

Check your pockets

A sleight problem. By Robert Blasiak

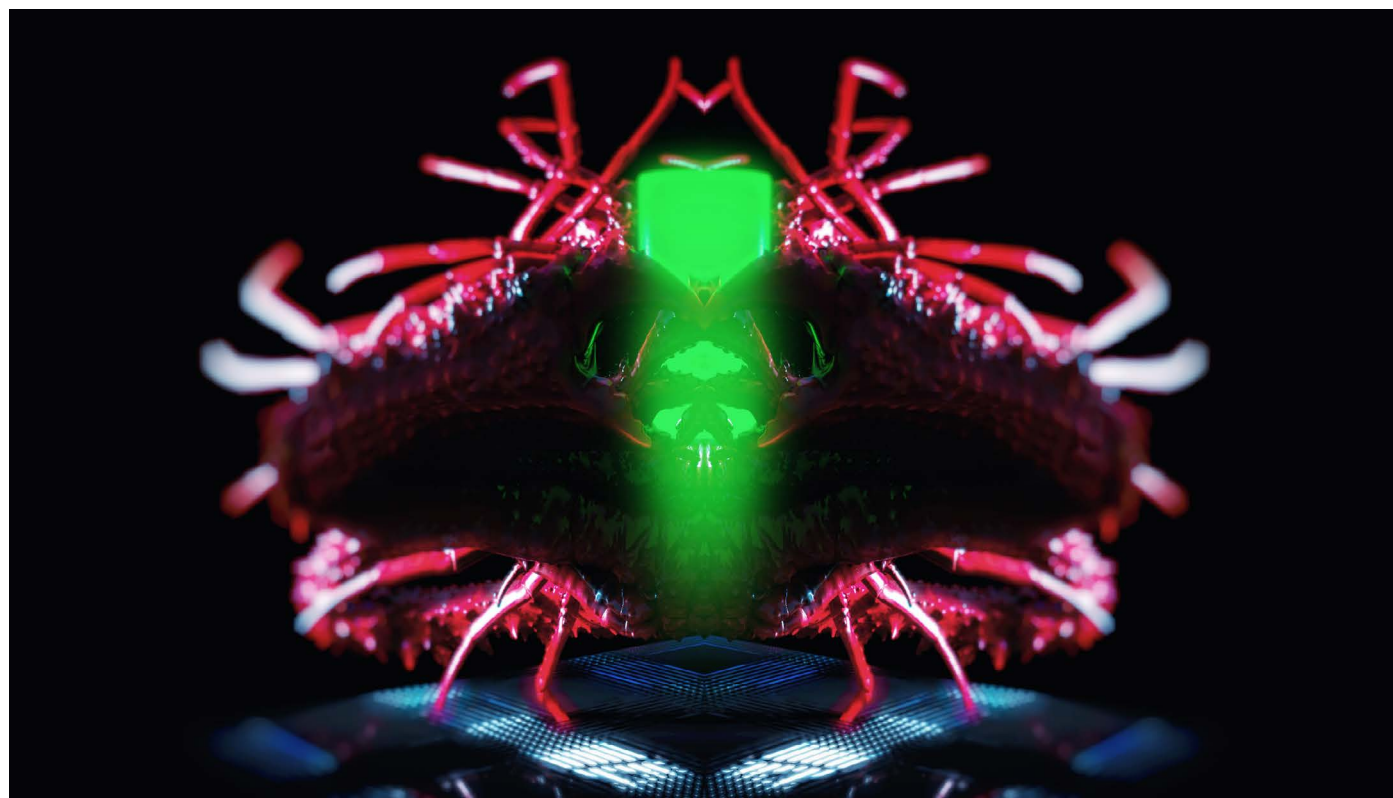


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

"So, who do you work for again?"
"Magnifico the Mystic Master of Magic."
"That's quite a name. Me, I'm just Sam. Plain and simple. So, when did he drop off his laundry?"

"It was sent over from the *Pythamon*, the galactic cruise ship that docked last night."

"Well your mystic master needs to empty his pockets out just like anyone else before throwing clothes down the laundry chute. Not sure what will be left now, but we can take a look."

Sam waves his arm for me to follow him inside, and I duck through the doorway past neon pink lettering that reads "Welcome to the Death and Taxes Laundromat!"

"That was my dad's joke. Everyone says the only things you can count on in life are death and taxes. He said it was time to add laundry to that list."

Sounds about right to me.

"Now, your mystic master, what exactly did he lose?"

"It's a small green tube. About the size of your thumb."

"What does it do?"

"I can't tell you that. It's part of the act he does for the cruise ship."

"Ha! We've had that before. You magicians are the worst. Spend the whole night disappearing stuff up your sleeves and then it's me who has to replace the filters on the washers when you forget to take it out again."

"I'm not a magician myself."

"But you said the drop-off was last night, right? Maybe it's still in the washer. Let me check where it's at now ..."

Sam taps buttons on his wrist unit, and scrolls through a list on the hologram that pops up.

"What's his name? Mystic Magic ..."

"Magnifico."

"Right, Magnifico. Got it. Wait a minute, he's a zarg? Why didn't you tell me sooner? Well, according to this, his clothes are already in Mite Bath 4 down the hall. Hope your secret

item isn't organic."

"What difference does that make?"

"Zargs always wear metallic nanomesh. Can't stand the feel of organic matter. Best way to clean a pile of zarg shrouds is a few hours in a mite bath. Comes out good as new, and not a speck of anything organic afterwards."

"Well this is zarg tech, so I'm guessing it's not organic."

"The mites have been at it for a while already, so it's either OK or it's not. Come back in a couple hours and we'll take a look."

"That's way too late. Magnifico's next show starts in an hour, and he needs this for the finale. I need to take a look right now."

"What happens in the finale?"

"He shrinks half the audience and puts them in a snow globe, gives it a shake, and then takes them out and makes them normal size again. Kids love it. Look, can we go in now or not?"

"Alright, alright. Put on these gloves, though. The mites won't hurt you, but you'll get a nasty rash if they get on you."

Futures

We slip on our gloves and pass through the doors to Mite Bath 4. It looks like an indoor swimming pool, but on the bottom of this pool there are a dozen large crates filled with shiny metallic shrouds. And there's no water.

Sam is scowling at his wrist unit and swiping rapidly through menus.

"That's weird. System isn't scheduled to be flushed until the end of the month. But it's good luck for you. His crate should be the last one on the left over there."

There's a moist, earthy smell in the room, and as I near the crate, I recognize the bright purple shrouds that Magnifico always wears during his matinees. I rummage around a bit, and then start going through the shrouds one by one.

Sam is yelling at someone through his wrist unit.

"Why did you flush the mites this morning?"

A groggy voice is protesting, but Sam talks over it.

"Well I'm standing here right now and there's not a drop of water anywhere."

More protestations.

"Well there's a dozen crates here and the mites are gone. It's going to be days before we can grow another colony. This is your problem now. Get down here and fix it!"

Sam pauses and starts walking towards a hole at the centre of the pool.

"Wait a second, what's with the drain? Hold on, I'll call you back."

The drain's metal grating has been twisted into a series of jagged pieces around a black hole. Like bomb fragments. And a thin green tube is caught in one piece.

Sam is bending over the hole when a bright red crablike creature the size of his head suddenly pokes up out of it. All pincers, claws and spines. He falls backwards with a yell and it disappears back into the darkness.

"What the ... Did you see that?!"

"I saw it, I saw it. And do you see that green

tube there? Don't touch it."

Zarg tech. Only one thing to do now. I key my wrist unit.

"It's me. I've found it. But it got switched on somehow ... No, no, not yet ... Yeah, looks like maybe some insects got hit and escaped through the drain ... Just a second."

I turn to Sam who is still staring wide-eyed at the hole.

"How many mites did you say are in one of these baths?"

"I don't know. A couple million maybe."

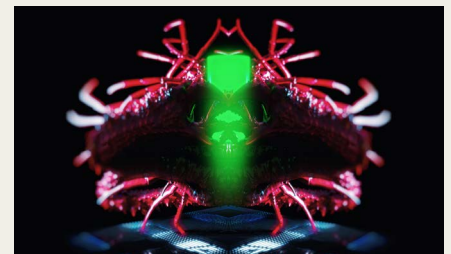
"Yes, it's me again. We're going to have to cancel tonight's show. Can you come over here now? Yes. The Death and Taxes Laundromat. Don't ask."

Robert Blasiak lives on an island in the Stockholm archipelago and spends a lot of time thinking about fish.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Robert Blasiak reveals the inspiration behind *Check your pockets*

I wrote this while on parental leave with two young kids at home. It was a rainy, muddy November in Sweden, and that created three inevitabilities — all closely interconnected. The first was piles of laundry of epic proportions — a daily, unavoidable reality. The second was little kids with runny noses. The third was a forgotten tissue in someone's pocket that ended up shredded across everyone's freshly washed clothes.



So, at the end of the day, every parent gets to practise their favourite coping strategies. Some ice cream after the kids are asleep? An e-mail to an old friend to complain about all the tough moments? A good book that makes you forget for a while? I've tried them all. But one night, I decided to try something new. I turned the kids into aliens and a shredded tissue into a swarm of giant runaway mites. And I wrote it all down.