

T T B A



Chairbeing's Address

The other day our esteemed editor and I were able to take a trip into the murky depths from which TTBA first sprang forth, fully formed.¹ Surveying the path which has brought us here, I was able to make two important observations:

1. The current cover is clearly the most gorgeous in TTBA's illustrious history.
2. At some point in the past, TTBA didn't accept all submissions. At some point in the past, *rejection letters were written. On college paper. On typewriters.* The point being: why on Earth did I never run for TTBA editor?

Things have changed since I wrote my last Chairbeing's Address. The membership of the society has seemingly tripled. I'm no longer plagiarising Shakespeare to write this. Blue is no longer in fashion. Boars once again roam the streets of Cambridge. I won University Challenge.² Footnotes are not always trustworthy. At least one of these statements is true!

But enough trivialities. I think this society is stronger than ever³, and that's in large part down to the freshers. You should all be very proud of yourselves for integrating so quickly into our grouchy tradition-bound ways. See, I think at least three are truly fantastic, and the rest of you aren't so bad either.⁴ So keep it up, and don't forget: when(/if) next year's crop show up, you are to refer to them as *foetal CUSFS*. This is important.

I write to you, dear friends, on the eve of my exams. Exams which, more than any other year, have proven a great battle: a battle to remain with you in the year to come, to offer what wit⁵ and wisdom my humble powers allow. It's a battle I am fighting all the harder knowing what lovely people, old hands and newcomers alike, I can look forward to spending time with. It's been my pleasure running this society for somewhat more than my allotted time, and you've put up with me gracefully – now, as the end of term approaches, I can finally hand over to the next generation.⁶ Best of luck, everyone – I'm sure you'll do just fine.⁷

Filip Drnovšek Zorko
CUSFS Chairbeing 2012-3

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- 1 According to leading scientific theories, Volume 2 sprang into spontaneous existence some time in 1974. The whereabouts of Volume 1 remain a mystery.
 - 2 Disclaimer: I didn't win University Challenge.
 - 3 Or at least, stronger than a while.
 - 4 Lest I offend anyone: remember the pun.
 - 5 Here auto-complete suggested "Wittgenstein", in case any were doubting the eruditeness of my credentials.
 - 6 Well. Next-ish.
 - 7 Not least because I'm still on the committee.



Editorial

WELL GOSH! because this issue of TTBA is a whopper, thanks to you lot – it is, rather embarrassingly, about four times as long as my dissertation, which probably tells you something about what my priorities have been this term. Oh well!

So – given this is my last assignment as TTBA editor before I leave you in the capable hands of Miss Lilian Halstead (responsible for two short stories and the beautiful cover – innit marvellous?), what have youse given me to work with? Thankfully, plenty. Sam Ottewill-Soulsby in particular has been a busy beaver, contributing three stories - "Baghdad", "Kindness" and "Stardust" - but he's by no means the only one. Hannah Wray, Ben Confino, Thomas Goodey, James Robson, Filip Drnovšek Zorko, Sam Cook, Harley Jones and Sarah Binney have all written or otherwise contributed material to this bumper issue as well, and I thank them for giving me such a good sendoff. TTBA's reputation is so high we've even attracted an anonymous contribution from a dirty Oxonian, P.K. (not Roseanna, before you ask). So enjoy that.

And on that note I must, alas, leave you. I've enjoyed my time as TTBA Editor but the day comes when each of us has to enter (shudder) the Real World (unless you're Fraser McNair). But think of this not as farewell, because I'm pretty sure you'll have a job getting rid of me. Just think of it as a farewell to sending me things with the subject line "PLEASE PUT THIS IN YOUR NEWSPAPER THINGY". And a farewell to me dealing with your crazy two-spaces-after-a-full-stop-related habits (NAMING NO NAMES). See you around!

-Frederic Heath-Renn
TTBA Editor

TEN TRANTORIAN BIONIC

ANOMALOCARIDIDS

TTBA Volume μ Issue 1
(the volume that unasks the question)

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CUSFS Committee, 2012-2013 (and their excuses for not revising)

Chairbeing	Filip Hajdar Drnovšek Zorko (Exhausted from writing name on notes)
Secretary	James Robson (Immobilised by hat)
Treasurer	Imogen Gold (Defending Pembroke from invaders)
Membership Secretary	Fraser McNair (Charters 'a bit dull really')
Librarian	Christine Lee (Too busy knitting little Chris Pines)
TTBA Editor	Frederic Heath-Renn (TTBA editing)

Upcoming Committee

Chairbeing	Sarah Binney
Secretary	Filip Hajdar Drnovšek Zorko
Treasurer	Imogen Gold
Membership Secretary	Tristan Roberts
Librarian	Will Bradshaw
TTBA Editor	Lilian Halstead

Larvae

The air was filled with the stench of unwashed bodies and rotting vegetation. The fungal farms were a rough place to work at any time of the year, but it was in the warm, damp springtime when the smell was at its worst.

The larvae tending to the bulbous, pale greenish blobs were normally younger ones, for once the adult grew past a certain size the larvae struggled to do any physical work. The fungi grew on the waste from other agricultural industries, which also, as a rule, used mostly young larvae for their labour.

Still, Terin was pleased his work did not involve any contact with the first stage of his species' life cycle; he found them rather disgusting creatures. It was a shame they had to exist at all, in his opinion, but he couldn't think of another way for the adult to grow: if they didn't emerge from the husk of the larvae, where else would they come from? Some of his contacts who disagreed with the way the larvae were treated had suggested that the larval stage could be undergone away from the adults, in their own little society, but, although Terin disliked them, he disliked the idea of having adults do larvae's work even less. They were disgusting, but useful.

The blimp drifted back towards the inner city, the region where it was civilised, and devoid of larvae and the associated stink. Hundreds of them were swarming near the gates, most of them with the adults visible inside them, ready to burst out at any moment. As the blimp drifted inwards he was able to look upon more pleasant sights, the towers and spires that made up the dwellings of the adults.

However, contrary to his expectations, the smell didn't improve. Angrily he got up to have a word with the pilot. He wasn't sure what they'd done but he suspected there might be some stowaways on board, hoping for a better life in the inner city. He opened the door, and was shocked to see a larva standing at the controls, wearing clothes as if it were an adult, not the filthy animal that it was. "This is outrageous! Get off! Now!" Terin yelled, furious.

"Fine, have it your way then," the larva retorted, opening a window and leaping out, leaving Terin staring at the controls, clueless as to their purpose.

Lilian Halstead

No One Will Ever Love You

Review: *The Sirens of Titan* by Kurt Vonnegut

There's this weird feeling I get when I read Vonnegut. I get it when listening to certain music, also, a sort of quiet desperation of the human spirit, perhaps a certain form of madness. It feels like standing on a precipice, and looking down, and feeling the long slow deep pull of gravity tug at your soul. It's something about his style, perhaps: so simple, too simple, almost constructed more like a poem than a novel, sometimes feeling almost child-like in its terseness of prose. It reminds me of Hitchhiker's but with humour black as pitch, of what I've read of the Illuminatus! Trilogy but with the LSD gingerly pried out of the Author's hands. Perhaps it comes from lies. A lot of Vonnegut is about lies. Lies to children, lies to adults, lies that mankind tells itself. The essential inadequacies of the constructions we place across our lives in order to give them purpose. And so on.

Listen.

So this book in particular. "The Sirens of Titan" has as a protagonist a really lucky businessman with an implausible name, although this is Vonnegut so the presence of implausibly named people and rich people who satirise some aspect of the American Dream should probably be expected. Malachi Constant (for such is he) is summoned/invited to witness the materialisation of a man who keeps appearing every 59 days on the planet Earth after him and his dog crashed into a chrono-synclastic infundibulum. I'm really only including that detail because it means our dear editor might despair over the correct spelling of it [*haha nope! - Ed*]. This man's name is Winston Niles Roomford, and he can see the future, and the past. He tells Malachi he is going to go to Titan, via Mars, Mercury and Earth. This then happens, and then the novel ends. Many people are killed in between for reasons which are banal and terrible and fruitless.

In the end, things do happen as predicted, but they are due to manipulations within manipulations, wheels within wheels, and at the end of it an utter pointlessness, the revelation of a cosmic joke made on mankind which, revealed on page 1, would have seemed bizarre, but by the time you reach it just makes as much sense as anything else, an "of course" along the way- as

you, like Malachi, are drawn into events which unfold with a quality not unlike that of dreams. The prose helps, Vonnegut's turns of phrase as ever as simple as they need to be and more so, always playful, always mischievous - whatever they describe.

So you see that, starkly laid out, there's not much to the plot: naturally I omit a few minor details, but then I think that's for the reader to find. But frankly I don't know that that's really the point. When the book ends, which I can confirm it does do, one is left with the feeling I allude to above. It is hard to place. It is a feeling of being utterly small in an uncaring universe, and yet, and yet, perhaps this doesn't matter at all. Perhaps one can laugh at it, all the same, and perhaps there is no meaning and you can't make meaning and it is all a big joke. But what of it? So it goes.

James Robson

How strange to think that under every face
There lies a skull. Feel it with your fingers
The hard eternal bone beneath the flesh.
When you are gone and nothing else remains
But memories, and then not even those,
It will be there and in some stranger's hands
They'll wonder who it was, what face it framed
The white domed shell, the empty eyes, the jaw.
In the end everyone becomes a skull.

Hannah Wray

Kindness

She had loved the theatre from the very first moment she had seen the stage, back when she had still wanted to be a woman of letters. Despite all that had happened since it had never left her. So as she removed the bag from his head, she had him facing out the gap in the west wall as the sun went down. She remembered the old hand who had taken pity on her confusion at their school's first performance. *Remember the audience* he had told her. She had never forgotten.

'Before we begin, know this,' she said quietly into his ear as his eyes fought the burning of the dying light, 'there is no possible course of events in which you are alive when that sun rises again. I am a woman of my word. Do you understand?'

He was a brave man. That had never been in dispute. His voice was almost calm as he replied 'All men die. I never imagined I'd be different.'

She smiled, as a parent does when their child has said something both endearing and naïve.

'There are deaths and deaths. This can be quick or it can be painful. You should feel honoured. Few of us get as much say in the manner of our ends. Your friends didn't.' Then she turned him to face the room. He groaned as he saw the heads. For all the showiness, she wasn't inclined to melodrama, not really. She was a practical woman. When her mother had found her, dragged her out of the school and told her either to live by the sword for ever, or die on it that day, all those years ago, she had picked up the sword and obediently come home. But if a little theatricality would get her what she wanted then she had no qualms about it.

Remember the audience. He was certainly worth attention. The broken nose spoiled it a little bit, but those gentle hazel eyes and long raven mane must have made him a local favourite with the girls. *A knight there was...* And what of the stage that greeted the audience? What were they seeing? A plain room, Spartan, with a low bench on which a few items she had found useful in past situations of this type rested, ominous in their simple utility. Heads of his old companions decoratively scattered to make avoiding them hard however he turned. But it was the sword he was gazing at, as she had known, offering him desperate hope.

She had spent the time between attack and interrogation bringing it to a fine keenness. The wait had calmed her and unnerved him. Other

Amazons she knew swore that swords, unique among weapons, sang to them, calling their attention. She had never heard anything from a sword. She knew a tool was a tool, a thing to be used and nothing more. And she knew that things could often be put to more than one use.

The knight seemed to be hearing the music. He hadn't been a bad fighter. Her jaw still ached from where his vambrace had smashed into it. The man had been fast, but he hadn't expected her strength. He would be considerably slower now with his wrists and ankles bound. Few this far west were prepared to face an Amazon. Although he should have had some second thoughts after she'd ripped one of his friend's arms off. The man had died of shock, and having been relieved of his head, placed with the other bodies down in the cellar. The call of the blade seemed to weaken as he turned to look at the third person in the room. If his face had been hungry looking at the sword, now it was ravenous.

'Who told you we were here?'

His lips tightened, his eyes narrowed, his whole form seemed to squeeze up. She didn't sigh, but reached for the spectacles, becoming for a moment a reflection of what she might have been had her mother not willed otherwise. Her vision for close work wasn't as good as it had been and while she wasn't an artist at torture she wasn't a butcher. Butchery was inefficient and too much blood distracted the subject. But a little blood? She had an image of herself as a sort of anti-mother. Just as his mother had brought him into the world with pain and screaming, so she would usher him out. She squatted to get a better view, not of the man himself so much as his body, overlaid in her mind by the illustrations and dissections she had witnessed during her studies. If acting had been the most useful lessons she had picked up during that time, some knowledge of human anatomy had helped her more than once.

'The fingernails,' she said aloud and reached for the hammer and nails. *Remember the audience.*

'No!' The third person in the room had decided to make a contribution. *We never play to just one audience.* 'It was me, I told him!'

At this, the captive came to life, 'Rose!' He began bellowing and ended begging. 'You don't need to... It was me, all me!'

She turned to view her charge. Rose was quivering, her face going blotchy but she stayed in the room, displaying more spine than she had for most of this nightmare of an assignment. The Amazon had suspected of course and now that she

knew, she wasn't sure what to make of it. She could see it, the soft words whispered in the night, the gentle kisses stolen while she had been away sorting transportation to the next city. Neither the scholars nor her weapons masters had had any advice on these matters.

Theatricality. *If you are unsure, take up a part that is certain and perform it.* She addressed the bound prisoner, keeping her ward in the corner of her eye. 'I see. No doubt she told you about the monster keeping her captive, preventing you from being together.' She let her lip curl. 'What did she promise you? Undying love, her hand in marriage, eternal bliss, naked flesh on flesh? And all you had to do was be a good knight.'

She leaned in so close she might kiss him. 'Only, monsters don't die nearly as easy as they're meant to.'

Rose began to cry.

He told her everything. There wasn't much to tell. After a short while he began to digress, his life story garbled out between repressed sobs. One would hope that a condemned man would have an interesting tale to tell, but she had been disappointed before. She listened to learn who else knew of them and if there were likely to be more unexpected visitors, and after that just filtered out the rest of the words. She was a practical woman, but there was room for small kindnesses, on occasion.

Even as she had thought him utterly broken though, he saw Rose and before the Amazon's eyes she saw him begin to mend the fragments, as some semblance of the old knight returned. Rose stopped crying a little at this. And the Amazon realised that she had only once seen a face like the girl's before. When her mother's wife had arrived one day and the couple had played chess before rowing furiously over who was cheating at the game, and on that warm afternoon, her exasperated mother had thrown up her hands. She had looked like Rose did now.

Twice in her life. There had been the boy at the theatre... Dead, she told herself, of a surfeit of lampreys, or of justice, or of plague. Or worse, alive, a solid burgher who founded orphanages for the children of the people he had robbed so he could look himself in servants having diddled the chambermaid. Or maybe a pious priest who canted against lechery during the service before copping a feel during communion. A wasted alchemist perhaps, blind from years of chemicals and onanism, seeking a second youth having failed to use his first.

Remember the audience. Time was limited. 'I am as you know a woman of my word. This is your last night.' She moved behind the man so that both young people could see each other. 'But perhaps an hour or two can be found for you to say goodbye.' For a moment the Amazon wanted to hit the man, for looking so stupidly grateful. The missionaries who periodically showed up in Amazonia out of a fit of optimism sometimes talked of divine grace and she had dismissed it as fine words, meaningless apart from how well it was performed. But now she looked at the knight's face and thought maybe the missionary might have known something. He was focused utterly on the girl. He held himself straighter and locked eyes with his somewhat blemished damsel. She had heard stories of Tristan and Isolde, Abelard and Heloise. And now she was standing in the stalls, watching a full performance. *A knight there was. And there is his lady. And if she's hardly a maiden pure, and he's had some bad luck on the monster slaying, we are none of us entirely what we pretend to be.*

Sometimes there was room for small kindnesses. Her swing had always been admired by her trainers. The sword might not sing to her, but she could make it dance. She could aim as well as any critic's barbs and the blade was as sharp as any jester's wit. She would have been surprised if he felt a thing. His body fell into Rose's arms, giving her a ruddy coating just as shock spilled across her face. *Remember the audience.*

She was not a cruel woman. She was a practical woman, who used cruelty as a tool like any other. It just seemed that there was more room for cruelty than kindness these days.

She looked at the girl who had started to retch over the remains of her beloved. 'Time to go,' she told her, and she walked to the door, to go down to the cellar to deal with the bodies. If they didn't leave town now her head would join this room's fine collection. On the way she nearly tripped on the man's head. His face beamed at her, frozen in a moment of rapture for all time. Or until decay took the flesh from the skull.

Perhaps that boy had stayed an actor, with a company sponsored by a fine lord, and there was someone with him who looked at him with that same face full of grace and focus.

A small kindness.

And with a little more cruelty she might yet get the girl out of this damned continent alive yet.

Sam Ottewill-Soulsby

The Birds

"Look at the birds," said Oliver, "and tell me what they are saying."
Harry listened for a moment, trying to understand. "Nothing, all I hear is crowing."
"I said look, not listen, boy. You saw the contract. Hold it in your mind, remind the birds of their promise. They'll let you understand."
Harry looked again, and this time he saw. "The way they're moving. It almost looks like writing... They're hungry, and demanding, I think they're saying we owe them."
Oliver gave a laugh; it was warm with pride. "That's it my boy, that's it. We do owe them. This very spot was a battlefield, 1182 if I recall. Two barons, one of them promised to leave the dead for the birds if he was granted victory. That's why we're standing out here in the wind, and will be every year until the thousandth anniversary."
Harry had stopped listening earlier. "Did you say the dead?"
"Yes I did." He pointed his cane at a car in the distance. "Here they come now."
The car was driven by a nervous, neat-looking man dressed in a trendy tracksuit, clearly trying to look as little like himself as possible. Oliver handed the driver a thick brown envelope while Harry unhitched the trailer.
"Take a look."
Harry took a look. On a bed of ice were a dozen dead bodies. Men and women, mostly old, all ethnically oriental.
"What are we doing?" Harry said quietly, fighting the urge to run.
"Have you heard of Tibetan Sky Burial? Illegal in this country of course, but it's always best to find two people who have what the other wants. Don't think of the phrase, you might offend the birds."
"What are we doing here?" repeated Harry, increasingly uneasy at what was happening.
"Us, we're just waiting. The funeral party will be here soon. We watch and make sure the treaty is fulfilled for another year. Shake a few hands, say some solemn words. By my reckoning we'll have just enough time for tea before the next job."

Ben Confino

T.T.B.A.

At the centre of the galaxy lay the great world-city of Trantor, centre of the Galactic Empire, a dense, rich clot of humanity, forty billion of them packed in great towering buildings, carefully-dug tunnels, massive factories and awe-inspiring feats of technology.

But humanity was not the only creature to populate that legendary planet. In a deep, forgotten pool in the grounds of the Imperial Palace, a group of strange, alien animals had gathered, twisting and turning in the dark water, the great tentacle-like appendages found in pairs above each of their mouths moving in strange, inhuman ways.

In the centre of them all floated Linge Chenderhannes, the Chief Commissioner of the Commission of Public Safety. Unlike the others, rushing from place to place and chattering to each other electronically using their localised field perturbers (the appearance of which was as a third, metallic eye-stalk somewhere between the biological two), he was still and silent, and yet his magnificent scarlet and gold exoskeleton made him by far the most striking of his lot.

The time circuits in Advocate Serratus's visual display unit flashed an alarm and he sent a shrill signal for quiet across the pool, drowning out all other attempts at communication until the assembled throng (save for Chenderhannes) stilled their talk and turned their eyes towards him. The Advocate made an almost imperceptible motion with the flaps on its back - roughly the equivalent of a nod - and settled into his established position. The Commission was ready to resume its trial. From far away in the murk of the water came two stocky, grim-faced figures, escorting between them two smaller ones: one, old and serene, the other, young and nervous. They were Hari Saron, the psychohistorian, and his new employee Gaal Hurdianick.

"Hello, Dr. Saron," said the Advocate pompously, switching his field perturber to a new setting so that he could drown out Hari Saron said at will. Saron did not reply.

"Let us resume our questioning," continued the Advocate. "Dr. Saron, you claim to have an especial insight into the future of anomalocaridid life on Trantor. Is that correct?"

"Not particularly especial," he replied. "My conclusions would be available to anyone who had studied psychohistory, as Dr. Hurdianick can assert."

"Could you repeat to the Commission exactly what your forecast is?"

"If the Commission knows it already, I see no reason to."

Some members of the Commission waved their great appendages disapprovingly; the Advocate buzzed for silence and addressed Hari Saron with irritation.

"Nevertheless."

Dr. Saron paused, and then began. "My deductions are simple. In the next three hundred years, life on Trantor will be no more. The planet will undergo a mass extinction, an unhaltable period of ruin that will see the devastation of our culture."

"And you charge the Commission with sitting back and allowing this to happen? You realise such a suggestion is treason."

"On the contrary," said Dr. Saron, twisting his rectangular mouth into the closest anomalocaridid approximation to a smile, "the Commission will be powerless to stop it. The reason for this destruction will be the fall of the Empire itself."

A great wave of shrieking and waving erupted from the Commission, its eight lay members and the Advocate howling "Treason! Treason!" at Dr. Saron and the terrified Dr. Hudianick. Then Chenderhannes raised one great appendage silently and calmly and a hush fell across the Commission, the noise disappearing as quickly as it had begun.

"So the aim of your little mathematical project is to bring about the fall of the Empire?" charged the Advocate quietly but furiously.

"Not to bring it about," replied the psychohistorian. "Personally, I regret the prospect. But the mathematics makes it clear that the Empire is declining and will only continue to decline further. There is no way of stopping it."

"If there is no way of stopping it," said the Advocate, waving its appendages grandly, "what exactly is the aim of your project? Why have you gathered together a hundred thousand anomalocaridids of every genus from *Amplectobeluato* to *Peytoia*? To watch?"

Dr. Saron did not reply.

"No," continued the Advocate, "I charge you have gathered together this army to bring about the devastation of which you speak! I charge that you are not a humble mathematician but a scheming, calculating autocrat!"

"No," replied Dr. Saron quietly.

"Then what are they *for*?" shrieked the Advocate with bile. "If they're not to prevent the destruction, and you claim they're not to cause it, what are

they *for*?"

"To cure it," stated Hari Saron calmly.

The Advocate was struck dumb for a moment, its mouth-parts contracting and expanding as it struggled to think. Finally, it ventured "W- What do you mean?"

"While it is true this mass extinction is unavoidable, the events that follow it can still be changed. The dark age that follows can last for thirty thousand years, or it can last for a mere thousand. My anomalocaridids are as we speak preparing to gather all the knowledge of the Empire in a great work, the *Encyclopedia Radiodonta*, so that after the Fall civilisation can restart with the shortest possible gap of anarchy and misery."

The Advocate, once again, was silent. As he tried to think of something to say, a presence swept past him to his left. It was the Chief Commissioner. "Dr. Saron," said Chenderhannes, "it is of the utmost importance that you are removed from Trantor immediately. The Emperor cannot countenance your continued stay here, spreading your rumours of devastation and panic. I have half a mind to have you executed."

"I can only say that to do so would guarantee your own death by the end of the year - at a 90% confidence, of course."

"Of course," said Chenderhannes grimly. "But your death is not the only answer that will satisfy us. Your only intent is to compile the *Encyclopedia*?"

"Indeed so," said Dr. Saron.

"And need that be done on Trantor?"

"Trantor is the centre of our civilisation, my lord.

All the resources I need are right here."

"But there is no reason it could not be done elsewhere?"

"This is, I suppose, true," said Dr. Saron, and then he fell silent.

"Very well then. You are to continue your work to abrogate the results of this so-called mass extinction - but you are not to do so on Trantor. I am instead exiling you and your followers to the planet of Perminus."

"But Perminus is at the edge of the galaxy!" cried Gaal Hurdianick.

"It is a little secluded," responded Chenderhannes.

"But that should make it ideal for your scholarly work. And, of course, the alternative, Dr. Saron, is your execution and the execution of as many of your followers as I deem necessary for the safety of the Imperium."

"I see," said Hari Saron, and then, after a couple of minute's pause, he said, "I accept."

"Then you and your followers are to move to Perminus within six months," said the Chief Commissioner. "And there, far away from the Emperor, far away from Trantor, you can establish your little foundation."

Frederic Heath-Renn

Baghdad

In the half darkness she waited, watching day turn into night through the cedar wood mesh, the smell of musk and spice meeting the dust on the boundary of outside and in.

Tell me a story.

A new smell, oil, a lamp being lit, dispelled a little of the growing magic.

Very well, are you sitting comfortably?

An idiotic question, she'd been sitting all too comfortably her entire life.

Then I'll begin.

The servant left. She traced in her mind the servant's movements through the complex that made up her world.

Once Upon A Time, Long, Long Ago,

Step by step, down the now cooling stone staircase.

Before the Word of God came to the Prophet,

Skirting the tiled courtyard, where a fountain gushed in the middle, and tame monkeys gibbered at birds in cages.

When immortal spirits ruled the world and demanded that men worship them as gods,

Past the watchmen, eagerly awaiting the end of their shifts, their heavy armour no doubt safely stashed somewhere, leaning on their spears, their leers at the passing servant and her gibes in response as ritualized as the changing of the guard.

There lived a man of astonishing beauty and nobility.

The tutor's room, his teaching days long since done, he meditated on Ibn Sina and chewed dates, his door opened enough to reveal the skeleton of a snake, collected on a whim, standing on a low box.

Always was he correct and law abiding, always was he courteous and kind, always was he brave in battle and always was he generous to his fellow man.

She sipped the tea left by the servant, finest Damascene glass, edged with silver, unfazed by her vision, for she was always rather fond of snakes.

Most of all was he generous to the spirit of his tribe, in good times and bad.

Like them, she knew how to bide her time.

The spirit looked into the man's soul, and was touched by the goodness he saw within the man, lighting the darkness that lay around him.

Down to the kitchens, the tranquility of the

evening was broken by the shouting of the cooks, putting both birds and monkeys to shame.
From that day forth the spirit protected the man, and when he saw that the man proved uncorrupted by his good fortune, loved him still more.
The kitchen door, leading out onto the backstreets, meaner and squatter than the front door, to her, sitting behind the wooden mesh, it couldn't have looked better if it was covered in pearls.
The other spirits, forever plotting, and jealous of their rival's happiness, leagued against him.
The muezzin recited the adhan.
One day, they struck the man down with a poison dart, leaving him weak and dying.
The black cat in her lap, showing surprising presumption for one recently splayed, hissed as she rose to obey the call.
The spirit wept, distraught at the fate of the one he loved. Inconsolable no matter how many offerings of myrrh and goats were presented to him.
As she worshipped, she was aware that the cat had begun attacking her untouched dinner.
At last, the spirit, determined to save the dying man, mixed its own substance into that of the man, creating a merging of souls.
Finished, she returned to her earlier position. The cat, having forgiven her, climbed back onto her lap, gnawing at a wing of the dove.
The man recovered fully. More than fully, for he was stronger and wiser than he had ever been before.
Idly, she reviewed the positions of everyone in the household. Based on a lifetime of knowledge, barring a sudden change in circumstance, she knows everyone's place.
Seven more years he lived, and then another seven, and another, doing good work everyday.
It had been forty years since the last sudden change in circumstance, with every year showing no hint that the pattern of the days, like the migration of the swifts, should ever alter.
On the day that he died, the spirits crowded around his body, jeering their fellow as he died too, trapped within the mortal clay.
Tonight would be different.
Asking him if he regretted his foolish choice.
The cat's tail twitched, as she waited behind the wooden mesh, staring into the darkness.
You fools, spat the spirit, that choice was the only thing I don't regret.
Coiled to spring.
Sweet dreams beloved.
Waiting for an eagle.

"Run that last bit past me again, will you?"
A dark night in Baghdad, and the certainties of the day are long gone. The dull safeties that stand in the light have vanished and the world revels in its true trappings, danger and risk, magic and change and above all opportunity.
Or so these two footpads hope. And they have reason for their optimism. For is this not Baghdad, city of a thousand crooked passages and ten thousand twisted stories and one hundred thousand lost people? Strange soldiers may patrol the streets, and the palace may be filled with men from foreign skies, come bearing spears and fire, but the city generously embraces such suitors, knowing that the old laws under which life is conducted will continue as always. For yesterday was Babylon, and tomorrow who knows, and today is Baghdad, and a man lost in time would recognize the rhythm of each in turn.
But today is Baghdad. Here the full spectrum of existence can be comprehended by smell alone, as the spices and perfumes of the desert war with the reek of the tanning workshops and the cesspits before combining in an olfactory union of stunning magnificence. Here the whole circle of the world can be navigated through following the voices brought together in this place, under the direction of the almighty twin empires of faith and money, happily working in concert as the clink of coin resounds to the call of the muezzin.
And here, on a shadowy corner on the edge of the poet's quarter, our two footpads lie in wait, dreaming of opportunity, but knowing that nothing is as it seems. The district suits them, down-at-heel in a proud way, having turned its dilapidation into a reason for existing, a spitting defiance of all that is proper. It is the abode of lovers avoiding their spouses, writers escaping their creditors, sorcerers running from the law and dreamers fleeing reality. The assassins give it a wide berth, for the Old Man of the Mountain keeps hallowed bargains with the worshippers of blood-drinking gods. It is in short, their kind of neighbourhood.
If nothing else, it provides an excellent place for their favourite activity, bickering.
The taller man sighs at his companion's obtuseness. Apart from his size, there is nothing about him that would mark him out as in anyway special. The perceptive might notice his accent, which suggests an educated background. Save that he is a face on the street and Baghdad has many of those. "This is not difficult. So the first theory divides mankind into three parts, saying that

climate determines a man's characteristics. In the north, where it is cold,"

"You mean the land of the Franks," the other interrupts.

"Indeed, there the men are brave, but stupid and savage. Whereas the men of the south,"

"And now you mean people like me. Tell me, are we by any chance, intelligent but cowardly?" asks the shorter man, in a worryingly light tone of voice for one whose cloak only half conceals a well-used long-axe.

"That is the theory, Abu Bakr, but before we go any further I think I should once again emphasize that this is not my theory and I have strong conceptual difficulties in accepting it."

"By which you mean you think it is bunk, but are troubling me with it regardless. Very well, Yusuf, whose theory is it? This man Ibn Khaldun you've been talking about?"

"No, I explained this already, this is one of Aristotle's."

"The Greek?"

"That's the one."

"You said there was a third grouping of men in this system. May I hazard two guesses?"

In the darkness Yusuf the Giant's nod of affirmation is easy to miss, but the Ethiopian carries on anyway, raising one finger as he does so.

"First, this final body of men represents the centre, between the two previously mentioned extremes. This lucky community marries the best qualities of both, managing to be clever but not craven and daring but not dim. How am I doing so far?"

"It is as if a jinni has carried me to Athens."

A second finger is elevated. "Now, the question, where to place this happy medium? Of course I have no idea, but if I were to take a wild guess, I would say that this ideal climatic zone lies roughly over the land of the Greeks."

"That," Yusuf remarks, "is uncanny. You have outlined Aristotle's theory perfectly. But later commentators have added innovations. For example, the Romans identified the ideal land as, and this will surprise you, being Italy."

"Surprise is too weak a word for the sensations that now overwhelm me. I am astonished, astounded. I gape, like a hawk seized in mid-air by a roc. But tell me, where do your acquaintances locate the blessed middle realm?"

Yusuf grins. "Is it not obvious to your senses? Open your eyes man! Is not here, where we stand now, the most perfect place in all of Creation?" He stops, takes a deep breath, and doubles over in hacking cough as the city's perfume rushes down

his throat. Abu Bakr takes this opportunity to opine "I don't like this. Your countrymen treat me as a dirty thing as it is, I hardly wish them given more reason. Although perhaps this explains the theory's popularity by providing people with a justification for what they already knew but couldn't prove."

The Arab, having recovered, says "But does it not imply interesting things about the mutability of mankind? If we are all the products of our climate, does it not suggest that our natures are not set in stone? That perhaps we are the results of the circumstances we find ourselves in? If that is so, then surely changing the external factor, the climate, would change the man? Could not one go from gormless to genius, from lily-livered to lion?" His friend considers this for a moment. "In theory," he answers slowly, "but in practice it seems to me that men never speak of another's progress, but always of his degeneration. I'll warrant that this is another way of talking of the past, when really they're talking about the present, and just using what is gone to give them something to rail at what is here, as they have always done."

Yusuf raises his palms in acceptance, "very well my friend. Let us move onto Ibn Khaldun..."

"Another time," the Ethiopian interrupts "for it strikes me that we have spent a not inconsiderable time discussing this subject, fascinating as it has been, and meanwhile there has been no sight of our target, this Frankish monk, Matthias Beck, whose presence is required if we are to get paid for this night's work." He pronounces the strange name carefully, like a merchant in foreign lands offered a local delicacy, chewing with caution. "We are certain that this is indeed the route between the eagles' landing ground and the house of the wizard?"

His companion shrugs at the vagaries of an all powerful deity, whose plan all are bound to. "It should have been," he says "but it seems not."

"In which case," Abu Bakr says, "it seems we must abandon our initial plan and instead pay the sorcerer a house call."

Yusuf straightens, "Ah, there I must confess we have a bit of difficulty," and to the short man's surprise, it seems the Arab is becoming less clear in his outline, his flesh beginning to shift in patterns that suggest smoke while growing if anything taller.

"I am afraid I have not been completely honest with you, Abu Bakr. I am not in fact your partner, Yusuf bin Muhammad, late of Damascus. Rather, I am a most potent jinni, bound into the service of

the wizard Ibrahim bin Ismail, ordered to ensure that his guest suffered no unpleasantness."

"Wait, hang on-"

"Know that your doom has come for I am Al-Magist, born in the depths of the desert, older than the Pyramids..."

"Yes, yes but-"

"I am the Black Wind of the High Sands, master of fire and shadow, keeper of..."

"About that-"

"Look, will you stop butting in and have the decency to quail? It took me ages to come up with that speech and now I've lost my place and am going to have to start all over again."

The man who called himself Abu Bakr raises his finger once more. "Which is all very well, and I am certain the appropriate audience would react accordingly. But I am not condemned to death either." Even as he speaks his limbs grow longer and his skin changes from dusky brown to burgundy, his teeth yellowing. "I am Solomon, demon from another world, close friend and protector of Brother Matthias Beck. Pleased to make your acquaintance in truer colours." A whiff of sulphur settles in the air, adding extra spice to the rich hotpot of the atmosphere. The jinni stares at him. "Wha-"

"I suspect we have been working at cross purposes," the demon continues, "although this does explain my confusion at your choice of conversation topic, which struck me as a little unusual for a hired blade."

"What do you mean? My master talks like this all the time."

"Yes, but he is a wizard and by definition mad. That aside, while one mystery has certainly been cleared, this revelation does raise another question, namely, the current whereabouts of the real Abu Bakr the Mameluke and Yusuf the Giant? Silence. Neither the demon nor the jinni relies upon sight to comprehend the world, they have multiple, keener senses to bring all into understanding (although in this city it is best not to depend on one's nose). Nevertheless, their eyes drift towards the faded heart of the poet's quarter before locking glances.

"Oh shit."

A hurried flight through streets gone cold and still, a mere backdrop to the drama unfolding as two shapes, unusual even for Baghdad, frantically move through space. The wizard's building, grand in its dilapidation, displaying the trade of its owner through eccentricity (for who would consult a wizard who lived in a normal house),

built with several floors more than is structurally sound, standing only through the magic of a sorcerer too cheap to pay for decent builders. The lower floors are quiet, the hum of servants gossiping the only noise.

Higher, the demon taking the stairs two at a time, the jinni coming through the windows, both arriving in the private study at the same moment. Their first sight, the host, Ibrahim bin Ismail, a grand old man with a weak chin disguised by a thick beard and a weak bladder disguised by a thick robe (and a thick perfume). What is not disguised are his nerves, for his glass is empty, but still he sips, and the numerous fabulous bangles and amulets (none of them silver of course) with which he has chosen to bedeck himself jangle softly as he shakes.

The man sitting next to him is a striking contrast. He is the embodiment of affable calm, wrapped up in a patched white Dominican habit. Despite being small and scrawny he seems to take up more space than the wizard, despite being bald his age is hard to determine and despite being in the same room as two men in the employ of his enemies, he is entirely relaxed. The shaven face of Brother Matthias Beck breaks into a smile, "Come join us Solomon, we were just discussing an old friend of yours, Aristotle."

Sitting cross legged opposite the monk and the mage, the real Abu Bakr the Mameluke and Yusuf bin Muhammad bear the beatific grins of men who have just met a brother in soul. Numerous weapons lie still in their sheaths, their owners disarmed entirely by this new acquaintance. The Arab leans forward, "But wouldn't you agree that Ibn Khaldun elsewhere has done much to challenge the implications of the argument." The monk nods his agreement and the conversation continues. "True, but in the end he still subscribes to the basic model..."

The jinni and the demon look at each other. "Fucking humans."

"Who fancies rescuing a princess?"

Abu Bakr was a rather more contemplative man than most he knew. He was aware that events generally germinated from a variety of different causes, even if all ultimately came from the will of Allah. Take this current situation. Reading too many fairy tales during his time in Egypt was certainly a contributing factor to his presence here. A certain boredom as well, together with a touch of Shaitan in his soul. If however, he had to point to the principal agent in this mess, his finger

would swing undoubtedly toward one Matthias Beck and his interesting proposition.

Four figures running along the rooftops of Baghdad in the night, followed after an inexorably narrowing gap by a host of others. The monk in question was the fourth shape, directly behind Abu Bakr, covering ground gamely, his black cloak flying behind him as he tried to manage an old rolled up carpet the same size as him. Abu Bakr was starting to reconsider his dismissal of Aristotle's characterization of Franks. Beck's courage was not to be doubted. His sense, on the other hand, was beginning to worry the Ethiopian. Right now, he was starting to miss the old days in Cairo. Yes his time with the Mamelukes had seen him lose home, family and balls, but he had gained God, books and hashish. And fewer people had been trying to kill him.

Four figures running across the rooftops. Yusuf in the lead, finding the thieves' roads, the highways that offered fugitives escape in the night and cutting down those who would block them. That such a huge man should move with such grace still amazed Abu Bakr, taking him back to the hot and dusty day when they had traded blows and found themselves matched. It certainly surprised his opponents. There was blood on the roofs of the sleeping denizens of the city, and none of it so far was Yusuf's. The Damascene moved quickly, and with good reason for he fought Tartars, whose fathers and grandfathers had broken through the trap set for them by Alexander and escaped the fires of hell. But then, Yusuf was no stranger to fire either.

Four figures running along the rooftops. Second ran the object of this little escapade, the princess herself. There, Abu Bakr had to concede, his reading habits had let him down entirely. The princess turned out to be an old bag, age and bitterness having twisted her shape, shrieking and complaining incessantly. It was to be expected, the Tartars had rode into Baghdad nearly forty years ago now and any scions of the old house left would hardly have spent the intervening time suspended in sleep. Still, give her her due, she kept up surprisingly well.

Four figures running along the rooftops. The wizard had declined to join them. This was rational enough as everyone knew Tartars to be immune to magic. Still, Abu Bakr speculated on the consequences of a ton of rock dropped on them by magic. He nearly slipped over the edge of a rooftop. Yusuf carefully broke the hinges of the wooden door that gave access from the inside of

the house, laying it across the gap to the roof of the next building. Now was not the moment. He needed to concentrate on making sure he saw old age. The image of his special flask hung in his mind. Abu Bakr dismissed it with some reluctance. The contents of that little flask and others like it were another cause for his participation on this jaunt.

Instead he called to the monk, "Remind me again, how many times have you done this?" Beck almost dropped the carpet.

"Done what?"

"Cut your toe-nails! Rescued princesses of course!"

Silence. "Well?"

"I'm thinking. If you include the time in India..."

"Yes?"

"Once. Sort of."

"Sort of?"

"I did die."

"I hear that can be a bit of a hindrance."

"Worst thing was the princess died, so I'm not sure I can really call that a success either. John was most vexed."

"Which rooftop is she running across tonight?"

The monk stared at Abu Bakr like he was mad.

"No, I said she was dead."

Abu Bakr shook his head. Their pursuers were gaining on them so he followed the princess across the walkway. From the other side, Beck knocked it down. Before the Ethiopian could comment, the monk shouted, "I may be able to give you some time!"

"You don't need to give up your life for us!"

Actually, Abu Bakr had been wishing the infuriating man dead over much of the last few minutes, but there was form to be observed in matters like this. Again the monk looked puzzled.

"Who said anything about that? Just go!"

Three figures running along the rooftops. Abu Bakr could not help but hear what followed.

"Gentlemen, behold!" A stunning absence of screaming.

In a hesitant voice, which had lost the strains of Tartary and picked up a city drawl, someone said "Is that it? It's not very big!"

"It's shriveling before our eyes!"

"My sister's got a better one than that."

"Yeah, I've seen it."

Beck, "There's nothing wrong with my carpet!" A listener with good ears might have heard Abu Bakr's sigh of relief. He had to stop running as Yusuf rigged a rudimentary rope bridge out of washing lines, vines and someone's pet monkey.

"Well, it's riddled with holes!"

"Shows it's been loved!"

"Any more love and I reckon it'll collapse entirely. Look at it, it's well threadbare! Shoddy palace workmanship."

"In which case," and Abu Bakr could see the Frank straighten up in indignation in his mind, "my shoddy carpet and I shall go elsewhere."

"You and that thing will have plenty of time to get to know each other in a cell."

"I think I shall fly instead."

This got the derision it deserved. These boys might be Tartars but they were Baghdad born and bred and familiar with all eleven kinds of bullshit. Abu Bakr was moving again, reckoning they didn't have much more time.

"Well, have a nice trip then. Mind it doesn't unravel."

"Sorry?"

"Carpets, as a rule, are not great for flying on. Eagles yes, carpets no."

"Why would I be flying on the carpet?"

Silence. Abu Bakr turned after helping the princess down the side of a wall to see the Tartars, mouths agape. He looked closely and found himself doing the same. Matthias Beck was holding his carpet, now unfurled. His habit but shone white in the darkness, peeking out through his cloak. He was also standing in mid-air, above the street, moving away with speed. For a moment, in the night, peace reigned.

But in Baghdad peace never has time to get comfy on the throne.

"It's a jinni! Kill it!"

"Oh that is it!" From a patch of sky underneath the monk, turning rather quickly into Solomon, complete with pink flamingo wings, "do I ever call you gorillas? The word is demon. Demon!"

Grinning widely, Abu Bakr quit the spectacle of disarray, lowering himself down into the depths of the streets, leaving the angry figures on the rooftops of Baghdad. Feeling like maybe, just maybe, he had achieved a rare good deed.

In the histories read by the young Yusuf bin Muhammad, long before the growth spurt that had led men to name him Giant, he had encountered stories of palaces with palm trees that spurted the unwary with fresh water, of pomegranates artfully fashioned, so that when peeled, they revealed pips of gold and of lions trained to let singing birds trill from their tongues. Of such miracles Yusuf had dreamed. Such a miracle it seemed the desert had delivered to him.

Not that his youth had been devoid of precious

metal, certainly not. His family had served the faith since the days of the Prophet, first as soldiers, then as administrators and finally as scholars, poets and courtiers, and every generation had made sure to return home with full pockets. But as Yusuf stood in the cavern next to Abu Bakr, he found himself overwhelmed. Silver he had seen before. Silver linings, silver edged Korans, silver ornaments, silver plate. A sea of silver, burst fresh from the desert, was a new one.

They had gone west, further west than Abu Bakr or Yusuf were entirely comfortable with. Getting out of town had been a good idea. Even Abu Bakr, committed lover of all things urban, had seen the sense of that. Besides, it was necessary for the next part of the plan. Beck's jailbreak had one aim in mind, to release the one person still living who knew the site of treasure in the desert. The monk proposed a simple five way split between him, Abu Bakr, Yusuf, the princess and the wizard.

When pressed as to what a man of religion would do with such an abundance of wealth, the monk had muttered something about paying debts. Yusuf was not entirely sure what he'd do with his share. All he knew was that he needed to get away, far away and that silver would buy him a lot of distance. As he'd followed the princess down the passage revealed in a sheer rock face with just the right amount of pressure applied in the right place, he'd felt excitement growing in him, knowing that months of scrabbling near the bottom of the fetid heart of Baghdad was about to pay off.

And now, silver. A cavern full, with a giant stone eagle on the farthest end, where the floor sloped up, guarding an underground nest that shone by the light of their torches. They had left the wizard outside with the donkeys, knowing the poisonous effect of silver on practitioners of magic. For a man puking his guts out, Ibrahim bin Ismail looked remarkably happy. No doubt he'd just found all he needed to bribe any law enforcer or overzealous cleric to look the other way. Abu Bakr was the first to recover. "Well," he said, raising his hand so that his long sensuous fingers touched Yusuf's shoulder, "guess we better start shoveling."

Shifting the treasure took longer than Yusuf was happy with. The best part of a morning's work to get half the silver up to the surface. The metal came in the form of coins, thousands of coins, with strange letters, which Yusuf thought had a Frankish look to them, and pictures of men on them, a blasphemy soon to be rectified by Ibrahim's furnaces. When he asked Beck about

them, he was told they were Roman, and more than a thousand years old. Perhaps one of the coins might be spared the fires.

There could be no supernatural assistance, for if silver was bad for wizards, it was fatal for demons and jinni. The parting words of Solomon, before he'd left for wherever demons went had been an injunction to look after Beck. When the Arab had enquired how the Frank had earned such concern on the demon's part, Solomon had changed, perhaps unconsciously, his ears shrinking, his colour turning blue from purple, before fixing sad yellow eyes on Yusuf. "The first time we met, he asked me my name." His voice grew quieter. "The second time we met, he asked me if I was happy." His eyes turned black. "The third time we met..." The demon loomed. "I was in a bad place and it made me bad. He took me to a better place and now I am better. It's what he does. Look after him for me."

As he reached the surface, he found the princess sitting at the top, staring into the desert. He turned to the cavern entrance and then stopped. "Do you," he asked, not bothering with formalities, which here in the midst of the sun's heat, the empty dunes, seemed meaningless. "Do you regret your family's hoard passing into the hands of outsiders?" The princess said nothing and Yusuf wondered if she had chosen not to answer as a reproof to his brusqueness. He moved to return to the cavern when she spoke.

"I was eight when the Tartars came." She spoke in a matter of fact voice. "It was the most exciting thing that ever happened to me. For a week everything changed. I heard strange people talking in a language I did not know. I was scared, but I was alive, and for a week I knew it. Someone even suggested taking me to Tartarus. Then everything went back to normal. Same servants, same tutor. Even the guards stood exactly the same way, even if some of them were foreign. The same routine. That week was just one brief escape from the tedium of nothing ever happening. Every day, I felt myself being bent more and more into the shape the house wanted me to fill. "

She looked at him, but he could not keep her gaze. "Every day, for every meal I ate off silver plates. They were fabulously decorated, with interlocking patterns running around the edge, swallowing and giving to birth to more lines and edges that danced if you looked at them right. One day, when I was twelve, I looked at one of these plates, and I realised that all they were good for was putting food on."

A wind came down and tugged at the end of her scarf. "You cannot eat silver. It will not carry you, it will not warm you. All silver is good for is allowing you to get other things. I have never been to Tartarus, or Damascus or Ethiopia. If parting with every single one of those disks of silver will allow me to do that, I will do it in the blink of an eye." She stopped and said nothing more. Embarrassed, Yusuf retreated back into the shadows.

Midday having passed, when Yusuf returned to the trove, he threw himself down on a pile of silver and instantly regretted it, as his back protested at having several hundred bits of metal thrust into it. Abu Bakr laughed, and passed him the bag with food in it. Yusuf leaned back, still having difficulty believing the evidence of his aching body. He reached into the bag, and discovered that the day had brought another miracle, for Abu Bakr had left a sesame cake. He brought it out, raising the sesame toward his open mouth.

"Although I am in the death business, really I find its life that holds the greatest interest." Yusuf nearly choked. A female voice, and not the princess either. "Please note that I do not mean life in general. I am not interested in the slightest in the petty, squabbling lives of the majority, the people who live quietly and only commit small kindnesses or minor crimes." A shift in the shadows, and although some part of him must have been aware of this fact before, only now did it sink into Yusuf that as they only had three torches down here shadows ruled the cavern. "Some lives stand out. They acquire interest, by breaking through the limits set for the rest of mankind." A figure, coming from the darkness, bringing the darkness with it. "But at what cost to those around them?" She looked up and smiled. "Greetings Yusuf Kin-killer-

"Don't call me that," Yusuf snarled, instinct kicking in.

"-greetings, Abu Bakr the Polluted."

She was middle aged, like the princess, and that was all that might be said for their likeness. She stood straight like a heron, her lined face was scarred like an alley-cat and she had a grin like a madman in a bad hashish house with a knife and nothing to lose. "And who are you, who comes throwing foul names in the air?" Yusuf enquired, making sure his sabre was loose in its scabbard. Her smile widened. "I am the Old Man of the Mountain." Yusuf's third thought was wonder, his second being surprise and his first being obscenity born of sudden, desperate fear.

"What a tale it made," the assassin continued, "in

the war between Damascus and the Mamelukes. Damascus, staring destruction in the face, finds a new champion, despite it being his first battle and untrained in arms, a giant who holds the line against a cavalry charge. Said champion then met in single combat by an Ethiopian of astonishing skill, and the two fight for a day and an hour..."

"It was more like three minutes," Abu Bakr interrupted, "and this is an old story for us." Yusuf said nothing, remembering the shouts, the roars, the adulation, the taste of dust in his mouth.

"But I have a duty to educate my students," the Old Man replied, gesturing, and Yusuf became aware that there were more things moving in the darkness.

"On what happened that day, and what followed." Her voice carried on, unending as Yusuf remembered. *He found me after the battle. We talked about anything and everything. We talked and I emptied all that I had carried in my mind so long. We talked so long Abu Bakr got left behind.*

"When the giant hero returned to his home, his first act..."

"Do not judge him!" Abu Bakr roared, "you know nothing, you have no right to judge him!"

Yusuf could feel the heat from walking through old fires. The assassin turned sharply, her face creasing in disdain. "And you do? Abu Bakr the Sot, famed for being deadly on foot or on horse, with lance or axe, famed for being an alcoholic warrior of God, famed for being a womanizing eunuch, famed..."

"None of us have entirely clean hands, do we Fatima?" echoed the quiet voice of Matthias Beck from the passage leading to the entrance. The monk walked slowly into the cavern. "My congratulations to you on your elevation. I'm sure it was well deserved. Did you let Hassan die peacefully, or did you expedite the process?"

"I did not come here to discuss my career path." The Old Man was still smiling, but Yusuf couldn't help notice that a knife had appeared in her left hand.

"No more than you came here to chastise Yusuf and Abu Bakr."

The Old Man straightened as she faced him. "An old debt needs paying. A clean start is required." Beck gestured toward the silver.

"My share should cover the matter." The assassin shook her head.

"I'm sorry dear Matthias, that's not good enough. We've started charging interest. I want the whole treasure."

The Frank raised his hands, opened his mouth. Any negotiation would have to wait, for the

moment was broken by the princess running down the passageway. "Tartars!" she screamed, before taking in the scene before her eyes and freezing.

Before anyone could say or do anything, an object bounced slowly down the steps behind her. All eyes fixed on it as it made its way closer. Yusuf had read Euclid when aged seven and he traced the parabola of each arc, although as it differed from a perfect sphere in a number of pertinent matters he had difficulty predicting its final path.

Spheres do not possess weak chins, or thick beards designed to hide them. The head of Ibrahim the Wizard did not glare balefully as if laying a curse on those that had separated it from his body. It did not look at peace, as if transported to paradise, or in pain, as if languishing in the fires of hell. His dead face just looked very confused.

The entrance of a troop of Tartars into the cavern broke the moment. As they poured in, covered in armour and looking business, the Old Man screamed, "Take them!"

The shadows spat black clad assassins, while others burst from beneath piles of silver. They raced for the soldiers. The Old Man made for Abu Bakr, who was dragging the monk and the princess to the great stone eagle, but Yusuf met her in the middle of the piles of silver, throwing his uneaten sesame cake at her in a failed bid to distract her, before drawing his sabre.

And immediately he realized he was outmatched. He was tired from carrying silver all day, his body was in pain in a number of different ways and the coins beneath his feet slipped and slid, destabilizing his footing. Even if none of those things had been true, she would have beaten him. He was at least twenty years younger than her, and she was faster than he'd ever be. The only thing keeping him alive was the voice in his head. The voice was chanting. Chanting his name amid fire and screaming and retribution for long forgotten crimes and a destiny not wanted and guilt that would never die and loves who'd died all too soon. He added his own scream to the chorus, trying to drown it out, trying to find peace in the cut, thrust and move of battle. Trying not to hear the voice that chanted his name. That chanted *killer*. Yusuf bin Muhammad screamed once more, as he fought the enemies of his mind and body.

Abu Bakr had seen chaos in his time. The battlefields of Syria were the most obvious comparison. The Great Square of Cairo had some of the colour of the scene playing before his eyes, as he stood on the eagle's head, with all those

present shouting and dickering, looking to make, ah-ha, a killing. Closest of all was the twilight he'd spent in a tree as a child, peering into the darkness to watch as hyena and lion fought for a carcass on the ground. The princess and Beck were behind him, both admirably calm given the circumstances. Assassins and Tartars fought amid the wealth required to keep a small town fed for several decades. Shadows moved in strange pantomime across the walls. The silver, long protected from the elements by the dry cavern, was getting a covering of liquid for the first time, and it was red. The Tartars had numbers and discipline, but the assassins had broken their formation and were fuelled by an old hatred. The cavern echoed to the shouts of "Remember the Alamut!" as assassins abandoned stealth and secrecy for fury. They weren't the only ones filled with rage. But as Abu Bakr knew well, Yusuf's hatred was directed within. His friend was in trouble. Already his limbs were moving slower, already he contributed his own little shower of red rain to the silver. Abu Bakr lifted his axe. "Look after the monk!" he bellowed to the princess, leaping off the aquiline beak.

His axe head should have buried itself in the side of the Old Man. Instead it found air and had to be brought back up quickly to block a knife blow on the haft. The Old Man seemed in no way dismayed at Abu Bakr's joining the fray. Her smile only grew wider still, as if her head were about to fall off, and she only moved faster. As he felt her knife score his chest, just barely avoiding a mortal wound, Abu Bakr realized he was about to die. A kick to the stomach sent Yusuf onto his knees and suddenly Abu Bakr was staring at the blackened teeth of the assassin as she turned.

Many of the heroes in the stories Abu Bakr devoured when he thought no one was watching were saved by the appearance of giant eagles, come to rescue them from whatever desperate scrape their teller had placed them in. A stone eagle exploding was a new one to the Ethiopian, but well-timed. All activity stopped as bits of stone rained down. Abu Bakr could see the princess dragging the unmoving body of Beck, whose skull bore a nasty gash.

Then the face grabbed his attention. It was terribly beautiful and beautifully terrible, in which cruelty wrestled with sorrow and won hands down. Her eyes were golden and staring, with great black pupils which sucked in the light of the torches. It was a face worth taking time to look at. It was a shame it was attached to the body of a snake of

gargantuan size, its width greater than Yusuf's height. This was not to say it was not a beautiful snake, with olive green scales and golden bands shining in the torch light as it shifted across the silver. But all in all, Abu Bakr would have preferred an alternative to the coils emerging from the wreckage of the eagle.

The thing shrieked and the noise did not echo through the cavern, but rather emerged from all sides, not confined to one entrance into the world. "One thousand years," the dreadful call, "one thousand years and more, and they come to break my chains, and they come to wake me with noise, iron and blood. I do not care who you are, I only ask why you could not let me sleep." The Old Man moved, maybe to leap, maybe to run. The thing stared at the assassin, who froze, her limbs locked in unnatural stiffness. "It was such a good sleep," the snake with the human face continued, "I did not dream."

One of the Tartars began to move toward the eagle, a short man with broad shoulders, half his helmet broken off from the recent melee, holding a huge sword in both hands. The human with the snake body fixed the warrior with another stare, but he laughed. His amusement was curtailed when a nest of snakes burst from beneath his feet. Larger than the man, they wrapped around him and dragged him down into the earth before his comrades could react.

"I wanted water, and my followers fed me blood until I sickened," the thing screamed. The word goddess was beginning to intrude into Abu Bakr's mind. If he survived he was going to need a conversation with a decent Imam to straighten this one out. "Always my worshippers demanded death. As if I cared which pack of merchants and camel herders controlled which trade route." Abu Bakr felt his boots get wet, and as he looked down, saw he was standing in a growing pool of blood. Cries of alarm sounded as others noticed this, only to be frozen, or killed by snakes as they tried to run. Yusuf was still on his knees, his legs stained brown-red.

"Century after century of endless, remorseless death, death I could deliver, but never receive." The pitch of the shrieking rose, and rocks began to fall from the roof of the cavern. "And then he came." It was some achievement to distract Abu Bakr from the prospect of being crushed or drowning, but somehow she managed it. Unless the prospect of death was causing him to imagine things, the thing's voice had a coquettish, almost giggly quality to it, as she turned her head.

"Caesar, beloved Caesar, the golden boy. He came to me from across the far seas, to court me, to love me. By day he had to be what people wanted him to be, a loud man of trumpets and drums, but in the night when he was with me he could be himself, gentle by word and touch. The way he'd touch, not-touch, almost touch, soothing me, letting me forget the nausea in my stomach. He'd talk to me for hours, wanting to know everything about me. He wanted to know everything. The things he'd say, he could make everything I thought certain turn chimera. He'd say anything he wanted with a dangerous gleam on his face. He had conquests across the known world, had women in every village and I knew and it did not matter, because he was Caesar."

The blood stopped rising. The rate of falling debris slowed. "First he courted me with flower, then with song. Finally he offered me my heart's desire, oblivion." The goddess slowed. "He buried me in stone and sand and an empire's ransom of silver, sufficient to sever the connection to my worshippers and dull my magic. It would not kill me, but I would do nothing, know nothing and be nothing. He covered me with silver marked with his face so that I could be with him forever." Her face turned twisted. Her return from reverie to the present was confirmed when she lunged too fast, impossibly fast, toward Abu Bakr, so that her newly contorted visage looked deep into his own, the near turned far so that all rules of perspective seemed broken. Abu Bakr could see her teeth and realised they were grooved.

Her breath was dry and dusty as she spoke. "Tell me, southern man who thought himself so very clever, why should I not kill you?" Abu Bakr felt the blood rise to his knees. No begging, he told himself, I will not play your games. "Well?" the goddess shrieked, raising herself up above him. Compared to her noise, what was said next was a whisper, a tiny murmur, but Abu Bakr heard it clearer than a horn by his ear. "Because he's a good man!"

The goddess looked at Yusuf, standing upright again. "Lies!" she spat.

"Because he makes the world better by being in it." "Lies!"

"Because there are so many in this cavern who deserve death better!"

"Like who?"

"Like me!"

Yusuf was standing before the goddess, arms outstretched, head raised, baring his throat. "Look at me! Look at how wretched I am. How tainted

with hate and guilt and rage! Spare him, kill me!" The goddess circled around the Arab. "Should I do that, little Ethiopian? Should I take him and leave you?"

The words came to Abu Bakr. For Yusuf and only Yusuf would he shred his pride. "You loved a man once. You loved him for what he was, for the things he did and said. You loved him because he was clever and never stopped asking questions, never stopped wanting to know a bit more. He walked off the old path into fresh places and found new things on familiar tracks. You loved him because he was brave and wild. Because he continued when others stopped and fought while others slept. Because he wanted to be gentle even when the world conspired to make him hard." The goddess was about to interrupt him. "For all these qualities," he shouted, "you loved him. Well, Yusuf is not Caesar. But those things you loved in dead Caesar live in Yusuf." She was going to stop him now, but Abu Bakr continued, not caring anymore. Soon he'd be dead, but that was insignificant compared to this opportunity to say everything he'd ever thought about Yusuf, the man who was more than a brother, everything there had never been time for, that had never been right to say before and which would now forever remain unsaid unless he said it now.

"Yes, Yusuf has done wrong! Yes, he has hurt people who shouldn't have been hurt! Yes, in Baghdad we did things we should not have done! But could Caesar say different? If you could only see..."

"ENOUGH!"

Abu Bakr wondered if he would ever hear again. As his ears rang and blood rose and stone fell, he almost missed the next thing she said. He then wished he had. There was a strange look on the goddess' face as she spoke.

"As you are so devoted to each other in life, it seems cruel to part you in death. Take comfort, for your deaths shall be swift. There is no room for mercy when the gods play with mortals."

"What about bargains? Is there room for self-interest?" The princess looked close to death, the excitement of the past week piling upon her exhaustion from moving the still prone Beck, like stones placed atop a cart missing a wheel. Her jaw was tight and her face utterly focused on the goddess, who spat at her "Make this quick girl! Sleep has not improved my patience."

The princess stood her ground "What if I could offer you an alternative?" She raised her chin. "You wish to die, and for that you must become mortal.

You need a host to accept you utterly, so that you are one of the flesh and when that clay fails you fail with it."

The goddess stopped, her mind savouring the idea. "The host must be willing, or else the bond will not take."

"Which is why I offer myself. I have a decade, maybe two, left, and then you would be free."

"No!"

The goddess ignored Abu Bakr's interjection. "If you let me in, I would have absolute control, you know this? I could choose to crush you entirely, leave you with no power, no memory and no consciousness?"

"I understand."

A part of Abu Bakr was crumbling. The princess certainly hadn't been what he'd expected, but he'd still clung to his stories. After years spent doing disreputable work of the most sordid kind, it had felt strange to do something clean. More, something worth telling, well obviously not the grandkids about, but some tiresome brat, when he was old and boring. Listen to me, for I once stole a princess from a Tartar fortress in Baghdad! He, Abu Bakr the Sot, the Polluted, the Dark had been the hero. Now that was collapsing as the cavern he stood in.

He tried again "You don't have to do this!" The second time I've said this in a week, he realised, how repetitive I've become. "We'll work something else out!"

The princess stared into his eyes, angry and terrifying. "Abu Bakr the Mameluke, I am very grateful for the assistance you have rendered me, but the time is past when I will let any person dictate how I choose to spend what life remains in me."

"Why?" The goddess had used this difference between the two humans to move in closer. "You say you have just escaped bondage, why would you surrender what you have just achieved? For your friends?"

The princess faced her. "I lived my entire life at the whims of men, not unkind men mind you, but knowing that everything I did had been determined by others. That span felt like more time than it would take to count every grain of sand in the desert. And yet it pales in comparison to what you have suffered. I have just enough of an inkling to know I would not wish that on anyone."

The goddess was silent, for what felt like sufficient time for the sands of several deserts to be counted, recounted and sorted by size. At last she said, "I

would know your name child."

The princess started and Abu Bakr realised he did not know it. "Why?" she asked.

"Because I have just encountered something new, and I do not know what to call it."

Another silence, one that stretched so long that for a mad moment Abu Bakr wondered if the princess had forgotten her own name and was as ignorant as everyone else in the cavern. Just as he was about to laugh at the absurdity of the situation, she answered, one word, softly, the tone begging understanding. "Ayesha."

When the goddess spoke again, her voice was kind. "Prepare yourself then, Ayesha."

Yusuf had seen many unsettling things over the last few years and had committed one or two of them. The sight of the snake-woman being swallowed by a great column of blood was nonetheless an understandably striking sight, and so it was not surprising that for a second he quite forgot the princess (Ayesha, her name was Ayesha). When he recalled her to mind, he saw that she too was in full sanguinary attire, her terrified face vanishing in a red tide, her body toppling forward, but what landed on the silver was only liquid. Where Ayesha was now he had no idea but Yusuf imagined she'd be in company for the snake-woman was also missing, the blood required to replace her bulk, in a grisly demonstration of Archimedian principle, creating a wave that buffeted the assorted occupants of the cavern.

There, in shock, stood Abu Bakr, his face in pain and wonder, stunned still. But then Abu Bakr had hope for redemption and therefore his soul must grieve, whereas Yusuf had no expectations of salvation at all and must therefore see to their escape. It had better be speedy, for while by some art unknown to the Arab the blood which had previously threatened to overwhelm them was now receding, the surface collapsing above them appeared to bow to no magical control beyond that gravity. The Tartars and assassins had drawn the same conclusion as him, their enmity forgotten as they fled, stripped of their backgrounds, fighting only as men to get out. Light was entering the cavern, as the earth separating them from the sky tumbled in, revealing small gaps where the rock was thinnest.

Yusuf waded through the sticky coins, reaching the recumbent Beck. The monk was still breathing as the Arab hoisted him up. The sensible option, the passage, was no use, filled as it was with

struggling armed men. That left stupidity. He looked up. No time to judge, no point in asking Allah to intervene for a murderer and a Christian. Beck was surprisingly light as Yusuf threw him. At this point the surface was only three feet above him and the monk passed into the air and landed safely, at least for now, on ground under sky. Doing the same with Abu Bakr proved rather more difficult. For one thing the Ethiopian was considerably heavier than Beck. The monk had not been vigorously protesting being manhandled or carrying an axe either. Consequently Yusuf's aim proved off in this attempt and for a horrible moment it seemed that Abu Bakr would simply plummet back down into the cavern, before a lucky grab of his hand caught a rocky outcrop on the edge of the surface, leaving him dangling in the air. Less fortunately this left him in full control of his vocal apparatus. "I await the next stage of your plan with some interest," Abu Bakr snarled, his face twisted as he swung his axe into the earth, trying to get a better grip.

Before Yusuf could think up a suitably crushing retort, gravity responded with one of its own, as a wedge of rock nearly hit the Arab and left Abu Bakr clinging onto a thin shelf consisting more of sand than anything else. And then Yusuf thought he had been hit after all as pain burst into the back of his head and the earth tilted and once again he found himself lying uncomfortably in the silver and standing above him was a smile to put a crocodile to shame. He had forgotten the Old Man of the Mountain, a mistake that nobody makes twice. All Yusuf could see now was the knife moving towards him. Movement slowed as Yusuf braced for his well-deserved end and imagined the torments of hell.

This took a while as Yusuf was a man of some imagination, and he was just finalizing the details of his meals (thorns and molten brass) when it occurred to him that the knife was taking an unconscionably long time to do its business. His fear transmogrified to boredom and then to outrage. He took a look at the assassin and decided that she must be immobile. Judging by her smile would get him nowhere, but the rest of her body was also clearly not moving.

"I would kill you, but that's an old habit I'm trying to get rid of," said the woman who wasn't quite Ayesha. She stood too upright, adjusting the weight of her body differently. Her voice was lower, slower, the voice of one who expected to be listened to. Her eyes were yellow and older. "We are all murderers here, so I will not presume to

judge you." She leaned toward the frozen Old Man. "But Abu Bakr the Mameluke, Yusuf bin Muhammad and Matthias Beck are under my protection. I'd advise you not to push me." With that the Old Man was free, stumbling back, strangely ungainly for a heartbeat, her hand moving as if to strike at Ayesha, before backing into what remained of the shadow. One last parting shot remained. "Rest assured Yusuf Kin-killer, we will cross paths again, and you will not enjoy it." Then her form vanished into the dark, much as her smile had, temporarily, vanished from her face.

Then it was Yusuf's turn to be hurled in the air and it gave him no comfort at all that his thrower was a thing unnatural as his stomach bucked, rolled and seemed worryingly close to leaving altogether at this treatment. He landed with a heavy thud that caused the dangerously thin surface beneath him to groan ominously. Before he had to time to process this danger, get up, pull Abu Bakr to safety, check the monk and gingerly make his way to safer ground, he was moving, a storm of wind lifting him, spinning him. Having grappled with confusion which was then succeeded by terror, he finally opted to relax and wait this latest development.

Just as he'd reached this place of calm, his much mistreated body, hopefully for the last time this day, crashed back to earth. This time he lay in sand rather than silver and Yusuf wasn't going to complain. He'd had enough of the substance for a while. As he gingerly raised himself, he saw Abu Bakr leaning over Beck, slapping his face in a no doubt well intentioned effort to revive him. It was certainly an energetic exercise. The Arab became aware of the person who had been the princess, then briefly Ayesha and was now in some sort of post state. She stood behind, looking at nothing in particular.

"How're you feeling?" Another dumb question he knew, but Yusuf was having difficulty with his conversation skills at the moment, and saying something was better than nothing.

There was a pause, as she chose her words carefully "We have reached a...balance. Stability has been achieved."

"Oh, well that's good then."

Silence. Yusuf would have been increasingly unnerved by her unblinking stare if the past hour hadn't involved a chat with the Old Man of the Mountain, the death of a wizard, an enraged spirit and a small ocean of blood. *So quickly we acclimatize. Can anything become routine, no*

matter how foul?

Abu Bakr joined them. "What do you intend to do now?" he asked.

She smiled and Yusuf tried not to see fangs in her teeth. "There is a world to see, and we have limited time at last. I thought maybe Rome. A new place with a different climate."

The two men were distracted from answering by noises being emitted by Beck which suggested that he was returning to consciousness. As they back to address her, they were greeted by empty dunes and a clear sky.

"Good luck and fair travels," whispered Abu Bakr. Yusuf could think of others who would need it more, but let it stand.

They helped the monk sit up and watched him take his bearings. His face was very red and Yusuf didn't like the gash on his head. "I take it things got interesting while I was in the dark. Poor Ibrahim, he didn't deserve death. Is Ayesha all right?"

"I think she may have found a new lease of life," Yusuf began, "you missed-"

"Quite a lot I'm sure, but I suspect we have a long walk ahead of us, so you can tell me en route. I imagine the Old Man is distinctly displeased with us?"

"That would be an accurate description, yes."

"In which case I think it behooves us to get out of the dar ul-Islam for a little while. Give Fatima some time to calm down."

"To the Frankish lands?"

"The head of my order probably wants a chat about my extra-curricular activities." He considered for a moment before slapping his knee.

"I know, the Amazons, I still have some friends there."

Abu Bakr considered this. "The Amazons."

"Yes."

"Don't they have a complex relationship with men?"

"So long as you mind your manners they're very unlikely to stick sharp things in you. And considerably less likely than other females one might talk about."

"Point very much taken."

"After all it's not as if you're going to do anything stu-" Beck stopped. "Well, you'll be with me anyway." He stood up. "Time to get going. It'll soon be dark and I'll show you a navigational trick my old friend Ibn Rushd taught me."

"Didn't he die two centuries ago?"

"Well, I did say he was an old friend." The three men began walking. "In the meantime, you can fill

me in on what happened while I was out. And then you can finish what you were saying about Ibn Khaldun."

Sam Ottewill-Soulsby

And now a special treat for you: Benjamin Coles wrote his dissertation on "**Play in Art, as Comedy and throughout the Works of Douglas Adams**", and thought you all might appreciate it. Personally, I hope you appreciate the effort it took me to do the footnotes correctly.

'He was curious about and amused by all kinds of inanimate articles and objects, by living plants and creatures, by himself, by other people, by the world and by the whole universe. The most fundamental laws, principles and accepted systems that underlie everything and are taken for granted by almost all of us were to him fascinating, funny and appealingly odd. More than anyone I have ever known he combined childlike simplicity with a great sophistication of understanding and intelligence.'
- Stephen Fry

The final chapter of *So Long and Thanks for All the Fish* (1984) is a short parable, not explicitly related to any part of the preceding story. We are told of a uniquely brilliant but easily distracted genetic engineer whose masters, upon discovering that their planet was soon to be invaded by a great warrior race from a distant star system, locked him in a room and demanded he design an even greater warrior race to defend the planet. Unfortunately, he got distracted and instead created, among other things, a remarkable new breed of fly that could work out, unaided, which half of a half-open window was open and an on-off-switch for children.

Celebrations of these remarkable achievements seemed doomed to be shortlived because disaster was imminent... But astoundingly, the fearsome invaders who, like most warring races, were only on the rampage because they couldn't cope with things at home, were stunned by these extraordinary breakthroughs, joined in the celebrations and were instantly prevailed upon to sign a wide-ranging series of trading agreements and set up a programme of cultural exchanges. And, in an astonishing reversal of normal practice in the conduct of such matters, everybody concerned lived happily ever after.

'There was a point to this story,' we're finally told, 'but it has temporarily escaped the chronicler's

mind' (pp. 589-90). Now, given that the unexplained discontinuity of the final chapter and its account of a catastrophe narrowly and startlingly avoided do strongly suggest 'a point', the story referred to is ostensibly the parable, but, as this last line is also the last line of the book and intended as the last line of the entire *Hitchhiker* series – which, at the time of the book's publication, had been very almost the sole focus of Adams's professional life for over six years – there is a pleasing ambiguity to the expression: what was the point of all that, he may have asked himself or imagined his readers asking, what was the meaning or purpose of this project that had so dominated his life and now defined him in the eyes of so many? Perhaps a response to this question (and the story's elusive 'point') has something to do with the fact that 'the chronicler' of the final line errs in exactly the same way as the subject of his story: the point of the genetic engineer's confinement temporarily escapes his mind and, what's more, the fruits of his confinement, various apparently pleasing but random and, in the circumstances, quite useless innovations, do bear an essential resemblance to the fruits of Adams's own confinement – as was quickly becoming standard practice, he had finally written this latest novel, after a year of missing deadlines, over a two-week period of internment in a minimalistic hotel suite, rented and manned by representatives of his increasingly desperate publishers (Simpson, p. 202). Furthermore, this book especially was not what anybody expected Adams (or Adams himself intended) to write; having established himself, somewhat to his bemusement⁸, as a Sci-Fi writer, he'd now dispensed with his cast of wacky aliens and written a love-story set on Planet Earth. 'Adams had,' as Neil Gaiman delicately put it, 'a tendency to have ideas that didn't always fit into the framework of what he was doing at the time' (p.154). The reason *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* had, unlike anything else he'd tried since leaving university, worked, was, as Adams realised, that the use of the guide itself as a source of narrative enabled him to go off on whatever tangent came to mind (*Salmon*, p. 156). Now, however, even this miraculous plot device was increasingly failing to compensate for his boredom with the whole set-up: 'It was like a chore – people were saying, 'Let's have a Zaphod bit,' and I didn't

⁸Asked 'Why do you write Sci-Fi?', Adams once replied, 'I didn't mean to. I just exaggerate a lot.' (Gaiman, p. 160)

feel like doing a Zaphod bit!' (Gaiman, p. 140). In other words, there's reason to believe that Adams ('the chronicler') sympathised with the genetic engineer, and even that he wrote the parable in defence of the apparent failing that they were both susceptible to. Of course, the failing *is* apparent rather than actual because the 'remarkable achievements' of the genetic engineer do in fact save the planet and *So Long and Thanks for All the Fish*, like the rest of the *Hitchhiker* series, is in fact high-quality fiction.

Adams once observed that creative thinkers are 'at their best when they're just doing stuff for the sheer delight of it' (*LUDA*, ca. 51:00mins). With this in mind, it might have seemed to him that a specific plan or purpose (other than to do what's most delightful, which may or may not be consistent in or with other plans or purposes) would be an impediment to creative work. Although he certainly never fully enunciated and probably never fully developed a theory of art or of comedy, Adams expressed at various points in his career interesting and, what's more, interestingly related views on the creative process he was involved in. Taking explanations and examples from the fiction and nonfiction of Adams and of his diverse influences, I shall, with the help of various other thinkers, flesh out these ideas and examine their implications.

A concept (or, at least, a word) that is recurring in Adams's work and always central to his postulations on art and comedy is play.⁹ I don't suppose it's particularly divisive to say that, in designing a new breed of fly that can distinguish open window-space from closed window-space, the genetic engineer is, in some sense, playing, or that Adams's writing is, in some sense, playful. In the introduction he wrote to P. G. Wodehouse's unfinished novel *Sunset at Blandings* (2000), Adams praises (even valorises) precisely this quality in the work of the writer who influenced him perhaps more than any other:

He doesn't need to be serious. He's better than that. He's up in the stratosphere of what the human mind can do, above tragedy and strenuous thought, where you will find Bach,

⁹Although the term 'play' has a long and complex history and the way Adams uses the word has much in common with the way many other thinkers have done, there is nothing in his own output or in criticism of his work or accounts of his life to suggest that he was in any way influenced by these thinkers.

Mozart, Einstein, Feynman, and Louis Armstrong, in the realms of pure, creative playfulness. (*Salmon*, p. 67)

Judging by the remarkable industriousness that Wodehouse had in common with those here identified as among his peers and that Adams starts the piece by describing in some detail, the play or playfulness he has in mind is by no means at odds with hard work. It seems likely that he would agree with John Allen Paulos when, near the start of *I Think Therefore I Laugh* (1985), his essay on the relationship between comedy and philosophy, he says that 'people underestimate the extent to which play enters into any serious intellectual endeavour', and that 'doing something for the what-if fun of it frees one from the shackles of goal-directed plodding and sometimes leads to otherwise unlikely new insights' (p. 23). Certainly, enjoyment is also part of what Adams means by play, and an essential part; in a 1998 interview with *The A.V. Club*, he argued that we get the most interesting work in a given craft or medium when people are 'incredibly creative in it, just because they love it to bits and think it's the greatest fun you can possibly have' and, furthermore, that 'the idea of art kills creativity' (*Salmon*, pp. 158-60). In defending what might sound like quite a controversial view, he took as his primary example the emergent popular music of the 1960s, which, at the time, 'nobody would have ever remotely called art', but, tracing this reticence through history, he might also have referred to, among others, Chaucer and his contemporaries, who were understood to be writing in an inartistic language, the plays of Shakespeare, which were, as Anthony Burgess puts it in his introduction to the Alexander text, 'merely plays' (p. 17), the early English novelists, who, having sorted out the language problem, were understood to be writing in an inartistic medium, many of the modernists, widely dismissed as lunatics and pornographers, or indeed his beloved Wodehouse, described by even Hilaire Belloc, his most outspoken admirer, as a master of the 'craft of writing' rather than any artform (p. 5). Of course, unstated here is a subscription to an institutional theory of art, that is, a definition of art as something like 'work of the kind studied in Arts faculties'; certainly, from this definition, the concept of quality is excluded, as, apparently, are the concepts of beauty and insight. The idea of art, as it is here conceived, can then be seen to kill or at least seriously limit creativity because, insofar as to set about trying to produce a

work of art is to set about trying to produce something of a specific and known kind, innovation in art is precluded¹⁰.

There are of course other definitions of art, and Adams elsewhere uses the word to mean something unequivocally positive: Wodehouse, in the introduction to *Sunset at Blandings*, is very pointedly described as an artist, in the same sense and the same league as Shakespeare and Bach, and also Feynman and Einstein. These latter inclusions suggest a more unusual definition, which Adams comes closest to spelling out in the essay's closing remarks (reproduced above): what, in Adams's view, links these various figures and qualifies them as great artists is the extent of their exploration of 'what the human mind can do', describable as or enabled by their 'pure, creative playfulness'. Of course, this 'art', defined in terms of creativity and innovation, stands in direct opposition to that other 'art', a killer of creativity: Adams's fear of art in the one sense is a fear for art in the other. Even so, it would perhaps be fairer to say not that he contradicts himself but that he uses a famously difficult to define and ambiguous word in at least two different ways; after all, his thinking seems quite consistent. In both cases, the essential concept is and the essential concern for a kind of cognitive play, a freedom of thought, in Paulos's terms, 'from the shackles of goal-directed plodding'. Just as physical play might be defined as action characterised by freedom from commitments (to pressing concerns, to procedure), so Adams's play seems definable as *thought* characterised by freedom from commitments (to set purposes, to settled conceptions), thought that runs not (only) along the established pathways (within the established matrixes) but in breach of them.

Of course, in saying that what qualifies these writers, musicians and scientists as artists is their playfulness, Adams is not fully defining art; he is only insisting that this concept of play is an integral part of the definition. Certainly, however, there are theories of art with which this insistence can be comfortably reconciled. In *Mostly Harmless* (1992), a parenting manual points out to Arthur

¹⁰From this end of the explanation, it's clear that the view is not especially controversial. When Adams says that 'the idea of art kills creativity', he means something not so very different from what Wordsworth means when he says, in his *Essay Supplementary to Preface* (1815), that 'every author, as far as he is great and at the same time original, has had the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed' (p. 46).

Dent that being able to perform the most basic social tasks involves 'a great deal of filtering skill for which all conscious entities have eventually to develop a capacity in order to protect themselves from the contemplation of the chaos through which they seethe and tumble' (p. 125). This 'filtering skill' is a key concern for many art theorists: as Henri Bergson puts it, 'things have been classified with a view to the use I can derive from them. And it is this classification I perceive, far more clearly than the colour and the shape of things.' (p. 73) 'Algebrization', in Viktor Shklovsky's terms, enables 'economy of perceptive effort' but only at the expense of 'the sensation of life' (p. 12). Where the theories of Bergson and Shklovsky differ is in the exact nature of the role they then ascribe to art: for Bergson, art's function is to unveil reality (p. 75); for Shklovsky, to defamiliarise it, 'to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process is an aesthetic end in itself' (p. 12). Now, if, taking Adams's lead, we understand thought to be playful insofar as it is characterised by freedom from commitments, we can say that the artistic processes envisaged by Bergson and by Shklovsky both necessarily involve playfulness. Indeed, both theories posit art as play to a certain end: for, in conceiving of more than the labels, the algebraic forms of life, both the creators and receptors of art are thinking in breach of the established pathways, are discovering, as Adams puts it, what the human mind can do. Also, though neither Bergson nor Shklovsky make any such observation, their theories seem quite compatible with Adams's claim that scientific work is (or at least can be) artistic: by detailing every detail of the perceived universe, scientific theorising certainly contributes to 'the difficulty and length of perception'; and, to my mind at least, the unveiling of reality seems as accurate a description of the enterprise of science as of art.

In any case, what Adams means by play must have importance far beyond the realms of what's ordinarily meant by art, and, actually, in one interview, he does describe it in quite different terms, as a vital part of the ecology of all of the more intelligent animals, important at the level of staying alive and reproducing as much as at the level of philosophising – not that he stresses any distinction between the two (*LUDA*, ca. 51:00-52:00mins). He stops short of describing play's precise role in day-to-day life, but his comments suggest an agreement with Bergson's claim that:

What life and society require of each

of us is a constantly alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation, together with a certain elasticity of mind and body to enable us to adapt ourselves in consequence. (p. 16)

Especially interesting here is that Bergson is actually trying to explain why we laugh at the things we laugh at: in Bergson's view, laughter is invariably critical, and critical quite specifically of 'that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life' (p. 46). Comedy, in Bergson's scheme, is then 'midway between art and life', involved more in the admonition of the inartistic than in art itself (p. 81). There is a lot that he simply doesn't explain – like for instance the surprise element of comedy, why and how amusement fades – but essentially this particular theory fails for the same reasons that theories of comedy (or equally theories of laughter) tend to fail: firstly, because there are things that don't possess the qualities it identifies as causative of laughter but do nevertheless cause laughter, and secondly, because there are things that apparently do possess those qualities but nevertheless don't cause laughter. In support of the first charge, the kinds of jokes Adams comes up with are especially good evidence. In the transformation, several miles above Magrathea, of the two missiles heading towards the Heart of Gold into a sperm whale and a bowl of petunias (pp. 99-100), 'rigidity, automatism, absent-mindedness and unsociability', the basic incarnations of Bergson's inelasticity (p. 71), are significantly absent. Absurdist and conceptual humour in particular seem problems for Bergson, but he also fails to explain why amusement should ever be something we actively seek out, why, if 'this rigidity is the comic, and laughter its corrective' (p. 17), so many instances of the comic should make us so unequivocally happy and our laughter should so often be felt to communicate only approval and encouragement. As for the second charge, to defend his theory against it, Bergson would have to explain why a lot of what we do is repetitive, inelastic, entirely machine-like and yet not generally funny. Perhaps he does go some way to achieving this by stressing that we cannot laugh at and be (negatively) emotionalised by the same subject at the same time (p. 10) and that the objects of laughter, a social expression, are determined by social more than personal convictions (p. 67) but, to my mind,

this still leaves a lot to be accounted for. If a man performs a job like ticket-dispensing, a job that might equally be performed by a simple machine, he is not funny in consequence; our senseless routines are not necessarily common or sociable or even especially intentional – they are often as indicative of 'pure mechanism' as any character traits but they are not therefore funny to observe. It seems to me that, in general, inelasticity is funny where it is unexpected, and that what Bergson's theory shows very clearly is just how ubiquitous we expect it to be, just how central to our lives 'elasticity of mind' is. This is all immediately relevant because what Bergson means by elasticity of mind is, I think, what Adams means by play – that is, in brief, thought characterised by freedom from commitments. It's this kind of thought that 'enables us to adapt', that functions, in other words, as the driving force behind the individual's (and, by extension, society's) every breakthrough in understanding – it makes sense that it should be so important in day-to-day life, and therefore also that it should be so easily gratifying.

The theory of laughter advanced by Bergson is also relevant because the conceptual overlap between play and comedy is, I think, greater even than between play and art. According to Bergson, we laugh to communicate criticism of inelasticity but, even if this were true, also communicated by all of our laughter not directed at inelasticity of *body* would be our own elasticity of mind, our own freedom from devotion to whatever established course or conception, devotion to which was the object of our criticism. It is this announcement of elasticity, of playfulness, that seems to me the essential (if not exclusive) function of laughter. Certainly, laughter can be critical, but, to the degree that amusement is genuine and laughter unintentional, criticism is a side-effect – a very common side-effect, given our widely sanctioned tendency to expect and strive to sustain in others formal commitment to the view that we and all those things we associate with are at least comparatively magnificent. The important point is that, even if a playful approach can be unwelcome and, to certain subjects, often is, we can and do greatly reassure and generally aid those around us by making it clear to them, when it might be doubted, that we are playing, that our approach is playful, that there is nothing happening and nothing they are saying or doing that is, owing to the nature of our commitments, disturbing us. This explanation of the communicative usefulness

of laughter is, it seems to me, the great strength of the theory that's been advanced by Peter McGraw in recent years. 'Laughter and amusement result,' according to McGraw, 'from violations that are simultaneously seen as benign' (p. 1141); the essential purpose of laughter is then to 'signal to the world that a violation is indeed OK':

As humans evolved, the situations that elicited humor likely expanded from apparent physical threats to a wider range of violations, including violations of personal dignity (e.g., slapstick, physical deformities), linguistic norms (e.g., unusual accents, malapropisms), social norms (e.g., eating from a sterile bedpan, strange behaviors), and even moral norms (e.g., bestiality, disrespectful behaviors). The benign-violation hypothesis suggests that anything that is threatening to one's sense of how the world "ought to be" will be humorous, as long as the threatening situation also seems benign. ('Benign Violations', p. 1142)

If the word violation is understood in the loosest sense, if, by 'ought to be', McGraw means, as he often seems to, not *ideally* but *ordinarily* would be, this is perhaps a way into a general account of comedy. It could only be a way in because, in itself, the theory does not hint at answers to a number of clearly important questions. First, McGraw, like Bergson, does not explain why we want to laugh, why we go out in search of violations to recognise as benign. Second, there is the problem of poetry: poems constantly violate all sorts of norms ('linguistic norms' especially) and are generally understood, certainly on the level McGraw's talking about, as benign – why then are they not generally funny? Third, why, when we're upset or angry or worried, are violations that are clearly recognisable as benign (and even unrelated to our disturbance) still considerably less likely to amuse us? McGraw's problem, it seems to me, is his focus on the stimuli rather than the stimulation. He's concerned to identify what causes amusement but not, crucially, to explain what amusement is. To this latter problem, I think Adams's notion of play could hold the solution. What I want to suggest is that the joy we experience when amused is not essentially different from the joy we experience, to a varying (sometimes unobserved) degree, whenever we're thinking playfully, indeed that the abruptness and

extremity of the play in amusement – abruptness and extremity are, in this context, for reasons that I hope now to make clear, inseparable – are roughly proportional to the abruptness and extremity of the accompanying joy. If something seems to me genuinely funny, it is because it is, in some sense, a revelation, because it is having the effect of jolting me into playfulness, of suddenly and clearly exposing me to some possibility that is significantly at odds with my routine of understanding – some unexpected connection, minute (though magnified, as the subject of my immediate attention) and experienced only momentarily. I will not find funny what is not a revelation *in this sense*. An entirely new insight will not amuse me if I recognise no rule or norm, if I have no conception, in relation to which it is a revelation. Equally, if a clear, step-by-step explanation pre-acclimatises me to an insight, dismantles the conception in relation to which it would be a revelation, I will be less likely to find it amusing; so, the laborious explanation of a joke is no substitute for the joke itself. Also, what was a comic revelation will, of course, stop amusing me as I become familiar with it, as it becomes (if only temporarily) part of my routine of understanding; I can hear a joke a second time and still find it genuinely funny precisely because I do not usually incorporate the possibilities expressed in jokes permanently into my routine of understanding. Directly opposed to play are adamancy and fixation. If I am too strongly committed to the conception in relation to which some expressed possibility is (or, rather, would be) a revelation, it will be incapable of really engaging me and therefore incapable of amusing me. Thus, a joke that many people find hilarious may, to others, seem merely offensive or stupid. When we are angry or upset or worried, we are particularly committed to and focused on certain conceptions, and are therefore less able to think with the freedom essential to play, less able to tear our minds away from the subjects or themes of our disturbance and engage in comic possibilities. For a joke to be got, it must, however briefly, be the focus of attention; you cannot be terrified and a little bit amused; you can, however, be amused

and a little bit terrified.¹¹

Poetry is interesting. We don't ordinarily get a (clear, strong) sense of the comic when we encounter all sorts of typically comic devices in poetry – and, when I say poetry, what I here mean is language of the kind that proudly and quite openly confuses us – for a combination of reasons, all to do with the approach that poetry is, because of our conventions of reading, able to elicit from us; in the first place, while a sense of the comic is sudden, poetry, in its every expression, demands prolonged engagement: if we discern a poetic form, we discern also an obligation to contemplate – we become aware that what we are taking in is meant to be difficult to grasp but also, in some sense, beautiful and serious, that any understandings we have must be essentially provisional; rather than seem funny, the words seem to have deeper, as yet undiscovered meaning(s). In poetry, we expect every pun and every apparent absurdity to communicate to us – or help communicate to us – something profound. Poetry is wordplay with pretensions, and pretensions that we are accustomed to humouring. Furthermore, there is very little we know not to expect in poetry, and, although it is or at least involves an engagement in play, it often does, by seeking to move us, forcefully anchor and limit our play. A wit, according to Bergson, is a poet in intelligence but not feeling (p. 54). I think that, in reading poetry, we could get a joke only if it were (thanks to its form or its context) presented as one.¹²

¹¹It's perhaps worth pointing out that the importance of psychological distance shown in McGraw's most recent study, 'Too Close for Comfort, or Too Far to Care?', is certainly compatible with this approach. If the referents or components of an intended joke are psychologically closer, they will be more able and likely to dominate my focus and so amuse me; however, if, among the referents or components of an intended joke, there is a significant disturbing element, the psychologically closer it is, the more it in particular will dominate my focus and so limit my engagement with (the other elements of) the intended joke. The simple observation here is that, in general, the psychologically closer something is, the more you are pressed to engage with it, and the psychologically closer a threat is, the more it dominates your thinking, easily eclipsing everything else at equal and greater psychological distance.

¹²If, say, we came across a word or expression that had, in the hundred or so years since the poem's composition, taken on an exclusive meaning that was starkly at odds with the developing themes and tones, we'd struggle to maintain absolutely the approach we have learnt to take. On a recent episode of *QI*, it was pointed out that, in the Sherlock Holmes stories, all the ejaculating can sometimes

Of course something is comic to a degree, and this is partly because a possibility is familiar to a degree, its presentation sudden to a degree, and partly because one is committed to the relevant conception to a degree and focussed to a degree; also, however, it is because a joke, an instance of comedy, consists rarely of a single revelation, more often of a string of (conceptually interconnected) revelations: so, a novel combination of words will, except in the circumstances described above, have a hint of the comic to it; a novel combination of words touching on a taboo subject like sex will be slightly more comic; a novel combination of words touching on sex and spoken by the queen even more so. And the same instant could involve more revelations: this novel and provocative combination of words could be (a complete non sequitur) said while delivering a Remembrance Day speech, could appear to be read (without noticing) from a script or spoken (with great purpose) as the sole departure from a script.¹³ If we think for a moment about all of the different ideas, emotions and, in specific situations, thoughts, that can be read in facial expressions and postures and gestures, we can get a sense of how physical humour might fit in with this theory. It is in the different combinations of extent (inseparable from the subjects of revelation) that we get the different tones and genres of comedy. Now this is certainly not a description of Adams's theory of comedy. It is rather an attempt to outline a theory that is consistent with and to some extent follows from Adams's thinking. In an article published in 2000, he describes how, watching Monty Python for the first time, he was hit by the realisation that 'comedy was a medium in which extremely intelligent people could express things that simply couldn't be expressed any other way'; more, comedy was 'showers and rainbows in the desert', a constant source of 'astonishment' (*Salmon*, p. 122). 'I've always been terribly interested,' he said on another occasion, 'in seeing

detract from the suspense.

¹³See Paulos's chapter on Bertrand Russell and Groucho Marx, or George Pitcher's essay, 'Wittgenstein, Nonsense, and Lewis Carroll'; Paulos and Pitcher, concerned only to demonstrate that the philosophy and the comedy have very similar content, don't consider what might distinguish the two. It seems to me that the philosophers' tendency to explain in steps plays a part but more important is that, where they give us the skeletal logic of an observation, the comedians give us a real-life, detailed fleshing out of that observation. Thus, the number as well as the unexpectedness of the connections we are made to make is far greater.

how very familiar things look from unfamiliar points of view; how do you change your perspective and suddenly see, you know, the truth of something' (*Big Thinkers*, 17:00-19:10mins). Bergson would say that what he was interested in was art, and, thinking of Wodehouse and Feynman and Bach, Adams would probably agree. For Adams, however, the all-important concept was not art but play, a quality vital to human intelligence, the quality which gives art all of its (Shklovskian) beauty and (Bergsonian) insight, and the quality which, in its purest form, involved in no project but indulged in for its own delights, is comedy.

Of course pure indulgence can be very useful in its consequences, and comedy has, very obviously, the effect of making us happy and, perhaps slightly less obviously, the effect of exposing us to new ways of thinking. We might recall Paulos's observation that 'doing something for the what-if fun of it frees one from the shackles of goal-directed plodding and sometimes leads to otherwise unlikely new insights' (p. 23).

Philosophy and the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy (2012), a recent collection of essays edited by Nicholas Joll, takes as its starting point the view that the works of Douglas Adams are particularly good sources of these 'unlikely new insights'; indeed, Andrew Aberdein, in his contribution, 'The Judo Principle, Philosophical Method and the Logic of Jokes', invokes Wittgenstein's reported observation that 'a serious and philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of jokes' and then claims that Adams's *Hitchhiker* series comes closer to fitting this description than anything else (p. 231). Other essays in the volume focus on particular instances of philosophy being 'camouflaged as a series of extremely good jokes' (Webb, p. 123). For instance, Ben Saunders and Eloïse Harding examine the scene in *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* (1980) in which Arthur is expressly invited by a cheery bovine creature to select a part of its anatomy for his main course (pp. 227-8); they see in the dialogue between Arthur and the creature a clash between Kantian principles on the one hand and the concerns of Marxism and the Animal Liberation Movement on the other. In another of the essays, Michèle Friend expresses in formal logic – and then, while insisting on various qualifications, defends the validity of – the argument for the non-existence of God derived from the sheer usefulness of the Babel fish (p. 52). Both sequences of jokes certainly show the

revelatory, re-analytical quality that seems to me fundamental to comedy.

Both are also, clearly if not pointedly, critical – the first, of those who unthinkingly eat meat, and, the second, of those who claim there to be proof of the existence of a God in whom they also say they must have faith. Of course all comedy is critical in the sense that it undermines the routine of understanding, the intellectual status quo; some, however, is also critical in the sense that it is seen to also undermine something of more specific and established importance – a reputation or a deeply held belief, for instance. If comedy is too pointedly critical in this latter sense, it will of course not be comic to any victims of the criticism. In general, though, because comedy's end is fundamentally different from the end of complaint, because its recognised primary purpose is to make us laugh rather than to make us see the error of our ways, its edifying capacity is greatly enhanced. In a lecture, published in *This Craft of Verse* (2000), Borges, building on Emerson, says that 'arguments convince nobody... and they convince nobody because they are presented as arguments' (p. 31). In a passage reminiscent also of Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, he observes that stories and poems and metaphors and similes – and jokes, we might add – are far more capable of persuading than explicit arguments and, by way of an example, that the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth have been so widely embraced at least partly because they are, for the most part, presented and explained not in arguments but in parables. 'When something is merely said or – better still – hinted at, there is a kind of hospitality in our imagination' (pp. 31-32) and this hospitality is related to – if not utterly dependent on – the absence of a challenge, a confrontation, an attack from a foreign intelligence. What Borges doesn't observe is that, by presenting our arguments in these indirect and creative ways, we not only avoid disturbing (and so stifling the receptiveness of) our audiences, we also have an ability to please them, to make them more amenable still, to cultivate reciprocal geniality.

There are certainly reasons to suppose that Adams was keenly aware of this. In fact, the final line of *So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish* – 'there was a point to this story but it has temporarily escaped the chronicler's mind' – is, as well as an admission to distraction, a failure or refusal to moralise: the amusing little story is left as an amusing little story rather than developed into anecdotal support for an argument (i.e. for the 'point' the story so

strongly suggests). The same failure or refusal is, of course, described in the story: the brilliant genetic engineer is called upon to create a race of warriors but instead plays around and comes up with one or two things that amuse people and make them happy. In the story, all turns out well because the invading warriors are not met with violent resistance but with these innovations and the celebratory atmosphere that has come with them. A serious point is surely suggested by the absence, both in the story and in the offering of the story, of forceful engagement with opposition: Adams seems to be using the technique described by Borges to champion that technique and so defend his own career path. Certainly, the genetic engineer resembles and so represents his creator: Adams, a uniquely brilliant but easily distracted writer, living very much on the apparent eve of destruction, is naturally expected to use his talents to attack the evils that threaten his society; unfortunately he gets distracted and instead comes up with one or two things that amuse people and make them happy; it's not unfortunate though, first, because these things work criticism into forms that are not only palatable but positively delightful; second, because they, in contrast to direct criticisms, delight people, make them generally more happy and content and therefore less angry and upset and inclined to think and act in ways that will be harmful to others. It is because of comedy's ability to simultaneously scrutinise and delight, to raise concerns and, in the process, free us from concerns, that Adams saw it as having yet another function, even greater, even more existential, in a sense. This function is described quite exactly towards the end of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980); having watched the monastery burn to the ground, William of Baskerville instructs Adso as follows:

Fear prophets... and those prepared to die for the truth, for as a rule they make many others die with them, often before them, at times instead of them. Jorge did a diabolical thing because he loved his truth so lewdly that he dared anything in order to destroy falsehood. Jorge feared the second book of Aristotle because it perhaps really did teach how to distort the face of every truth, so that we would not become slaves of our ghosts. Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, to make truth

laugh, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth. (p. 491)

In Adams's writing, the conviction that comedy can liberate us from our desperation for essential truth or meaning is expressed most clearly in perhaps his most famous joke. In the first *Hitchhiker* book, a great computer, Deep Thought, creates an even greater computer, Earth (of which humanity is assumed to be merely an insignificant part), to work out the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything, the answer to which, Deep Thought has discovered after seven-and-a-half million years of calculation, is 42. Unfortunately, five minutes before Earth is due to reach its conclusion, it is demolished to make way for an intergalactic bypass (pp. 128-30). In the second book, it is revealed that, had Earth reached its conclusion, it would have been wrong anyway because its programme was interrupted and then corrupted by the arrival on its surface, two million years before its demolition, of an assortment of useless service industry personnel (the actual ancestors of human beings) who believed they had been sent to establish a new colony but had in fact been tricked into leaving their old planet by its other inhabitants (p. 302). In the third book, it is confirmed that the Question and the Answer are in fact mutually exclusive, that it is impossible that both can be known about the same Universe and that if, somehow, they were, they would just cancel each other out and take the Universe with them, leaving in its place 'something even more bizarrely inexplicable'; it is also suggested that this may have already happened (p. 455). 'It is as if,' say Nicholas Joll and Alexander Pawlak, 'the intelligibility or purpose of the Universe were a clown whom Adams wants to hit not once but multiple times with a custard pie' (p. 258). Terry Eagleton, in his book *The Meaning of Life* (2007), argues that 42 is a funny answer to the question 'what is the meaning of life?' because of the various ways in which it is a category mistake (pp. 42-3). He misunderstands comedy and misrepresents Adams. There is nothing integrally funny about category mistakes; they, like all things under the sun, will be experienced as funny if they are adequately experienced as possibilities significantly at odds with routine understanding. What's more, to claim that Deep Thought is making a category mistake by stating 42 as the answer to the question 'what is the meaning of life?' is to claim that 'what is the meaning of life?' is a real question, to which there is a correct

category of answers. And this, of course, is precisely what Deep Thought disputes (p. 128). As a Catholic, a revolutionary Marxist and the author of at least one book on the meaning of life, Eagleton is perhaps an ideal example of the kind of person Adams saw the joke as criticising, that is, the kind of person William of Baskerville warns Adso to fear. George Watson, who supervised Adams at university, explains the Meaning of Life sequence in his obituary essay.

Anyone who has passed through a university knows there are people who believe there is an answer to the riddle of the universe if only they could find it. (Occasionally, and disastrously, they think they have found it.) ... Of course there is no answer to the question. There is no question. We live in the universe – life, the universe and everything, as he put it – because it is all there is. (pp. 115-6)

Certainly, in the *Hitchhiker* series, the abandoning of the quest for essential meaning and purpose is liberating. The Meaning of Life sequence seems to come to an end in the fourth book, when God's Final Message to His Creation is discovered to read: 'We apologise for the inconvenience' (p. 588). Gazing at the thirty-foot-high letters of fire, our heroes are 'slowly and ineffably filled with a great sense of peace, and of final and complete understanding' (Ibid.); in her café in Rickmansworth, moments before the original Earth was destroyed, Fenchurch had sensed the implications of this message, had 'realized what it was that had been going wrong' and 'how the world could be made a good and happy place' (p. 463). As the Earth's conclusion would necessarily have been wrong, as the Question and the Answer are mutually exclusive, it was not the longed for Ultimate Question that had emerged in her thoughts but the impossibility of that question. 'We apologise for the inconvenience.' There is no essential meaning, and so no essential purpose. And, surely, it is liberating to grasp this not only because set purposes do in a fairly basic sense confine us but because most of our pain arises from the frustration of our purposes, and the more essential the purpose, the more essential the pain. Adams once observed that creative thinkers – which we all are in some sense – are 'at their best when they're just doing stuff for the sheer delight of it' (*LUDA*, ca. 51:00mins). With this in mind, it might have seemed to him that a specific plan or

purpose (other than to do what's most delightful, which may or may not be consistent in or with other plans or purposes) would be an impediment to creative work – which is all work, all life in some sense.

Commitment to settled conceptions (or 'meanings') and set purposes is, of course, what playful thought is characterised by freedom from. Obviously, we could not function without settled conceptions and set purposes, and cognitive play is predicated upon them; it just requires and, in a healthy mind, helps ensure, that, if they needn't be disposed of, they are at least not too finally accepted, too exclusively focused upon or revered. Children tend to laugh more than adults not because they don't have settled conceptions but because they, still open-eyed and changing their world picture from moment-to-moment, do not have such automatic recourse to them. Children are, of course, playful; it's when people grow older and develop strong commitments to specific purposes and conceptions that they lose their intellectual creativity and the joy that comes with it. This, as Stephen Fry observes (p. 367), was a mistake Adams was fortunate enough not to make, to the extent that he later realised that it was a mistake he'd been fortunate enough not to have made.

Benjamin Coles

One Level Up **An Olaf Stapleton Mashup**

Now I/We, the being finally formed as the unison of the diverse minds of the surviving galaxies, knew that the supreme moment of our cosmos was imminent. But we also knew that we were a poor twisted and stunted thing compared to what we might have been. The fighting with the Mad Empires and later the war between the stars and the minded worlds had done great damage: it had sapped much of the vigour of the stellar and planetary intelligences and had wasted more than a billion years of irreplaceable time. Entropy was steadily advancing. Black holes everywhere were progressively and inexorably swallowing the matter of the universe. And even worse, the spreading of the disastrous Rupture had destroyed fully a tenth of all the galaxies. By mental effort hitherto unknown in the history of the cosmos, we had managed to cauterize and isolate this nearly fatal wound to the tissue of the spatio-temporal plenum, but the psychological cost had been almost crippling, and the hideous scar on the fabric of space remained and could not be repaired. In the long term it presented a serious danger to all existence.

Nevertheless we steeled ourselves for what must be our over-riding purpose and our destiny. As the culminating yet ephemeral ultimate entity of our universe, puny and soon to be extinguished, we intuitively knew that, even in our damaged state, our mission was to strive to comprehend and to praise the Star Maker and His work. The time available was short. Our estimate was that we had about four million years for insight before our spiritual functioning started to deteriorate seriously. After that, we could expect only gradual senescence and ultimate death.

But, while our very being yearned to admire and worship the Star Maker in his austere and veiled glory, and although we had heard so often from so many theorists that God is Love, we doubted the fact: we imagined that He was much colder and more serene, more detached, more unfeeling. We could not conceive how we could excuse Him for the agonies suffered by a million million million million creatures down through all the ages of all the worlds. How could we pardon Him for the countless tortured screams and the myriad hopeless despairing deaths of so many beings that He himself had embodied in His cosmos and for

whose suffering He was ultimately responsible? Indeed how even could He be forgiven, if all had been happiness in the universe He had made from its creation to its final ending, except for the fleeting misery of one little girl weeping over a blemish on the face of her doll? The paradox of suffering and the paradox of evil had challenged the theology of all religions, and, as we settled down to contemplation, we were no nearer an answer than was the first Cro-Magnon shaman.

It took more than a million years of concentration before we felt that we were piercing the veil of our four-dimensional background fabric even in dream-thought. To beings who are embodied in flesh, what we now perceived (or thought that we perceived) can only be described in terms of metaphors upon metaphors. Even counting numbers were not applicable in the elementary sense that we understand them, and measurements were utterly irrelevant. Of course, we did not experience with physical senses, nor indeed with the conventional telepathic faculty; the transcendent mode of apprehension was only available to a being on our structural level, to the unitary mind of a complete cosmos. We were three stages removed from the individual creatures of a sapient planetary race: the fleshly beings of each planet were mentally united as a planetary mind; the planetary and stellar minds of each galaxy were united as its galactic mind; and we were the union of all galactic minds. Yet this union was a fragile and transitory thing doomed to disintegrate soon - the galactic minds would individually long survive us, their union and culmination. Our duty and our destiny was to approach the Star Maker as best we could while we still had even a small chance of success.

To speak in far-removed analogies, we seemed to see a vast field, or in another aspect a small cosy garden. Snowflakes were falling from a dark and looming sky, fluttering down to the ground and lying in drifts. Each of these snowflakes was a complete cosmos with its own burden of myriads of conscious beings. Each cosmos was different, each unique. They were coalescing steadily from an inchoate hovering cloud of possibility, each solidifying the potential of emptiness in a different way as it broke the overarching symmetry and crystallized into its own simpler symmetry. In our perception the lifetime of a universe was contracted to the brief span of solidity of an ice crystal. And we could perceive no planner, no Star

Maker anywhere directing the growth and development of the patterns.

We became aware of activity among the heaps of universes. Two huge figures like titans seemed to be wrestling among the falling cosmical snowflakes. The titans swayed to and fro as they struggled, each stumbling step trampling a score of snowflakes and - as we realized in horror - meaninglessly extinguishing many septillions of beings. And there seemed to be another smaller figure apparently observing the titans in their contest.

At first, we were inclined to consider these great figures as types of Ormazd and Ahriman - Good and Evil fighting over the totality of sentient beings with all the universes as their field of battle; and then the smaller figure would correspond to Armaiti. But as we watched, we realized that the struggle was more jovial than serious, something in the nature of play or sport. Our impression was that no huge issue depended upon the outcome. And, in their blundering fun, the titans no more concerned themselves with the myriad feeling creatures in the universes they were treading down and annihilating, than human children playing outdoors at Christmas care about the spores and microbes adhering to the snowflakes they shape into snowballs.

We realized that our own universe had only barely escaped the same fate. The Great Rupture, which for us had nearly become a cosmos-destroying disaster, had been caused by a small splashing from the boot of one of these great uncaring brutes. We were lucky that our cosmos had survived at all, and indeed, if the struggle were to tend again in our direction, our whole existence might still be blotted out at any moment. I should say, at any super-moment, for of course each snowflake-universe had its own proper time-dimension [or time-dimensions], and the abstract contest of the titans was not in fact taking place in any space or along any kind of time-dimension in the way we think we understand.

Nearly another million years had already passed from our local point of view while we were groping towards partial understanding, and our universe's one fleeting moment for supreme apprehension was passing by fast. We concentrated, trying to apprehend the smaller figure better, and as we did so the situation

became a little clearer. He/she/it/they (all these are ridiculous oversimplifications) seemed to be contemplating the two contending larger figures, and huddled a much smaller entity that seemed to be of the same general type, but inactive. As our powers of supernal perception weakened and we slipped back into contemplation only of the mundane details of our own cosmos, paradoxically our grasp of the flow of events seemed to become more lucid. We got the impression that, from afar, there was some kind of summons for the titans to attend to something more urgent than their contest - a meeting? a celebration? a reunion? Forthwith they ceased their struggle and obeyed the command. And as they strode jovially arm-in-arm towards the source of this calling, their monstrous feet kicked up a last splash of melting snow-universes that splattered the face of the little child's doll. Tears came quickly and briefly to her eyes, but then she followed her brothers, gaily laughing again like the sun after rain.

Thomas Goodey

Unity

Never hunt the Fowl alone.

Brian stepped gently into the sun-dappled stream, probing ahead with the butt of his spear. The rocks beneath his feet were slimy and sharp, and dangerous to the careless. The stream itself was a small and shallow trickle of water, one of the many insignificant tributaries to the flat, placid depths of Down Lake, and he crossed over it with relative ease. He had taken this route a few times before, but this time his only company were the mosquitoes, flies and beetles of the thick jungle that surrounded him. Macaws squawked from the canopy above him, but Brian was deaf to their background screams.

It takes twenty men to kill a Fowl.

Huntsmistress Linda's cracked, croaking voice bounced incessantly around his head instead, in his mind more shrill and discordant than any jungle bird. She always put an unnecessary stress on the word *men*. *Men*, to rhyme with *fool*. As if *men* could form a proper, cohesive hunting party. Under her tutelage, the male hunters were treated with a patronising dismissal, while Alice, Susan, Naomi and the rest were accorded a proper respect. Brian's skill with the spear, his strength and agility, were not important. He was a man, incapable of teamwork, his pride barely held in check. He could see Linda's little black goat eyes now, watching his progress, not mocking or chiding, but silently amused at his hubris. With every step forward, he was proving her right.

One stick breaks easily. The bundle does not.

Another one of Linda's little parables. She even kept a bundle of soursop twigs, bound up in vine, to show all her charges the truth of her words. Each individual twig was like her, old and dry and fit only for kindling. She had passed it around, inviting everyone to try and break it. The other hunters had half-heartedly tried to bend the bundle before passing it on, but he had gripped it until his palms bled, straining to crack Linda's hold on them all. She finally intervened when he had taken a fresh, young rubber tree branch, laid the bundle on the ground and begun hammering at it with all his might. She had been scared, obviously, scared that he was about to destroy her precious little prop.

Ahead of him he could see the dense copse of palm trees that marked where the tiny stream dripped out into the green waters of Down Lake. Brian moved quietly and swiftly forward, his

junjum spear at the ready. It was freshly made - he had whittled the end of the hard wood into a fearsomely sharp point, and carefully shaped and shortened it to match his balance. Around the middle was a grip made of feathers, taken from the softer underbelly of one of the Fowl, stuck down with jaangany sap. It was a fine spear, and he needed only one.

As he approached the lake, he began to make out the infernal exclamations of the Fowl. Were it not for the devastation they wrought, and the viciousness of their attacks, their throaty rasping would be comical. Instead, Brian felt the adrenaline seep through his body as he listened, filling his every muscle fibre with quivering, cold fire. In the village, such a warning call would bring all the hunters out into the central reservation, as all the non-combatants would scurry into their huts. Unchecked, a single Fowl could devastate their homes, its flattened bill and powerful wings capable of knocking down even their sturdiest buildings as it searched for victims. When they were on such a rampage, the monsters were near unstoppable, driven by some hormonal rage that made them faster, more aggressive and deadly. It was rare to kill a Fowl when they attacked like this, and there were always casualties. The lucky ones would be crushed by beak and webbed foot, killed apparently for sport. The unlucky ones would be carried away, and never be seen again.

At the same time, the Fowl were a vital resource – Brian's own home was constructed around a base of light yet strong bones taken from hunted Fowl, covered and surrounded by waterproof feathers. The meat from one of the winged monsters would feed the village for many days. Even their thin, pole-like legs were used for fences, spears and paddles.

There were times when Brian wondered whether the village's relationship to the beasts was symbiotic; that during their attacks the Fowl took as much the village as the village did from hunting the Fowl.

He dared not think what precisely the Fowl gained, or what happened to those people they took away.

Brian slipped into the copse quietly. The bank of the lake was a few feet of slick, squelchy red-brown mud in front of him, while the lake itself was dark green, filled with algae and weeds and impenetrably murky. Brian knew he would have to keep close to the shore, as the lake floor plunged quickly to its lowest depths, and he would stand

no chance if he were in deep water. Surveying the area, he knew he had picked the correct spot to approach. Most of the Fowl were swimming on the far shore, gliding around with a grace that belied the frantic underwater paddling of their webbed feet. Even so, the air was sharp with the stench of their guano.

A small, disparate group of the beasts were much closer to Brian, and one was standing on the shore a short distance away, ruffling its dowdy brown plumage. A female, alone and on the shore. Brian became hyperaware, sensitive to every sensation. His ragged breath and yammering heartbeat were unbearably loud, drowning out the gentle slosh of the lake. It felt like the sun was singling him out, blasting rays of heat and light through the leaves he hid behind, and the air felt as heavy and moist as his skin. Every muscle filled with a cold fire, fuelled and ready to do something as yet undecided. He realised he should act quickly, decisively, before the rest of the Fowl could join his prey.

He swallowed down the yowl that desperately wanted to escape his lips, and leapt from the copse, spear clutched in both hands. He sprinted as fast as he could, barely keeping his balance on the treacherous, muddy ground. As he reached the Fowl, he saw that she was turning to face him. It was impossible to him to recognise emotion in her flat, hard beak or beady black eyes, but her all-too-late squawk and her desperate flapping jump suggested he had caught her by surprise. He thrust his spear wildly at her, but she had pulled away just enough for it to miss her soft, downy underbelly. Instead it caught one of her wings, ripping away feathers and drawing blood. Brian felt like pure, unblemished life was pouring through his veins – his movements felt free, unrestricted by the tight mass of other hunters that normally accompanied him. He was no longer at the back of the group, poking futilely at the beast to keep it away from the others. It was just him now, unfettered and whooping with joy. The Fowl tried to back away from her maniacal attacker, but Brian launched forward again, his spear recklessly held in one hand, extended well beyond the point of balance. He felt it ring violently down his arm as the beast managed to kick it away with a flailing, webbed foot, and he fell splashing into the edge of the lake. He was up again in an instant, smeared with chestnut-coloured mud, and circled the Fowl as she tried in vain to keep facing him. He let his arms swing freely, feeling the air rush past his arms and

through his fingers, no longer cramped by the limbs of his deadweight companions. He thrust again with the spear, throwing all his weight behind it, and felt it shudder as it bit flesh. Suddenly the world was whirling around him, filled with a mad rush of beating feathers. He clung on to the spear even as he lost his footing, falling heavily in the wet mud. He felt her beak pound the ground around him, desperately seeking to crush him with one unstoppable blow, but the beast was panicking, and growing weaker by the second. Blood seeped down his spear, making it slick and frictionless. He felt his grip slipping, and she was getting closer with every strike of her beak, his writhing evasion becoming less and less effective. Her beak finally struck his shoulder heavily, and Brian cried out in pain. The blow forced him to let go of the spear, and he sprawled on to the ground, defenceless and prone. He cringed, trying to shield himself with his arm, and waited for the killing blow.

It never came. The spear had lodged deep in the beast's heart, and its blood poured out, streaming down the spear and mingling with the sloppy mud. She tried one last time to stand, but her legs gave way and she slipped gracelessly into a heap. Brian stared at the creature for a long, long time, waiting for any last twitching assault. He crept toward it, and slowly wrapped his fingers around his spear. It was slippery with blood and stuck deep into the Fowl's underbelly. Bracing his foot on the corpse, he managed to pull it out with a few heaves. Only then did his mind catch up with events.

I did it!

I killed a Fowl!

He felt as energised as when he first attacked the Fowl. He felt no pain, no aches and no fear. He began laughing, an insane elation that foamed from his mouth.

Linda was wrong! The old hag was wrong!

He could imagine her face now, bitter and hurt, as he dragged proof of his kill into the vill- With a jolt, he realised he needed to grab his prize before the other Fowl noticed what had happened. He looked out to the lake, and saw nothing. The group of Fowl that had been swimming nearby were gone, missing. He turned back to the jungle, and immediately stumbled backward in shock.

They had already noticed him. They had noticed him some time ago. He counted four, five, six of the monsters standing between him and jungle. All females. All advancing.

He was running before he even noticed what he was doing, sprinting across the lake shore, trying to find a way past the cordon of Fowl. One of the beasts moved at unnatural speed, slamming into his side, cracking his spear and sending him sprawling into the lake. He stood quickly, knee deep in the water, but the Fowl were not in any rush. They stalked slowly forward, a few low, ominous quacks the only sound they made. Brian tried again to run around them, but now he was hampered by the tepid water and the wet, sucking mud of the lake floor. The Fowl simply moved to cover his pathetic attempts at escape. As they loomed over him, crowding around him, they felt larger than anything he had ever seen before, and their fetid stench filled his nostrils. He tried once again to flee, but this time a granite-hard beak came down on his leg, shattering the bone and sending Brian sprawling, screaming into the water. The last thing he saw, as their bodies blocked out the sun, were the multitude of thin, sturdy legs surrounding him, looking for all the world like brittle yellow sticks.

PK.

Stardust

"Operations have been fully executed. Engagement is at an end."

There was silence following the Vox's announcement. It was the silence of disbelief, of fifty odd brains trying to compute the new data and failing miserably.

"Very good cL-10," she said. Adjutant Caran Dog watched her, as she slumped back into her chair, the first time he had seen her not sitting straight. And as his and every other voice in the chamber burst into wild ululation, he knew that he was watching a hero make her ascension to immortality. Calgacon would not forget Mandan Boda. He doubted the galaxy would.

"A perfect victory."

"Beautiful, a work of art! A symphony in war!"

"One for the textbooks!"

"One for the songs! One for the ages."

Boda was not smiling as the General Staff frolicked. Lines of congratulation were coming in from the generals. The politicians wouldn't be far behind.

She had defeated the Empire of a Thousand Suns, something no one had managed in more than a millennium. A display of happiness shouldn't be too far beyond her.

Out of nowhere she had come, fleeing the imperial invasion of Masada. Someone must know her background, but whoever it was, it wasn't her Adjutant. She had spent almost a decade in refugee camps, applying for asylum, nearly getting deported.

Then had come the tariff dispute. The unfortunate misunderstanding concerning the Calgac ambassador's new robes. Some idiotic fools in the Gerontia and some foolish idiots in the armed forces getting overexcited. And Calgacon, a small collection of planets in a peripheral galaxy, found itself at war with the Empire that ruled half the system and three other galaxies.

Three times they had come. Three times imperial victory had seemed assured. And three times Mandan Boda had beaten them. She would have been the first to point to the professionalism of the Calgac Painted Brigades, the logistical difficulties faced by enemy forces, the other pressures on imperial resources and the political feuding within the Empire's high command, but ultimately this triumph was the result of her uncanny genius. Dog had watched her during the battles, utterly

controlled and calm as she relayed orders to the fleets light years away, scanning the screens as they reported on destruction and mayhem in which the people involved numbered millions. He hadn't believed in heroes. He'd thought the world squalid and cheap, the gaudy paint unable to cover the rot beneath. Then he'd met Boda. He'd been a soldier who'd known nothing of war. She'd been a civilian who'd known nothing else. He heard snatches of talk from Colonel Togitt muttered excitedly into a comm. "...the 9th Fleet no longer exists...what remains of the Victorious 20th is currently being harried out of the system... had to transfer the 2nd Fleet to the Batavi sector now that the Sarronid War has gotten hot...the 14th Doubletime still in the galaxy but with imperial satellites rebelling everywhere...going to be fire-fighting for years."

Dog walked to the Oculo pulpit, where the legend stood. Through the screen she gazed at a lush, green planet, one that Dog knew well. His own homeworld, Bregante, the most densely populated and wealthiest world in the Calgacon state, even if tradition dictated that government was stationed on Trinoba.

He remembered that she'd never set foot on any of the Calgac planets, her refugee camp and military bases being on specially constructed satellites.

He'd promised her once he'd show her Bregante, see the towers of the giant oystercatchers, near his father's estates. She hadn't been that enthused.

Now that the war was done, she could have time for other things.

He thought she was unaware of his presence until she spoke in her thickly accented Uggan, the military tongue, a remnant of the old days of kings and heroes, much like the war paint worn by the soldiers. "Not a bad show, nay?"

"One they'll remember for sure, though they may not request an encore. Their fleets are mauled. Their colonies are in revolt. Their military is bogged down in a war with the Sarronids. Their populace is against any further martial adventures. Their capital festers on the edge of revolution. You did it."

"Not a bad performance then." She turned to look at him and Dog was shocked to be reminded how old she was. But he could read her face as clearly as the runes and saw the fierce pride in it. "Let the whole universe take notice of this."

Suddenly, the Vox spluttered alive, lacking its normal smoothness. Someone had jacked their communications open. A familiar face appeared on the screens facing the Oculo pulpit. "You fucking

idiots!" Cornelius, one of the Empire's top diplomats, charged with persuading Calgacon to surrender, was clearly feeling less than diplomatic today. "You stupid fu-, for fucks sake, you clowns are actually celebrating, you actually think you've done something clever!"

"Perhaps beating your boys doesn't take much in the way of cleverness," Colonel Togitt roared at the incandescent Imperial to a general cheer from the High Command, "but we enjoy any opportunity for a party. You should try it when what's left of your navy gets back. It'll fit in one room."

Cornelius leaned in, "Enjoy your party quickly then. You may find few opportunities to do so later." Then whatever self-control he'd gained deserted him, "You know what's going to happen now. Why the fuck didn't you guys give in while you had the chance? They're coming for you, they're send-"

The Vox cut out at this point, but the image remained, ranting wildly at them. Dog was astonished to see tears in the diplomat's eyes. Then his commander's words distracted him. "They've done too much talking and will do too much soon no doubt. But today, let them be silent."

They'd argued over where to locate the Gerontia on Trinoba. The high hills, closest to the gods, had been strongly proposed, as had the black rocks on the Far Sea, where the wind cut through the stone. In the end, having made the careers of several generations of lawyers and lobbyists, they'd chosen the Sword Islands in the Saev River, where kings had made peace and the bodies of heroes were interred into the water. That practice had been in abeyance for two centuries. Dog suspected that when Mandan Boda died it would be revived. Of course the initial island had proven too small for all the politicians and their flunkies and fixers, and the complex had sprawled out onto the other islands with bridges connecting the precariously mounted structures. They were talking about building artificial islands to allow further expansion, but the augurs were against it, as they were against using pesticides to keep down the biting insects.

He caught one of the little winged monsters on his shoulder, as he found her standing on a bridge, staring into the sky. The motion must have caught her attention, for before he could say anything, she spoke. "When I was little, my people used to tell if the great geysers were about to blow up by watching the way the midges moved. The Empire

ended that."

"Did they forbid it?"

"Worse. They laughed at it, then gave us sensors."

Dog looked at her. "I never learned why the Empire came to Masada. They have so much.

What more could they possibly want?"

"Control. Oh, they took a moment of justice and called it genocide, but really it was about control."

Time to change the subject. "What do you make of seeing Trinoba?"

"It bites. Constantly."

He laughed and she asked, "Is it time to go?"

It was. They stood amongst the stones, windows beaming live to oculo pulpits on three planets, with nearly a thousand politicians, officers, augurs and journalists present as they waited for the triumphal march to begin. First, the High Augur must preside over the sacrifice. As his assistants neatly opened the bound sodomite's belly, he leaned in to inspect the liver. Dog was rehearsing the next few hours in his mind, preparing to steer Boda through the upcoming formalities.

He was pulled out of his reverie when he realised that the augur had stopped, gazing at the flesh of the dying man. The priest's face was a picture of confusion. For a moment Dog almost giggled at the look of stupefaction on the old man's face.

Then chaos erupted, as sirens burst from the Vox.

"Emergency...emergency...wave of hostile projectiles entering the system. Missiles will make contact in four minutes. Missiles have been identified as Imperial Ultima Ratio. No evasive action possible."

Dog couldn't quite understand what he was hearing. An Ultima Ratio strike was something out of legend, a system killer that would annihilate moons, planets and suns. Galaxies had been ripped apart by them.

He tried to speak to Boda, but found the words wouldn't come. She stood absolutely, a rock amid tumultuous waves as the room and three planets panicked. At last she said something, "It seems we scared them."

"They can't be doing this! It's been more than a thousand years since the last Ultima!"

"I believe that's the last time they met someone who scared them."

"What do we do?"

"The augur may be a better person to ask. Making peace with your gods might be a first step. I have only demons to face and I believe this clears all debts."

"But- you knew this was coming!"

For the first time since he had known her, Mandan

Boda snapped. "Of course I did, you stupid man, it remains unchanged in standard imperial military doctrine."

"But why?" He grabbed her by the shoulders, but she shook him off and gripped his collar.

"Because this is how the Empire works," she hissed at him, "they justify interfering with everything by pretending to everyone that all they want to do is make everything better by setting up trade federations and protecting people, but really it's all about control and cruelty. I needed to force them to show it."

He gawped. "I learned as a girl during the Burnings. You never know a person in the good times. It's the bad times that reveal us. The way we act when driven right against the wall, with nothing in our pockets and no way out. That's when you know a person. We just did that to the Empire."

"You used us to make some sick-"

"And now everyone who has eyes has just seen the Empire of a Thousand Suns commit the worst atrocity in a millennium. You think anyone will believe their lies ever again? No, the Empire has shown its true image and it will destroy them."

Her eyes were fixed on his so strongly it took him a while to realise she was smiling.

"The only question is what kind of man are you?"

Last few seconds of sweet, precious life, how do you take them? Don't worry, you're reacting to the end of the world about as well as most of the people I knew as a child."

He wanted to say something defiant, to spit in her face, but could do nothing. He felt the increase in heat as the sun swelled and saw in his mind's eye the oystercatcher towers burning. "Fu-"

It was textbook, but that didn't stop it being beautiful. One for the songs, one for the ages. The sun went first, expanding upon impact, so that the sea by which the giant oystercatchers built their towers, and the river in which heroes were buried, and the bodies of every living thing in Calgacon were dry long before the fires reached them.

Planets, moons and satellites were devoured, until the sun, overfed and fully sated, halted and collapsed in on itself in a final climax.

And then, solitude.

On the bridge of the *Leviathan*, the Imperial Ambassador to the Calgacon System played the clip again. It beat looking for a new job. But this, the twelfth, or maybe the thirteenth time he'd played it since the Ultima Ratio strike had ended

was fated to be interrupted. The *Leviathan* was a Mundorum Eversor, unmodified in a thousand years, a relic of the days when big meant beautiful and a ship this grand was meant to be the size of a moon. Yet somehow Cornelius had found himself spending too much time in the company of Gunner Officer Aemilianus.

"Operations have been fully executed. Engagement is at an end."

Empty space and stardust. Cornelius had once been told that everything was made of stardust. The purveyor of this intelligence had, to Cornelius' mind, missed the point entirely. The significance of anything depended not on the substance of its makeup, but on its arrangement. And most arrangements were much more interesting than mere stardust. Cornelius had entered the service in order to encounter interesting things. As he stared at the Oculo, he muttered, "what a waste."

"It's called peace," replied Aemilianus.

Cornelius ignored the soldier. "Why didn't they surrender?" he said to himself.

"Congratulations are customary."

"I'm sure they're planning your triumph as we speak."

"The orders came from the Magister Equitum, he talked of nothing else..."

"I don't care what Porcius said," Cornelius suddenly snarled.

He was aware that the soldier despised him.

Cornelius had done his service in the 2nd, Aemilianus in the Wild 3rd which didn't help.

Neither did the fact that Aemilianus' family could trace its service in the military back two and a half centuries.

"Sometimes I forget that you're really a farmer's boy," Aemilianus, contempt no longer disguised. "I mean you talk like a real imperial, but scratch a little deep..." He leaned forward, "Those painted bastards knew what they were doing. They were warriors, bound by a code, fighting for a cause. You ask why they didn't surrender. Shows more about you than it does about them."

Cornelius snapped, "What about the children? And the old folks? Did they all die as warriors? Did they take the oath, wear the paint and pledge their lives to some cause of freedom? They might not be able to move, think or breathe but at least they're free, eh?"

"This was necessary Cornelius." Aemilianus said, "The Empire has stopped wars with its armies, opened the galaxies for trade with its fleets, saved lives with its medicine and protected people with its might. And all of that depends on the certain

knowledge that the Empire knows no checks, no hindrances, that it is absolute."

"So this great and noble enterprise is to be based on fear then?" Cornelius asked.

"Don't talk like that," Aemilianus replied. "They were just as covered with blood as us. They ritually slaughtered people like you and your husband."

Shunting back the image of Cnaeus, Cornelius retorted "Well just so long we're not specific about who we slaughter, it's absolutely fine then! When we're handing out death, we don't discriminate." Aemilianus' voice went low. "Mandan Boda was there when the Lethe decided once and for all to wipe out the Shabba over some crime no one could remember it was so old. Course, everyone remembers what followed, what's left of the Shabba, and the 10th, when they finally got sent in. You remember what the 10th found? Floating bodies in the river. She burned the adults, but she drowned the children. The 10th are still stuck on Masada now, trying to stop everyone killing each other. Remember that, before you shed any tears. They were no cleaner than us."

"Perhaps that's why I cry. They were like us."

Aemilianus just stared at him, before making a start on the paperwork and Cornelius joined him. But if the bridge was silent, Cornelius' mind wasn't. How far are we made by our enemies, he wondered? How often do we make our rivals in our image? Was that the point of this, Boda, to make us as vile as you?

He wondered how the others would react, the inhabitants of the empire, its neighbours. Would they be cowed into silence by this destruction, or would they seek to ensure it was never repeated? And which of those possibilities appalled him more?

For some reason he couldn't keep silent. "Did you ever hear about the giant oystercatchers of Bregante?" he found himself asking. The grunt in response was all he needed to continue. "They built towers out of black mud found on the coasts. And there they placed their treasures. The males used to fish for oysters and when they found pearls they would place them on their tower." "I suppose the locals trained the birds to fetch pearls for them?"

"Not in most places, strangely enough, they seem to have had a religious significance."

Aemilianus grunted again, and returned to his work, while Cornelius continued, "the birds used them to attract females. When a female had chosen a male, she'd swallow the pearls."

Apparently it helped with the digestion, and the resulting waste would join the towers, growing higher and higher with every generation."

Aemilianus looked up. "Why the fuck are you telling me this?" he demanded, "do you think I fucking care?"

Not really, Cornelius thought. I doubt Mandan Boda cared either. But I'm sure that someone out there must have cared. My unknown friend, we brought you peace. Forgive us.

Sam Ottewill-Soulsby

Rising Midnight

"NOOOO!" I cry, a distressed sound that tails off as the sobbing starts. My legs give way beneath me and I collapse against the window, tears blurring the view that I really don't want to see. I keep looking anyway, unable to tear my gaze away from the destruction before me, no matter how much I may wish that I could turn away and pretend it never happened.

Slowly I slide down the glass, lacking the will to fight the station's artificial gravity any longer. The deck is bathed in the glow of my planet's lifeblood, a delicate orange light that might have been beautiful under other circumstances. I continue to weep as the reflection of the one responsible looks down at me with an expression that's equal parts disappointment and disgust. He turns sharply and abandons me to my humanity, unwilling to try to understand my emotions.

"No..." I whisper, although it's more for his sake than mine. All my emotions are gone; I feel that in that moment my soul took one look at what I'd helped bring about and abandoned me in disgust. I sob mechanically, mindlessly repeating my last action over and over not because of how I feel but merely because I don't know what else to do. The void where I should be hurts so much I can't feel it, the emptiness scares me more than the pain, even more than the guilt.

I reach out for my departing soul, resting my palm against the glass that separates me from my dying world. "I didn't know..." It's barely even a whisper, and it doesn't fool anyone, least of all me. The rest of the sentence is swallowed by the vacuum, dying a quiet death as the better part of me leaves in disgust.

Still quivering I watch knowing that this would never have happened if it weren't for me. I'm as much to blame as they are. *I helped destroy my own world.* As I stare outwards I just can't wrap my head around it, the scale of the destruction is just so much greater than anything I've seen before and the implications of this are beyond my capacity to imagine, especially now.

I wonder what sick part of me ever thought this was worth it; how I could have ever pretended to myself that this wasn't going to happen. I find no answers, only more and more accusing questions. All the things people said to me to try and sway me from this path, the small things I missed at the time echo in my head, along with all the doubts and suspicions that I should have listened to. For a moment I see Caleb's face through my tears, and with a sad smile he says "You always said you wanted to be remembered." Then I'm alone again, just me and the space where everything I loved used to be.

I finally understand what he meant, but it's too late now. Too late for anything but regret.

I can't undo what I've done, I can only weep.

Lilian Halstead

The Adventures of Space Emperor Zorko **Episode #7: Zorko Versus the Space Pope**

It is often said that history repeats itself. In the far future, they have discovered exactly how often this is: every 1.37×10^5 years for a complete cycle with smaller ones inside this. The exact details vary from cycle to cycle but the general patterns remain the same. This would not usually have been noticed, except that with the discovery of (fabulously expensive) immortality treatments, the galactic government¹⁴ became the immortal galactic imperial staff, led by the beneficent (and only slightly corrupt and despotic) Space Emperor Zorko. They were therefore able to survive the Economocalypse and slowly lead humanity¹⁵ back towards the path of civilisation. It was then they noticed that things were looking rather similar, a feeling only confirmed when, a few hundred millennia down the line, after immortality treatments were rediscovered, the upper echelons of society sparked a second Economocalypse trying to pay for them. After this had happened a few more times, despite the best efforts of the most enlightened Space Emperor and his loyal advisors to modify history to avoid it¹⁶ and a practical score of history: 23, humanity: 0, they stopped bothering and did

14 Who had between them, one way or another, already collectively embezzled the equivalent of 2000 years of galactic GDP in order to afford the immortality treatments, and conveniently sent everyone else back to the Stone Age after the greatest economic slump until then seen, restarting history for the first time.

15 Immortality meant immortal in every respect and put them outside history so they could do what they wanted whilst the rest of humanity was trapped. An unexpected side effect of the treatments was superpowers so it was not too difficult to get the primitive remnants of mankind to do what they said. Being able to set fire to people with your mind tends to garner obedience in most societies.

16 The best they managed was to force some other sort of catastrophic ending on humanity, such as nuclear Armageddon, zombie apocalypses or, in the most distressing case, which even the imperial staff avoid talking about, the Bieber sonic meltdown. A corollary of this was that they could not accelerate the development of technology or civilisation – bad things happened when they did (chiefly that whoever they tried to advance was portrayed as the bad guy and got ganged up on and defeated by everyone else, returning society to its historically-appointed stage. This phenomenon became known as the Saruman effect). They also, of course, strenuously ensured that no-one else managed to become immortal, or, if they did, that they were thrown into a black hole for eternity. Even superheroes have to respect some of the laws of physics.

*what any rational self-interested being would have done aeons before. They moved the galactic capital to the fabulously beautiful planet of Rarotoa, which conveniently consisted almost entirely of South Pacific atolls. There they just lazed around on the beach all day being waited on by the fabulously beautiful Rarotoan women, having a great time, keeping at best a lazy eye on developments on Earth and elsewhere in the cosmos and generally trying to have nothing to do with history, except to make sure it was vaguely proceeding as expected. Join them now for another episode in: *The Adventures of Space Emperor Zorko!**

Space Emperor Zorko the Eternal, Great Perspinax of Qoom, Most Vaunted Flammifer of Occidentissimus, Lord High Megalomaniac of Earth and Grand Dragon of the Guild of Exobiologists, among other titles too numerous to list, was lying resplendently in his ceremonial infinity pool, bedecked in his ceremonial swimwear¹⁷, wielding his ceremonial Macguffin¹⁸ and attended by his hundred favourite concubines¹⁹. He was also feeling slightly miffed. The reason for this was the small patch of cinders lying on the edge of the infinity pool. Until recently, the small patch of cinders had been one of the Emperor's secretaries who had had the misfortune of bringing him the bad news that had occasioned the Emperor's miffedness and the secretary's unfortunate incineration.

17 A sort of lurid purple with dayglo green stripes and matching cape – the galaxy was currently undergoing one of its periodic fashion crises as a result of which the Galactic Parliament had voted the Emperor a new set of quite hideous clothes. The Emperor accepted such inconveniences as part of the normal course of history and on the basis that a) there would be another lot round soon anyway who would want something completely different, b) he would outlive the whole lot of them and c) if the Parliament tried to force anything really outrageous on him, he could just destroy them all with his mind, something he disliked doing as it inevitably led to quite a lot of trouble and paperwork.

18 Best described as a sort of bronze-ish spoon, which in the throes of the fashion crisis, the Galactic Parliament thought enhanced the Emperor's majesty. He thought it made him look a bit silly. He was right.

19 Despite being immortal, they could still have mortal children – the immortality treatments were specific to one person – so Rarotoa was now entirely populated by various descendants of the imperial government who tended to their every need and made sure the imperial bureaucracy functioned. Fortunately, the imperial cabinet and original population of the planet were large enough to avoid too much inbreeding.

"Fetch space medievalist Fam²⁰" boomed the Emperor. "And get someone to clean up this pile of ash. It's distressing me." As various minions ran to do his bidding, Zorko considered his late secretary. His unfortunate lack of control would inevitably mean having to placate the unions again – they did get so annoyed when one of their members got whimsically slaughtered. Perhaps he'd try to bribe them and then shoot all the ones who accepted, thus gaining the gratitude of their successors and the plaudits of the people for cracking down on corruption. Or – his train of thought was interrupted by the arrival of Fam, who was sporting a particularly unfortunate combination of a canary yellow ruff and violently pink shell suit²¹. "Hail most majestic Space Emperor. You summoned me?"

"Yes, I did, Fam. It seems like the Space Pope²² is stirring up trouble again now that we're in the 5th pseudo-medieval subcycle of this cycle. Apparently, he's claiming that his authority supersedes mine and that the Church should have the power to do things like appoint bishops, decide who's Emperor and so on. Apparently, he wants me to go on Crusade to Andromeda and conquer it in the name of Christianity or he'll excommunicate me²³.

20 It has never been satisfactorily explained why the original galactic cabinet had felt the need to include a medievalist and everyone involved, even Fam himself, had entirely forgotten. They only remembered that it had seemed a good idea at the time.

21 The rest of the Cabinet also had to endure the Galactic Parliament's forays into clothing design. Part of the fashion crisis was a complete inability to recognise clothes coming from different historical periods, leading to some particularly strange outfits.

22 Gregory 1.74x10⁶ – it was decided that the Popes should be numbered using standard form after the unfortunate coronation of Benedict MMMDCCCLXXXVIII, whose ceremonial nameplate (an addition to papal ceremonies to help the increasingly aged Cardinals remember who they were actually investing, introduced after the time, in their confusion, that they declared a potted plant Pope. To be fair, during its short reign, the plant was actually quite a good Pope – it didn't annoy any powerful temporal rulers, hold orgies, practise nepotism, embezzle funds or cause any schisms. It also led to the first and, so far, only excommunication of an entire species after the plant unfortunately succumbed to an infestation of aphids) accidentally crushed a large section of the College of Cardinals when it collapsed under its own weight.

23 Something less of a threat when the person you're threatening is immortal. Needless to say, given the trouble they caused, the Papacy was one particular institution that Zorko was very keen to keep from attaining immortality.

Again²⁴. While I'm away, he'll no doubt declare I'm dead, appoint a puppet Emperor and try to take control. At least, that's what happened last time²⁵ - I came back from my "intergalactic" wanderings after the "army" had been unfortunately caught in a supernova and found half the galaxy fighting the other half, all because of that turbulent priest. That caused me a great deal of annoyance and left rather a mess after I'd got everyone to calm down²⁶. Obviously, I'm rather keen to avoid a repeat of that, so could you, seeing as this is your area of expertise, suggest some solutions to shut him up without plunging the galaxy into turmoil?" "Well, your most resplendent majesty, I'd respectfully suggest you don't do what you've done before. Like the time you "accidentally" teleported the then-Pope into the inside of the nearest aquarium. The inside of the Piscian Hyper-Piranha tank, if I recall correctly. I think, to be fair, they did stop arguing about who had supreme power after that, though the ensuing religious infighting was distinctly unpleasant²⁷. Or the time, back in one of the true medieval subcycles²⁸, when you actually

24 Due to the cyclical nature of history and the consequent ever-repeating struggle between temporal and spiritual authorities, Zorko had in fact been excommunicated (and had it lifted) several million times. The fact that this continued to have no effect at all only served to strengthen his belief that God either didn't exist or really didn't care.

25 No Crusade had in fact taken place – one galaxy was quite fractious enough for the Space Emperor. He'd just created a giant holographic army, set off in the direction of Andromeda and then proceeded to have a holiday for a few decades in a quiet part of the Outer Rim.

26 The vast majority of the galactic population, who regarded the Space Emperor with godlike awe – that's what you get when you have a cult of personality stretching over aeons – quickly rallied behind him when it turned out that he was not dead, as the Space Pope had claimed. The Pope, knowing a lost cause when he saw one and not wishing to die messily, decided discretion was the better part of valour and developed an intense interest in lifelong meditation on remote monastery planets.

27 It had led to a sector-wide nuclear war when one particularly militant group of cardinals had decided that the best way to ensure their candidate's victory in the resulting Papal election was a pre-emptive strike on all their opponents' home planets, declaring that God would protect his favoured candidate (i.e. theirs, who was already safely ensconced in a hyperdiamond bunker buried 10km beneath the largest mountain range of the Superearth, Zagros). This strategy, to be fair, did work, but not before the militant cardinals, the other candidates and most of the population of the Papal Systems had been wiped out by the original strike and the retaliatory actions.

28 In periods when humanity was at a stage before space travel, the Space Emperor liked to moonlight as

pretended to be Jesus and got everyone whipped up into a millenarian fervour, which ended with the mass suicide of most of the world's Christians²⁹ after they persuaded themselves it was Judgement Day and that they'd rise again straight away. That one set society back a few millennia. Or, that other time when –"

"OK Fam, I think I get the point. Try to avoid gratuitous violence and divine impersonation. What does that leave me with?"

"Well, O most gracious lord³⁰, historically, most rulers that defied the Papacy tended to come out worse in the long run. The Popes invariably excommunicated them and then "encouraged" other, more pliant rulers, to declare war on them. Or they just called a Crusade. On the other hand, they weren't superpowered immortals, so you're in no direct danger, but it would still be wise to avoid antagonising the Papacy. As I think I've made clear, it does tend to create more problems than it solves. Might I suggest that a policy of forceful negotiation might be your best course of action?"

"By which you mean...?"

"Pay the Pope a visit on Planet Vatican under the pretext of wishing to cleanse your immortal soul. As your escort, just happen to take, ooh, the entirety of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Galactic Fleets and have them surround the planet. Then make sure you direct your conversation with the Pope towards galactic security and how fortunate we all are to have such LARGE fleets with so many HUGE BATTLESHIPS, all equipped with so many HORRIBLY INVENTIVE PIECES OF WEAPONRY, which can LAY WASTE TO ENTIRE STAR SYSTEMS IN 45 MINUTES, to ensure our safety. Then say something about how UNFORTUNATE it would be if, in a fit of ABSENT-MINDEDNESS brought on by STRESS due to having to deal with all the UNREASONABLE DEMANDS OF YOUR SUBJECTS, you accidentally gave the ORDER TO ATTACK, say, PLANET VATICAN. Then suggest if the Pope would be able to help you deal with some

various historical rulers or characters. At this particular time, he was pretending to be the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, and, as such, managed to get himself caught up in the whole Emperor v Pope debacle again when Gregory IX started causing trouble.

29 Which was nearly everyone. When someone who claimed to be Jesus turned up with apparently miraculous powers, everyone else started converting pretty quickly.

30 Zorko had become more autocratic over time and, whilst the rest of the government was also immortal, that didn't mean they couldn't feel pain, so they had decided that a certain amount of sycophancy was worth it to avoid provoking the ever-mercurial Space Emperor.

of these demands to avoid the possibility of such a regrettable incident occurring. I'm sure he'll suddenly feel much happier about your supremacy, especially if you give him a few concessions like awarding him the revenue from another couple of star systems and tax breaks for Christian clergy, as well as, perhaps, a week-pass to Rarotoa³¹."

"Yes, Fam, I can see how that might work. I like the way you think! Why haven't we tried that before?"

"Well, O splendiferous one, mainly because by the time you thought to ask for my advice before, you'd already taken matters into your own hands in your signature... direct³² way."

"Hmmm, yes. Perhaps I was a tad hasty in some of my actions in the past. They did cause a bit of trouble but I just get so vexed sometimes. It's hard being Space Emperor, you know! You just need to let off steam and once or twice, things might just have got a bit out of hand."

Fam privately thought that was putting things mildly but even though the Space Emperor was in an unusually mellow mood and had received his criticism surprisingly well, felt that he had probably already pushed his luck far enough and wisely decided that noncommittal grunting was the safest response³³.

"Well", continued Zorko, "I shall head off to Planet Vatican at once and see if I can't pacify the Pope. If your plan works, Fam, I shall award you the largest research grant in history³⁴! Oh, and another

31 At times when space travel was available, access to Rarotoa was strictly controlled to allow the galactic government to achieve the highest-possible levels of relaxation. Members of the government, though, were allowed to bring personal guests, who got to enjoy the superb hospitality, unrivalled range of leisure activities and spectacular scenery. Among the galactic elite, there was therefore intense competition for one of the coveted Rarotoa passes, which involved being as sycophantic and useful as possible to members of the government. Or as cunning and violent as possible to acquire them from people who had been given one. The passes had therefore been causal factors in several major wars and countless assassinations. Consequently, as a galactic security measure, anyone who received a pass was now instantly teleported to Rarotoa and kept there until there until the pass ran out.

32 i.e. arbitrarily violent.

33 Immortality doesn't mean you can't feel pain. And Fam had no wish to find out how much pain can be fitted into eternity. It wasn't that Zorko was particularly sadistic – he just had a tendency of forgetting about his prisoners. Fam didn't want to be left submerged in lava for millennia until Zorko finally remembered about him.

34 The Space Medievalist was still, first-and-foremost, an academic.

100 concubines from my personal harem³⁵." Overjoyed, Fam skipped³⁶ out of the room chanting "Arse, arse, arse, arse"³⁷ whilst the most illustrious Space Emperor signalled for his personal battleship to be made ready for his voyage to see the Space Pope.

So Zorko travelled to Planet Vatican and, following Fam's wise advice, peacefully resolved his dispute with the Space Pope. The galactic populace and the Imperial Communications and Publicity Office under Communications Minister Flahr; who was really not looking forward to spinning another piece of casual and short-sighted imperial violence, breathed a sigh of relief. Though the galactic arms industry, hoping for another lucrative war, were rather disappointed. Fam was richly rewarded and used his research grant to find out something totally inconsequential about the toilet habits of the Carolingians. There was also a brief vogue on Rarotoa for medieval re-enactment and ruff-shell suit combos. Zorko personally recorded his lowest-ever annual total of incinerated flunkies (52) owing to how amazingly relaxed the whole experience of resolution-by-not-casual-violence had left him. So farewell and until the next episode of the Adventures of Space Emperor Zorko!

Sam Cook

I would class this as Adams-esque incidental. I was particularly pleased with the way nothing happened. Your use of the comma could be more consistent, and indeed better. Stylistically this would work perhaps better in a more expanded version - the scarcity of description, except with regard to the costumery, is imbalanced with the scale of the world explored, and more description would be welcome. Your dialogue, however, is well-crafted; I especially appreciated the use of address, removing the need for clumsy 'said so-and-so' sentences. Perhaps the authorial subjectivity, evident in a few of the footnotes (in such expressions as 'to be fair') could be reined in; it is not usual in this filmic style of writing (nor indeed in any fiction), but could work in a more expanded or lengthy work. On the whole, enjoyable, short but complete, and not without humour. More would not be shouted down instantly.

7/10.

Harley Jones

35 On the other hand, he was also permanently 23 so was still prey to certain urges. And, if you're a member of a despotic government, you've got to have a harem. It's expected.

36 It was the influence of the outfit. When you look that ridiculous, skipping is the least of your worries.

37 Again, no-one was really sure why he did this and Fam always denied that he did so. Zorko thought it was probably the result of mild insanity brought on by too many hours spent poring over 10th-century charters whilst listening to pop music.

Is This What They Used To Call Love?

Review: *The Painted Man* by Peter V. Brett

Peter V. Brett's *The Painted Man* is set in a world where annual performances in outlying villages provide convenient exposition about its history. We therefore learn almost immediately that this is the far future of our own world: this is a shame because, with a bit of clever misdirection, that fact might actually have made the plot interesting - perhaps the Statue of Liberty could have made an appearance. Instead, it serves mainly as an excuse for lazy worldbuilding. This is apparent particularly in the city of future-Muslims, whose three characteristics - fighting a holy war, treating women as slaves, and killing heretics - must surely have originated in the mind of someone whose only contact with the outside world is through Fox News.

The abundance of historical exposition makes it all the more perplexing that the magic system is barely fleshed out at all. The premise of the novel is that humanity has been returned to a quasi-medieval state by the nightly attacks of demons, who can only be fended off with the use of magical wards. But how these wards work is not described in detail and often seems inconsistent: sometimes, for example, an unbroken circle is needed, whereas other times evenly spaced wards suffice. All too often, they seem to serve as a plot device: wards will hold or fail based largely on whether the plot requires the person behind them to be brutally mauled.

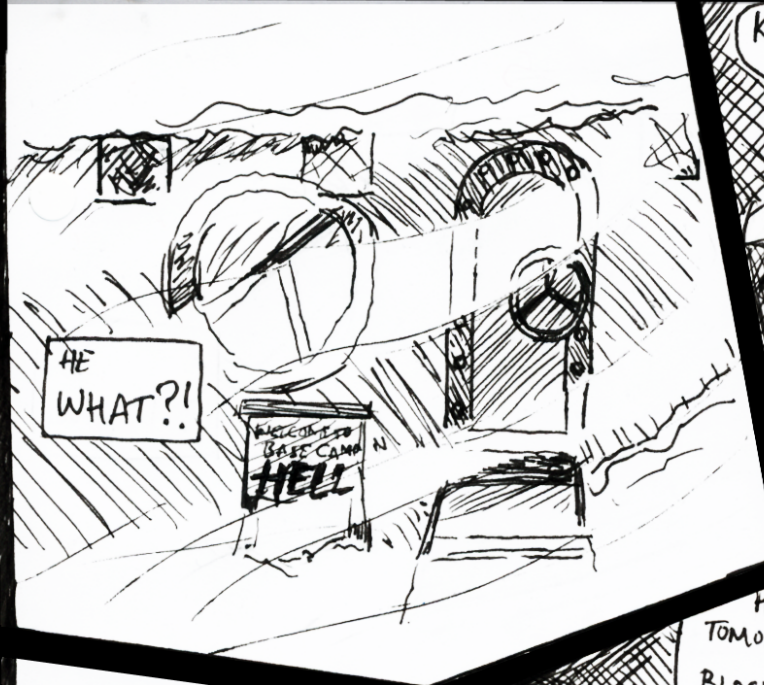
All this could be saved with interesting characters, an engaging plot, or good writing. Alas, the book fails on all counts. Of the three main characters, one is entirely forgettable and one is interesting right up until he becomes an invincible demon killer. Both of these are preferable to the third, however, who is clearly the result of the author putting on his feminism hat. Raised by an abusive mother and a meek father, her plot concerns her decision to give up the marriage planned for her and become a healer instead. On its own, this is not so heinous, but the author clearly decided that she - alongside the token city with an all-female ruling council - met a certain quota, and that the rest of the book need not concern itself with avoiding misogyny. Between the aforementioned future-Muslims, the scene where readers are clearly meant to cheer as the meek father puts the mother in her place - and I quote: "It's going to take you a while to learn your way around the

kitchen" - and, all-too-inevitably, the rape of the female character and subsequent healing sex with the main male character, I was just about ready, had I not been reading on my Kindle and on a plane, to throw the damn book out the nearest window.

The story itself is nothing special, and somewhat difficult to write about, because the book meanders a great deal. The main plot, as far as I can tell (this being, of course, a trilogy), is about finally finding a way to fight back against the demons and, more importantly, convincing everyone else that this is a good idea. Which, again, sounds quite promising on its own. Near the beginning, some of that promise shows through: the demons are presented as genuinely terrifying and nigh-invincible, in a way that makes the reader wonder how exactly they can be defeated. But as the book progresses they become less and less scary, to the point that I found myself wondering why exactly it took hundreds of years for someone to think of blowing them up. Finally, the writing is cringeworthy as well. There are adverbs everywhere. People are constantly congratulating and warning and very rarely saying things. Old cliches are rolled out - has anyone ever been "boxed around the ears" outside a fantasy novel? Perhaps most bizarre is the book's obsession with the sexuality of teenage girls. Far too many pages are spent, entirely unnecessarily, on considering who is and is not a virgin. Lest I be accused of exaggerating: of the twenty instances of the word "flower" or its derivatives, only four are in reference to actual plants. The effect, stylistically, is painful; narratively, it borders on deeply unsettling.

At best entirely unremarkable and at worst fundamentally problematic, there is little to recommend this book. What may, at its inception, have been an interesting idea is buried by a slew of bad decisions. I cannot fathom why the series is as popular as it seems to be - I was first intrigued when it was mentioned by Patrick Rothfuss in a blog post - and I would urge everyone to spare themselves the time and effort and read something else instead.

Filip Drnovšek Zorko



HE WHAT?!

WELCOME TO
BASE CAMP IN
HELL



KID INSISTED. SAID HE COULDN'T WAIT UNTIL SPRING.

YOU INSANE?! YOU TOLD SOME LAD HOW TO GET UP CRIMSON PASS?!

THINK I DON'T KNOW THAT?!

LIKE I SAID, KID WOULDN'T TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER.

HE'LL BE DEAD BEFORE TOMORROW! WE'RE DUE BLACK SNOW FALL ANY DAY!

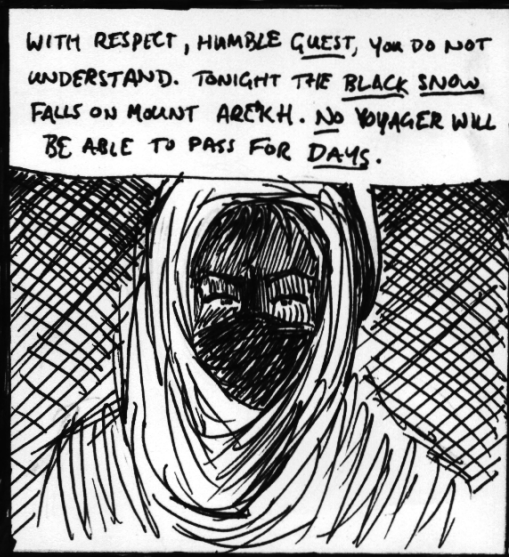
NOT LIKE IT MATTERS, ANYWAY. EVEN IF HE DOES MAKE IT THROUGH THE PASS, NO-ONE IN CENTURIES HAS ACTUALLY MADE IT UP TO THE TEMPLE!





HAIL, PILGRIM. THE ORDER OF ARE'KH BIDS YOU WELCOME. PLEASE, REST.

NO. A THOUSAND APOLOGIES, BUT I MUST FULFIL MY MISSION AND LEAVE WITHOUT PAUSE.



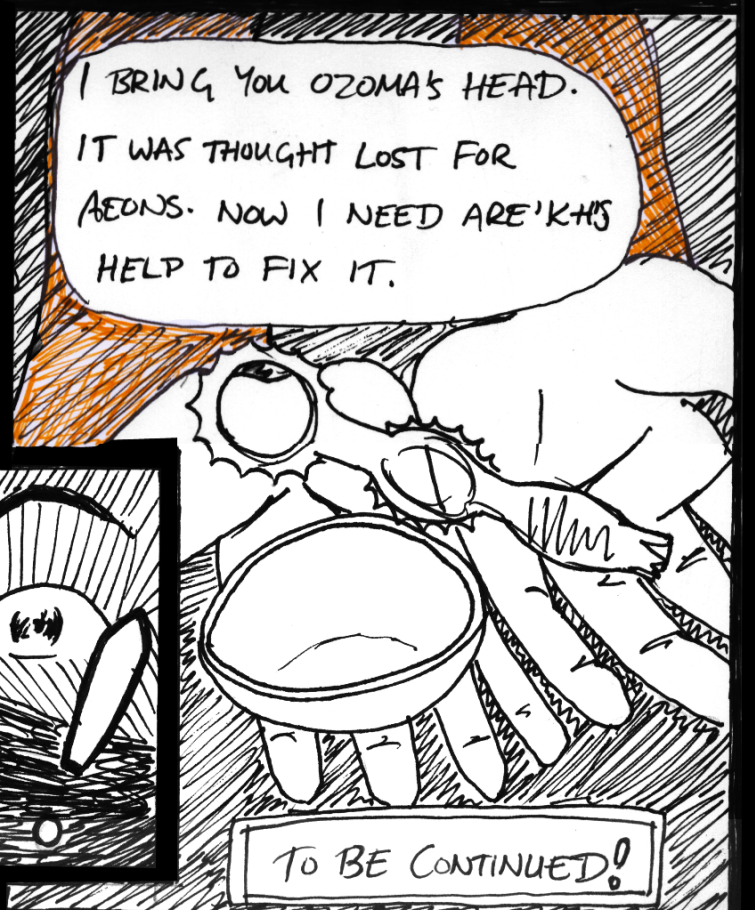
WITH RESPECT, HUMBLE GUEST, YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND. TONIGHT THE BLACK SNOW FALLS ON MOUNT AREKH. NO VOYAGER WILL BE ABLE TO PASS FOR DAYS.



WHICH IS WHY I CAME NOW. I HAD TO ENSURE I WAS NOT FOLLOWED.



I HAVE TRAVELLED FAR, FROM THE PLAINS OF PATAGONIA TO THE CRATERS OF CYDONIA; I HAVE SAILED THE SEA OF TRANQUILLITY AND BRAVED JUPITER'S EYE. MY QUEST CUMULATES HERE.



I BRING YOU OZOMA'S HEAD. IT WAS THOUGHT LOST FOR AEONS. NOW I NEED ARE'KH'S HELP TO FIX IT.

TO BE CONTINUED!