

Two tentacled bunnies amble

TTBA Volume x Issue y+2



Two Tentacled Bunnies Amble

TTBA Volume x Issue y+2

Easter 2015

Contents

Chairbeing's Address..... 3

Danielle Saunders

Editorial..... 3

Isobel Sands

Branching Chain: The Elegance of the Almost Human..... 4

A Chain of CUSFS

Branching Chain: No-Win Scenario..... 9

A Chain of CUSFS

Branching Chain: Blood and Ashes 14

A Chain of CUSFS

The Porpoisian Transcendence 18

A Chain of CUSFS

A Song of Fire and More Fire 24

A Chain of CUSFS

Fear of the Dark 29

Samuel Cook

Nomad..... 34

Sam Ottewill-Soulsby

Cephalopocalypse (a short story about the end of the world) 36

Connor Willmington-Holmes

Breakfast at the House on the Hill 39

Danielle Saunders

Chairbeing's Address

CUSFS!

We come to the end of another year and the start of another TTBA, which means, of course, another Chairbeing's Address. As some of you may have picked up, this section consists chiefly of as many footnotes as I can declare before the Editor snaps and simply refuses to put them in¹²³ having delayed the writing of it until this has very nearly happened anyway.⁴⁵

The final use for this bit is to thank you, CUSFS, for an excellent year as your Chairbeing – I can't wait to see what next year has to offer.

Incomprehensible-Joms-based-greeting,

Danielle Saunders

CUSFS Chairbeing 2014-5

The Current Committee and Their Advice to Their Successors

Chairbeing – Danielle Saunders – “Fewer vampires.”

Secretary – Sarah Binney – “Everything in MATLAB.”

Treasurer – Rory Hennell James – “Infiltrate proctors.”

Memsec – Catherine Gray – “Abolish small change.”

Librarian – Lee Colwill – “Library on wheels.”

TTBA Editor – Isobel Sands – “More vampires.”

Editorial

Congratulations, CUSFS, we made it! Another year! It has been incredible fun putting TTBA together for you all, running the chainwriting, coming up with daft titles which might possibly make for pretty cover art, and fending the encroaching hordes of footnotes back with a big stick.

Somehow there has been enough material for this third issue, which is slightly smaller than previously but hopefully just as enjoyable.

What with the branching chain and the alternative version of another chainstory as envisioned by its starting author, I feel that a satisfactory level of meta has been achieved, and I can now back away slowly and pass things on to Curtis. I look forward to what next year will bring!

Happy Summer everyone!

Isobel Sands

TTBA Editor

The Future Committee

Chairbeing – Isobel Sands

Secretary – Danielle Saunders

Treasurer – Rory Hennell James

Memsec – Connor Willmington-Holmes

Librarian – Jake Choules

TTBA Editor – Curtis Reubens

¹ And I get banished to live in an ant colony.

² More or less how I'm predicting the next Marvel film will finish.

³ Maybe ants have a superhero who becomes human-sized while maintaining their mass...

⁴ And until the only alternative is sitting in my room watching old Castle episodes.

⁵ The other purpose of this section is the pun which is now going through its fifth identical iteration.

Branching Chain: The Elegance of the Almost Human

Chainwriting: Harley Jones, Bettina Juszak, Gwilym Kuiper, Emily Room, Andrew Kanaber, Alex Allen, Rory Hennell James, Sarah Binney, Pedro Tarrisse

breathless through the corridors and vast deserted rooms, through endless cloisters, faster than thought, up to the battlements, my heart thumping, I ran, my pursuer ever behind me, loping with long stride and lank legs, but ever elegant, not at all dishevelled by his pursuit. Along the curtain wall of the castle and through the gatehouse we sped, not looking back, not caring about those in our way, who were knocked over or merely shocked at our rapid passage. Then from the battlement up towards the East Tower, through the open doorway, and –

the door down was locked.

Up then, to the top, through the open hatchway and now on the roof with nowhere to hide as he came up the stairs; twitching, itching, cowering against the wall. His head emerged through the gap, and he looked round the tower's top before emerging fully and walking, so slowly now, towards me. He loomed over me; despite his hard pursuit his appearance was still that of complete elegance, his hair perfectly slick, and his teeth so white, glinting in the moonlight, menacing. I was cornered.

As he approached time seemed to move far slower. My thoughts raced through my head, faster than we had raced up to this point. How could I escape? The moat was over forty feet below me; I would not survive that. The walls were too sheer to attempt to climb down, and besides, he was much the more graceful climber. Nor could I overpower him.

There was only one choice left. Surrender.

Slowly, heart beating in frantic rhythm with my stuttered breaths, I raised my empty hands above my head. It was a desperate, foolish act, but I was desperate and foolish to boot or I

would never have ended up in this situation to begin with – and I had nothing much to lose.

Faced with an action he hadn't predicted, he stopped a few feet away from me, his flawless face now marred with a slight frown. For a moment wild hope surged through my heart, the satisfaction of having taken him by surprise at last, then his lips pulled into a smile that somehow managed to be more terrifying than any thunderous frown could have been.

"Are you done running now, little rabbit?"

His voice twisted through my head, sweetly slithering and yet cold enough to freeze over the moat far below. I did not answer. Could not answer for my voice had frozen alongside the air and well he knew it. A last spark of defiance guttered, teetering in the chill, and I raised my eyes to meet his gaze. In the darkness his eyes seemed almost black, two pools of infinite depth only lit by a glimmer of malice. Too late my common sense caught up with, reminding me that he'd always hated those who dared make direct eye contact, but then again, at this point he could hardly hate me more.

His expression distorted into a snarling grimace as he advanced once more. Still staring into his eyes, I could only think *perhaps I should've jumped*.

I'm not sure what I was thinking, I reached into my coat pocket and held out in front of me, the shining gem this whole incident was about. He paused his advance. I got a sudden burst of confidence and managed to say, just above a whisper,

"One step closer and I'll drop it."

It would've been a waste to break it. After the many months I'd spent planning, only to find that the one I trusted most betrayed me. We were going to steal the gem, the one thing they value above all, on the day they would need it most. The plan was perfect. We knew the layout, which guards would be where. Which guards we could bribe, drug or had to avoid. We'd mastered moving silently, hiding when

there were almost no places to hide and communicating with each other without words. We managed to break into the most heavily guarded room in the castle and, as we had agreed, I was to carry the gem.

No-one would've expected a fourteen year old girl to be part of the most successful, well-carried-out theft in history.

But he'd changed his mind, wanted to be the one to hold it, drew a knife on me when I said no and shouted when I ran away. I hope they killed him, it's thanks to him I'm in this mess now.

I learnt a very important lesson: you shouldn't unconditionally trust your older brother.

"You wouldn't drop it, you know how valuable it is."

My pursuer snarled, seeming to read my mind. He stepped closer.

"Now," he took a deep breath to compose himself back to his former state of icy elegance, "Give me the jewel."

He stretched out a long hand toward the gem, I instinctively shrank away from it. I could see in his face that he knew there wasn't much time left. The ceremony had to take place at sunrise or it would have to wait another year.

Behind me the sky was already beginning to lighten, just a shade bluer than it had been a moment ago. It wouldn't be much more than an hour until the ceremony would begin and an hour and a half until the sun rose over the mountains and the darkest night of the year was over.

A desperate last idea came to me – maybe I could keep him talking?

"You know she'll just use it to control you? Just like she'll control everyone else." I blurted out.

He seemed briefly confused, and I took a small amount of satisfaction from having caught him by surprise twice.

"Oh, everyone else, yes." A smile slithered across his face. "But not me. She and I will rule together – she as Queen and I beside her as her Prince. There's nothing you can do to stop that. Now," The sickening smile abruptly vanished, replaced by a hard dagger-like stare. "*give me the jewel.*"

I couldn't let him have it As much as I wanted to keep the gem as a prize, a reward for my and my brother's hard work in pulling off the theft, I had to keep it out of his hands. But for all my conviction that what I was doing was right, I couldn't stop my voice from cracking as I choked out "Come and get it." and my hands from shaking as I hurled the gem down to the icy moat below.

"No!" he shrieked elegantly. Too quickly for thought he flung himself over the battlements in doomed pursuit with a frantic impulsive leap, almost a spasm, that was somehow also, inexplicably, elegant.

I hurried to the parapet to get a glimpse of his fate but I could make no sense out of the murky shapes in the gloom below. There was a splash, and a faint rippling in the slightly darker band that must be the castle moat. Then silence, and no more motion that was visible from the tower.

Surely he couldn't survive a fall like that? Not that high, not into ice water? I hadn't realised the gem's hold over the nobles was so strong that it could pull them to their deaths like moths to a flame. Not just the nobles, but my impressionable brother too. Poor Anton. Poor, stupid, greedy Anton.

Everything about the castle was warped and wrong. It twisted men's minds. Now that I was safely away from the Duke, I realised with a start that even as I'd been fleeing for my life I'd been thinking about how elegant he looked. That couldn't be normal. And now he didn't seem so appealing in memory: what I'd taken for an aristocratically refined face I noted in recollection as abnormally thin and hungry

looking. His perfect poise now seemed more like unnatural stillness.

It was true after all that the nobility here had some terrible power. But still, he couldn't have survived that fall, could he? And even if he had, there was no way he'd be able to find the gem in the total blackness under the nighttime moat water, surely.

I shivered, and quietly made my way back down the stairs. Better to get moving before any more of them came looking.

I made it through the courtyard, using all the knowledge and training I'd gained in preparation for this day to silently move through the shadows of the many halls and corridors, desperate to reach the drawbridge. The world was silent around me, as if holding its breath ready for the coming morning, when the fate of us all was to be determined.

Each silent step led me closer but what was my goal? I couldn't simply run away, allow the nobles to complete their ceremony and doom all my friends and family. Yet the gem was at the bottom of the moat, irretrievable. I had saved them, sacrificing the wealth and power I was promised in a desperate moment.

I had been so absorbed by my thoughts I hadn't noticed the wrong turn I had taken, finding myself back in the room the gem had been stored. I didn't have time to wonder why there were no guards before I noticed the blood. It stained the floor and as I followed its trail I found the origin.

I held a hand over my mouth to stop the screams, my stomach churned as I stumbled backwards, falling into a pool of blood. I was choking on my own breath, terrified. This wasn't meant to happen. No one was meant to die.

There had to be at least 5 bodies, all guards. I pulled myself up onto shaking legs, needing to escape before I met the same fate.

"Sister." A voice called, echoing off the stone walls.

I turned instinctively, my eyes meeting his across the hall.

"Brother," I replied, not trusting myself to say anything more.

"You should have let me hold it, sister." As I backed away he walked slowly out of the shadows, blood dripping from the corners of his mouth in counterpoint to the red liquid rolling from his unsheathed dagger.

"Why did you do this? None of this was part of the plan!"

"Let me hold it," His voice was quiet, as if now he was concerned about stealth.

"No one was meant to die! No one was meant to know we were here!"

"Let. Me. Hold. It." Each word was separate, clearly enunciated, but as they echoed from the walls they merged into a fading hiss.

"I don't have it."

"Why not?" He tilted his head, hair gracefully framing his face as drops of blood traced gentle curves across his chin. "You don't mean to tell me you lost it, after all this work, all the sacrifices we made."

We had sacrificed much to get here, but as he spoke he swept a graceful hand about the room, indicating the bodies strewn across the floor.

"It's in the moat. They'll never find it in time. Our job is done. If you want to hold it so badly you can jump in after that foul Duke."

In an instant, he span and dashed down the corridor, gracefully loping toward his obsession. As he left I heard slapping footsteps from ahead, like wet leather on stone, echoing as if from an elegant stride.

I made myself count to seven. The languid seconds drew out like a bowstring. Then I ran.

Come on. Close now. Left, down past the courtyard, into the Great Hall. Panic clutching at my throat, still clinging to the tatters of the plan – all I had to do was get to the garrison and I could escape, *get out, leave this godforsaken place* –

“No, you couldn't.”

I froze, a rabbit in firelight. The voice reverberated in my skull, seeming to arise from the very flagstones themselves. I turned.

She sat atop the dais, alone at the High Table – no, not alone; the dim predawn light through the mighty stained glass hinted at figures of lords and gentlewomen standing behind her in the shadows, very still. The Queen-Uncrowned stood and gestured in some subtle arc, and the doors at the end of the Hall swung closed with a sickening *k-THUM*. “To disregard Our hospitality, little bird, would be the epitome of impropriety.”

Through the door by which I had entered came two figures: one limping and dripping wet – the Duke, a bestial snarl on his emaciated face – dragging Anton... covered in blood. I tried to cry, to run over, but my feet were immobile. The Duke flung Anton across the floor, hitting the edge of the platform with a horrifying crunch. He didn't move. *Get up. Dammit, get up. We can still go home.*

The first warm glow of dawn was just beginning to suffuse the window from the east.

An anguished moan rose in the hall. It wasn't me, and it wasn't *them*. My brother's body twitched in the pooling blood.

“Anton!” I cried, pushing towards him against some invisible force. Judging by his wounds, it was a miracle he had survived at all. He was still my brother, despite everything.

“We must hurry,” I said, shaking him.
“Everything is set...”

White eyes stared back at me. Whatever he was now, my brother was long gone. Jerkily, as if unused to its body, the creature shuffled to join the others, another thrall to the Queen. I should have seen the signs sooner: the unnatural strength, the bloodlust.

“You have it?” slithered the Queen's melodious tone. The urge to please her was overwhelming.

The Duke smiled, brandishing the dark stone.

The Queen frowned. “You wouldn't dare.”

“I've been thinking,” said the Duke, twirling the stone, “why settle for princedom when I could be King?”

The Queen seemed to have an answer in mind, but the hall erupted in dust and glass as the charges detonated. Our preparation had been thorough - we weren't about to have these kind of people hunting us down. Sweet, purifying sunlight bathed the hall, sizzling where it met flesh. The hall collapsed.

* * *

Since that night I have been on the move. I don't always risk unpacking the stone, but this evening something rekindled my fears. It was just a vagrant, asking for food. It struck me when he walked away. So elegant.

The Elegance of the Almost Human – Extras

“I very much enjoyed all the different directions my successors in the chain decided to go in; however, none of them picked up on the identities of the first two characters that I was thinking of, as I envisioned a cat chasing a mouse. Zero marks for psychic powers, guys.”
- Harley

The Editor cheered aloud at: The development of the use of the word ‘elegant’ from simply descriptive, to repeated, to self-aware, to sarcastic, to downright silly. I was especially pleased that it became the last word in the chain. This turned into a wonderfully genre-savvy piece of overwrought gothic, and I say that as someone who has read far too much of it.

Branching Chain: No-Win Scenario

Chainwriting: Harley Jones, Clara Ceulemans, Adam Cowden, Choong Ling Liew-Cain, Sam Ottewill-Soulsby, Lee Colwill, Airlangga Gunawan, Jake Choules, Tom Ruddle

breathless through the corridors and vast deserted rooms, through endless cloisters, faster than thought, up to the battlements, my heart thumping, I ran, my pursuer ever behind me, loping with long stride and lank legs, but ever elegant, not at all dishevelled by his pursuit. Along the curtain wall of the castle and through the gatehouse we sped, not looking back, not caring about those in our way, who were knocked over or merely shocked at our rapid passage. Then from the battlement up towards the East Tower, through the open doorway, and –

the door down was locked.

Up then, to the top, through the open hatchway and now on the roof with nowhere to hide as he came up the stairs; twitching, itching, cowering against the wall. His head emerged through the gap, and he looked round the tower's top before emerging fully and walking, so slowly now, towards me. He loomed over me; despite his hard pursuit his appearance was still that of complete elegance, his hair perfectly slick, and his teeth so white, glinting in the moonlight, menacing. I was cornered.

As he approached time seemed to move far slower. My thoughts raced through my head, faster than we had raced up to this point. How could I escape? The moat was over forty feet below me; I would not survive that. The walls were too sheer to attempt to climb down, and besides, he was much the more graceful climber. Nor could I overpower him.

That left but one option – I started channelling my powers. A demanding process in any situation, but made all the more harder by the sight of my pursuer slowly cornering me in. He started smiling then, this elegant, menacing

smile of his, convinced there was no escape for me. I could feel the energy building up though, and started to see the shift in the pattern around me.

While I focused on selecting the right shift, I could see how the creature began to realise what I was doing. He started sprinting towards me, but it was too late – gradually, he became less clear, while the alternative reality I had selected appeared before me.

I was safe. But, more importantly, so was the package for which I had risked it all. I carefully unfolded the blankets, and there they were – the last litter of ghibbies. They were still blind, but already started to exhibit their characteristic paisley-patterned skin. There were three of them, snuggling together in their sleep.

I covered them up again, and made my way back towards our stronghold – or, at least, where the stronghold had been in the reality I just had left behind. I walked slowly, exhausted because of the energy channelling I had to resort to. Meanwhile, I pondered on my pursuer. There was something different about him, this time. He had seemed too confident, too smooth. Could this mean that one of the additional spheres had been unlocked? There was only one person who could know this...

“Ben...” I called upstairs, craning my neck backwards and away from the computer screen. No answer, as usual.

“BEEEEEEENNNNNNNN!!!”

Still nothing.

“BEN IF YOU DON'T ANSWER ME I'LL DELETE YOUR PROFILE!”

That never worked. He knew I was bluffing.

“Uggggghhh...alright fine, if you come help me I'll do your homework again.”

As usual, that was the ticket. Almost immediately, the ceiling lights flickered

following a loud “THUD” that signalled his leap from his bed to the floor. Then came the thunder roll of his feet scampering towards the stairs. I waited patiently for the usual opening insult as he made his way down.

“What do you need now, noobface?”

Despite the collection of tests proving that he was miles beyond his age in terms of intelligence, I still maintained that my little brother was just as much of an annoying git as any other 11 year old.

“Just shut up and listen before I change my mind. So I was just completing the ghibbie rescue mission, and I ran into a weird mob that I’ve never seen before. I escaped just in time to an alternate realm with that right-shift hotkey for my dimension-jump ability that you showed me, but it was super weird.”

He rolled his eyes. “God you suck at this game. You’d probably still be chopping wood and getting killed by wererabbits if I didn’t show you how to make a freaking wooden spear.”

“Yeah, well if I was as annoying as you are Mom probably wouldn’t have ever decided to have you in the first place. Do you want that homework done or not?”

“Uggggghhhhhhhhhhhhhhh....FINE!” He rolled his eyes again. “What did it look like?”

I pulled up the video log of my game session and rewound back to the chase, pressed play, and motioned to the screen. “Like that.” Within an instant, Ben’s eyes shot open wider than the time I caught him snooping at the magazine collection under my bed and his jaw dropped nearly down to the keyboard.

“Dude...you are in deep, deep shit.”

“What? What do you mean?” Panic rose inside me, the words tumbling out of my mouth before thought could restrain them. “What’s wrong? Am I going to die? What can I do?”

Ben turned back to me, a massive grin on his face. “I *love* how squeaky your voice goes when

you’re scared. Anyone would think I was talking to a six-year-old girl.”

I glared at him, grabbing a cushion and launching it at his head, hoping that it would distract him from the scarlet swiftly spreading across my face, however futile. Smirking, he turned back to the game.

Back to the castle, the battlements, the vast deserted rooms, racing right, leaping left but always descending deeper downwards. Weaving through corridors, sprinting between brilliant patches of light then diving back into absolute blackness. He was always just behind. I had never been to this part of the castle before; I was completely lost. Through a doorway and into a room lit by an eerie blue glow. I turned around to face him, watched him slowly, gracefully stride towards me. Suddenly, the blue intensified, until the screen was saturated with colour.

“What did you do?” I cried, dreading a blue-screen-of-death when it had been so long since I last saved. Fortunately (for Ben’s sake mostly because it would definitely be his fault) the walls of the room began to return, leaving me alone, surrounded by cold, dark stone.

With a victorious smile, Ben jumped off the chair and bowed. “I’ll just go and get *your* homework.” He skipped out of the room. Sighing, I exited the program for now, reopening Word and the essay I should have been writing, wincing in preparation for the appearance of That Bloody Paperclip. It never materialised. He did.

The screen seemed to tear, not slowly but violently, almost vomiting out a black shape. My computer avatar was a thing possessed of grace and cool nerves. I had neither of those things. Startled, I leaned back much too quickly on the chair and over-balanced, the wheels on the legs spinning frantically and uselessly as I toppled over and the world spun around me. In the seconds it took me to recover and get on my feet, he was in.

His teeth were very white. I remembered them from the game. They were very much on display now as he grinned at me. He remained as perfectly groomed here in my room as he had been racing the battlements. What my computer had been unable to render was his smell, a not unpleasant scent of damp earth and wet slate, seemingly at odds with his elegant attire. In left hand, nestling beneath long and strangely unkempt nails, he held a sphere.

He advanced, and as he shifted the edges of his body did not quite connect with the space he moved through, as the world rebelled at his alien presence. His cloak did not lie as it should, but swayed in obedience to phantom winds.

“Oi Buttface, you break the chair with your fat...” my brother’s crowing trailed off as Ben entered the room and saw him.

He ignored Ben and spoke to me, in a voice that was surprisingly gentle. “Now then my dear, where are my ghibbies?”

“Wow, when they said ‘immersive gaming experience’, they really meant it, huh?” The words tumbled out of my mouth without stopping to consult my brain on the way.

“Game?” A small frown creased the elegant, paper-white face. I waved somewhat helplessly at the twisted remains of my computer. The frown vanished. “Ah, I see. What a curious manifestation of the Gate. So ingenious. But the question remains: where are my ghibbies?”

“I don’t know. As far as I was concerned, they were just some pretty paisley pixels on a screen, same as you.”

“Interesting. In which case...” He turned to peer into the wreckage of my computer.

There was a bookshelf to my right. Nestled on the top shelf was my mum’s PhD thesis, an 1100-page whopper in heavy brown binding. As I finagled it into my hands, so very, very quietly, I caught Ben’s eye. He gave an approving nod. I stepped a little closer to the elegant figure, raised the book above my head, and *smashed* it

down on his skull. He staggered forwards and became entangled in the wreckage.

“Run!” I shouted, but Ben was already out the room and on his way to the front door, and I, hurdling a sofa with surprising grace, was right behind him.

“Car keys!” Ben yelled, and I grabbed them as I passed. There had been no cars in the world of the game. If I could just get us out onto the road, surely we’d be free and clear.

Ideally, when one finds themselves pursued by a pan-dimensional being, the car of choice would be something sleek and fast. A convertible, obviously, that would add an air of nonchalance to mask the overwhelming fear that exuded from your body.

Unfortunately, the car sitting on the driveway was bought out of sheer convenience – a (not so) quick ticket to freedom that blinded me at the age of 19.

That car, was of course, a completely inconspicuous, postbox red Reliant Robin.

Sliding over the bonnet and getting into the car in a way that would have made Starsky proud, I gunned the engine and J-turned out of the drive, having honed that particular skill from numerous hours of playing *Grand Theft Auto*.

“Where are we going?!” screamed Ben, “and more to the point, what the hell are ghibb-“

The screech of a car horn cut him off, having managed to barely miss an oncoming vehicle.

Glancing in the rear-view mirror, I let slip a small scream when I saw the creature... the ...Thing. Silently, purposefully, it glided from point to point.

The gap was closing.

The sense of panic rose when we realised that...it...was causing the streetlights to turn off, one by one, around us.

In the enveloping darkness, my eyes caught the silhouette of a pedestrian ahead. Far too late

to stop, I yanked the steering wheel hard right to avoid the person.

"NOOOOOOO," yelled the both of us as the Robin began to roll sideways.

We were tumbling.

Wham! as Ben's side of the car squashed up against the road. Owwwwwwwmph! as Ben's face squashed up against his side of the car. Skreeeak! as the left wing mirror broke off. We still had plenty of momentum left: I braced for a 180 flip at least – more likely a 360.

The 180 must have come, and the 360 too, and indeed the intervening 270, but I didn't notice any of them because the Robin wasn't making contact with the road any more. That, and there was also no longer any appreciable force of gravity. I looked out of the front windscreen for the pedestrian, then out of each of the windows, not finding any sign of them, nor indeed of anything else that had previously been present around us, such as the streetlights. Or the road.

Or the... Thing.

Ben peeled his face from the window, composed himself, and then glanced around in much the same way I had. Not satisfied by what he saw, he decided to roll down the window to get a better look.

"Ben!? What the utter f..." I squealed, then was quickly stifled as Something came in through the window. It was paisley. Two others shortly followed.

I had never seen a real ghibbie before, nor had I ever expected to, because ghibbies don't exist. But in defiance of all good sense, three of them were now existing rather noisily – and malodorously – inside my Reliant Robin.

"That... Thing... wants *these*?" said Ben, clearly unimpressed.

There was a sudden SMASH from the back of the car as the rear window caved in. I let out an involuntary short scream as a pair of hands

reached into the car and dragged us out. Before anything dramatic like my life flashing before my eyes could happen, I was staring up into the face of my avatar again. Replaying the accident, I could now put two and two together to realise that the figure before the crash had to be the manifestation of my avatar that I'd seen earlier.

Before he could speak though, I noticed that we weren't lying on the road. Or even in my avatar's world. We were in what seemed to be an endless expanse of white, with only a few models from the game here and there.

Next to me, Ben stirred and murmured, "We're dead, aren't we?"

Ignoring Ben, my avatar pulled me to my feet. "Ah! My ghibbies! Thank you so much for returning them!" my avatar chirped. Immediately, he turned to walk away, and I had a sudden flashback to every NPC I'd ignored after they gave me what I wanted in the game.

"Wait!" I shouted. "How did I survive the car crash?"

"My latent ability to dimension jump, obviously," he replied.

Trying not to think about how much of a dick my avatar was being, I continued. "But what are they for?"

My avatar paused. "To be perfectly honest, I have no clue. A gentleman in Redkeep will not part with a key until he gets them."

"But why am I here?"

"I told you, dimension jump. I pulled you and your machine here."

"But you're my avatar! How are we interacting?"

My avatar had clearly had enough of this conversation and was firing up his sphere, presumably to jump out of here. I realised that what I just said probably made no sense to him.

“The Thing that was following us, though?
What was that?”

“I often observe these kinds of beings. They are known as Moderators. If anything is going wrong in my quest [at this, he gave me a pointed stare], they subtly correct what’s going on, even if it means destruction of what they pass.”

Before I could ask what the hell he meant by that, he tapped the sphere and jumped away. The noise caused Ben to sit up.

“Where are we?” he stammered.

“I have no idea.”

“How do we get home?”

“Ditto.”

Gamer chain – Extras

The Editor cheered aloud at: The absolutely stunning ninety-degree turn in the middle of this one. I wonder if anyone saw that coming; I certainly didn’t, and it made my day. The existence of a Reliant Robin and small paisley-patterned quest-relevant animals were bonuses. Excuse me while I rewatch all of The Guild.

Branching Chain: Blood and Ashes

Chainwriting: Harley Jones, Anonymous, Anna Peel, Curtis Reubens, Samuel Cook, Joel Lipson, Connor Willmington-Holmes, James Baillie, Danielle Saunders

breathless through the corridors and vast deserted rooms, through endless cloisters, faster than thought, up to the battlements, my heart thumping, I ran, my pursuer ever behind me, loping with long stride and lank legs, but ever elegant, not at all dishevelled by his pursuit. Along the curtain wall of the castle and through the gatehouse we sped, not looking back, not caring about those in our way, who were knocked over or merely shocked at our rapid passage. Then from the battlement up towards the East Tower, through the open doorway, and –

the door down was locked.

Up then, to the top, through the open hatchway and now on the roof with nowhere to hide as he came up the stairs; twitching, itching, cowering against the wall. His head emerged through the gap, and he looked round the tower's top before emerging fully and walking, so slowly now, towards me. He loomed over me; despite his hard pursuit his appearance was still that of complete elegance, his hair perfectly slick, and his teeth so white, glinting in the moonlight, menacing. I was cornered.

As he approached time seemed to move far slower. My thoughts raced through my head, faster than we had raced up to this point. How could I escape? The moat was over forty feet below me; I would not survive that. The walls were too sheer to attempt to climb down, and besides, he was much the more graceful climber. Nor could I overpower him.

Distracted, I glanced off a crenellation and stumbled to the ground, scraping my hands on the rough floor. His thin lips parted into a crescent moon grin, the stars above blacked out one by one by his growing shadow. He

opened his impossibly pale mouth, "Let's call it there, shall we? Return what's mine and I'll consider letting you go."

I shook my head and raised my bloodied hands in front of me, trembling with the knowledge that returning my prize would mean certain death. He frowned, "Shame, I'd hoped this would go down painlessly." Then, in one fluid motion he swooped down to strike, and encountered only thin air.

I fled across the dark sky. It was only a matter of time before he gave chase and I was running on the fumes of my magic reserves, the blood pouring from my hands had just enough magical essence for me to cast a flying spell. I had spent most of it incapacitating the monsters I had encountered on the way to the castle. I didn't think to save it because I wasn't expecting him.

"Well," my chest tightened at the presence behind me. "You're just full of surprises aren't you? You sneak into castles, you steal, you bleed and you use magic. What next, golem?"

I became acutely aware of the roaring in my ears, the mass of darkness rushing below us, the lightness of my head and the heaviness of my body as the spell wore off.

I heard his laugh as I began to fall, and knew without the seeing of it that his mouth was open in shark-delight, taunting. "You cannot hide from me," the king's shamir called, and I curled myself small as a stone and shut my mouth tight tight tight, as the trees reached out their grasping fingers and the ground rushed up like an old friend.

The impact drove all thought from my mind, even the miserable tally of all of the things of which my maker had not warned me when she sent me on this mission. I lay perfectly still on the dark earth and twitched each of my fingers and toes. By the grace of the Lord my limbs remained attached to my torso. If I had had a tongue I would have bitten it through; but the stolen parchment behind my teeth was

untouched. I could feel its power thrumming from the top of my skull to the base of my feet.

“Little golem, do you think I will not see you?” came the voice of the shamir from above, and I shrank into the soil. The green light of his gaze sifted through the trees, parting bough from trunk and leaves from stem in little more than whispering sighs. A bird cleaved from its nest fell with a soft thump onto my chest, shivered, gasped, and died. I closed my eyes and was glad that I could make no sound to give me away. *Please, my Miriam, come for me.*

*

Miriam is running. Miriam is hurtling through the forest, pushing aside branches that lean down to claw at her, hopping over gnarled roots that seek to trip her up. The voice in her head is not a voice at all, but what it is saying is clear; there is trouble. She is needed. And she needs to keep running.

*

He landed smoothly before me, like a leaf carried on the wind – though such a metaphor failed to express the razor-sharp reflexes or the aura of danger he exuded. He stepped towards me, his wicked thin blade in hand, his cruel smile in place. “My offer still stands, you know. Give me back what you have taken, and this all ends without bloodshed.”

My only response was silence.

“Very well.” He plunged the sword into my chest. Where the heart would be, were I human, but as it was all he hit was ‘flesh’, and a tube carrying blood through my body. I felt no pain, but could feel the movement of my blood, detouring slightly around the sword, pulsing with power. I could have let it flow straight through, and burn off the blade’s tip, but my reserve was feeble enough that I didn’t want to waste any of it.

“Of course, golem.” The shamir seemed irritated. “No pain receptors.” He moved again, his sword ripping a great gouge in my torso,

blood flowing freely out, confused, scared by its freedom. It flowed across the ground; a little dripped from the end of my foe’s sword.

*

Miriam can feel her creation’s consciousness fading. It is badly injured. She can almost feel the blood leaking, no, pouring out of it as if it were her own. If she does not reach it soon, it will be too late. Her life’s work will have been wasted. She keeps running.

*

The shamir looked down at his handiwork. He seemed satisfied.

“It’s so boring interrogating golems. You feel no pain, you make no noise and you’re loyal to a fault and totally incapable of betrayal. It takes all the fun out of it. I wonder why I bothered at all trying to bargain with you. I suppose it was more of a formality than anything. It just seems so wrong not at least giving you a chance to save yourself before I kill you. So cold. So impersonal.”

I remained defiantly silent. Not that I had a choice in the matter, but this was very much defiant silence, rather than, say, numb terror or disengaged slothfulness. As it was, I rolled my eyes to indicate my complete contempt for his bombastic oratory and his entire kind.

“Well, you’re clearly not going to co-operate. Time to finish the job and reclaim that scroll. After all, we can’t have anyone besides the king knowing how to create shamirs now, can we?”

He raised his sword for the killing blow.

*

Miriam is nearly there. She can see a clearing up ahead. She can feel her creation – still alive, but barely. She bursts through the trees. She has arrived.

*

My body seized with the force of her presence. It was enough to stay the shamir's hand. But he did not lower his weapon. It gleamed, an extension of his smile.

His physical control was incredible. Though he did not waver, or relinquish, even for a moment, his hard gaze upon me, he seemed somehow to bow, low and mocking. "My lady," he intoned.

My mouth opened in reply, but it was Miriam who spoke: "My servant is not your toy."

The simple confidence of these words clearly amused the shamir, and his sly smile spread about him. "Nor, my lady," he cooed, sweetly, "is it yours. You have displeased the king with this game of yours: displeased him greatly."

"It is not your place to question me," my mistress hissed, with enviable passion. "You call him a toy, yet are nothing more yourself."

"Rather more sophisticated than your own recent efforts, my lady." These last words spilled openly from the shamir's lips, betraying contempt. "Can his majesty's latest conquest truly hope to replicate subtle thinking matter? A shamir? Little more than a puppet, this one."

No, I think.

He stepped forward, smile lost in shadow. I was weak; my thoughts were beginning to spill. I could not move myself.

But Miriam could.

"Be gone," she said. She did not raise my voice. She did not soften. She was defiant, and brimstone burned behind my eyes. Her strength filled my hands.

If the shamir smiled then, it was for the last time.

Miriam raised but a finger, the air itself rallied to her side. Rank and file of intangible reinforcements assembled, baying their blades not of metal, but of a sharpened arcane fury.

"You think destroying me will aid you? The king will not take lightly to your insurrection," seethed the shamir, its smirk wiped clean in favour of terrible awe with a dawning understanding of what Miriam sought to unfold.

My voice was returning, in flashes. Though wincing, I spat noise, blood and phlegm in response: "If the king knows of this and does not flee, he is a fool."

Our fists tensed, and with a few utterances her incantation took bleary form. The shamir did not fight, did not run. It stood, beguiled by power it could barely dream of comprehending. Miriam called forth magic she could barely control, never having been taught discipline in the magical arts – on the king's instruction.

She pushed on, word after word, tearing back the veil of mire hanging thick around the castle walls which still loomed overhead. A clear thought rang out among us, emanating in pulses from Miriam, "Know now your ending, shamir, and be dust once more."

In but a moment, shrieks of cackling tempest engulfed the shamir. A ruinous wind, tameless as the oceans, brought her rage into corporeal destruction. Battlements were tossed aside like driftwood in a storm, strewn across the citadel. In a few moments more, silence. A stillness rose through the chaos until all was motionless calm.

I stood – motionless. Miriam's fury left me, and cold began to seep in, blood and dark humours beginning to ooze from my body.

Miriam.

She walked a step forward, and knelt beside me, my blood running, spitting, cool and dead over her clothes.

*Thought of my thought. Hope of my hope.
Miriam.*

The secret was safe. The paper in my hands I surrendered: the castle had not kept its secrets from me. How could it, when I had something so great to fight for? How could it, when all the desperation, the hate, the cruel need of a kingdom had driven me so?

Miriam. Giver of life.

It was she, now, not I, who must bear the parchment. The king would be watching, would be waiting; this was our first unexpected blow, and we would not get a second. I was calm as I watched my life seem to flow away before me; a sacrifice to our forgotten gods, perhaps. For a second time.

Miriam. Say something.

At last she choked out the word that had brought me here. Brought me back, to fight for this nymph-like girl I had never known, forged me to bear burdens no human could. The word that, feeble and desperate, had bound the life of an old warrior to paper, bound paper to clay, clay to blood. Returned me – I knew not for how long – to a war I had lost before Miriam had even been born.

“Grandfather.”

An old warrior, old enough to outlive usefulness on the field, to be taught and turned scribe instead. Of course she had needed my spirit, had found and summoned it. Few from our home grew old enough to be taught writing. The king deemed it safer that way.

“Grandfather, can you still-”

It was safer that way, of course. Safer for the king and his soulless troops. No protection against the shamirs who had conquered our lands a generation before mine, who stormed townships to take anything the king wished to have. *Miriam is no-one's conquest*. No way of shaping the writing in the minds of the king's men. No way of writing our own defence.

She could feel my spirit soaking outwards, fading through the link she had wrought. But

my Miriam - my homeland - needed a warrior, and a messenger, and a scribe, not a grandfather. These were roles my clumsy, failing shell could assume while my self faded.

Parchment had been laid before me, sufficient to be sent to any townships that might have their own sympathetic, living scribe. Maybe a new army would be built. A match for the king's shamirs, a match for the king. Maybe, to fill one of those warrior's bodies, my spirit would be summoned once more.

The scroll laid out in front of me, I glanced over the instructions and began to write.

Blood and Ashes – Extras

Alternative Title Suggestions:

Wisdom of the Ancients
The Elder With Some Scrolls
The Terracotta Army

“In my head, this became Dorfl raiding Don'tgonearthe Castle, fighting the Count de Magpyr, and being rescued by Susan. Or possibly Granny Weatherwax. I'm not entirely sure why. Possibly more books should have golem characters...” - *Samuel*

The Editor cheered aloud at: The moment I realised the narrator was a golem! Golems are great. This one had some particularly interesting elements to it, containing an actual human soul. I recommend *Feet of Clay* by the late great Terry Pratchett, who shall be sorely missed, to everyone.

The Porpoisian Transcendence

Chainwriting: Connor Willmington-Holmes, Sarah Binney, Aimee Summers, Nathan Smith, Ed Elcock, Lee Colwill, Andrew Conway, Olivia Morley, Ed Heaney, Emily Room, Anonymous, Alex Guttenplan

Hanging up his top hat and wakizashi, Mr Oda-Redgrave sat down to a delicious bowl of Xnqqnshi fried noodles. Not normally a person of *that* socio-galactic social rank as to lower himself to rapid-rehydrate from deepspace station dispensaries, Javad Oda-Redgrave, HRH Sultan-Consulate of New³ York, was a little tentative.

Leaving much of his official regalia aboard his ship permitted a degree of anonymity. After a refreshing after dinner mint, Mr Oda-Redgrave paid his way (followed by the culturally accepted handshake-dance of the sector) and was about to go on his way when – from nowhere – sprung his bitter rival, Bobby-Dallas Pyrrho.

The gun-slinging lunatic was disembarking his vessel: 'The Compensator'. They drew swords, squawking across the bar in the most threatening manner possible, before being asked to "Grow up and get out of here" by the barbeing.

Both obliging, business resumed as per normal in the diner-bar. But escalation was inevitable. From her window booth, Jenny watched the two warriors making preparations for a final showdown – in space. The Texan spaceracer and the Ikko-Ikki descendent assembled their mechas. Bobby-Dallas' was covered in NRA stickers, staring down the barrel of a 14 metre gun barrel.

"A double espresso please, with extra vocalisation," Jenny requested of the barbeing. Choring shouts of caffeinated affirmation erupted from the brass speaker heads in the walls. A tremor. Vast proclamations of rapture entranced the room. "On my tab, please."

The espresso came rolling down the track with a tiny "peep-peep", azure smoke steaming from its funnel. Jenny grabbed it and downed the neon pink fluid in one, not taking her eyes off the spectacle outside. She had so little time for these infantile holo-shows, but coffee was coffee, and a few hours out of cryo was worth it – even if it had to be spent at a fracking bar at a fracking service station in the back of fracking beyond. Then she'd be back on the Milky Highway, with five gigaelectronvolts of pion lazuli in the hold, a new life before her, and no looking back.

The mechas were throwing insults at each other and striking poses. Jenny wanted to vomit.

"M. Gaposchkin?"

Adrenaline flooded her veins. How could someone have found her, here? Don't turn around. Don't blink. The mechas had progressed to blowing animated holes in the ships parked at the airlock. Who would have followed her? How could they know her name?!

"M. Gaposchkin, I'd like you to come with us, please."

She allowed herself to turn, very slowly. The voice had the unmistakable glottal drawl of a Gliese accent, calm and unyielding. Jenny looked behind her to see –

A shabby human woman in an undersized spacesuit, the mottled green of cryo fading from her dark skin, tired eyes under stiff white hair.

Herself.

The doppelganger seemed unmoved by her reaction. "M. Gaposchkin. We have taken your pion lazuli. Please follow. We have much to discuss."

Skit sat, jostling with the hiccups of the aerotrains as it bumbled over hitches in the rails, bumping the arm of the ginger-haired being sitting beside him. He flinched away.

"I'm sorry!" Skit muttered quickly - but the being did not reply. He remained silent, staring ahead with glassy eyes which flickered from side to side as he pored over the tiny screens behind his retina. He was evidently deeply engrossed. The white-haired woman on his other side also sat stiffly, her eyeballs roving but unseeing. In fact, the entire carriage was still, silent; full of living bodies and the emptiness of people who were far away.

Skit sighed, leaned his elbows on his knees; ruffled his unruly hair. He might have found it eerie, if he wasn't so used to it; (the silence, not the misbehaving curls); the non-presence of people, as they skimmed through separate virtual universes.

He kept himself locked in his own bubble of space as much as possible, clenching his knees together, and keeping his elbows tucked in. People didn't usually like to get too close.

After all, it was clear from a single glance that he was below the Consulate's standard height and weight; that his skin was far too pale - and a darksight-being could have told you that the haunting mash of his features; the heavy brows, the gauntness, and those eyes, would never have been commissioned or designed by any StarCity engineer. If the other passengers had been less absorbed in their virtual lives, perhaps they would have been made to feel very uncomfortable about sharing a carriage with someone who was so very obviously a Natural.

As it was, all twenty of them crowded the dark-haired Asian boy, statue-like, and unaware.

Opposite, in the dark and grimy window, Skit's eyes locked on his own reflection, clinging to it as if nothing else were real.

And perhaps it wasn't.

Somewhere, on the other side of the Galaxy, a dolphin wept.

Skit felt this dolphin weep deep down in his soul but thought no further of it. Focused on his inner turmoil, he observed as the crowd

slowly dismembered the boy. Emotionless, almost robot-like, they stripped his body down to its component parts, leaving little but a blood smear and a sense of disgust in his mouth; now that humanity was regulated, its parts were interchangeable. That was one of the benefits of being a natural, no one wanted the parts. But still, in this world of grey, the virtual Technicolor convinced many to perform truly horrendous acts. Murder was still illegal, mind you, it's just they changed the definition.

Tearing his eyes away from the stain that was once a human, he returned to his pods computer. He knew the life he lived online was a lie, but it was a lie he was part of. Signing in to his government regulated account, he read the official news. He then liked the official photos of cute kittens and watched the official music videos. It was always best to perform ones duty as a citizen straight away, less they get suspicious. Once he had worked his way through the state-regulated internet program, he moved to the forum. Ostensibly about how to grow button top mushrooms, the forum was a way for naturals to communicate. Secret passwords traded in nightclub bathrooms gave access to the inner site. Logging in, the first post struck him...

*

"Ow," said Jenny. "And that is not a word I say lightly. OW."

Her doppelganger paid her no attention. Her hands were busy working what looked like a databoard – something crazy old. Low-tech salvage. Something the state did not control.

"Owwww," reiterated Jenny.

The doppelganger had jammed a dozen metafluid needles into Jenny's bare skin. They were molecule-slender, and thus painless in theory –

"OW!"

"Be silent." The doppelganger – Jenny now resolved to call her Dop – casually adjusted a

few of the needles. “We need you clean before I take you where we’re going. Don’t want the Consulate following us...”

“I *am* clean,” said Jenny, a trifle indignant. She’d disabled her sonetics personally.

“Sure,” said Dop, clicking her tongue as she plunged in another needle with aplomb – “Sure, you smashed your sonetics around until they shut off. Thing is, some of us know how to get them back online. The only way to stop us tracking you is to yank ‘em out for good.”

Sonetics, noun: Metafluid fibres woven through an organic host matrix on the molecular level, primarily used to transmit information on the host’s location to government agencies.

Example usage: Jenny screamed when they pulled out her sonetics.

Afterwards, once Jenny had apologised for repeatedly punching Dop in the face, and the pain meds had kicked in, Dop pushed some outrageously ancient computer into Jenny’s hand.

“Read this,” she said.

“What is it?”

“A forum we created to facilitate Natural-to-Natural communication,” said Dop. “This article was posted there earlier today. It thoroughly explains everything that’s going on, including the dolphin, coherently and ingeniously, written in such prose as to make Shakespeare weep, all in under two hundred and fifty words.”

Jenny looked at it. “Could use more cat pictures,” she said. “But OK, if this thing will explain just what in the nine galaxies is going on, I’ll read it.” She studied it in silence for a few minutes. “Look, I know you said the prose would make Shakespeare weep, but I thought you meant it in a *good* way. This is all ‘blah blah blah, smash the Synthiarchy, blah’.”

Dop leaned over tapped a line further down the screen, momentarily distracting Jenny by giving her a startling insight into what the phrase ‘know it like the back of my hand’ actually *meant*. “That bit,” Dop said.

Jenny read it. Then read it again. She took a deep breath. ‘OK,’ she said, “I know I’ve been kind of out of the loop, what with being on the run from five planets, but dolphins definitely didn’t used to be able to project their emotions across space and time. Since when...?”

Dop checked her chronopiece.

“Ah,” said Jenny. “That recently, huh?”

“Yes. They’re audible only to Naturals – it’s still unclear whether that’s down to luck or judgment. What *is* clear, though, is that the dolphins really *really* want to smash the Synthiarchy.”

“Wait, only audible to Naturals? But then, why can’t I hear them?” Normally, Jenny’s status as a Natural was a closely guarded secret. But if the dolphins were agitating for a revolution, she wanted to be part of it, dammit.

Dop looked uncomfortable. “This probably isn’t a good time to tell you I’m not the clone here, is it?”

“What? But I remember, my parents! The fungus ranch on Marsupial Five where I grew up! My first date with a cephalopod!”

Dop nodded sympathetically. “A full memory implant from a backup taken three years ago. He was a pretty cute cephalopod, wasn’t he?”

Jenny was horrified. “Are there any more of me out there?”

“There were three others,” Dop looked even more miserable. “None of them got the pion lazuli, though, and we really, *really* need it. We, that is, I, had to keep trying until one of us got through.”

A waft of tropical air hit them, and a raucous Junkanoo band marched through the bar as someone ordered a Bahama Mama. Outside

Oda-Redgrave was down to his last three mechas, but Bobby-Dallas was leaking oil badly from two prosthetic tentacles. Jenny shook her head. It all seemed so normal.

The ancient computer pinged. Dop (Jenny still thought of here as that, even though some new nomenclature would probably be required if they were going to be friends) touched the screen to refresh, and a comment appeared on the forum, in the iambic pentameters and hackneyed clichés that most of the posters affected.

*The truth and nothing but the truth is here,
So we must take this as a call to arms
And fast advance our long considered plans.
The hour is near when we must do or die
For we will not succeed unless we try.*

The message was signed "Skit".

"It's time," said Dop. "Let's roll."

Skit remained expressionless as he received confirmation that Jen⁴ had the pion lazuli, and had been contacted at the Top Secret Contact Location. That she had managed to get the required 5 gigaelectronvolts was surprising, but the dolphins had trusted in her abilities. They were the best plotters that Skit or any of the other Synthiarchy Smashers had met, as well as being experts at hiding their true nature behind cute grins. They were the allies Skit had been waiting his entire life for; their motivations running parallel to his own had spurred on his planning. Now, finally, everyone was in their right place.

He quickly liked a picture of a pygmy mammoth, and then sent Jenny the coordinates of the mecha he had hidden in the Top Secret Contact Location. That should provide her enough fire/drill/tentacle power to reach cargo bay 23, where the Very Dangerous Secret Weapon had been stored. 5 gigaelectronvolts had better be enough...

Skit flinched as another dolphin wept with the first, their pure emotions swirling in a

harmonious symphony that ravaged deeper into his soul. They were getting desperate.

*

Jenny hurried after Dop as she entered the hidden room behind the bar.

"The dolphins are louder, so we have to find the mecha as soon as possible," Dop had explained, "We're friends with the barbeing, so stored it here for safekeeping."

Mecha combat, despite being a life skill, was something Jenny had always tried to avoid, as there was little skill in it – after all any idiot could pilot them, as Oda-Redgrave and Bobby-Dallas were so excellently proving.

That said, some mecha required more skill than others.

"This is where you tell me," said Jenny slowly, as she looked up at the supposed prize that the Smashers had stashed away, "that it may look like a heap of junk but it can... I don't know. Outrun police cruisers. Gun down battlefleets without breaking a sweat."

"Sadly," answered Dop, "I would go so far as to say that it looks like a heap of junk because it is, actually, a heap of junk. You may hazard a guess as to the sort of resources we actually have available to us. Luckily for you, we try to work by more subtle means."

"This had better be worth it."

"You didn't think it was a coincidence, did you, that two such bitter rivals as those two, with such... big... mecha, met here in the back of beyond just when we needed a distraction?" She gestured towards where Oda-Redgrave was skittering the remains of his little troupe backward to avoid a rather clumsy swipe by Bobby-Dallas. "Speaking of which, they're on their last legs and I feel the show will soon be over. Best that we get moving."

"Okay," said Jenny. "After you." She wasn't sure how they were both going to fit into that cockpit, though.

"I'll rephrase," said Dop, somewhat testily.
"Best rather that you get moving."

"I thought as much," began Jenny, but got no further. The full bulk of Bobby-Dallas' mech came smashing in through the supposedly-reinforced glass of the service station wall, bounced gracelessly across the bar, and ended up with its head jammed through the doorway, seeming to stare directly at Jenny through the darkened faceplate.

Jenny and Dop both paused.

"You did say you were trying to distract attention away from us, didn't you?"

"You should probably get in the mecha." Dop continued to stare at the wreckage of the wall and the mecha struggling to its feet. Jenny nodded and scrambled through the hatch into her own mech.

Jenny squeezed into the tiny cockpit. There was barely enough room for her alone, what with the mess of wires looping across the ceiling and the bulky button-strewn console in front of the seat. She clambered over the pipes, ducked under the cables and somehow got herself into the seat. Helpfully, someone had taken the time to label most of the buttons. She threw the handful of switches marked "ON/OFF", and the mecha whirred into life and juddered to its feet. A screen blinked on, displaying a map of the station and the quickest route to Cargo Bay 23 from the bar.

Jenny took hold of the stick labelled "STEERING" and tilted it forward, causing the mecha to lurch forward through the hole in the wall that Bobby-Dallas had just been dragged out of by Oda-Redgrave. She tilted the stick forward a little more and her mech broke into a clumsy, lumbering run across the hangar full of parked ships.

Jenny turned towards the doorway to cargo bay 23 on the far side of the hangar, clanging the shoulder of the mech on a nearby shuttlecraft and taking out part of its wing. She

began to run towards it, but skidded to a halt as a large copbot stepped out from behind a vintage saucer-ship and aimed several hefty looking missile launchers directly at her.

"YOU ARE UNDER ARREST. STEP OUT OF THE MECHA NOW OR WE WILL RESORT TO EXTREME FORCE."

They did not.

Trazom Suedama's Zauptiquiem began to blurt from the saucer-ship's ghettosirenblasters, as valraukarapaceous enforcers in the hated colours of the Phocoenidaphilofinder General mechanically brantagressed forth indigoxanthophagaceously to encircle them in intermeshed shadow-wings of impregnable lanthanoinvar. Their ventport-emoicons began to glower a dull red, never a good sign.

"YOU ARE CHARGED WITH ACTS OF GROSS INDECENCY WITH PORPOISES AND BOTTLENOSES,"

They dogmadictated in unison, tasertriggerhappily teargasbombing the interior of their perimeter.

"YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO ASPHYXIATE UNTIL UNCONSCIOUS. ANY AIR MOLECULES EXHALED CAN AND WILL BE USED AGAINST YOU IN THE GALACTIC COURTS FOR THE ERASURE OF MARINE XENOBESTIALITY. IF YOU UNDERSTAND YOUR 'RIGHTS', LOSE CONTROL OF YOUR PERVERTS' BLADDERS... NOW." they otovisceratively megatoned, ending by pressing down hard on the "treble voltage" butts of their taseruzzis.

"HA-HA, I DETECT THAT THESE NATSCUM EVEN HAVE MICROPROBOSCID PORN ON THEIR HARD-DRIVES!" banterjected the copbot-detective-sergeant as they drifted out of consciousness.

Jenny woke up in a windowless room that she first thought was a cell- but the door was much too big. As her eyes focused, she noticed that

Dop was on the other side of the room and starting to stir. Behind her was a huge number stencilled on the wall- 23. And the room looked much more like a... cargo bay!

There was a thud as the empty mecha pitched forward and disintegrated in a puff of rust and a fizz of picocircuitry, followed by a creak as an access panel on the copbot opened.

“So you’re saying this was all part of the plan? I’ll be all over the internet- ‘you won’t believe what this woman did with a pygmy mammoth”.

“Well, your hard drive does have some *extremely* detailed representations of Phocoenids on it. They’re targeting information. You just put it in here-”

She indicated a cable dangling out of an object which fit in a missile launcher but looked nothing like a missile-

“And the pion lazuli goes here.”

“And what does it do? Shoot dolphins?”

Dop didn’t answer, but threw a switch that looked like it had been added as an afterthought. The devise glowed grue- or was it bleen?- and seemed to simultaneously swallow itself in four different directions.

Somewhere and somewhen else, four particularly angry Phocoenids became something much more than marine mammals. The eventual conquerors of the Synthiarchy, and deities of the World Pod that replaced it, they would be known to history as the Four Immortal Porpoises.

The Porpoisian Transcendence – Extras

“So essentially, my first thoughts were "what the hell is going on?", followed by "how do I resolve this cliffhanger in 250 words?" How did we get from a gonzo mecha-duelling space-opera setting to a genetic dystopia with mandatory cat videos? And where did the dolphins (and portmanteaus) come in? Apologies for making this a shaggy dog story. It seemed fitting....” - *Alex*

“This seems to have situated the great Porpoisian Transcendence in a wretched hive of scum and villainy. With mechas. Excellent.” - *Connor*

“...
...
...
Wat.” – *Sarah*

The Editor cheered aloud at: Every time this chain descended further into complete and glorious silliness. To begin, it looked like an Alastair Reynolds style space opera. Then it became a Douglas Adams style space opera. Then there were dolphins and mandatory cat videos. I’m especially happy about the author who ended their section with, essentially, “I don’t want to do exposition, so here, next author, I’ll let you do it straight away!”, and the following author who began their section with, essentially, “nope”.

A Song of Fire and More Fire

Chainwriting: Samuel Cook, Bettina Juszak, Harley Jones, Curtis Reubens, Allie Weaving, Sebastian Selven, Danielle Saunders, Rory Hennell James, Ed Heaney

The Tenth Rome was burning. The First Rome had dwindled before being sacked by the barbarian hordes in AD 476. The Second Rome, Constantinople, had picked up the baton 140 years before and maintained the Roman tradition for another millennium, until it too fell to the ravaging Ottoman Turks in AD 1453. The mantle then passed to the Third Rome, Moscow, the new bastion of Orthodoxy. But Moscow had ended in the nuclear conflagration of WWII when the self-declared Emperor of All the Russias, Vladimir I, had openly invaded Poland. Civilisation had been hurled back to the Dark Ages. Petty kingdoms had been born, had fought and had died, appearing to any watching god as giant mayflies that glowed briefly as they burned.

But the legacy of Rome had endured. Through ash and fire, through blood and steel, there had always been a successor to the First Rome, which now lay lost forever beneath the sterile waves of the sea. For Rome had God on its side. After the radioactive ash had settled and the nuclear winter had passed and the pitiful survivors had emerged onto the blasted and changed skin of Earth, the gods had returned. Tales of miracles had spread and soon fully a tithe of the remaining population had messianic powers. But only the heirs of Rome espoused the true God, personified in the unbroken line of the Emperors. This certainty could bend iron, could quench fire, could move mountains. For five centuries they had fought heretics, unbelievers and idolaters and brought a semblance of order and progress to the benighted wastes, sparking a second Renaissance. But now the Tenth Rome was burning. And the Emperor was missing.

The Emperor was missing, the city lay all but in ruins, panic was spreading through the Empire and all of it was all the more worrying because,

despite tradition, the current Emperor did not have a history of unreliability and erratic behaviour. Asger II, second Emperor of Tenth Rome, was the base and the peak of their religion, the true God, and he had conducted himself as such. Though some were unsettled by his integrationist tendencies, admitting fugitives of other lands as long as they swore to uphold him as the true God, the citizens of Tenth Rome adored their Emperor. No more than the occasional whisper of dissent had reached the ears of the Honour Guard, tasked with protecting the Emperor as well as uncovering any plots before they came to fruition, through their many informants – and certainly no unrest great enough to hatch a plan to depose the Emperor.

The Southern Lands were quiet, still licking their wounds from Asger I's assault a decade ago, when there had been stirrings of revolution against the new world order, driven by heretics who denied their true God. The Eastern Lands were still so heavily scarred that little life remained. The Western Lands were only ash. There were none who would oppose them alive on the earth. Yet still the Emperor was missing.

General Caspar paced the walls and watched his city burning. After travelling all over the Empire on innumerable campaigns he had risen through the ranks to become the Emperor's most trusted military advisor. Now, following the attack, the city was under martial law; his law.

They had routed the enemy; they had followed the retreating forces and put them to the sword. But some remaining hostiles had set the city ablaze, and as his forces organised the evacuation of the city he considered how to proceed. There would have to be camps set up for the evacuees around the neighbouring cities and a workforce to rebuild Rome recruited; the army would have to remain vigilant against any further insurrection, as any rebellious groups would see this as a sign of weakness on the part of the Empire.

And where was the Emperor? Without its head the Empire could soon be in considerable difficulty. The members of the Senate were scattered around the ruins of the city; the patrols had orders to send them to Caspar when they found them. Until they arrived Caspar could only wait and wonder, where, where is Asger?

The first senator to reach the walls was Lord Pawel. His house had evidently escaped the worst of the damage, for he had taken the trouble to dress in his robes of state; but the dishevelled state of his long hair showed his haste. Ragnvald, the high priest, arrived soon after. The temple had been hit badly and his arm had been severely injured.

Next to arrive was Lord Shilven, more dishevelled than the others and babbling nonsensically. It took a long time to calm him, to make him first quieten down and then speak rationally; in this time, a large portion of the senate had arrived, and thus were gathered to hear Shilven speak:

"I have seen the emperor."

A murmur rippled through the assembled crowd; General Caspar shushed them with a single gesture. (In the days before this one, such insolence would have him severely chastised, a small part of his subconscious noted.) "Where is he?"

"He dances in the fires. He watches Rome burn. He wills it to be so!"

The uproar from the senators was more than Caspar could quell this time; it was all he could do to stop a couple of particularly hot-blooded members from attacking Shilven right then. He called to a couple of his men: "Find Shilven a bed and lie him in it. He must be running a fever, or else simply going mad."

"No, general!" Shilven protested. "The emperor is near the Old Market. He is wreathed in flame, his robes and hair and beard all ablaze, but the fire does not scorch him. No, he treats it like an old friend, and

carries it from place to place, his touch raising fire all around."

'Shilven-' Caspar started.

'I know what I saw!'

A chill sweeps through the crowd. A wordless horror. For there is but one thing on Shilven's face.

And it is fear.

This man who had ridden the crest of war and felled armies with his might. Knew pain as an old friend. Had lifted his helmet before Death so that the devil might see the whites of his eyes as he broke bread with the afterlife. This man who breathed chaos both in and out and thrived in the darkest of days.

This man had fear written through both eyes.

And nothing would ever be the same.

"Lord commander," said one of the older senators, a Bombastus von Flippenburg, from the Western provinces. "Could I have a word with you?"

He took Caspar by the arm and led him to the window. Outside the sky was a ripe red, smudged with black.

"Yes, senator Bombastus?"

"Oh, please," said Bombastus, raising his palms. "Bombi."

"All right... Bombi?"

"Might I remind you of some of the more, hrrm, unfortunate traits of the imperial family? I am loathe to bring it up, of course, but their genetic line is somewhat –" he waved his hand vaguely – "disposed to mutations of the more flamboyant kind. Or should we say flame-boyant, hmm?"

He raised his eyebrows twice, rapidly.

Caspar couldn't hold back a sigh. But the old man was right. He had spent enough time going through the history of the imperial family to know that.

"Yes..." he said, slowly. "Empress Luxadora Cholericus did self-ignite from pure anger after the defeat at Venicetanbul. And Reginald III turned into a salamander and disappeared into the Walpurgisnacht bonfire."

"And then there was the case of emperor Conbustus, who was abducted by that dragon," Bombastus filled in.

"And his brother."

"And his brother. The sad fate of emperor Rudolph the Rosy, yes... turning into a comet like that. You know, if it hadn't been for their divinity, the imperial family might've gotten quite a reputation by now."

Caspar nodded. "It's strange – I've never thought about this before. We..."

The door to the senate slammed open. A flicker of fire caught Caspar's attention. Sparks crawled on the jambs, searingly bright enough to disguise the dark fingers of Emperor Brennen Asger II as they clung to already-charring wood. After a moment long enough to set the doorway smouldering, the Emperor entered the Senate Walls, last defence of Rome's heart.

Below him, the steps leading to the Wall Gate burned. Cries were the only indication of the crowd attempting occupy the street below. Really, mused Caspar, it had been a mistake to build so much of Tenth Rome from wood. Especially the steps.

Whose idea *had* that been, anyway?

"Bombi," said Caspar, not taking his gaze from Asger, "Do you happen to remember why this city, given its disposition to conflagration, has been built of wood?"

A shrug. "It's always the way. After the Fall of Rome, the last ruler is found dead, having with their last moments saved a number of vital texts from the Great Library, and from the knowledge imparted we rebuild. At the Fall of Ninth Rome, it was carpentry. Rather a

disappointment – at the Fall of the Second, it was some fabled material know as Prestress'd Concrete, the working and moulding of which is now lost to us. Emperor Calor saved some textbooks on Nuclear Fission, too. A true bounty."

There was a long silence, in which Caspar felt a hitherto unknown need for a desk to place his head on. Hard.

"Something," said Caspar, "has been playing with us. Playing with Rome, for millennia. Something has been controlling the Imperial family, the wars, the library, and *whoever has been naming the goddamn Imperial Babies*. And since no-one seems to have pointed out this *incredibly obvious fact* in the last *untold centuries*, I assume we won't live to either."

You assume right. The voice emanated from Asger – not from his mouth but from the flames wreathing it.

"Who are you?" demanded Caspar with more authority than he felt.

I am many things, more complex and varied than you can comprehend. But you may call me God. The voice came again from the flames rippling across Asger as Senators fled, fainted, or froze on the spot, some managing a combination of all three at once.

"Heresy! There is no god but the Divine Emperor, who carries divinity in His blood!"

"I hate to be *that guy*," interrupted Bombi from the side, "but this flamey-voice god appears to be rather intimately attached to our own flamey-Emperor god."

Enough prattle! The voice was angry as Asger II strode forward into the walltop Senate chamber. *God has not touched this world since the day of its creation, but it is an apt word with which you may address one so superior to yourselves.*

Caspar drew his sword as what remained of Asger moved closer, though he was unsure if

he could bring himself to strike his Emperor. In his heart, he was less sure still what harm his blade would do, for what could a ceremonial weapon of electrum do against a god made flesh, bathed in flames which claimed to be another god?

I have grown bored of this "Tenth Rome" already, it is time to start anew. There is no more need for this pathetic city of wood.

As Caspar ran out of space to step backwards, Asger came within reach. There was a flicker, a moment of hesitation, but it did not last. General Caspar made his decision and struck.

"There is no God but the Divine Emperor!" No vengeful tongue of flame lanced out towards him, but neither did the Emperor flinch even the tiniest bit at such a blow.

"But let me tell you this," cried Caspar, buoyed up by his success. "Is a hull with no crew truly a ship?" He struck again, and again no retribution descended upon him. "Is a scroll with no words truly a codex?" And again.

Bombi had moved rather further away, but some of the fleeing senators had regathered – perhaps something of the General's spirit had stirred some forgotten sparks of bravery within them.

But Shilven had not withdrawn. Afraid he might be, but he would not back down. "This is not right!" he cried. "Do you really think that..."

Caspar glanced at him for barely a second before he continued his tirade. "And is a body without the soul of His Holy Highness truly the Divine Emperor? No! It is not! It is nothing but a body, being used by whatever this might be, and it is a blasphemy against his name!" The sword smashed down a fourth time, almost cleaving the Emperor in two, and the flames thinned and spread... and caught two of the unfortunate senators. The fire roared up around them, as it had around the Emperor; they too burnt but were not consumed, and they too spoke with the same voice, together, in an unearthly, resonant unison.

That was all very pleasantly symbolic, boomed the voice. Caspar's mouth dropped open and his sword fell from his hands. Had it not been he, when all things were tallied up, who had struck down his own emperor? Had it not been his own act alone?

Yes; he had acted alone. Bombi was nowhere to be seen; Shilven was glancing between the flaming senators and the shaken general.

Caspar began to whisper, his hands folded – "Confiteor Imperatori omnipotenti quia peccavi, quia peccavi nimis, contra vos, fratres, contra Romam, et in extremo malorum contra Imperatorem sanctum..." – but it availed nothing. Without the sacred person of the Emperor to protect the flesh, someone had frenziedly struck at one of the burning senators, and so the fire had spread, and spread again. The baleful glare of Shilven snapped him back into a detached sort of fearlessness... until Shilven burst into flames.

"You think you have won!" shouted Caspar at the fire, at the air, at the world, at the arrogant and unstoppable force which was tearing his city apart around him. "You think you have won, but you do not know! This city may fall, but we will not be cowed! We will return! We will be back, and you cannot keep us down for ever!"

There were no words, but Caspar was sure he felt, rather than heard, a mocking laugh.

"Tenth Rome may fall. But you have not won! We will return! We will rebuild! We will be reborn! Eleventh Rome will rise from the ashes!"

Well, yes, said the voice, matter-of-factly, as the Senate House could take no more and collapsed in a ball of flame, sending showers of sparks into the heavens. As Caspar perished, the voice rang in his ears, almost patronising in its tone.

Yes indeed. That's rather the point, isn't it? Do try to keep up.

* * * * *

And so it came to pass, as it had been before, as it was, and as it would be many times again. Eleventh Rome, as it happened, perished in a volcanic eruption three hundred and eighty three years later. But that is a story for another day...

A Song of Fire and More Fire – Extras

Alternative Title Suggestions:

Ashes to Ashes
And Then Everything Changed When The Fire God Attacked
Fire of the Dark
Firesale
AD 64 All Over Again
Rome meets R'hllor
The Day is Dark and Full of Terror
Fieryvolution
Goodness Gracious; The Lord's on Fire!
Rome Wasn't Built in a Day

"I'm slightly puzzled as to why so many of the Romans appear to have Norse names. The Vikings got a lot of places, but never Rome... it is interesting to see, despite the divergence from what I originally envisaged, how a few similarities popped up in the story. An interesting example of convergent evolution!" - *Samuel*

"The ending was extremely profound." – *Rory*

"I'm very pleased with this one. Things that made me happy: people picking up on my plot-forcing attempt; getting to do a genre-savvy rant; working round characters standing on the walls surveying the city while looking out of windows; name puns." - *Danielle*

The Editor cheered aloud at: all of the fire-related names and puns. The inexplicability of Roman Vikings. The intriguing not-quite-deities

status of the imperial family. The campness of Bombi.

Fear of the Dark

Samuel Cook

The author would like to point out he's not actually religious, just interested in religions from an academic point of view, and that the bits that read like an apology for Christianity are merely narrative necessity.

The Tenth Rome was burning. The First Rome had dwindled before being sacked by the barbarian hordes in AD 476. The Second Rome, Constantinople, had picked up the baton 140 years before and maintained the Roman tradition for another millennium, until it too fell to the ravaging Ottoman Turks in AD 1453. The mantle then passed to the Third Rome, Moscow, the new bastion of Orthodoxy. But Moscow had ended in the nuclear conflagration of WWII when the self-declared Emperor of All the Russias, Vladimir I, had openly invaded Poland. Civilisation had been hurled back to the Dark Ages. Petty kingdoms had been born, had fought and had died, appearing to any watching god as giant mayflies that glowed briefly as they burned.

But the legacy of Rome had endured. Through ash and fire, through blood and steel, there had always been a successor to the First Rome, which now lay lost forever beneath the sterile waves of the sea. Some, especially during the cataclysm of WWII and its aftermath, the period that had come to be simply known as "The Long Night", had existed for only a few years before withering into dust. Others had lasted decades before their annihilation. All had fallen eventually, but there was always a successor. For Rome had God on its side.

After the radioactive ash had settled and the nuclear winter had passed and the pitiful survivors had emerged onto the blasted and changed skin of Earth, the gods had returned. Tales of miracles had spread and soon fully a tithe of the remaining population had

messianic powers, coming to rule the scattered masses of a fallen humanity. But only the heirs of Rome espoused the true God, personified in the unbroken line of the Emperors. This certainty could bend iron, could quench fire, could move mountains. For five centuries they had fought heretics, unbelievers and idolaters and brought a semblance of order and progress to the benighted wastes, sparking a second Renaissance, exemplified by the glories of the Tenth Rome. Magnificent works of art, soaring cathedrals, gleaming palaces; for three hundred years the Tenth Rome had borne the mantle of the Succession, acting as a beacon of hope in a shadowy world of despair. Its name in the Ages of Day before the Long Night had been utterly forgotten. No one even knew if it had had a name. Now it was, and always had been, Rome, and had turned from the darkness. But now the Tenth Rome was burning. And the Emperor was missing.

Anaximander, the Lord Martial¹, paced the throne room in the Imperial Palace worriedly. Where was the Emperor? A man of his godlike powers could not have been overcome by the heathen horde that was besieging the city. Admittedly, the Voroithoi were more organised than the average heretical rabble – their ability to defeat the Roman field armies, place Rome itself under siege, and breach the first wall were testament to that. Rome hadn't faced such a serious threat since the Fall of the Ninth Rome a quarter of a millennium ago. But the Emperor was, well, the Emperor. The Vicegerent of Christ on Earth. Equal of the Apostles. The last Emperor to fall in battle, rather than Ascending as they reached old age, Valens IV, had done so centuries ago. But Anaximander was worried. The Emperor had led a sortie from the second wall in order to hearten the defence. He'd tried to dissuade him, begging to lead in his stead, but the Emperor was having none of it. He'd been

¹ Before everyone points out that it's spelled "Marshal", that's a deliberate choice of words and not me getting homophones confused.

adamant that it was his responsibility to lead his men.

“Anaximander, my friend,” he’d said. “What right do I have to expect obedience from my subjects if I will not share their perils at times such as these? I may rule by divine providence, but I govern by plebeian goodwill. I must set an example. Besides, these Vorothoi need to receive a bit of a kicking.” With that, he’d grinned at Anaximander, flipped down his gilded face mask, and strode to the head of the column.

That had been hours ago and still he had not returned. The men of the sortie were safely back inside the second wall, having reported good progress in disrupting the Vorothoi assault preparations, but of the Emperor, there was no sign. Reports were confused, but it seemed he had just vanished from under his men’s noses at the heaviest stage of the fighting. Anaximander knew the Emperor could shield himself from prying eyes if he willed it, but this disappearance was worrying. Anaximander hoped that the Emperor wasn’t going to do anything stupid. He knew his friend and how impetuous he could sometimes be.

The throne room doors boomed open. In tottered in his gilded wargear and purple cloak His Most Imperial Majesty, Constantine XVII, Pantocrator, Augustus, Emperor of the Romans, Vice-gerent of Christ on Earth, the True God Incarnate, Equal of the Apostles and Patriarch of the People; the most powerful man alive. And promptly fell flat on his face. As Anaximander rushed to his side, he could see the cloak was torn, the armour was rent and that the Emperor was badly wounded. He immediately called for servants. Questions raced through Anaximander’s mind.

“How had the Emperor made it all the way back to the palace in this state? How had no one seen him? Where were the surgeons?”

But, one thought stood above them all.

“How had this happened? What could have done this to the Emperor?”

And, even stronger than that, Anaximander felt a strange emotion: fear. Fear for his friend’s life. Fear for his city. Fear of whatever could have harmed his beloved Emperor so. The Heirs of Rome did not fear. They knew they were in the right and that knowledge gave them strength to rule, to fight, to win. But now Anaximander did fear. And he did not like it.

*

Outside the second wall, a patch of shadow swirled. It grinned, and the crenellations atop the wall seemed to give it teeth. Hundreds of teeth. It could feel its enemy was badly wounded. The shadows swirled again and, suddenly, those cast by the crenellations looked harmless once more.

*

Anaximander dreamed. He was exhausted. He’d stayed up well into the night at the Emperor’s bedside, until the Chirurgeon-Archbishop had assured him the Emperor would survive and had almost ordered him and his peers, the Lords Temporal and Spiritual, to leave and get some rest. He had recognised the doctor’s wisdom and been soothed by her assurances. He had been asleep almost as soon as his head touched the pillow. But still, he dreamed.

In his dream, a man-shaped patch of shadow stood in front of him. It reached out a hand and he heard, no felt, it speak:

“Come. I can show you a better world. Take my hand and all that you will desire will be yours.”

Visions flashed across Anaximander’s mind. He saw himself crowned Emperor. Leading an army. Crossing the Encircling Sea to reclaim the legendary Lost Lands for the Heirs of Rome. Slaughtering the heretics and the unbelievers. Uniting the peoples of Earth – the good, the bad, the forgotten – under one banner. The banner of Rome. Humanity undergoing a new Golden Age. He would be the most glorious ruler since before the Long Night. All he had to

do was reach out and... within him, a core of reason cried out:

“What was this apparition? How could it offer him such things?”

Anaximander stopped reaching. The thing’s voice had felt...wrong. He couldn’t describe it any more clearly than that. It had just felt evil. Besides, did he really want the responsibility of rule? The awful burden? In his heart of hearts, he knew Constantine was a much better ruler than he would ever be. What he wanted was for his friend to be well and for Rome to survive. He was a man of war, but he did not love war for its own sake. It was a regrettable necessity in a chaotic world, but he was not some bloodthirsty maniac to build a pile of skulls in the name of his own glory. Imperial history was littered with such men and women –Agrippina, Caligula, Phocas, Justinian II, Irene – all had come to be reviled and had perished at the hands of their own subjects and family. Rome had to fight to survive, but did Christ’s teachings not anathematise wanton violence? The fates of those who ignored this dictum exemplified its applicability. Anaximander spoke.

“No”.

The shadow withdrew its hand. It seemed to grow. A suggestion of great wings and teeth appeared. Anaximander found himself looking into the shadow’s eyes. Eyes that were blacker than the darkest catacombs of Rome. Eyes that seemed portals into a great sunless void. Eyes of Nothing.

“Who are you to defy me? I, who am older than time, older than the stars, older than all? You are to me as a grain of sand is to the loftiest pinnacle; as your tiny world is to the immensity of the Universe.”

Anaximander tried to blot out the voice. Here was surely a minion of Satan, if not the Deceiver himself. He made the sign of the cross. “Get thee behind me, Satan,” he shouted.

The shadow laughed. It seemed to grow further.

“Satan! You think I am he? Puny, superstitious mortal. You are so blinkered, so ignorant of the cosmos. I am far more than he.”

Anaximander grew angry at the shadow’s taunting. He felt an urge to strike back at it. Before he knew what was happening, he was running at the shadow. He felt a weight and looked down. A sword seemingly fashioned of pure light had appeared in his hand whilst an armour of diamond had clothed him. He struck at the shadow. It reared back, growing darker.

“Nay, you are valiant at the least. Your title is well-earned, Lord Martial. You may amuse me yet. I think I will let you live for a time. Your Emperor, however, may not fare so well. At least, he did not on our first encounter. He is almost mine.”

With that, the shadow faded away and Anaximander felt himself falling into an endless void.

Anaximander woke up. For a moment, he thought he saw the shadows at the end of his bed swirl. He rubbed his eyes and it was gone. Just shadows. He felt terrible, as if he’d barely slept, though the clock on the wall indicated it was nearly morning. He also seemed terribly anxious. And sweaty. He felt as if he had just fought a great battle. Why was he so worried? A single, insistent thought erupted from his subconscious. “The Emperor!” He could not remember how or why, but he knew that the Emperor was in mortal danger. He jumped out of the bed and raced through the palace corridors, nightgown flapping, to the Emperor’s personal chambers. He dreaded what he might find there. The guards stationed on the door only had time to look surprised as he thundered down the passageway and burst through to where his sovereign lay.

Constantine was where Anaximander had left him, lying asleep on the bed, but Anaximander could tell something was wrong. The Emperor was thrashing around on the bed, grimacing in

apparent pain. Even more disturbingly, all sound was deadened, whilst the shadows in the room seemed almost solid and...were moving. Anaximander wasn't sure if he was hallucinating, but he could swear there was a dark figure standing over the Emperor, drawing in shadow as the Emperor continued thrashing. It seemed to be getting more solid as Constantine's struggles grew weaker. Anaximander knew he had to do something quickly, or he was certain his friend would die. Suddenly, his dream came back to him. What had driven off the creature? It had seemed afraid of light. Or, at least, it seemed light could hurt it. If only the sword of light in his dream were real. Anaximander somehow doubted that the weak, flickering torchlight of the brands in sconces along the corridor would suffice. So he prayed.

As one of the Elect, the blessed ruling elite of Rome, Anaximander fully shared in the miraculous abilities of the chosen survivors of the Long Night. How these manifested themselves or were accessed varied from person to person. Some had the strength of Samson, others the healing abilities of Christ himself. Some could command their powers with a thought, for others, they could only be used in the greatest need, though, for these, their powers were often less narrow and much stronger. Anaximander always found, as befitted God-given powers, that prayer helped him channel his abilities. It provided the focus and clarity of thought he needed. But light was something new. As was common to many warriors, his abilities centred on boosting his own strength, speed and endurance. If anything, he had normally wished for the ability to reduce light, to hide himself and his troops, not for more illumination. But, it was said God aided the needful and Anaximander had never felt such need.

He prayed for light. He prayed for the light that he imagined had emanated from the Light of the World himself. He prayed for the light of the Sun of God. He prayed for the light that banished the primeval darkness and heralded

the Creation. And his prayers were answered. Anaximander felt a wall in his mind crumble and was flooded with pure joy. He opened his eyes and saw light. His entire being was shining radiantly, as a star in the darkness, as the oncoming dawn. The light was so bright, it should have blinded him, but he felt no pain, only a great peace. The lesser shadows in the corners of the room were banished, but the dark figure by the bed persisted. If Anaximander had doubted his eyes, this was proof that the figure was far more than the harmless figment of a distracted mind. It was no longer nebulous, but sharply-defined, yet it remained inscrutable. It seemed made of nothing; an abyssal void into which all things fell and were no more.

It turned towards him. He could feel its malice beating on him as the storm-wracked waves of the Encircling Sea beat relentlessly on the rocks of the shore. But he also felt its fear. He had guessed right – it did fear the light. He took a step towards it. It hissed with anger and pain, took a step back and faded into the wall. As soon as it had gone, the Emperor groaned and woke. The whole episode, from Anaximander rushing into the room to the figure disappearing, had taken barely a minute, yet to Anaximander it had felt a lifetime. As he lost the focus of his need, the light shining from him dimmed and failed. Guards rushed into the room, quickly followed by the Chirurgeon-Archbishop. She quickly examined the Emperor's recumbent form and seemed satisfied he had suffered no serious hurt.

"What happened?" she asked Anaximander.

"I...I'm not sure. There was a shadow...." he replied, before trailing off, still unsure what to make of all that had happened.

The Emperor spoke in a weak and hoarse voice. "I think I have some idea. I wrestled long in the realm of thought with the creature and learned something of its nature, as did my good Lord Martial here, if I am not mistaken."

Anaximander inclined his head. "Summon the

Senate. This is a matter that concerns the very survival of Rome; nay, of the world.”

“But, Sire, your wounds, the Vorothoi siege...?”
interjected the Chirurgon-Archbishop.

“They are of no consequence. I will heal and, if I am right, the Vorothoi are merely a tool of this being. I have spoken. Let those who can, rest. We will meet at the ninth hour and debate doom.”

Anaximander surveyed the faces in the room at this portentous pronouncement. Uncommonly, all showed fear. Fear of what the Emperor might reveal; fear of this tenebrous being; fear of the dark.

Nomad

Sam Ottewill-Soulsby

In autumn my brother is happy to see me. As the sun's rage abates I come to his farm, which was once that of our father, and I pick up my scythe and join him and his wives and my nieces and nephews and cousins and the hands on the harvest. He smiles as he hugs me. Our uncle the magician will raise a fire to thank the spirits for shadowing me. We work the long days with joy and smoke poppy in the nights. We raise great crops of blisters on our hands and aches in our bones and songs on our lips. The children will beg me for gifts from the city and stories from the summer. My brother will take mules to the market, and he'll want me there to carry a blade and look foreboding. He'll drink cider and get drunk safe in the knowledge that I'm watching the corral. Come harvest end there will be a dance and it shall be my turn to get outrageously drunk. I wouldn't tell his wives, but they know about his annual adventure and don't care much so long as he comes back bearing silver and not the pox. He's a good husband in his way and knows his land well. He loves it like he loves his wives and both regularly bear fruit.

The fruit is tested come winter. The sun vanishes and with them the smiles. The land goes grey and so does my welcome. I know the way of it. The food has been tallied and now it goes, the harvest a memory, the rock lizards no longer sleepy on the hills but hiding in their lairs. Another mouth is not to be welcomed. I know this, but every year I wait until the first comment from my brother before I return to the shield. I lay down the scythe and the poppy and strap my livelihood and life onto my pack staff. My brother will place silver in my hand and wish me a speedy departure. I take up my leather cap and lead my patient little mule back through the hills, over the paths I came from.

My father was good to his children. He took me to the city the first time on my twelfth winter. Perhaps he knew that was when I would

always arrive. While the land is dead, the city lives on in winter and you can feel the heat from twenty parasangs away. The griffin banners wave from the high, thick walls and a hundred fires challenge the night. My father gave two mules and good coin to enter me into the guild of tigers. Already I was familiar with recurved bow, made from the horn of the deer we hunt with it. I knew the spear from herding rock lizards. What the guild taught me was how to stand and move, how to march in rank and deploy, to create the dense block of spears with my comrades, or to loose fire over their heads. My father was good to his children. He gave me a trade, and most of all he gave me a shield, a thick thing of layered ox-hide with a bronze boss. It must have cost him another mule at the least.

I flee the cold, delving into the midst of the heat of the city, along with every other vagabond. The number of feet on the streets doubles, and then doubles again, raising the price of the corn of summer past further. People grow impatient and desperate. I make a living as a guard, hired by the children of the flame to protect their winter gardens. Although I must stand outside the gate and am forbidden to enter, or even to turn, I can hear the fountains and feel the heat of the glasshouses on my back. I have an understanding with a clerk at one of the counting houses and live in his quarters. His wit is perhaps defter than his embrace, but both are welcome. Whether he has other companions when I am not in the city I do not know and will not ask. I am a bird that moves with the sun and it is not my place to make demands of the trees. But we have a little money saved, for a day which may not happen, when I take root.

After the bleak months there is always an initial blaze from the heavens that drives those who tend the gardens unhinged with despair. As the ornamental rivers dry up, so does my employment and the silver I bring my clerk reduces to a trickle. Spring burns and it is time for the muster. My brother cuts the weeds

from his fields. I cut the hair from my head. I am completely shorn when I kiss my clerk. He may be mine again come winter. Then I strap my shield and bow to the pack-staff, pick up my spear and lead my mule to the Assembly fields. There the King's captains wait. I press my seal into the clay of the recruitment tablet and am assigned to my company.

We drill for practice and sport for the King's amusement under the stone reliefs of heroes in the past doing likewise. The gardens are at their most beautiful just after we are gone, or so I am told, for this is not my city come summer. But I see the early figs begin to grow and hear the love cries of the black storks, who have tired of the warmer lands of the north and have come south to engage in trysts along the canals of the King.

The city cannot sustain storks and soldiers both, so we march, locked in step under our flags, down the Tiger Way, past the myrtle green glazed bricks with their frozen snarling cats and through the Gate of War, made of thick cedar, while crowds cheer. Out of the city, we follow the military roads, in whatever direction the King sees fit, although it scarcely matters. He goes to fight his neighbours who are alike in all but name, marshalling out of their cities at the same time. They use the same roads.

We march through forests of oak and wild almond. We eat our bread and drink our date wine and feast upon the occasional unfortunate onager. We avoid drinking from the streams, for the water is bad and makes us gut sick. At night we hear the sniggers of hyena. Worse is the silence of rock lizard. The ground is hilly, verging on mountainous to the south, but roads find the passes. Only once have we climbed high in the peaks. There it was cold even in summer and I saw a dragon trapped in the rocks.

We steal sheep and sack towns that will not give us tribute. Eventually we meet another army. Our captains trade compliments and insults with those of the other side. The

magicians pour herbs on the flames to call the spirits to them. Champions dance and duel to the applause of the watching soldiers. Then the horns announce our advance and we lock spears like fallow deer. Sometimes we lose and must retreat down the pass in order, leaving our tents to be plundered. More often we win and it is them who must flee and we who overrun their baggage.

So far I have been lucky in battle, may the spirits keep it so. I pretend to my brother's children that my scars are those of war, but most of my wounds are not so honourable. I broke my nose in a sparring match and cut my hands slicing pomegranates. I do my duty and I earn my bread and I fall back when my fellows do so.

Whatever our fortunes, we always return in triumph to the city come summer's end. We parade through the Gate of Glory, down the Griffin Way, our King resplendent in tiara, carried on his scythed war chariot, artfully battered like his soldiers from the field for military authenticity. We get our final silver before the crowds and are dismissed. I have one last drink with my comrades, thankful in the colder air that our hair is returned to warm us.

And then I must leave the city, for it is autumn and my brother will be happy to see me.

Cephalopocalypse (a short story about the end of the world)

Connor Willmington-Holmes

Credit: Lilian Halstead

You wake up one morning to discover that flying squids with laser eyes have taken over the world. The air is hot, thick with the smoke of a thousand razed cities. They came from the sea, they came from the skies. There was no mercy, no respite.

Around you the room is dark, lit but dimly by a flickering orange glow: "Sunrise at last," you mutter. This day had been long coming. To your left you hear mild buzzing, pleasing to the ear for its constancy. Andrea had been at the radio whilst you slept, listening for them on longwave.

The desk lies cluttered with wires and stained coffee mugs. Static pours from the headset whilst you flick the frequency around. 50MHz, 45MHz, 40MHz, nothing. But you weren't expecting anything. Any submarine crews still alive are unlikely to be broadcasting. You tune back to 500kHz, one of the only signal bands everyone seems to be on. You don't read morse, but the machine keeps rolling it out.

..... / /

Moving up to domestic bands you hone in on a few music stations still running.

Though already distant, the music fizzes and begins to crackle. You inspect the transistor array in the hope of finding a simple short-circuit to be fixed, but nothing looks obvious. Teuthology was always your strong suit, not electricals. The two don't usually mix well either. You wrestle with the VFO until it returns to 500kHz.

..... / /
..... / /

Steam rises from one of the mugs, "Andrea?"

you ask absently. A muffled response comes from the floor below. "Signal's foggy, wanna take a look?" Another dull sound of acknowledgement seeps up through the floorboards. The lambent orange haze insists on lighting the room through the shutters. After ambling to the window you peer out on the streets below.

The city has emptied, this close to the shore most people fled as the rumors became credible. Video reports weren't believed at first. You were ridiculed, rejected. "And here you have it ladies and gentlemen, a respected *scientist* betting their reputation on an army of *flying squid*! You heard it here first!" But you bear them no resentment, no bitterness. You only hope the reporters, the *fools*, are safe. Hidden, where lasers cannot find them. But you know a terrible truth: There is no squidproofing.

Governments had declared war on the Squid Nation over 14 months ago. They had "sured up" the Thames flood barrier, they had "prepared" Manhattan. But nothing could stop the waves. Even if it could, even if they raised the continents ten miles higher, no walls could stop the aerial corps.

Footsteps approach from the stairs, each creaking and swaying beneath the gaunt shadow of your comrade. Andrea nods to you, acknowledging your presence in the upper room of the apartments you'd all come to share. You don't notice, you don't much care. Though you think to yourself, that perhaps you should. What more is this struggle, this endless battle against the octogarchy, than a fight to preserve that which makes you human? But such questions are not yours to solve, you think.

A new dawn lies somewhere far beyond this smouldering city, this time. It will be for some other to find such answers. In this time, you must keep that chance alive.

You head downstairs, confident that Andrea can best operate the radio. Hushed voices from the

map room drift past your right ear as you pass the door. You hear cities and numbers. You hear silences. Heading downstairs again you cross the street. The local fishmonger doesn't mind you using his shop, he probably isn't aware of it. He'd left four weeks ago, to 'visit family' in Berlin.

It provides all the required facilities for your work – knives, tables, sinks – plus a few you provided yourself, notably the microscope. Dismissing the morning's pleasantries with your assistant, you set to work. Some features of the squid are still a mystery to you. Their jet propulsion seems vastly superior to classical winged flight. 'Coupled with glider membranes they're capable of sustained flight over long distance', you scrawl on a 'borrowed' notebook.

The dim haze of light fades from your bench, you look up idly to the skylight, only to see dappled orange scratches cross the cover. Dropping your tools, you rush to the door. "Jenny, fetch the camera." Your assistant obliges, focusing intently on the drifting scout patrol just visible through the morning's dust cover. All data on them will be valuable. The war you are preparing for cannot be won in the open field, the squid have made this clear enough. Your proposal is to destroy them from the inside, some engineered disease.

You suppose the small jet chambers just above the gliding membranes provide a constant air circulation to some kind of lungs, to allow stationary activity without hypoxia. However, you are yet to document living squid behaving as such: keen to confirm these suspicions you instruct Jenny to the roof. If this is the case, even a mild muscle relaxer – if localised – could knock out vital systems. Such a weapon could prove effective, if it survives first contact with the enemy. But then, no plan ever does.

They have shattered every military, and each passing scout could well be the vanguard of an invasion. The scouts' shadows drift away,

perhaps twenty in all. Humid and febrile, the drab light returns.

Their lasers perplex you. That a cephalopod could develop such fine structures as to generate quantum wells is a prospect beyond your feeble concept of terror. It suggests to you something beyond evolution, even with all its complexity. It suggests intelligence enough to manufacture weapons, to arm a militia of airborne decimators, to keep tight the stranglehold on your ill-prepared terranean world.

Perhaps there is hope, you jibe to yourself. You've heard stories of whole Mediterranean islands kept safe of squid, where the local stray cat populous stood firm at humanities side. Trinidad too had been saved by the Ocelot armada. Yet, without backup it faced annihilation at the hands of guerrilla combat octopodes, bred for silently navigating mangroves and forest canopies from which they strike.

Though easily the coldest room in your tin-can fortress, the fishmonger's shop still draws sweat in the mid-day blaze. You break from work, making final notes before lunch when a low murmur peaks your attention. You've heard nothing like it. The drone grows slowly in pitch and volume, until concerned by its possible implications you begin to hunt down the source. The plumbing seems to rattle with this odd dirge, but only transiently as the frequency changes. The sound grows still, into some distant moan.

You begin to walk back to the apartments when as you step outside, the clamour's source becomes all too clear. You turn, feeling the familiar blistering heat fade from your skin as the now-pale sunlight retreats far behind nearing clouds. They are beating, humming together like reeds passed quickly over hot air. As the clouds draw nearer you see waves of movement, contracting and expanding along the median of each slowly resolving swarm.

The first wave of an ordinarily halcyon sea breaks hard against the waterfront, its shockwave disturbs the settled rubble-dust smothering every surface of the city. From your little street cut into the hillside above the bay, you see the pier torn from its standings.

The swarms are upon you now, visible not as individuals but as the constant twitching of some beast, not wanting for size. Sunlight still peeks through the scarce gaps in its teeth, granting false hope to the tawny scene below.

You do not bother to run, you do not turn to see your companions' horror. You merely stare at the deep red flashes in the town below, the tumbling rock and burning wood. The squid seem to converge their focus, you notice, as beams from across the entire width of the crooning horde centre on a single target.

Ground troops marching up from the waves begin assailing the city's tidal barriers with ease. Piles of flexing claw and shell amass at the water's edge, eventually dwarfing the walls and spilling over onto the promenade beyond.

Seawater glints on their claws, a ramshackle militia of crab advances landwards. They clamber over rubble, ceaseless, simply an extension of the tide which bore them. Some accost satellite dishes, car doors and power cables, passing them back to the water in great marching columns of crustaceans, ant like in their mute servitude. What technology these seabound materials will serve is beyond your reckoning. What cities they will serve, even more so.

You cannot hate them, though you muse that perhaps you simply do not understand them. How can you hate a force of nature? Defenders of a planet long forlorn by its previous 'masters', they come not as conquerors, but as exterminators. The world has belonged to *them* far longer than humanity has tied down the land with fences and flags. Whatever mind instructs this torrent, be it a single brain or emergent

from many, weeps for the loss of a single species but rejoices at the saving of the many. The emancipation of the Earth comes at the hands of the Sea, and the crimes of the Land have not been forgotten.

The sunlight, bright and warm, returns to your senses for a moment. You feel beyond it your not-so-distant star, ambivalent to the rise and fall of empires. The time of human kind is so dearly over. The squid have come. The sunlight dissipates. A moment later the warmth returns, but beyond this there is no star, only the blind rage of a hundred thousand eyes.

Breakfast at the House on the Hill

Danielle Saunders

“Wine? For breakfast? Really?”

“Well,” said Heather, dumping the armful of bottles on the table, “*You* told me to scout out the dining room, knowing that the only way there was through that room with the fallen-in floor. With the wine cellar beneath it. And it was still full of the bodies of those Things that climbed down after Missy, and then the bottles starting talking to me, and now they’re in the kitchen I think they’re happy.”

Madame Zostra began to level a stare, but then reconsidered. Their collective bars for Weird had been raised significantly over the night.

“I mean, one of them wanted me to take it to the pentagram chamber, but I decided that might not be the *best* idea...”

Flash shambled in, without speaking, and collapsed onto a chair. The chair collapsed onto the floor. He didn’t move.

“... Which gave me the idea they might, um, not be wine anyway! So no, not for breakfast, and we should probably lock them in the first lockable thing we find.”

A remarkably clean stack of frying pans wandered into the room and set themselves on the counter, revealing Missy underneath.

“Also, I’m not trying to get to the dining room again.”

Dawn was breaking over the house. Where hours before vicious winds had shrieked around garden, graveyard and inexplicable tower, now sunlight played and birds sang, although none of them came too close. And while the Things had been banished and the treacherous Professor’s corpse lay slumped in the library, his sometime-friends sought breakfast.

“Missy, that’s great!” said Zostra, happy to turn away from Heather, whose sanity had clearly taken a knock in the night. “I thought it was strange there were no pans in this kitchen. Had they been thrown into the junk room?”

“No,” muttered Flash, “I know exactly what’s in the junk room. There isn’t much else to do when you’re there for *three hours*.”

“They were in the mud,” said Missy.

“Mud.”

“You remember how that groundskeeper appeared and then disappeared and then we found a full suit of armour in the mud he left?”

“You found frying pans in the mud.”

“Frying pans *and* this pack of bacon. It goes off tomorrow, he’d probably want us to have it.”

“But they’re so clean!” Zostra picked up the largest pan, running her finger around the edge.”

“Non-stick?” suggested Heather, grinning slightly manically.

“Well,” said Zostra, deciding for the umpteenth time in the last ten hours that some things were better not questioned, “We have pans, we have bacon, I can’t get the stove here to work but we can always head down to the furnace room and hope for the best, we have *something* in bottles *which we will not be opening*,” – to Missy as she reached up for the nearest – “I suppose all we really need are eggs, and we’ll be set!” She gave a slightly maniacal laugh herself.

“I saw a research laboratory on the way back from the junk room.”

“No, Flash.”

Less than an hour and only a few terrified screams later, the four returned to the kitchen with full plates, Flash still clad in armour for cooking purposes. They couldn’t find any cutlery that wasn’t either suspiciously stained

or a blood dagger, but that didn't matter. Each silently stared into their own nothingness as they ate.