

CUBE
by Paul Watson

The door opens and she walks into the office. The city skyline is clearly visible through the ceiling to floor window behind the heavy mahogany desk. Amongst the technology spread over the desk, sits a pristine white cube, about three inches across. She steels her face against the opulence of the office as the man performatively standing staring out the window turns towards her. He's wearing a suit that costs more than her monthly rent, tailored, of course, chestnut hair slicked back, a short beard running along what she can admit is a strong jawline. "Mr Stevenson? I'm April O'Hare from the Planet and..."

"Please, Ms O'Hare, call me Cameron. Mr Stevenson was my father.."

"Right, Mr...Cameron, of course. Thank you for agreeing to the interview."

"Not at all. Anything for our friends in the media."

"So where shall we begin?"

"Why don't we begin at the beginning? I'm told it's a very good place to start." He leans against the desk, a study in practised nonchalance, resting his hand absently on the white cube.

"Well, speaking of the beginning, is that..."

He looks down, apparently surprised at what his hand is doing, "Oh, this?" he lifts it up, "Yes, this is a gen one, gen zero really, Packing Cube™. You could say this is what the company is founded on." he laughs heartily, "In fact, as we're starting at the beginning, I should probably tell you the story of that particular Cube as it's really the story of this company's start."

Years earlier, at a technology convention, a packed hall filled with dozens of the hottest new things, all competing for the attention and money from the same small pool of investors. It's impossible to escape the sound of demonstrations as various technologies whirr, click and hum to show off their inventor's genius. Equally hard to ignore are the carnival barker-like shouting as each stand tries to outdo the others to get people invested.

A young man shifts nervously from foot to foot in his stand, a small fence around the stand. A computer sits on a white pedestal, a shipping crate taking up almost half the stand and forcing everything else into far too little space. He carries what looks like an electronic wand in his hand, all in smooth white plastic and chrome. He runs his hand through his chestnut hair, enough people milling around to constitute a crowd, so he figures he might as well start.

"Welcome, all, to the inaugural public demonstration of a device that will revolutionise the transportation, shipping, even the holiday industry."

A woman scoffs in the front row. Big talk is the standard here, after all.

"Well, you may scoff. It's a bold claim, but one I wish to back up. The biggest problem all those industries have is space. Transporting anything, takes space, volume, fuel, it's just inefficient. And that is what my device here intends to resolve. First, take a look at this shipping container. You can see just how...big it is. I mean, look at it, it's huge and bulky and heavy. Wouldn't it be so much easier if all of this was just...smaller."

"Uh-huh."

"So watch." He points the wand at the crate. The tip begins to glow a pale golden light.

"Scanning." a cuboid of light surrounds the crate. "10 percent scanning...20 percent..." The robotic voice continues as the light gets more and more difficult to see through, "90 percent scanning...scanning completed. Compaction imminent."

"What does that..." The golden light on stage contracts. There's a collective intake of breath as the golden glow squeezes inwards until it's only a few inches across.

"Compaction complete." the voice announces and the glow fades, revealing a pristine white cube, about three inches across.

The man on stage walks over the much emptier space, lifting up the cube. "Imagine it. What takes a colossal ship to transport today could be achieved almost in hand luggage."

"You don't expect us to believe that's really..."

"I do indeed." he places the cube back into its resting spot and points the wand at the cube.

"**Compacted material detected. Scanning...**" The glow sweeps over the cube.

"**Scanning complete. Unpacking imminent.**"

"Ok, stand back everyone, this will get..."

The glow expands as fast as it shrank, fading away to reveal the packing crate. "**Unpacking complete.**"

"Nice magic trick, Copperfield, but you don't expect us to believe you really shrank it down to a Rubik's cube, do you?"

"I do indeed, Miss..."

"Stevens. Lois Stevens."

"Well, Miss Stevens, how about you get a closer look at the process?"

"Oh, no, I am not..."

"Oh, I'm not proposing to pack you away just yet, I just meant for you to observe the next demonstration more closely up here."

She looks sceptical but cautiously takes his hand and steps onto the platform. "So, what are you proposing, Mr...?"

"Stevenson. And you'll see..." He opens a box, lifting a very waggy terrier out, "Say hello to Emily." The dog sniffs at Lois' hands, yipping and wagging her tail. He places Emily onto a high chair in white plastic with long chrome legs. "Now, if you could just sign this..." he hands over a small square of paper on a ring through a pink collar.

"Let me guess, you'll put this on her to 'prove' it's the same dog."

"Of course not. You'll put it on her."

"Me?"

"Who else would you trust?"

"Fine." she signs it and gingerly closes the collar around Emily's neck, getting a tongue licking her finger for her trouble.

"Now just step back and watch to make sure there's no trickery." He points the wand back at Emily who looks at it with big black eyes. The glow surrounds her and contracts inward, leaving a three inch white cube on the chair.

"**Compacting complete.**"

He lifts up the cube. "As you can see, organic material can also be packed quite harmlessly. Think of how easy it would be to transport pets...or even children."

"Children?!"

"It's perfectly safe. I'll demonstrate." he places the cube on the floor. "Stand on that while I get the demonstration out."

"Stand? On that?"

"It's perfectly safe."

She climbs gingerly onto the small cube, wobbling on it, until she sees him coming back with a sledgehammer, whereupon she steps back onto solid ground. "That does not look perfectly safe."

"Tell me bout it. I've broken three bones in my foot dropping this on them." he raises the hammer and brings it down with a crash onto the cube. Then again. Then, sweating a little, again. At no point does the cube seem to notice.

"Could you put the cube back on the chair and I'll restore Emily to prove its safe?"

She complies and steps back quickly. The wand glows and soon Emily is back on the chair with a yip and wag.

"Can you check that is the same piece of paper you signed on her collar?"

She pulls the paper off "It...seems to be."

"Good girl, Em." He pulls out a doggy treat and Emily rises on her hind legs to beg for it, snaffling it down. "I can see you're still not convinced."

"What gave it away?"

"Well, there's clearly only one way to convince you."

"What? Oh, no, no, no. You are not going to..."

"Well, how else am I supposed to convince you this isn't a trick?"

"I...fine, Mr Stevenson, you win."

Stevenson smiles and lifts Emily off the chair. Lois sits down very carefully, making sure nothing's showing that shouldn't, her legs pressed tightly together.

"This doesn't hurt, right?"

"Of course not." he holds out a tablet, "Could you just thumbprint on the NDA?"

She looks down, skims the document and gives her authorisation.

"Excellent. See you in a minute." he points the wand at her.

"You'd bet..." and the glow collapses into a three inch white cube sitting on the chair.

"There. I'm sure she's convinced now."

"How much for that cube?"

"Don't be silly. She's not for sale. Now just let me."

"I'll give you a million."

"No."

"Two."

"Restoring her...now." he points the wand at the cube.

"Scanning complete. Unpacking immin..." the glow starts to solidify when the lights above explode in showers of sparks. Every electronic item in the show. Which means a lot of items spark and smoke. Stevenson drops the wand as sparks fly into his hand, the plastic and chrome breaking open on the floor.

"What was that? What?" he looks down at the shattered wand and the smoking computer, then at the cube sat neatly on the chair. "Oh, no, no, no, no...this is going to ruin me!"

Now, "Wow."

"Yes indeed. Not the most auspicious start to a business. Fortunately, the lawyers proved the power surge was the fault of the convention centre overloading its generators. And the compensation acted as seed money enabling the devices to be rebuilt. By that point, there was interest and...the rest, as they say, is history."

"What about Lois?"

"What?"

"Lois. The woman who was turned into a cube."

"Ah, well, there's a tale. The packing had been started and then interrupted which had corrupted the signal. Gramps worked the rest of his life to get her out. Got so obsessed the board intervened and got him shuffled out of management into a special emeritus developer role so he could crack that. He made a lot of improvements to the technology along the way, but, he was still working on it when it was decided for his health to cube him until his conditions could be dealt with. My father had been made chairman when Gramps was...moved on. But he had to be cubed after that Ebola outbreak. Which is how I got the big seat."

"And Lois?"

"Well, after Gramps was cubed, the firm's priorities changed. We hadn't been able to track down any next of kin in Gramps' time and when my father took over, it wasn't a high priority. I'm sure we all thought Gramps would make a breakthrough, man was a genius, after all. But, no dice."

"So that's... she's been"

"According to the lawyers, that is a proprietary industrial manufacturing material and it is perfectly legally owned by the company. Lois Stevens was the victim of a tragic industrial accident. And that's the end of the matter. If we can't restore the cube, what makes you think anyone else would be able to?"

"I see."

"I'm glad you do, Ms O'Hare. Shall we take a tour of the facilities?"

He puts the cube back on his desk and leads her off, his arm around her shoulder.