

Shambles

A new career for the home help.

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First Lieutenant Simon Perry sighed, and leaned back in his seat. It was going to be a long day. To take his mind off things, he remembered back to a time when shambles were grown for uses other than war. How long ago it seemed.

His earliest memory was as a six-year-old, hiding behind his mother as she showed him the shamble they'd bought. The hulking, misshapen thing looked like a huge pink, melting snowman. But Perry was more scared by the look in its eyes — still vaguely human, still just-about-there.

"Say hello to your new friend, love," Mum beamed proudly. Every home should have one.

Perry grew to like his shamble. So did Arthur the dog, who barked and wagged his tail whenever the creature came indoors after helping Dad in the garden. They'd often go out to play on the green together until the rough kids from the estate came along with their pit-bulls and made trouble. Arthur was no match for any of them, human or dog. But the shamble once picked up a staffie and snapped it in two, throwing it at the feet of the owner, who had only a minute earlier been smirking as he was threatening to set Bronson on them. The gangs left Perry and his two best friends alone after that.

The backlash began a few months later. Not because a shamble could kill a man with its bare hands, but because they were driving wages down. The Trans-Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority had ruled that medium-sized firms could have up to five shambles, and large companies could have up to ten per branch. But this, it was claimed, meant many low-skilled workers were losing their jobs. Why pay a man £10 an hour for a seven-day shift to clean loos, when you can own a shamble who'll do it for 20 hours and needs feeding only twice a day? What else needed to be said?

"And if you don't do well at school, you'll end up like them," sneered Dad when he downloaded the news one morning and pointed to the lines of charity cases left redundant. Perry nodded. He was going to be a Premier-League footballer anyway.

The shamble then lurched in from the kitchen with breakfast. Dad smiled and got it to bend down to pat it on the head. "Good boy!" he cooed, though strictly speaking it wasn't male or female. And for a while, all was well.

But then Perry's mind dwelt upon one memory in particular: the day their shamble died. They only realized there was a problem when the shamble collapsed one Sunday after dinner. Mum called the vet in, who said it was due to cellular exhaustion: the poor thing simply wasn't built to live for long. The vet finished the shamble off with an injection, and left the family alone



with it for a moment. Dad was crying for only the second time in Perry's life. The first time was when poor Arthur got hit by a car and they had to put him down, too. Perry was choking it back though — Dad needed him to be strong.

Mum just shook her head. "We can always get another one." She was always so sensible.

"Oh just bugga off!" Dad half roared, half sobbed. And he continued to stroke the shamble, tears streaming out of his eyes.

They didn't get another one in the end — it wouldn't have felt right. Instead his Dad bought a hutch and started breeding rabbits. "Keeps him out of my hair," Mum explained, while chopping carrots.

The years passed, and Perry started his A-Levels. Then the wars began. A brief nuclear exchange between India and China had killed millions, and the ensuing conventional war killed many more. The European Union was refusing to get involved, but tensions between the European capitals and India's Russian ally were growing. Perry applied for Sandhurst, and they offered him a place.

Mum was upset that he was going to be so downmarket as to become a squaddie, but Dad got excited and rang up Granddad. That afternoon, Granddad drove them up to the war memorial in town and pointed out all the old friends of his who'd died in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Never forget, soldier, never forget ..." Granddad muttered, then shook Perry by the hand. They went to the pub after that and Granddad told them about his new shamble. "Even does the shopping for me!" he said, in between sips of beer.

Russian forces poured over the EU border a year later. The casualties were high and so yet another use was found for the shambles. They were strong; they could be trained; they could have race memories encoded in their DNA; their bodies could be 'weaponized' with implants, and, best of all, if one died, another two could be grown in a month. All they needed was to be led into battle by someone they could trust, someone who sympathized with them, someone, perhaps, who'd had one as a child ...

... First Lieutenant Simon Perry finished putting on his armour, his surgically altered reflexes twitching as the sounds of battle neared. Looking up, he gazed at his platoon in the APC: eighteen combat-shambles, and one trans-human sergeant, all readying their weapons for the assault. The APC rumbled to a halt and the hydraulics hissed as the exit ports opened.

Perry was the first out, looking around the ruined city as the battle screamed around them. He then gestured with his hand. Behind him, the shambles roared as one and stormed past into battle.

"Good luck, boys," he whispered as he followed them in. ■

When not slaving over a PhD thesis about online journalism, Alexander Hay's long-term goals are to become a writer and to avoid getting a proper job at all costs.

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