Bombs away!

Happy landings.

Paul Di Filippo

Having left the McConnell Air Force Base in Kansas just a few hours earlier, the squadron of long-range B-5 'Shelly O' Stealth bombers arrived over Igboland in south-eastern Nigeria at 3:13 a.m., local time. The air defences of the reclusive and hostile dictatorship (a failed state since the collapse of the global petroleum industry after the advent of microbe-generated electricity from trash) could not detect the invaders.

The payloads unleashed by the bombers, however, were a different matter.

Each package measured some 4 cubic metres, big as a freestanding urban street toilet, swaddled in protective foam and with a chute on top.

Soon, mushroom-like synthetic blooms dotted the night sky all over Igboland.

Nigerian troops scrambled to meet their descent.

Each package, as it touched down in countryside, town or city, automatically jettisoned its self-destructing foam coating and parachute, removing evidence of the landing.

Revealed was what, indeed, appeared to be an urban street-toilet: a shed-sized, streamlined plastic structure, windowless, with a curving door panel.

In 90% of the landings, soldiers arrived on the scene first, surrounding the structures menacingly, weapons raised, until military trucks arrived to haul the invaders away.

Occasionally, average citizens reached the bombs first. The finders generally cooperated. They sought to shift the structures out of sight of the authorities. But sometimes fights erupted, or pirate bands intervened. For the most part, unless the citizens moved very fast, the soldiers soon showed up and took the prizes away, brutally and with bloodshed.

But in a very small number of instances, the bombs passed safely and secretly into the hands of non-state individuals.

A young, orphaned bachelor, Okoronkwo Mmadufo grew pearl millet and raised goats on the edge of an abandoned and decaying Chinese coltan-processing plant; land no one else coveted as it was seeded with toxic waste. His farm struggled to provide even one person with a subsistence living. The soil made his crops sick and the vegetation did the same to his animals. Okoronkwo despaired of ever being rich enough to afford a wife and family.

The night of the bombing run the farmer was awake, tending a sick goat. He looked up when he heard a muffled but sizable thump, and saw the bomb settle atop a patch of scrawny millet plants. He left the goat and rushed to the structure.

He began to push futilely at the big bomb, which was nearly as large as his house. But then he saw a large red unlabelled button near the door panel, and he slapped it.

The bomb lifted itself up on a set of wheels and an air-cushion effect.

Okoronkwo ran with the bomb towards the deserted, ruined factory. A small outbuilding looked impenetrably collapsed upon itself. But Okoronkwo knew the secret of its access.

He moved some timbers and hauled aside a wall of galvanized tin and got the bomb hidden. After grabbing a branch, he erased any slight tracks leading back to the landing site.

The soldiers found him cradling his sick goat.

After interrogation and discussion, the soldiers decided not to investigate the abandoned plant, as they had heard that the effect of the toxic waste would be to cause their penises to disappear. They had much sport speculating on Okoronkwo's genital shrinkage, then left.

Okoronkwo waited until the next night to investigate the bomb in the outbuilding.

When the curving plastic portal opened, light flooded the interior of the bomb. Okoronkwo quickly stepped inside and shut the door.

The interior of the structure was much smaller than he expected, indicating concealed machinery or reservoirs. The only visible features were an intake hopper, a dispensing chute and a docked cellphone.

Okoronkwo picked up the phone and it came alive.

Speckled with animated glyphs, the face of a young white guy appeared.

"Sticky here. What's your name?"

"Okoronkwo Mmadufo."

"Gonna call you OM. Here's the tranche. You're now the proud owner of a Biofab Field Unit. A BFU. It comes supplied with feedstocks — just common stuff you'll be able to replace — and smart microbes that will handle their own reproduction, as well as diagnostic, engineering and interface instrumentation. PCR, nucleotide decouplers and linkers, sequencers — the works. You can use the BFU to make nearly

any medicine or other products of any natural or synthetic organic processes. The unit will tailor doses of active agents, as well, for dispersal into the environment. You run everything via the cellphone. You'll see the control panel now on the touchscreen, with a link to an interactive tutorial. Click on the terms of agreement, please, OM — Swell! Goodbye."

"Wait! I have many questions!"

"Sorry, the feds aren't paying me to answer questions. Strictly freelance. So, I'm gone. Unless — can you get me any rare highlife recordings?"

"You like live shows of Dr Sir Warrior?"

"Hell yeah!"

"I can get those."

"Bring me tracks I don't have, and I'm yours to command."

Over the next week, Okoronkwo and his new friend used the BFU to tailor a remediation treatment for the soil, a cure for pearl millet top rot, and nutraceuticals for the goats.

Okoronkwo came to feel confident in his prowess with the BFU, and eventually bade Sticky goodbye. He knew now that he could continue to help himself and his neighbours, and that his personal future would include a woman and children.

But first he had to tailor a certain lethal smart bug, keyed only to the genomes of Nigeria's rulers. These men were lax with their condom use, and obtaining their seed would be no chore at all.

Having celebrated his thirtieth year as a professional writer, Paul Di Filippo believes he still detects potential for self-improvement.

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