phases of crises, indeed. These are mercifully rare and short, indeed. But if our luck runs out, today, tomorrow, one year from now, we’ll have to prove our type of existence is worth to proceed, or we’ll get our material manifestations terminated. Terminated. End of biggie. Only half the cat left. Felinity rules, not biggies. And I need to get out.”

Hard to believe, for Jesse, that a mere five pound cat should be able to deep talk that forcefully. But Mattoo is clearly on a mission. Sounds like some omen from a dark movie. First you get the voice of doom. Next something really bad happens.

Looking around the hall, Jesse half expects the floor to blow up, or an alien spaceship to crash in. Unimpressed, RDRV Cinema looks it’s standard boring vast. Fire hazard regulations insists on ample corridors, to make sure an evacuation takes less than a minute even if all theatres are full. Which they never are, but that’s completely besides that particular point, as far as the fire hazard prevention inspectors are concerned.

The administration doesn’t know, about blockbusters and arty fare, and how the mix leads to an average occupation rate of less than thirty percent. Jesse does, because if you’re cursed with vacuum cleaning vast expanses of red carpet, you take an interest. And the screen on Jean-Francois’ desk confirms. Right now, they stand at eighteen percent. The Halloween movie is booked out. Everything else is running in front of one digit mini-audiences.

All calm in the RDRV Cinema hall, except for the occasional muffled boom from the action movie in theater II, some war game. Pretty much the same outside. From this comfortable workspace, Jesse has a good view of the glass doors. The rush hour traffic is stop-and-going through the drizzly darkness, perfectly unaffected by Mattoo’s threats.

Having taken all this in, Jesse assumes the cat to be wrong. On past form, this suggests Mattoo is telling the truth. There was this pattern at school. Every time Jesse had convinced himself he knew an answer, he had picked a wrong one. Especially in multiple choice. He was always more of an oral guy, where you get a fair chance to read visual clues and reconsider.

When in doubt, don’t commit. “Please tell me you’re kidding, Mattoo?” Jesse ventured, hoping to elicit a more detailed explanation allowing him to refine his assessment.

Back at the flat under the bed, Mattoo is so pleased with himself he has to start purring. He didn’t feel very comfortable deep talking so forcefully to a biggie. He’s him, not exactly a massive, ferocious packet of muscles, teeth and claws. Doesn’t even qualify as cuddly fur ball, too slender.

And Tasty Feet might be subsize, for a biggie, but that's still huge, for a cat. Pretty surprising, how he seems to accept being admonished. There's potential in this relationship.

Mattoo switches to his gentler, most persuasive deep voice and starts to explain. About how cats happen to be a multilevel species. Or bilevel, if you ignore paralellity. Which you should, because honestly, even very clever brains balk at being told to process that.

An good while later, Jesse gets reprimanded for idling at the hotline desk instead of selling popcorn. The supervisor has a point, because there are a grand total of three early spectators ambling the hall. They might want to buy popcorn, theoretically, the stall has to be opened.

The thirty-something couple are busy smooching, they probably won't fancy munching instead. The elderly professor type probably denigrates popcorn as junk food. He'd rather show up at work with one of RDRV Cinema's laser swords than be seen eating popcorn. But customers are customers, and they're entitled to the full experience, including the popcorn stall.

Jesse dutifully apologizes, aloud to the supervisor for having failed to notice the customers, inside to Mattoo, for having to abandon this fascinating lecture:

"This bilevelity, or however you call it, it doesn't make any sense to me, Mattoo. But that's OK, I'll just consider it the next geometry. Never managed to make sense of that one either, despite all the explaining. See you tonight at the flat!"

## Karlsruhe

Over in Karlsruhe, Safo encounters a lot more resistance. At first, her project with Uzo, as she has by now learned to call the new she-keeper, took off like a big fucking rocket.

When Uzo arrived, with her magic lamp, Safo immediately presented her tail, pressing her butt extra hard against the cage bars, to facilitate access. The she-keeper of course obliged, immediately starting to treat the tail.

The associated wellbeing nearly distracted Safo from her project. Only the thought of leaving felinity's future at the mercy of a mere juvenile kept her focused enough to stay on plan. She managed to resist the urge to savor every last second of the precious soothing heat and suddenly turned around, assuming Sphinx position and starting a the keeper.

Late Arkan has taught her this trick, and she has practiced it for years.

Assume Sphinx position, eye to eye, and stare at a biggie. As hard as you can, with the full unblinking depth of your eyes. Do it right, and their inner prey will react. They'll go all transfixed, unable to do anything but stare back. There's of course no hypno-mumbo-jumbo involved, just fear. But anxiety is a powerful emotion that can clear the mind in one flush.

Keeping up the staring and roaring gently for additional effect, Safo threw the full maximum force of her deep thinking at the puzzled keeper. Full force, one shot only, right first time. That's how late Arkan had achieved his initial contact with Roy, the biggie posing as his tamer.

For the first split of a second, nothing happened. Then, Uzo's eyes went wide and she stuttered: "Safo? Is that you? What the fucking hell are you doing? Oh shit, I really can't go down with psychosis now. No, no, no! Stop it, now. I have to bloody stop that, now."

On the upside, contact has been established. On the downside, shrink talk is not what a magnanimous lioness going the extra mile to initiate a biggie to a fascinating new world does expect. A little less resistance, and a lot more gratitude, would have been preferable.

Instead, they're still arguing about the basics half an hour later.

"OK, Safo respectively my inner psychotic element projecting itself into a big old bloody lioness, let me recapitulate this fairy tale, to make sure we're arguing on the same page:

There's a second level to cats, reaching into a totally different but not parallel universe where an awful lot of non-matter forms sapient patterns. Right so far? Gooood.

All cats have access to their second level, this different but not parallel realm, at all times. They think predominantly with their organic brain for basics, like food and sex. For more complex considerations, and for some kind of networking that leads to an awful lot of background noise I struggle to ignore, they use their second, so called deep level. Right so far? Gooood.

And I mean it. Because, honestly, never would I have guessed my imagination to be able to come up with such a load of highly sophisticated bullshit. I seem to be far more creative when psychotic than when in good health. Pity this disease didn't do me the favor to strike earlier. I could have done with a little more inspiration in my school days. Who knows what could have happened, if I had achieved only slightly better grades in the chattering subjects.

But I didn't, and became a biologist. I'm into science, not fairy tales. Which means, dear Safo respectively my own inner psychotic element, that you have to prove, and I mean scientifically prove, this big fat figment of my imagination. Proposals, oh mighty feline?"

On hearing that last bit, Safo is glad the argument takes place after a good dose of magic lamp. A lioness needs a tail to convey irritation, and she really does hate irony. The worlds are complicated enough without having to second guess what you hear to identify jokes. Especially bad ones.

This is one stubborn biggie. By now perfectly able to deep talk, Uzo still fights back, denying the obvious. Well, at least she keeps talking. She might be on the slow side, intellectually, but she got the basic principles fast. Not just hearing what's being said, also feeling the subtle clues conveying emotions. Like now. The biggie has paused in her defensive rant because she noticed Safo's intention to answer. Pretty good, for a novice biggie. Time to go one up.

"You want proof, Uzo? More proof than hearing the deep voices? For quite a while now? This can of course be arranged, no problem. A big old lion does struggle with the science bit, of course. Afraid I will need to keep that simple, not to confuse myself. A simple numbers game, would that be considered acceptable? I think of a number, you try to guess it. Ten rounds, for starters."

Safo is so pleased with her idea she has to soft growl at herself, before going:

"Being a biggie and bad at memorizing, you might want to use your writing skill, Uzo, not to forget the numbers. I'll explain later. The game is simple. I choose a number, you try to guess it, I tell you my number, you write it down. Ten times. Ready?"

Uzo conveys a big lump of residual skepticism with her agreement. They play.

She gets only one number right, the second one, a three. After ten rounds, the note on her phone reads two, three, five, seven, eleven, thirteen, seventeen, nineteen, twenty three and twenty nine. And she has her clinching argument all ready:

"Fine, Safo. I didn't guess the numbers, I don't know what you think. OK. But this doesn't prove you are you. I can easily fool myself into believing I'm surprised. You have to face it, you can't prove you're not something I'm coming up with..."

What? OK, I'm looking at the line of numbers again. So what? One, two, three... Ten random numbers. All between zero and thirty. A one in thirty chance to get the number right, if you limited yourself to thirty, even though we didn't discuss any such limit.

What? No, biology doesn't involve much maths. Of course you know that, I'm the one telling you you're a figment of my imagination. Of course I've heard of prime num... Holy shit!"

Safo licks her sore paw. Mental note to ask Uzo for a dose of magic lamp for it. The ache feels exactly like inside the tail, there's a good chance for the magic lamp to work on it.

Uzo feels stupid, standing there in the dark, next to a lion cage, trying to self diagnose. She's no psychiatrist, has only done some reading on hallucinogens. Back in the days when she wondered if she might be brave enough to risk a drug manufacturer career, she followed a couple of journals openly available through the Unilag library. Nothing she ever read suggested the type of episode she's experiencing. Too business as usual. All her senses function normally.

Despite the semi-darkness, Uzo clearly sees the lioness. She's licking a paw, again. Might be affected by the rheumatism plaguing her tail. Mental note to try the same treatment on it. Uzo smells the distinctive scent of carnivore urine typical for this house. She hears the hum of the evening traffic rolling along the fence of the zoo. She feels her hands resting on the concrete for support, to give her tired legs a break. It's all bloody normal. Too normal for comfort.

Reactivating what the lioness calls her deep voice, Uzo goes: "OK Safo, one point for you. Not prepared to envisage a cat brain handling prime numbers, but I concede that this is not a series I would have come up with. Not my kind of line-up, OK. I admit I struggle to prove your deep talking is a hallucination. I'm prepared to grant you hypothesis status. So what next?"

A bit of a trick question, of course. The best explanation for this whole scene is still an atypical schizophrenic episode. Playing along should help reveal some inevitable oddity. Uzo feels proud of her strategic thinking. Nothing like an Odyssey, to sharpen up a girl.

Safo stops licking to look straight at Uzo and goes: "Well done, biggie, congratulations. As we don't need to save the world just yet, would you mind applying that magic lamp to my paw? I've got a hunch that it's wrong in the same way as my tail, and that a little heat might help."

Somewhere at the back of Uzo's brain, a switch flips. This is one hell of a sound hypothesis. And seeing the huge lioness roll herself against the cage bars like some playful kitten, to push the back of her paw into perfect position, provides the final confirmation. However it's possible, they are definitely communicating. Despite all the research proving cats dumb.

Uzo must have thought that last bit aloud. Safo, still expectantly holding her paw in position, swishes her tail in irritation and goes: "What are you waiting for, Uzo? Good biggie-biggie, use lumpy-lumpy? Yes, by the way, your research is right, my cat brain is dumb. It would like to bite of your hand and taste the gushing blood. It has figured out that if you stumble, you might reach for the bars, and snap goes your tasty hand. My cat brain knows no past or future, couldn't care less about prime numbers, wave lengths or resonance phenomena. That's my deep brain. And please be aware, Uzo, that this one isn't in charge. One step into my cage, you're bloody food."

As this round of deep insights comes with a couple of gory images, Uzo moves back one step while reaching for the infrared lamp to point it at the presented paw. Being a considerate keeper, she adds: "Here you go, Safo. But please do take care not to look at the light, it can damage your eyes. The last thing you need is another ailment, right? Best to shut your eyes. Perfect!"

This is one very pleased lioness. No deep thinking necessary to see it. The position of the whiskers and ears tells the story all right.

As any good physiotherapist, Uzo anyway feels compelled to start a conversation:

"So Safo, now that we have established you're no hallucination, would you mind enlightening me a little further? Why do you call me biggie, if you're not a manifestation of my inner body shamer?"

Amused lioness. Uzo is starting to be familiar with the signs. And surprised to learn that felinity is not unlike humanity.

As there are many more pet cats than lions, tigers, leopards and cougars, the pets set the terms of reference. Compared to them, all humans are big, hence biggies. Regardless of the amount of body fat they carry. To differentiate between thin and fat biggies, felinity uses the terms hard and soft. Once again the pet way of thinking. If you try to make yourself comfortable on their lap, you want soft. More or less fatty tissue is only relevant in food, not seats.

The big felines are a minority relentlessly struggling against discrimination and disrespect. Their particular plights, both in the wild and in captivity, never make the news.

Cars and castration, that's the only horrors the average cat cares about.

Plus cat food scares, of course. When the deep network reported, wrongly, as it turned out, that the tuna flavored food from a particular brand had been laced with hormones, to reduce the sexual urges of tomcats, felinity went wild. A quarter of a billion of males went on hunger strike, leading to a bonanza for vets. A lot of them of course shouldn't have cared, even if the rumor had been true, because they had been castrated long ago. One more case of male denial.

That's another surprise. Safo turns out to be a lioness lib activist. Very critical of males, and lions in particular. "Mostly useless parasites" in her own deep words. They excel at bragging and roaring, but don't expect them to engage in any proper hunting. If you want to take down serious game that will feed a family, you need the concerted efforts of a well organized group of ladies.

While open to join forces in a little gender squirmish, Uzo can't help asking if Safo has any first paw experience of hunting, as opposed to jumping at the carcass provided by a keeper.

This sends the lioness deep waxing lyrical. She was born in captivity, but spent the glorious days of her youth at Loro Parque on Tenerife island. A much more relaxed zoo, where the lions were allowed a proper life. On feline fun mornings, the keepers would bring a piglet. A squealing pink piglet full of warm gushing blood. Once released into the lion cage, it would race around at full speed, no longer squealing, for lack of breath.

Young Safo was a good hunter, to be bet on by the clever keepers. Even now, more than fifteen years later, she still recalls that glorious taste, specific to the first bite. Sinking her teeth into a live piglet, marvelous. Would Uzo by any chance be able to procure a piglet? Just once, for the sake of their friendship? Safo would prefer it tied up, because even with a by now well treated paw she no longer feels like sprinting. Just once?

The company of a talkative bloodthirsty lioness wouldn't meet most people's idea of a comfort zone, but Uzo is happy. For a biologist, this is mighty interesting. She's more into plants than beasts, only vaguely recollects her basic zoology course, but you don't need to be an expert to be familiar with the controversies around zoos.

What Safo shares confirms the so-called ambivalents, the zoos-yes-but faction. While the radical anti faction want all zoos abolished and the radical pro faction doesn't care about the animals as long as the public gets entertained, the ambivalents call for more research and better design, to make the existence of zoo animals as pleasant as possible. Fascinating, to hear the other side.

"Oh, cutey, lion show foot. Next Whiskey cage in, for cuddly cuddly?"

Both Uzo and Safo are startled, they had been so absorbed by their conversation that they didn't hear the head keeper and key master of the predator compound coming. Uzo is glad he doesn't disapprove of her administering infrared to the lioness' paw, an action she should probably have cleared with him and the vet in advance. She quickly retorts:

"Infrared for the tail, infrared for the paw. The lion shows the paw. Never I go past the line, never I go in the cage, because dangerous the beast."

Uzo manages to say that last bit with far more conviction than she would have felt yesterday. It's one thing to have two old white men rambling on about fierce beasts ready to tear you to pieces, despite looking like a gentle old rug of a fat cat. You can't help thinking some doubts. But after deep hearing the lioness' own warning, Uzo is sure to keep her distances.

"Right answer, Whiskey test passed", retorts the boss. "You well done, tomorrow again. Now closing time. Whiskey home, Whiskey can have some whiskey, hahaha."

Uzo smiles at the bad joke, wholeheartedly. She's genuinely glad. This episode could have taken a bad turn. An intern can't be allowed to fool around with any of the precious few charismatic megafauna, you don't need an overdeveloped sense of diligence to know that.

Switching off the infrared lamp to store it in the lion equipment locker while the head keeper waits for her to clear the place, Uzo deep bids Safo a silent farewell.

Instead of a return greeting, a giggly lioness explains how there's no distance, in the deep realm. No need to be close, as long as you know your interlocutors identification and he's willing to chat. Felines have inbuilt mobiles, well in advance of humans only starting to think about implants.

Wow. Uzo promises to tune back in once she has made it into her packed tram and found a good corner for where to stand for twenty minutes. Conquering one of the few vacant seats wouldn't be a good idea while being young and black, so she doesn't even try, despite her tired feet.

The main station, where Uzo catches her tram, is located right at the far entrance. A ten minute walk along the main lane of the zoo now devoid of visitors. Would be nice if it wasn't so chilly.

Another ten minutes later, she has boarded a tram and found herself a grip.

It's hot in here, Uzo needs to take off her gloves and earmuffs and open her duvet jacket. A lazy local youth sitting two rows away comments, for the entertainment of the buddy sitting next to him. The usual bad joke about her being a walking candy called a chocolate kiss. An allusion to its racial slur of a traditional name. Uzo has a strategy all ready for this recurring situation and sighs, to no one in particular "Today's youth... Not worked one day, but sitting down, and a big mouth."

Uzo has developed and practiced this sentence with her German coach, it comes out just like a native would say it. Immediately shifts the mood. The old guy in the blue overall standing next to her, as uncomfortably as herself, doesn't hesitate to take over. He engages the kids in a debate. Three stops later, they prefer to vacate the tram, allowing him to sit down. He even offers Uzo the second seat. She politely declines, with one more rehearsed sentence "No thanks, my stop soon." It's better that way. Some people go for sitting blacks.

Etsenred, Uzo's stop. She's the only passenger alighting here. No school kids at this hour, they are done by four at the latest. No pensioners no longer able to drive, they don't do darkness. Everybody else reaches Etsenred by car, because the tram stop is down here in the valley and the village up there on the mountain. Steep climb ahead. No need to pull up the zipper of the duvet jacket, you start to sweat ten steps in whichever your clothes.

Uzo hurries up the mountain because she doesn't feel safe. She has been living in Etsenred for three months and never met anyone on this path in the afternoon, but she still hates it. Never would she have guessed, back in dangerous Lagos, that orderly Germany might achieve to feel scary, but it does. Uzo envies Safo. Must be cool, to be a lady who never experiences fear.

Deep thinking this at the lioness triggers hilarity: "Never no fear, biggie? Come again, you can't believe that, you're clever! Of course I know fear. Like when I want to jump up onto my board, for a change of view, and know my sore paw is going to hurt, when I jump back down later. Scary."

It's nice for Uzo, to have Safo at her mental side. The lioness would be no help whatsoever in case of an attack, but having someone to deep chat with boosts Uzo's bravery. Just like having her sister on the phone on a tricky way home after an outing, back home in Lagos. Strength in numbers, works even when they're virtual and with a lioness talking bullshit.

"That's totally not the same, Safo. I'm talking about real danger, serious fears. She-humans are at risk of rape, you know? Like he-humans forcing them to have sex. That's what I call serious."

Uzo refuses to use the term biggie for humans. Despite all Safo's benign explanations, it still reminds her of her butt. She would like it leaner, but the only progress she manages to achieve through dieting is less volume in pretty much all other body parts.

Safo likes an argument. Biggies are stupid, but the fun kind of. She's really glad she initiated the contact and doesn't mind enlightening her prey, about how things are:

"You're too young to understand, lucky biggie, so let me tell you: A sore paw is serious. At least as serious as the less consensual kind of sex. I mean, if he threatens to bite you, you think again. Why not let him have his way, he'll be done soon enough? Not such a big deal..."

That's the kind of talk Uzo is not prepared to take from anyone. Past experience with the topic has told her that just exploding won't help her cause. Vital to establish some kind of common ground that allows to set things straight, in the due course of time. Always best to start with a question:

"Sounds like you had a hard time with the late Menelaos, Safo? The head keeper told me you didn't get along that well, with your destined mate, and that you never had kids, but this sounds far more awful than I would have imagined..."

Uzo doesn't get to finish her sentence, Safo is once again performing the deep talking equivalent of a laughing fit. Barely managing to convey information, she goes:

"Mene, a rapist? Oh biggie, that's a good one. Poor old fag, wish he could hear you now. The last thing he wanted, in his life, all his life, was female company. No mane, not for Mene. For me, the arrangement was superb. No stress, no litter. I'm of the asexual persuasion, you know? I was so glad to get rid of Épico, my stud back at my first zoo. Poor Mene, he suffered. In the wild, the gay lion, no problem, he goes find himself a partner. In captivity, no way. The girls, they might be kept in groups, things can work out. The poor males, never... Come on, biggie? Now your listening sounds exactly like gawking. Don't tell me your gender diversity prejudiced?!"

Uzo is glad she has reached the front door. Couple more steps and she's inside. Better that. She really doesn't want her landlords to see her face. It's bound to show her confusion. She's as good as back to the psychosis assumption, because gay and asexual lions, honestly? Only the imagination of the seriously gender insecure person can come up with such a concept. She occasionally admits to herself being such a person, but never shared her struggle before. Not even with her sister. Making tea for comfort, she tells Safo about her most private worries.

The lioness deep listens patiently to Uzo's tale of three awkward dates with boys, an even worse attempt at a date with a girl, and how this whole mess lead to an urge for a fresh start that culminated in an expensive, complex and so far successful emigration.

Done with both her tale and her tea, Uzo puts down her empty cup and waits for Safo's verdict. The whole situation suddenly feels weird and sick again. If anyone saw her sitting on her couch looking nowhere, he would sure guess her mad.

"Well, biggie, from a felinity point of view, all is fine with you. Self reliant female, clever, doing what she feels is right for her, excellent. You're having an asexual phase, a very natural event. Can happen for lack of a suitable mate, because the environment isn't right, or due to whatever other priority being so much more important that you can't fit in a he-biggie. Very natural. My advice: Grant yourself permission to enjoy, and have fun. It's OK to have fun by yourself, Uzo. And now is the time, because I need to check today's news. See you tomorrow, Uzo... Oh, and please don't forget to think about how to get me that piglet? Just one piglet? See you, Uzo!"

Uzo goes make fresh tea, to help her think. An LGBT activist lioness might be an unusual confidante, and certainly can't be mentioned in polite company. But Safo's advice does make a lot more sense than even her sister's. Orji's compassion is meant all nice and caring, but at the end of the day, she insists on Uzo marrying ASAP. Just like everyone else. Orji's just more liberal, considers different types of marriage acceptable.

The longer she thinks about it, the more Uzo prefers Safo's approach. "Asexual phase", this has a cozy ring. Especially the "phase" bit. Nothing absolute, no eternal commitment. Cool. Gives her permission not to take any initiatives, without excluding options. Good.

## Strasbourg

When Jesse finally makes it home, at ten to three because of the stupid guy who had to spill half a bottle of Aperol in theatre III, he's too tired to care about cats. The only thing he wants now is to rid his hot feet of those damn shoes, lay down and get some sleep.

Mattoo takes him by surprise, he nearly manages to squeeze through his legs when he opens the flat door. He had stayed in his den until both fridge door operators went to bed. Once they were breathing deep asleep on the mattress above him, he had relocated into the corridor to lurk next to the apartment door. He needed out, and was ready to use force.

With both a loud and a deep "What's wrong with you?! You know you have to stay in!", Jesse only just manages to grab the body of the furry wannabe fugitive. Holding Mattoo up to breast height, his body and hind legs hanging down to a surprisingly long length, Jesse swings him back inside and puts him down. Using his deep voice only, he adds: "Sorry, Mattoo. It's not that I don't understand you, why you'd like to get out. But I promised, even in writing. If I let you out, M4 throw me out, and I can't afford another place. You don't want a friend on the street, right?"

Mattoo doesn't answer, keeping his tail in half-mast scorn position. But he does amble towards Tasty Feet's room, thereby signaling all is not lost, in their relationship. No scurrying away from him. His is a dignified posture. He'll just pretend it all never happened, neither his attempt to flee nor the getting caught and held up bit. This just happens to be his grumpy day.

Impossible to keep up the grump once Tasty Feet has gotten rid of his shoes. The odor is even more delicious today. Some additional component graces his trousers, very spiced, completely new overall bouquet. Mattoo rubs himself hard against the source of the perfume.

Jesse still feels a chemical taste on his tongue. To clean the carpet in theatre III and vanquish the stench, he had to use the high-pressure cleaner, with the water laced with stain remover. Nothing, no vomit, no ketchup, no liquor, resists this weapon of mass disinfection. Also ruins the sense of taste and smell of the poor operator forced to inhale the vapors. You need to down cans of soda and whole packs of sweets and crisps to get back to tasting anything. He would like to fetch a himself a can from his fridge. Standing up is sure to piss off the cat. Apology time.

Using only his deep voice, Jesse goes: "Friends again, Mattoo? OK with you if I repurpose my feet for just one second, to go fetch me a soda? I promise I'll be back in position in a blink."

Mattoo provides the slightest of acknowledgments, only just barely approving. Deep hearing the word "promise" reminds him of the incident he has decided to forget. He would like to reprimand Tasty Feet for his clumsy rude way of not playing along. But priority on the mission. Without Tasty Feet's help, Mattoo is never going to overcome the flat door. He needs him on friendly terms.

Even a grumpy cat has to concede that this biggie excels at keeping promises. He said he'd just fetch a can of soda and be right back, and there he is, once again granting full body access to tonight's divine mix of a perfume. The predominantly cheesy body, the salty side, and tonight's special spice, striking the nose like a needle, at the limit of the bearable. Divine.

Still not deigning to engage in a conversation, a feline has his pride, Mattoo tunes into the network to check how badly his fame stocks have gone down.

Another first contact? By a zoo lion? Now that's a first. Artists, yes. In a circus or cabaret, the supersize felines work closely with biggies and initiation can happen. But in a zoo, that's a first. Accomplished by one hell of an impressive old lady, going by the chic name of Safo. Big news. And, as an extra, none of the news fails to mention Mattoo. They're broadcasting his picture right alongside his supersized fellow biggie handler. Mattoo is back, with a roar.

There's of course a hot debate going on. Two first contacts, after such a long lag time, that has to mean something, calls for interpretation and speculation.

The usual doom sayers are of course getting ready for the end of the world. They never do anything else, so it's just one more status update. According to them, the next challenge is imminent. Under current conditions, it'll prove impossible to win. They've been saying that for as long as any cat can think back, but today is one their vigorous days.

The gung ho faction share the first half of this assumption, but they urge to get going. "Finally something happening", that's all they need, for joy. Never would they dream of losing any fight, until the very moment they go down. Must be fun to live like that. Except for the end.

The more thoughtful crowd haven't decided yet, about what is happening.

This second first contact might just be a result of folks trying harder, upon hearing about the first success. Without valiant Mattoo to take the lead, would Safo even have considered trying? She doesn't comment, thereby making Mattoo's night. A leader, that's what all the best ladies long to date, right? If only he could get out, just once...

The scientifically minded once again wonder if it would do more harm or good, to try check with the deep-only entities if any challenge action is imminent.

During challenges, there is interaction with them, that much is an established fact. But no cat knows for sure how the challenges start. Do the deep-only entities come up with the challenge for a reason? Might contacting them be the trigger that sends the wheel turning? Most cats consider an initiative unadvisable and agree to ostracize anyone trying to differ.

Mattoo would never tell anyone, but he does wonder, if asking might not be the safer course of action. If the deep-only entities were to make themselves available, for a chat, it might be possible to talk them out of the next challenge, or convince them of a feasible scope.

The news having declared him a leader, Mattoo feels an alien burden. Yesterday, he was one more playful Siamese lad, hoping against pet life odds that he'll manage to have sex, at some point. Today, he's half of the team in charge of saving felinity's material side, and everything else.

Settling against Tasty Feet's by now dry extremities, Mattoo performs the deep thinking equivalent of a harrumph and goes: "Tasty Feet, in case we need to save the world, just assuming, you'd be game, right? You wouldn't back out, yes please? We're talking responsibility here. If we have to, we'll get our act together, OK? I'll do the translating, because biggies struggle to hear the deep only, and you get the biggie-ship going, OK?"

Jesse, half asleep after a hard shift, struggles to answer. If only this wasn't so much like school revisited. He does hear Mattoo all right, deep noise incoming. But for making sense... His tried and tested approach for such occasions involves an nod, delivered with an aplomb suggesting readiness to promptly answer whichever follow-up questions. Mattoo, totally unlike Jesse's former teachers, immediately buys it. Even purrs louder, suggesting advanced pleasure. Jesse's first good mark in an abstract subject. He's on a winning streak.

Which reminds him. There must be a way to take advantage. Jesse thinks hard.

Just this once, it would be good to be the guy who comes up with a plan. Jesse's more the follower type. Join the crowd, go with the flow. The less you stick out, the less you get into trouble. That's his way. He's doing good. He has a job, and a place. He never spent a night in an emergency room or police station. Couple of hours, couple of times, for both, that's a must, for a black teenager. But never nothing serious with Jesse, never no full night.

Being able to talk to cats, how can this be useful? Assuming a cat was willing to do his bidding, perhaps in exchange for help with a door, what could Jesse ask for? What are cats for?

Originally, they had to catch mice. In the countryside, some of them might still be performing this function. Nothing like this for city cats. Judging by Jesse's own experience, it's the other way round. The M4 feed Mattoo and clean his toilet. In return, he ignores them.

Jesse's once again not getting anywhere. He's able to do something extraordinary, but it's no more consequential than anything else he ever did. One more news channel, that's about all the obvious benefit associated with his talent.

He tunes in, to at least take advantage of this little extra. Ignoring what sounds like the kind of complicated talking that gives him headaches, he goes for the light side.

The cat 101 on proper falling and soft landing, that's interesting. Pretty good trick, how they make sure to distribute their weight and soften the impact. No multiple lives, they're just supple.

The cats and dogs section, that's also enlightening. The standard rules of coexistence very much sound like "cat rules dog", whenever they share a fridge. And the associated biggie a.k.a human staff. Apparently, there's something in it for the dogs, too. They like being bossed around. Not just by cats, which makes sense to felinity. By dumb biggies, too. Jesse feels dogish.

Cat code of conduct, the rules on territory and courtship. Complicated. Also reminds Jesse of Mattoo's impossible request. No way to let him out, the M4 would freak out. But the little Siamese is sure to come back, any guy wants to get laid. He's asleep now, nestled between Jesse's feet. But sooner or later, he'll wake up and resume nagging. Jesse should come up with a more convincing apology. He can't think of any.

"Hello, biggie called Tasty Feet to be called Jesse? You there? Me, it's Safo. We better chat now, to get to know each other. If it's true what some folks say, we won't have that much more time. Better get acquainted now. You're a male, right? Some kind of leader, by any chance?"

Jesse can't help it, he bursts into virtual laughter. Being considered leader material, that's a really good joke. Pity he can't share it with people who know him. Feeling the irritation he's causing at the other end, he quickly resets himself and politely goes:

"Sorry, Safo, but no sorry. I'm the popcorn man at the local cinema. This is about as non-leader as it gets. A vacuum cleaner, that's my followership." Feeling disappointment at the other end, he adds: "If you're looking for leadership, you might want to talk to Mattoo, the cat who got me this subscription. He likes to decide stuff, and gets all cross when things don't go his way. Very much the leader kind of personality. And always ready for a date, like a big guy."

As far as Jesse can guess, Safo takes the news in her stride. She keeps the two of them going for a little chitchat and some inter-species niceties before excusing herself. Nice lion.

Takes Jesse a couple of minutes to do his sums. Cats, they can't do anything substantial, for the man. But lions, that's a different category. A deal with a large cat, to perform together, that feels exactly like the kind of idea his career counselor always tried to elicit. "Black, man and panther", for example, that sounds like a promising title, for a show.

Suddenly all excited, Jesse wakes up Mattoo to inform him of Safo's deep call and his subsequent splendid idea. It's greeted with the opposite of an endorsement:

"Don't you even dream of it, Tasty Feet," goes an alarmed Mattoo. "That you can talk to us doesn't mean you can control us. As I explained before, bilevelity has its downsides. All felines are two, part of two realms, and not always in sync. In a conflict that involves this material world, the biological part of us wins. Always. As in big cat eats biggie. Never ever enter no black panther cage, Tasty Feet. While you're still exchanging deep greetings, you're already staring to get ripped apart. Our deep level isn't in charge, it's more like an afterthought."

Jesse deep sighs back acknowledgement of the advice. He's not offended, not at all. He's glad to have been spared the consequences of one more bad idea. It's just not his forte, this idea thing. Left to his own devices, he comes up with unwieldy plots and ends up in trouble. By far preferable to be led, even by a cat. As long as no one finds out who tells him what to do, they'll do fine.

***Everynowhere***

*Non ripples all messed up. What should be a smooth non spiral disfigured by spiky non knots.*

*On such occasions, Central Awareness Tensor hates his sense of space and time. No sapient entity should be forced to witness such a mess.*

*Worst of all, he only has himself to blame. He gave in to Upper Lateral Entropies' pleading, instead of defending his smooth and tidy non ripples against a very bad idea.*

*"Just a little experiment in pulsar resonance", Upper Lateral Entropies had argued. "Never no harm done by blowing up a little dirt, especially as we're not exactly running short."*

*Perfidious understatement. It's going to take what humans would call a millisecond to straighten out this mess. A full millisecond of mess. Yuck.*

*Central Awareness Tensor has learned his lesson. No more Upper Lateral Entropies' experiments. Polite they might be, but they make a mess. Pulsar resonance...*

*Next time the pressure for dynamics gets overwhelming, Lower Lateral Entropies will be forgiven their bad language and allowed to play it their way.*

*They're guaranteed to do the shape thing, to threaten astral flares and make the communication enabled light space creatures go wild. That spike is fun to watch.*

*And if there's no spike, localized astral flares are less disruptive than pulsar resonance.*

## **Etsenred**

Half past nine already?! Never before did Uzo forget to call her sister Orji at the scheduled time. Every Tuesday, nine o'clock in the evening, she calls and they chat.

Normally, Uzo spends the hours ahead of the call planning what to say. Pretty complicated affair, such a conversation with her sister.

There's the secrecy agreement, limiting what she can share. Uzo's migration facilitator made it plain that any indiscretion carries the death penalty. How she got to Europe and the rationale of her application for a residency permit can't be disclosed. In the early days, this led to exchanges devoid of any content. They went like this:

"How are you, Uzo?" - "Fine, overall."

"Where are you?" - "Can't say."

"Still on the road or at destination?" - "Can't say."

"Where are you staying, some hotel, or a private place?" - "Can't say."

"What are you doing, do they make you work already?" - "Can't say."

"For fuck's sake, Uzo, do you even hear yourself? It's me, Orji, your sister you're talking to, not the fucking immigration police. There must be something you can tell me!" - "No, not really."

Twelve weeks of this damaged Uzo's bond with her sister. Nowadays, she can share most of her circumstances, but Orji has either lost interest, or Uzo's overseas life is just considered too overwhelmingly boring to merit her attention.

Uzo typically spends hours preparing what to say, how to share some of the struggles of her immigrant life, only to get cut short after her first sentence. Insofar it's perfectly OK for her to call unprepared today, she's sure not to contribute much either way.

The phone is ringing at the other end. Uzo steadies herself for at least one, more probably some long waits. Orji is a very busy person, always engaged in a mightily important activity she can't

just interrupt to take a call from overseas. Uzo visualizes Orji's posh living room with the pricey furniture 360 couch and supersized TV. She's most probably talking on the other phone.

Not this time. Three rings only, and Orji answers, all excited, for once:

"Uzo, is that you? Gosh, I was so worried. What happened, how comes you didn't call? Did you get yourself arrested? How comes you can call now, do they hand back phones? Did they beat you up? Come on, Uzo, why so tight lipped, what happened?"

Uzo bites her upper lip, to avoid going bitchy. That's so Orji. Always talking nonstop, only to accuse her interlocutor of being tight lipped next. Always keen on drama, to provide her social network of so-called friends with click bait.

Uzo of course doesn't utter any of these thoughts and answers: "All fine, Orji, no arrest. Just forgot the time over a little work related research, that's all. How are you doing?"

The disappointment at the other end is audible, once again. Uzo grins at herself. Orji still expects her to fail, after all these successfully uneventful months. Well, she won't.

Done sighing at the lack of interesting news from overseas, Orji dives into her status report. Never no uneventful day with her. She only does highs and lows, no flats.

As usual, Orji starts with on-the-job events.

Working part-time, afternoon shift only, as the third pharmacist at the Baobab pharmacy in Lekki, Orji isn't in charge of much, one more qualified salesperson. Listening to her, you'd think she owns the place. It stresses her out so badly she has to call in sick every other week, for at least one day. Uzo once dared wonder, how Baobab manages not to break down on such occasions. Earned her a lecture on lazy jobless youths misdemeanors, plus a pointed remark concerning tight jeans and weight gain. Practiced sisterly affection.

Done recalling today's feats at the pharmacy, Orji moves on to miscellaneous grievances.

The rom-int, sisterly code for romantic interest, a.k.a Orji's husband Abeo, is a particularly troublesome specimen. He never gets anything right. Today, the rom-int has failed his marital duties by not showing up for dinner. A recurring offense, calling for extended criticism. On past form, he'll apologize, and will make sure to head home early tomorrow. This will interfere with Orji's homely wellbeing. By being him at home, the rom-int practically forces her into a coach role. Unpleasant and unsustainable, calls for more strong words.

Listening quietly, Uzo plays with her Copernicus puzzle. A parting gift from Hanelore, an nice elderly lady volunteering at the shelter where Uzo spent her first few Karlsruhe days. Fascinating toy, keeps the brain engaged throughout an Orji rant. Uzo also loves the Copernicus story. Brilliant, how he made more sense of the solar system.

Who knows what would have happened, without his exceptional mind. And science is still at it, moving on from progress to progress. Five hundred years from now, people will look back at the twenty first century and marvel at the ignorance. Fascinating.

"... and I bet you there's something ongoing, at the office. Or rather, not at the office, not in the sense of taking place there. I bet there's some young bitch somewhere, and that she's trying to get pregnant, to force him into a divorce. I mean, I don't mind him having fun, not at all. To be honest, I'd rather go for less than more gymnastics, if I get the choice. May he have fun, by all means. As long as he does the needful, not to get us into trouble, why not?..."

This is the rhetorical question where Orji expects Uzo to say the soothing phrases, and she delivers: "Bullshit, Orji. He loves you like mad, he'd never betray you. He's just the very busy man he always was. He'd never betray you, and you know it."

They have been practicing this exchange for four years now. Uzo knows exactly what to say. And what to swallow, not to trigger a nervous breakdown.

Irony is strictly prohibited. Uzo can't say anything on the lines of "If the bloody imbecile wasn't so madly in love with you, he wouldn't take one single day of the verbal abuse you're throwing at him". True it might be, telling it she can't.

Same for "What kind of schedule did you expect, in a commodities trader? Nine to five? Long weekends? Public disservice hours?". And damned be the brute who dared add "You'd never have married a low roller. You wanted a rich business man, you got one, now cope with it."

And never ever can Uzo repeat what once slipped out, under some influence: "Why don't you just tell him you don't want kids, neither home made nor adopted, and see what happens? If he's going to divorce you for that, better get it over with and go for a fresh start..."

Uzo didn't manage to outline the rest of her brilliant concept. Getting a full bowl of pineapple tidbits, with cream, thrown into her face proved too much of a distraction.

Having provided comfort, Uzo is now allowed her sentence. She tells Orji how she has come up with a treatment for a sick lioness, and was praised by her boss. This triggers a lecture on useless biology degrees and the evil of internships. Not Orji's first of this kind. It culminates in her usual advice: "You've really got to smarten up, Uzo. Dress up, put on some make up, make the best of you. Slaving away in unpaid internships, that's for losers. They'll never grant you access to a proper career. You got to find yourself a local, Uzo, and get pregnant, that's your ticket."

Uzo counters with her all-purpose promise to think about it, and done they are, for this week.

Back home in Lagos, they used to be close. Different in so many ways, always arguing, but close. After some initial bombast, Orji would wind down and talk seriously. Uzo used to admire her beautiful sister. Orji was good at everything. Smart and funny. Far more mature than an age advance of two years suggested. Orji always had clear goals. She achieved them without any visible effort. Uzo was a little envious, but mostly proud to be close to such a perfect being.

Of late, and especially since Uzo moved to Europe, Orji feels different. She's always rehashing the same old platitudes. Where her husband took her. What car he bought her, and what an adventure it was to recruit the right driver. How she got her nails done. Which spa not to frequent.

Plus and endless litany of Lagos grievances. The dysfunctions and dangers are real enough, but Orji doesn't live a life of hardships. They both grew up with the comforts of a wealthy household, and now Orji's full blown rich, barely affected by comparatively minor nuisances. But trust her to dramatize every single little glitch as if it put her life at stake.

Uzo makes another tea, with a double dose of sugar to cheer herself up. She wonders if she has finally grown up. Her parents and Orji used to agree on considering her a hopeless dreamer, even more at risk of ending badly than her twin brothers. They were surprised when she made it first through school and then through university, even landing a gig job there after graduation. They were aghast when the local migration facilitator proposed she should travel.

Clutching her hot tea cup with both hands to warm them, Uzo remembers that weird evening.

The twins, all dressed up for the occasion, and her parents received the guy supposed to organize the twins' trip to a bright future in Europe in the salon, with full honors. Uzo was in attendance to serve as a discreet maid, and for once glad to be of such service.

She was curious. Such trips were a much discussed topic, among her friends, and she longed to find out how the facilitators did it. Her parents certainly wouldn't sponsor her, but knowing more than conflicting rumors would still feel nice.

And then it happened. The facilitator proclaimed legal impossible for young men. Two weeks ago, there was a stratagem. Tricky, but feasible, at an acceptable risk-price ratio. Today, no longer.

Zero chance to attain legal residence, unless they were prepared to claim homosexuality. Illegal option, absolutely, available for one or both. "Buy it or leave it" he said.

The facilitator had obviously assumed illegal would be acceptable, and that they would discuss tariffs and rebates. He had only talked to the twins, never met Olagundoye senior. His aghast reaction took him by surprise. Struggling for a polite way forward, the facilitator suddenly asked if Uzo would by any chance be the daughter of the house. They hadn't been introduced.

When Uzo's father confirmed, not exactly pleased by the irrelevant question, the facilitator proposed to send her. To the horror of Uzo's rather conservative parents, he explained that legal was perfectly achievable, for young ladies. Netherlands, Denmark and Germany on the menu. Very safe process. Very fast. And at less than half the cost.

At first, Uzo's father looked like he would send the facilitator packing. But he didn't. Instead of blowing up, he asked for details. The facilitator, all smug once again, refused to reveal details, just insisted on being able to deliver. "Safe, fast, low risk, good price, that's all you need to know", he kept telling Uzo's father, again and again and again.

Uzo had been terrified at first. Stories of rape and drowning bounced around her head. Never would she dare go on such a trip, even if her parents were willing to pay for it.

The facilitator kept insisting, repeating his mantra again and again, "Safe, fast, low risk, good price". Hearing him so confident, Uzo was just starting to wonder if this project might be within her reach after all when her father suddenly told her to come sit with the group.

No more loitering at the back, at the ready to refill glasses and cups. Being called felt like those unannounced tests back at school. Not Uzo's favorite situation at all.

Fortunately, the first questions turned out to be easy. Uzo got to tell her age, which schools she had attended, up to what level, what subject she had studied.

The facilitator seemed to consider her degree in biology perfectly acceptable. A nice change from her parents. They would have preferred a doctor, to go with the pharmacist, but Uzo didn't make it into that more selective course, had to go for what her grades allowed.

If all oral exams had been as easy as the interrogation by the migration facilitator, Uzo would never have needed pills from the family doctor to make it through them. She was starting to feel comfortable when the interview took a strange turn.

The facilitator enquired if she had ever engaged in role playing games.

Uzo dutifully searched her memories. Unsure if this would qualify, she admitted she occasionally imagined being someone else, some TV personality for example, to play out, in her head, how they would handle a given situation, what they would say...

Seeing her mother roll her eyes stopped Uzo short, but the facilitator went:

"This sounds good, you've got the brains, you're a natural. Now imagine you had to stick to a script, for a couple of weeks. You get a part, you memorize the facts, and you have to stick to that part, come what may. We can't have answers ready for all questions, so you'll have to come up with additional details, sometimes on the spot. Feasible?"

Tricky question. Uzo had to pause for thinking. On the one hand, she was good at memorizing, and it would be fun to construct her new self. Not much to miss in her real one. On the other hand, she was hopeless at quick wits. Always took her a while, to react.

"Forget it, man" her mother went. "She'll never manage. Never gets anything done, and most certainly not fast. Very slow slow motion, our Uzo. Her older sister, if she wasn't married, she could do it, she's the type. But Uzo, she'll never think fast and clear enough."

Uzo would have preferred not to hear this. It's embarrassing to be called a dim wit in the presence of a stranger. Being aware of her limitations, she still didn't resent strongly. Her mother was only stating the facts, if a little too bluntly for comfort.

It therefore came as a big surprise to hear the facilitator disagree. Apparently, the less chatty girls sticking to straightforward stories did best:

"The less they talk, the less mistakes they make," he said. "Your daughter will do fine. On the quiet side, a bit shy, certainly not overconfident, nor too pretty, but clever enough for a degree, that's perfect material. Sign up tonight, and she'll make permanent resident by Christmas."

One of the best moments of Uzo's life. In the same league as making it into UNILAG and being awarded her degree. Her parents, especially her mother, just sat there, all puzzled disbelief.

And the facilitator reiterated: "By Christmas. I've got an open departure slot next Friday. Normally, we have a young lady rehearse for two weeks, but a clever girl can get ready in two days. Your daughter has got ten, no problem. By Christmas. If you sign up now."

And Uzo's parents did it. Despite desperate attempts by the twins to delay the decision. Uzo's parents spent the equivalent of a small car on her ticket. An unrejectable proposal. Terrifying.

Sitting in her cozy living room in chilly Etsenred, Uzo can't help giggle at her former anxious self.

She had spent a whole night in agony, wondering if there was any way out. There wasn't. By the time the early morning traffic had started to roll outside, Uzo had accepted her fate.

For the next couple of weeks, she would be Ruzo the Resourceful. Uzo had come up with this alter ego and confidante in her darkest teenage days, when there wasn't anyone to talk to. Pretty much agender and therefore never embroiled in romance, despite looking great, Ruzo was bright and fast and everything else Uzo wasn't. Now she would be Ruzo.

Uzo would never make it through a clandestine operation. Ruzo laughed at any challenge and would get both of them to Germany, the destination Uzo's parents had selected.

Pretending to not be her mediocre self, Uzo did indeed clear all hurdles. There weren't that many.

The first thing they told her, when she entered the boot camp posing as a small hotel, was that she couldn't share any details of her trip with anyone. Not even her parents. Paying for the ticket didn't qualify for insider knowledge. A big relief. No need to deliver detailed progress reports.

Giggling once again into her tea cup, Uzo recalls her surprise at the simplicity of the plot.

Plot as in two plots. Her official storyline, the one she would have to defend in Germany. And her real trip. Lagos, Cairo, Cannes, Karlsruhe. Plane, speedboat, yacht, minibus. Cannes to Karlsruhe on a fake French identity card with her real first name, to keep it simple.

Her coach, a friendly old actor moonlighting as a clandestine migration trainer and declining to tell her his name, very much insisted on maximizing simplicity:

"Don't embellish, Uzo. Don't provide too many details. You were tense, you got more and more scared, perfectly natural you only remember fragments. A name, a smell, a sound, a bed, a shout. Small fragments, easy to memorize and to stick to, to bring your story alive."

Coach Sir, as he liked to be called, was a good teacher, and Uzo a passable student. He declared her clandestine migration course passed on day five. They continued to practice interviews, at a leisurely rate of two a day. For the rest of the time, Uzo was told to rehearse a few basic French expressions, an add-on to enhance the plausibility of her story.

Taking another sip from the mug, she recalled how tense she had been, despite Coach Sir's praise. Good old coward Uzo was coming up with one thousands ways for the trip to take a bad

turn. Ruzo the Resourceful had his work cut out, to keep her from breaking down. Even made her hang up on her mother, to shield her from an overdose of doubts.

Her condition improved when she finally got going. Flying Lagos to Cairo all alone wasn't exactly the stuff of legends, but nor was she a frequent flyer. Getting all the practicalities right kept her busy enough not to worry much. Same in Cairo.

The man codenamed Ramses picked her up at the airport, as expected.

She didn't get to see much of Cairo, except a lot of traffic. Compared to Lagos, things were moving fluidly, but it still took them hours to reach a small port. They had dinner at a touristy kind of restaurant with a multi language menu. Uzo barely dared eat, for fear of getting sea sick on the next leg of the trip. Ramses kindly wolfed down the better part of her main dish and dessert, all the while chatting in Arabic on the phone.

When Uzo was starting to wonder if she would be leaving tonight after all, one more phone call delivered the starting signal. Ramses paid, made her check she had her passport, her phone and the tiny backpack, the only permitted luggage, and they left.

The speedboat was already waiting at the jetty, in full view of everyone. Ramses helped her board, making her feel like a parcel on a conveyor belt. A smooth conveyor belt. The man to be called Captain made her take two pills, to calm her stomach, and stored her on a very comfy reclining seat. She was provided with a blanket and told to get some sleep, which she soon dutifully did, despite the deafening roar of the engine. Must have been the pills.

It was still dark when Uzo woke up and soon started to worry about the presence or absence of any sanitary facilities. She shouldn't have. When she was barely starting to make up her mind to ask, the boat slowed down. No ten minutes and one more passport, phone and backpack check later, she was handed over to another captain on a yacht. It was far bigger than expected. She was introduced to the staff quarters and there was a tiny bath room nearby. So far, so easy.

The next couple of days were practically a posh holiday, with her having to work so little.

Uzo assisted the cook and the maid with their duties, as per her script. Dressed up maid style, as rehearsed back in Lagos, she diligently did whatever she was told to do, mostly light kitchen and domestic work, for a couple of hours a day. Like cutting vegetables, doing the dishes or vacuuming the cabin of the owner with its enormous wheel of a bed.

That bed scared her, when she saw it for the first time. Looked like something out of a porn, suggested a bad turn of events upcoming. But no, no assault happened. A reprimand for stacking the dishwasher the wrong way was as drama as the yacht leg of her journey got.

Light work, quickly done. Lots of time to sit up front, out of sight of the owner, look at the sea and enjoy a very exclusive mode of transport. A nice trip.

A week later, they reached Cannes and anchored off shore, for owner security reasons. That night, there was a party on board, with one boat full of guests and one delivering additional service staff. When it was time for the service staff boat to leave, Uzo was handed her French passport, told to go with a waiter nicknamed Black Panther and wished good luck.

Black Panther didn't look the part, but theirs was a smooth ride ashore anyway. The other service staff were just glad to get to sit down at the end of a busy shift, didn't care about Uzo at all.

When they reached the harbor and climbed ashore, Uzo's first step into Schengen land, all the others walked off to the right while her companion motioned her to head off to the left. It was scary, to walk this dark harbor in the middle of the night. Uzo feared, Ruzo frantically rehearsed self defense techniques, but all went well.

Black Panther handed her over to a minibus driver, Ahmed. She climbed into a pretty battered affair of a vehicle bearing the faded logo of an international temp agency.

There were three ladies sitting at the back, all in black-and-white service staff attire under hoodies or shawls against the nightly chill. One of Uzo's mock colleagues stood out, with her very white skin framed by the tight kind of pious Muslim headscarf. The other two were reassuringly black and her age, which made fitting in innocuously easy.

Once Uzo was seated on the middle bench next to the headscarf lady, the driver sped off. Not much to see outside. Well lit streets devoid of traffic at this hour, few billboards, many street signs.

The two ladies at the back resumed chatting, in what Uzo proudly identified as French. Headscarf was busy with an extra large phone. When they reached a motorway, the minibus rolled more steadily and Uzo soon dozed off. It had been a long busy night.

Traveling Schengen illicitly was the opposite of thrilling. They sped along a motorway, stopped at a toll barrier, sped again, stopped to refuel and have a bite from a supply of tasty sandwiches, sped again, were slowed down by a sudden surge in traffic, sped again.

Having spent the better part of the day on the motorway, they crossed the frontier into Germany with so little fanfare that Uzo nearly missed the critical moment. There were a few signs, they had to slow down, there were slightly different signs, and that was it. She was in.

Half an hour later, the driver stopped on an emergency bay on an urban expressway. In exchange for the fake French identity card he handed her a crude map with an address and sped off.

From the safety of her flat, Uzo wonders how she had managed to proceed through the next steps with such precision. She had been on her own, no longer a parcel, and she did it.

She walked to the shelter for battered women, told her story in English, didn't get understood because, as she later found out, the social worker in charge was specialized in Turkish and Kurdish victims, was made to sleep on a sofa, got to tell her story again in the morning, to a pretty fluent English listener, and was registered as the targeted kind of case.

Just like that. As planned. From then on, Uzo only had to stick to script. She was registered, categorized, assessed, examined, processed and finally declared the real thing, an innocent victim of human trafficking. As the complex procedure required her sustenance, over months, she was also housed, fed and provided with pocket money. Exactly as advertised.

Uzo had achieved so much, over the last months. Even her mother, who had expected her to get deported faster than the twins drive on a Saturday night, was starting to wonder aloud, if she might have underestimated her younger daughter.

And now she's sitting here, potentially psychotic. Imaging a telepathic lioness certainly sounds like a symptom. But everything else feels so perfectly normal. How can migrant life as usual be unfolding in so much banality when she's in trauma mode?

Uzo's tea tastes like tea, more sugar makes it sweet, the bloody local climate is kept at bay by the radiator and her sister sounded like her sister. So many reasons to doubt she broke down.

The tea is gone and Uzo's mind is made up. She won't call in sick tomorrow. She'll wait for her symptoms to worsen, or to abate. She feels good, being able to talk to felines doesn't really stress her, there's no emergency. Better not to rock the boat.

## **Strasbourg**

Walking up at half past nine, Jesse doesn't even need to open his eyes to become aware of Mattoo's longing presence. The tiny fellow is once again gearing up for a plea to be let out.

Not possible. Jesse owes the cat, for this Felinity experience. Very interesting, very exclusive, very nice. But having a place, even if it's just a small rented room, makes the difference between a civilized man and a tramp. And a black tramp, that's a prison inmate in the making.

Jesse is not prepared to risk his room. It was hard enough to get. He'd rather have a tooth pulled than repeat that hunt. He lets his mind wander back to his early Strasbourg days.

Accommodation brokers mistook him for a delivery boy when he showed up in person, and visibly struggled not to laugh out loud once his mission was revealed. They took his contact details, never to call back. Same game when he went for advertisements. Owners who had sounded approachable on the phone didn't unchain the door when he tried to visit. One even called the police, mistaking him for a robber, and he got to see a police station.

Jesse's room hunt was one big waste of tram money, and his situation was veering towards catastrophe. He was running down his little savings fast, wouldn't be able to afford the cheapest hostel bed for much longer.

M4 were a nice surprise, by comparison. They had advertised very old-fashionedly, in the local newspaper, providing both a phone number and an email address. Having learned his lesson, Jesse applied by email, discreetly including the picture from his CV in the signature.

The M4 reacted fast and favorably. In their reply, they explicitly mentioned extensive anti-racist credentials. Jesse hadn't heard of any of the organizations they listed, but this big lump of fancy wording sounded promising. He was invited to visit his future room the next day.

No police alerted on this occasion. He was welcomed warmly and seated for weak coffee and stale biscuits, to be lectured on the necessity of anti-racist activism. This took very long, and the ladies' strange habit of finishing each other's sentences added to his confusion.

Him being black was obviously considered a bonus. The M4 only flinched slightly when he admitted having been born in Gerardmer and holding a French passport. They went: "Would have been nice to host a refugee, but you can't have it all". His official first name of Jean-Segun and his adopted alternative of Jesse went down less well. Too Catholic respectively too American. And his lack of political activism was considered so shocking it nearly cost him the contract.

The three of them were sitting at that messy kitchen table. Among notes, flyers, books, pens, three pairs of reading glasses, a ravel of needlework, two corkscrews and a fist-sized pink rock topped by a phone charging station there was barely space for Jesse to land his mug.

Madame and Madame Meunier-Moraire, as he was still addressing them, despite their insistence to be called Monique and Madeleine, were crowding in on him.

Clutching mugs so obviously sticky that they must have been in use for days and would have sent Jerome's food hygiene teacher from his kitchen pro diploma days fainting in terminal disgust, Madame and Madame rattled on and on, about topics absolutely unrelated to lodging.

Having taken in the corridor and the kitchen, the mess, some dirt hotspots still going strong in their later years, the peculiar odor, Jesse urged to find out how bad his future room would look and smell. Instead, he was getting lectured about what sounded suspiciously like politics.

Never before had he sat so close to white women of such advanced age. Their skin with the big pores looked sickly, even the most generous amount of makeup wasn't able to bury the ravages of time. Together with equally worn hands covered in brownish spots the mask-like faces with the creaking lipstick mouths were screaming 'old'. Sharp contrast to the bright red respectively black hair, without so much as a gray shadow to mark the part, and the gaudy shirts.

Fearing to be spit at, you can't trust generation denture to hold on to their saliva, and lost for comments, Jesse preferred to look down to his rabidly purring new friend.

When the future M4 had let him in, one was clutching a cat while the other explained a lodger would have to be devoid of any cat hair allergies and treat their pet with respect. Once the door was safely shut, as it had to stay at all times, "and you really, really, really need to watch it, he's so fast, our pussy, pussy little rebel, Mattoo, he's called", the cat was released.

Instead of racing off to hide as predicted, “under our bed, that’s in our bedroom, and we’re married, by the way, no family-for-all-instead-of-marriage-for-all talk in this LGBTQ-pride household”, Mattoo bumped his head and rubbed his body against Jesse’s shin while purring forcefully. The tiny fellow sounded like a drone ready to take off. This response to Jesse’s presence was declared a very good sign.

Mattoo was as pleasant as the future M4 weren’t. An elegant gray body, very soft, like the mink coat Jesse once got to touch on a checkroom gig at a posh venue, framed by dark head, tail and feet, like he was wearing boots. And to top it all, very blue eyes.

Never had Jesse seen any such cat in Gerardmer. Cats there were stocky. They came in three basic designs, two-shades-of-brown striped, black-and-white spotted or bad-omen black. The occasional longhair version was even more stocky. Town and city, worlds apart.

“Poor little fellow, such a pretty cat blighted with such messy owners,” Jesse had thought on the day of their first encounter. Cats like their environment meticulously clean, that much he knew, and no chance of this desire being met in this dump of a flat.

It wasn’t like those worst cases you got to see on social media, where doors would not longer open, blocked by ceiling high stacks of rubbish. At the future M4, there were paths. With some rearrangement, you could clear enough space on a table or sideboard to land a bag, mug or book. cursory cleaning must also have been performed on a regular basis, to keep the place at this level of semi-structured non-neatness. But overall, it was bad. Especially the smell.

Once it had been determined that neither the future M4 nor their future lodger were fans of the current French President, if for very different reasons, Jesse was suddenly presented with the contract. Enduring the politics must have been some rite of passage. He declined to read and sign yet, as politely as feasible, and asked to see his future room first.

Jesse’s request triggered a round of complex explanations. Something about the complications of home ownership, even if it was only a flat, tight budgets and rabid banks. “Raging capitalism be dammed, long live the revolution” was restated, definitely the household slogan. The scheduling challenges ruining the lives of hard-working women only paid a pittance for their professional efforts, and nothing for trying to save the world, were bemoaned next. Last, his freedom to redecorate as he pleased, as long as he kept the furniture intact, was declared.

Led to expect the worst, Jesse was agreeably surprised when he finally got to see what he had already invested two hours into renting. A tiny room with an ugly old rug of a carpet he would have to replace after an initial grace period of perfect lodger behavior. The place hadn’t been aired in a while, but except for some dust it was surprisingly clean and uncluttered. The walls and ceiling were mercifully white, with few stains where a previous lodger must have scotched posters. The bed and cupboard were basic mock-wood affairs, and matching. Not pretty, but no worse than the decorated-style eyesores he had at his mom’s.

Jesse didn’t need to look twice. He politely ask to be allowed to proceed to the signature ceremony at once. Another two hours later he had his first own address.

Having recalled the hardship of his early Strasbourg days, Jesse reaches a decision. He can’t risk this precious room. Mattoo does of course deserve better than forced celibacy, Jesse’s heart is bleeding, but a lodger contract infringement isn’t on the table.

For the umpteenth time, Jesse regrets not to be one of those creative types who always come up with a clever workaround, whatever the problem. Like the guy in that dating platform advert using his umbrella to replace the forgotten selfie stick. If only he was that kind of person.

As there’s nothing he can do about his lack of cleverness, Jesse resorts to doing what he does best. He opens his deep talk channel to apologize to Mattoo.

The little Siamese of course doesn't accept his decision, once again arguing for just one trip outside. This calls for more thorough explanation. Jesse uses the advert he had just been recalling to explain what kind of person he is, or rather isn't. In return, the Mattoo asks:

"What's a dating platform? Is that for he-biggie meets she-biggie, and they get to have sex? Would they by any chance be doing cats? Can you order a she-cat for me, home delivery?"

Mattoo is one hell of a clever cat, Jesse has to grant him that.

His lodger contract permits visitors, even overnight. It states rules, for conflict prevention, as the M4 had explained during the one hour contract content lecture. Radically left wing lawyers are still lawyers, and it shows in the paperwork they propose.

Having fetched the document, Jesse reads deep aloud, for the benefit of Mattoo:

'Lodger visitors have to proceed straight to lodger room on arrival. They stay there, except for the occasionally unavoidable trip to the bathroom. No sitting in the kitchen or living room for lodger visitors. That privilege is only granted to lodger himself, and only as long as it doesn't inconvenience flat owners. Flat owners can discontinue this privilege at any time, no reasons need to be given. Both lodger and lodger visitors are forbidden to carry weapons or bring drugs, materials for bomb building or or any other obviously illegal objects into the flat.'

This last sentence will never stop scaring Jesse.

"Just a precaution," the M4 had explained, "not to get the three of us into trouble. A successful revolution very much depends on not getting caught." The wink accompanying this cryptic remark didn't bode well at all, but Jesse needed a room and decided to ignore it.

No weapons, drugs or bombs. No mention of cats, and they're perfectly legal. A visitor can bring a cat. Jesse joyfully informs Mattoo he might be up to something, with his dating platform idea. Together, they devise and immediately implement a clever plan.

They select the CHAT dating platform, because the name means cat in French, a coincidence allowing an introductory pun:

Next to a very impromptu picture of both of them, their entry says:

"Cat CHAT, anyone? Or outright cat on CHAT? Only joking. Two matching pretty boys, authentic blackfaces, are looking for two matching pretty ladies, Strasbourg region only. Looking forward to face-to-face, at our small but cozy place, Mattoo and Jesse."

Jesse is pleased with his perfect spelling, not one word highlighted for amendment. The profile looks good. Not as sophisticated as some of the others, but it stands out.

His imagination has by now caught up with the project. What started as a favor for Mattoo has become a more personal quest. Mattoo's future date needs a human for transportation, and who knows? Talking from cat person to cat person will be far easier than a conventional flirt. Should be within Jesse's reach, on a good day. And if the cats get along, both ladies would have to keep visiting. You can't be cruel, to animals. Over time, opportunities might arise.

Jesse likes their CHAT profile and keeps checking how often it gets viewed.

Quite a lot of traffic, for a weekday morning. Jesse wonders. Either all these pictures of better-than-average looking, sporty young adults are fakes hiding fat kids and crumpled pensioners. Or a youth unemployment that was officially declared overcome is surging again. He has to check his message box to confirm he didn't get sacked overnight.

"What's happening, Tasty Feet? Is there already a picture of my future mating interest? Talk to me biggie, you know I can't read your stupid gadget."

Mattoo tries his best, to stay calmly in charge, but there are limits. Tasty Feet is to getting things done like a spider to proper prey. You can make do, in the absence of alternatives to chase, but a cat could come up with so many better ways to waste his time.

The biggie is willing enough. Diligent, too, sort of. If you manage to get him to understand what he's supposed to do. A big if. Mattoo, unable to check details on that bloody tiny screen totally unfit for feline use, can only hope their profile isn't too embarrassing. He's lucky his future mating interest won't see much of it, either. But her biggie, she's sure to comment on Tasty Feet.

Mattoo doubts his dating platform typist to be any more sexually experienced than himself. All door handles at his service, as unconstrained as a wild biggie, free to roam the whole planet, Tasty Feet should have fathered a couple of litters but obviously didn't get himself laid yet. Mattoo can only hope this loser won't cramp his own perfect style too badly.

Jesse is on the point of deep telling Mattoo to get his hopes down when the screen proves him wrong. Incoming. They are in demand. He deep reads the message for the benefit of the cat:

"Dear pretty boys, two pretty ladies say hi. Sylvie is white with fair hair, and Sweetie is white with black spots, as you can see on our picture. Sweetie didn't want it taken, hence her grumpy stare. In real life she's just like her name says, very sweet. Same for Sylvie. And we're from Strasbourg proper, High Rock. Looking forward to our first meeting, your two S. PS: We'd love to visit you, but Sweetie is often tense, in alien environments, and might need to use your cat loo."

Such a charming message. Jesse has to deep read it three times, to allow Mattoo to memorize every single word. And the profile picture is even better. A voluptuous blonde, at most ten years older than Jesse, clutching a big lump of a grumpy spotted cat against her ample bosom.

Sylvie has updated her profile picture no ten minutes ago, just for them. Her other pictures are more conventional. Sylvie in a fancy if a bit tight pink silk dress with a bouquet of flowers, just like for a wedding, the kind of carefully photoshopped picture a professional delivers for serious money. Sylvie on the beach, in a red swimsuit highlighting her cleavage, her lower body and legs coyly covered by a matching red-and-white striped towel. Sylvie at a bar with a huge cocktail. Sylvie at a cafe with a huge ice cream. And a couple of pictures of Sylvie with two even more massive friends, strongly suggesting a weight watchers meeting.

Jesse could easily have spent the time until his shift just looking at Sylvie's profile, but forever hurried Mattoo has other plans. They have to go cat online to find Sweetie.

A tricky task. Many pet cats not answering to the name of Sweetie out there, and indoor-only felines have typically no more clue about their location than a potted plant.

Jesse and Mattoo have to try their luck with a general call for comments:

"Hi every feline online! We're looking for a white cat with black spots, one across the left eye. The lady in question is very beautifully built to impress. Her age is hard to guess due to unfavorable picture. Her fridge door operator is a big she-biggie answering to the name of Sylvie. The two of them probably live alone, no he-biggie or litter in the house, and stay at home a lot."

That last bit is Jesse's guess, and he's proud of his deductive skills. Every bit like Sherlock Holmes, he looked at Sylvie's profile, saw 'reading, writing (poetry), social media and a Saturday night crochet club' listed as main interests and knew what her life was like.

Mattoo being somebody, all hell breaks loose in response to their call.

Dozens of cats declare themselves to be Sweetie, often without even being white, never mind having access to a fridge operator anything like Sylvie. Dozens of others don't even bother with mentioning their name or describing their coat. They simply declare themselves in heat and ready to carry a well known males litter.

Mattoo has to rush to his cat loo and Jesse feels with him. Imagining a horde of girls clamoring for sex, that's scary enough to give any man diarrhea, even if they can't storm his place for real.

Once Mattoo is back, they manage to calm things down by explaining that whoever was ready to date would need a biggie able to drive her to Strasbourg High Rock and carry her into his flat. With this prerequisite firmly established, the number of aspirants dwindles fast and they are able to discard improbable Sweetie and Sylvie teams one by one.

Jesse is already keeping an eye on the clock, not to arrive late for his shift, when a forceful female voice suggesting as massive body goes:

"Hi guys! Not sure I'm called Sweetie, my fridge operator usually addresses me with a hush-hush sound. But on the phone she always goes 'and then I told myself: Hit it, Sylvie', so this should be her name. According to my balcony neighbor, an enterprising lady allowed to roam, we also do live in Strasbourg High Rock, Paul Claudel street, just rechecked with her for confirmation. And I'm white with black dots, and no light weight, good food is appreciated in this household. No big fan of skinny boys, to tell you guys the truth, but after due consideration, I'm prepared to make an exception for you, Mattoo. One doesn't get out much, to date, if you get my meaning? 'Don't let the cat crisps in your bowl go to waste over dreams of the steak in the fridge', my mom used to say, and so right she was. So what do we do now? When do I get to have sex with you, Mattoo?"

Jesse is so embarrassed he's for once glad to have to leave for work. Mattoo doesn't even return his farewell, too busy deep flirting.

Walking to the cinema, Jesse wonders. Will Sylvie really come over for a visit, with Sweetie? And if she does, what will that be like?

He's going to be in a tricky situation. Impossible for him to reveal he's able to communicate with both cats, unless he wants to be considered a weirdo, or a fraud, or both. He will be hearing the cats, while Sylvie will consider them to be as good as alone.

Jesse feels the pressure build up. His life has gotten more interesting, but also tough.

## Karlsruhe

While Jesse is only just on the way to his shift, Uzo is savoring her lunch break in the kitchen of the predator house. Full time staff on proper wages go to the canteen at the district office located close the the main entrance of the zoo. She prefers to bring a lunch box with whatever is left from last night's dinner. Or sandwiches. And fruit. The proverbial apple a day to keep the doctor away is a must on Uzo's menu, courtesy of that bloody chilly climate.

When she chatted with Safo in the morning, the lioness had informed her about the Strasbourg side of events. She proposed Uzo should deep liaise with her fellow biggie, also to provide him with guidance that slow-thinking dreamer of a young man clearly needed.

An interesting turn of events. Very unlike anything Uzo knew about schizophrenia. The possibility that there might be another human in the same weird situation considerably cheered her up.

Certainly a good idea, to deep meet this Jesse. They could exchange phone numbers. If he proved real, if she was able to call him in good old real life, and talk about their insane ability in the good old verbally vocal way, this would be proof positive her mind isn't making this up.

Uzo would have tried deep calling Jesse right away, but she's not versed well enough yet, in the ways of this particular network, needs the lioness for guidance. Not an option now, Safo wouldn't appreciate a disturbance of her pre-meal doze. She will get fed at three o'clock and likes to prepare for this highlight of her day by visualizing all kinds of carnage:

"This is vital, to get ready for a very dead meal," the lioness had explained. "You lot feed me borderline meat, extremely dead, as good as ready for the scavengers. A cat has to eat and I'm of course going to go for it, full force, but it is too dead. To remind me it wasn't always like that, I

imagine how it would have looked while grazing. And how it would have tried to run. And how the warm blood would have gushed out of its still twitching body upon capture. Gets me into the mood. By the way, biggie, about that piglet?"

As a biologist, Uzo is fascinated by what the lioness tells her. So many insights to be gained, now that a mode of communication had been established. So many simple improvements within reach, to make captive life more enjoyable for zoo felines.

Hard to imagine the public would appreciate live prey getting killed in the lion cage, though.

Safo's way of thinking about prey, her bloodlust, that's sure not to go down well with the prevalent cuddly soft toy approach to cats, small and big. People are only very marginally aware that cats are predators, and what that means. Same as with the steaks. Most people love to eat them, but resent being shown pictures of even the finest slaughterhouse.

At a very abstract level, everyone knows that the meat stage is preceded by a cute creature with beautiful eyes, and that herbivores are structurally unable to commit the kind of misdeeds that deserve to be countered by the death penalty. But they get killed, skinned and carved up at industrial scale, to fill plates. Not nice, people not keen on details.

Imagining the usual zoo crowd of well meaning toddler moms confronted with a fierce predator chasing a squealing piglet, Uzo laughs out loud.

Even the hunt stage of what a lioness considers the good life would shock the audience. The subsequent climax even more so. A piglet getting its head bitten off, Safo's idea of a mercifully quick way to proceed, would send a standard zoo crowd braying for the blood of the poor director who let such atrocity happen under his watch.

Safo is probably right in arguing that her piglet wouldn't suffer. While running for its life and hoping to escape, there would be no chance to consider wider implications. And a well targeted bite snapping the neck is a very fast mode of execution. The brain would be gone so rapidly it wouldn't even have time to abandon all hope and acknowledge its bad fate. True enough, the feline rationale. Impossible to explain to a toddler mom anyway.

If the old lady ever is to get her piglet, the action will have to happen after opening hours.

But first of all, Uzo needs to come up with a reason for her initiative. "The lioness deep told me," is of course a no go. Proper scientific advice provided by human specialists is required.

Consulting the search engine on her phone, Uzo is please to find out that some zoos and wildlife parks are actually thinking and experimenting in the right direction. Unfortunately, the lack of feline contribution has led them to get things upside down. They have developed a number of contraptions to pull the meat across a cage or enclosure, to allow the predator to chase it.

Having endured a headful of Safo's piglet pleas, Uzo doesn't need to ask for her comment. She would consider such a game a nice add-on, particularly for young lions with healthy paws. But the major issue, the advanced deadness of the meat, is not resolved by moving it around.

Yes, cats in general as well as lions in particular like playing at chase-and-catch. This is how they put food into the mouth in the wild, and there's no such thing as too much practice. But this subject is totally unrelated to the savory aspect. A human wouldn't differentiate the taste of rice by its mode of transport to the market. Same principle.

Safo is missing the taste of warm blood gushing out of an equally warm body. She's perfectly prepared to accept, does even prefer her piglet on a leash, or at least cuffed, to make it easier to catch. No matching scenario delivered by the search engine.

Which can mean two things. Either no zoo expert has come up with the concept of live prey yet, to embellish the life of the predators under his care. Or there is an insider code to talk about such projects without attracting unwarranted attention.

Some animal rights organizations are even more fierce than a bloodthirsty lion. Uzo knows because she owed them her postgraduate gig.

A big agrobusiness conglomerate headquartered in Missouri had transferred some toxicity tests that used to be performed in-house to a contractor based in Lagos and making lucrative use of Unlilag labs. The poor US employees had been stalked and threatened, meaning they were glad to get rid of these particular projects. The relocation and outsourcing also provided a boost for the company social responsibility score. A win-win.

Except for the mice and rats who now had to make do with a less rigorously supervised facility. Uzo had done her best, to keep them state-of-the-art comfortable, but there was only so much she could achieve on a very limited budget and in a building with intermittent power supply.

When she committed the error to announce her gig acquisition prowess on Twitter, proudly, it got forwarded to one animal rights activist and all hell broke loose. People who had never met her, and no idea what she was doing, and for what purpose, called her names. They promised she would end up burning in an especially hot hell, and worse.

This incident taught Uzo never again to reveal to outsiders that she was involved in animal research. The same people who didn't think twice, about eggs produced under dismal conditions, called her worse than a nazi for feeding new types of corn to mice and rats.

Highly probable that any zoo staff doing their predators the favor to feed them live prey would conceal their animal welfare efforts. Small wonder Uzo's search engine doesn't deliver. She'll have to ask her supervisor, or the zoo vet, if they are aware of such practices.

The chime from her phone informs Uzo of the imminent end of her lunch break. Always the model employee practicing the learnings from her integration course, she has set the alarm to go off five minutes in advance, to make sure she doesn't exceed her statutory thirty minutes. Sets her apart, because all canteen goers take at least forty-five minutes to come back. Probably some special form of the famed German punctuality reserved for native performers.

It's just a short walk to the gazelle compound where a new carpet of brown leaves is waiting for Uzo to rake it up, bag by bag. As it has rained last night, finally, as all Uzo's colleagues said this morning, this task is far more pleasant today.

No clouds of dust, no danger of a nice heap of leaves getting blown apart by a sudden gust of wind. The wet leaves stick together forming like sheets that can be picked up in one go. Heavy work that sends Uzo sweating, but she's making good progress. The trees have also lost the better part of their foliage by now, this bloody task won't stay with her for much longer.

One and half hours later, Uzo has reached the bottom far end of the compound. She's drenched in sweat by now, and both her back and her feet clamor for a break with a legs up. Letting her eyes wander across the compound, she's pleased. A steep expanse of brown ground covered in a nice pattern of stripes from her rake. Dots of big bright green bags stuffed with leaves. And, most importantly, only the odd fresh leave here and there. Neat.

As she definitely doesn't need to engage in another round, Uzo decides to go find her supervisor to ask for additional work. Sitting down right here, on one of the alluring rocks, would be like asking to be called a lazy youth. Her feet will have to carry her a little farther, back to the predator house where Safo will be fed any minute now. This task attracts crowds of gawping visitors keen to see the big felines in action and is of course performed by a senior keeper.

When she reaches the predator house at ten past three, Uzo is surprised to see the feeding ceremony hasn't started. The expectant crowd is there, as dense and orderly as usual, kids at the front, nannies and parents at the back, sorted by height. The two leopards are pacing their cage faster than usual, a clear sign of irritation. But no sign of Safo, who should be displaying the same signs of impatient excitement. Uzo's heart misses a beat.

Safo is an old lioness. What if recent events were too much for her?

“Ah, good timing, Whiskey. Here coming, here coming. Whiskey lion whisperer, haha.”

It's her supervisor calling her to proceed through the metal door providing access to the predator backstage area. She's only partly relieved. Safo is obviously alive, otherwise her supervisor would talk differently. But why the hell would they need her?

The answer deep crashes into her head before Uzo even reaches the door: “They want to poison me! The biggies have gone all mad! I can't resist eating the poisoned bait much longer, I'm terribly hungry. Please, biggie, fast now. You have to put it away.”

Backstage, there's the vet and Uzo's boss. On the other side of the cage bars, there's a lioness in Sphinx position at the one end, staring down a small pink lump of meat. Safo's tail is twitching in anger, but a small thread of spit hints at how badly the bait sends her salivating.

“You're pretty good at getting on with the old lady, aren't you?”, the vet goes, addressing Uzo in English. “Any idea how to make this veal cutlet more attractive? We're trying to put her on analgesics, to ease the pain from her tail and paw, but the clever old cat must be smelling the diclofenac and doesn't like it. Any idea of anything we might add, to get her going?”

It stresses Uzo out to both listen to the vet and deep translate for Safo, but she gets it done.

The lioness' first reaction is skeptical. How would something going into her stomach help with her sore paw and tail? Not plausible. Uzo needs more time and tells the vet:

“IMHO, Safo just takes a while to make up her mind. She'll get used to the smell, and she won't be able to resist forever. A fresh veal cutlet, that must be yummy yummy, for a lion.”

The vet nods and there they stand, three humans waiting in silence for the lioness to give in to temptation. A very partial silence for Uzo.

She's deep arguing with Safo. The lioness is prepared to be convinced, because “hell, what a gorgeous smell, nearly bloody”. But she wants to understand how this stomach-to-tail-and-paw is supposed to work. Uzo counters with an impromptu deep lecture on the digestive system, the blood stream and the mode of action of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. Safo is impressed, less by one more bit of biggie science than by Uzo's knack at explaining it, and not holding back on potential side effects. Having deep listened attentively, the lioness goes:

“OK, now let me rephrase this: There's indeed something hidden inside the bait, as I smelled. It's indeed a poison, can give me stomach pains. But these pains will be less bad than those affecting my tail and paw. Both tail and paw will get better if I take the poison. The pain should recede in a matter of hours, the action on the swelling will take days, at least. OK, fair deal. If will now...”

The lioness doesn't deep finish her sentence, bouncing forward instead to swallow the veal cutlet in one gulp. The vet and the senior keeper go “Yes” in syn and exchange a high five. Uzo just stands there, glad to have been of service. Her quiet doesn't last long.

“Know what, biggie? This was one tasty morcel of excellent prey. Tiny, tiny, tiny, but yummy! And know what else, biggie? You said it would take hours, for my tail and paw to hurt less. Not true, biggie, at least not in felines. I can already feel it. Tail already much better, and paw definitely getting there too. You have to take a note, biggie. It's immediate action, in lions.”

Uzo keeps her deep response vague, not to offend the lioness and ruin a happy moment.

There's of course no need to take note of any new insights. Safo is just experiencing the good old placebo effect. From now on, the pain in her tail and paw will ease each time meat carries the faintest whiff of diclofenac, regardless of the dosage. With cats sense of smell, a minimal amount sure to trigger neither intended nor side effect should to the trick. Uzo would love to tell the vet, about this promising insight, but that's a no-go. Bittersweet moment.

After all this excitement and under the influence of the painkiller, Safo delivers a top show, jumping high for the meat, sinking her claws deep into it, even roaring twice once she has got hold of it. The audience is in ecstasy, performing the wildest contortions with their selfie sticks to get their phones into a good, cage-bar-free angle. Gigabytes of social media click bait in the making. Some of the smaller kids cry, because what they considered a big plush toy cracks bones with its impressive teeth, but this only adds to the ambiance.

The slender leopards don't have an ice cube's chance in hell to impress the audience when it's finally their turn. They're more agile, much faster, all their fangs are intact, of course. But this doesn't make up for the comparatively diminutive size.

Uzo wonders if the leopards notice the difference, and how they feel about it. Mental note to ask Safo, once she's done with her carcass and willing to deep talk, how to find the leopards on the network. Uzo is still standing there. She came here to ask for a next task, but her supervisor is busy, currently not available for staff management.

Not to be considered a lazy youth, Uzo tells the vet, in English: "You're probably wondering why I'm still here, not doing anything. I came to ask for my next task, but with my boss busy..."

The vet interrupts her, laughing: "Now you really do take your internship seriously, don't you? Always working, never without a rake or broom and wheelbarrow, always asking for next tasks. Are you even aware how much you're stressing out the poor regular staff? You've really got to calm down, Miss Olagundoye, you've got a whole life of hard work ahead. Absolutely no need to pack all the effort into the very first year, you know?"

Uzo is lost for words. As they're talking in English, she's sure to make sense, for once. It's a rare pleasure, to be certain to know what a conversation is about. But what the vet says is the plain opposite of what they were told in the integration course. Or he's joking.

Really hard to react, if you don't know whether your interlocutor is serious. Uzo decides to go for a facts-only middle path compatible with both interpretations: "I'll take that as a compliment, sir, thank you. Truth be told, I'm no workaholic, not at all. In the integration course, they urged us to strive, to fit in with the locals as soon as possible. Might be overdoing it, thanks for the warning. But I'd rather be considered a workaholic than a lazy youth."

The vet seems to consider her answer hilarious, but he doesn't get in another comment. The senior keeper is done with the leopards and back.

With Uzo still standing there awaiting orders, he engages in a discussion with the vet, in German of course. As far as Uzo can make sense of their rapid exchange, in a regionally flavored version of the language, it's about Safo's diclofenac. Sounds like she's going to get one dose per day, for two weeks for starters. If she looks good, no visible side effects, no alteration of appetite, and perhaps wagging her tail more forcefully and limping less, the arrangement might become permanent. An old lioness deserves to enjoy her last years without crippling pain, even if the accumulating side effects might shorten her life a bit.

Uzo likes how both men care, about Safo, despite never having talked to her in person. It's impressive, to what lengths all zoo staff go, to make sure the animals live as well as possible, under these very restricted conditions. Lots of people across the world would cherish to have access to this level of food security, health care and comfort.

Safo's course of treatment having been determined, the vet excuses himself, to go look at the poor seal. Its blind eye has gone all red, probably an infection, and the keeper in charge of the fish-eaters dutifully alerted the vet.

Once the vet is gone, the senior keeper tells Uzo to go perform another round of leaf collection at the gazelle compound, and then come back to treat the lioness with the infrared lamp.

Unable to explain the lack of leaves to rake up in her basic German, Uzo nods and trots off. She will pull her rake around a little, and pick up the odd leaf, for compliance, before heading straight back. She needs to talk to Safo, and both the vet and her boss sounded like she might get away with spending the rest of the afternoon in the predator house.

It's already getting dark, and the gazelle herd eyes Uzo with suspicion when she enters their compound. Their big bulging eyes and targeted ears ask "Predator alarm?". They have a certain way of standing, when they're ready to bounce away. Uzo takes care to move extra slowly, and mutters to herself, in German: "Need collect leaves. More leaves. Lots of leaves. Always collect." This kind of grammar and pronunciation exercise, performed in a low voice, has a soothing effect on jumpy gazelles. Uzo assumes they get stalked by silent predators in the wild and therefore consider any noise by larger animals a reassuring sign.

"You will still be coming, with the magic lamp, later on?" Safo has a way to initiate a deep conversation that always startles Uzo. The lioness is behind bars, very solid bars. But she has a very intimidating way of making her full predatory presence felt. Uzo's inner prey twitches.

"I mean, it's not as if I currently needed the lamp. Your science pill is doing one hell of a good job. Tail all mobile, and all smooth going, whichever way I wag it. Paw getting there, too. But I'd like the heat of the lamp on top, because it's so wellness."

Uzo promises to show up soon, to perform the lamp exercise. She takes care to keep her deep thoughts straight, not to let slip out what she's really thinking.

That's most probably no longer just a placebo effect Safo is experiencing. The old lady must have been keeping tail and paw too static for too long, fearful of the pain associated with every little movement. Lack of exercise wreaks havoc with joints. The opposite helps.

Uzo can practically hear the gazelle herd breathing a sigh of relief when she leaves the compound. Her muttering under her breath might have been better than silent creeping around, but her gone, that's the really good news.

The alleys are empty. In the winter season, the front gates close at four o'clock. A sign next to the entrance encourages the visitors to leave the zoo at nightfall. A surprisingly vague rule, compared to the local fetish for exact prescriptions and prohibitions. That was what Uzo thought, when she noticed the vagueness of the wording on her first day. Meanwhile, she has been learned that nightfall is clearly defined, in Germany: As soon as all cats look gray, it's night.

Inside the predator house, there's of course light, and and expectant Safo doesn't look gray at all.

The lioness is in a good mood, immediately starting to deep talk when Uzo steps through the metal door. Mostly about all kinds of tail movements.

While Uzo applies the infrared, she tries and fails to keep track of a hopelessly bewildering array of feline rearside action. She manages to follow for the difference between tail root and tip movements. Once Safo moves on to the different ways to combine these to twitch or whip the tail, to comment on particular circumstances, Uzo gets lost.

There's only so much even a talkative old feline can say about one of the more complex communication organs ever invented by evolution. Finally, Uzo gets to ask her question:

"Safo, now to something completely different, if you don't mind? There's this other biggie-feline couple making the news, right? Is there any chance you could introduce me to the other biggie? I really love our chats, and we absolutely need to do more of this, but it's all a bit scary, for me. Deep talking to another human, that would help me trust myself not to be going mad."

There, she said it, it's out. Now Uzo can only pray she didn't offend the old lady.

Safo softly growls to herself in satisfaction. She's as lucky with her biggie as she had hoped, this remark proves it. A smart biggie anticipates the risk of disbelief and selects her confidantes with

care, not to waste time on fruitless arguments. This is better, for both their safety, at the current stage, and will become vital if they really get a challenge and need to move fast and decisively.

Deep aloud, the lioness goes: “Good thinking, biggie, good biggie. I’ll see if I can locate him, and remind me to teach you how to deep call out for someone. It’s not hard at all, could even be in reach for your kind. Just one word of caution, though. You better keep your expectations on the low side. The other online biggie is just a male, not the brightest light under the sun, and not even prone to gung-ho activism. We have our work cut out, with that one, you better brace yourself.”

Uzo smiles. This exchange went better than expected, and she seems to be lucky, concerning her fellow cat whisperer. The last thing she needs is some macho type, especially a white one, trying to boss her around, or calling her.... Becoming aware of one more challenge, Uzo asks:

“Safo, how will I be deep talking to the other biggie? Is this a specific language we’re using, do we need to speak the same real world language? If that’s the case, we might be headed for trouble, unless he’s fluent in English. My German is very basic.”

Up to now, Uzo had been too busy worrying about a potential psychosis to wonder how exactly she was deep talking to Safo. It felt as natural as her native English, but now she’s suddenly far from sure this is actually what she is using.

Safo confirms, at first by not making much sense of the question.

Turns out, after some to and fro, that deep talking happens independently from the brain area devoted to language processing and syntax in humans. Felines don’t have that. They only hear sounds and manage to identify matching patterns, hence Safo’s cluelessness around the language concept. All deep netizens ‘speak’ in the same mental images, a complex web of both representations and abstract concepts. Humans can translate this communication into their languages, experience it in their languages, but it’s something else.

Satisfied she will understand her fellow cat whisperer whatever his native language, Uzo looks forward to meet him as soon as possible. And she makes a mental note that her next degree, if she ever gets the chance to study again, will be in neurolinguistics.

Takes Safo until well past five to get Jesse on the line, popcorn man is busy at this hour.

## **Felinitynet**

Jesse has managed to make a mess of his peak hour.

With his brain busy anticipating different scenarios for his first encounter with Sylvie, he’s more gaffe prone than usual. The afternoon feels like one long litany of apologies. Salted instead of sweet popcorn. Handing back the change for a ten Euro note, when he had actually been handed twenty. Dropping a big bucket on trying to hand it over. And more. Calamity day.

His penultimate apology is to Safo, for not being able to take her call yet. Then one more excuse, because he really doesn’t sell sodas, just popcorn, meaning the customer has to queue again at the bar, which is of course unfortunate but a fact, and the afternoon stampede is over.

Checking if the lioness is still waiting for him to take the call, he finds her fast, thanks to her massive online presence. She doesn’t even let him apologize, introducing him to Uzo instead:

“Tasty-Feet-to-be-called-Jesse from Strasbourg, please meet Uzo from Karlsruhe.”

Jesse’s heart sags. He’s used to bad starts, but this difference in names is embarrassing.

Uzo can sense Jesse is online, Safo is kind of pointing at him, but he stays mum. As this mode feels like enduring, and keeping Safo’s warning in mind, Uzo decides to take the initiative. Not being a natural small talker she goes:

“Hi, nice to meet you, fellow practitioner of whatever we’re in process of doing. That’s one hell of a long name you go by, OK to call you Jesse? Me, it’s Uzo, as Safo said. I work in Karlsruhe now, and live in a village nearby, but originally, I’m from Nigeria.”

Uzo has decided, spontaneously, to include that last bit. Without a visual feed, Jesse has no means to find out he’s talking to a black lady. If he’s not prejudiced, he won’t mind. If he is, they better deal with the corresponding complications right away.

Jesse is puzzled. He had expected another guy, because of the name ending on an o, but this Uzo deep sounds like a lady. He also wonders if she might be black. He vaguely remembers, from his school days, that there are African countries with substantial white populations. Nigeria might or might not be one of those, impossible to recall.

Uzo can feel her new acquaintance deep listening, but whatever else the lad might be, and Safo’s warning readily springs to mind, talkative he isn’t. A question might help. An easy one:

“Sounds like you don’t mind being called Jesse for short, cool. So how long have you been talking to cats, Jesse?”

Uzo is surprised how well she does, in this novel situation. Not like her, to take the lead in a conversation, but here she is, even coming up with a question making some sense.

Jesse, who had been in process of preparing one more apology, for his silence, is so glad for the easy prompt he immediately shoots back:

“Just one day now, or two, depending on how you count. Still very new to me. And you?”

The ensuing dialogue works just fine, for both of them. It’s Uzo coming up with the questions and Jesse answering as best he manages. Surprisingly well, for once. Uzo asks him easy stuff, like to describe how his deep talking started, his feline interlocutor, what the talking feels like. Totally unlike school. All Jesse’s answers get accepted, he’s doing well.

At the Karlsruhe end, Uzo wonders. Jesse is a nice guy. Pretty young, probably younger than her. Very polite and shy. He describes his deep communication experience well, and it’s exactly like her own. He’s no academic, uses simpler terms, but that’s the only difference. And he’s anything but stupid. He has come to the same conclusion as her, not to brag about this.

Which might mean Uzo is imagining him, just like the rest of this weird episode. Sitting there in the semi-darkness of the predator house, instead of rushing home like any self-respecting wage slave should, at the end of her shift, she once again wonders about schizophrenia.

Time to come up with a test to once and for all determine if and how mad she is:

“Jesse, have you ever considered all this might not be real, just a figment of our imagination? I admit I do wonder, very intensely so, no offense intended. How about exchanging phone numbers and calling each other in the real world, just to check we’re real?”

Jesse feels his heart bounce with joy. Ever since he gave up trying to understand Mattoo’s lecture on feline bilevelity he had been worried this might end badly. Both his mom and his teachers had always castigated him: “You have to make an effort, Jean-Segun. You always need to make sure you understand, before doing anything. Once you turn eighteen, you’re all responsible.”

Having grown up with exhortations that grew more strident the closer he got to the official adulthood threshold, Jesse expects the sky to fall in on him at any moment. There are and have always been a lot of things around that don’t make much sense to him. Deep talking qualifies, too, and he’s very willing to perform the check as proposed by Uzo.

Luckily for him, she’s the clever kind of person. Once they have exchanged phone numbers, making sure to get the country code right, she asks about his language skills. Boy, could this have gone wrong if she hadn’t asked! He’s a native French speaker with a smattering of German and

English barely sufficient to tell tourists how much to pay for their popcorn. She's a native English speaker with ten French sentences and basic German at her disposal.

Uzo decrees they'll do their mutual best in German, on the phone. None of them is fluent, no risk of breaking into an gallop sure to be unintelligible for the other party. If they get stuck, they'll deep talk in parallel. Uzo is by now at ease, doing the leading. Jesse seems to prefer it that way.

To make sure they don't cheat, they agree on an exact time, six o'clock, and to cut the deep connection. Either they're both real and will talk, or they will have to seek treatment.

## Karlsruhe

Uzo spends a tense ten minutes wondering if she will really make an appointment with a psychiatrist, if Jesse turns out not to exist. And another frantic five minutes trying to call him, instead of the other way round, as they had agreed. His phone number is viable, but five rings in it switches to a robot voice informing he's offline. Damn?!

If it hadn't been for her inner Ruzo the Resourceful, Uzo would have panicked.

It's Ruzo insisting that the viable phone number proves there's just some glitch, perhaps a sudden peak in job activity. Jesse was sure not to be solicited, because he would be hiding in a theater closed for seat repairs, but a supervisor can always interfere, on the job.

Uzo has developed a steady rhythm, dialing Jesse's number every third minute only, when her phone suddenly rings. It's not his number, she knows that one by heart by now, but the same country code. The cool kind of female voice addresses her by her first name and explains, in very Australian English, that she's Amanda and calling to apologize for her colleague Jesse. His phone battery has failed him, again, at the worst possible moment, despite plugging the charger into a socket, and he's so sorry, sending very deep regrets. He will make sure to do the needful, about the Mattoo cat, and meet Uzo online in an hour. If this is OK for her.

Uzo of course agrees, her heart suddenly filled with joy. This is real. Wow.

On her way back home, she chats with Safo. About Jesse, meaning it's a bit like gossip.

Doesn't qualify as the bad kind of gossip, though. Too matter-of-fact. They both agree the lad needs to be lead. He's the reactive type, not prone to initiative. Which doesn't necessarily imply he's stupid. He proceeds carefully, step by step. That's not stupid.

Uzo ends up defending Jesse rather more robustly than she would herself have expected, especially after her short and sharp burst of anger at his bloody phone glitch.

This whole experience being proven real, she also urges to understand. Tons of questions pop up, and she raises them all, with the patient lioness:

Why are even the most talented biggies, as in her and Jesse, so far less apt, at deep communication, than even the least talented felines?

Why she can't access the network news Safo is referencing to? She struggles to search for and call even familiar entities on her own, experiences her own efforts as hopelessly clumsy.

How does this universal language work, at the biological level, if it isn't associated with the brain segments in charge of speech? There has to be a physical basis to the telepathy mumbo-jumbo.

Uzo isn't prepared to back down on the need for a physical basis: If there is communication, exchange of information, there has to be a medium where a physical action takes place, full stop. Deep talking involves sending and receiving, and she needs to know the how.

Safo does her best to answer, but the result is still far to inconclusive for Uzo's scientifically trained mind. Some bits make some sense, though, in a shocking way:

According to Safo, there is a different level, the deep level. Deep-only entities call it the real world, as in the only world that matters. In their view, the space where Safo, Uzo, Jesse, Mattoo and all those lovely tasty prey creatures frolick around, the space of all life and stuff as biggies know it, this space doesn't even qualify as a side show to the real, important world. It's rubbish, just some remnant of some big bang that didn't go fully right. Deep only entities consider the space of all life and stuff rubbish, biggies have no clue there even is another level.

Cats, they straddle both levels. Their clever bit is a deep level entity happily communicating through the network. Their fun having bit is a creature of the life and stuff space, of the flat level, happily chasing and catching prey to devour it, more or less alive.

The old lioness describes the foundations of what she calls feline bilevelty in very lay terms. It takes Uzo a while to identify her big bang as the Big Bang and the deep level as what is more commonly called dark matter and dark energy. Oops.

Uzo didn't do too badly in physics, back in her school days, but this is very strong stuff.

Safo is sure about the two levels, and that all felines live in both. After some hesitation, she also confirms being two Safos, a deep immaterial and a flat bodily one. But she's not prepared to declare them overlapping. Wrong concept. Only the flat, bodily Safo has a shape that can overlap with any other shape. The deep one is..., different.

Uzo would prefer a more scientifically descriptive term and proposes a couple of analogies. Waves, pulsations, patterns. Safo diligently probes each concept, only to declare it the wrong kind of different. Her deep level knows itself well enough not to confuse whatever its structure might be with any flat level phenomena. Different as in different, period.

Uzo is nearly home and declares them done. Safo is sounding irritated by their lack of progress, better to stop pestering her for now. She tries to bid farewell, but the lioness begs to differ:

"No way, biggie, you've got lots more to learn. We don't know what's in store, and how soon. We can't rely on Mattoo and Tasty-Foot-to-be-called-Jesse. The deep-only can come up with a challenge at any moment, I need to educate you."

What follows qualifies as by far the worst news Uzo ever had to handle.

By the time she opens the front door of her flat, she's in desperate need of very sweet tea.

What Safo calls a challenge, the euphemism of the billionium, could end up in one big final devastation, for all residents of planet earth.

The deep-only might be hard to define, but this doesn't keep them from being mighty. Seriously mighty, as in able to make the sun go bonkers. Seriously bonkers, as in solar flares blowing off the earth's atmosphere in one short sterilizing whiff.

The good news, according to Safo, is that they can and hopefully will stop this devastation from happening. With the help of Felinity, perspicacious biggies, a.k.a Uzo and Jesse, only need to prove that all biggies respect and cherish bilevel Felinity. This will please the deep-only, they will refrain from meddling with the sun and life goes on, until the next challenge.

Clutching her second cup of a tea so sugary it could be called caramel, Uzo learns how her most recent predecessors met their challenge.

They created sphinxes. Millions and millions of sphinxes, of all sizes and materials. They were all over the world in those days, with an extra big one built on the spot of the countdown.

Because each challenge involves a countdown, and that's a nightmare all by itself.

A very big cat, really huge, so black you struggle to look at it, because its shape swallows all the light, will appear in a particular spot. Normal biggies will only see the deep black, but there will be a striped pattern, at the deep level. The stripes disappear, one by one. That's the countdown. The deep-only have to be satisfied before the last stripe disappears, or bye bye life on earth.

Uzo decides even the sweetest tea can only help so much, that some emergencies call for a nervous breakdown. Safo is prepared to grant her permission, but Ruzo the Resourceful won't give up just yet and makes Uzo ask Safo:

"Are we sure this is going to happen, that there's going to be a challenge, in the near future?"

To Uzo's immense joy and relief, Safo negates. No certainty yet, just a hunch.

Both Matto and herself are worried, as is a major part of the overall network, because two first contacts in a row, after generations and generations of biggie inertia, don't bode well.

But no signals from the deep-only yet. According to the records, oral records of course, not very precise, the deep-only will provide all cats with an advanced warning, of an upcoming challenge. Cats will be warned, about the imminent appearance of the countdown cat.

Safo abruptly ends their conversation at this point, suddenly recalling she has news to listen to.

Left on her own, Uzo discards the nervous breakdown. She's far from convinced to be spared the challenge, but endangering her residential perspective now is sure not to help with it.

Sipping away at a glass of cold water, to dilute an overdose of sweetness, Uzo contemplates calling her mother, or her sister.

The Felinity challenge could be imminent. Once it starts, she'll be terribly busy. She doesn't know in which way, but Safo was adamant that she would be, and the old lioness is the topmost available authority on the subject.

After some wavering, Uzo decides not to call Lagos. This doesn't feel like the right moment to listen to one more admonition to keep on track and prove she's worth the big investment. Nor does she feel ready for the next dose of sisterly consumerism.

When the facilitator warned her, about the loneliness of the illicit migrant, she shrugged. "If there's one thing I'm used to," she told herself, "it's loneliness. Not fitting in, lacking friends, the whole panoply of wondering what's wrong and keeps me from bonding, I've been handling that for like forever, certainly for the relevant parts of my life. More of the same, so what?"

Back home, in the old days, Uzo was genuinely convinced of her ability to cope with all flavors of loneliness. Nothing like regular practice, to implement a successful routine. Right now, she's discovering totally new dimensions of the phenomenon.

It's one thing to lack a best friend, without counting Ruzo the Resourceful, when nothing of special interest ever happens. It's nice to be able to share the tale of a particularly grueling commute, an especially untimely power outage or an exceedingly dysfunctional segment of officialdom, but it's no must. Everybody reports this kind of stuff, all the time. Tell it or don't, face-to-face or on social networks, one more or less doesn't make a difference.

What hurts, and Uzo is by now doubly aware how much it does, is living an adventure, something really extraordinary, all alone. Telling the good old daily routine kind of incidents only ever triggers a cascade of corresponding tales. Everybody has been there, done or endured that kind of episode. Not so for Uzo's adventure. Successfully making it into Schengen land, by means of a clever stratagem, that would be a tale well worth listening to.

Everybody knows it's possible to pull this off, with the right kind of money. Very literally everybody. Mister and miss Olagundoye senior, Uzo's parents, otherwise wouldn't have managed to find a facilitator. But this general awareness doesn't mean people know how it's done.

Had she been asked a year ago, Uzo herself would have been off the mark. She would have bet on some kind of bribery, forged documents, bought certificates, a chain of corrupt officials to travel along, with all the risks this entails. Never would she have guessed it was possible to turn invisible before rematerializing in Karlsruhe with her very own, not fake at all passport.

The French identity card she carried on the Cannes to Karlsruhe leg of her journey was never destined for active use, just a fallback precaution to make it through a routine control. And it was most probably no fake, just borrowed from a French lady for the occasion.

All that big stack of money, minus a well deserved profit component for the facilitator, went into her mode of travel, her invisibility cloak.

All the details of the trip only served one purpose, to hide her from sight. Much better to evade officials than to bribe them.

A yacht screaming filthy rich at the world doesn't get searched for illegal refugees. For illicit money or substances, perhaps, if only very rarely. For the visa-short, no, never. One more or less black person in service attire catering to the rich partying at sea, that's not a difference anyone will care to notice. And a minibus ferrying the more expendable section of the workforce to their next job, that's not a promising target for a paperwork check.

With the right kind of Schengen residents involved, entering the presumed fortress is easy. And provided the numbers stay low and no one blabs, this kind of scheme can run for years. Uzo can't help wonder, if the owner of the yacht is making a little additional money this way, or just a libertarian philanthropist enjoying a little thrill with humanitarian side effects.

The second part of the stratagem is even more clever. And Uzo feels bad about it, despite Ruzo the Resourceful's insistence she's doing no one no harm, not adding to anyone's plight. He has a point, but Uzo is ashamed of this part anyway.

Entering Schengen is easy, getting permission to stay is hard, and forever getting harder.

In the good old days, her facilitator brought both ladies and gents to Schengen land. They had to pick from a set of political scenarios and learn corresponding details, to be able to convince their asylum claim processors they were at risk of serious harm in their home country.

The lucky ones, or perhaps just the most skilled performers, would be granted full political asylum, including the right to invite spouses and offspring. The jackpot. The rest would have to make do with a so-called exceptional leave to remain. A lesser status, non-permanent, but people still got to stay for years, and were granted work permits.

Those good old days, for those wealthy enough to pay a facilitator, were abruptly terminated by the EU decision to declare most of Africa safe. No more political refugee recognitions, no renewal of exceptional leave to remain status.

Nowadays, there's only one reliable path to legal residence. If a girl is a victim of human trafficking, and willing to denounce her traffickers, and prepared to go to court, the prosecutors will want her around as chief witness. They will make sure she's granted a residential status.

A lot of ifs. Too many for most real victims. They'd rather get themselves deported than denounce the perpetrators, even after having suffered abuse too horrendous to recount. It's just too dangerous, for them and their loved ones back home.

Uzo's clever facilitator spotted the demand for victims willing to denounce their traffickers. He also noticed how easy it was to identify and target some such perpetrators. Not the big fish doing people and drugs at the transcontinental level, these are way too dangerous. But many a Libyan dealer with the means to extort money from hapless villagers trying and failing their luck is scary only on a very local level. He's unable to strike back when hit by professional opponents.

Uzo's facilitator has each of his parcels, as he calls the girls traveling with his support, learn a story and a set of details pointing straight at a very real Libyan slaveholder. They show up at a shelter for battered women, physically unharmed because the merchandise is supposed to be delivered 'fresh and in good condition', to tell a tale of a perfidious trap and lucky escape.

Uzo's story involved a putative Au-Pair job with a marine biologist in the lovely coastal town of Stralsund up in Northern Germany. It went like this:

Some friend forwarded her a twitter call for Au-Pair applications, preferably from biology students. A couple of direct messages later, she invested all her savings into a ticket to Cairo. There she was supposed to meet her future boss and his wife on their holiday. The paperwork would be completed at the German embassy, and then they would fly on to Germany.

That fairy tale didn't happen. She was picked up at the airport all right, by a taxi driver. He delivered her at a hotel, smaller and less international looking than expected, but still according to plan. She was served a soda in the lobby, while waiting for her future boss.

Next she woke up in the back of what must have been a van, handcuffed and blindfolded.

They rolled and rolled and rolled for such a long time she wet her pants. She might also have been unconscious, lost any track of time and place, unable to say if she had been on the road for hours or days. They occasionally stopped, but never for long.

Finally, they arrived at their destination. Near the sea, by the sound and smell. She was taken out of the van. One man told her off for having wetted her pants, in very rudimentary English.

Two or three men discussed in what might have been Arabic. Then she was walked to a house, or a cabin. The English speaker told her she would be shot if she tried to remove the blindfold, but that he would take her handcuffs off to allow her to undress, wash and put on fresh clothes. She argued she wouldn't, not in the presence of men. He threatened to shoot her right away.

Scared deadly, she complied, and was very glad no one touched her. The English speaker called her good girl quick learner and gave her some bread, and a bottle of water to drink from. She was thirsty and drank, despite the toilet problem. Then they waited, and it was cold, must have been night. Another van came, and another, and men were talking, but not in English.

When it had become very cold, she heard a a boat arrive and there was a commotion, with lots of shouting in barely decipherable English. Still blindfolded, she was made to stand up and hold hands with what later turned out to be two other ladies, one on each side. It took a while until everything was sorted. They were just standing there holding hands, not daring to speak.

Then they were made to walk. They were still on the shore, but very close to the water, with the waves right next to them. Scary, she was afraid to fall into the sea. Up front there was shouting in English, the queue only advanced stop-and-go. She found out why, when it was her turn to board the boat. Still holding hands on both sides, she was grabbed and lifted and put down on deck.

Once the whole queue was on deck, they were told to sit down on the floor. They of course complied, and she feared to die at sea. But it wasn't that kind of boat.

When they had left the shore, a man ordered them to take off the blindfolds, in passable English. There were twenty four of them on board, and the man who had given the order, and a captain. It was a big boat, like for groups of holiday makers, with cabins, sanitary, everything. They were allowed to move freely on board, provided they didn't go near the captain or the other man. There were granola bars and water, no one was going hungry or thirsty.

They sailed for six days. After the second day, they could sometimes see a shore in the distance on their right. Especially at night, when there were beacons. In the sixth night, they reached a concrete jetty built far out into the sea. On the shore, everything was dark, no town, not even one house in the vicinity. They had to assemble on deck in advance and were made to disembark in a hurry. As soon as the last lady was off the boat, it steamed off, full speed.

Not knowing what to do, they walked to the end of the jetty, hoping to find something or someone. They found a big concrete surface, like a parking lot, but there wasn't anyone waiting for them. In the darkness, with little moonlight, they didn't dare walk further and stood there, discussing what to do, one group in English, one in French, one in Arabic.

Suddenly, headlights came towards them, fast. They turned out to belong to a container truck. It stopped right next to them and the passenger alighted. He carried a gun, and barked at them, in English, to hurry into the container. It was battered, with Chinese signs for logo. But when the gunman opened it, the inside was quite clean and there were like bunk beds. They had to climb in, one lady per slot, were told to shut up tight, and that they would be safe.

There was no light inside the container and they were at first scared they would lack oxygen, but there must have been holes somewhere, air supply turned out to be no problem.

They rolled and rolled and rolled until a first stop, somewhere in the woods, where the first six ladies were told to get off. Then they rolled again, and four more at the next stop. And so on, until there were only four of them left.

At the last stop, once again on a small bay on a deserted road, the three other remaining ladies were left standing there, in the middle of nowhere, while Uzo was told to come sit up front, between the driver and the gunman.

At first she was scared they might have bad intentions, but they gave her coffee and cookies and explained they had another two hours to roll, to deliver her to yet another place. They both spoke good English and were in a talkative mood, perhaps because of drugs.

They bragged, about how mighty bandits they were. And how they were building big houses back home in Passau. They also badmouthed their business buddies back over in Tobruk, at length.

Especially one El Jameer. Originally a hammam owner, this El Jameer had diversified into exporting premium slut material, as in girls with diplomas and manners. El Jameer used to be well aware such fare had to be handled with care, and reliable. Lately, he has gone meth, and it shows. Half the cargo arrives in such a damaged state it has to go straight on to the recycling plant, a cheap brothel near Nuremberg. This barely covers the cost of transport,...

When they stopped at a petrol station, Uzo asked for permission to go to the bathroom. They let her go, because the station was out-of-town, there was nowhere for her to run.

They didn't expect her to ask a lady she met in the bathroom to give her a ride. She did and rolled off before her captors even noticed she was missing. Luckily, the lady spoke fluent English and was well aware of the plight of trafficked girls. She provided Uzo with the address of a shelter for battered women, a crude map, and dropped her off in walking distance.

Staring at her small TV without listening to the newsman, Uzo once again feels the sting of shame. She's a liar. A professional one. She has been rehearsing and telling this tale so often that part of her believes she has been there. But she didn't. It's one big scam.

When she was introduced to the plot, she balked. Using the plight of fellow ladies, to propel herself towards an even more comfortable future than her not so bad present, what could be more despicable? Her parents didn't raise her to go fake. They were principled people.

"Don't be stupid, Uzo. Those same principled people paid a fortune to get you going", Ruzo the Resourceful argued, in Uzo's head. "They know what they're paying for. As long as no one nice gets hurt, so what? This mister El Jameer, if ever Interpol catches him, he's bad for real, committing atrocious crimes. Not against you, OK. But guess how his real victims feel, about this particular detail? You know how you would feel. You'd want the bastard behind bars."

Uzo is aware of all these sound arguments. She did what her parents had decided she should do. Unfortunately, this doesn't help one bit, against the sting of shame.

And the Felinity Challenge, it feels like the punishment for her sins.

Uzo spent months telling lies, pretending she had been through an ordeal she had developed, scripted and rehearsed with an acting coach. She's a scammer, big time.

She isn't into magical thinking or religion. She doesn't need a guru or God to tell her that lies are bad. That's basic common sense. Others hate being lied to as much as she does. And the people she had to lie to, they were just like the coach had foretold. On the nice side, despite being white and born into the comparative privilege of a Schengen fate.

Uzo's first contact, at the women's shelter, was a shade less white than the local average, and born into less privilege. Theirs was a tedious exchange, because Uzo hadn't acquired any German yet and the social worker struggled with English. As Uzo later found out, when she went back to say thanks, by means of an apple cake, the social worker was a native Kurdish speaker also fluent in Turkish and German. Small wonder her English was so poor.

On that first encounter, they had relied on a translation app, to reach a minimum of understanding. In return for her story, Uzo was given a blanket and allowed to sleep on the couch. Her first success in what would become a long line of liar achievements.

Uzo had to spend the next day loitering close to the office of the social worker. This lady, barely older than herself but blessed with a resolute temper, was working her phone hard. Twice Uzo was called into the office and made to answer questions on the phone, in English. All those calls were about getting her organized. The right people needed to hear her story.

The very specific intonations used in the local variant of English proved elusive at first. Uzo spent more time asking for a repeat and rephrase than it took her to answer. With only a vague idea of the questions, she stuck to a very basic litany: "From Nigeria, wannabe au pair girl. Bad men trouble. No place to go, no one to turn to. Not in Germany, not in Nigeria, can't tell parents."

Her coach had been adamant: "Whatever you do, stay friendly, and on message. Do what you're told to do, go where they send you, wait as long as it takes, and keep smiling. A lot of procedures won't make one bit of sense, and some will have to be performed three, four, five, ten, twelve and more times. That's OK, that's how they do it, don't argue. Friendly, on message."

Not easy, to keep that up, but Uzo managed.

By day three, she was already in possession of two pounds of paperwork. Precious loose pages she was carrying around in a folder wrapped into a plastic bag, to keep them safe and dry.

To obtain the documents, she had recited her first and second name, place and date of birth so many times she was ready to challenge the German reputation for efficacy. Shouldn't such a technologically sophisticated place be doing eAdministration, and just forward information? But Uzo kept smiling, and repeating her story, to whomever asked for it.

At the shelter, she had graduated from the couch to a room. One more liar milestone.

Uzo had never suffered any harm from any man, and here she was, official resident of an institution meant for victims. She felt bad, about blocking a precious room, but the social workers insisted she was safer here, and she couldn't argue against that.

In her third week, when she was starting to wonder how long the emerging routine of few appointments and ample leisure was going to last, events suddenly picked up drama.

The pivotal phase started with what looked like an invitation to one more standard interview, where she would have to recite name, date of birth and so forth, provide some of her paperwork as supporting evidence for yet more documents.

Uzo was by now familiar with the inner city and walked the short distance, arriving ten minutes early, as planned. She had been in this particular building twice already, but never on this floor. And when she was called in, the setting differed from the usual. Besides the standard public servant type at his desk, there were two other men. Sharper types, especially the old one.

Her initial interview took three hours and felt like ten.

Uzo's coach had been so right, to warn her against improvisation and embellishments.

In the first round, she was allowed to tell her story in chronological order. It was slow going, because the sharp oldie struggled with Uzo's English. The younger man had to translate for him, to allow him to take an improbable amount of notes. Sometimes the oldie asked for clarifications, the first hint at things to come.

In the next round, the oldie revisited his notes, seemingly at random, asking for details.

No chronological order, and he inquired both about her journey and her previous life.

Once again, Uzo would have been lost without her training. The coach had warned her that savvy interrogators would compare her responses, how she recalls past events, for the legend bit and older periods, where she was to stick to her real biography.

"You can't sound like some parroquet that learned a tale by heart. In your head, the lie has to be as real as true memories, to allow you to tell it plausibly," her coach had said. Tall order.

Uzo was treated well, provided with mineral water and a cup of office coffee, talked to respectfully. This made the interview even more terrifying.

It took ages, to satisfy the curiosity of the sharp oldie. But there came a point when he leant back on his chair and looked at his sidekick in a let's-call-this-done way. The sidekick said something in German, the oldie nodded, and Uzo was asked to wait outside.

Sitting on the visitor chair in an otherwise empty corridor, she tried not to worry. Having only just passed many exams, and failed a couple, she was used to close encounters. This one didn't feel bad, overall. She had apologized a lot, for not remembering more details. Each time had felt like disappointing the interviewers, as the coach had foretold. His guidance had been clear:

"Don't make anything up on the spot, Uzo. You have your story, it's complete. If there's a carpet in your story, they might ask about the color of the carpet. If you didn't care to think of that, admit you don't remember. You can have felt a carpet under your feet, without consciously looking at it, and hence know there was a carpet, but not its color. Selective memory is OK."

Uzo had managed to stick to this guidance. She felt sort of stupid for not remembering more details, from both her real and fake past, but this wasn't exactly a new experience. Never had she passed an oral without a couple of hiccups. There hadn't been too many of those, and not one catastrophe moment, where it all blows up.

When she was asked back in, she automatically resumed position to get quizzed again. And she indeed got another round of questions, mostly about her real biography.

Expecting a trap, Uzo resisted the temptation to get carried away. This was so much easier to talk about than the made up tale of her trip, but she kept her answers brief and flat.

The oldie then went back to the starting sequence of her fairy tale. He challenged the idea that any educated person could walk into such an obvious trap. According to him, a clever girl would guess scam, or at least inform her parents before flying off to take up an au pair job. Uzo agreed, confessing a knack for acting stupid. She also begged to leave her parents out of this, because they had seen more than enough of that. This nonplussed her interrogator.

Next, he articulated disbelief around the harmlessness of the proceedings. “No rapes, no beatings, absolutely no use of force?! This is unheard of, impossible,” his young sidekick translated. Uzo agreed again, confessing cowardice. Getting blindfolded, being made to piss into her pants and forced to change clothes in the presence of male strangers had been bad enough for her. “Call that not brutalized if you wish, but to me it felt brutal,” she said.

Speaking up for her own perspective and emotions did the trick, as the coach had predicted. The sidekick even asked if she would prefer to be interviewed by lady officers. She again answered truthfully. Talking to female officers would be easier, but wasn't a must.

And then she was asked to leave. No marks, no clue if she had passed.

Many weeks later, Uzo found out that she sailed through this exam with honors.

Her room lady, a hot tempered young piece of officialdom who was in charge of keeping poor people off the streets and got her her Etsenred flat, leafed through her file in search of some reference number. She commented on the excellent impression she made on the federal police agents. “The truth, for once”, it said in their assessment. Uzo's biggest achievement.

What Uzo hates even more than having to lie to officialdom is having to lie to colleagues. She was never fast and easy at making friends. But being reliable, rarely grumpy and a listener, she normally gets closer to the right kind of people over time

None of this in her new life. And not just because of the language barrier.

Uzo is pretending to be the stupid victim of the more organized type of crime. How she behaves has to fit with her tale. As the facilitator had warned her, and he was right to emphasize this aspect, she has to keep up the acting at all times. When she interacts with the natives, and even more so when she interacts with fellow migrants.

One impromptu encounter with a real Nigerian victim of human trafficking slaving away in an informal Karlsruhe brothel taught Uzo to keep her distances. To keep it up in such company, this advanced kind of lying proved beyond her means. Not even Ruzo the Resourceful was able to come up with an excuse and decreed fellow Nigerians off limits.

Up to now, Uzo just missed the occasional gossip, the chance to let off a steam in the company of friends. Now, faced with real life threatening danger, she's suddenly close to sobbing at the TV.

It's not fair, to be forced to handle something as big as the Felinity Challenge alone.

## **Strasbourg**

With the last screening under way, Jesse is in no better shape than Uzo. It's not fair, to get reprimanded for clumsiness when you have spent a whole shift working yourself flat out.

Jesse doesn't expect leniency from the customers. It's their role and right to ruin the life of service personnel. Customers are entitled to complain, make a fuzz and rat on you whatever your performance. That's an integral part of what they're buying.

But colleagues and supervisors, they know what it's like. They're familiar with the bleak shifts. Sometimes, it's all aligned against you. You're not in your best shape to begin with. And then your tech fails you. And there's a crowd you'd guess it was freebie night. And the worst customers in town have taken rendezvous to teach you about hell.

On bleak shift days, you need support. Not more of the same from your own side.

Jesse would love to be the kind of guy who would act on Amanda's advice. When the supervisor had caught them on the phone, he had made sure to differentiate his admonitions.

Amanda got away with a mere: “You again, of course. You know where this goes.”

Whereas Jesse got the full broadside: “Jean-Segun Edun, never would I have expected you cheating! It’s your first time, so I’ll keep it out of your file, for once. But you have to understand how deeply disappointed I am. I mean, look at me. Instead of being prejudiced, like everybody else, I give the black boy a chance. I tell myself, he needs a chance to prove he’s not worthless, like people say, someone has to give him the chance. I go out of my way, to make this a better world, and what do I get in return? Ask yourself, Jean-Segun Edun...”

The supervisor went on and on, using ever stronger words, talked about betrayal, cheating, theft even. Jesse stared at his tired feet, waiting for a slot to squeeze in the due apology. He would have preferred Amanda to walk away, but she stayed and witnessed the whole scene.

Once the supervisor was done and gone, Amanda urged Jesse, in her foreign accent, to file a complaint. She was positive European antidiscrimination law prohibited this kind of reprimand, and willing to act as witness. Jesse felt the worse for it.

It’s not fair, to get lectured by a foreigner about your presumed rights. And Amanda really seems to be convinced he would get away with claiming them. Little does she know! Pulling the vacuum cleaner around, Jesse would love to quit. Not just this stressful nuisance of a badly paid job. He’d like to quit the shithole he’s supposed to call an existence.

No working man should be forced to subrent. He should have his own flat. A place where he doesn’t need to fear visitors will turn around on their heels in disgust.

At the back of Jesse’s head, Mattoo performs the deep talk equivalent of a knock. The cat is keen to get the Sylvie and Sweetie project moving. His enthusiasm is unperturbed by any practical considerations, he’s clearly thinking with his balls only.

Jesse denies to deep talk, pretending he can’t perform additional tasks while on the job.

Once he gets home, he’ll have to apologize once more. Mattoo is sure not to take kindly to the news that there won’t be no Sylvie and Sweetie visit.

But Jesse has made up his mind. He doesn’t want a stranger to see how he lives.

Being a mere lodger, and the smallness of his room, that would be hard to reveal. Like ending every sentence on the refrain of “and by the way, I’m penniless, don’t expect any expensive outings, unless you pay for both of us.” Not a moment of pride, barely feasible.

Being associated with the parlous state of the rest of the flat, that’s impossible.

A visiting lady would be entitled to use the bathroom, contract-wise. For the sake of Jesse’s dignity, she would have to hold her bladder.

His daily efforts notwithstanding, the place looks as sticky as it feels if you touch anything. The M4 are just too generous with potions and lotions, Jesse’s sponge and detergent don’t stand a chance to fight back the tide. He would never leave one smattering of shaving cream on the zinc, they distribute lipstick and eye shadow across mirrors and towels.

Jesse is proud to be a good, clean boy. Perfect shave and haircut, never the same well-ironed shirt for two days, that’s his way, his pride. He even takes his stupid job uniform home for proper washing and ironing, because the company isn’t prepared to do it often and well enough. He would die of shame if Sylvie associated a disgusting bathroom with his person.

Jesse has to switch off the vacuum cleaner in a hurry, it’s making desperate choking noises once again. Incredible, what people manage to drop in a cinema: When he dismantles the sections of the suction pipe he finds a green and white bathing cap. Why anyone brought it and how it got lost will remain a mystery. After a short inspection, Jesse decides it’s not worth the effort to deliver it to the cash counter, for lost objects safekeeping, and stuffs it into his dustbag.

Last week, Jesse had what looked to him like a very fake Rolex, so big and bling. He guessed ten Euros, the threshold for lost objects safekeeping, and dutifully deposited it at the cash counter. Three days later, the presumed fake was claimed, correctly described and handed back. Jesse had handled a genuine white gold Yacht Master II worth a good forty thousand Euros. Ever since he wonders what drugs it takes not to notice losing a fortune for three days.

There it is again, the banned topic. Somewhere deep down, Jesse's brain longs for drugs, to escape it all. He refuses to conform to stereotype, didn't touch anything since middle school. He won't do the racists the favor. Temptation resisted, again.

Mattoo knocks again, and Jesse apologizes once more. This cat is so pushy!

Another reason not to invite Sylvie and Sweetie. Mattoo's no-holds-barred dating style is too embarrassing. No subtle flirt to be expected from this cat. By the sound of the furry sex addict, Sweetie will barely have the time to disembark before he throws himself at her. Onto her. Even if Sweetie does fancy Mattoo's approach, a very big if in the age of #metoo, there's still the problem of how to bystand. What do you say, when and while your cats engage in sex?

Jesse can't imagine any appropriate small talk for the occasion. With a lad, perhaps. A little round of you-brag-I-brag, and damned be who hints at lack of practice. With a lady? Impossible.

Mattoo is sure to resist a strategic reappraisal. A lot of apologies ahead.

If only Jesse could ask someone for advice. Without getting himself hospitalized.

It's unfortunate, that the only other person sharing his talent has to be a foreign woman. With a French guy, preferably black to be spared the risk of racism, he would find a way. They might even become mates, and think of something useful to do with the gift.

This Uzo, funny name, like the liquor, she deep sounds posh, learned. And she's well travelled, too. Jesse's longest distance holiday so far was a disaster of a school trip to Marseille and the Mediterranean. The Uzo, she's from Africa, but residing in Germany, full cosmopolitan.

Attacking the last theater with his vacuum cleaner, Jesse discovers himself a new interest.

Talking to someone from Africa, that could deliver insights. What it's like, to live in a place full of blacks, that would be interesting to know. Uzo was there and is here now, she can compare. Her former life was no nirvana, obviously, otherwise she wouldn't have left it behind to move to Germany, of all places. Good or bad sign, depending on how you look at it.

Doing the front row of seats, Jesse discovers a disaster. The forth seat is wet, and that's not the smell of coke. Tonight really is a strong contender for the bleak day high score.

The incident must have happened in the early afternoon session, during the cartoon. Jesse pictures a small kid, seven or eight, laughing like mad. Too much pressure, an extra outing-treat soda in the bladder, and blast. Poor kid, not his fault. But the bloody parent, he or she should be... Why can't they ever admit it? Spare staff the disgusting first encounter and moment of reckoning? Piss and run, that's antisocial behavior, that is, and parents do it all the time.

Jesse goes fetch the Kärcher. Hot steam laced with detergent, that'll do the trick. And at least a twenty minute round of applying the hair dryer. You can't risk tomorrow's customers to stand up to wet pants. Jesse's turn to deep call Mattoo, to announce a delay.

Still mindful of the reprimand, Jesse dutifully informs his supervisor why he'll take longer than usual with the final round. Watching porn, his so-called lifelong learning moment, the important man at first resents the intrusion. Jesse's tale of piss mollifies him, he even grants paid overtime. Must have been good porn, to have improved his mood so significantly.

Once he's back in the theater, Jesse takes his time with the Kärcher. Paid overtime has been granted. He can do additional bucks. Good moment to clean two more slightly sticky seats he

had noticed the day before. One features dark brownish smears. Chocolate in the best case, nosebleed in the second best, and you don't want to think about the rest. One features three white dots, probably former marshmallows. People will sit down on anything.

Mattoo comes knocking once again, and this time he freaks out when Jesse apologizes. Turns out the little sex maniac had been hoping for a date right tonight. Mad cat.

Another two hours later, Jesse is so tired he doesn't even resent his fate any longer. He only wants to limp home, have a shower, quietly, quietly, and lay down. People, felines, the whole galaxy, include whatever challenges, they can all kiss his exhausted posterior.

Having expected a dose of feline scorn for a welcome, Jesse is pleasantly surprised by the opposite. He's not even fully inside when Mattoo comes running, without attempting to squeeze through the partly opened door. He's also purring full force, and goes:

"Come on Tasty Feet, shoes off! I really need a good fat dose tonight, to get ready. You can use the communicator with the long tail now, right, no more work? And call them over? Sweetie will be so pleased, for our first date to take place at such a nice dark hour..."

Jesse hates to ruin such a good mood. In the due course of time, he will confess the truth, or rather a first tiny bit of it, to cover tonight. He will get himself scolded, he will apologize. The usual, except for a cat doing the shouting. That one will be a first.

Jesse is way too exhausted to care. As long as Mattoo refrains from calling over that mighty impressive lioness, may she be locked up tight, Jesse doesn't care. Come to think of it, getting eaten by a big predator would have its merits. Should stop the feet from hurting.

Having plugged in his phone, to Mattoo's delight, Jesse takes off his shoes and fetches himself two sandwiches and a soda from his fridge. On his bed, propped up by a cushion between his back and the wall, washing down his first sandwich, salami, with the soda, the cat enthusiastically massaging his feet, Jesse feels bliss. A moment worth living towards.

If only it could last. Mattoo is polite enough to let him eat. With a little luck, his patience might last throughout the second sandwich, cheese. But at some point, he'll demand action.

Why are people always so keen on action? Not that much good achieved through it, against a lot of nonsense, and serious harm even. If Jesse had a say, the world would be a more contemplative place. Moving at a slower pace, you get there, you do get things done. Just later.

"Tasty Feet? How long does its tail need to be in the wall, for the communicator to work? When will it be able to call the ladies? They're not far, a short dose of wall should do, right?"

His furry friend has a nice way of asking, Jesse has to grant him that. Voice all tentatively hopeful, absolutely unlike the usual demanding barks. And it's cute, how Mattoo tries to make sense of the phone and charger. Jesse decides to make an effort to break the bad news gently:

"Mattoo, I'm afraid you won't like what I say next next. You better brace yourself, OK? Now what you need to understand is that biggies have their ways. There are cat ways and biggie ways. Cats, they're active at night, it's their time. Biggies, they're active during the day..."

Jesse pauses in mid sentence, because he hears himself talking bullshit. He just came home, at a quarter past four in the morning. Even a less clever cat than Mattoo wouldn't fail to point out he's not in line with his own statement. A new angle is needed.

"... mostly during the day. There are exceptions, because biggie stuff can't just stop at night. But all biggies are better at daylight, for the seeing. Night scares them, especially the she-biggies. They don't walk around at nighttime..."

A none to subtle change in Mattoo's deep listening signals he's getting the message, and wants to argue, as expected. Better to let him weigh in right away. And here comes his counter:

“But Tasty-Feet-to-be-called-Jesse, they don’t live far, Sweetie and Sylvie. We checked, they’re right here, in High Rock. And Sweetie can help with the seeing. Please?”

Such a clever little charmer. And so polite in his pleading. He deserves a nice answer. Jesse would so prefer to be allowed to sleep, but he goes:

“Sorry Mattoo, no. No she-biggie will go see a he-biggie stranger she only met online once in the depth of night. She’d probably rather call the police if we asked. And High Rock is big. I can walk for half an hour, and I will still be in High Rock. Only just, OK, but it’s that big.”

If there’s one thing Jesse can’t take, it’s crying kids and miserable animals. Poor Mattoo signals acute distress, plaintively returning to a familiar whine:

“Really that big? Half an hour of walking, for you, on your high tower legs? You get all that outside, and all the roaming she-biggies? And I’m not allowed through that door, just once? Please, Tasty-Feet-to-be-called-Jesse. Just once. Just remember what it was like, before your first she-biggie, please? A male really needs to do his thing. Please?”

Poor furry fellow. Jesse feels with him, and knows a way to cheer him up. When it comes to male bonding, nothing beats shared suffering, and he goes:

“I so wish you were right, Mattoo. That would be cool, to just go for a walk, here in High Rock, meet a pretty lady and get laid. Really wish that was like that. But she-biggies, they’re very picky, Mattoo. Very, very picky. A man needs a car, a house, or at least a proper flat, before they even look at him. Very complicated business, with she-biggies. Unfortunately. You’re not alone.”

Mattoo gets the message, immediately, and counters with renewed vigor:

“You didn’t either, Jesse, get to do the thing, right? Sucks so bad, right? We’ve got to change that, for both of us, Jesse. Sure we can’t call Sweetie and Sylvie to come over now? Perhaps it’s the same for them, and they’re as keen as we are...”

Jesse is no nay sayer. It’s wrong, to inflict suffering on animals. He checks their CHAT profile.

Sylvie isn’t online, as expected. Mattoo accepts there won’t be no meeting tonight, and compliments Jesse on his superior she-biggie knowledge. Pleasant to hear, even if it’s bullshit.

Jesse is also amazed to find another bucketload of messages. Five girls and two ladies grabbed more or less violently recalcitrant cats to give it a go. None of the new responders from Strasbourg though. Colmar, Belfort, Qimper, and, total madness: Montreal. Montreal girl is Asian, and her cat is another Siamese, makes for a pretty picture. But Montreal!

It’s obviously true, what people say. To get anything rolling online, you need cat pictures.

Jesse had never tried his luck at dating platforms before, assuming he would be as hopeless online as in the real world. Now he discovers a whole new world of opportunity, thanks to Mattoo’s guidance. A nice end to what had felt like a bad day.

## ***Everynowhere***

*Central Awareness Tensor steadies himself. He’ll have to give in any moment now.*

*It’s normal, for subentities, to urge to play with junk. Its presence calls for action. Telling them to leave it alone, to focus on the clean realm of rippliness, that just doesn’t work.*

*Central Awareness Tensor would prefer no action. But if he denies the subentities their go at dirt, they might turn rogue and smash non ripples. Much better to have them mess up light space.*

*Subtly shifting his non resonance spectrum, Central Awareness Tensor makes sure Lower Lateral Entropies gain an advantage. And here comes their shape thing.*

*Central Awareness Tensor is surprised to feel a tingle of suspense: Astral flares ahead?*

## **Etsenred**

Waking up to a general sense of dread, Uzo makes an effort to kick out the gloom.

She resists the temptation to reset the alarm to an hour later and stands up. She hasn't come this far, achieved that much, to stumble on the finishing line. This adventure might have turned her into a despicable liar, but she insists on being a successful one. If she has to fight, she will.

"Take that, Felinity Challenge" she sings under the shower, to a basic lala melody and stomping rhythm. This hot shower, guaranteed to be here for her to take at all times, is one of Uzo's daily highs. Later on, she will have to go out and walk firm against the brutal cold. Now she enjoys a waterfall of hot bubbles while the machine is making coffee. She's strong.

"Good morning, biggie! Nice to hear you're all ready and aware of the big news. Mattoo been on the line yet? How about a little emergency chat, all four of us together? It's just an announcement, the declaration of an intention, at this stage. If the legends tell it well, we should have many days, before the countdown shows up and the other biggies discover the stakes. But no such announcement was ever retracted and the network is going silly. Felinity needs us, biggie."

Safo's imposing voice feels like echoing from the walls of the shower cubicle. Uzo's singing must have worked like an alert, telling the lioness she's up.

This talk of an emergency chat sounds like bad news. Uzo feels like panicking, she can't take bad news before even getting dressed. Ruzo the Resourceful declares panicking a taboo act and asks for a confirmation instead. No jumping to bad conclusions if clarity can be achieved.

Safo delivers. Yes, the Challenge is on. Four thousand five hundred years after the last episode, the deep-only are once again taking an interest in flat-space affairs. The flat-only will be asked to prove they deserve the presence of bilevels, a.k.a cats, to be allowed to continue existing.

Drying herself up, Uzo is coming to grips, fast. This is bad, but waiting for it was worse.

Just like with exams, she prefers the action phase where she struggles to answer tough questions to the agonizing expectation of even worse ones. No more rehearsing, no more worrying, now is the time for action. But what action, exactly?

Uzo's very short hair doesn't take long to blow-dry. Same for Safo's explanation.

The basic principle of the Felinity Challenge is simple: Humans have to prove that they cherish the presence of cats, the only local manifestation of bilevelity and hence the only reason not to sterilize the planet. How they go about this proving is their decision.

Last time round, they made many, many, many cats. From all kinds of materials, like reed, wood, stone, gems and metal. Of all sizes, from small enough to wear as jewelry to larger than the largest house. Took a while, to impress the deep-only. On day twenty seven, they nodded.

Sipping her coffee and nibbling at her bread waiting for the microwave to heat her breakfast beans, Uzo listens, leaving damage assessment to Ruzo.

Four weeks, that's one hell of a long exam, but short in terms of getting stuff done. Making what sounds like tons and millions of cat effigies should still be feasible. The Chinese will have to be recruited to do the manufacturing. Their factories can copy November's craze to have hundreds of millions of the same toys delivered in time for Christmas, they can do it.

“... so, the biggest challenge really is to get enough biggies to participate. According to the scholars, how the cherishing is done, by making stuff or singing songs or whatever, is far less important than biggie numbers. One percent of the population joining in, and doing whatever has been defined, that won't do, however well or often they do it. Ten percent, perhaps. A third of biggies really cherishing their hearts out, we're through. It's as easy as that. With modern biggie networks, we should be done in a week, and will save a lot of cats a lot of stress.”

Puff goes the faint pink bubble of hope. Mobilize humans to do stuff?! They're doomed.

Uzo is left speechless. Ruzo, reliably Resourceful, refuses to give up and makes her go:

“Got it, thanks Safo, very good explaining, looks like we've got our work cut out. To get us started, I need to learn more about the countdown you mentioned yesterday. That countdown, it will happen, and be visible, for biggies, yes? And help us spread the word, yes?”

Uzo hears herself sound firm, just like in her interviews. She hasn't got the foggiest on how to proceed and just raises a question because not talking is failing, but she does sound firm.

And Safo answers, diligently and comprehensively. Her explanations last throughout the rest of Uzo's breakfast and all her freezing march down to the tram station.

Standing there shivering in the open shelter, Uzo summarizes.

The Felinity Challenge countdown is indeed expected to show up soon, in Egypt, at the site where the ancient Egyptians built the Sphinx.

It's even bigger than this monument, a full football stadium worth of a huge cat shape of black nothingness. It swallows all light. People don't dare go near it, because it feels like a hole in the universe and they're afraid to fall into it. If they go too close anyway, they faint. Same for all other life forms. Birds, rats, mosquitoes, weeds even.

Flat-only people will just see this huge cat shaped hole in the universe, not the countdown stripes, but at this size it should easily make the breaking news, impressive pictures sell well. Washington, London, Paris or Beijing would be more newsworthy locations, but Cairo has flair. With a little luck, some people will think Stargate movie and series and fear an alien invasion.

Tasty-Feet-to-be-called-Jesse, mental note to ask him how this stupid nickname came about, Uzo herself and all cats will perceive a pattern of stripes, like tiger stripes, the countdown. The stripes will disappear one by one, starting at the head. The Felinity challenge has to be met before the last stripe near the tip of the tail disappears.

Having boarded the tram, Uzo notes the Felinity Challenge basics on her phone. This is complicated, and she always takes notes to handle complicated. Makes her feel like getting a grip. That's the first step towards passing an exam.

'Cherishing cats', this will have to be defined more precisely. The more options, the better. A topic for the conference they will have later on, once Jesse and Mattoo become available.

'Mass participation', that's the big fat problem elephant sitting pretty in a tiny room. Depends on the options for 'cherishing cats'. They need simple tasks. Easy to translate into all languages. Possible to perform under very different circumstances, with simple means.

'Who?' Four weeks is short, to convince enough people to perform the tasks. They need someone who can reach a global audience. A movie star? A musician? The pope? A footballer?...

'How?' Old and new media. CNN and BBC and AJ. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. If 'who?' is solved well, 'how?' will fly all by itself. Pope on Facebook?

By the time Uzo reaches Karlsruhe main station, her stop, she feels in familiar territory. Preparing for a Felinity Challenge is basically no harder than getting ready for a botany exam. Except you die if you fail. Which didn't happen when she botched botany.

Ruzo the Resourceful once again advises to ignore the potential death aspect. Only bad vibes that way. Uzo will do what she can to pass, as usual. On past form, it's not impossible. She's got a diploma to prove it. And is on her way to permanent residency.

Hurrying through the dark zoo towards the work yard where staff have their lockers, Uzo hopes for another day in the gazelle compound. Picking up leaves is simple enough not to interfere with her emergency conference. On the assignment board, she finds the hoped for task, for starters. At ten, she's supposed to meet the vet in the predator house. Sounds interesting, is incompatible with a session of deep talk. On her way to the gazelle compound, Uzo liaises with Safo.

The lioness is pleased to get informed in a timely manner. She will make sure to get Mattoo and Jesse online at eleven, when the vet will hopefully be done with Uzo. The old lady sounds like enjoying herself. Despite only mentioning bloody piglets once. An action type.

Entering the compound, under the eyes of three worried early riser gazelles, Uzo decides to declare Safo their leader. With that slot filled, she feels better.

When Uzo enters the predator house, five to ten, the vet is already there, watching the leopards do what sex maniacs do more often than others. Uzo tries to look away. She's sure to end up talking to those two, one of these days, and watching their private life feels inappropriate.

"So, Miss Olagundoye, what is it you didn't tell me yesterday? You looked like raising a question, and my pinky tells me I won't get to hear it in the presence of your supervisor. Now is the moment, Miss Olagundoye." The vet looks at her expectantly, his crinkled face folded upwards in what could be his version of an encouraging smile.

"What's he talking about? What's he up to? OK for the poison, it works. But one more dart, into the behind, and doing things to me when I'm asleep, and I swear he will regret it. Feel free to tell him that." Safo has a way of jumping in on Uzo that is really distracting.

Fearing she might look like the idiot she feels for not multitasking well, Safo brings up the one topic that might interest both her interlocutors. She goes, on both channels:

"Your right, sir, I had something on my mind. I've got a gut feeling, a biologist's hunch, that Safo would prefer fresher meat. Bloody, like lions eat it in the wild. And that zoo professionals would get into trouble with animal rights activists, if they did lions the favor. Which I consider a pity."

Safo won't interfere with this particular conversation. She freezes so perfectly, in hopeful expectation, that you could think her stuffed.

To Uzo's surprise, the vet reacts with enthusiasm. Turns out she hit a hot topic.

The vet explains how some zoos try to provide predators with a more natural way of feeding. Complex machinery has been developed, to pull carcasses across compounds, allowing the big felines a semblance of a hunt. With mixed results. Movement clearly isn't everything.

When Uzo translates for Safo, she confirms. Too dead is too dead. The disappointment is worse when the prey moves. Sends your hopes rocketing, only to turn out to be the same old cold carrion. A lion wants blood, pushed outward by a still beating heart, and warm flesh.

Turning this statement into a question, Uzo gets the vet to brainstorm. He's really putting his heart into it, mangling his English sentences in the process. As far as Uzo makes sense, guessing the meaning of the odd German word, this is his reasoning:

Live bunnies or piglets as lion feed? Cheap, readily available, but no. Can't get away with it. The public would go mad if they found out, and you can't exclude that, in the bloody age of the

fucking smartphone. The Easter bunny on its way down a ferocious maw, or a piglet like the one in that movie - what was it called? never mind - ripped apart by a lion, on Twitter. Catastrophe. Could be the end of a zoo. Would be faster and circumstantially more pleasant for bunny and piglet than the more conventional, industrial ways to turn livestock into dinner, but trust folks not to listen to that. They don't want to know, not to ruin their dinner. Same for cutey lambs.

Or is it? There's the concept of the sacrificial lamb.

Predator wellness qualifies as a good cause. Not for the loonie kind of vegan, of course. Middle-of-the-road vegetarian, the kind just not eating meat, eggs and dairy, no problem. Plenty of other suitable food for an omnivore available, and good for the environment. Loonie vegan, they'll put your cat on a diet of soy protein faster than you can say 'carnivore'.

A zoo trying to get away with doing the natural thing needs allies who won't budge under a loonie vegan attack. The usual motley crew of nature lovers won't deliver, too soft around the edges. Some serious contrarian grandstanding is required. Unscientific, unpragmatic and undeterred by criticism, be it well grounded in evidence or fake news propaganda.

Who... Of course! Two good causes in one go. Or perhaps even three. And the beauty is, they need vets, for certification. There was a report they have trouble finding vets. Could this place... It's tiled all over. With a little twisting, if the area is clearly demarcated. Will be a close call, with regulations, but worth a try.

"See you, Miss Olagundoye, need to go check something" goes the vet, and off he runs.

Uzo is left standing there with nothing to do. She has been translating for Safo as best she could, and the lioness is thrilled. She wasn't familiar with the concept of lamb, it didn't feature on her menu yet, but the pictures Uzo conjures sends her salivating. Now she goes:

"Fine with the lamb prey. Any chance the get all that..., what's the fur called again? Wool, right? Any chance to get the wool off? Because that's the beauty, with piglets, no fur. You don't want fur in your mouth, makes you choke..."

Uzo would prefer to discuss the Felinity Challenge, and find a way to save the world. She has no idea what the vet has in mind. Her own boggles at the thought of her convincing him to shave the lamb. This whole prey project doesn't feel like adding up. But a senior lioness is a mighty presence with a top-of-the-food-chain attitude. If she wants to talk lambs, that's your topic.

Ten minutes later, Safo accepts the non-imminence of the lamb. She deigns to forgive Uzo her ignorance, concerning vital details of this most important plot. The biggie will have to listen better, next time, and to improve her biggie languages. This is Uzo's opportunity, and she grabs it:

"Sure, Safo, I'm all keen on improving my German. But this takes time. Lots of. We're talking years and years, to understand everything the locals say. Really keen. Wish I was sure to have those years ahead of me. By the way: How are we going to save the world? Shouldn't we be talking to Mattoo and Tasty-Foot-to-be-called-Jesse?"

Judging by the gentle movement of Safo's tail and her silence, the switch of topic is deemed acceptable. When the lioness is irritated, her tail twitches erratically. With Uzo's limited ability to go deep, she can only guess the silence means the lioness is looking for Mattoo and Jesse.

Uzo wonders what to do. She's not performing any task, during working hours. According to the task board, she's still with the vet, until lunch break. He might return and expect to find her here. She should be safe staying, if she finds something to do.

Idling is a no-go. Uzo's supervisor often says "There is no done, never. There's always something to do. Even if all looks clean, you can clean it better."

He doesn't say it to her, because she doesn't idle. But to her short-term colleagues, all the time. Once a month, the zoo gets a group of interns, for two weeks. Sometimes young ones, still at

school. Sometimes old ones, undergoing vocational reorientation. After an introductory day of getting shown the premises, they're supposed to help with cleaning and go idle in the more remote corners, like on the hill. Uzo's supervisor has a point.

The predator backstage area is clean, in a superficial sense. Look at the tiles more closely, though, and you'll see the kind of ancient grime that won't budge under a mere swipe. Exactly the kind of project Uzo's supervisor considers recommended, for when the urgent stuff is done.

Elbow grease or tech? Technically, Uzo can chat with Safo and the boys whatever the noise level. Deep talking doesn't involve sound and hearing. But the old lady might balk at the noisy high pressure cleaner, cats have sharp ears. Admiring her own courage in the face of a tough job, Uzo goes fetch a bucket, a canister full of detergent, a scrub sponge and a mop.

Barely has she started filling the bucket at the faucet in the corner that Safo interrupts her search for the boys to call her to order: "Water only, biggie. None of the green nose poison. No loose green in here, never again. You've also got to tell the other biggies."

Uzo obediently closes the faucet and empties the bucket. She hadn't been keen on the elbow grease option in the first place, Safo's reservations suit her fine. She will have to introduce the lioness to human hierarchies, though, at some point. Safo will have to understand that she's an intern, barely qualifies as staff and is being told what to do. Not the other way round.

Deep aloud, Uzo goes: "OK Safo, no detergent. That's what it is, the green. It helps with thorough cleaning. If I can't use any, I will need to operate a noisy machine. It blasts away the dirt, instead of melting it. You Ok with noise, Safo? I can't just stand here, I need to work."

Uzo wonders if her deep talking is polite. It feels so different from the real, voice-language way.

If Safo has taken offense, at being presented with two unpalatable choices, she doesn't show it yet. Her ears and tail signal mild curiosity and she goes "Show me".

Ten minutes later, it has been established that Safo likes to watch the pressure cleaner in action and is therefore prepared to tolerate the noise. Lucky Uzo. Always nice to have, a pleased boss.

While Safo returns to the tedious task of trying to get the boys online, Uzo proceeds systematically. No point in starting at the lower end of the wall. She folds the multipurpose ladder she wheeled over along with the cleaner into a scaffold. Standing on this platform, she's able to reach the top line of tiles with the nozzle. She has to climb down and up again twice, to adjust the distance from the wall, but once she has got it right, she makes good progress.

It's even fun. The tiles turn out to be creamy white and shiny, not lackluster yellowish. When Uzo is done with the first two meters, the contrast is stunning. Like the difference between an operating theatre and a garage. She pulls the platform along the wall and attacks the second section. Saving the world would be more important, but this looks nice.

Uzo is nearly done with the first of three walls when Safo finally signals she managed to get hold of Mattoo. The Strasbourg team doesn't report fully present, Tasty-Feet-to-be-called-Jesse is unavailable. Mattoo explains how his biggie mate got into trouble yesterday and will only be joining them after his shift, for job security reasons.

Safo is not impressed. A challenge has been announced, the world needs saving. The stupid he-biggie can't just miss a meeting. He has to reconsider his priorities, on the double.

It takes Uzo some diplomacy to get the lioness to accept that biggies can't just walk away from jobs, unless they want to lose their bed and breakfast. This kind of concern is just too unfamiliar, for both the zoo lion and the pet cat. They live in a world of perpetual room service. And the only housing issue they know is how to get out, not in.

Once Jesse's failure to take part has been accepted, Uzo asks for permission to share her notes. Not Safo's way to proceed. Her tail twitches in irritation when she declares it an unnecessary waste of time. To her, the next steps are perfectly clear:

The leader of the biggie pack orders it to worship cats. Tasty-Feet-to-be-called-Jesse being the he-biggie, he should now give his best shot at the required initiative. Which makes his absence unfortunate. The three of them will provide him with moral support for his quest. And moan him, in case the leader of the biggie pack resents being approached by a puny juvenile. Uzo would them have to take over, and hope for the powers of she-biggie persuasion to work their magic.

Safo doesn't hide she would prefer to proceed the other way round, because of Uzo's more mature personality. But a cat has to work with traditions, not against them. Otherwise Felinity would be going down the drain faster than you can bite off the head of a piglet. Or lamb.

Mattoo argues back. According to him, the young, young males in particular, are underrated. An unfortunate phenomenon that has been plaguing Felinity for a long time, since before he was even born. The young are open minded, creative, flexible. The young are good. Not meaning to say oldies are bad, he wouldn't dream of saying that. But young equals good. Tasty-Feet-to-be-called-Jesse admittedly doesn't sound like much of a hero. But that's just a clever trick, to deceive his opponents. He will do a good job as sure as Mattoo is going to get laid later today.

Busy with the tiles of the second wall, Uzo struggles to come to grips. She might not be the brightest light that ever left Lagos to conquer the world, but it's evident that neither Safo nor Mattoo have the faintest idea of what needs to be done, never mind how to go about it. She's in process of ending up in charge. Unless a guy with a weird nickname takes over. That he's renowned for his smelly feet doesn't sound promising.

It takes Safo and Mattoo a while, to discover they won't be convincing each other. Uzo is nearly done pressure cleaning the second wall when the lioness deep states "Enough squabbling now. We have to get everything ready for when Tasty Feet shows up. She-biggie, how many of your kind on earth? Still in the four to five million range?"

Uzo turns around so fast, to look at the lioness, that she nearly falls off the platform. Safo doesn't look like joking, she's perfectly serious. The way she asks even suggests smugness. She's proud to have the facts at her paw tips. More diplomacy is required and Uzo goes:

"No, not exactly. We have been adding a couple of heads. We're talking billions now. Nearly eight billion people, according to my phone. Take or leave a couple of hundred millions."

In response, both cats perform the feline equivalent of a face Uzo has had to make all too often in her school days. Polite interest trying to hide an absolute lack of a clue. To bring her audience on board, she adds: "A million, that's the one with six zeros. A billion, that's the one with nine zeros. And we've got roughly eight of those."

Mattoo recovers first, thereby proving his earlier point, about juvenile flexibility:

"That's a fucking lot of a big lot of biggies. Any chance we can get rid of some? Like to bring the number down to less than one billion? Otherwise, we're never going to make it!"

Hard to beat for bluntness, the young fellow. Cheerfully genocidal. Safo is more measured:

"What kind of leadership is that supposed to be? Didn't anyone ever teach you guys how to avoid population boom and bust? Any lion will tell you that you need to keep your numbers in check. Unless you want to fight the hyenas for the last sorry carcass, before starving to death."

Uzo deep nods and explains about contraception, how population growth is declining and will go into reverse soon enough, especially if the ladies get their way. Safo is pleased to hear that Felinity's example is being followed, and approves of the gentle ways of the biggies. Lions killing litter fathered by a rival, you don't need to have kids to know this is gross.

This nice and polite lady conversation bores Mattoo. Keen on action, and to prove his mettle, the young hothead inquires about ways to get rid of large numbers of biggies, fast. Uzo patiently explains that multiple means to achieve genocide are available, but not at her disposal. Which brings them back to the leadership topic.

Uzo is nearly done with the third and last tiled wall when Safo and Mattoo declare biggies a hopeless mess that can't be saved. With all her convoluted explanations, about different countries, each with their own rulers, more or less fair ways to elect these, international bodies and so forth, she in the end only achieved to trigger two shrugs.

They're going nowhere fast. Even Ruzo struggles to keep a little flame of hope glowing.

## **Strasbourg**

The mood is slightly more cheerful at the RDRV cinema in Strasbourg.

The day started well, for Jesse. He had expected yesterday's hours not to be listed, on his account. His supervisor often 'forgets' to amend the records to match his promises of paid overtime. Usually takes a frustrating couple of days of nagging to get the extra pay.

Not so this time. When Jesse clocks in, his extra hours are there for him to see. And it's three instead of the two he had been hoping for. His supervisor isn't a bad man, after all. There's a tiny corner of his heart feeling with the poor operator who has to touch pissed chairs for a living.

Jesse opened his popcorn stand in high spirits. He managed to keep them flying despite a matinee crowd of school children. The teenagers had come to watch some arty fare, about war and peace and how to better mankind. Instead of rising to this serious occasion, they went for Jesse's popcorn like it was double pocket money week.

One boy pretended to film Jesse, in his stupid uniform, handing the popcorn to a girl. Jesse played along, for the sake of peace, only to be handed a banana, to oink-oink sounds. And no teachers around to see and intervene, just like in his school days.

The horde of sweet little racists had barely piled into theatre VIII when Jesse's supervisor arrived, asking him to perform a special job requiring utmost diligence. A big honor.

And the job in question even turned out to be a cool one. Not another round of advanced cleaning, as Jesse had feared. Quite the contrary. He would supervise the craftsmen redecorating the big amphitheater, for tonight's special screening of *Fantastic Beasts*. A themed coming of age party, for a rich kid, complete with food, booze and DJ. Half the seats had to be removed, to be replaced by a buffet, high tables and a dance floor.

Jesse would supervise the craftsmen, help them if needed, hurry the lazy bastards on and, fly in an otherwise pleasant ointment, make sure the place is as spotless as the Elysee palace on Inauguration Day by the time the guests arrive. If necessary by going hands-on.

There is no refusing a bonus task. Jesse followed his supervisor to the amphitheater where they met five guys dressed in very different levels of work clothes.

And old man, short, thin, face crumpled under very little graying hair, had shown up in full craftsman attire. His blue overall, multifunctional vest and metal capped security boots were screaming 'professional' at the other four. They were much younger, and dressed up in the kind of casual wear your most stupid nephew would choose for helping you move house. Hoodie over tight jeans and last year's colorful sneakers.

A gig platform crew. RDRV will make do with amateurs, for redecoration, despite charging the customer a five digit sum for the birthday party. Having introduced Jesse as 'our representative' and handed him a twelve page printout of the work order as posted on the gig platform, his supervisor left him to fend for himself.

Jesse at first tried to live up to the expectations raised by his grand new title and attempted to read the worksheet. Luckily, he was soon saved by the old craftsman.

Seeing him struggle with the plan, the professional went: "You can't make any sense of this, right? Just give it to me. And make yourself useful by fetching as many cordless screwdrivers, with the chargers, as you can find. We'll also need a pushcart, to move the chairs. And the tables we are supposed to set up. But those come last, first we need the screwdrivers, and the pushcart."

Such a nice old man. Just the lightest hint of racist sub tones, in his way of taking over. The oldie also proved very adept at directing his four helpers. Only one minor accident occurred, in the course of the next three hours, a thumbnail crushed between a tipping stack of chairs and the wall. Pretty good, considering the lack of experience of the crew.

Jesse spent most of the time in standby, waiting for the next order to fetch.

His high moment came one and a half hours in. As the young crew members were showing signs of fatigue, he went find his supervisor to ask if he might award them a break, for recovery and accident prevention. As they were well on time, permission was granted. The supervisor even allowed a round of sodas and snack bars on the house. This endeared Jesse to his charges.

Watching the rows of chairs disappear and the dance floor take shape, Jesse realized his privileges. His job was pretty good after all. Mostly light work, barely any sweating. Compared to the giggers, he was living in the land of milk and honey. There he was, the black youth, supervising the work of white guys. Small wonder the country was rife with racists.

Towards the end of his special job, Jesse was once again in high demand. The DJ and the caterer arrived, needing pushcarts to bring in their equipment, and an improbable number of multiple sockets and extension cords to get everything going. Then the client showed up, presumably the father of the birthday boy, accompanied by Jesse's supervisor and a lady.

The client only needed one look around to nod off the work. He was visibly satisfied, and congratulated Jesse's supervisor for his splendid job. Not so Madame. The bloody witch scathed the dance floor, for not being shiny and slippery enough, the remaining seats, for their tired velvet, and the DJ, for having brought too few spotlights.

With Jesse's supervisor lost for words, and Monsieur focused on not rolling his eyes, Jesse took over to perform the one thing he's sure always to get right. He apologized, profusely and unreservedly, not to have delivered to Madame's satisfaction. This soothed her mood, and the birthday party was declared ready to begin.

Now Jesse is back at his popcorn stand, proud to have been promoted to VIP project handler. His supervisor was so pleased with his performance that he even promised to ask management for a raise. That's never going to materialize, RDRV cinemas take pride in not exceeding the minimum wage for staff with less than ten direct reports. But Jesse might get a bonus. Perhaps in the form of fake extra hours the supervisor can assign without bothering the higher ups.

Life could be beautiful, if it wasn't for Jesse's foreboding. There's an obvious one, convening his new VIP project handler role. Never would he have accomplished anything without the oldie. Next time he might be less lucky, with his crew. And there's the vague one, nagging at the back of his head. If all this deep talking with cats is real, and it did feel very real when he was at it, the world might need saving. With him in a lead role. Jesse feels even less ready for this VIP project.

With not much to keep him busy, at the popcorn stand, Jesse comes to terms with his fate. There's no escape, he will have to go deep looking for Mattoo at some point, why not now?

Half hoping to fail, because the cat had only introduced him to the technique last night and he doesn't consider himself a fast learner, Jesse focuses.

**Felinitynet**

Poor popcorn man gets hit by a double whammy in response. Mattoo is all cheers, excited about hopefully getting to perform what sounds suspiciously like a big bad genocide. Immediately followed by a salvo of reprimands from a lioness suggesting she will have Jesse for dinner if he doesn't get his act together, on the double.

There goes Jesse's first good day in months.

He apologizes profusely to Safo, once again not even trying to justify his behavior. Giving good reasons might work in some ideal, fair world. In this world, Jesse's real world, it only ever leads to an increase in anger he has learned to avoid triggering. Apologize wholeheartedly, without reservations, and you have a good chance to be called an idiot and forgiven. Try to argue, and you'll be the mean idiot calling to be punished. No good.

Jesse is lucky not to be busy, but even without any popcorn activity to distract him, Safo and Mattoo don't make much sense.

He manages to grasp that the current dimension of human population is considered an issue. Fits with racist rants he knows all too well. White people worrying about global demographics, and environmental sustainability, this topic has a way of turning into allegations against people of color in general and Africans in particular. And now the cats are at it, too. Bad moment.

But worse is yet to come. By the sound of Safo and Mattoo, the plan would be to first convince the leader of humanity to cull seven billion people, before getting the rest to make what sounds like one big heap of cat statues. Even a timid man not prone to speaking up has to balk at this, especially if he's expected to do the convincing. No way Jesse's going to call the likes of Donald Trump or that Chinese guy, name with an X, his official counterpart. He doesn't even have their numbers, or speak their respective languages!

Safo and Mattoo take turns arguing, not giving Jesse a chance to get another word in. He lets them ramble. Any service person's reflex, when confronted with angry customers. They won't listen to you whatever you do, why bother trying to speak up?

Like that couple he's trying to serve. They asked for a particular type of caramelized popcorn, apparently all the rage in Paris. Jesse's machine only does conventional sweet, or salted. Might be a puny choice of flavors, but it's all he's got. A tiny inner voice suggest to quip back something on the lines of "Hey folks, we're the provincial backwoods here, take it or leave it!", but acting on this only gets the man sacked. So he waits, popcorn bucket at the ready.

Jesse doesn't consider himself an expert in world affairs, only ever looks at the news for the sports section, but he he can't help notice Safo and Mattoo have even less of a clue. World leadership, what a funny notion. Not even the likes of Cristiano Ronaldo would expect to be considered such. Unless... With CR7, you never know.

With one final "we need to get out of this antediluvian backwater, the faster, the better" the couple abandon their quest for popcorn they consider worth eating for tonight. At the deep end, Safo shares their mood "Tasty Feet, we haven't got all day. I'm expecting a shaved lamb for dinner. You will now proceed to initiate the Felinity Challenge response."

Jesse is starting to seriously dislike this conference call. And gets hit by a blinding flash of the late but obvious that makes him ask "Uzo, you're on the line too, right? Can't you tell them, how this world leadership idea is mistaken. I mean, even Cristiano Ronaldo, the footballer, he's as global as celebrities get, but from there to getting the whole of humanity..."

In Karlsruhe Uzo, by now done with the walls and in process of folding back her scaffold into transport shape, answers with a deep yippee. Finally a statement that makes sense. Jesse might have an issue, concerning lower limb hygiene, but he's stating sense. She cuts in

"Exactly what I have been thinking, Tasty. CR7, Kylie Jenner, the Kardashians, that's the kind of people we need, to have a chance to get humanity going. No idea how to reach them, you can't just call Juventus and ask to put through to CR7, but with you for the basic idea."

Jesse is surprised. Both to be called Tasty, which doesn't feel bad at all, especially in a female voice, and to meet a woman mentioning CR7 and Juve like she knew what she's talking about. The two other names, that's definitely celebrities a lady would know and care about. But familiarity with a football star, that's unusual, in a woman. The nice kind of unusual.

With Safo and Mattoo suddenly quiet, Uzo and Jesse quickly manage to agree on a first outline for a battle plan. It's mostly Uzo talking, with Jesse cheering her on.

"... and this is the room where..." goes the vet entering the backstage area, in German. Seeing Uzo's achievement, he stops in mid-sentences to change tack. No longer taking to the visitor he's introducing to the premises, he addresses her instead, in English:

"Wow, Miss Olagundoye, now that's what I call foresighted, we'll done! I was just going to tell my new friend mister Akbari here that we would of course need to redo the place, before implementing our marvelous plan, but this looks like the nicest slaughterhouse I've ever seen. Much better than the one we got to visit, during our introduction to livestock practices, back in my student days. Because, believe it or not, Miss Olagundoye, I was young, at some point. Hard to believe, if you see me today, I admit, but I was there."

Uzo breathes a silent sigh of relief. She had wondered, how spending two hours cleaning the predator backstage area, without any official assignment, would go down with her hierarchy.

Obviously nothing to fear on this side. If the vet is pleased, her supervisor will follow suit. He'll also grumble, as soon as the academic is out of earshot. About useless suits not able to tell a wheelbarrow from a delivery van, and how they ruin the life of an honest working man. But he'd never talk back, not even around ideas he considers hippopotamus shit, his words.

"Lamb man? The one with dart man? If that is my lamb man, why didn't he bring one? It's my feeding time soon, he could have brought my lamb right a way, the idiot. Or do I get to chow on him? Might give him a try, but I prefer my prey young, biggie. That's not what we discussed."

Safo is all excited, her body language matching her deep talk.

How her eyes are locked onto the topmost button of the visitors white mantle, like she was ready to sink her fangs into his throat, how her tail twitches rhythmically, like following a heartbeat, everything about the lioness screams "predator poised to jump". Uzo's eyes automatically wander, to check the cage is locked. It is, mister Akbari is safe.

The vet has now switched back to German, to resume his conversation with a visitor visibly distracted by the very close presence of a lioness.

Mister Akbar gets told he's safe, as long as he doesn't cross the faded white line on the floor. Same principle as at the railway station, on the platform, where you need to keep a distance from passing trains that could rip your arms off. Big predators are just like trains. Cute to look at, but dangerous close up. Even a rheumatic old rug will try her predator luck, if someone comes within reach. The visitor does nod, but he clearly hasn't reached the stage of confidence yet. Backstage is very much unlike the visitor area, where a fence keeps people further back.

As far as Uzo manages to make sense, Safo is right in principle. She won't get no lamb today, which is sure to lead to a round of angry growling later on, but mister Akbari's presence is about fresh meat all right. He's in possession of a license to slaughter lambs in some specific way, and needs a tiled place matching certain criteria, and a vet. The vet is offering the freshly cleaned backstage area and himself in exchange for a share of lamb for Safo.

Once Uzo is sure that this share will be the head, not easy to determine with accuracy in a foreign language conversation replete with technical terms, she checks with Safo.

The lioness is thrilled. Uzo learns that the head is considered a delicacy. In Safo's own words "You need to watch your teeth, when cracking open the skull, but the soft bloody inside is worth any effort. Brain, that's maximum yummy. Where's the lamb, when do I get the head?"

Uzo does her best to explain that mister Akbari is just visiting today, to check the premises and perhaps plan the first slaughter. Uzo is well aware no agreement has been reached yet. She interprets the conversation freely, to limit Safo's disappointment. Doesn't work.

The lioness deep shouts back "Get me that lamb head, now, you stupid nuisance of a biggie! How many times do I need to tell you, that this world is on the point of getting sterilized? Are you even listening, for Felinity's sake? I'm not prepared to die without a taste of that lamb head."

Uzo is left breathless. Up to now, she had considered this whole episode, her talking to cats and a guy with a weird nickname, the world-about-to-end plot, with some reservations. Like at a distance. It all felt too strange to be the real kind of real. No longer. This lioness really expects to have every chance to die, in the very near future. The lamb head is her last wish.

"Uzo? This is for real, isn't it? Shit, Uzo, sorry for the foul language, but I need to tell you I'm the wrong guy, for that kind of shit. Me, I'm Jesse, Jean-Segun Edun, the popcorn man."

Deep hearing the distress of her partner in adversity jerks Uzo out of her short moment of shock. Ruzo the Resourceful rides to the rescue and makes her sooth back:

"No need to panic, Jesse. That's actually the last thing we should do now, panic. We will keep a cool head, and get our act together. We've already as good as a plan..."

"Uzo, come on. I do admit I'm not clever, because that's true. Doesn't mean I'm that stupid. Don't know about you, but me, I'm not the kind of guy who goes online and thrills the celebs into doing his bidding. I sell popcorn, for fucks sake! Now unless you have some famous relative, or acquaintance, or whatever, you can call, we have zero chance to pull off the celeb stunt. Honestly, Uzo. You sound like a clever lady. Would you bet your savings on us?"

The blinding flash of the obvious strikes Uzo out of nowhere. That's it. That's how they will get people to take note. So bloody simple. Why didn't she think about it earlier?

They're lucky Tasty Jesse is such a whiner. Without his lament and rhetorical question, she would still be grappling in the dark. Instead, there's light now. In all respects. If her plan works, she will have proven herself she's not going mad, and perhaps save the world.

Uzo quickly checks with the two cats if she got one particular detail right:

"Feline guys, let's forget the lamb head for a moment and go back to saving the world. Thanks, Safo, for the timely reminder of our major concern, very much appreciated.

Now, just to make sure I got this right: You are positive, as in certain, no doubt, absolutely sure, that a gigantic black cat will appear, in Egypt, right on the spot where the ancients built the Sphinx? It's vital to know the spot in advance, I'll explain later why, but first we need to make sure we know the spot. Do we?"

Mattoo leaves the answer to Safo who barely manages to constrain her anger, despite having been thanked. The lioness shoots back:

"If I'm sure the countdown cat will be in that same spot? Biggie, you are seriously asking me if I'm sure?! Why the hell don't you give me that big bloody tasty brain of yours, if you don't want to use it? Yes, the countdown cat will be there. In that spot. At the same place. And now I want my lamb head, instead of stupid questions."

Uzo ignores the sarcasm, she's on a mission now:

“Listen, guys, there’s a way to attract attention, lots of it. We only need someone on the spot, in Egypt, to take a picture and propose an online bet. There are platforms for this, I only need to search engine, no problem. Our contact in Egypt, he takes a picture, and bets that a giant black cat is going to appear on that very spot. By this time next week at the latest? Would that be right, Safo? We need to be absolutely sure, about the timing, totally absolutely sure, that’s vital.

Our man places a first bet, little money. People will bet against him, for fun, because the bet is there, and stupid. A few people will bet with him, because the odds are so low. Betting platform addicts do that all the time, my aunt told me. She’s mad at her husband, my uncle, because he loses a lot of money on such platforms, instead of saving to replace the generator.

And then, wham, the giant cat will appear. It will be all over the news, all channels. Those media people, they always want a special angle. They will search for one, and find our man, the guy in Egypt who proposed the bet. He will get listened to, because, hey, he saw it coming.”

Uzo is all excited now. She can see events unfold. Her only anxiety at this stage is to get the bet in before the countdown cat appears. But Jesse isn’t with her yet. He goes:

“Our man in Egypt? Uzo, this is a great plan. You’re right, people will bet on anything. But me, I’m not exactly the Egyptian holiday type, if you know what I mean? No spare money, no holidays. Are you that kind of rich? How do you suggest finding our man in Egypt? We can’t just post a call for a Cairo friend request on Facebook or Twitter, or can we?”

Uzo loves working with this guy, he’s so creative. Luckily, they don’t even need his brilliant idea, can move much faster, thanks to her connections:

“Not a bad idea, Jesse, we might come back to it if my plan A fails. I’m no more a holiday type than you, but I happen to have a phone number, from a guy in Cairo. Bit of a hustler type. I only need to convince him, to give the bet a try. Should be feasible. I’ll need a cover story, of course. Already got an idea for it. There’s a university and nuclear research facility near here, doing pretty advanced stuff. I’ll pretend I met a scientist, in a bar, and that he told me, about the upcoming giant cat. My Cairo contact, he’d never guess me able to come up with that.”

The more she talks about it, the more Uzo convinces herself she’s on the right track. Like in exams, on seeing one of the precious few questions with an obvious answer.

Jesse doesn’t need much bringing around, but Mattoo isn’t prepared to believe that biggies could be in denial around the hottest of Felinity news and would need convincing. He only gives up his resistance when Safo calls him to order with a sharp “Grow up or shut up, will you?”.

This is as much of an endorsement as Uzo gets, from the old lioness. Pretty good, considering she’s still more preoccupied with fulminating against the lamb head delay.

While the four of them were arguing in silence, about how to save the world, the vet and his visitor have kept up their cultural exchange. Their way of talking suggests a friendship in the making. Reminds Uzo of one more statement of her coach: “If there is win-win, there is way. Don’t worry about strange, weird, implausible. If it’s beneficial, it’ll pass.” So true.

The vet and his visitor are finally done with their exercise in cross cultural harmony. On his way out, the vet tells Safo to forget whatever tasks she had planned for the afternoon. She needs to treat the floor in the same way as the walls. He promises to be back in the afternoon, to check what the result looks like, and decide if to award it some paint.

Once again alone in the predator backstage area, and overdue a lunch break she didn’t take, Uzo decides to call Ramses right away. She had memorized his phone number, one of the precautions she took before her trip, and has no trouble bringing it up after all these months.

Ramses answers at once, probably curious to see who might be calling from overseas.

Uzo's Cairo contact turns out to be far easier to convince than expected. He gobbles up Uzo's lurid story without any reservations, even explodes in gratitude to be the one she has decided to call. As if she had a fistful of Cairo contacts to choose from. But it's probably hard, for someone from that place, to consider a Cairo contact an exotic asset.

Ramses doesn't need any instructions, concerning the betting platforms. A big fan of Liverpool in general and Mo Salah in particular, he's perfectly familiar with the principle, and knows where to place what the platforms call novelty bets. A big relief for Uzo, who only had a vague idea.

Twenty minutes after their first exchange, Ramses calls back, inquiring if Uzo really is one hundred percent sure about this giant cat.

Guessing there will be substantial money at stake, Uzo hesitates.

Pretending to need to check with her scientist, she once again asks Safo for confirmation, especially concerning the timeline. The answer is as unambiguous as they get:

"What's not to understand, biggie, when I say fucking three fucking days, at most?!"

Uzo gives Ramses his go ahead, in more polite terms. The Felinity showdown is on.

## Strasbourg

Idling behind his popcorn stand, Jesse knows he should be worried, about the world, and how it needs saving. Instead, he replays Uzo's compliment in his head, savouring each syllable.

"Not a bad idea, Jesse, we might come back to it if my plan A fails," she had said. Practically equivalent to calling him clever. And Uzo said it like she meant it, without a hint of irony.

Jesse wonders how he brought it about, his sudden luck. First the episode with the VIP project. Normally, this kind of opportunity, if it showed up at all, rarely enough, had a way of ending badly. Not so today. And now he's getting showered in praise. And by a lady. Twice lucky, in one day!

He will really need to thank Mattoo, for having introduced him to this new way of life. It's a bit too exciting, for Jesse's taste. He would prefer to make do without the part about life on earth at risk of coming to a sudden end. But everything else, that's very fine indeed.

Mattoo really deserves to meet a she-cat. Having been promoted to cleverness, Jesse feels compelled to think of a way to make it happen. Inviting Sylvie and Sweetie is still out of the question. This is no longer just because of the filthy mess surrounding his room. Now, it would also feel like betraying Uzo. No way.

A family of five. One dad and four kids who should still be at school, at this hour. Strange. The dad looks stressed. Probably not used to be in charge of the troupe. Doesn't even dare talk back, when the kids clamor for one big bucket of popcorn each. They'll never eat that much, he's wasting his money. Being a charitable soul, Jesse asks for confirmation. He can't push the smaller portions, that would be disloyal, but he dares look surprised and ask. To no effect.

Jesse has a little queue to handle, can't check where the family is going. But he'd bet he'll meet some of this popcorn again. On a floor, later tonight.

A solo lady with a popcorn voucher. Those came with a Christmas gift package. Last year's Christmas gift package. Due diligence demands that Jesse check the valid-until date. Sure enough, there it is, the smallprint declares this voucher expired since March 31.

The poor lady visibly had no intention of cheating. Close to tears, she pays cash and mumbles something about three years, probably in reference to the voucher for the actual cinema ticket. Jesse feels with the poor thing. She's not the first victim. He doesn't like causing her pain.

One more family of five. Three kids, reluctantly followed by mom and dad. Popcorn clearly wasn't part of their plan, but they took too long to notice and react. That should teach them, to hiss at each other like angry snakes, in front of the kids. And now dad just turns around and storms off? Not into manners, the brutal bloke. Just lets his wife stand there, searching for her wallet to pay for the big bucket of popcorn the kids weren't even supposed to order.

Done with the mini-queue. Jesse follows what is now reduced to a family of four with his eyes. He imagines the lady with the three kids meeting the guy with the four kids. That would be one hell of a big family, if they hit it off. They would only just fit into a nine-seater van.

Jesse likes to imagine little stories, about his customers. Makes the time go by.

Unless you have a big scary story to think about.

Jesse is proud, of Uzo. And of himself, by association. To actually know someone from Egypt, a seriously exotic place, an actual guy who really lives there, that's special. Anyone can do Algeria, or Tunisia and Morocco, with Mali and Senegal not far behind. But Egypt, no.

Being in a team with Uzo from Nigeria and Ramses from Egypt, that's so unlike him. At school, he always got picked last. Not because he was a bad football player. Provided he got the ball, admittedly a big if, Jesse's dribbling was pretty good, and his shooting not that bad. But he always got picked second to last. Only Henri fared worse, because of his wheelchair.

Jesse can't help wonder, if the giant cat will really do them the favor to appear. He's aware one shouldn't hope for gloom, but the associated fame does feel alluring.

With not much ever happening here, he might even get himself interviewed, by the local news channel. That would teach his mom, and his former teachers and classmates. He would be standing there and tell the world, about Felinity. Not the world world, of course. Just the Great East region. But that still adds up to a lot of people.

Imaging so many people scares Jesse into a cold sweat. No, no interviews for him. He'll leave public relations to Uzo and Ramses while keeping his own profile low. Quietly savoring the attention they're sure to get, and cheering them on, from victory to victory, that's his thing.

Jesse spends the next hours selling some popcorn and imaging Uzo and Ramses on France 24, BBC and CNN. They'll be talking English, which he can't imagine fluently, so he dreams up the simultaneous translation instead.

It would be nice, if Uzo repeated her praise of him, in one of her interviews. She could mention how a dear friend, no name, not to pull him center stage, came up with a good plan B. Subsequently, Jesse would tell an exclusive selection of friends that this bit was about him. He doesn't have any friends yet, but who knows what the future might bring?

Jesse is pulled out of his reverie by a charging horde of drunk fifty-somethings. Retro Night is striking, again. Today, Saturday Night Fever is on. And trust at least one senior citizen birthday party or class reunion to jump on the occasion to make fools of themselves.

They're not poor and must have invested considerable sums into dressing up, period style. But no amount of money and effort will conceal how old they are. The fat ones at least look droll, bulging out of their glamour and glitter outfits. The thin ones only look sad.

Some of the ladies scream for "Popp!-corn", triggering a tsunami of hilarity. Some accompanying gents obediently reach for their wallets, while one particularly sad couple performs a dance floor number executed with military precision right next to Jesse's popcorn stand.

Smiling politely, Jesse very much wishes for just one clip of this to make it onto the streams of their kids and grandkids. For ridicule, to teach them what not to inflict on fellow citizens. Smiling even more politely, he refuses to accept one more credit card: "No sir, cash only, sorry."

This triggers the usual round of comments. How such a young person can be so old fashioned. About the beggars in Sweden taking eGifts. And the all time favorite, about how even his presumed cousins back in Africa use eCash these days. Jesse performs his fake smile and tries to tell himself the horde is drunk and doesn't mean bad. He fails.

Once the horde is gone, Jesse wonders if the cats were serious, when they proposed a genocide, to bring human numbers down. There are people he wouldn't miss, like his last customers. The world could do without the sense of humor they're no longer shy to display, under the influence. But envisaging to kill them still feels wrong.

Jesse itches to go online, to check for signs of Ramses' activity. Will their man in Egypt manage to place his bet? Could be considered a hoax. Or someone might mistake Ramses for a dangerous lunatic, and send the police to get him. A lot of things can go wrong.

## Cairo

Ammon checks the sum once again. Forty thousand Egyptian pounds, correct, ready for validation. He has maxed out his account, barely a tip left. If this goes wrong, he'll have to double his transcontinental relocation facilitation activities. So be it.

That Nigerian kid is clever. Very obviously studied, talks like the Brits on TV. And to still have his Ramses code name and phone number at hand, after all these months, only a very organized person is capable of such a feat. And who could come up with the notion that a giant black cat will appear on the spot of the Sphinx? Certainly not a girl. Ramses is a movie addict, and he never encountered such a plot. She must be telling the truth when she says she got this information from a contact in a research facility that does indeed exist, Ammon checked.

It was funny, to make a video clip of the site, just like the tourists he occasionally ferries there. Ammon even got himself approached by street vendors mistaking him for a passenger. Incredible, what junk those guys sell, and at what prices.

Ammon had uploaded the clip, together with the actual bet: "Before November 15, a black cat will appear on the site of the Sphinx, big enough to cover it completely." At first, he had only waged five British pounds, the minimum amount.

Noticing how the bet immediately attracted three takers, he decided to up the ante. Those clever Brits might be good at quoting some Darwin, they might enjoy engaging in blasphemy, but he, Ammon, knows someone who knows a scientist aware of the next big thing.

Ammon can't afford qualms. With ten kids to feed, a shopping queen wife and parents with huge medical bills, using insider knowledge to win on a betting platform is just one more way to make ends meet. He murmurs a prayer and clicks OK.

Ammon's life is well sorted. His shop, at the mercy of the tax collectors due to its immobility, pays for the house and the taxes. His official taxiing, mostly for tourists, occasionally for business visitors, pays the bills. His relocation facilitation activities take care of the extras. He might have trouble recalling the names of his kids, never mind their birthdays, but he's more business savvy than the average Cairo hustler, and that's steep competition.

Watching the screen reload, Ammon leans back to savor. As he had guessed. Upping the stakes attracts more of a crowd, the pot is getting bigger fast. On his own side, too. Two guys with him, both with serious money, against two dozen on the other side. Once the big black cat shows up, he's in for a big win. Time to take the necessary precautions.

Nothing attracts the authorities as fast as a pot of money, especially hard currency. Ammon calls an acquaintance and offers the usual deal, twenty-eighty. It's a hard haggle, but he stays firm. As his equally business savvy father always says: "You have to do what you have to do, but no more. Let them get away with more once, and their greed will know no limit. Twenty-eighty, period. That's a good deal, for not working, and they know it."

Still movement, on the betting site. No stampede, over such an exotic bet. But ten times his initial input, and counting. If the big black cat takes a day, or preferably two, to show up, Ammon might even be in a position to reconsider moving.

His wife fell in love with a brand new gated community. They would need two apartments combined into one, with all their kids and the elders, meaning the deposit alone is a fortune. But if the cat bet keeps progressing at the current rate, who knows?

Feeling his stomach grumble and smelling dinner, Ammon decides he has worked enough, for today. If it's the will of Allah, he'll make enough for the deposit. If it isn't, he gets spared moving house and stays close to his favorite cafe, also a nice outcome. Time will tell and all is well.

## **Etsenred**

It's evening in Europe too, but Uzo lacks Ammon's peace of mind. Having arrived at home, she struggles to enjoy her afternoon.

What if the big black cat doesn't show up, Ramses gets mad at her and sends goons? What if the big black cat does show up, and they fail to meet the challenge? Whichever way ahead feels terribly dangerous, fraught with hazards she's not the person to deal with. She should be watching this plot unfold on TV, cheering on the heroes.

Uzo would love to be more like the cats. Safo, she's so present-only.

One minute, she's foaming mad, very literally, at biggies in general and Uzo in particular, for denying her that bloody lamb's head. Ranting on and on, about how a lioness can't subsist on meat that is too dead, and how she will reject this insult of a meal, from now on and forever.

The next minute, the supervisor brings her daily quarter of very dead pig, and what happens? The very same old lioness jumps high, claws for the presumed insult and wolfs it down faster than you can think "Now wait a minute, why all the fuzz? You look like enjoying this!".

Once sated, still the same Safo will be at peace with the world, feline and human. "Yes," she goes, on the verge of falling asleep, "we will definitely need to do something, about the Challenge. But not just now, kids, OK? I've had one bite too much, burp, sorry. Now I need to digest."

And don't you dare try taking advantage of that peaceful moment, to venture a timeline for the lamb project. The only response you'll trigger will be: "Lamb? I don't need no bloody lamb! I feel more like never eating again, actually. Burp, sorry, really full right now. Why can't you kids just leave me alone, and go do something generational, like sex? One minute of peace, please?"

Uzo admires Safo. She's inconsistent with aplomb, she has got style.

Same for Mattoo. One moment he's all serious, talking Felinity Challenge with the grown-ups. Next moment, he declares his participation over for the day, because he needs to get ready for a date. This apparently involves stealing a fish head from the dustbin, to polish his breath. In combination with the delicious odor to be gleaned from Tasty Feet, this will turn him irresistible.

Disgusting, the youngster. But he at least managing to have fun. Unlike Uzo.

She once again considers calling her sister Orji. But to tell her what, precisely, assuming she gets in a sentence? The best Uzo manages to come up with would sound like this:

"Orji, now I know you won't believe this, but I've ended up in the middle of an adventure. There are kind of ghosts, dark ghosts, out there, getting ready to challenge humanity into oblivion, in concert with cats. It's called Felinity Challenge..."

No need to try saying this for real to guess the answer. Something arrogant, about how only lowly people without any education believe in ghosts.

Uzo is running in circles. She's terrified not to be mad, that the challenge might be real. And equally horrified at the thought of no big black cat showing up.

She needs something to do, to get her mind off the imminent gloom.

Reaching for her smartphone, Uzo goes straight for her German vocabulary app. It was designed with kids in mind, but works well for her.

Shows her pictures. She has to enter the corresponding word. If it's right, and spelled correctly, she gets two points and a new picture. If it's right, but spelled incorrectly, she gets one point and the correct spelling is displayed, before moving on. Three wrong answers, no point, and moving on. Very simple, but she already learned a lot. High score stands at five hundred thirteen points.

It's not fair. Even the app does its utmost, to remind Uzo of her travails. First a picture of a cat, and now one of a graveyard. There were also cars, power drills, traffic lights and three kinds of vegetables she has never met in person, but still. Cat plus graveyard.

Even a scientifically trained mind occasionally starts to wonder, about bad omens.

## Strasbourg

Walking home fast, his arms clutched tight against a particularly freezing November night, Jesse is in high spirits. A genuinely good day on the job, a rare pleasure. Not one really annoying incident. Couple more such shifts, and he might stop job hunting.

A now he's headed home for one more nice mate talk night. Mattoo wasn't disappointed for long, when he learned there would once again be no visitors.

Jesse is starting to wonder, if his feline friend might be as anxious as himself, about what will happen if they ever meet Sylvie and Sweetie in person. Date fright, a perfectly natural state of mind, for young men and felines. Much easier to brag in the comfort of male solidarity.

One option would be to chat with the ladies, online. Both kinds of online. On the dating platform for Sylvie and Jesse, on Felinitynet for Sweetie and Mattoo, with Jesse occasionally listening in. Something to look forward to. And no betrayal of Uzo. Meeting would be, chatting isn't.

Hurrying though the cold, Jesse has to admit to himself that this aspect is important.

And that he'd really like to know what Uzo looks like. Which shade of white or black? Fat, thin or beautifully curved? Her looks like will determine his chances of landing a date. He's not prone to reach for the stars, knows his limitations. Sylvie reacting on the platform, this was a very nice surprise. But she's huge. Whereas Uzo doesn't sound huge. She's bound to be picky.

Having reached the front door, Jesse decides against asking Uzo for a picture. He knows himself too well. If he comes out in favor of such a courageous move now, he will reconsider once the time to act arrives, and feel like a coward. Unpleasant. Better to discard the stupid idea right away. He's just not this gung-ho kind of guy.

Quietly opening the flat door, Jesse is surprised to find the corridor lights on. There's also laughter in the living room. The M4 throwing a party? He tiptoes into his room as fast as possible, stumbling over poor Mattoo in the process. The cat shrieks in pain and anger, forcing Jesse to utter yet another apology. As they are mates, he also dares explain his behavior.

It's dangerous, to be caught in that corridor, when the M4 throw a party. Jesse learned this lesson the hard way, right in his first month.

Coming home from a grueling shift to the same scenario as today, Jesse was clueless enough to loiter in the corridor, to get a glimpse of the living room and kitchen action. He got himself spotted, by one of the visitors, another ancient lady wearing an overdose of makeup. She went "oh, lovely, you must be the black lodger", grabbed his arm and forced him to follow her into the

living room. He was made to sit down, amid five oldies, forced to eat some kind of kebab pizza, and lectured on how to identify and fight racism.

Jesse of course tried to point out that he would prefer to get rid of his uniform, have a shower and change into his civilian clothes. No way. He had barely uttered half a sentence that his catcher went on a rant, about how poor people dress up, in a way they consider stylish. And how they can't be blamed, for buying clothes manufactured under despicable conditions of exploitation. She had mistaken his terrible uniform for his personal choice of dress. Quite an insult, and not the only one. Took him two hours, to escape. Never will he risk being caught again.

Once they're on the same mate page again, Jesse and Mattoo head for the dating platform. Sylvie is online already, and pings them on arrival. Not bad, for a first date.

Time flies by, in such nice company, both on the dating platform and on Felinitynet.

Jesse would probably have gone on for another hour, but Sylvie calls them quits at half past three. She apologizes, explaining how she can't sleep in, despite her late shift. Something about an appointment at the hairdresser, at half past nine, that can't be rescheduled at short notice. Jesse feels honored, to be considered worth such a complicated apology.

With Mattoo still chatting up Sweetie, currently by means of one hell of a big brag about his priority access to the most tasty feet ever witnessed, Jesse could go to bed. This would be the sound thing to do, to get a healthy dose of sleep.

But with the occasional bursts of shrill laughter from the living room, it doesn't feel viable. Jesse decides to check, if there really is a big black cat bet anywhere online.

Doesn't take him long to find Felinity Challenge phase one. And what he gets to see scares him to the bone. He has to check the number of zeroes twice. Two hundred thousand for the black cat, and one hundred eleven million against. And that's British pounds, not Euros.

Their man in Cairo must be a fucking rich guy. The real villa, limo and yacht affair. Who'd have thought. If Uzo knows this kind of person, she's bound to be very upper class herself. Too bad. Jesse should have known she's out of reach.

To bet a house, on hearsay, that's ludicrous. No one can be that mad, not even a filthy rich Egyptian. Jesse immerses himself into details that are hard to decipher, even in the French language version of the betting platform. If he gets this right, and with so much math involved there's a fat chance he doesn't, people can join a side. The headline numbers list the sums of many individual bets that are much smaller.

Account Ammon-the-Pharaoh, probably their man, started the dance. With what is substantial money for the likes of Jesse, but not that much for lots of other people. He did a good job, there's even a picture of the site where the action will take place.

Three accounts with names sounding vaguely familiar from school, Newtonton, Pascal-Rascal and Curie-Curry bet against Ammon-the-Pharaoh, pretty much at once, at a similar level.

And then a crowd of accounts, mostly with Manga kind of names, probably Asians, started picked their favorite side, with tiny sums. They're still at it, the headline numbers are still going up, and lots of those small bets add up to mind boggling sums.

Jesse knows he should get some sleep, while there's still time. Instead, he sits there, on his bed, back propped up by his cushion and the rolled additional duvet he never needs, with the flat heated to a steady twenty two degrees. His eyes can't let go the tiny screen of his phone.

His team started something that is affecting strangers who live thousands of kilometers away. And they don't just look at the project. They care enough to invest real money.

Jesse is of course aware there are lots of Asians online. Everyone knows they excel at games. He never had access to the kind of hardware you need for proper gaming, he never saw any Asians in action, but he did hear people talk about their prowess. Never felt real.

Scrolling along the list of Manga themed accounts, Asians are suddenly real. Especially the ones betting with Ammon-the-Pharaoh, and per extension Jesse. They're on the same team.

Jesse's world has suddenly expanded. Daring to move from Gerardmer to Strasbourg, against motherly advice, had been his first and so far only courageous move. Now he's part of an international and interspecies team engaged in a high cash stakes online game.

Online and money and scam. Jesse can't place it yet, but he recalls people talking about this combination. There was something else, there's something amiss. Online and money and scam and... It was a warning, mixed with the bad kind of glee. People were making fun of folks who lost money online, because they were stupid enough to fall for...

Jesse clearly recalls himself worrying, in the context of this warning. And not just because people often called him stupid, declaring him at risk. There was another aspect...

Nigerian prince. That's the missing term. Online, money, scam, Nigerian prince.

He was right, Nigeria is one of the African countries he's been made aware of. But not because of a substantial white population. It's the Yahoo boys place.

Jesse was still in school, and they were getting taught programming basics. Theoretically. No one had a clue, the teacher even more lost than his charges. He preferred not to touch the equipment, telling them tales instead. Mostly meant as warnings. These sent the usual suspects looking for the dark web faster than you can type words like 'drugs', 'porn' and 'guns'.

The dark web worried Jesse's teacher most. Next in line were Nigerian princes, a.k.a Yahoo boys, because of their preferred email addresses. The teacher went into a lot of details on those.

Some poor fellow, and not just the rich get targeted, would receive an email. Personally, in his personal inbox, like from any other acquaintance. He would be told a fairy tale, just the kind of story you'd expect, out of Africa. About big families, complicated inheritance constellations, thugs and corruption. The self-declared prince would pretend to need a feasible sum, like your average fellow would have ready, in case the boiler needs replacing. And he offers really, really high interest rates. Sounds perfectly plausible. And, know what? It's a scam! A dirty scam.

Takes Jesse a couple of minutes to recover. Stroking the purring Mattoo for comfort, he performs a situation assessment. To his pleasant surprise, it delivers a benign result.

Uzo is a lady. The teacher never mentioned Nigerian princesses, only princes. Never no talk of Yahoo girls, either. Suggests Nigerian ladies are less dangerous than their male counterparts.

Uzo never claimed royal origins. She's in an internship at a zoo, not on some golf course. And she never engaged in no money talk, didn't ask Jesse for cash. She probably doesn't even know he has saved six hundred and fifty euros so far, on a separate account.

Uzo is most probably harmless. And has every chance of being black.

This result comes a big relief to Jesse. Calls for a nap, and some sweet dreams. If they make it through the Felinity Challenge, there might be a bright future ahead.

The Asians are still betting hard, driving the sums ever higher, but Jesse is done watching.

## ***Everynowhere***

*Central Awareness Tensor won't admit it, but the suspense is gaining traction.*

*He's undergoing the same transformation as a football agnostic caught up in a crowd of World Cup fanatics. After a couple of days, formerly irrelevant issues like goal or no goal, fault or offside, become vitally important and eclipse all other topics.*

*Will or won't the light space entities manage a sufficient spike in activity to avert being wiped off their bit of junk by a blaze of astral flares?*

*Central Awareness Tensor catches himself preregretting a potential loss. These entities are fun to watch. He's inclined to wish them luck.*

*Being a responsible referee, Central Awareness Tensor chides himself for a tendency towards leniency. He'll stick to the rules of the game, come what may.*

*They better get their spike going, or else...*

## **Cairo**

Ammon has barely fallen asleep again, after his usual bladder walk at half past five, when he gets busted awake by a hysterical wife.

They have stopped sharing a bedroom five years ago, officially for lack of space. More economical, to have him sleep in one bedroom with the boys, and her in the other with the girls, and the bloody elders. Being spared nightly admonitions is just a nice side effect.

"Will you get out of that bed, now, you bloody moron? You really want the neighbors see you arrested in your nightgown, and me to die of shame?! And it's the army, too."

Arrest. Army. Any hustler worth his salt avoids thinking about both terms, because bleak never got no one anywhere. "If they ever come for me, it's the will of Allah", that's the thought to have, in the weak moments of worry. Now Ammon comes perilously close to think "Fucking hell, Allah, how about adjusting your aim?". Being pious, Ammon only comes close. There are limits.

The wife was right to shout. Ammon barely manages to dress and step into the corridor before she gets overwhelmed by the storm troops forcing through the entrance.

She's one hell of a woman, a pink mass of bathrobe defending her realm. No one else would manage to delay four soldiers in combat fatigues by mere shouting. Ammon will make sure to bring a small bouquet of flowers and a big box of her preferred candies if this ends well.

The soldiers are more civil than Ammon would have expected. No grabbing, no insults. He's just told to come along. They even wait for him to put on his shoes parked outside the door. Totally unlike the tales about such encounters everyone gets to hear, occasionally.

On the street, it gets weirder still. There's a big black limousine, with the back door held open by one more soldier in full attire. And an army truck, troop carrier. Ammon tries to head for the truck, but gets himself deviated to the limo. Very gently, with a distinct "This way, please, sir." Sir?!

There's already a passenger in the car, currently engaged in a phone call. He wears a uniform Ammon struggles to identify. A general? It has been a long time, since his military service, and he was glad to forget that period. Ammon puts on his business face. This might be more harmless than feared, perhaps about some extravagant relocation facilitation.

They barely exchange greetings and the presumed general tells the driver to hit it. Which he does, into heavy morning traffic. No problem, for a military motorcade. Two bikes at the front escorting a black limo with a howling siren tell more humble commuters that now is not the moment to insist on their right of way, unless they want to end up bundled into the truck at the rear.

Ammon's host is back to his phone call. Voice all deferential, like he had someone even higher up on the line. Pretty impressive. It's about important stuff, too. Sounds like some major military

operation. Right here, in Egypt. And in Iraq. And in Pakistan. Unholy shit, this is serious. But what the hell do they need Ammon for?

Looks like they're headed towards... Unholy shit!

Ammon doesn't dare pull out his phone to check if he's guessing right. But each minute, each kilometer in the right direction, confirms his guess. The good news is, he's in process of making serious money, and faster than expected. The bad news is, this must be one hell of a big black cat. Even his most mighty contact won't have the means to cover up for him.

One more turn, and there it is. 'Big enough to cover the Sphinx', the bloody Nigerian kid had said. That's the problem, with the folks from beyond the desert. Not into precision. Ammon's bet is fine, the wording does fit the phenomenon. He would still have preferred an advance warning, concerning the magnitude. This is one hell of a lot of cat. And that something about its blackness feels wrong enough to send a grown man shuddering doesn't help.

"Impressive, isn't it? Bigger than expected? Who's is it?"

No introductions, no pleasantries. Lean military talking, fit for a field battle.

The enormous black shape is already surrounded by tanks. There are also rocket launchers and troop carriers. The Egyptian military is taking this on, big time. Under the flashlight supported eyes of at least a dozen TV crews playing at embedded journalism.

"Who's is it? Who do I call to get rid of this?"

The raise in insistence is barely perceptible, but Ammon is no dupe. Failing to answer is not the recommended course of action here.

"It's called a Felinity Challenge, sir. German scientists found out about it. It's about cats, supposed to teach us to cherish them. Who owns it, no idea. The Germans, perhaps. I once did a Nigerian kid a favor, she told me about this in return. An occasion for a good bet."

Hearing himself state this nonsense, Ammon regrets his greed. No one is ever going to buy this bullshit. They will try to beat, rip and cut a better truth out of him. He's such an idiot.

"A Felinity Challenge? Why a? Why not Felinity Challenges?"

Ammon is on the verge of considering the presumed general even more stupid than himself. Of all the possible return questions, he picks one that is both easy to answer and perfectly irrelevant. There can sure be only one of these. Doesn't one feel bad enough?

Ammon is lucky to be good at face control. Turns out the general wasn't done asking:

"Who are your Basra and Karachi contacts? Why no bets on Basra and Karachi?"

Unholy triple shit! This explains the phone calls, and the seemingly stupid return question. Bloody fucking Nigerian lack of precision. Had he known there would be two more cats, and where, never would Ammon have touched the issue. Basra and Karachi, of all places!

Without any need to fake indignation he goes:

"You mean there are more, sir? I had no idea, no one told me about those. I would never have touched anything with links to Iraq or Pakistan, sir. International relations, that's for our government to handle. Me, I only do local business, sir."

Ammon's performance must have been as good as it is true. The general shows no sign of displeasure. But nor is he done quizzing:

"Get me that Nigerian kid on the phone. I need his take on this."

Ammon feels part of the burden lift. That request is a good sign. He's more facilitator than perpetrator now, an honest Egyptian citizen doing his duty to help his proud military.

Getting out his phone to bring up Uzo's number, which will accidentally provide proof they talked yesterday, he even dares correct his general:

"Her take, sir, with all due respect. The Nigerian kid. Uzo she's called. You want me to call, with the phone on loud? Or would you prefer yourself..."

No need to finish that sentence. Ammon pushes the call button, hoping for the best.

## **Etsenred**

That's the wrong sound. The phone, not the alarm. Irritated, Uzo picks up the device, to tell Orji that some people need their sleep because they have to turn up on time and work, on their job. Even if it's just an internship. Instead of her sister, she hears a male voice:

"Uzo? Allah be praised, and you're on loud. Listen, Uzo, I'm with a general, and he needs you to answer questions, about your Felinity thing. I'll just hand him the phone, OK?"

That's enough to wake up Uzo for good. Ramses! About the Felinity thing, and in urgency mode. Something is happening. Her wish has been exhausted. She's not mad, really able to talk to cats. It's proven behind doubt now. And she's in a terrible mess.

Ramses is already off the phone, replaced by what must be the general he mentioned. He sounds more like an American, posh east coast, and demands the facts.

Summoning all her little courage, and an extra helping she hadn't been aware of, Uzo tells her tale, as rehearsed in her head. No more lies at this stage, now that this is real. No more pretending she got word from KIT. Felinity Challenge is too big for lies.

Uzo tells the general about her internship. How she tried to hide from the public, in the predator backstage area. About sitting in the dark, with the lioness. How Safo started talking to her, and ended up predicting the Felinity Challenge. About her worries, how she feared both schizophrenia and the end of the world. How she called Ramses, to make him place the bet, to alert the world, because he's the only spare money type she knows, except for her parents who don't bet.

The general turns out to be nice. Doesn't doubt Uzo once, cheers her on instead.

Even this shortest possible version of the story, without any mention of her trip, or the Jesse and Mattoo angle, would normally stretch Uzo's narrator talent, despite all the training she had over the last couple of months. But she gets the job done, to her own pleasant surprise.

Her phone battery is showing signs of weakness by the time the general asks for her contact details. Uzo readily delivers. This man sounds like the right person to handle the Felinity Challenge. Competent, calm, not impressed by the imminent danger.

For farewell, the general tells Uzo he might be back in touch later in the day, with additional questions. Perfectly acceptable, under the circumstances.

With another twenty minutes to go before her wake-up time, Uzo plugs in her charger and calls up her news app, to see for herself what she has been talking about.

Three cats. Three Felinity Challenge countdowns. All over the news, everywhere.

Uzo feels as bad as at the end of her most horrible lab exam. She had to prove her ability to correctly operate the gas chromatograph, on a set of samples. It started well. She was getting results that made sense. She enjoyed making good progress. Even finished ahead of time, for once. With a good ten minutes left, she proudly tried to hand in her results. The examiner sent her

back to tackle the other two sets of samples she had failed to notice. She run away instead, and only passed the following year. Never will she forget this nightmare of a situation.

Uzo isn't just miffed at herself. That general, he withheld crucial information. That's bad manners. And a certain lioness could have done more, to earn her lamb head.

"Lamb? Today I will get my lamb head? Well done, biggie! I was worried you'd take too long. Because the countdown is on already, time is running. When do I get my lamb head?"

Uzo absolutely needs to learn to think less forcefully, about Safo's trigger terms.

Now she has to explain that the lioness isn't done waiting, and that the vet calls the shots. The news are greeted with grumbling, about some biggies asking for challenges. Uzo clenches her teeth and apologizes, to allow them to move on. The lioness accepts, grudgingly.

Carefully choosing her words, Uzo asks about the additional Felinity Challenge cats.

Safo waffles something about primary and secondary locations in return. And about how biggies only erected a monument in the one location she correctly mentioned, designating it as special. And how a busy cat can't keep track of every minor detail.

Uzo has heard enough: "You didn't know, OK. No problem, Safo. Now we do know, and we have to make sure that the cherishing cats bit works out fast. It is the same Felinity Challenge, is it? It's one and the same challenge? Not three different challenges?"

Uzo lets out a sigh of relief when the old lioness confirms. It's funny, how a catastrophe suddenly feels like good news, compared to a bigger one you just anticipated.

Safo proposes to go listen to Felinity news, to be able to provide Uzo with a status report once she arrives at the zoo. The lioness sounds less grandiose than usual. Not so proud not to have known, about the additional Felinity Challenge locations. Poor old cat.

Uzo thanks her more effusively than necessary, to cheer her up.

The old lady is doing an admirable job. She really doesn't need to be ashamed, over one glitch. Compared to endocrinologically challenged Mattoo, Safo's deep level, her clever side, has a good grip on the flat, her inner predator baying for lamb heads. But she can't be expected to approach the task in the way of a scientist. That's Uzo's job.

Under the shower, with her body warming up, Uzo suddenly makes sense of the three countdown locations. "If this is about big cities in warm coastal regions, why not include Lagos or Port Harcourt?", she had been wondering. "Not old enough!" Is the obvious answer.

Cairo and the Sphinx, that's the seriously ancient kind of old. Basra as such doesn't ring a history lessons bell with Uzo, but it can't be that far from Mesopotamia. And that's definitely antique. Big time kind of old, cradle of civilizations fame.

Leaves Karachi. A blank, as of now. Barely done drying herself, Uzo reaches for her phone. And she's on the right trail. This Indus civilization didn't feature prominently in her history books, but it's an old one. And Karachi it the corresponding coastal city.

Over breakfast, some more search engine activity confirms Uzo's hunch. Hard to find solid numbers, except from a couple of bible literalists she's sure not to trust, because evolution. But what estimates there are align well with Safo's numbers. At the time the Sphinx was built, the right number of people lived on earth. And they were concentrated in those three regions.

Not even noticing the weather trying to freeze off her nose, Uzo considers the implications of her findings on her way to the tram station.

Safo's deep-only are obviously operating on seriously outdated numbers.

Same locations suggests they didn't bother to check, about modern demographic hotspots. Cairo would still qualify, sure. But what about Beijing, Tokyo, Delhi, Lagos, and the rest? They should feature long before Basra and Karachi.

An inept bureaucracy, that's both a nightmare and an opportunity. If you're expecting it to deliver, goods or services, brace yourself. If it expects you to deliver, taxes and fees, be smart and game it. Uzo is no expert, unlike her father. He would be outraged by her calling him such, because his kids are not supposed to know that kind of stuff, but he is good. Uzo's mother said so, and she doesn't lie. Thanks to her tales, Uzo is aware of some general principles.

To game a system, you first need to understand that it's dumb and delusional. Dumb as in not being aware of ninety percent of your life, and mistaken about at least half of the rest. Delusional as in considering itself omniscient. That's a combination you can work with.

Next, you need to follow the rules. Use the right forms. Tick boxes. Make what little you're prepared to reveal fit into the provided structure, never mind how nonsensical. If the form calls for annexes, make sure to attach something, however redundant.

Like when Uzo's mother had fallen in love online. A glass cabinet, for the dining room, got her hooked. Made of wood, baroque ornaments and feet, pretty traditional, except for being painted turquoise, a collector object. Importing it as fancy furniture would have cost a fortune, because it fell foul of currency regulations. It instead entered the country as a tobacco leave drying chamber. Uzo's dad included meticulous drawings, like for industrial equipment, showing how the bundles of leaves would hang in the cabinet, the glass doors allowing inspection of the drying progress by the operator. His efforts were rewarded with an industrial innovation subsidy.

If the deep only didn't update their demographic hotspot map for the last three thousand years, there's a good chance they won't have any idea of the current dimension of the world population. The Felinity Challenge will be far easier to meet than feared. Seven billion people should match the achievements of a couple of millions easy. Hopefully. If they get their act together.

Uzo's tram is unusually empty, lots of the nice single seats to choose from.

Sitting pretty, she stares at the darkness rolling by outside, and wonders how Ramses is doing.

## **Cairo**

Ammon is starting to relax. He must have been sitting in this limo for at least an hour, without anything bad happening. They are still parked next to the big black cat hiding the Sphinx. The general is still on the phone. Only his interlocutors change.

When he was done interviewing Uzo in English, the general immediately called someone else, probably the same even higher up as before, to report his findings in Arabic. A much more condensed version of the tale, combined with an assessment aside.

Ammon was relieved to hear himself referred to as "one of our very own schemers, the basic number". Uzo would probably not fancy being called "one more Nigerian whore that made it to Germany", but she too was in fact getting off lightly. No mention of terrorism, for both of them.

The general's next call was again in English, now even more strongly US flavored.

Same condensed tale, with more emphasis on the military angle. The general went to great lengths to explain that the singularities, his slightly misleading term of reference for all three giant cats, were not intended as weapons, according to sources he was still in process of vetting.

Hearing this exchange drag on, Ammon wondered if Donald Trump might be considering a nuclear strike on Cairo. This most unpleasant development would hopefully be prevented by Allah, because of his will per default never being most unpleasant, but still...

Next, Ammon wondered about future vetting stages. Lots of bad tales of torture resurfaced at once, making him fear for the safety of sensitive body parts. He preferred not to delve into that angle too deeply and sent his eyes wandering outside instead, to survey the scenery.

The soldiers from their tail truck dismounted when they arrived and are cordoning off the limo.

They have their job cut out. The TV crews, done with taking pictures of the big black breaking news cat, are on the hunt for explanations. Or explanators. They're desperate to interview anyone who'd say anything more conclusive than "By the will of Allah, it will be safe. And if it isn't, that's the will of Allah, too. We have to wait and see."

"So Ammon, or Ramses, whichever you prefer, anything to add?"

No threat, no warning, just a simple question. Ammon summons all his courage and answers:

"It's Ammon, please, sir. Ammon Safar. Ramses is my gig name, when I show tourists the sites. And I'm sorry, I don't know more. Didn't even know some of the stuff the Uzo girl told you." Pointing at the black silhouette, he adds "She's the expert, one those things, not me."

Not good. The general shaking his head, that's not a good sign. Ammon holds his breath to hear what the master of his life has to retort, and the general goes:

"Let's leave the little Nigerian slut out of this, Ammon, shall we? Fine to have her on the phone, nice kid, good manners. Quite observant, for a civilian, and some brain to work with. We keep in touch with her, make sure she tells us all she knows, direct her if needed. But this matter as such, this global strategic matter, it has to stay in Egyptian hands. The slut won't mind staying in the shadows, Ammon, so we're in pole position. You're in pole position."

Ammon's inner coward envies Uzo her low profile. His inner businessmen gets ready to charge even before the general in done explaining his plan.

Ammon will be the official global Felinity liaison. He's hereby promoted to charge d'affaires. The president will sign the paperwork declaring him a member of government later today. His bet proves he's qualified. Even the pests commonly referred to as investigative journalists and international lawyers will have to acknowledge his credentials.

No one needs to know there's an international subliaison involved, for the actual communicating with Felinity. That's just operator level, like technical infrastructure. Best not to mention subliaisons, to avoid complications. Involving the German chancellor, why not, a lady, that's always manageable. But no one needs Muhammadu Buhari, may Allah grant him the very best health and many more pleasant days, falling asleep over vital Egyptian affairs.

Egypt, represented by Felinity liaison Ammon Safar, will resume its rightful place at the top of global affairs, discreetly seconded by US military know how. Due to their secondary Felinity phenomena, the Iraqi and Pakistani governments are of course welcome at Egypt's side. If and when they manage enough unity to nominate their charge d'affaires.

The President will of course make sure to keep the most honorable fellow Presidents Trump and Xi informed. Their secret services are all over the place anyway, half the international media teams qualify as operators. No harm done in keeping the top informed as well.

But Egypt, represented by Felinity liaison Ammon Safar, will lead the human effort.

Ammon's inner businessman experiences a rare moment of hesitation. Play it safe and open a bank account in Switzerland? Or head for the Virgin Islands? This is the kind of situation where a self-made man can turn himself into a self-made rich man, and he won't waste it.

Outside, right next to the limo, a surprisingly well organized team of soldiers are nearly done erecting a platform with a pulpit. Not much time, for Ammon's introduction to press conference rituals. Ten minutes later, he exits the limo to enlighten the world.

Ammon's new job turns out to be as easy as the general had promised.

At first, he only needs to stand there, next to a bustling official obviously familiar with the media crowd. This suited choreographer directs the press into formation.

Once the platform is surrounded by a layered hemicycle of men and audiovisual equipment, the director introduces Ammon, "the honorable Ammon Safar, charge d'affaires for the Felinity phenomenon," and announces the rules for the event. First there will be statements, in Arabic and English, no interruptions tolerated. Then there will be the opportunity for questions.

Ammon has already cleared his voice, to make sure it carries well. This is a good microphone and amplifier. Totally unlike the cheap equipment he uses when guiding tourists. No need to shout.

Once the director signals his turn, he steps to the microphone and delivers his statement, first in Arabic, then in English:

"Gentlemen, a good blessed day to all of you. What you see here is called a Felinity Challenge. It's not dangerous, it's not a weapon. The Felinity Challenge is a signal, like a traffic light. It tells us, all of us, humanity as a whole, that we will soon need to perform certain actions. I'm honored to have been made aware of the Felinity Challenge's imminent appearance in advance. I will now act as your guide throughout the Felinity Challenge process. I will inform you as soon as the required actions have been defined, and if our efforts are considered sufficient or need to be enhanced. With the help of Allah, we will all have a good Felinity Challenge and prevail."

Ammon's sidekick nods appreciatively, must have expected a less fluent performance. He asks the assembled press for questions next, and they come flying thick:

"Is it really safe? Not radioactive? Sure it's no bomb? Why do people faint, when they try to get close? Will it grow even more enormous and engulf our city? Is it just a shape, or solid? Is it alien, as in American/Russian/Chinese made? Is it alien alien, perhaps a gigantic space ship? Why are there two more, in Iraq and Pakistan? Why aren't there any in the US? Why is it cat shaped? Why doesn't it have eyes? What kind of black is this? Is the Sphinx still there, inside or underneath?"

Ammon has his answers ready and delivers them promptly.

The caller either gets a reiteration of his initial statement or a friendly nothing:

"This aspect is still under consideration/being defined/classified at this stage, we will address it in the due course of time."

Ammon keeps doing it until the last member of the hemicycle has gotten the message.

With his first press conference completed, Ammon is shepherded back into the limo. His general is once again on the phone. Sounds like he's in the middle of the spook or military equivalent of a press conference. Same basic message as Ammons, plus the stakes angle:

"... yes, sterilization, of the whole planet, that's the threat... How? Well, just like your cook does it, for the jam jars: Boil long and hot enough to kill anything that could live and grow... No, not by the big black cat. That's just a signal, not a weapon, except you faint when you get close, which would come in handy on a battlefield, but that's for another day... No, not by means of nukes, no technology. More like solar flares, or an explosion of the sun... Yes, that's big indeed, and a big issue. Now let me put this bluntly, Josh: Your boss not liking issues, and being prone to fire people who bring up any, I couldn't care less. Tell him or don't, the cats won't give dick."

Ammon wonders if he should really listen in on this conversation, or rather do something useful. He could call the Uzo girl for updates on the tasks. But his hearing isn't what it used to be. According to the wife, he shouts on the phone. Better to sit quietly and wait.

## Karlsruhe

Uzo couldn't be happier, except for the Felinity Challenge footnote. Outside it's barely above zero. On past form, she would be freezing her butt off in the gazelle compound. She's sweating instead, cleaning the first wall of the spider monkey cage.

Yesterday's action in the predator house must have convinced her supervisor that she can be trusted with a high pressure cleaner. For today, the task boards says "clean spider monkey cage". Tomorrow, it will be the turn of the mangabey. Then the lemurs. If Uzo proceeds with care, there might be enough gritty walls to take her through winter.

Assuming there's still a planet to live on, at the end of winter.

"Biggie? Where are you hiding, biggie? What about my paw and my tail? No magic lamp for me today? And where's my lamb? We haven't all year, you know."

Safo is not the gentle morning type. Uzo has to remind herself of her late grandma's wisdom. "When you're old", she used to say, "waking up to painful spots is the good news. No more hurting means you died last night." Small wonder the lioness is grumpy.

Uzo makes an effort to answer cheerfully, explaining how she's busy next door and will be delivering the daily dose of infrared before her lunch break. Wrong answer.

"You only think about your lunch. And don't do anything about my lamb head. This is so wrong. Are you even aware, where you'd be, without me? Just one more dumb biggie, not even aware of the deep level. And what do I get, in return? Not even a dose of magic lamp..."

Uzo lets the lioness rant, and wonders.

Where would she be, without her meanwhile proven additional sense? In a much better position, obviously. Blissfully unaware. Not stressed by a responsibility the rest of this so-called team supposed to save humanity doesn't take seriously enough. Safo is ranting. Jesse and Mattoo are sleeping in. They leave the heavy lifting to poor hapless Uzo. It's not fair.

Ruzo hates moaning. He makes Uzo interrupt Safo, to inquire about what the deep-only know, about cats and humans, and how they will determine the size of an acceptable response.

The old lioness reacts with irritation. She's accusing Uzo of trying to avoid the lamb topic. She's trying to ditch one more question she can't answer.

Uzo and Ruzo are so on their own.

Uzo wonders if she should call Orji. The end of the world calls for sisterly reconciliation.

Convincing Orji that Uzo is involved with the Felinity Challenge, that's sure to take ages. Even assuming she was prepared to listen, a big if, she's never going to believe her baby sister might be involved in anything that big. And if she did, her mood would only get worse. Spontaneous enthusiasm for someone else's project has never been Orji's forte.

Ruzo detests gloom and makes Uzo ask the lioness:

"Safo, how about just trying to start, with all kinds of cherishing cats we can come up with? A lot of people are already aware the Felinity Challenge is on. By the end of today, practically everybody will. They'll be keen to act.

Let's say, just for example, that we ask as many people as possible to draw a cat, to display their cherishing. That wouldn't be much, but a start, better than nothing. Or could it do any harm? What if people are no good at drawing? Could this be considered an insult?"

An additional worry, not the outcome Ruza had intended. And Safo's reaction is once again inconclusive. Her lack of experience with visual art doesn't help.

They're not getting anywhere when a real world voice booms:

"So that's where you're hiding. And fully armed, big gun blazing. You're a real hardware store junkie, aren't you, Miss Olagundoye? So like my neighbor. Except he's old, fat, and mean. Wants to cut down my wonderful trees. Because one loose branch grazed his car on its way down. One branch, and he goes after the whole forest. Mean man."

This vet is a nice funny sexist. Uzo wonders if he could be persuaded not to consider her mad, if she revealed how she's associated with today's breaking news. But a clandestine migrant should stay out of the limelight.

"Afraid you're in for a tough choice, Miss Olagundoye. It's either keep using your mighty weapon, or witness an interesting experiment with a fierce creature. Thought you'd like to see, how our favorite old rug reacts to a fresh lamb's head..."

The vet of course doesn't need to say more, the world won't get saved just yet.

Uzo downs her equipment and they hurry over to the predator house. Mister Akbari is waiting by the door, clutching a bleating brown bag. There are no visitors around, and the four of them make it into the predator backstage area unchallenged.

Hearing the noise from the bag, Safo jumps up like never no rheumatism, roaring with anticipation. Uzo also gets to deep hear a very loud and heartfelt "My lamb!"

The vet, really excited by this massive reaction, asks the butcher to release the lamb. It staggers out of the bag, visibly glad to have escaped the dark. Oblivious to the lion, it doesn't hesitate to nibble away at the treats the vet is offering.

"Alfalfa hay cubes," he explains. "We normally use them when we have to comfort our grazers ahead of minor interventions, before administering a vaccine or checking the hooves. Thought it would be more humane, for the lamb, to meet its maker with a treat in its mouth."

"My lamb! I can hear it breathe, and the heart beating. What the hell are they waiting for! I want my lamb! My laaaamb!" deep goes Safo pirouetting along the bars of her cage.

Uzo wonders if the lioness will recall she's only entitled to get the head. Her current mood sounds more like full lamb expectations. And no mention of the prey needing a shave.

"Mister Akbari, ready to proceed?" goes the vet in German. When the butcher nods and pulls a knife that would have made a medieval knight proud from his mantle, he adds in English, handing over his smartphone "Miss Olagundoye, would you please record the scene? We need documentation, for the research angle, and in case we need to prove we commit no crime."

And so Uzo ends up filming what would later be known as episode one of the first zoologico-crosscultural dual use project. A happily nibbling little lamb, held by a man in a white coat crouching next to it, gets its carotid severed and its head hacked off by a second man in a white mantle, with bars holding back a jumpy old lioness for background.

It's all very fast and surprisingly clean, with most of the blood flowing into the head bucket immediately delivered to a radiant lioness.

Uzo is alone in hearing Safo's deep jubilations:

"My lamb! Delicious head! Fresh dead blood yummy! Finally, good life, bloody yummy!..."

She can't capture those on her video. But Safo's body language is unambiguous. This lioness loves what she's eating, to the very last morcel of bloody brain carefully licked from the ground.

When the paperwork is signed and Mister Akbari on his way out, the freshly slaughtered rest of the lamb concealed in a white tight plastic bag, Uzo hoses the place clean while the vet checks the video. He's visibly satisfied and goes:

"Wow, very good pictures, well done. It really shows, how the lamb is at ease, and doesn't even have time to wonder what's going on, when the knife hits it. He did that well, Mister Akbari, just as he promised. Years of experience, the man. You'd really wish your escalope to have come about in such a stressfree way. I'm not into religion, and certainly not his, but his technique, impeccable. And our stiff old rug, you'd think some youngster. Must have been a real treat. Let's hope her intestines can stomach it. She's really old, you know?"

Uzo does know, about Safo's age, and more, but she's certainly not going to comment.

Mattoo has just come online. Uzo wonders if Safo's joy alerted him. If only she had more of this capability, for the deep level. She could engage in proper research, understand. Instead of poking at a dark fog of vagueness. And not one search engine to consult.

"You got to lick fresh blood? Crunch meat right after its last heartbeat? Wow, you zoo guys live the life of luxury. Me, I can count myself lucky if my fridge operators don't forget to switch from bland to vapid and back every other day. There's two kinds of tasteless food in the fridge. Similar animals, same kind of long overdue dead. But one tastes vapid and the other bland. That's as much change as I get. And you're licking fresh blood, not even clogged!"

Uzo makes a mental note to alert Jesse to Mattoo's dietary dissatisfaction. A live mouse a week, that's not going to boost anyone's budget. You can get them one by one at a zoo shop, where they sell them as both pets and pet snake food. Or, if you're clever, you buy a breeding pair.

Mice for Mattoo, that's easy, far easier than Safo's lamb. And if Jesse has qualms, about the mouse getting subjected to cruel treatment, he can kill it. Safo is a critical soul, to put it mildly. If she can make do with freshly killed instead of running away alive, so will Mattoo.

"OK, we've done well," goes the vet, putting away his phone, "Safo has eaten well, our turn now. Any chance to persuade you to give the canteen a try? You're my guest today, miss Olagundoye, we've got to celebrate. We're now lion welfare conspirators."

Ramses is struggling in Egypt, with a gigantic cat and a general. The world needs saving. Uzo should be biting her nails off. Ruzo sends her have lunch instead.

"But biggie," goes a distraught Siamese, "what about our team meeting? And performing famous heroics, to make me more attractive to she-cats? You can't just leave now. Safo, she got a bleeding lamb's head. Me, I got nothing..."

Uzo performs the deep equivalent of a bye bye waive. Ruzo has decided she has to keep herself in shape. And the vet might become an ally. And she's not keen on bragging boys. And most of all, she's hungry, after all this excitement.

"Can I at least get a lamb head, too?..." Mattoo only has the vaguest idea, what this treat might look like, but it's definitely worth a try. For the time being. Until he gets that door issue resolved.

## **Strasbourg**

Mattoo is so miffed. First Safo gets a bloody treat and he doesn't, despite him being the male. Next, Safo doses off, to digest aforementioned treat, ignoring his protests. Now the Uzo biggie goes offline, without his permission. Her preferring boring biggie company to his mightily important presence, that's the ultimate insult. Leaves Tasty Feet as only possible audience.

Mattoo decides now is the moment. This time, the lazy biggie has to wake up.

Jesse is dreaming, the nice version of his football dream. He's on the bench, an accepted mate. Sits next to Moussa Dembélé, no less. On the field, Kylian Mbappé scores, to get them ahead 3:2. The match will be over any second now.

Instead of getting to run onto the field to celebrate with his team mates, Jesse desperately gasps for air. A giant hairy caterpillar is obstructing his nose. And now it's in his mouth, too. Horror, near death experience. Jesse wakes up eye to fur to Mattoo's tail and deep hears:

"Good morning, Tasty-Feet-to-be-called-Jesse. So glad you finally woke up. You need to prepare, for our team meeting. The Felinity Challenge is on, and the ladies rely on us. First things first, I'll provide you with an overview, concerning the Felinity side. Then we can..."

Jesse doesn't hear the rest. Having grabbed his towel and put on his tartan bathrobe, a cheap second hand affair that went out of style before he was born, he heads for the bathroom.

In principle, the apartment should be his at this hour. The M4 work conventional office hours. When they work. He's still in process of learning his landladies' sick days pattern. When they're not sick, they occasionally call in stressed to justify home office. "Afraid I'll have to work from home today, something wrong with the tap in the bathroom, need to wait for the plumber." That's a funny phone call to overhear, on exiting a perfectly functional bathroom. Or they start late. There is no such thing as a safe time to cross the corridor in minimal attire. A working man should be able to afford his own flat, and be allowed to walk to the bathroom naked.

And on his own. Irritated by the cats nosy presence, Jesse goes:

"Mattoo, what did I tell you yesterday? Please, Mattoo, some things are best done alone."

Jesse has to insist, to make Mattoo leave the bathroom. The furry bandit mutters something about capricious biggies, before ambling out. Closing the door, Jesse admits the cat is only half wrong. Not so long ago, he didn't mind, about a feline presence.

It's Mattoo's bathroom, too. He has his cat toilet right next to the real one. And they share the pressure. More often than not, they wake up to a full bladder, only to find the bathroom occupied. These waits can be uncomfortably long. They typically end in a shared rush, when the coveted spot finally becomes available and they get the chance to do their thing.

Mattoo still doesn't hesitate to use his facility in Jesse's presence. He even chatters on, while letting go. Impossible for Jesse. He needs his privacy. No urinal bonding rites and aiming competitions for him. And no side by side with a talking cat.

The bathroom once again looks like a crime scene. No corpse, but lots of evidence. Red smears, dark traces, debris. Something glassy didn't make it through a morning ritual. Small wonder, with every flat surface crammed with flacons, pots and bottles. Two wads of cotton escaped the overflowing dustbin. It's so disgusting. Jesse keeps his towel in his room for a reason.

Having picked up and discarded the shards from the floor, Jesse takes care to also inspect the cat toilet. Mattoo is challenging company, but he doesn't deserve cutting his paws. A cat should be safe when using his toilet. No dangerous debris, but the thing needs cleaning.

Jesse gives the sink and bathtub a superficial wipe, to restore a semblance of civilization, before brushing his teeth and taking his shower. A working man should not be forced to choose between vegetating under disgusting conditions or playing domestic to strangers.

Clean and angry, Jesse regains his room to dress up, to get himself ready for one more day of slog. Only when a jittery Mattoo jumps onto him from the sideboard screaming "Banzai, will you listen now, you biggie imbecile?" does he finally realize that something big might be ongoing.

Startled and puzzled, he sits down on the bed and asks:

“It’s on for real, Mattoo? No kidding? I’m no fan of early morning jokes, not my time of the day. The real Felinity Challenge is on? Or is this about one more bloke joining our talking shop?”

Pleased to have captured his buddy’s attention, Mattoo provides an overview of the news: First giant cat sighting, and second, and third. Matching biggie location names: Cairo, Basra, Karachi. Felinity all wild, and ready to mate with your man, on the girl side.

Not trusting Jesse to have listened well to his earlier lectures, Mattoo reminds him of the core facts: Flat only biggies just see a giant black cat shape. Bilevel organisms, as in felines and talented biggies, will also see the stripes serving as units of measurement for the countdown.

Jesse obediently shapes his face into an expression of attentiveness. It’s easier than usual, because Mattoo’s teachings make more sense than school fare.

Compared to Jesse’s previous experience with science classes, Mattoo’s stuff is fine. Felinity is about cats, hence the Challenge starts with a giant black cat. Quite a lot of cats are striped, hence the black-on-black countdown stripes. If you leave out all the levels-of-the-universe, dark-energy and quantum-state bits of the teachings that would only fog up your brain, it’s easy.

Rarely has Jesse felt so comfortable in a science class. Unfortunately, his bliss doesn’t last. Mattoo does the one thing Jesse hated most about teachers, he abruptly switches from lecturing to interrogation, and poor Jesse’s sitting in a class of one. Mattoo goes:

“Now that it’s officially declared, we have to meet the Felinity Challenge. We have to come up with a plan, and make all the biggies act on it. What are we going to make them do, Tasty Feet?”

Checking the clock on his phone for an escape route, Jesse discovers he’s in trouble. Deep trouble. More than an hour to go until he needs to leave for his shift. On past form, he’s in for rounds and rounds of humiliation. He’s hopeless at oral. Mattoo sounds like resolve, too. He’s sure to insist, won’t take a perplexed shrug for an answer. Shit!

And Mattoo to charge again, exactly as feared:

“Come on, Tasty Feet, not answering won’t get us started. You know your fellow biggies. There must be something they can do, to prove they cherish cats? Your kind is stupid, won’t deny you have your limitations, serious limitations even. But with a little effort...?”

Here it is, the encouragement morphing into a threat. Slowly softly at first, but sure not to stay that way. Afraid to say something stupid, Jesse tries the bounce back:

“You know best, Mattoo, it’s your Felinity Challenge. How did people do it, last time round?”

Mattoo doesn’t appreciate, and goes mock patience in return:

“Oh come on, Tasty Feet, or should I call you Slow Head? This was already mentioned. Last time round, the biggies made many representations of all kinds of cats, big and small, from all kinds of materials. All biggies were at it, each with his preferred material and tools, for days and days. You know that. Are you proposing to proceed in the same way?”

Of course not. Jesse knows a tight corner when he lands there. Mattoo sounds exactly like his maths teacher reacted to stupid answers. The master of the mysterious equations used to go “Oh come on, Jean-Segun, you’re not seriously proposing this?”

Mattoo’s reaction suggests they can’t meet the Felinity Challenge in the same way as thousands of years ago, and Jesse has to prove he isn’t stupid by explaining why. Tentatively, he goes:

“No, we can’t proceed in the same way as last time. People, they’re no longer good at making stuff. Except for the Chinese. They make lots, but it’s the machines. People no longer do carving, sculpting, sewing, drawing. Making is out. Some people do painting by numbers, but that’s cheating. People are only good at taking pictures. With their phones...”

Hearing himself talk, Jesse feels a warm beam of hope pierce the cold fog of stress. He's having an idea. Not clear yet if it's any good, but it's there, his very own creation. Cool. Gaining in confidence, he continues:

"... People, they take lots and lots of pictures with their phones. Mostly of themselves and each other, but cats also do feature, a lot. Cat pictures, cat video clips, tons of cat material online. Any chance this might count, towards the Felinity Challenge? What do you think, Mattoo?"

Mattoo needs examples, to check if he feels cherished. As the miniature screen on Jesse's smartphone wasn't designed with a cat audience in mind, Jesse has to explain what the material looks like. Not trusting his memory, he uses his search engine to bring up images.

'Cat pictures' delivers a cute series of millions of results. Half of the cats on display are youngsters, or even babies. Jesse waxes lyrical on these, because aren't they cute?

Cute doesn't impress Mattoo. He's looking for cats standing proud, fierce felines. Litter, that's she-cat stuff. The he-cat will have to make some appreciative noises, concerning litter, to get laid. He might use the term cute for tactical reasons. But a cherished thought litter isn't.

Jesse quickly changes tack. To please his feline buddy, he describes the one picture from his first search that shows a cat carrying away a blackbird. The great hunter and his game. Mattoo likes the sound of this, and demands more. Jesse obediently switches his search term.

'Cats hunting' delivers a comparatively meagre result. Jesse admits as much and provides an overview: Cats chasing mice, hamsters, birds and laser pointer dots.

Mattoo's first reaction to the laser pointer dots is curiosity. He wonders about the size, shape and speed of this particular prey, and what its meat tastes like. When Jesse explains the perfidious joke, Mattoo is outraged. Biggies playing tricks on felines, mere fridge door operators daring to make fun of mighty cats, that's unheard of and has to stop, immediately.

Jesse wishes he hadn't come up with this stupid cat pictures idea. If Mattoo gets mad at a harmless laser pointer joke, how is he going to react to the bad ones?

Jesse doesn't dare withhold the magnitude of the disrespect phenomenon. Mattoo is entitled to know, about people taking unfavorable pictures of cats. With his deep fellows poised to blow up the planet, Jesse needs Mattoo's help. And who would help someone who withholds crucial information? That's the way of salespeople, not friends.

Keeping his overview very abstract, to cause as little grief as possible, Jesse tells Mattoo about bad people taking naughty pictures. Cats with hats, glasses, scarves, coats, toys, anything. On, next to, under and behind bits of furniture or nature. Not always esthetically pleasing, not necessarily very respectful, but always kind of funny, if you share that sense of humor.

Mattoo shakes with angry disbelief, but demands the full truth.

Jesse doesn't dare withhold information on the odd case of voyeurism any longer. He admits that "Very few bad people" take pictures of cats exposing their private parts, or engaged in copulation.

To his surprise, Mattoo couldn't care less, about a breach of intimacy. The cat goes:

"No problem, Tasty Feet. I mean, why should I mind, about the world seeing my beautiful hardballs and dick in action, if and when we finally meet Sweetie? As long as the overall picture is nice, as long as the cat is shown from his best angle, such immortalizing is a compliment. It's a bit intrusive, to take pictures without asking for permission first, even if it is to pay homage. But as most biggies lack the ability to ask, leniency will prevail."

Jesse is pretty sure a relevant number of the pictures don't qualify as homage, but he prefers to spare Mattoo details. Too much transparency turns into torture.

To change the subject, Jesse mentions cat comic books and cartoons.

Mattoo's primary response is weak. Why draw a cat, if you can take a picture of the real thing?

Jesse describes how kids and teens worship their feline heroes in return.

Felix, Chi, Hobbes, Kitty, even Garfield, all those cute kind-of-cat characters saved the Gerardmer bookstore from going bust, and sowed shelves full of merchandise. Jesse explains how his Sunday school priest used to bemoan how people nowadays buy this kind of plunder instead of votives and candles. The priest even had a Garfield mug, for demonstration. You could get your own, if you got invited to join him for a hot chocolate. Jesse never was.

Mattoo is more interested now, inquires about the looks of the Garfield hero.

Jesse regrets his unfortunate choice of example. The famous feline lasagne devourer calls for mitigated description. He chooses his words carefully:

"The most impressive Garfield, he's a mighty he-cat. Powerful. Clever. Makes very good use of his personal biggie. He controls his every move. Garfield rules the house, especially the kitchen. But also the living room, and the bedroom..."

Jesse doesn't get to finish his laudatory speech. Mattoo only cares about Garfield's looks. Giving his best to turn one more insult into appreciation, Jesse goes:

"As I said, Garfield is impressive, a mighty one. Few cats can rival him for size..."

To his surprise, Jesse loves it and goes:

"Oh, so he's fat, the lucky Garfield fellow? Real big, like thick neck, broad back, low hanging belly? Oh Jesse, please, can you get me Garfield's kind of food? The ladies go wild, for a fat boy. And it's so much safer, too, when dealing with a romantic interest with sharp claws. Can you please fatten me up to Garfield shape, Tasty Feet?"

Jesse breathes a silent sigh of relief. Who'd have guessed?

Slender Mattoo will never achieve Garfield shape, but this disappointment is for another day. They'll deal with it after the Felinity Challenge, if there is any after. Now, it's time for Jesse to leave for work. And for Mattoo to be left behind in an empty flat.

Jesse checks the news stream one last time, before pulling the charger. He really needs a new battery. Or a new phone. That's even more unaffordable. No good thoughts that way.

The three giant cats are all over the news. Not much else happening. Even the yellow jackets and their road blocks have been displaced. Lots of excited suits talking about cats. Breaking news business as usual, except for one guy who is all over the place and looks different.

He's a non-suit, no jacket. The white shirt is there all right, but it's crumpled and he wears it without a tie, the top three buttons open for comfort. He's sweating profusely, in the way working people do and media people don't. He seems at ease, talks vividly, with much gesticulating. He's #CatzillaMan, he saw them giant cats coming. He bet on them, and now he's famous.

Jesse finally recognizes the tale. That's Uzo's Ramses, with a brand new cool nickname. And it's happening for real. Their man, team member for Egypt, is all over all media. Just like a real star.

Curious to hear if and how he and Uzo feature, Jesse switches on the sound. He shouldn't, because it's time to go, and showing up late can get you sacked. But this is extraordinary. Sometimes, you need to break rules. And with the world about to end...

#CatzillaMan and his French language voice over do a fine job. That's a good statement. Short, clear, reassuring. Felinity Challenge in a nutshell, as of now without the threat. A clever move, to avoid stampedes. If more news were like this, Jesse would listen in more often.

#CatzillaMan tells it like service staff would:

When he goes "This is a traffic light, not a weapon" he sounds like Jesse going "This is a popcorn stand, not a bar." Polite, concise, firm. The client is king and can't be offended, but you get paid for explaining giant black cats respectively selling popcorn, not for waffling.

#CatzillaMan's way of deflecting unwarranted questions is equally professional. Varying permutations of three different sound bites, one and the same polite message: Neither will this question be answered nor will I lose my temper.

Jesse prides himself for above average apologetic skills. He knows a fellow practitioner when he sees one. Very hard, to be polite in a customer friendly way. You can't veer into the submissive, that's inviting abuse. Nor can you go smug. It's a fine line, and #CatzillaMan treads it well

He's more at risk of going smug than Jesse, but it never happens. Not even when a very lightskinned and fair haired journalist quips at him: "So you are basically herding giant alien cats instead of camels now, right?".

Many a dark skinned and balding guy would have gone mock-polite. Not #CatzillaMan. He calmly retorts: "The Felinity Challenge is indeed characterized by the presence of giant black cats and we know they are acting as signals. The other aspects will be addressed in the due course of the Felinity Challenge process, Allah permitting."

Very nice performance. And no mention of Uzo or Jesse. Not one single reprimand.

Jesse is so glad he has been bracing himself for nothing. Ever since his new ability appeared, he has been waiting for the usual bad limelight moment.

On past occasions, they sounded like this, and the words are ringing in his ears to this day:

"And it had to be Jesse in the goal. We might as well have planted at tree, it would at least have moved with the wind. Anything is better than this stupid statue."

"Jean-Segun Edun, you will have to face this at some point, so we might as well get it over with. This is no longer mediocre, this is insufficient. We have to put you on a different path."

"You're asking me out? You, Jesse? Me, Nathalie? For serious? Wait till my brother teaches you not to insult me, you bloody motherfucker."

Jesse has spent the past days trying to anticipate the corresponding Felinity Challenge soundbite.

One more "Jesse, not even you can be that stupid?! Every sane person would have..." topped his list. And now it turns out he doesn't get blamed. Must have been Mattoo's influence. The cat deserves his very best apology. Jesse goes:

"Mattoo, I know you won't like this, but I will have to leave now. Need to go to work. Our man in Egypt, Uzo's Ramses, he's called #CatzillaMan now, which is a cool nickname, he's doing a superb job to get people ready to meet the Felinity Challenge. And we will have a great team meeting later on, when Uzo and Safo become available..."

Jesse was planning to add an exhortation, to keep Mattoo busy coming up with ideas for pictures that would please cats, but his team mate is already going furry fury:

"Don't you dream of leaving, bad Tasty Feet. The clock is ticking. Safo gets a lamb's head, Uzo goes meet he-biggies, you go chase she-biggies. And I'm supposed to sit here, starving and lonesome? Over my cold dead body, Tasty Feet. I'm entitled to cherishing, and this isn't."

What would every sane person do, under the circumstances?

Jesse would like to be the smart guy. Like in the movies, where they know what to do, fast and right. Cut the red or the yellow cable, boom or not boom. They never cut the wrong one.

He's not like that. If he leaves now, to show up at work only a little late, next stop might well be:

"Jesse, what the hell have you been thinking? Can't you try use your brains, just once? Now the planet is going to get boiled, like some stupid potato, because you had to go sell popcorn. Popcorn, Jesse. Now tell me one sane person who would..."

Sounds plausible. Same for the other way round:

"Oh come on, Jesse? You, of all people, saving the world? By means of keeping a cat company? Now, you, personally, might consider it funny, to aim for a high score in the worst-excuses-ever-for-not-showing-up-at-work league. Me, personally, I lack this kind of sense of humor. I will now forward your request for career reformatting to HR. And, on a lighter note, just to inform you: Boiling the planet is a very fine project, humanity does it all the time."

Which of these is the red, which is the yellow cable? Where's the boom?

Jesse curses his dad. According to his mom, that's where his hopeless brains come from. As she used to say: "I'm doing my best, but with the material at hand..."

Never will the result of mom's struggles select the right cable on his own.

And Jesse can't even ask Mattoo for guidance, because this dilemma is about him.

Or can he? Mattoo already provided guidance, by asking him to stay. And he's a proven leader.

Jesse calls his boss and lies as best he can. Three minutes later, he's done.

His boss most probably didn't buy the lie. Jesse isn't sick, he didn't sound sick, why should the supervisor consider him sick? He'll most probably get himself sacked, thereby increasing his natural risk to end up in prison. So be it. Felinity Challenge is more important.

Mattoo doesn't fully appreciate the risks Jesse is taking for his comfort. He goes:

"Knew you'd be seeing some sense, Tasty Feet. Next time, try to take less long. And now to the tasks of the day: First, we get me food that will turn me Garfield. Next, we get Sylvie to bring Sweetie. It's daylight now, they can travel safely. While they travel, we inform Felinity the Challenge is as good as resolved. Sweetie will hear about my feat on the road, and this will get her into the right mood. Finally, I get to have sex. Yummy! On you go, Tasty Feet, food first."

Not even a thanks. No mention of the team, and saving the world. Jesse knows he should have second thoughts. But showing up at work, after having called in sick, that's too tricky. Much easier to keep going, under Mattoo's guidance. He needs some more and goes:

"Mattoo, glad to hear you are feeling better now. But for the food, I need your help. Garfield, he's into lasagne, but we can't prepare those. No way I do any cooking in this health hazard of a kitchen. Don't know what else fattens up your kind. Saw an add on my phone, about diet cat feet, but never anything about weight boosters. Doubt the supermarkets will have any, have to do some research first. And then there's another problem, about fetching it. Today,..."

Mattoo has to exert maximum restraint. Biggies are so tedious to train.

Before he started communicating with Jesse, he had considered the lack of a shared language the road block. "If only I could get them to understand my needs and wants," he used to tell

himself, “they would do my bidding much more readily. Biggies are dumb beasts, certainly, far from perfect for complex operations. But if there was a way to instruct them...”

Preposterous, his old self. Naive. Mattoo has only been talking to biggies for days, but the result is conclusive. Procrastinators. Above and before all else, biggies are procrastinators.

Your average cat, especially the gung-ho males, it's see-jump-catch. Sometimes it's see-jump-miss, granted, but there's always action, immediate action.

Biggies, they contemplate, and consider, and reconsider, only to often end up doing nothing. They're boring and ineffective. If it wasn't for the fridges, no sane cat would bother, with biggies. Training them is not for the impatient. Still exerting maximum restraint, Mattoo goes:

“Good biggie Tasty Feet, don't be afraid, you can do it. You can forage, for food. Like Uzo got Safo her lamb head. If a she-biggie can do it, so can you. I'd like you to find me a mouse or a hamster, Tasty Feet. You can do it. Go outside, forage, catch a mouse or a hamster. And if you don't find any, you bring crispy meat. Come on, be a good biggie.”

Jesse sighs, he would so prefer his tasks easy.

He knows where to buy mice and hamsters, the pet superstore has cages full of furies for sale. But that's far out, he'd have to take two trams and a bus to travel across town. Being officially sick, this is impossible. With his luck, he's sure to meet a colleague and get himself sacked.

What Mattoo calls crispy meat is more feasible.

The M4 occasionally buy minced meat. Being disorganized, they tend to leave it in the shopping bag or on the kitchen table for a while, instead of putting it right into the fridge. This isn't just unfortunate from a food hygiene point of view. It's also a recipe to get it abducted by Mattoo.

The M4 typically notice his crime when he's still in process of shredding the paper bag to get at the meat. They call him a naughty cat and, shockingly, rescue what is left of the meat. A food hygiene abomination that left Jesse stunned, when he witnessed it for the first time.

There's a butcher just around the corner. This short walk should be safe. And if a colleague shows up, Jesse will have a cover story ready. Everybody knows you have to eat chicken soup, to recover fast from a cold. A sick person is entitled to go buy the ingredients.

Jesse dresses up in private casual to go fetch a pound of minced meat.

## Cairo

“... and if I ever catch you again, without jacket and tie, in public, in front of TV cameras, to look like some laborer from the street, Allah is my witness, I will... Don't know what I will do, yet, but I will come up with something. Rest assured, Amon Anwar Safar, that you will regret it, if you ever dare do this to me again. Such humiliation. Such disgrace. The whole neighborhood...”

This is going well. Once it had become clear that Ammon's general wouldn't dump him into a dungeon, he had started to worry about how his wonderful wife would react.

On past form, no leniency was to be expected. She hates surprises. She insists on having the last word on all decisions affecting the household or business. She cares a lot, about how things look and what the neighbors will say...

When Ammon got dropped off in front of his home, he felt like an action game figure: First hazard overcome, and look what the game has in store for you next...

The wife welcomed him at the door, as feared. She's not fond of moving, only serious anger and hunger are powerful enough propellants to get her up. Not even giving him the chance to voice a preemptive catch-all apology, she started howling right away.

The next ten minutes delivered clarity, concerning Ammon's crime. The wife doesn't mind his new government role, nor him showing up on TV. If anything, she sounds rather pleased, except for the surprise aspect. But him failing the minimum dress code requirements, that's huge.

Once the first stage of spousal hostilities is over, Ammon will promise, on the health of all ten kids, never again to leave the house without a jacket and tie. And that these will stay in place, come what may, regardless of the weather, aliens, or whatever else.

Ammon knows just saying sorry won't do.

When he dared attend a wedding in his second best suit, because he knew some of the sodas would be laced and didn't want forbidden stains on his best one, it cost him a new dishwasher.

Luckily, his general has confirmed, if only reluctantly and on redemand, that a pay package matching the responsibilities will be found, for the charge d'affaires.

Spousal peace is restored a mere twenty minutes later.

Ammon would have preferred not to waste an outrageous amount of money on English accent tuition for the oldest girl, but if his wife considers her talking like a Brit a must-have, so be it.

He's allowed a shower.

In the solitude of the bathroom, Ammon performs a situation appraisal.

He made it home safely, good. The world is at risk, bad. He's in charge of saving it, good. He doesn't know what he's doing and has to rely on some Nigerian kid for technical assistance, bad. He's making solid money and boosting his contacts, good.

Overall, the outlook is good. Once the world will have been saved, it will be even better.

Drying himself, Ammon wonders how to dress up. He's a global celebrity now. There are soldiers cordoning off his front door to make sure no one disturbs him. He has to be ready at all times, for the next round with the media people. This would call for a fresh suit, his best one. But that's tight around the waist. He'll make himself comfortable in traditional attire instead.

The wife is in a better mood than Ammon would have expected.

When he enters the living room, a plate with dates and banana chips coated in chocolate, his preferred sweets, and the tea tray with a nice pile of cookies already wait for him

He sits down and takes out his phone, explaining he needs to call the girl that helps with the Felinity Challenge. He gets a nod, and a smile, from the other end of the couch. Being a charge d'affaires certainly didn't damage his standing.

Uzo is on voice mail. Makes sense, the kid has a job. During the day. Suggests she's either no sex worker, or European perverts skip the office for a quick manly ride. Disgusting.

Ammon leaves a message, asking his Felinity Challenge assistant to please call back.

They need to define the message for the next day, what people have to do, to meet the Challenge.

He also informs Uzo that the rest, as in a mock-scientific background story, will be defined by his general, in coordination with fellow military types from stakeholder countries. Current front runner is hints at undetectable aliens, plus some mumbo jumbo about worm holes.

Restating the main message, the order to call him back, Ammon marvels at his wife's nerve.

He's talking aliens and end of the world, she's stitching. That pillowcase will take weeks to complete. Strength in adversity, that's her. Pregnancies, aliens, she takes all kinds of adversity in her stride. She should be dealing with the general. Would teach him manners.

Nibbling away at his treats with one eye on the TV, Ammon is no longer surprised to see himself.

The general's limo had TV. Waiting for him to finish his phone calls, Ammon had plenty of time to get used to the footage from his press conference. The next George Clooney he isn't. His wife has a point, concerning the shirt and lack of tie. But that's not what counts, in business. If you want to do good deals, you have to sound competent and confident. That's mandatory, everything else is optional. And he achieved that, both in Arabic and in English.

Pretty impressive, considering he's working on the basis of less than solid facts.

Normally, he knows what is good, about his product or service, what justifies the price he's aiming for. He also knows what improvements would come in nicely. He will even concede as much, especially if the client signals a willingness to pay extra for premium.

No such clarity with the Felinity Challenge.

There's a defined client, the government as represented by the general. They're willing to cough up big time. So far, so excellent. There's also a goal, but this is still too vague for Ammon's comfort. He has to make humanity do stuff to stop aliens from blowing up the earth. Fine for the humanity part. The media are reporting, he's good at explaining, there's every chance he'll get lots of people to do his bidding. But what the hell is it going to be? What are people supposed to do?

That Nigerian kid better get her act together, fast, before people lose interest.

## **Karlsruhe**

They're having coffee now? Uzo doesn't trust her eyes. They have been in this nice self-service restaurant of a canteen for an hour, but the vet shows no sign of intending to leave.

They're sitting at a table for six, next to the window.

The vet had met another elderly guy in casual dress in the queue at the main dish counter.

He had introduced her, very nicely: "Miss Olagundoye, a biologist from Africa, with us on a temporary contract. She struggles to speak German, but understands very well." Then he had paid, for both their lunches, as promised.

The three of them had joined a guy of Uzo's age in a lab coat sitting all alone at a table for six.

They had barely started eating when two more casual oldies had arrived with their plates.

Up to this point, the conversation had mainly consisted of introductions, and Uzo had felt at ease. She didn't catch the names and job roles, but the scope of the exchange was obvious. Next, the guy they met in the queue embarked on a tale. Something about prices.

Everything else was lost on Uzo, and she focused on eating. At first, she struggled with the blandness of her dish, a chicken leg, Brussels sprouts and rice. But then she found pepper and a bottle of a liquid spice with a slightly peculiar, but attractive taste. Pleasant lunch.

The others were not making do with a main dish, despite the steep prices. They had also picked a soup for starters and a dessert. And they were talking animatedly, often over each other but never with their mouths full. Pleasant company. But this is taking ages.

Uzo had started to worry early, about exceeding her break time.

Her inner Ruzo countered robustly, insisting they were doing fine, courtesy of the vet, a superior. Uzo had accepted this as a sound rationale and decided to grant herself an additional thirty minutes, double the regular break.

Now she's in breach of the generous limit. No way to justify this, not in her basic German.

Standing up, she apologizes, in German: "Sorry, need to go, no more break."

The vet doesn't let her leave. He says what must amount to a complicated no in German, and adds in English: "No way, Miss Olagundoye, you can't leave. This is a business meeting. We need food hygiene advice from our specialists here, and we need you as our lion wellness expert. Why block a precious meeting room if we can sit here with a cup of coffee?"

Uzo knows a direct order when she hears one, she doesn't leave. But nor does she sit down, still worrying about her supervisor. The vet must sense this issue, because he adds, again in English: "No need to worry, about the master of the task board. I can call him, if you like, to inform him you're with me." And he does it, from his mobile, right away.

Uzo sits down, trying to enjoy. Her supervisor is sure not to appreciate. He hates calls from the vet disturbing his routine. But he will hopefully not take revenge.

"You are a scientist, from Africa? What do you think, about the Catzillas, in Egypt, Iraq and Pakistan? This must be some hoax, right? Still surprised they have the technical means. I mean, 3D projections, OK. But this size, and no one able to identify and interfere with the projector, after so many hours, that doesn't sound like the Near East. What do you think?"

The guy in the lab coat had been mostly quiet throughout lunch, glancing at a phone he had positioned discreetly next to his plate instead of following the conversation. Now he speaks up, in fluent English. Easy for Uzo, except for the topic he picks. Recalling how Ramses' Egyptian general had got her talking earlier today, she picks her words carefully:

"Have seen the pictures of the Catzillas, pretty awesome. Think we need to wait for scientists with direct access to comment. This is the twenty-first century, there are means to fake pretty much anything. My guess would be that the Egyptian army is all over the Cairo site already, and that they'll work with the Americans to determine what is projecting the cats."

Lab coat nods, appreciatively. They don't pursue their conversation, because the two elders look miffed. Not hard to guess it's because of the foreign language talking. Symptoms of progressing globalization not welcome at their lunch table.

The vet is finally done chatting up Uzo's supervisor and explains their counseling needs. In slow easy German, to allow Uzo to follow. He too picks his words carefully.

First of all, the vet tells his lunch buddies about Safo, at length. Her advanced age, her assorted health issues. Makes it obvious the old lady really deserves a treat.

Next he informs about the municipal office for multicultural peace and reconciliation. How they provided the phone number of a first halal butcher. How keen that diligent man had been, to gain access to officially sanctioned premises and qualified veterinary supervision. How superbly he had performed in today's trial run, sending a lamb to its nirvana faster than you can say "chops". And how rejuvenating a dish of ultra fresh lamb head had been, for good old Safo.

Most tables are empty and the smell of hot detergent from the rumbling dishwashers has replaced the odor of frying oil by the time the vet is done. He's obviously anxious, but he shouldn't have bothered. The four food safety specialists are all in favor.

No problem with a miniature slaughterhouse in the predator backstage area. Protected species need to be fed their natural diet, that's an animal welfare issue. One of the old guys explains simplified regulations are available, for use at farms that produce a certain kind of eco-label meat.

The zoo can apply for that same status, an inspection will be performed, and it's official. No need to hide behind exemptions for research purposes, or cross-cultural mumbo-jumbo.

This last remark leads the vet to explain, why he considers the cross-cultural angle important and would prefer to stick with it. Never will their shared scientific reasoning prevail against vegan anger. Muslims insisting on halal meat, they can match that kind of temper.

The vets reasoning is appreciated, in what Uzo can't help identify as racist glee.

If she manages to muddle through and make the planet survive the Felinity Challenge, if she gets hold of permanent resident status and on track for a Schengen passport, she will have to think about what to do, about Schengen racism. She can't not react forever.

Uzo doesn't need Ruzo to know that this worry is the least of her current concerns.

Lab coat speaks up once again, to switch the conversation to his favourite topic:

"Talking of the scientific community, exciting times, aren't they? What do you make, of the Catzillas on the news? Wonder if the KIT guys are involved. Might be, with all this talk of a kind of radiation stopping people from getting close. Sounds like their thing. Anyone heard anything?"

Turns out the old guys only watch the news in the evening. They have no clue what lab coat is talking about. Never would Uzo have guessed Schengen natives to be so antiquated, in their media ways. If the seniors even have smartphones, far from a confirmed fact as none are carried visibly, they don't know how to make good use.

Lab coat puts his phone at the center of the table. He pulls up the first Catzilla clip on his newsfeed, for his colleagues and the catering lady's benefit. The latter, a bulky matron, had come over, probably to tell them to leave. Now she's hooked. And scared. She performs the sign of the cross three times, with big slow careful gestures, starting at the right shoulder.

Even Christian gestures are different in Schengen. Such a lot to learn, for Uzo. She once again notices she will need a lot of time, to come to grips with all the little differences. And there might be no time, if she fucks up her Felinity Challenge role. It's all such a mess.

He food hygiene specialists take the Catzilla news in their stride. Obviously fake news. By the time they will watch their proper TV news tonight, the hoax will have been debunked. Tomorrow at the latest, some juvenile perpetrator will be shown on his way to jail, hiding his face behind a folder. Unless it's one more Russian stunt. Or if the Chinese did it. In this case hapless German politicians will queue to make the usual fools of themselves, pretending not to mind.

Uzo is shocked. That's not the kind of reaction that will help her save the world.

How can these guys be so blasé? The Catzillas look awesome, even on a tiny phone screen. Their size suggests supremacy. Even assuming a hoax, its magnitude and how it still stands, no less mysterious after hours of scrutiny, this screams imminent danger. Unless you are so fundamentally safe that certain kinds of risks become too remote to fathom.

Getting the likes of Uzo's vet to do the needful will be hard. Even Ruzo admits as much.

"And what happens, in superstitious Africa? Your people going to go mad?"

The nearly bald elder with the rimless glasses addresses Uzo in an extra loud voice, in German. She uses the translator app on her phone to check she correctly identified the term superstition, it's a permutation of the word for belief, and answers in her best grammar:

"Same happen, Africa with Europe. Superstition people their response, science people their response. At first. Later, if still Catzilla, people think more. Finally, one response, together."

It's more a wish than an assessment Uzo is expressing, it sounds different from the German her new canteen buddies speak, but they nod, seem to appreciate.

A round of deprecating remarks follows. As far as Uzo manages to makes sense of what she hears, the assembled bright minds seem to be convinced the final shared response, to be reached after lots of convolution, will be to unmask the Catzillas as fake. They very much resent a dumb populace prone to superstition, like the periodic food scare stampedes.

On their way back to the zoo, the vet once again reassures Uzo, concerning the reaction to expect from her supervisor. Nothing to fear, she has been promoted to vet assistant and only answers to him. It must show on her face, how much she worries. She thanks the vet profusely, taking care to look the part, and asks about next tasks. Sends him laughing:

"You really need more integration, Miss Olagundoye. Your job as an intern is to try to get away with as little and comfortable work as possible. Only when this gets too boring do you start bothering me to find you a task you will take your time to perform. And nowadays, with a smartphone and plugs for the charger, who'd ever get bored? Got me? Good.

Now I'd like you to go monitor Safo. The old rug has been fed exactly the same diet for years. I don't trust her bowels' capacity to handle a lamb's head. Didn't expect her to devour the whole packet, with all the wool, bones, and even the teeth. You watch her. Any sign of bowel discomfort, if she keeps licking her belly or gets unusually restless, you alert me."

Perfect! Never did Uzo get a more welcome assignment. She's sure to get that one right.

Calling Safo even before she reaches predator house, Uzo learns that the vet guessed well. The change of diet does indeed affect Safo, but positively:

"My bowels, biggie? Glad you ask. It's such a relief, after all these years. Remember when I said I'd like my lamb shaved, all pinky skin? Remember? Well, that was a rare case of me talking bullshit, biggie. For all these years, as far back as I can remember, I always had to belch so much. Whichever the food, forever those same two issues. It was way too dead, and I went from belch to burp and back, often for hours. I didn't even know, that you could escape. Well, guess what? Nothing. Not one belch. From now on, nothing but lamb's head for me. And no shaving."

Uzo will report a fine old lioness. For the rest, she will see. The conversation in the canteen suggested a good chance of more lambs headed for the predator house, but every day? Most probably not. Best not to comment, at this stage. Instead, she goes:

"Wonderful, Safo. So glad to hear the new food is working for you. Let's observe this a little longer, to make sure your bowels like lamb's head all the way down, shall we? Just to be sure it does you good. Then I will report to the vet, and he'll organize the follow-up."

Polite pause, to give Safo the chance to comment. No response suggesting acceptability of the proposed plan, Uzo dares switch topics:

"How about a team meeting, Safo? I had Mattoo on the line earlier, and he was anxious to get us going. Think he's right. With the countdown on, we need to get our act together. What do you think, would you try to call the boys, please, if it's not too much action after lunch?"

It's funny, how the lioness turns out to be just one more pompous old lady. Just like Uzo's favorite aunt. She'd never notice exaggerated politeness. A little slime delivers a big birthday gift.

Safo easily locates Mattoo and Jesse-aka-Tasty-Feet. Turns out the boys haven't been idle.

Uzo is impressed. Never would she have expected those two silly heads to come up with such a promising approach. To declare the online avalanche of cats and cat cartoon characters humanity's modern way of cherishing Felinity, that's surprisingly astute.

And Jesse even managed to identify a potential hazard associated with the plan.

Uzo is oh so familiar with the wrong kind of pictures causing massive grief.

Boys keen on dating her sister often discovered that making fun of 'Uzo the Loozo' endeared them to their target faster and at less expense than cinema tickets. There's a whole gallery of more or less doctored but uniformly degrading pictures of her younger self. Used to drive her mad and sad, until Ruzo declared ugly pics a feature sparing her unwelcome attention.

Tasty Jesse is so right. Some online cat material can't be repurposed as proof of cherishing. It will need to be hidden, at the very least.

Uzo recalls the digital savvy lecture she attended, in her student days. It wasn't mandatory, for biologists, but she hadn't made it into the entrepreneurship course and thought this would look nearly as good, on her CV. There's better than hiding. She goes:

"Guys, this online cherishing, that's an excellent idea, so well done, congratulations. And Tasty, I'm with you, about the risks around unfavorable pictures. Might have a solution, for that one. There's this law, the right to be forgotten. If people tag disrespectful cat pictures, the IT folk can wipe all copies from all platforms, as a kind of passive cherishing."

Uzo is surprised to hear herself weigh in so confidently. In conventional meetings, she never got a word in. Ended up wondering whether to send the team an email, afterwards. Never happened, because that would have looked even more stupid. Here and now, she's at ease.

Jesse is all in favor, of Uzo's proposal to wipe the online realm clear of disrespectful cat material, to make sure not to create offense. Next, he unfortunately talks nonsense:

"... very good idea, a right to be depicted with respect, and to delete the occasional rubbish. Every cat is entitled to pride, to be depicted as a successful predator and mighty ruler of fridge door operators. We need to make sure all pictures qualify..."

This is bullshit. Uzo is no forwarder, but she gets enough of the stuff to know that online cats come in two basic modes, cute or funny. Funny as in humans laughing, not the felines.

Would Tasty be as digitally innocent as the food inspection oldies in the canteen? Impossible. He came up with the idea, he's familiar with cat pictures. He must be talking nonsense on purpose, for some hidden reason he can't reveal. If only she could call the guy, to have a private word.

Uzo only understands the dimension of the risks when Safo goes:

"Don't be stupid, Tasty Jesse. All cats look fantastic at all times, whatever the circumstances. Beauty and pride, that's cats in a nutshell. It's nigh impossible, to make a cat look bad or silly. Our bodies, our fur, our eyes, the way we move, we're just perfect..."

The old lioness at her most authoritative. Uzo no longer needs to inquire, what happened in France and why Tasty is talking in riddles.

She fervently hopes the lioness doesn't ask for a glimpse of what they're talking about. Cats with funny hats, cats in pink tutus, cats fooled by TV screens and mirrors,... If Safo gets a glimpse of this, earth is doomed. Uzo goes:

"Tasty, thanks for pointing out the additional angle, got you. Let's sum this up: I will tell Ramses, or #CatzillaMan, as we probably should call him now, to tell the world to cherish cats by posting as many additional attractive pictures and clips of cats and catish cartoon characters as they can come up with. And in case anyone finds any imagery that might offend a sensitive feline onlooker, they tag it as offensive to get it deleted. All with me on this, no objections? Wonderful. Now let me find #CatzillaMan's number and call him, will take a couple of minutes..."

Uzo is surprised not to encounter any objections. Her team even shuts up, to allow her to focus on her call. That's very considerate, makes her feel valued.

On unmuting her phone, Uzo discovers Ramses has been trying to call her, and that he left a message. He's eager for the guidance she's about to provide, that's nice. She'll have to return his appreciation, come up with some nice words, about his performance.

She'd better have one more look at it first, in English, to know what exactly she's praising, and choose the right words. What she saw in the canteen looked professional enough, but the main message is in the soundtrack, and the German news had voiced that over.

Uzo picks the BBC as source. Not always her first choice. Too high brow, too few feelgood stories. But in matters of planetary security she prefers to aim high. And she's curious. How do British egg heads deal with an incident that had her doubt her sanity? They only have to cope with half of it, but three giant black cats of unexplained origin, that's still big.

Ammon Safar. Not Ramses. #CatzillaMan's real name. Makes sense. Who would use his real name when trafficking people? Uzo is glad she was clever enough to check the news before calling him. High brow brainy she isn't, but at the day-to-day level, she doesn't do that badly.

That's really, really cool, how mister Safar fends off the media people. One hell of a messenger. Not hard, to think of a compliment. And nothing to criticize. Uzo especially likes his dress style. Just like when she met him. A plain regular guy, someone's dad or uncle.

The BBC news anchor has gotten himself three experts, to dissect the footage from Ammon's press conference. There's a grey-haired military affairs expert. He makes his impeccable suit and tie look like the uniform he must have been wearing for most of his life. He's flanked by a middle aged man wearing badly cut hair over a grey wool jacket and a beige sweater. The physicist. In remote attendance from Hollywood is an ageing hoodie wearer. He's introduced as a animation and special effects professional.

With the help of the anchor, the expertariat takes ten minutes to admit no clue.

The military expert proudly quotes "sources on grounds zero E, I and P with full access to a battery of advanced analytical instruments". Multiple armies are apparently doing their high tech best to find out what the Catzillas are, only to find dick. According to them, there shouldn't be any Catzillas, because light can't be swallowed in the way they do it.

Cue for the physicist to argue that aggregations of infinitely thin nothingnesses neutralizing photons are imaginable. And them taking the shape of three giant cats. Of the observed, insubstantial kind of blackness. Possible in theory. An interesting thought opening up novel paths for consideration. Impossible in practice, as an event...

"Well, Einstein, why don't you tell the cats they're impossible? Oops, they might not like that. And boom goes the planet. These cats are no 3D projections. Just too beeping big, just too beeping black. Impossible. For us, humans. And I'm not talking mere military and DARPA, I'm talking blockbuster Hollywood. For this, you need aliens, or God. I'd rather go with aliens, because..."

The anchor, greenish around the nose from two close encounters with filthy language, prefers not to let the public hear a Hollywood animation pro go blasphemy. He wraps the conversation up instead, with a joyful: "So many fascinating insights, but no source discernible yet. The giant cats in Cairo, Basra and Karachi remain a mystery. Despite all our technological sophistication. A moment of reckoning and humility? We will keep you informed. Please stay..."

A wonderful moment of vindication, for Uzo. The BBC egg heads only have to cope with half of her burden. They're spared the talking cats, their bilevelity lore, and the countdown. Their puzzled faces grant her permission to panic. Take that, Ruzo.

But not yet. Now Uzo needs to call Ramses, remember to call him mister Safar, and brief him for his next press conference. She would be forgiven to panic, but she'll keep going just a little longer. The next step isn't that hard. And perhaps it does help, with the challenge.

Mister Safar doesn't mind Uzo addressing him politely. He's a bit less articulate than on TV, because Uzo caught him eating, but not offended by her interruption. He calls her kiddie, like she was some niece. Very nice and easy conversation.

Mister Safar turns out not to be familiar, with the abundant online presence of cats. He readily admits he's not much into 'this computer stuff', as he calls it, except for the occasional bet. A son gets summoned, to demonstrate, and issue awareness is achieved, fast and fully:

"Allah be at our side! See what you mean, kiddie, horrible. Just think what it would feel like, if cats did this to us. Someone shows my wife a picture of me in a pink tutu, I kill him. - Business call, honey, just an analogy, nothing to worry about. Suit, white shirt, tie, no tutu, sure, honey. - Kiddie, still there? Sorry, just had to keep my wonderful wife informed. I'll make sure to have that next press conference tomorrow morning, and get people going. Tonight? No, not good. People aren't good at fast. We need to give them time, to let the news sink in. A good night's sleep, they hope it was just a hoax, and here we come again, and tell them something easy to do..."

Uzo is glad she had all by herself decided to call her new boss mister Safar. He deserves it.

## Strasbourg

"This is taking ages, Tasty Feet! Why can't Uzo just tell our media biggie what to say, and he does it? Is this because she's a mere she-biggie? This is so boring. Felinity Challenge can't be boring, it's heroic times. Can we at least check if Sweetie and Sylvie are available?..."

Mattoo is so full of vim Jesse can't bring himself to resent his nagging. He patiently explains how human conversation is far less immediate than Felinity style deep talking. Very complicated, and prone to misunderstandings. Not just because of the languages:

"Even if they speak the same language, humans often don't think the same. For example, one example, like it happens all the time. My supervisor tells me to hurry up. I do hurry up, vacuum the floor of the hall as fast as possible. Next he's angry. Turns out he wanted me to clean the pavement, not the hall. That's human conversation, for you."

Jesse shouldn't have chosen this example. Mattoo makes him clean the cat toilet next. He also insists on a new rhythm, every second day, for this exercise. Meaning Jesse will have to clandestinely buy additional cat litter. The M4 consider one helping a week sufficient.

Jesse will struggle with any expenses, if he really loses his job. On the other hand, if they fail at the Challenge, there isn't much time for him left, to turn homeless and criminal and end up in prison. It would be a terrible waste, to spend his last days behind the popcorn stand.

It's Jesse's first ever duvet day, as a worker. At school, he barely managed to attend the minimum number of days required to keep the social services from showing up. "More out than in", as his teachers used to say. As a worker, he's diligence personified. They pay him, they're entitled.

Done with the cat toilet Mattoo is now inspecting, to confirm an acceptable level of cleanliness, Jesse wonders if he should redeem himself by giving the bathroom a good scrub. It's a tedious exercise, because of all the stuff that needs to be displaced.

"Come on, Tasty Feet, let's go find Sweetie and Sylvie. They will both know the countdown is ticking, and who'd want to die a virgin? Come on, Tasty Feet. You don't need to let Sylvie in. We can tell her to deposit Sweetie in the stairwell, for you to fetch..."

Jesse would rather have the world end than tell a lady to deliver her cat for mating. That's so wrong. He can't even bring himself to talk sex with the mates he doesn't have. But he needs to display a minimum of cooperation, not to leave Mattoo feel uncherished:

"OK, OK, I'll check, if Sylvie is online. But biggies are normally working during the day, like I should be, if it wasn't for your need to be entertained, so please don't expect too much. I'll check she isn't online, and then I go fetch your crispy meat. Deal?"

Mattoo would prefer to be both gourmet and gallant, only accepts the deal with reservations. And fate sides with him.

Sylvie turns out to be at home, because she's unwell. Officially, unwell in the sense of a disturbed stomach. She readily admits she's faking this, because the aliens have landed, all hell is sure to break loose any minute, like it always does in such movies, and she's not prepared to waste her last days juggling bedpans. She proposes a speed date.

Jesse can deep hear Sweetie proposing her version of a matching plan to Mattoo. She calls it fast f\*\*\* instead of speed date, highlighting the physical aspect, but it's the same grab-what's-available-and-enjoy-yourself-while-you-can attitude.

No way. Jesse doesn't think of himself as prude, but there are limits to what a man can do and facilitate, on his first ever duvet day. He pulls the plug of the charger before Sylvie has time to ask for his address and apologizes to Mattoo:

"Sorry, my device is malfunctioning. I have to get it fixed first, only then can I call Sylvie again. Really sorry about this, mate. I will of course admit it was my fault, and apologize, OK?"

Without access to the mains, the phone has switched itself off. The screen is dark, to prove Jesse is telling the truth. Now he has to keep his fingers crossed. With a little luck, Mattoo doesn't understand electronic devices. He didn't start shouting yet, a good sign.

After a little pause, Jesse gets to hear the opposite of shouting, from Mattoo:

"No problem, Tasty Feet, no problem. Actually quite happy. Your gadget chose a good time to malfunction. This Sweetie, she is... I mean, honestly, did you hear her? She sounds like,... She must have been around, like with other he-cats, up close, to talk like that..."

Jesse keeps a straight face. Never would he go "Now look who's scared?"

A little unease is perfectly adequate. Ladies ready to go intimate are intimidating in totally novel ways, compared to moms, teachers and supervisors. Jesse feels so with Mattoo.

He has always considered unfair, how the ladies get away lightly, around romance. All the effort rests with the poor blokes. First, you have to court, and risk rejection. Anguish. Next, you're supposed to conquer. And in the physical sense, too. Even more anguish.

Jesse did of course watch his porn, and liked the graphic clarity. What goes where is shown in such great detail, even a slow brained and short sighted audience can't miss the concept.

For the rest, the movies rock bottomed his self esteem. He's not white, he doesn't do bodybuilding, and his most aggressive behavior ever was to miss the right moment to run away. Never will he satisfy the insatiable sexual appetites of those voracious ladies.

Mattoo is right, to shy away from an actual encounter. Much safer to savor anticipation.

Doing his best to comfort his buddy, Jesse goes:

"Glad you take the misfortune like a man, Mattoo. And the absence of ladies can't spoil our wonderful day off. I will now fetch your crispy meet, and a ham sandwich for me. Why don't you take advantage of my absence to have one more go at the mattress?"

Mattoo disappears under the bed even before Jesse leaves the room. And here comes the sound.

A couple of weeks back, Mattoo has discovered himself the perfect scratching board. Much better than the purpose-built device in the living room he won't touch.

The vulnerable underbelly of the bed is comfortably accessible and offers just the right kind of resistance. A cat in need of a manicure only needs to crawl under the bed, lay on his back and claw away at the bits of mattress protruding from the bedframe. Scratch, scratch, scratch, up and down the bed he claws, tearing off little brown fragments of mattress. A world of fun.

On his way to the butcher, Jesse wonders if he'll ever meet a lady. One of his customary thoughts, suddenly turned emergency. Only so few days of ever left, if they don't deliver.

## Karlsruhe

"Time for the magic lamp, already? Amazing, biggie, I came within a whiskers breadth of forgetting about it. It's because of the paw heal poison, even better magic that. But if you insist, we can of course make assurance double sure."

Safo rolls herself into position, to allow Uzo to point the heat at her sore paw.

Uzo had come close to forgetting to apply the infrared. She was only reminded of this task by the lioness herself. Waiting for Uzo to finish her phone call with mister Safar, Safo had started to lick her paw in what must be an unconscious response to resurging pain. Brave old lioness.

"Bloody hell, Miss Olagundoye, you should be on TV instead of those suited gasbags. How the hell do you get the old lady to do this? You'd think some kitten ready to play with a ball of wool. Come on, Miss Olagundoye, spill it. Do you talk to cats, like #CatzillaMan?"

Startled by the sudden entrance of the vet, Uzo is close to tears. Not because she burnt her hand on the infrared lamp. That injury hurts far less than the acute onset loneliness. If only she could tell that nice old man the truth, about her and Safo's role, and the boys, and how the four of them provide mister Safar with instructions. But she can't risk the spotlight and goes:

"So it's still on, the Catzilla story? Last time I looked at the BBC news, they seemed most inclined to suspect it's some scam. They even had a special effect maker, from Hollywood. But he said it's too big, can't be done. How about German media, what's their favorite guess?"

The vet doesn't notice she hurt her hand, or any other signs of distress. He makes himself comfortable on the sideboard and shares his insights with Uzo.

German language media are too preoccupied by the sudden resignation of the national football coach to care all that much, about the Catzillas. They stick to their basic approach for any trouble in the Middle East: Call for calm and consideration, wait for the Americans. The media also report anecdotal evidence of people rediscovering church or mosque to seek comfort, but the prevailing mood is more puzzled than worried: "Aliens? Oh come on, we're not in a movie."

Behind the scenes, frantic scrambling for explanations rages through all kinds of insitutions, including the local research facility KIT. The vet is friend with a colleague working at the Zebrafish Resource Center. This vet jogs with a physicist, they plan to try for a marathon next year. Today's jog was cancelled. The physicist had to attend an all hands emergency meeting for anyone capable of the seriously advanced kind of blue sky thinking. Result in a nutshell: Aliens.

There's a mountain of data piling up. The Americans, the Israelis, and some Russians and Chinese flown in for the purpose of shared misfortune, have been pointing every imaginable gadget at the Catzillas for hours. To no avail. The giant black shapes are there for people to see, they show up on film, but they happen without a reason. No source, no projector, no battery, no nothing. Stand-alone Catzillas. Three of them. In cities not exactly known for high tech prowess.

Three singularities, that's a lot of coincidence. The longer the Catzillas last, in their big fat black unexplainedness, the more pressing the who-does-them question. The aliens hypothesis is starting to feel like the more reassuring option. Fear of the void.

Listening to the vet spilling top confidential insights, Uzo recalls how mister Safar insisted to wait until tomorrow, before delivering the next message. What is happening at the local research

facility must be going on across the globe. Teams and teams of scientists trying to live up to expertise expectations. Poor fellows. Bilevelity, the existence of the deep-only, the whole concept of physical nothingness structured into sentiences, that's strong stuff.

"So what do you think, Miss Olagundoye? Aliens? A billionaire joke? Collective hallucinations? Me, I'm old, I can tell myself I have lived my life. Same for old Safo here. The two of us, world ends tomorrow, we get spared a lot of old age aches. But you, you're young. Aren't you worried? Is this the famous African fatalism at work, or are you just too busy integrating?"

Good question. Being done with Safo's paw, Uzo packs away the infrared lamp, to buy herself time. She has to liaise with her inner Ruzo again, to confirm she needs to lie. Her most trusted advisor stands firm: No spotlight, no endangering the permanent residency plan. She goes:

"Don't know about African fatalism. Africa, that's big. I'm from Nigeria. And that's still big. I'm actually from Lagos. Big diverse city. Keep cool and mind your own business, that's the attitude of choice. Perhaps a form of fatalism, if you like to put it that way.

And if I had to pick, from your choice, I'd default to aliens. What billionaire would select Cairo, Basra and Karachi, to stage a joke? Not plausible. And mass hallucinations, they should involve something more exciting than big fat black cats. Not plausible. Leaves the aliens. OK?"

The vet laughs his head off in response. This startles Safo upright and she deep goes:

"What is he growling about? No darts into my buttocks! If he dares one more dart, the Challenge is over, and out this mess goes. Never no more darts into my buttocks!"

Uzo quickly explains that the vet is enjoying himself, and no risk of darts. Now is not the time to tell the lioness about sedatives or necessary medical procedures. That's not cherishing.

Safo isn't convinced. Retreating to the part of her cage in view of the public, she goes:

"Might be true, but be careful with that he-biggie, Uzo. He delivers lambs, that's good, and he doesn't seem to carry darts now. But that's because he hides them. He's devious. I'm warning you now, so you don't come complaining, in case you wake up with a headache."

The vet doesn't of course hear any of this, he's still active in the other conversation:

"OK, Miss Olagundoye, let's default to aliens then. Aliens projecting Catzillas, instead of flying by in laser gun heavy starships. That's so us. Us as in humanity, I mean. Boring aliens. Hollywood suggested there would be lots of excitement, around first contact. Invasion, action, a fight for independence. Instead, we get tour operator adds. The travel app on my phone just urged me to book my Nile cruise with Catzilla photo op now. That's no proper first contact."

Uzo bites her lip in frustration, smiling anyway. Boring. Boring! If only. This vet will look lees smug once mister Safar unveils the stakes. Unless he's too snob to face up.

He still keeps talking. Perhaps a little more nervous than he cares to admit? Now he goes:

"As a kid, what am I saying, well into my teenage days, I used to pray for the aliens to come and abduct me. To spare me the next essay, because I was really bad at German, at school. Or to give me a chance to duck out of cleaning the hamster cage.

I hated that hamster. Got it for Christmas, instead of the dog I wanted. A hamster, that's useless. You can't even take it with you, like a rat. A hamster isn't considered cool, I can tell you that from my own painful experience. If hamster, why not outright cross dressing? That's not the kind of rhetorical question a teenage boy longs to hear, you can trust me on that..."

This senior staff is in one hell of a talkative mood. The Catzilla news is definitely affecting him more than he dares admit, even to himself. Something extraordinary happening, that's not part of his repertoire and he struggles to keep going.

Safo interrupts Uzo's musings with an irritated question:

"Why are there so many biggies outside? Can I have that small one for next lamb?"

Neither Uzo nor the vet can see the visitor area from where they stand chatting.

Uzo has to come up with one more lie to go check what the lioness is deep talking about. Pretending to have had too much water with her lunch, she promises to be right back and steps out, only to freeze once she sees the crowd. The predator house is packed tight.

It's a very orderly crowd, sorted by height. No one dared climb the barrier keeping visitors at a safe distance of the actual cage bars, because the sign allows only staff in this corridor.

Only one toddler sits on the barrier, held by a dad now smiling apologetically at Uzo.

Staring straight at this toddler and wagging her tail in anticipation, Safo reiterates:

"Yes, that one! Nice head, big juicy brains. There's an adult biggie already attached. You can make him cut off the head. That head, it will count as very cherishing..."

Crowd control, in German, while deep arguing with a feline with a big appetite, that's beyond Uzo. She quickly retreats to the backstage area to fetch the vet. It only takes him one look at the crowd to take decisive action. He calls the lead keeper, to come and order.

Ten minutes later, the predator house is empty and both entrances are shut. Uzo and the vet can hear the lead keeper bark commands outside.

Another ten minutes later, the lead keeper opens the entrance on the elephant side and allows twenty nine people in. He had been aiming for thirty, but a lady was unwilling to separate from her boy. Now they both have to wait for the next round.

As soon as the group has assumed museum formation, the lead keeper promotes the vet to tour guide. His job to explain why flashes are prohibited. And the rest, while he's at it, please. If people come see lions and leopards because of the Catzillas, they might as well learn something.

And so the vet explains, about big felines. How endangered they are, in which natural habitats. How they would like to live, and how the zoo tries to accommodate their needs. And about Safo's advanced age, and the corresponding ailments. Just like other senior citizens.

Uzo deep translates for the lioness, at her insistence. She takes care to choose nice words, and skips some gruesome details about lions and tigers hunted to be turned into traditional Chinese medicine. Too uncherishing, unsafe under current conditions.

A few questions get raised. "How heavy is Safo, how much meat does she eat per day?" and "Why does she stare at me?" The vet's answers trigger a couple of nods respecting shrieks, and the first group is let out at the meerkats end. Next round.

Once Safo is well informed, Uzo heads for the outer corridor to check how big the crowd is.

She discovers a queue winding all along the outer cages. Contrary to German custom as practiced at the supermarket check-out, the adults are chatting, animatedly. The vet isn't the only one seeking consolation in communication.

Funny, how people grasp that the Catzillas are about cats, and to see them head for the biggest specimen on display. Uzo feels hope well up. This queue is making an effort, to react to the news. Without even having been called into action. Add mister Safar's talent, and a win is within reach.

## **Strasbourg**

Incredible, how much fun a cat can have with a one hundred gram package of minced meat. Jesse had to buy a hot merguez for himself, to pacify the butcher, but this spectacle is worth it.

Mattoo shredded his parcel comprehensively, to get at the edible core. Now he's in process of licking every last morsel from the inner, plastic wrap. A happy hunter savoring his prey.

With Mattoo busy, Jesse dared plug in his phone.

They're still going strong in the news, across platforms. The Egyptian government has announced another press conference for tomorrow morning. Apparently, #CatzillaMan will explain the meaning of the giant black cats, and ask people to contribute to an as yet unspecified collective effort to do something about them.

Jesse's preferred retro rapper, Oxmo Puccino, is rumored to show up for an impromptu appearance in a Paris club tonight, for an homage to the Catzillas.

Lucky Parisians. They get all the fun a young man is entitled to expect, from a city. Down east in Strasbourg, the rents are nearly as high, in exchange for none of the fun. Bad deal.

Wow. There's already a Cult of Catzilla, or CoC. Dress code all black, which spares the mostly young adherents unwelcome outfit expenses. You only need a grey eye patch with a black Sphinx. Looks flashy in combination with this year's hip hair style, a blueish kind of grey.

The eye patch signals advanced awareness. By wearing it, CoC adherents admit they only ever saw half of everything, or even less, until the Catzillas showed up. The projections reminded them we're no culmination, just another fly shit on the window to universal understanding.

That's real deep thinking, very much in tune with Jesse's own feelings. He contemplates joining. The eye patch looks OK on black guys. Most of the folks who updated their profile pictures to the CoC look are white, but there are two black guys, and they look good.

Some of the CoC ladies are so pretty not even an eye patch can ruin their looks. Talking philosophy with them feels much more alluring than meeting massive Sylvie.

Jesse contemplates himself hinting, and hinting only, at his close association with the Felinity experience. This should turn on any CoC lady. They would share only ever knowing half of everything, and comfort each other. Perhaps up to the point of...

"Tasty Feet? Tasty Feet, I think we should take advantage of your gadget's resurrection to call Sylvie and Sweetie. The crispy meat was very invigorating. Now I feel like doing something, with all this energy. Sweetie, she's... She's many things, and I'm not sure, about some of them. But she's also..., how to say this.... Sweetie is accessible. I like accessible."

Jesse hates being reminded of his intellectual non-prowess.

Mom was right, he's an idiot. He shouldn't have plugged that phone back in.

Jesse might be an idiot, but he's good at apologizing:

"Sorry, Mattoo, we can't go find Sweetie and Sylvie yet. Important Felinity team business needs to be dealt with first. Look, there's a Cult of Catzilla. I need your expert opinion, if this qualifies as cherishing. There are nice ladies, too. As Catzilla cultists, I would guess them to have nice cats..."

Jesse doesn't get to finish his explanation. Mattoo insists on meeting cultists, and their cats. Which means they have to update their profile picture.

Jesse wears his eye patch on the right eye, Mattoo on the left. Lacking the real thing, they had to doctor their picture. Not Jesse's area of expertise, but the app on his phone delivers a surprisingly pleasant result. You'd bet they're really wearing the things.

As soon as they post their “Hi CoC, nice to meet you!”, they get flooded with warm welcomes.

Jesse would never have dreamt of starting a style. Trying to keep up, often with last year’s craze, due to provincial lag, that’s him.

Now, he’s in the lead, and experiencing copycats. Quite literally.

Some of the CoC ladies, lacking access to a cat, copy and paste Mattoo into their profile pictures. It’s lucky the feline wannabe gigolo struggles with the tiny screen. Otherwise, he would be at acute risk of falling in love with a copy of himself.

Jesse describes what he sees and reads, Mattoo chooses where and how to reply.

A good team can spend hours that way.

## **Karlsruhe**

Half past six already. It’s black bloody night out there, all visitors should already have left the zoo. At nightfall, it says in the how-to-zoo instructions. But they continue to queue for access to predator house. Not willing to give up now, after hours of patient waiting.

Understandable. This will take as long as it takes. Uzo will get home late today.

The vet seems to be enjoying his overtime, he’s not shortening his lion lecture.

Uzo had to fetch him a cup of coffee and a bottle of water, more than an hour ago. Taking small sips now and then keeps his voice going, and he smiles at visitors. Totally unlike the senior keeper. He’s still dividing the queue into tour groups of never more than thirty people, strictly. Doesn’t smile at all, this one, but still looks content, in his own grim way.

Uzo urges to leave. It has been a long eventful day. She needs rest, time to worry in peace.

“Look, there’s another one. With the blue bonnet? Marvelous, those large heads. Even more out of proportion in the very young than in adults. Did you ever try baby biggie brain, Uzo? Oh come on, no reason to take offense. I wasn’t referring to your own litter, I’m not some monster...”

It has been a while, since Safo has been fed. Boosts her interest in toddlers.

Reminding herself that lions, even deep talking lionesses, are predatory animals entitled to a lack of ethics, Uzo very gently retorts:

“Own kids or someone else’s kids, Safo, that’s the same for humans. We don’t eat them. Never ever no way. And we say kids, not litter. Because they mostly come in single births. Twins are rare, triplets very, very rare, and more is exceptional...”

Uzo can deep feel Safo’s appetite for preschool humans. The lioness’ tail is twitching, her ears and eyes are pointed at the nearest gurgling baby in his stroller. She’s polite enough no longer to say so, but her idea of what to do next, if it wasn’t for the cage bars, is clear.

The vet is taking his time, with the last group. Uzo wonders about his private life. Shouldn’t he urge to get home, to be with his family at a time of uncertainty and upheaval? Why teach a group of strangers about lions and leopards? Or is this flirting?

The girl in sportswear with the big headphones, Uzo has seen her jog around the lake, she seems to be coming to the zoo every afternoon, she has caught the vet’s attention. He only pretends to talk to the whole group. Would a man of his age aspire to get laid with a student? He’s at least twice her age. What would his daughters say?

Uzo once again wonders, about how the locals organize their family lives.

Her neighborhood in Etsenred is abysmally old and quiet. A whole street of very nice houses with barely anyone living there. An ancient lady to the right, struggling with the garage door when she drives out to do her groceries shopping on Saturdays. An old man with a walking frame to the left. A nurse drops by every morning and evening, even on weekends.

Further up the street, there's a yellow house with an old couple with two dogs. They get visited by what must be their daughter, a lady in her forties. She comes with a preschool kid. Probably her daughter. Must have been a dangerous pregnancy, at that advanced age. The yellow house is like the party section of the street. They even laugh in the garden, in summertime.

Puzzled by the waste of magnificent housing, Uzo did some research. Only two people per household, on average. More than a third of people live alone, it's the most frequent way of life. Her street is far from unusual. The vet might live in just such a house, alone.

"Thank you very much for your interest, please do come back. And no need to wait for Catzilla news on TV, our animals are always interesting. But now they need their rest."

The senior keeper has had enough. He might have a family to go back to in the evening. Rudely interrupting the lecturing vet, he rattles his bundle of keys at the group, to signal they're either out or will end up locked up. And the group jumps on the signal, with the jogger in the lead.

And the vet to follow her out, oblivious to the unspoken message.

Uzo is left with the senior keeper and gets ready for an uncomfortable moment. He's bound to be cross, because she didn't tackle the tasks he had ready for her and assisted the vet instead.

"What a day, Cognac! Now you're my..., We look at the watch for... Tomorrow, we need to fill in the form for... We have a right to..., Cognac, important learning."

The senior keeper is talking loudly, as usual. Unfortunately, he uses words Uzo is pretty sure never to have encountered before. Only the beginning and the end of the sentence make sense. In between, there's something about the time on his wristwatch, half past six. She nods, to signal acquiescence with whatever he's talking about. As long as he isn't cross, it's fine with Uzo.

She allowed to leave in return. On her way out, she deep bids farewell to Safo. The lioness grants her leave, too, with just a hint of upcoming lamb head expectation. What a day.

## Strasbourg

The M4 are home, both, and rummaging in the kitchen. Mattoo is resting on the duvet on Jesse's feet. Exhausted by an afternoon of indirect social network bonding, he suddenly stopped purring and turned out to have fallen asleep, leaving Jesse to worry about his fate.

When he called his supervisor, the plan felt good. Why go do a nasty job if the world is about to end? Why not have a nice day while you still can? What's getting sacked, compared to a boiling planet? Peanuts. Perfectly irrelevant peanuts.

That's how Jesse felt, a couple of hours ago. Now anticipation is creeping in.

The world is basically as usual, give or take a couple of Catzillas on the news. The later it gets, the closer the next day, and with it the next decision.

He might get away with one day of absence without a medical certificate, he'll just lose the corresponding hours. More senior colleagues are doing it all the time, why not him? Because he's the black guy, of course, but that's only a marginal problem at this stage.

A second day of absence without justification, that's sure to trigger the standard keep-on-and-bye-by warning letter. Not good. But going back to work feels even worse. Even with outstanding apologetic skills, Jesse won't be able to hide his good health. His supervisor will know he cheated. And this cheating caused RDRV cinema dramatic losses. A whole day without

revenue from the popcorn stand, that's ugly numbers. Before even counting in the reputational damage caused by lack of cleaning. One single regular customer so offended by a stray ice cream wrap that he vows never to come back, that's serious damage. And there might be more.

Jesse feels exactly as his mom always predicted. "Never cheat, Jean-Segun," she used to say, "you're too stupid to get away with it. You'll only end up stuck in a corner. And don't count on me to help you get out when that happens. You can rot in prison, just like your nuisance of a dad. That's just the same for me, good riddance."

His mom was so right. And Mattoo so wrong, to suggest skiving.

The M4 sound like having one more argument. And bang goes the kitchen door. And wham the flat door. As if they had problems. The world is about to end, and Jesse is stuck between feuding landlords and a bossy cat, with a bawling supervisor upcoming.

Jesse's phone provides some comfort.

A substantial number of CoC ladies seem to consider him less useless than he feels. Probably due to Mattoo's presence on the profile picture. Jesse would never dare answer without the cat's support, for fear of making a fool of himself through spelling mishaps or dumb wording, but he likes to look at the little hearts the ladies send.

When they don't send him romantic emojis, the ladies discuss a broad range of issues. They are the Cult of Catzilla, but that's more for the profile pics than topics. Currently, two are disagreeing over the music clip "No time" by Faf and three exchange recipes for fast dinners. As the threads intersect, it reads like Faf being accused of excessive saltiness.

Jesse admires the ease and extroversion of the exchange. Everybody else online chats effortlessly, and so fast. Never would he be able to keep up, even if he wasn't afraid to make a fool of himself. The CoC aren't his kind of people.

Searching for other Catzilla-themed forums, Jesse discovers a lot of science.

A slide set that went viral two hours ago and is by now available in seventeen languages, including basque, explains how the giant black cats are cloaks hiding the access to fusion reactors that could power electric cars for everybody. "Like an invisibility cloak and the stealth fighter planes, but the other way round," the author claims.

A three minute video clip features a serious, responsible looking man, like the guy in that life insurance add always interrupting searches. He explains that the ongoing experiment in mind control will last another ten days. No reason to panic, but now is the time to order a particular brand of hangover medicine, to be ready to counter the side effects.

Jesse wonders if he should get drunk or stoned, or both. He falls asleep instead.

## **Etsenred**

"Orji, honestly, I'm afraid I don't have the..."

"When have I ever asked you, for anything? This one tiny favor, Uzo, that's nothing..."

Uzo puts the phone on loud and on the window sill. She might as well cook her rice and cut her vegetables while her sister is freaking out. Just because she dared say no.

She was still on the way home when Orji called. Seeing her number was nice, Uzo felt cared for. Catzillas on the news, and her sister worrying about the younger sibling stuck in a foreign land. She enthusiastically took the call, only to find out this wasn't about her.

Orji has fallen in love with a dress, from a particular online shop. The bastards only accept orders from specific countries, Nigeria not among them. A workaround is needed, as available thanks to Uzo's current location. She only needs to order the dress and forward it.

At first, Uzo felt honored. Orji deigning to admit she was in a position to do her a favor, that was a novel situation, not unpleasant. But when she learned she would also have to prepay, a small fortune compared to her meagre income, she claimed no time for such extras.

Uzo explained how she had worked overtime today, because people queued to see the zoo's felines. And how she expected the same for tomorrow, assuming the Catzillas would stay.

Orji was unimpressed. According to her, this giant cat story was a typical case of fake news. "And a couple of minutes, to order a dress, that's no big deal. Just do it at work."

They have been arguing back and forth for a while now, with Uzo granted less and less time to state her side. Orji isn't used to take no for an answer, she's getting real bitchy now.

But Uzo, having handled an Egyptian general, a senior lioness and a lot of foreign language speakers is in no mood to bow. Not this time. It's her own money, too, earned the hard way.

"So this is what happens? You waste our parents money on your ticket, and next you dare play naughty haughty? Shame on you, Uzo, shame on you. That's not the kind of family values our parents taught us, and you know it. You can't be serious..."

Uzo is done with her carrots and cutting the onions now. That's what makes her eyes all watery. She's not angry at Orji, her sister doesn't deserve such a response. She will keep her calm, with the help of Ruzo, and look forward to a nice dinner. All alone in a cold foreign land. With the world about to end. Those are really powerful onions.

## Cairo

One of the boys is coming down with a cold, he's sniffing in the dark. Outside, the burglar alarm from a car that went off like a siren many minutes ago is dying down in a series of faint beeps. The room is more than quiet enough for Ammon to sleep.

On any other day, he would already be snoring. Tonight, he lies awake.

It was a good idea to wait, with the second press conference, to give people time to digest the first batch of Catzilla news. Ammon is still convinced of this approach, and not just because his general endorsed it. It's sound, to wait.

Unfortunately, it also provides him with time to worry.

He's confident concerning his own performance. He did well in his first round, ad hoc, without any preparation. He's sure to do even better tomorrow. He has been rehearsing his wording at length, it's perfect. He'll tell people what to do, which cat footage they need to produce, and which to discard. They'll understand and act. Respect, that's a universal concept. People know what it looks like, and the opposite. Everybody has been there. Couple of examples, that's all it takes.

Ammon is confident to get the message across. What keeps him awake is his team.

To rely on a Nigerian kid that sounds like little clue, that's not how he does business. What if she fucks up? With someone so young, how can he be sure she gets what the cats tell her? It would be a pity, to lose earth, and his life, just when the going gets real good.

Ammon himself should be talking to whatever is behind the Catzillas, instead of working through such an incompetent subordinate. Changing his position for the umpteenth time, he still doesn't see any way to bring this change about. He's not getting anywhere, only missing sleep.

Ammon decides to rely on Allah, to make the kid clever enough not to fuck up.

Satisfied with this solution, he sags into a dreamless sleep.

Ten hours later, the charge d'affaires delivers his speech, in a best suit no longer pinching at the waist. He must have lost a little weight, over all this excitement. He definitely has been to the loo a lot, especially this morning. You don't get to talk to the world every day.

The press tent on what is now called Catzilla square is packed. The spotlights would be blinding if a clever Ammon hadn't taken the precaution to wear dark glasses. He takes them off for his most important sentences, to look his audience straight in the eye when he urges the world to give their best, "with all available cameras, and damned be the data limit, this is too important."

Ammon can feel the world sucking in his every word, anxious to get going, to do something.

When they reach the questions stage, his positive impression is confirmed, beyond even his wildest expectations. Not one hint of doubt or criticism. The few journalists who do speak up only want to make sure they got the message right.

That pictures of cartoon cats count to the same extent as the real furry felines.

That the 'report' functions can be used to mark inappropriate social media content for deletion.

That TV channels running loops of feline-themed content will count as per audience numbers.

The last one had Ammon pause for thinking for a quarter of a second, before confirming wholeheartedly, and adding all cinemas to the mix for good measure. A clever extension of his exhortations, why wouldn't he adopt it?

Half an hour into question time, the microphones and some of the lights fail, before quickly being resuscitated by a generator kept at the ready for eventualities. Ammon and his audience proceed unperturbed. They're the mettle kind of crowd, unimpressed by default.

Shortly thereafter, Ammon is listening nonchalantly to one more request for confirmation when one of his aides, a flashy uniformed youngster, hands him a note. He reads: "Main power down good news, crash because everybody Felinity Challenge, watching and contributing."

Ammon is proud of his city. That's the Cairo spirit. Plenty of energy, always ready for action, and hitting hard. By the time the villages wake up, Cairo will already have saved the world. He shares his pride with his audience, to great acclaim.

Another ten hours later, Ammon still can't get enough of watching the world respond to his call.

He's at home, once again comfortable on his sofa. It wasn't for the wife muttering about disruptions at the bakery and commandeering the older girls to go hunt staples for hoarding, and him to provide them with cash, the day would be even more exhilarating, but it's still his best.

The response to his call for respectful cat footage is awesome.

Billions of pictures are being taken. As of the last news update, an average of 10 GB of material has been uploaded, per person. There isn't much else happening, all over the world, and bandwidth and energy supplies are stretched everywhere. The occasional blackout or network breakdown has also caused the odd fatality, but overall, things are looking bright.

The positive trend has also been confirmed by the Nigerian kid. When Ammon quizzed her on the phone, she sounded less cheerful than he would have expected, but her contacts seem to be rather satisfied, with current progress. Humanity has apparently got thirty days, to prove it's cherishing cats, plenty of time left, they're going to make it.

Just to be on the safe side, in case they take more than a week, Ammon goes fetch some of his emergency cash and sends his most business savvy son fetch an additional supply of recreational herbs. When the boy is allowed to buy some for himself, he gets really good prices.

## Strasbourg

“Your presence won’t be required from today on, for an as yet unspecified number of days. Please note that all service staff have been declared technically unemployed due to the requisition of the premises for the national Felinity Challenge effort. You will be eligible for benefits according to your employment history, please refer to the employment agency for details.”

Jesse has read the message five times, and it’s not getting any better.

He had expected the sack, and was looking forward to making good use of his newish union membership to get it revoked. He had a plan ready, for getting sacked. Not for a national emergency, like in terror attacks.

He doesn’t need to check with the employment agency, he knows he’s not yet entitled to benefits. That particular date has been noted in his calendar, as one of the important milestones on his way to establishing himself as an independent adult. Three weeks to go. Won’t happen.

Jesse’s rent is due tomorrow. Paying it would reduce his minimal financial margin of maneuver even more. With no receipts to expect, it would be stupid to pay up. But the M4 are surprisingly organized, as far as collecting their due is concerned. They come knocking.

Gerardmer or Germany? Jesse doesn’t need to think twice.

Confronting his mother in told-you-so mode, that’s certainly not how he’s going to spend what might be his last weeks. There are limits, to what a man can endure. Even ending up on the street, just like his mother predicted, is better than an endless loop of reproaches.

He’s going to get himself into one hell of a lot of trouble, stealing from lawyers.

Jesse surprises himself by coming up with an excuse. It’s lame, of course, but uttering a lame excuse is much better than just shrugging. Provides people with a reason to call him stupid, the first step towards redemption and forgiveness. Using a sheet from the lined block he bought to pin his mom her monthly letter, he writes:

“Dear Mesdames,

Felinity Challenge emergency. Had to take Mattoo to special vet, vitally important.

Will take a couple of days, at least. Room ready for next lodger, all clean.

Apologies, Jean-Segun.”

Uzo is no vet, but she works with one.

After some consideration, Jesse decides to deposit the letter and his keys in the liquor cabinet in the living room, next to the M4s favorite bottle. It’s the most tidy spot, and they are sure to reach for this bottle at least once a day.

Doesn’t take him long to store his few belongings in his backpack. With so many people always foretelling him he’ll end up on the street, he prefers to travel light, just in case they’re right. He only leaves behind his voluminous bathrobe. His successor will need one, this legacy will serve him well. With his backpack and sports bag ready, he goes fetch Mattoo’s transport cage.

On seeing it, his feline mate switches from jolly to fury and screams:

“No way! Tasty Feet, how dare you, that’s no cherishing. This stinks, and we’re it gets you stinks even worse. No one gets me into this. No fucking way!”

A couple of apologies, explanations and considerations later, the cage is back where it came from and the content of Jesse’s sports bag has been transferred to his backpack. The sports bag is repurposed as feline sedan by means of two towels allowing Mattoo to rest comfortably.

Satisfied with the comfort of his carrier, the cat goes:

“OK, this will do, let’s hit the outside and go find Safo and Uzo. But I warn you, Tasty Feet. This has to stay open at all times, and my head stays out, to allow me to see where we are going. And no more arguing, I’ve heard enough of back talk for a whole week.”

Jesse would love to argue, because a young black guy with a backpack and a cat bag, that’s so not inconspicuous at all, but Mattoo clearly won’t have it. Resigned, he goes:

“OK, zipper stays open. And your head stays out, most if the time. But when I tell you to duck down, you have to. One needs paperwork ready, when one crosses a border, and I don’t have any for you. You have to do this Mattoo, to make sure not to end up at the shelter.”

The cat has heard enough bad tales, about those shelters, to immediately promise compliance.

To Jesse’s elation, the trip is pleasantly uneventful.

A refreshing hike through the unusually quiet city and the empty park, a stroll over the pedestrian bridge across the Rhine, another walk through the park to Kehl station. Perfectly, laughably easy. If it wasn’t for his money worries, and the Felinity Challenge, Jesse would be a happy man.

Same for Mattoo. He’s blabbing excitedly, nonstop, seeing she-cats everywhere. There never are any, but his inner eye won’t stop wishful thinking just now. To Jesse’s relief, his mate ignores the occasional bird, shows no sign of wanting to escape to hunt. Jesse promises him some crispy meat for when they reach their destination anyway, just for precaution.

The German ticket machine surprises the lucky traveler by providing the option of a French interface, and a rather inexpensive regional ticket that will take him all the way to Uzo’s place.

Jesse has to change trains three times. A trip that would take less than an hour by car will add up to over four hours, because he has to wait for connections, but that’s no problem. He can’t meet Uzo at her workplace, because pets can’t be brought to a zoo and visiting friends at their workplace is a no-do, and she won’t be at home before late afternoon.

On the trains, Jesse quickly discovers that a black guy with a cat is more welcome than one without. Normally, people have a discreet but pertinent way of avoiding him on public transport. The seat next to him will stay empty for longer than logical. He’s the last one to get talked to spontaneously, when any incident occurs. Pretty unnerving, especially without a phone.

Today, Jesse gets to chat with more fellow travelers than over his whole previous life. And all encounters are pleasant, despite him not recalling more than five sentences of German. His new acquaintances all have working phones, and are happy to help him find words.

Jesse’s new vocabulary is exclusively focused on cats. With him carrying one and the Felinity Challenge ongoing, that makes sense.

Mattoo is pleased to be centre stage, he does like getting stroked. When it’s done right.

Jesse gets assigned the role of cat touch coach, initiating people to the fine art of where and how to touch a cat to make it feel good. This distraction is a fortunate coincidence, because Mattoo doesn’t take well to the rumbling and vibrations of the trains. If it wasn’t for all the attention, he would end up being sea-sick. From time to time, he reminds Jesse he will need a good bite of crispy meat on arrival, to compensate for his sufferings.

They make it to Karlsruhe main station, where Mattoo barely survives the shock of a nose-to-nose encounter with a big fat beast of a black dog. Jesse has to carry his bag higher from then on, and is made to promise an even bigger bite of crispy meat.

On the tram, Jesse notices a beautiful girl a couple of seat rows ahead. No fake, no bling. Hair short, boyish, just like he loves it. A bit like a young Hale Berry, but darker. They would be a perfect match. Hypnotized by her phone, she doesn't notice him.

The longer the ride takes, the more fretful his imagination gets. What if this beauty is Uzo? The time is about right, she should be done working now. And she takes this tram. He knows how to get to her place because she mentioned her daily commute. One more stop. And another. And perfect girl still shows no intention to get off.

Next stop Etsenred. Jesse apologizes to the granny stroking Mattoo in just the right intensity and bids her farewell. On his way to the door, he has to let fade his last glimmer of hope. No, perfect girl can't be Uzo, she shows no inclination to dismount at the right stop.

## Etsenred

This is just like the Gerardmer region. They're less high up, it would be even colder there, but this is one more hilly middle of nowhere with lots of fir trees. A sign helpfully points the way. To reach the actual village, he has to leave the valley with its river and pastures behind and climb a steep path up into the forest. Exactly as Uzo had described.

Glad to be done sitting in trains for today, Jesse strides up the hill without hesitation. Yes, he's stupid, he can't just show up and expect he'll be allowed to stay. No, he doesn't care.

Mattoo interrupts this proud resolve with one more plaintive:

"Are we there yet? How long until I get my crispy meat? Can't you wobble less?"

Jesse has to admit that Mattoo has been a well behaved cat and deserves a treat. Problem is how to get one. Back at the Karlsruhe main station, there would probably have been some sort of supermarket with a butcher, or at least some packaged meat, in the vicinity. But up here, he can only try what passes for a high street in a village and keep his fingers crossed.

Jesse is lucky. There's a fine looking butcher, and it's still open, if only just. Putting down his sports bag, he tells Mattoo to stay put, which he solemnly promises, and enters the shop.

The matron behind the counter starts shouting immediately, in a very fast and local variant of German. As she's pointing at Mattoo in his bag, Jesse guesses the commotion is about him. He tries to explain, in his very freshly acquired specialist vocabulary, that all will be fine.

What he says doesn't seem to make much sense to the matron, but it calms her down enough to stop shouting. Instead she screams at someone who must be somewhere at the back. This brings about a lad of Jesse's age, his professional gear introducing him as the butcher, or his apprentice.

He addresses Jesse in what must be English at first, which Jesse counters in some more of his German. His accent must be telltale, the young butcher switches to French, and even turns out to be passably fluent. Jesse gets to explain the reason of his visit, and about Mattoo being a very special cat that will stay and wait just like that.

Next, the butcher makes a video clip of the feline star patiently staying in his bag in front of their shop, despite his mother going in and out and even making hush sounds at him. It's for his website, as he proudly explains, combining Felinity Challenge participation and promotional effort in a most subtle way. In return for Mattoo's acting, Jesse gets a good pound of the very best and freshest minced meat, for free, and pointed to where Uzo lives. Very village. She has never set one foot into this butcher shop, but which local wouldn't know where the black girl lives?

With only a couple of meters to go, Jesse wishes he hadn't let himself get dreamy, about that girl in the tram. If Uzo turns out to be white, or ugly, or both, he will be disappointed and it risks showing in his face. Which would be a disgrace. That's not how you treat your team mate.

This is a very nice house indeed. Like where a doctor, or a notary, would live. The main entrance is impressive, the decorated metal door alone must have cost a fortune. The side entrance features a more conventional wooden door, and Jesse fervently hopes that's where he's headed. He's suddenly so aware he's a popcorn vendor, and it doesn't feel good.

There are two bells at the gate, and one says 'U. Olagu.' Uzo's full name didn't fit on the tiny bell label, but that must be her. Holding his breath, Jesse rings.

With her afternoon tea ready, Uzo was just wondering whether to award herself some cookies with it. It has been one hell of a day, she didn't even have time for a lunch break. The zoo is bursting with visitors, and they all want to see the big felines and take Felinity Challenge pictures. No more time for lectures, to the vets chagrin. All able hands have to help with rigorous queue management, as defined by the head keeper. Every visitor gets ten seconds, and that's it.

The door bell. Expecting one more neighbor inquiring about a potential for privileged access to the zoo and the predator house, Uzo puts on her stern face. She's on track for good integration, never would she contemplate a corrupt act. She won't go so far as to call it racist, that people assume she might be willing to open doors, for a little extra, but she'll look disgusted.

That's no neighbor. That's great! Taking in Jesse's lanky silhouette and the sports bag he's carrying up front, with the expectant Mattoo, Uzo identifies her visitors at once.

At first, they just stand there, exchanging deep greetings and expressions of joy.

Soon enough, Uzo becomes aware neighbors might be looking, and find their silent standing intriguing, if not peculiar or threatening. She asks the boys in, and offers Jesse tea.

Jesse doesn't move at first. He's stunned. Uzo is even more beautiful than the girl on the tram. Same no frills dress style, same haircut, but her eyes and her smile... She's the most perfect girl he has ever seen up close. He finally manages to stumble into the apartment, put down Mattoo's bag and his backpack and sit down on the couch as told. But he's unable to speak, on all levels.

Mattoo jumps out of his bag, glad to get a chance to stretch himself, and goes:

"OK biggies, so far, so good. Nice place, Uzo. Will improve your couch later on, needs scratching. But for now, first things first, and I'm informing you very officially here: This it was, for me and your kind of traveling. Not doing this again, no way. My future she-cat, she comes visit me, may she have a good ride. I stay put, right here. And now you serve my crispy meat."

As Uzo has never heard of crispy meat, Jesse needs to explain. To his surprise, he manages to think straight enough to deep utter the corresponding sentences with only a slight stutter.

His explanation makes Uzo burst into laughter, which sends him right back to stunned.

He made the most beautiful girl ever laugh, and not about him. They're sitting here, side by side, in a private tête-à-tête. A whole array of paradises suddenly seem within reach.

If there's one thing Mattoo hates, it's procrastinating biggies. And them flirting reminds him the nagging absence of she-cats. He goes, in his sharpest deep voice:

"That's enough, you two. None of your complicated foreplay now, I'm not going wait for the hours it will take you to get going and done with your sex. I want my crispy meat. Now!"

Now they're both laughing, to Mattoo's exasperation. But at least Jesse obediently stand up to go open his backpack. An exhausted cat is getting his treat.

The rustling of the crispy meat shell. The smell, faint at first, but getting stronger when Jesse brings the package closer. And then he tears it open a bit. An explosion. Mattoo's inner predator has him jump before Jesse is done letting go the prey, he's lucky to escape unscratched.

Watching Mattoo rip apart the paper to devour his minced meat, Jesse feels shame. This is so unhygienic. It's a wooden floor, it can be wiped clean, but still. A bloody mess, right in the middle of this nice living room, and it's totally his fault. He shouldn't have. There's a tiled kitchen corner, that's where he should have fed Mattoo. He's stupid, and Uzo will hate him.

Feeling the strength of Mattoo's elation sends Uzo wondering. What if they're doing this wrong?

Humanity is going strong, on the pictures and videos side, but Felinity isn't impressed. The response got a little less muted when Safo told the network, at Uzo's request, how well their numbers compared to those achieved in the last round. She pointedly left out population growth and technological progress, which allowed her to perform staggering arithmetics. Felinity acknowledged the feat, but the countdown is still running. Something is wrong.

If one pack of minced meat... Admittedly a big one, but this doesn't seem to be the clinching factor. Mattoo is already slowing down, must be filling up fast... If one package of minced meat can induce such strong emotions, and keeping in mind Safo's reaction to the lamb head, they should perhaps try a different, less abstract form of cherishing.

As expected, Uzo only needs to think 'lamb's head' more forcefully to alert Safo.

Deep talking to all of three of them, resolutely, the old lioness goes:

"Where's my lamb? No way this juvenile gets my lamb! I'm entitled to my lamb. Or some big headed biggie litter. Either way, it's me first, and second, and the juvenile will get the leftovers."

Safo must somehow be aware they share a physical space, because she continues, ever more irritated:

"Where the hell are you all? What do you think you are doing, meeting away from me? What's wrong with the spot in front of my cage? Just because I'm behind bars doesn't allow you to mess around like no discipline. Mattoo, you're ridiculous, pretending to growl at me like that. Wait until I get hold of you, to teach you how not to eat ahead of a lioness..."

Uzo can feel the emotional waves of both felines gaining in strength. This is exactly what she had hoped for, why she called Safo. Pumping herself up to maximum courage, she weighs in:

"Safo, thank you, you're wonderful, very much deserve another lamb's head. Just one question, before I do the needful, to get you one as fast as possible: Would the provision of fresh meat, as recently killed as possible, by any chance count as cherishing? As in enough cherishing to meet the Felinity Challenge? Just asking because the countdown is still running, even though we've already got so many pictures. How about a tasty add on?"

An explosively hilarious lioness is no less impressive than an angry one. When she has overcome her laughing fit, she explains, very slowly and in extra simple terms, because she's dealing with biggie idiots, that the Challenge could of course be met by food. But as biggies are always running so desperately short of animals to kill, and react so reluctantly to proposals to sacrifice some of their own, Felinity accepted representations instead. Grudgingly, of course...

Uzo has to hug a puzzled Jesse, he's such a genius. Without him bringing Mattoo, and their crispy meat act, she might never have solved the riddle.

Reaching for her phone, she calls mister Safar. He insisted she could call him at all times and would never fail to reach him, whatever the hour. He sounded as anxious as herself, around her ability to handle, and keen to help. Time for him to prove his worth.

It takes him only three rings to answer, and he's immediately with Uzo, concerning the new way of cherishing. Also comes up with a good story:

He'll use his charge d'affaires breaking news direct access to the media to inform the world that humanity is doing fine, with the ongoing effort. To celebrate what has been achieved and get everybody in the mood for the final stretch, humans and felines should share a good bite. Bread, veg and fruit for the people, fresh meat for the felines. They'll take pictures of the solemn occasion, and with the will of Allah, the Felinity Challenge will be met.

Uzo is glad she called. Putting it mister Safar's way sounds much better than how she put it: "Let's forget about the bullshit we did so far, that's useless and didn't get us anywhere. Here comes the next big thing we will do instead." Not exactly confidence inspiring. Whereas his praise of the people, and his idea to turn meat for the cats into a shared feast, this might be deemed acceptable. Especially when he says it with his sunglasses off.

Leaving Mattoo and Safo to discuss the merits of crispy meat versus lamb heads, Uzo turns on her TV to watch #CatzillaMan's impeccable performance.

At her side, Jesse looks at the TV, too. He's very quiet, and probably doesn't make much sense of BBC World for lack of English. But he's nice, and shows no signs of minding her hug. If they meet the Challenge, Uzo will contemplate ways to build on this promising start.

The press conference has been ongoing for nearly an hour when they feel it happening. Uzo and Jesse look at each other, to confirm they experience something. A tsunami of feline bliss is welling up, in response to millions of surprise treats. People heard #CatzillaMan and went for their fridges.

It's surreal, to hear the BBC commentator talk over images of the press conference while feeling how much action is being taken in response. In a synchronized movement, Jesse and Uzo reach out for each other's hand. They're so together in this, and so in the front row.

Still holding hands, Jesse and Uzo are also the first to witness victory. This is the threshold, whatever it physically is, the Felinity Challenge has been met.

With a delay of less than thirty seconds, the TV confirms their intuition: The giant black cats vanished as they had appeared, in a blink. Humanity did it.

Jesse and Uzo don't get to savor the moment. A plaintive Mattoo goes:

"Biggies? Biggies, really sorry to interrupt your foreplay, or whatever this is, but you've got to deal with an emergency. I need to go, real urgent. But I can't. The bathroom is broken."

Letting go each other's hands with only slight embarrassment, Jesse and Uzo go look for the cat. He's in Uzo's tiny windowless bathroom, staring at a spot next to the toilet as if expecting a cat loo to materialize out of thin air.

Jesse gets the issue first. He explains there is no way to procure a cat loo, apologizes for his failure to plan for this, and proposes the outdoors as alternative, pending Uzo's permission.

Permission is granted, and Uzo leads a sceptical Mattoo through her veranda door. There's a line of small fir trees, like a hedge, separating the gardens. Underneath, the ground is sandy. This is where she tells him to go do his thing.

On his own in the chilly outdoors, Mattoo doesn't go strong. But he's urging, and the place smells much better than biggie bathrooms. There's a lot, in the air, including a whiff of something he never scented before but will definitely get hooked on.

Having learned not to trust his biggies to clean his loo often enough, he ambles to the back of the garden to pick his spot. The sandy ground works fine, as promised.

Before walking back, Mattoo risks a curious glance at the next garden, and there she sits. Light brown with dark brown stripes, round head, no bigger than himself.

The world has turned a better place.