THE ABSURDISTAN CHRONICLES · VOLUME 4

LENA AND THE PRINTER OF DOOM!

TWELVE CHAPTERS. NO CONNECTION.



Based on a true fictional event.

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Lena and the Printer of Doom!

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For every place that is supposedly just around the corner.

A story from Goldhain and the neighbouring possibilities.

Based on a true fictional event.

Prologue - Unboxing



The printer arrived in a box labelled SIMPLY PLUG IN. Lena distrusted complete sentences that managed without a footnote.

She placed the device on the desk, pushed her round glasses higher and compared the contents with the diagram on the packaging. One printer. Three cables. Two cartridges. One manual so thin that it testified either to exceptional clarity or to cowardice.

Lena needed the machine for a single page. The page contained a shopping list for the evening at the shared flat: milk, cocoa, bread, cheese, tomatoes and those chocolate biscuits that Mina never officially requested but missed with diplomatic coldness whenever they were absent.

The list could have been copied with a pen. Lena knew that. The pen was lying beside the laptop.

But the printer was new, and new technology deserved to be set up properly. Besides, the box

said it would take five minutes.

It was 6:07 p.m.

Lena opened the manual. Page one referred her to page seven. Page seven claimed not to exist. Beneath a drawing that might have shown a cable and might have shown a very thin snake were the words: Connect the device in the usual manner.

"Naturally," said Lena.

The printer remained silent. Its glossy black front reflected the flower in her hair. It looked harmless.

At 6:08 p.m., the siege began.

I. The Cable

There were three sockets and four cables. One fitted everywhere but worked nowhere. One was so short that it could connect the wall socket to the printer only if both were prepared to abandon their personal boundaries. The third had a shape at one end that did not appear in the manual. The fourth, as Lena discovered after ten minutes, belonged to the desk lamp.

She knelt beneath the desk and traced every wire with the care of a cave explorer. The room above her was quiet. Plastic creaked occasionally as the device adjusted to its new surroundings.

Lena plugged in the power cable.

Nothing happened.

She turned the plug around. Nothing happened, which was technically predictable but nevertheless felt like a personal refusal.

She tested the socket with the lamp. The lamp lit up. She tested the cable with a meter. The cable conducted. She pressed the power button briefly, held it down and then tried that medium degree of determination manufacturers liked to assume but never described.

On the third attempt, the display awoke.

A blue bar travelled from left to right. Then from left to right again. Then it stopped at ninety-nine per cent.

Lena waited. She was good at waiting when waiting was part of an intelligible process.

After four minutes, a message appeared: PLEASE WAIT.

"I already am."

The printer appeared satisfied and started over.

II. The Language

The display asked for a language. Lena selected German.

The printer replied in Finnish.

Lena took one step back. She knew enough technical vocabulary to suspect that Peruuta was not a greeting. She opened the language menu again. The list jumped down one line every time her finger approached. German gave way to Danish, Danish to Estonian, and Estonian to a language consisting entirely of small squares.

Lena switched off the device.

It continued to display Finnish.

She unplugged the power cable.

The display remained lit.

Under ordinary circumstances, this would have been the moment when a person became loud. Lena became quieter. She placed her notebook beside the printer and wrote: Residual charge or battery. Language setting volatile. Device responds with delay.

The printer rattled.

A sheet slid into the output tray.

Lena looked at the empty paper tray, then at the sheet. Printed on it in neat black letters was the exact sentence she had just written down.

She lifted it by two corners. "You are not connected."

The display changed to German.

OUT OF PAPER, it announced.

Lena looked at the sheet in her hands.

"We shall begin again."

III. The Invisible Network

According to the manual, cable setup was intended only for people who had "no modern network environment". Lena found the wording unnecessarily judgmental and selected Wi-Fi.

The printer found fourteen networks. The flat's network was not among them. It did, however, discover the refrigerator, two pairs of headphones, a fitness tracker in the neighbouring building and something called CellarCreature_5G.

Lena refreshed the list. It now found seventeen networks. The correct one was still missing.

She entered the name by hand. The password consisted of twenty characters, including two hyphens and a capital letter that looked like a lowercase l. The printer displayed each character for half a second but erased the entire field whenever Lena reached the final one.

On the fourth attempt, it accepted the password.

CONNECTING.

The blue bar began its journey.

Lena made coffee. When she returned, it had reached ninety-nine per cent. She drank the coffee. The bar remained. She opened the window, watered the plant and answered a message from Lin, who wanted to know whether the new printer

was working yet.

Lena wrote: We are getting acquainted.

At that exact moment, the device reported:
INCORRECT TIME ZONE.

"Wi-Fi does not have a time zone."

SESSION EXPIRED.

Lena put down the cup. From that moment on, this was no longer a setup. It was research.

IV. The Driver

The manufacturer offered a "universal convenience driver" on its website. It was eight hundred megabytes and demanded agreement to forty-seven pages of terms before it could be downloaded. Lena skimmed them. The driver was permitted to manage print jobs, check ink levels and "continuously enhance the product experience".

"You are supposed to print a shopping list," she said.

The download began. At ninety-nine per cent, it failed.

Lena downloaded it again. This time, an assistant program was installed first to determine whether the driver could be installed. The assistant needed an update. The update required a restart. After the restart, the assistant explained that it was incompatible with this version of the assistant.

Lena wrote down every step. Her notes filled two pages. The printer watched her with one green light.

At 7:40 p.m., Lin appeared in the doorway. She carried a tool bag and the expression of someone who had hoped to be summoned to an interesting accident.

"Does it need more memory?" she asked.

"It needs humility."

Lin bent towards the display. The printer immediately showed READY.

"That looks promising."

Lena clicked Print.

The printer showed OFFLINE.

Lin straightened very slowly. "Oh."

"Yes."

They opened the device manager. The printer appeared three times: once as ready, once as unknown and once as a "kitchen appliance". None of the entries could be removed because another one always claimed it was currently in use.

As an experiment, Lin gave the unknown device a name. The system accepted Printer_2 and instantly created Printer_2 (Copy 1). Lena deleted the copy. Printer_2 (Copy 2) appeared in its place.

"It is reproducing," said Lin.

Lena drew a small diagram. Three boxes led to a fourth, which she marked with a question mark. The printer rattled and produced a page bearing the same diagram, except that it contained a fifth box.

They both studied it.

"Did it improve your plan?" asked Lin.

"It documented another fault."

Lena placed the page face down on the desk. The fifth box was still visible on it.

V. The Account

The convenience driver demanded a user account. Without an account, it explained, the printer could not tell who owned the paper.

Lena pointed out that paper generally belonged to the person who had bought it. The driver offered no suitable response button.

She entered an email address. The password needed twelve characters, a number, a special character and "an unexpected combination". Lena's first choice was too predictable. The second resembled an earlier password she had never used. The third allegedly contained her name, even though she had written it backwards.

Lin suggested PrinterPlease1!

"It is no longer a request," said Lena.

Eventually, the system accepted a sequence that looked like the curse of an exhausted mathematician. It asked a security question: What was the maiden name of your first pet?

Lena had never owned a pet. She entered NONE.

Answer too short.

She entered I NEVER HAD ONE.

Answer contains invalid spaces.

She entered GOLDFISH, even though it was a lie. The system welcomed her personally.

The printer rattled and pulled in a sheet. A certificate appeared: A WARM WELCOME TO YOU, GOLDFISH.

Lin sat down on the floor and laughed until no sound came out.

Lena added the sheet to the evidence.

VI. The Test Page

At 8:12 p.m., they succeeded in triggering a test page. The printer accepted the paper with ceremonial slowness. Rollers turned. Something inside clicked three times, as if a small machine were bringing its heels together.

Then the sheet returned.

It was blank.

The laptop screen, however, displayed a colourful chart and the message TEST SUCCESSFUL. Lena held the empty sheet up to the light. No faint line. No watermark. Not even a mist of ink from which one might infer goodwill.

Lin opened the cartridge hatch. Both cartridges were installed. The little protective strips lay neatly in the bin. The contacts were clean.

"Perhaps it needs calibrating," said Lin.

They started the calibration. The printer produced six pages of black angles, grey boxes and rows of lines that differed only in their willingness to be straight. Lena had to choose the best pattern each

time.

After the sixth round, the device printed a report: CALIBRATION IMPOSSIBLE. PRINT QUALITY TOO LOW.

"That is your work," Lena said.

The printer pushed out another blank page.

Lin whispered, "Perhaps it is very minimalist."

Lena looked at her.

"I will make coffee."

VII. Tray B

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The first real sheet of paper became jammed.

Not visibly. Not accessibly. It disappeared completely into the feeder, after which the printer made a sound like a satisfied swallow.

PAPER JAM IN TRAY B, announced the display.

There was no Tray B.

Lena checked the diagram in the manual. It showed Tray A, the rear hatch and a grey area labelled model-dependent. The model on her desk appeared to depend on itself.

She opened Tray A. Empty. She released the rear hatch. No page. She lifted the lid, removed the cartridges and shone a torch inside. Between two rollers, she saw a white corner.

Lena reached in. The sheet retreated.

She turned one roller. The sheet appeared on the other side. Lin turned the roller back. The sheet vanished again.

"It knows our strategy," Lin said with admiration.

Lena fetched tweezers. Millimetre by millimetre, she pulled the paper free. It was perfectly smooth. Not creased, not torn, not even crooked.

Printed on the back were the words: TEST PAGE SUCCESSFUL.

Lena placed it beside the goldfish certificate.

"We now have an opponent that falsifies reports."

VIII. The Night

By ten o'clock, the house had grown quieter. Doors closed, water moved through pipes somewhere, and a muffled demand for cocoa came from Mina's room. The shopping list still existed only on Lena's laptop.

Lin had fallen asleep on the rug with a roll of paper beneath her head for a pillow. Lena sat at the desk. The printer's green light reflected in her glasses.



She had removed drivers, installed drivers, disconnected the network, renamed the network and temporarily given the printer an address of its own. The device was simultaneously ready, offline, busy and in a state called manual rest.

Then it began to print without being asked.

One page came out. Then a second. Then a third.

Lena picked up the first. It showed the ink level: full. The second showed the paper level: sufficient. The third reported that zero pages had been printed since setup.

The printer produced more status sheets. They wound across the desk, dropped to the floor and formed a white path towards the door.

Lena stood. "Stop."

The display showed CANCELLING JOB.

It continued printing.

Lin woke, saw the stream of paper and said, "Oh, now it can do it."

"Unfortunately, yes."

The white tide reached the corridor. Mina opened her door, looked at the pages around her feet and pulled the blanket more tightly around her shoulders.

"Is that the shopping list?"

Lena lifted a report. "It is the network diagnosis."

"Are the biscuits on it?"

"No."

Mina closed the door again. A moment later it opened once more, and a heavy sofa cushion landed across the paper path. It held back the tide for three seconds. Then the next sheet slid underneath it.

Ruby came from the kitchen and set a bag of cinnamon rolls on the chest of drawers. "For mission control."

"We do not have mission control," said Lena.

"Then for the survivors."

The printer emitted a piercing tone. Goldie, who had followed Ruby, sat in front of the device and cocked her head. The rattling stopped. For a moment, everyone believed that the authority of a small dog had achieved what software and expertise had failed to accomplish.

Then the device printed a status page bearing a large paw symbol.

Ruby accepted it. "This one is pretty."

Lena added it to the evidence pile.

IX. The Counterattack

Lena cut the network connection. The printer continued. She removed the data cable. It continued. She emptied the paper tray. It pulled out a sheet that had been lying beneath Lin's arm for an hour.

Together, they gathered the pages. Some carried diagrams, some warning signs and some only a single grey dot. One page claimed that the room temperature was inappropriately emotional.

Lena arranged everything in chronological order. Between two reports, she found a recurring entry: POWER SUPPLY RESTRICTED.

She knelt beneath the desk again.

The power cable led to the power strip. The power strip led to the wall. Its red switch was set to Off.

Lena remained motionless for a moment.

All this time, the printer had been drawing just enough power through the data cable and the laptop to light up, complain and move paper occasionally. Not enough to set itself up properly. Every restart had merely been an exhausted collapse.

Lin lay flat on the floor and looked beneath the desk. "Is that..."

"Say nothing."

"I was only going to…"

"Nothing."

Lena pressed the red switch.

A deep, steady hum came to life inside the printer. The rollers turned once. The display brightened.

READY, it said.

This time, it sounded credible.

X. The Update

The printer connected to Wi-Fi at once. It recognised the laptop. It recognised the paper. It even recognised that it ought to speak German. For one delicate moment, the campaign appeared to be over.

Then a message appeared: FIRMWARE UPDATE AVAILABLE. INSTALL NOW?

Lena regarded the two buttons, Yes and Later. Later was greyed out.

"No," she said.

The printer began the update.

The progress bar travelled to ninety-nine per cent.

Lena closed her eyes. Lin silently pushed the coffee cup towards her. Mina under a blanket, Ruby with a bag of cinnamon rolls and Nika with her laptop were peering in from the corridor by now. No one asked whether help was needed. One did not enter an excavation while the artefact was being uncovered.

At ninety-nine per cent, the bar stopped.

One minute passed. Two. Five.

Then it jumped to one hundred.

Three people in the corridor breathed out at the same time. The printer restarted and printed a page informing them that printing was forbidden during an update.

Lena folded it once, very carefully.

"Souvenir?" asked Ruby.

"Evidence."

XI. The One Page

It was shortly after midnight when Lena opened the shopping list. Six words. No pictures. No tables. Nothing that ought to push a modern printer to the limits of civilisation.

She clicked Print.

The device remained silent.

Everyone waited. Mina had sat down on a chair without removing the blanket. Ruby held Goldie in her arms. Nika watched the network traffic. Lin knelt beside the paper tray like a mechanic before the first run of a historic engine.

The printer pulled in one sheet.

It disappeared.

A soft click. A hum. The smell of warm ink.

Then the page emerged into the output tray.

At the top was the word: Milk.

Below it: cocoa, bread, cheese, tomatoes and chocolate biscuits. Everything straight. Everything legible. No certificate, no warning, no goldfish.

Lena took the sheet in both hands. She checked margins, line spacing and completeness. Then she held it up.

There was quiet applause in the corridor.

Mina looked at the list. "The biscuits are spelt correctly."

"Of course."

"Then it was worth it."

Lena decided not to investigate that claim on the same night.

XII. The Documentation

The next morning, the shopping list was pinned above Lena's desk. Beside it hung the successful test page, the goldfish certificate and the report stating that zero pages had been printed. Together they looked like the diplomas of a small and badly administered expedition.

Lena wrote her own manual. It began with the sentence: Check the switch on the power strip first. Beneath it were clear steps, real pictures and not a single phrase such as "in the usual manner".

The printer worked flawlessly. It printed Ruby's recipe, an extract of Nika's code and, for Mina, a sign reading DO NOT RING - SOFA THINKING. No paper jam. No Finnish. No Tray B.

Lin came in that afternoon and placed a label on the machine: GOLDFISH.

Lena looked at it. "That is not staying."

"Of course not."

It stayed.

Over the following days, a cautious set of house rules grew around the printer. Ruby loaded paper only with dry hands. Nika never sent jobs from two programs at once. Mina printed nothing on principle but had someone confirm every morning that this remained an option. Lin was not allowed to add sensors.

Lena kept a small log. Day one: three pages, no errors. Day two: eleven pages, no errors. Day three: one double-sided recipe, turned neatly. The printer showed no further inclination towards foreign languages or philosophical status messages.

On the fourth day, a warning announced that the black ink was nearly empty. Lena checked the cartridge. It was three-quarters full.

"You are allowed to be concerned," she told the device. "But not dramatic."

The warning vanished.

Lena remained seated before it for another moment. She knew that machines did not act out of insight. Even so, she had the impression that Goldfish and she had achieved a form of mutual professional respect: it printed what she asked for. She left the power strip switched on.

Finale - Buying Milk

A week later, Lena realised that the shopping list had never been used. On the night of the setup, Ruby had brought milk, Mina had guarded the cocoa and Lin had eaten the biscuits to test their shelf life.

Lena carefully removed the page from the wall. The printer woke from standby and blinked in a friendly manner.

"Just one copy," said Lena.

She placed the sheet on the scanner glass and pressed the button. The machine hummed. A perfect copy slid out.

Then another.

Lena lifted her finger.

The printer paused.

The display read: ANOTHER COPY?

This time, both Yes and No could be selected.

Lena pressed No. The device obeyed.



She took the shopping list, put on her jacket and walked to the door. Behind her, Goldfish stood quietly on the desk, plugged in, connected and entirely ready.

As Lena left the room, it printed a tiny slip of paper.

It contained only the words: PLEASE WAIT.

Lena looked back from the doorway.

The printer remained silent.

"Very funny," she said, and had to smile.