

Time-Traveller Battles Alchemist

TTBA Volume x Issue y+1



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Lent 2015

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Chairbeing's Address

CUSFS,

Welcome back to Cambridge!¹ Great fun was had last term, ending as it did with the piling of a pool table 36 inches deep in board games, only some of which involved passive-aggressive castle-building. And much more is to come in Lent, whether it's our film nights, the gradual setting up of an orange scarf colony in the Pembroke NCR during our discussion meetings, or still more chainwriting, possibly with fewer confusing animals this time.³

It was, of course, wonderful to meet so many new people last term. Just a few things for everyone⁵ before I leave you to some well-deserved procrastination:

1: For those of you whose first TTBA this is: enjoy!

2: For those of you whose first TTBA it isn't, you're allowed to enjoy it too.

3: If you go down to Grantchester tonight, nothing will happen and you'll probably get very cold. I just wanted to clarify that.

So!
Science-fiction?

Danielle Saunders⁶

CUSFS Chairbeing 2014-5

¹ You, the reader, may or may not be back in Cambridge² but CUSFS as an abstract entity certainly is.

² Or might have lain underground here for centuries, just waiting for this issue of TTBA.

Editorial

Ahoy, CUSFS! Welcome to what I am retrospectively declaring to be the TTBA Of All Of The Footnotes. There are thirty-six of them in here, courtesy of Mr Hennell James, Ms Binney, our Illustrious Chairbeing, and the collected authors of the chainwriting story which bore the working title, "the one with the anteater". Thanks for that, folks. Tholks.

As well as all of the footnotes, which I am wary of making too big a deal out of given that I have some understanding of how CUSFS thinks and am also hoping to get another issue out this year, we have some wonderfully surreal chainwriting, overlapping with several stories wherein there is Crime, always exciting. No direct take-offs of Time Heist, but it turns out futuristic technology is generally really useful when planning something not completely legal.

(The Editor is exercising their right to be facetious and does not actually encourage or condone Crime in any shape or form.)

Finally, whilst it saddens me that there is no poetry section this time around, we seem to have acquired a DIY section instead, so if anyone feels like genetically engineering a dragon or baking a planet, go right ahead, the instructions are within, and do let me know how it goes! Happy term, everyone!

Isobel Sands

TTBA Editor

³ Not meant as discouragement. Always more confusing animals. The Editor loves them.⁴

⁴ The Editor also enjoys people putting footnotes where she's not expecting them.

⁵ And because I'm not quite done with this pun yet.

⁶ CB4 3AA

Elendi's Last Theorem

Chainwriting: Sarah Binney, Jake Choules, Margaret Young, Samuel Cook, Martin Vella, Isa Bonachera-Martin, Harley Jones, James Gard, Lizzie Colwill, Ben Dobson, Anonymous

"Ambassador Attano Maconda of the Serkahn!"

I stepped through the vast mahogany doors into the Great Hall. Indigo light streamed from hovering orbs suspended between great columns of Drakh marble and the air was thick with the smell of Ok incense and electricity. From high above loomed statues of Okroski heroes, the great magicians and mechanists and quantum warlocks of centuries gone by, scrutinising the mortal world with disapproval. Far below, on the gleaming marble floor, clustered Okroski dignitaries from every territory and of every kind, clutching platinum goblets, clad in extravagant gowns, all staring directly at me.

I started down the stairs with what I hoped was dignified poise. As I passed through the crowd mutters followed me like a flock of carrion. "Serk scum." "Tail between his legs." "Pitiful." "Come to lick the Empress' boot." I hoped my face betrayed none of my shame. They were right, of course.

Five years previously the Empress-Exponential of the Learned and Wise Principalities of Okrosk, Katherine the Symmetric, laid claim to the discovery of a particular mathematical method for the divination of solutions to chaotic systems. Simultaneously a Serk mathematician of reasonable note had published a paper which to all intents and purposes presented identical findings. As such, to defend the Empress' honour, Okrosk, the Electric Empire, noble and just, declared war on the Serkahn. We lost.

But it didn't matter. I intended to ensure that by the end of that evening the Empress would be dead.

The social rejection to which the assembled company were subjecting me was a blessing. Slouching, unobserved, against a marble column, I pressed onto it a coin-sized patch of electronics. Within a couple of seconds, its polystable veneer had taken on the appearance of the underlying stone – not very well, but enough to conceal from a casual observer the intricate weaving of its high-power nanoscale antennae.

A dozen or so more slouches – artfully interspersed with the eating of canapés and half-hearted attempts at light conversation – and the first stage of my work was complete. I took a moment to thank Greshpa that the Empress had chosen to hold this soirée in the Hall. Every other room in the Orthoplex was instrumented floor to ceiling: if I had tried to stick anything even slightly suspicious on the walls, then the walls themselves would have raised the alarm. The Hall, however, was the height of tradition: not a cubic centimetre of smartstone to be seen. Tradition had always been the downfall of Okrosk, and so it would remain tonight.

But graciousness to Greshpa would only get me so far: the next phase of my plan still remained. This part was rather harder. I worked myself up by hobnobbing with successively more superior personages, until eventually I found myself in the presence of the Empress herself. Of course, all I was expected to do was to lick her boot, as it were, and lick it I did, but this was contact enough for my purposes.

The Serkahn had largely moved past the base need to humiliate our enemies, it serves no purpose to us. That didn't stop the bitter shame that welled up in my chest as my tongue scraped across the slick polished surface of the Empress' boot. The shame was tempered by the knowledge that the biological technomages of our most secret military research group had coated the surface of my tongue with nanoscale biomachines. Even as I stood from the unforgiving marble floor to derisive laughter,

these triumphs of Serkhan science would be crawling along the surface towards their ultimate goal.

The required debasement completed, the higher ranking Okroski diplomats seemed very happy to pretend that I no longer existed. This suited my purposes perfectly. I slunk off to a shadow between two of the pillars, wrinkling my nose at the stench of the incense billowing from above. It was all far more primitive and unnecessary than the smooth alloys and perfectly filtered atmosphere of the Serkahn court. Years of diplomatic visits and residencies had not cured me of my distaste for the Okroski decadance.

I slouched against the pillar, wishing for a drink of cool, clear water to wash the taste of shame from my mouth. But there was naught but their cloying liquor. Anyway, to drink anything ran the risk of leaving behind the precious biomachinery filling my mouth.

The evening was becoming late when I was joined at my lonely pillar by a very unexpected individual.

“Greshpa’s blessings be upon you, Maconda.”

The person who had materialised next to me, from their costume, appeared to be Okrosk’s Chancellor-Ordinal, Potemkin the Hyberbolic. However, hearing such a person invoke the name of Greshpa was so improbable that even the most pedantic Serk mathemagician would have declared it impossible. The figure reached up to its neck and pressed a portion of skin indistinguishable from the rest of its azure countenance. “Potemkin’s” face flickered and was replaced by that of Elendi Romenda, an old acquaintance-cum-adversary of mine from our younger days when we did our service in the Serk military.

I had moved on into the diplomatic service. Elendi had... well, had chosen a different path, chiefly specialising in wet work and rather spectacularly explosive escapades. No one had ever worked out who had been responsible for the assassination of the renowned Irkutian

mathemagician, Perelmondru the Asymptotic, inventor of the Fractal Maze, a concept that now formed the basis of physical security technology across the entire continent and behind a particularly fiendish version of which he lived; and the subsequent explosive annihilation of his entire compound and mysterious disappearance of all his work, but the smart money was on Elendi.

Oh, and then she’d started a civil war among the Serkahn, a thing unheard of for millennia. Which she’d lost and, so had been widely reported, died in. That was the chief reason we’d lost the recent war against Okrosk – we were still recovering from Elendi’s insurrection. Judging by the evidence of my eyes, Elendi was, however, very much alive and possessed of some very nifty gadgets, if her chameleonic technology was anything to go by. If she was somehow here, it seemed likely that things were about to become a whole lot more... interesting.

“It won’t work, you know.” Lost in my train of thought, I hadn’t noticed Elendi pull closer and begin whispering into my ear.

“It’s an original idea, using nano-scale biomachines to paint her many delightful organs with a foreign agent, forcing her body’s immune system to turn on her. Quite brutal actually, especially for the Serk court, but as I said it won’t work.”

“Why, what have you done Elendi?” I hissed back under my breath, turning on her, now oblivious in panic to everything around me but her. “Tell me in Greshpa’s name!”

Elendi, though, was smiling at me with that mischievous grin that she always wore whenever she had best me in the army.

“Well, because I slipped her counter-acting bio agents, of course.”

Great infinities, I hated it when she did that, chiding me with that sickly sweet patronising voice, as if every fool, drunkard and spice head in Serkahn knew what I did not. If what she

was saying was true, then months of planning, research and the loss of two agents retrieving the Empress' DNA markers were all for nothing.

"The Serk Court has been wasting its time with bio terrorism and has missed the bigger picture anyway," she continued. "The Scholar-Eunuchs of the Ninth Great Okrosk Bureaucracy and the Okrosk Court are at each other throats and have been for years! All it would take, say, would be for the Vice Lord of the Bureaucracy to rush in here with a multi-phase vaporisation bomb strapped to his chest and the Okroski would descend into civil war."

Then suddenly as if on cue, everyone by the entrance to the hall screamed in terror. Then there was an explosion.

I ran as fast as I could out of the hall among the chaos around me. The explosion had damaged a couple of important pillars and the building started to collapse. Pieces of ornamentation and columns were falling right behind me, and cracks started to appear on the floor and walls. When I reached the exit I thought for a minute that Elendi didn't make it, but she was following me closely the entire time.

It seemed like a piece of rubble fell over Elendi's right arm. Elendi was covered in blood and was holding her injured arm. She also had that mischievous grin in her face. I knew that she loved it all. The killing, the pain, the chaos.

I continued to run until I reached a narrow alley where we could hide, and catch our breath. I grabbed Elendi and pushed her against the wall with all my energy and anger.

"Why? Why did you do that? You completely blew up the plan! The target was the Empress, there was no need for all this chaos and unnecessary attention!" I pressed her broken arm as hard as I could, I wanted to hurt her, but she didn't stop looking into my eyes with that relaxed and self-satisfied look in her face.

"We need the Empress alive...for now," she responded.

"Why? What is going on?" I had the sudden realization that Elendi lied to me. I had a feeling that she was not planning for the Okroski to start a civil war, and that everything, including her failed insurrection in Serkahn, was part of a much larger plan.

"I am sorry," she whispered.

"Sorry for what?" I responded.

Suddenly I felt an injection in my neck and started to feel dizzy. I started to faint and someone grabbed me and drop me on the floor gently. I could not move but I still could see some blurry shapes in front of me and hear voices. I saw Elendi in front of me and a second figure that I couldn't identify.

"What should be do with him now?" I heard. That voice was familiar, I heard it before, but it couldn't be...the Empress? As the drug dragged me further into unconsciousness I heard the guards coming towards me; their arms lifted me, and I blacked out.

I awoke. They had put me in a sealed containment capsule and would no doubt be on their way to question me when they saw that I was conscious again. Naturally, I had been trained in the best means of escape from such imprisonment; but Elendi would surely have put something into place to prevent my egress...

Yes, she had.

When she arrived a few moments later she saw the burns on my arms and her mouth twisted into a wry smile.

"Well, it was worth a try," I said, "It can hardly get any worse for me from here."

When her smile widened I knew I was in trouble. The guards by whom she was accompanied secured my limbs and led me to an interview room. There was no need for the shackles, really; it was another attempt at humiliation, and there was no hope of my

escaping at this point. No more, though, was there a need for me to mimic humility; and so I walked with pride to be interrogated. Upon arrival into the interview room I was shocked to see that the Empress herself was to question me.

“Ambassador,” she greeted me, with the formal slight bow.

“Highness,” I replied, bowing to the floor as was required. We seated ourselves at the desk, and, having chained me to my seat, the guards were dismissed.

This bow was the final straw. Not only was I in torturous physical pain, but now my beliefs were being sacrificed. All I stood for was lost in that crippled bow and in that whimpered “Highness”. I sat, in silence.

“Elendi tells me that you were once a great warrior. An outstanding missionary – is that correct?”

I stayed silent. I would never give in to this witch. She looked me up and down in my scorched nakedness and shackles. I hoped I was offending her a little more with my overweight figure. I even let out a malicious fart of vicious intent and subtly blew it her way with my dry lips. This was the only counter attack I had the strength to muster. But my goodness was that an offensive odour or what!

“Gosh you stink,” she moaned. “The whole room smells just with you in it! It’s quite obvious why you people are kept separate from the rest of us. Did you just expel a gust from your rectum?!”

Again she taunted me with this meaningless interrogation. I would not give in to questioning. If there was one person in this universe I would not discuss farts with, it was her. She was not worthy of even that in my eyes.

“You are the one who licked my boot, yes?”

She spoke as if she knew she was better than me. Like it was carved in her bones or flowing through her veins... or climbing up her boot.

“Yes, Highness.” The chains made any sort of movement difficult, but I hoped my stillness would be taken for an aloof lack of concern.

“You would debase yourself like that moments before your plan came to such explosive fruition? My word, I know the Serks are short of clever people right now, what with the war, but I didn’t expect them to pick someone both stupid *and* spineless!” She sat back, smirking, no doubt waiting for me to attempt something foolish to defend my honour, the abject failure of which would, of course, only emphasise her superiority over me.

“Highness,” I began, feeling the cold weight of the shackles against my burns – Greshpa, but these Okroski were living in the Slow Ages! Shackles! In an empire whose technomancers were responsible for some of the most staggering scientific advances this side of hyperluminous travel! – “I’m not sure what gives you the impression that I, let alone the Serkhan as a political entity, was responsible for that little display just now, but—“

“No indeed,” she broke in. “I’m sure you did stretch your Serk ingenuity to the limits trying to cover up your part in it. You were clever enough to fool my investigators, but then, we too lost some of our finest minds in the war. You were not, however, clever enough to fool *me*.”

Ah. That did not bode well. If the Empress Herself had ‘discovered’ my part in it – and if she had, Elendi’s skills at deception must border on the superhuman. I would have to congratulate her if I saw her again – any attempt to deny it would be tantamount to a slight on the Empress’ honour. And a slight on the Empress’ honour was why there had been a war in the first place. I drew in a deep breath.

“Very well, Your Highness, let us cease to play games here. You know as well as I do that, if I managed to persuade one of your closest

advisors,” – *had* it been the Vice Lord of the Bureaucracy, or had that been Elendi’s idea of a joke? Greshpa’s wits, how was I supposed to own up to a crime I knew nothing about? – “to transport a bomb into your presence, I have, to put it mildly, some talent for espionage. I also, as you yourself have so kindly pointed out, have the spinal capabilities of a squashed slug, and the honour of a particularly treacherous gnat. I’m very fond of being alive and in minimal pain. You’re very fond of the downfall of your enemies. I think we can come to some arrangement.”

Her expression became snootier still. “My! If the Serks had any dignity, your mere existence would annihilate it. And yet they present you as a diplomat! Your talent for persuasion is evident, but where is the *logic*? The elegance? Even as a missionary, there’s not a wave of philosophy in you. You tarnish this universe. You are nothing but a sophist!” Her voice became higher. Could it be...? Yes. This was genuine emotion. The Empress felt angry. A bona fide weakness, noted.

Neither of us could break eye contact. I kept my face blank. The Empress’ insults didn’t deserve my response, and after ten seconds or so, she went on.

“But no. You knew you wouldn’t kill me. This was propaganda. Elendi explained your fancies of a civil war. It is a wishful theory. But thanks to your stupidity, we’re at war with you. How *unfortunate*.”

What’s your plan, Elendi? I gave the Empress my least sincere smile. “All the more use you have for a miserable Serk sophist.”

Her face darkened. She lifted her left fourth finger from the larvikite table. I bent double in pain as my guts contorted and my chest burned. My hands pushed against my chair and my chains dug into my wrists and waist. I clenched my face.

The Empress’ voice resonated in my skull. *I am the Symmetric and the Exponential. I speak to*

light and motion. I know the shape of time and the weakness of matter. I divine knowledge from the causal membranes. I order chaos and smash order.

Then it ceased.

I looked up at the Empress.

Katherine the Symmetric gazed back.

“The flatfish outrank you. All my advisors would sacrifice their lives to expunge a spy. But since you are here, there is no need.” Her eyes were ice, and mine felt cold. “Technomancer-Transfinite Leoran the Polycyclic designed your seat. You don’t know its power. Who are the Serk spies?”

“I don’t know.”

My diaphragm clenched. Katherine the Symmetric watched me. My extremities started tingling. I felt like panicking. I started jerking my limbs, but they were restrained by the shackles. I tried to inhale. My heartbeat accelerated. My pulse thumped all over my body. I tried to swallow air and blood dripped onto my tongue.

And then I could breathe again. I was relieved: this torture wasn’t as bad as the last. Then my limbs screamed.

Who are they?

“I don’t know!”

Katherine the Symmetric stared at me. My agony clasped me. My shackles were bloodied. She lifted another finger, and pain burst out under my eyeballs.

“Greshpa help me! Elendi knows!”

Katherine the Symmetric smirked a little laugh. “You know nothing.” The eye pain stopped. “He’s yours now.” Then, as if to herself, “I will miss my advisors.”

Somebody freed me from the chair. “Up you get.” Elendi! I stood up, and fell down. “Whoa! What happened to your military mettle? Can’t even stand a bit of pain?”

Two guards picked me up and carried me out. I couldn’t see through my bloodied eyes.

“Obliquity cycles, Maconda. Serkhouru and I cracked them. It’s more than you deserve to know after that treason back there.” Then she whispered, “An *invasion* is coming.”

But then Katherine the Symmetric’s face suddenly *twisted* under her cardiosahedron buckyhorospherelet of supreme office, revealing a tuberous nose, which, even neglecting warts, had no inkling even of mirror symmetry.

Then Elendi knew that Chi-Branch’s n-top secret multiphase-action ergoscanner-sneaky femtobot filibustiers had found their mark. Hypersonically propagating, complex-analytically cushioned-landing, temporarily wall-infiltrating by the energy signature self-normalizing imperceptibles ensured by what would eventually be known as *Perelmondru-Grosstenthiek-Elendi Fractal-Topos Maze-Monodromatic*. From whence specific biotarget tracking (for the first Serk agent lost had been taken by Elendi’s n-fold secret police). All lovingly spearfronted with admixture of antisymmetrizer zeptowarheads and mitochondrion-splicing yocto-irreversibilizer-resonance-field generators. The antisymmetrizers had annihilated Katherine’s most prized possession – her hidden facial symmetrizer – thus breaking her sociopath’s mask of perfection, publicly exposing her web of lies as well as her hideous, bulbous, pasty, pickled, pox-ridden visage. Elendi smiled as she quietly backed away, smiled from knowing that every cell in the Symmetry-Broken Ex-Empress’s body would annihilate any facemask generator, and project the face’s form through any wrapping material. Not to mention dissolving any kind of archaic

make-up into a range of agonizing - and entirely transparent – surfactants.

Within three heartbeats, seventeen of the Okroski topoligarchs had started pointing and hooting. That was the precise point at which the secondmost-cohomologically-privileged thereamong placed an algebraic-curve stiletto through the eye of the Ex-and-Tor-supreme Apex of their order. First blood.

For Elendi’s *own* ideas about starting a civil war were on an incomprehensibly higher hyperplane than poor static linear unwitting patsy Maconda’s.

By nightfall, the whole imperiomathemagical continent was in secessionary turmoil, with survival probability distributed Ghoti. The cream and flower of Okrosk’s Court mathemagicians had already ‘cancelled’ each other out. Bruised and crownless, Katherine sobbed unrecognized amidst the ruins of a lowly unskilled-labour Silitec plant. She knew that it was over.

Elendi’s Last Theorem – Extras

Alternative Title Suggestions:

Beauty is Only Skin Deep
When Mathmos Go Mad
Chaos Spy-ery

“Well THAT HAPPENED. For the record, I have two words and they are ‘cardiosahedron buckyhorospherelet’.” - *Sarah*

“Whose side are we on now?” - *Samuel*

The Editor has now had enough of: The wiggly red lines Word uses to signify its displeasure with non-standard words in general, and this chain in particular. There is a kind of glory in the sheer density of them, which I suspect is what several writers were going for. As soon as mathemagicians were mentioned I thought something like this might happen, but expectations were mightily exceeded.

5 Things You Hope Won't Happen at Work Today (Number 4 Will Make You Laugh!)

Chainwriting: Jovan Powar, Alex Guttenplan, Jess Stritch, Andrew Conway, Anna Peel, Anonymous, Isobel Roberts, Samuel Cook, Aislinn McDonagh, Nakul Khanna, Ed Heaney, Danielle Saunders

The morning phosphorescence clung wet and heavy to the air on Theodore's last day. He shrugged off his raincoat, hung it on the stand with the other clerks' things, pulled out his chair, and sat, staring blankly into space for slightly longer than usual.

"I have tried my best to form a liking for the work," he had written to his father, "but am quite sure that I shall never get on in this kind of occupation."

He had made his decision three weeks earlier, but had lingered, optimistic that something would change his mind. It was enough that the son of Anthony Sterling had inherited none of his father's magical ability, Theodore hoped to spare his father the embarrassment of a son unable to find a career at twenty-three.

At the behest of Mr Sterling, Mr Atticus Morgan had agreed to take on young, inexperienced Theodore as a clerk in the London offices of The Morgan and Archer Stamp Company. It was a highly respectable enterprise, which had for the last twenty years produced the most beautiful, and more importantly, most secure, enchanted stamps in Britain.

Theodore gazed over stacks of invoices at the entrance hall. In two hours Mr Morgan would erupt from those great oak doors, the very portrait of a generous spirit. "Theo, my dear boy, how are you this morning?" he would cheerily pipe, as he did every morning, and Theodore would nod, smile, and hand his patron a letter of resignation.

As Theodore reached for the first invoice in a large stack- to Carnacki-Lucas, for thirty guineas' worth of tamper-proofing stamps- the doors swung open. He noticed the surprised

face of Atkins the commissioner, who had not stirred from his seat, shortly before he noticed the four extremely large policemen coming through the doorway.

The wall of blue serge tunics parted to reveal a woman who barely came up to the policemen's elbows, but who somehow didn't actually seem small next to them. She seemed too young to need the ornate walking stick she was holding, until Theodore realised that "staff" was probably a more appropriate description. As one, the other clerks looked up, a strange light appeared in their eyes, and they leapt over their desks and rushed at the policemen.

Theodore's dedication to The Morgan and Archer Stamp Company had never extended to charging a truncheon-wielding man twice his size armed only with a letter opener. As he dived under his desk, he heard a female voice shout a word that his abortive magical education had taught him to recognise as Enochian- though he could no more have translated or repeated it than he could have tied his tongue in a bowline.

"Very interesting," he heard the female voice mutter as it came closer to him, "why didn't that spell affect this clerk?"

He raised his head slowly above the edge of his desk, to see the other clerks frozen in mid-spring towards equally frozen policemen. The woman looked down at his letter of resignation. "Ah. I see."

What it was she saw exactly remained unclear. But Theodore saw her, the sinewy bird like frame and the fierce red hair, she was like a lit match and judging by her expression just as dangerous. He gripped the letter of resignation fiercely, feeling it crease but desperate for something to hold on to since dignity and scruples had fled from him.

Stamps. Stamps, the only coherent thought he could form was clinging on to his mundane routine, no plan of action or escape emerged from his rattled brain just stamps. Then the strangest sensation leaked into his consciousness for a fleeting moment he felt recognition, saw himself reflected back in her

eyes and felt a prickling doubt that this was the first time they had met.

“Does your father know you’re resigning?” Her breath was like an exhale on a cold day and the words seemed to linger like smoke after she had said them.

Theodore could feel his heart in his ears and wished he could calm his jagged breath enough to form a defiant reply. But panic had always been a default response of his and despite its frequent visits he still had not mastered controlling it. At present each inhale clawed its way down his throat and seemed to choke him.

“Get up.”

When he didn’t move she muttered an incantation which seemed to drag him to his feet and then continued talking, the end of the incantation running smoothly back into conversation.

“Once you stop working for a company the spells they cast on you cease to work.”

“What does that mean?” Theodore gasped.

“You’re a dangerous weapon that has been kept controlled.”

“I think you have must have the wrong guy, I mean look at me...”

“I would recognize the son of Anthony Sterling anywhere.” Theodore met her penetrating stare with utter bewilderment.

“You know my father?”

“No time for answers. If you want to survive – run.”

She took his hand. Her skin felt soft and a little moist, underneath there was immense strength. Like a panther wrapped in marshmallow, he thought. He had never been good at similes. A strange sensation seemed to run up his arm and permeate his body, like the thrill of drinking hot chocolate on a cold winter evening, when you were chilled to the bone from the cold wet wind off the fens, and your wellingtons were leaking.

Dazed, he found himself running after her through jumble of pedestrians, horses,

carriages, magic carpets and hovercycles on Oxford Street. Somewhere behind them there were police whistles. In a few hundred yards she stopped, and unrolled a small carpet that was wrapped around a parking meter.

She handed him flying goggles (where had those come from?) and pointed at the rug. “Lie down,” she said. “We have to travel fast.” She stroked the pile, muttered a charm, and the carpet rose a foot into the air and began to weave through the traffic at a terrifying speed. Theodore was acutely aware of her body lying next to his and tried hard not to think about hot chocolate.

As they cut across Hyde Park, he spoke up. “I’m not a weapon. I have no magic at all.”

“You have a degree in magic,” she said, “Or Morgan wouldn’t have hired you.”

“I got a third in Divination from Cambridge because I predicted the result of the last election. Look, I cheated. I wrote to hundreds of people asking them which way they were going to vote.”

“So you’re clever, too. I can see we’re going to have to be very good friends.”

If Theodore hadn’t been sneaking a glance at her face, he would have missed the flash of sorrow that passed over her features at these words; an old sadness, one to which she seemed accustomed to banishing. He looked away, hurriedly, but could not so easily mask the strange, answering flare of longing in his own chest. *What?*

“I’ll be blunt, then,” she said, oblivious to Theodore’s confusion. “You don’t have magic – true. Let me propose an analogy: a spell as a match, and a magician the chemist who shapes it – cuts it to form, composes its powder. How do you light it? Magic is the flame, but the match could sit there forever, perfectly stable, unlit, until the day the moon folds in on itself. The magician has to give it a bit of himself first, proportional to the power of the spell; the match must be struck.”

Theodore bit back a yelp as she yanked the carpet into a steep vertical climb. “You don’t have magic, Theodore, but you’re all strike.

Anthony Sterling knows this; Morgan and Archer do too, and they've been using you to trigger immensely powerful spells embedded in their stamps, spells that no magician alive could summon the power to initiate."

"Who are you?" Theodore said, blankly, as the carpet nudged through a half-opened window and settled with a quiet plume of dust on the floor of an echoing empty room.

But his tongue already knew the answer.

"Charlie?" he whispered.

He wasn't sure what had given it away – that sharp face, enshrouded by a fiery red halo of hair and perched atop a predatory frame bore not the slightest resemblance to Charlie. Her hair had been brown, for one, her face warm and generous, and her body tall and athletic – she had looked, in fact, strikingly like her father, Mr Atticus Morgan. The other thing making it exceedingly unlikely that this was Charlie was that she was dead, while the woman staring down at him, breath pluming out of her mouth in the cold morning air of the draughty room, was very much alive. Regardless, he knew it. A creeping sense of dread spread over him, numbing him far more than the wintery chill already had, smothering him and leaving him paralysed on the floor. Part of it was a delayed reaction from the frantic events of the last hour, part from the fact that he was staring up at a corpse, and the rest from the dawning realisation that he was in a huge amount of danger.

She strangled her look of surprise and worked her jaw nervously, as if wondering what to say. This action, utterly at odds with her fearsome appearance, removed any lingering doubt in Theodore's mind. It was her. Charlie had always clung on to that mannerism despite the nagging of her father.

Finally she blurted out, "Yes, it's me."

"I don't have time to explain everything – we won't be safe here for long. But, Theodore, you're the strike that brought me back. And trust me, that's barely the beginning of what my father and his company is capable of doing with you. They're messing with powers far

beyond what they understand. The authorities have realised how dangerous you are, that's why they're after you. But my father won't let go of you so easily, believe me. He'll see you dead before he gives you up."

Theodore could not remember sinking to all fours. (Or had he risen to them? He'd moved, certainly.) All he was aware of was the dull thump of urgent blood in his ears, and the rising terror clawing its way up his throat. A thousand questions swirled incoherently around his head. Who was after him? What was Charlie, now? Could she be trusted? How could he be facing death on a day that had promised only the most mundane of civilised horrors? He retched, and thought that he would surely vomit; but all that escaped Theodore's lips was a weak whimper, a schoolboy's whimper in the face of an adult world that he could never and would never hope to understand: "What now?"

"Swallow this," said a voice, and it was gentler now, with Charlie in its harmonies and its soft concern. A small, silver coin was pressed into Theodore's hand, plain but for the embellishment of a seven-pointed star on one side. It did not taste metallic; Theodore could not have described the taste, but in it there was something of the fog that so often permeated the city, and something of the rare sunlight... and a sharp, unpleasant taste that he could not identify. The coin dissolved before it reached the back of his mouth.

As he was helped to his feet by the woman (he could not quite think of her as Charlie, not yet), Theodore considered asking what the coin would do; but he decided that taking in any more unsettling information was unwise. As he walked across the dimly lit room, and his breathing began to steady, he asked, with barely a falter, "Where are we going now?"

"To the roof," came the answer, "we have someone to see."

In an unexpected rush of defiance, Theodore stopped dead, causing Charlie to falter.

"I'm going to need more than that. One moment, I'm sitting in my office, contemplating another boring day, preparing to hand in my resignation; the next, I'm in mortal danger from shadowy adversaries, lying on a magic carpet with someone I thought to be dead. I'm not going any further until you tell me what the hell's going on!" He realised his voice had risen to a strident shout and stopped, but he remained defiantly not-following-apparent-Charlie-blindly-onto-the-roof.

Charlie turned, with a look equal parts annoyance and surprise. She looked something like a puzzled red panda. He reflected that his ability with similes was still sadly lacking.

"Fine", said Charlie, "here's the very short rundown, given all that mortal danger chasing us I mentioned. Yes, I was dead. Yes, I'm not any more. The reason you've never been able to do magic is that your father, in collaboration with Morgan and Archer, has been using you to power all the spells the business has produced for years. Not just the stamps – they're partly a front. All sorts of other, infinitely more complex and dangerous things too. You're the greatest magician that's ever lived – your father realised this very early on and determined to use you for his own ends. One of the particularly dubious areas they've been working on is resurrection. As you can see, it worked. Well, sort of. I mean, it's me talking. I just happen to be in someone else's body. As you might imagine, people capable of that are capable of anything and need to be stopped. The person on the roof might be able to help us do so. Does that sufficiently answer your questions?"

This was ridiculous. This woman-come-zombie seemed to expect him to jump to it, excited for an adventure knew nothing about. It wouldn't do, he would not put up with it.

"No, not really. In fact this makes no sense! How on earth can you use a person to power spells?"

He looked at her, and when she did not respond immediately, threw his hands up and

turned back, calling over his shoulder – "Look I don't know how you know about Charlie or why you seem like her but I do not believe you – I may not be magical but I'm not an ignoramus and you can't pull some riddi-"

"Oh shut up." Theodore's suddenly felt his throat seize up, not due to spell but due to fear, revulsion and, again, panic. He knew that voice.

As he turned, Hester rolled her eyes. She stood in purples and blues with her signature silver brooch knotting a scarf at her neck, immaculately dressed but still, Theodore had always suspected, the embodiment of evil. Or at least, the embodiment of petty familial squabbling.

"Are you going to throw a strop like baby Theo always does? Is it going to be a fun one, like the time you made yourself sick in the middle of Paris?" Hester smirked, then seemed to crumple and fade from her usual technicolour presence. Charlie was giving her a pleading look. "You know I wouldn't pretend about Charlie, Theo. I loved her more than you know."

'Charlie' faded into mist and dispersed on the wind.

"I mean, in an *ideal* world I wouldn't. But how on earth else would I get you to come up here?" Hester Archer let out that irritating snicker that Theodore had always hated so much. "Your head was always filled with fanciful notions. Resurrection? Even the most rudimentary Oxford History of Conjuraton degree teaches you that *that* is beyond the reach of all but the most powerful wizards ever to live. And I assure you," she intoned, slowly approaching, "that you are not among their number."

So why would she go to the trouble of having her Charlie mirage narrate me that fictional life history?

Theodore could have sworn that Hester had flinched a little at the newly-formed look of

puzzlement and concentration on his face, but her punchable smirk swiftly returned.

“How does Atticus feel about you using his deceased daughter as bait?” he said, mostly to stop her from talking again.

“You ask far too many questions, clerk boy. The motivations of myself and Mr Morgan are of no-”

Link minds, Theodore. Now.

It seemed to resonate from the very air around him, and its aftershock filled him for several seconds after the voice ceased to speak. And yet Hester continued, seemingly entirely unaware that anyone had spoken.

Theodore, I promise that I will explain later. Link. Minds. Now.

Theo could have sworn that he heard a hint of Atticus Morgan’s clipped voice in that mental exclamation. He quickly realised that he had been paying no attention to Hester Archer when he noticed a bright light appear in her raised fist. This entire situation being far too bizarre to comprehend, he resigned himself to his well-imprinted default behaviour of following the instructions of whoever spoke to him the loudest. He reached out to the presence in his mind and formed a link.

There was a blinding flash.

Theo recoiled as if struck long before he realised that he hadn’t actually been affected at all.

“You don’t have any power,” Hester was saying, more affronted than puzzled. “You certainly don’t have the power to do that. Who’s really there? Speak up now, and I’ll...”

She got no further; Theo had raised his own hand – when had he raised his own hand? – and the most amazing thing he had ever experienced rushed through him and his whole being. The shattering blow had sent Hester staggering, and words were in his mind again.

You are, without doubt, the most worthless avatar through whom I have ever cast.

As the aftershocks cleared, he felt a cool, slimy stickiness upon his leg and turned a burning cherry red with the most unforgiving embarrassment he could ever have felt.

The most worthless, and the most shameful. But we are told to work with what we are given.

Again he was raising his hand, and this time he was speaking; the words were uttered with a force that the meek clerk had never mustered in his adult life. “I have an advantage over you, little one,” he was saying. “You let this descend into a physical brawl.”

If this were physical, then nothing Theo had ever felt had been physical.

“You let this descend into a physical brawl, but I’m not actually here, and you are.”

The incantation he had felt sure was about to engulf him again dissipated at a gesture from Hester.

“Actually...” she was saying, gesturing again, and Theo again felt the energy overpower him as the light Hester had been summoning shrivelled and died. It mortified him further that he knew his only salvation from his crippling shame this time was that he was already spent.

“Actually,” she resumed, shooting a black look through him at the force which animated his movements, “you’re wrong. Twice over. One, we both know why you need this little puppet alive, and with at least some semblance of a mind. Two, what makes you think you’re the only decent enchanter here? It’s been quite fun, acting for a while, but I let it slip a couple of times – did our little prize here wonder how Hester Archer knew all those little titbits about his past? And, come to that, about *her* past? Neither you nor Sterling ever liked her enough to tell her stories about your children.”

She paused, deflecting with a gesture a further bolt of light flung out from the shaking, exhausted Theo. As Theo’s puppet mouth took another breath, she smiled and spoke again.

“I’m not here either, Daddy.”

There was a soft silence, inside Theo's mind and out. He felt the taste of silver slip further down his throat.

"I knew the ritual hadn't failed," said, or sighed, Theo's mouth, Atticus' voice. It seemed to be getting fainter. "The Oxford necromancers had never seen an attempt with a body that ruined. Those fools couldn't conceive of simply reclaiming a spirit without a house..."

"The housing is proving a problem, I will admit. The last girl, that redhead, I'd had her a couple of days. An outlander, but I think she'd still held one of your stamps. Hester Archer was your partner, so she held no fealty to you. She'd last a week, maybe. Do you know, Daddy, it's damn hard to find a body in this country that you haven't somehow beholden to you, knowingly or not? I must congratulate you. You wanted me back and under your thumb completely, and gave me precious few other options."

Theo's jaw worked, but no sound left his mouth. Inside his head, Atticus Morgan was raging, but seemingly from an increasing distance. He felt the cold, hard weight of silver streaked down within his chest; more than he had swallowed, far more, but that was the way of magic. The link in his mind was breaking, not suddenly, but with the easing-out of a wire drawn far too thin.

"I know what you've been trying to do, Father. And you couldn't rest easy with me holding the secrets I knew - not even in the grave, not where some other magician, somewhere in the world, might someday pull me back. You thought you held every person of power in this world. This one," she gestured at Theo's slumping body, "He has no power, but guess what? I got lucky. He's not yours, which means he's mine. And I've worked out how to make him stick around for longer while I hold him. Long enough for my purposes, anyway."

Hester - Charlie - fell silent a moment, as both she and Theo felt Morgan's presence drift away. Then she looked to Theo, distant yet

sympathetic - the emotion sitting oddly on Hester's features.

"Sorry about this. Like I said, I was lucky. There was no-one else I could take, and there's a war on. Only no-one else in Britain has realised, yet. But they will. I'll save them. We'll save them, together."

Charlie reached out to take Theo's hand. Theo, still slumped and speechless, could only watch. "I wish I could say this won't hurt, but I'm really not sure how it feels for the hosts. They never seem to want to speak to me, once I'm inside. But I'm sure we'll be very good friends."

5 Things You Hope Won't Happen at Work Today (Number 4 Will Make You Laugh!)

– Extras

Alternative Title Suggestions:

Incantation of the Bodysnatchers

Are We Charlie?

A Party Political Broadcast from the Philately is Really Exciting and Interesting Party

Apologies for the silly title, it made me laugh too much to resist – Ed.

“For some reason, this reminded me a great deal of the Bartimaeus books by Jonathan Stroud - if they'd been a bit darker and set a decade or two later. Possibly it's the sort of Victorian-Edwardian and London setting and the whole foreign mind thing, but I kept on half-expecting Faquarl to pop up as the baddy...” – *Samuel*

“I had great fun going through and trying to tie up loose ends with the last part, but definitely wasn't able to cover everything - there was just so much fine detail people had thrown in. And I will admit that I had to draw out a chart of character relationships.” – *Danielle*

The Editor has now had enough of: Keeping track of who is alive, who is dead, who is one of the above while inhabiting someone else's body, and who is related to whom. That said, this is a beautifully written chain with some really interesting institutional magic frameworks taking shape. It would be really nice to read some more of this world.

Jump

Chainwriting: Bryn Dickinson, James Gard, Sam Ottewill-Soulsby, Tom Flynn, Adam Cowden, Nathan Smith, Olivia Morley, Connor Willmington-Holmes, Tom Ruddle, Matthew Wales, Rory Hennell James, Curtis Reubens, Pedro Fontoura

"Yes, Officer, that's exactly right. Ten days ago, myself and 'four associates' entered the Zone and removed, uh, 'some materials'. Exactly like you said."

Aliette's moved her head slightly, trying to get a look outside its capsule. The rest of her body was being stored somewhere else. At least, whatever was left of it.

"Please, Aliette. Let's not make this harder than it needs to be. In your own words, now, what were you doing in there?"

The Officer of Boundaries seemed to embody the word 'stern'. Sparkling black Zone implants, only slightly darker than her skin, traced across her face and arms in a complicated spiralling pattern. Her legs curved into powerful springs. No doubt she could use them to do all kinds of terrifying things.

Aliette grimaced.

"Well, Officer. If you insist! Some rich fuck from Jupiter hired us. Gave us a location and an item she wanted."

The Officer raised a hand, her face impassive. "Come on, Aliette, you can do better than that. I'm sure you'd rather not risk being digitised."

"...alright, Officer, you have me there." Aliette swallowed, and took a deep breath. "This plan is one we hatched ourselves."

The Officer's fingers twitched, and a chair slid smoothly out of the floor. "Please, go on..."

-

Ten days ago, Aliette was floating in the air, clinging for her life to a strand of spider steel as

a pod of antigravity filter-feeders floated by. A good sign. They were almost there.

They had been planning this for decades. There was no way it could go wrong. Every moment had been sculpted meticulously in Aliette's head. They had run through the plan so many times before that Aliette, even now, thought this could be just another simulation.

A bigger pod of filter-feeders then whirled past. Any second now.

She pressed the fingers of her right hand to her temple, her left was now gripping so tightly to the steel it could have almost snapped. She closed her eyes and said in her head:

"Alpha one ready. Come in Alpha two."

With that a voice came in reply, still in her head.

"Alpha two, ready. Three? Come in three."

It went on, each call in quick succession, each response still in Aliette's head. Five, seven...right the way up to ten. Everything was in place as the cave appeared beneath them. Aliette's left hand began to shake with vigour. She was clinging for her life and this time it really felt like it. Blood pulsed through her. Every one of her senses was the most focused it had ever been.

Her eyes still closed, she began to feel the heat from beneath her. The sound of rushing air climaxed as the patrol ship she clung to approached the centre of the deep cavern. A final filter-feeder passed.

They counted down in her head. Each voice reporting just their number. Ten, nine, eight.... three, two... and as Aliette's left hand opened: one.

Some people ended up in this game for the rush of staking everything on being smarter than the cleverest systems in the galaxy. Aliette mistrusted those people. She was doing this to get rich. Wealth could create diversions sufficient to alleviate boredom, and there were

means of coping with feelings of personal inadequacy which did not risk detention on Pluto or digitisation.

But there were moments, beautiful moments, when even Aliette had to recognise the joy in their craft. The second after Aliette triggered the programmes using the implants in her hand was one of them as the glorious instant of release seemed to render her weightless.

In that moment every boundary corps and government syndicate in the sector came under attack from one of the most sophisticated packages patched together with the aim of incapacitating the neural implants of those linked to these centres. It had taken years of espionage, bribery and programme construction to assemble. And not one of the programmes was going to succeed.

Boundary corps had been observing the programmes for months and would have stopped them all. A senior Officer of the Boundary was no doubt being congratulated. A search for the origins of the attacks was beginning, which would prove to be a master class in cryptography, frustration and bloody minded deviousness.

While everyone was busy, Aliette and her team were going to walk into the Zone by the front door. When people thought they had the drop on you, they generally stopped paying attention to anything else.

Aliette landed, in a manner which, hundreds of years ago, people would have said resembled a cat. She and Alpha Two converged outside the entrance to shaft three. The staff were plenty preoccupied by the spontaneous failure of all their digital devices, it was only the last who even seemed to notice the intruders.

It took them eighty seconds to drag the bodies of the guards clear of the detonator's radius: ten less than planned, probably due to adrenaline. Aliette was noticing only these tiny details: the things that were unexpected stood out against things that had been planned so meticulously. She threw the charge, and half a

second later the door that had been so valiantly struggling to repel the software attack was obliterated.

"Nice," she thought, and perhaps a little too loudly because it seemed to go through on the telepathic network.

Alpha Two had their face covered, as they had agreed, and Aliette had no way of identifying them. They were... perhaps a little taller than average?

"No, no Aliette. I'm afraid I just don't think you're taking this seriously."

"What? Oh, come on, you think we all exchanged names and numbers? We knew the risks."

The officer looked at her sternly.

"Of course you did. 10 years planning, and you'd go into this with a bunch of anonymous strangers? Ridiculous. And anyway, what was all that about cats? What are cats?"

Aliette glared. It was around this point she was really beginning to regret being captured.

"Cats," she seethed, "were ancient organic life-forms that could safely leap from incredible heights and land softly on their feet. Without any ridiculous implants." She motioned towards the Officer's grotesquely twisting legs with what little mobility her head capsule allowed.

"I suppose that helped them a great deal in avoiding extinction."

Aliette's glare narrowed. "It did. In the early days, they were the first species to make the jump. They migrated into the Network sometime around 10 G.C.E.. If you had bothered to poke around the Archive, you would have seen that they infiltrated nearly all of the early video files." It occurred to Aliette immediately after speaking that the Officer of Boundaries probably had no interest in the Archive files or even any knowledge of their existence. Brutes of her type appeared to be

equipped by the Boundary Corps with all the zone implants needed to rip a head off quickly and cleanly enough to preserve it and shove it in a bio-capsule, but none of the neural implants designed to stimulate intellectual curiosity or enhance critical reasoning capacity.

The Officer of Boundaries chuckled. "I'm beginning to think that we damaged your neural circuits in the capture process." It occurred to Aliette that the officer might be listening to her thoughts. There could be an implant built into her head's capsule. "You had better continue with the story, before I decide that you're too scrambled to be of any use to me and proceed with the digitisation."

Aliette sighed. "As you wish..."

-

Behind the door stood something magical, something beautiful, and, dare it be said, something holy. Glistening with all the radiance of a thousand positive metaphors and sat neatly in a throne made of the finest silver sat a rather large pigeon. Indeed it should be noted that the pigeon was not large in comparison to other animals, he was no bigger than the size a football, but he was rather large for a pigeon. It should also be noted that pigeons, being the ultimate suburban animals, quickly adapted to the intergalactic lifestyle humanity now found itself in. You still shouldn't feed them rice though.

"About time," he boomed - a pigeon booming is a rather curious occasion met with a response equal parts cuteness and confusion, "I'm guessing the girl from Jupiter sent you?"

"Ye-ye-es," stuttered Alpha Two, still cutefused by the sound of a pigeon booming.

"Excellent!" replied the pigeon, booming slightly less, "She's really lovely, we should all meet for drinks and nibbles sometime. She does the most breadcrumbs."

"You mean to say," started Aliette, "that all these years, all this money, all those lives, have

been wasted just to rescue you so we can go for drinks!"

"And nibbles," chimed the pigeon.

"You absolute [this word has been censored from the transcript]!"

"Well not just drinks and nibbles," said the pigeon, "It's the location..."

... How would you like to return to Earth?"

Aliette could feel her rising irritation. A decade of planning, training and the chance to outwit the most arrogant people in the galaxy was now spiraling into a bad joke, and she forgot for a moment that she was talking to a pigeon.

"Who in their right minds would want to return to Earth," she said, "when we spent so long trying to leave that...that death trap of a planet!"

A few traditionalists still believed that Earth was humanity's rightful home, regardless of the fact that anyone who had missed the jump faced certain death. Though it was strange for a girl on Jupiter and a pigeon locked in the Zone to believe in such theories - to claim to have travelled to Earth and managed to return was not a light claim; the Boundary existed for a reason. Aliette glanced at Alpha Two, and noticed that confusion was rapidly overtaking cuteness.

"Ah, so you are one of the unenlightened," the pigeon boomed again, "Well, let me tell you the truth of what happened all those years ago..."

-

At this point Aliette felt she had to pause the story, as the Officer of Boundaries had stopped paying attention and probably had come to the conclusion that Aliette's neural circuits were too badly damaged. Mentioning a pigeon conspiracy theorist was a quick way to prove your insanity, it seemed.

"Look, I know how it sounds but bear with me," Aliette knew that she didn't sound

convincing, "But the pigeon, well, the pigeon is important."

-

Important though it might have been, Alphas four and five continued the extraction plan. Aliette's fermion-acceleration boots whirred up to speed, preparing for return to their 'rented' cargo ship.

"You must recall the prophecy, my dear," cooed the feathered beast, "of the fowl and the pussycat?"

Aliette could not bear testament to such a tale.

"Less of a prophecy, more of a remembered future. Time, you remember, is merely a means of rationalising the simultaneous chaos of the universe. See now..." the pigeon began clucking inaudibly, its 'words' mixed and unintelligible.

Alpha five had already made the jump back out of the zone, after wiping down the security slates with a mercury-enriched silicate (procured at some great risk).

"It refers to the exodus of your dearest employer and yours truly, from a dying husk of a planet. The light of the upcoming full moon on Earth should provide the correct conditions for its resurrection."

The Officer of the Boundaries raised her eyebrow, removed it, applied a little lubricant to her optical motors, then replaced said eyebrow. Aliette was perfectly aware of what she was claiming, and the reasonable inference that her neural circuits were dysfunctional. Regenerative terraforming had been attempted, several times over, before the establishment of the Boundary. Each attempt had failed. It was preposterous, ludicrous, and involved a talking pigeon.

"What does the greatest cybercriminal ever want with Earth? No-one wants to go to Earth! Not even for drinks." Aliette protested.

"And nibbles," retorted the bird.

"AND NIBBLES!"

"No need to get shirty," the pigeon clucked. Aliette focused. She had to admit the pigeon's conversation had thrown her; she wasn't out of the Zone yet. One might say she had to get in the zone.

"Are you even listening to me?" The pigeon fluttered around to get her attention. "I'm trying to tell you a story here!"

"Got other things to be focusing on right now, you know," Aliette hissed.

"Yes, but this is vital."

"I highly doubt it."

"Don't you want to know what the greatest cybercriminal wants with Earth?"

"Can't you tell me later?"

"For me, darling, there will be no later."

Aliette paused. Completing this heist would put her up there with the greats. Leonardo Notarbartolo. Danny Ocean. Morty Koboi. But her interest was piqued and she knew that she wouldn't be able to focus without knowing.

"I'm so going to regret this."

In two smooth motions, she brought her emergency taser around and into the back of Alpha Two, then Four. It would have taken too long to explain what she was doing and they would have just been deadweight on the way out anyway.

Hunkering down in a safe corner, she sat the pigeon on her knee and glared. "OK, talk."

With a quick coo, the pigeon began. "What do you know about the first jump off Earth?"

"It was basically a grav-lift, wasn't it? Crude, but effective. Back when the Earth was still green and not, well, a deathtrap."

"Effective for the jumpers, maybe, but not so effective for the surrounding area."

"Oh yeah, it got decimated, right? Nothing alive for 50 miles. The whole area was written off."

"Well, you say nothing." It was at this moment that Aliette noticed the plasma burns on the pigeon's body.

"Wait – you mean to say you..."

"Survived? Just barely – and I wasn't alone. Scarred and weak, certainly, but, well, let's just say that security is of the utmost important to cybercriminals – you can't very well scheme when you're dead."

"But...they picked that location specifically because there was little civilisation, and you're trying to tell me the greatest criminal mastermind of all time just so happened to be hiding right nearby? But even then...the planet is gone. Without the plants, that place is a deathtrap, an..."

"And overheating, and an unbreathable atmosphere, well...a few things remained," the pigeon interjected. "You see, to make a jump you need some rather powerful control circuitry as you should know. But the problem was they couldn't take it up with them at first – so they built up a control centre."

"Could you just get to the point? I'd rather not stay here a minute longer than I have to."

"Fine, fine. So... basically, they had to wire it into the Network to get the distributed computing needs. And this led to some complications, that caused the rather larger than expected damage. Of course, we knew it wouldn't be easy – so we were already researching ways to reverse the process."

"Wait...reverse it? But...surely you'd need to move people into the same position – and even then, the energy, the sheer implausibility..."

"Well...not reverse per se, but to use the jumping process to rejuvenate. And, well, a full moon together with the correct creatures might just be enough to power the process."

"A full moon? Isn't that when it looks like a circle from the surface, if you're crazy enough to stand there?"

"Not a full moon - the position's unimportant. An *entire* moon. Specifically, Io. No one's using it at the moment and it's close enough to Jupiter to power the jump with the Great Red Spot."

"You want to jump Io halfway across the Solar System just for drinks and nibbles?"

"Firstly, Jupiter is relatively close to Earth at the moment so it's far less than halfway. Secondly, we have to jump it, someone's likely to notice if you start pushing moons around with rockets. Thirdly, I don't think you appreciate quite how good these drinks and nibbles are going to be. And fourthly-"

"Fourthly?"

"Fourthly," the pigeon continued indignantly, "our mutual friend already did, if everything has gone to plan. A jump is limited to lightspeed so she had to assume you'd manage your end without confirmation."

-

"You mean to tell me Aliette, that a pigeon jumped Io 33 light minutes across the Solar System?" the Officer of Boundaries asked, rising on her springs so as to look even further down her nasal implant.

"Of course not," Aliette replied, hoping whatever monitoring had been implanted couldn't detect condescension, "the aforementioned rich fuck jumped Io across the Solar System. The pigeon just used the 80,257,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 J it provided to open a rift into an alternate universe and superimpose a non-death trap Earth onto our one."

"And how did it do that?"

"Well wouldn't you like to know..."

The Officer of Boundaries leant back slightly, conscious that for a moment she'd almost been buying into Aliette's story. "I wouldn't, actually. What I'd like is the truth. Or I could just go ahead and digitise you now?"

Aliette missed her body; there was so little she could do to express her frustration as a disembodied head. "This is the truth! Just look at the Earth! There are at least eighteen different satellites capturing live video of the Earth, and you can access most of them. Check."

A deep breath. Then: "You know what? Okay. If it will rid you of this ridiculous illusion, then fine." She stepped over to the computer console, and with a quick sequence of keystrokes brought up the satellite feed on its monitor.

It was the same barren wasteland as always.

"But... But that's..." And then the pigeon's voice inserted itself into Aliette's head. "Well, you didn't think we'd let just anyone see, did you?"

What?

The Officer was still talking; Aliette gave one-word answers, the vast majority of her attention on the pigeon in her head. "We've put a hologram up around the new Earth. There's a new paradise nestled in the heart of the solar system, and it's *ours*."

But that kind of thing would take a phenomenal level of power-

"As opposed to jumping lo across the solar system?"

Oh. Right. I am still decapitated in a Zone interrogation cell, however.

"Oh, don't worry about that..."

I couldn't if I wanted to, I must've left my adrenal glands in my other pants. How did you reach me? They're jamming my 'plants.

"Easy," said the pigeon. "I'm in their net. I needed inside access for the transdimensional thingamajig."

What? Aliette screamed internally at the bioengineered flying rat. Getting captured and beheaded was part of the plan?

"I'm sure it's in the fine print," said the pigeon. "But we got you covered. Diddle diddle."

What's that supposed to... Something clicked in Aliette's mind. "The prophecy," she said out loud.

"...ten of you, but only five entered the Zone..." the Officer sighed. "You refer to the fowl and the pussycat?"

"No wonder it was too large for a pigeon," said Aliette. "It wasn't technically a pigeon. And our employer, that Cheshire grin, all of us dancing to her fiddle. Jumping the Completely Overwritten World over the moon..."

The Officer barked a rude laugh. "I tire of this sport. You'll be digitized and beamed into cold storage."

"I was a tool," said Aliette, her mind eroding in byte-sized chunks, "to scoop the bird free..."

"Don't worry," said the pigeon, "we're locked onto your frequency."

The parabolic dish ran away with the spoon.

[End of 3rd Per. Omni. Transcript]

Jump – Extras

Alternative Title Suggestions:

The 1871 Prediction

Fowl Play

Diddle Diddle

The Fowl and the Pussycat

“I've got to commend whosoever continued the Edward Lear references, gave me a real chuckle!” - *Connor*

“‘Jump’ is used fifteen times, ranging from surface-to-aircraft to planet-into-other-dimension.” – *Samuel*

“When you first sent me the chain I had a heavy cold and was slightly delirious, so I couldn't make much sense of it. By the time I was well enough to write my piece, it still made no sense. The parts written after my part are a bit less confusing, but only because they occasionally refer to things I wrote.” – *Rory*

The Editor has now had enough of: Pigeons. The first appearance of the pigeon was strange enough – what fabulous treasure or mind-shattering revelation could be behind such a heavily-guarded door? Of course, a hyperintelligent pigeon – and from then on it just got weirder and weirder. Every time I returned to this chain, my first thought was “this is the one with that freaking pigeon”. Congratulations, chainwriters, you have rendered me completely and utterly cutefused with this one.

Somebody Do Something!

Chainwriting: Robin Polding, Rory Hennell James, James Baillie, Anonymous, Choong Ling Liew-Cain, Gwilym Kuiper, Alexander McBride, Isa Bonachera-Martin, Clara Ceulemans, Tom Flynn, Curtis Reubens

It wasn't every day that residents of the Vale had their village flattened by a horde of rampaging wyvlings. Every month? Now that's not too far off.¹

Of the many habitable areas of Nordrum where one might choose to set up a community, the founders of Vale County had chosen almost certainly the worst. The moral of the story is: don't lose wars. And if you do, make sure it wasn't you who started them in the first place. Repeatedly.

And so it came to be that Mortha Shackelford stood with her three children staring once again at the shattered timbers of her house. She stroked her beard², a habit she had developed in times of mild stress.

She sighed.

"I'm terribly fed up of this. It is just a *dreadful* state of affairs. You know what I keep saying, don't you, Aliss?"

Aliss, Mortha's eldest³, stared back at her mother. She did know what mother kept saying. It was difficult not to. After all, she kept saying it.

"Somebody ought to *do* something!"

¹ Once a month may appear very often to the ~~ignorant~~ uninformed reader. The problem is the reproductive rate of wyverns. A comparison with rabbits could be made, but consideration of rabbits engaging in wyvern mating rituals rather spoils their innocence.

² Nordrian women who shave their beards are considered to look emmasculate, and to be very probably heterosexual.

³ "And ooh, isn't she getting so big? Are those hairs I see on your chin?" – Mortha Shackelford

The problem, it seemed to Aliss, was that all the somebodies in the village tended to be pretty busy with the approximately monthly communal village rebuilding. Those who weren't busy building were mostly occupied with trying to coax flattened crops back to life, or replenishing the field boundaries with spring onions.⁴ The somebodies living in the rest of Nordrum were not generally predisposed to be helpful to the residents of Vale County on account of the aforementioned wars. All in all, there was a distinct lack of somebodies available for the doing of something.

Though this was certainly a problem for Vale County, it was not the only problem bothering Aliss. Aliss hated rebuilding houses. It was quite boring to build the same structure again and again⁵, especially when children were expected just to turn cranks on the pulley all day. Unfortunately, she also hated farming; wyvling manure compost was about the least appealing substance to spend a day shovelling.

Aliss was a somebody with nothing to do in the village, but there was a something that needed doing outside the village. Wars and wyvlings. And wool traders. Nobody liked wool traders. They all came from the Munderling March and smelt funny and drank too much⁶ and were generally considered to be Not Our Sort.

But how to solve an infestation of wyverns? Or a war? Or both? It seemed a difficult if not impossible task. Which was of course step one in the process; assess the scale of your problem. Aliss found a clay writing tablet and a

⁴ Seeing wyvlings sent flying by a field of alliums is rather amusing, but not quite so much as eating onions all year isn't, so they were generally used as partially effective hedgerows.

⁵ Aliss' experiments with sticks and a toddler suggested this structure was in fact the most flattenable possible, but the Chief of Rebuilding, Holt Briston the lumber merchant, was strangely uninterested in her wyvling resistant designs.

⁶ They could down a small bucket of milk at a sitting. And cows were at a premium given their use as wyvling food.

stylus, and scratched "Scale: Lots of them, mostly covering the back." at the top.

The next step was the more difficult one; Find A Solution. Aliss had found solutions before, but she was pretty sure that mixing salt into water wasn't the answer here. She needed to do some research. And that meant the almost unthinkable.

"Mortha?"

"Yes dear?"

"I'm leaving the village."

"What?" Mortha stuck her head out of the door. "That's almost unthinkable!"

"Well, I just thought it."

"Oh. Well, you'd better go then. Take care!"

Aliss went to the village's Paddock of Curious Beasties⁷ and looked at the eponymous creatures therein.

The first she came to was an ostrich. Too cantankerous.

The second beast was Mildred the Floptroll, who was fast asleep.

Then she saw the Great Riding Anteater. A while later⁸, she was riding it out into the harsh Nodrum wilderness. Its back was covered in shiny black scales, which, when she tested it with her sword, first lightly then heavily, nearly dented it. She leaned down to stroke the creature's head from her riding position on its back.

Well, she thought, this is an improvement⁹ but it's uncertain whether it's a solution. She manoeuvred it towards known wyvling territory to see if she would bump into at least a few stray wyvlings and coax them into combat, she could handle at least that much

and if the Anteater helped, that would be a plus.

"Wait, we're not going in there, are we?" A soft squeaky voice spoke, shocking Aliss. "There's Terribles."

"What?" Aliss said, but there was no one around, only the menacing noises coming from the craggy rocks in the distance where the wyvlings dwelt.

"I have *bad experiences*," the squeaky voice spoke again, shuddering on the last two words. Aliss shuddered as well, but she wasn't the one shuddering, the Anteater she was sitting on was shaking.

"Er," Aliss hazarded a guess. "We have to go in there, because I need to see if you'll survive an attack."

"Why?!" The Anteater's head craned around to look at Aliss which really should have been impossible.

"Well, somebody has to do something so I'm going to be the Somebody doing the Something." replied Aliss.

"Do you think that justifies trying to start an attack? I don't like wyvlings. And just for your information I can survive any attack because I'm a pacifist. My beautiful shiny scales are impenetrable for as long as I don't try to harm anyone. If that happened I would shrink and become an Anteater of Miniscule Proportions. That would be a sad day. Also, can I point out that I'm not overly fond of your people. Imprisoning me with a bunch of useless critters and have people admiring the varieties of fluffiness of us all. You know what the worst part is? Anteaters aren't even fluffy!"

Aliss was taken aback. What should she do now? Shrinking anteaters was not one of her

⁷ Apparently initiated by Estria III, who quoth according to the Sages "PUT THE FLUFFIES IN ALL THE PLACES!"

⁸ After she had engaged in a long bout of haggling with the unimpressed old man sitting by the paddock sign.

⁹ The rocky, unforgiving wilderness was not the best place to take a walk, who knew.

hobbies. Should she apologise to the anteater? Could she say anything that would make it -

"I object to being referred to as an 'it'. My name is Ivan and I would appreciate it if you would remember that."

"W-what? You can read my mind?" stuttered Aliss. "How can you read my mind?"

"I'm a Great Riding Anteater. What did you expect? Besides, you think very loudly. You should try being a bit quieter sometimes." Ivan's last few words died into nothing more than a whisper. He tensed, as if scared, as if about to bolt.

Unsure of what to make of this, Aliss shook her head. Sighing softly, she turned her thoughts back to the wyvling issue in front of her. Literally in front of her.

There is a little known fact about wyvlings, so little known, it is unlikely that anyone in the town of Vale knew. It's very probable that only five or so people in the whole of Nordrum know. Wyvlings are terrified of Great Riding Anteaters. No one knows why, not the Great Anteaters nor the wyvlings themselves. They just refuse to go near them. It would explain why the village's paddock of curious beasties is always the only place left intact after a wyvling raid, but no one in Vale had thought about it. Partially because no one in Vale thinks very much, but mainly because this is a little known fact.

So Aliss, sitting on the Anteater, looked bewildered as the wyvlings kept their distance. They weren't even trying to advance. They just stood there. Ivan was still ready to run, but Aliss started to get more curious. She urged Ivan to go on ahead, but he refused. Apparently, even Ivan didn't know that the wyvlings were scared of him.

"You have two options, Ivan," Aliss thought as loudly as possible. "Either we move forward or you can go back into the paddock."

Aliss waited for a reply. After a moment of silence, she started speaking. "You have--"

"I heard you the first time," said Ivan, craning his neck into that impossible position again. He paused, thinking for a moment. Aliss hoped that he wouldn't pick the unstated third option, 'just stand here', but she realised as soon as she thought that

"I'll pick the unstated third option."

Having chosen this, Ivan proceeded to 'just stand here' for quite a while, seemingly watching the wyvlings uncuriously minding their own business. It seemed that whilst terrified of Great Riding Anteaters, having decided this particular one did not mean to come any closer they were perfectly content to go about their business of well, whatever it was they were doing. Eating? Thinking? Aliss couldn't really tell. Every so often one would stick its head up from the ground to make sure that the aforementioned Anteater really wasn't coming any closer, but other than that they just sat there chewing the proverbial cud.

Aliss pondered the situation. Feeling like she had been slightly outmanoeuvred by the uncooperative Ivan, upon whom with hindsight she had relied rather too heavily, and furthermore still strongly of the opinion that more somebodies really ought to be doing something about the wyvlings, Aliss took matters into her own hands. She jumped down from Ivan's back onto the rocky floor of the Nordrum Wilderness.

"Since you won't help me," she declared stubbornly, "I'll have to go it alone from here." She strode deliberately towards the waiting wyvlings, who now looked up in what appeared to be surprise. Whilst a Great Riding Anteater might have represented a problem to them, they were used to trampling over little girls on a daily basis. Unfazed, Aliss continued towards them and addressed them at large,

"Good morning, I'd like to speak to whoever's in charge around here."

Suddenly the ground started trembling under Aliss. She quickly jumped back and lay on the floor. Right where she stood before, the floor opened and a big colourful closed flower appeared right in front of Aliss. The flower opened very slowly and inside of it, Aliss saw a wyvling like she never saw before. He was covered in chains made of precious metals and was carrying a walking stick.

"We were waiting for you, Aliss. Welcome, my name is Tuckuk, I am the chief." he said.

"Y-you know me?"

"Of course we do. We have been waiting for this day for such a long time and it has finally arrived, just like the prophecy said! Today is the day it all ends, today is the day we will talk. You are the chosen one." Tuckuk walked towards Aliss very slowly.

"The prophecy? The day it all ends?" Aliss couldn't believe what she was hearing. Was it going to be that easy?

"Yes, please, follow me, today we are going to make history."

"This is wonderful! Of course, where shall we go?" replied Aliss, but she was extremely confused when she saw the face of horror of Tuckuk who was staring right behind Aliss with his eyes wide open. "W-what is going on?" Aliss turned around to find Ivan the Anteater staring at Tuckuk with a very aggressive pose.

"Quickly! Jump on my back!" Ivan said to Aliss.

"W-why did you do that? I was finally talking to them!" Aliss was completely confused about Ivan's sudden change of attitude, but she jumped on his back anyway.

"I was able to read his thoughts, they are planning something absolutely awful!" the Anteater said as he ran away as fast as he could.

"But they are talking about amnesty! I don't understand!"

"I am the one who read thoughts here, ok? Just trust me on this! They are truly planning something completely devastating...somebody...somebody should do something about it!" replied Ivan.

Suddenly, Aliss felt an object that flew quickly right by her face. It was an arrow that hit Ivan's scales and was refracted away without causing any harm. The arrow was followed by a dark cloud right above them. When Aliss turned around she realized that it was not a dark cloud; the entire sky was covered by flying arrows and they were all coming toward them.

Aliss looked around for a place to hide – but there was nowhere she could see, the nearest trees were just too far away. Suddenly, she felt Ivan throwing her off his back. She started to scream, and already saw her life flashing before her eyes – endless times of rebuilding the house and shuffling manure. Then, Ivan turned back, and curled up around her. This way, his scales protecting them both, Ivan started to roll towards the forest.

Once they disentangled, Aliss turned to Ivan: "What is going on – what have you seen in their minds?"

Ivan looked around and said: "We have to keep going – now that I saw their plans, they will not let us go."

"But what are these plans?"

Ivan turned towards her: "Fine, I'll explain. Tuckuk's thoughts were constantly dwelling on a prophecy: *One day, Somebody will come forward to the Stone of Flagley, and actually do Something about It. That day, all people of Nordrum will unite, and peace will be forever more.* The wyverns are terrified of this prophecy coming true – they depend on the people of Nordrum being divided, so they can attack small groups. Somehow, they think you are the Somebody from the prophecy, so they want to kill you."

"But – that is brilliant, there is actually a way to do Something about It," Aliss exclaimed, "I have to find the Stone of Flagley."

"Where is it?" she wondered.

"Uhm, It's in this forest, a couple of miles North, b-"

"Do you know everything?"

"I *am* a Great Riding Anteater. But look, the stone isn't much you know."

"What do you mean? It's in the prophecy."

"Yes, but it's more like a minor detail... an... uhm... *identifier*. It allows us to distinguish the prophecy's Somebody from a mere somebody. You don't just go to the stone and everything is magically fixed, you have to go to the stone, and '*and actually do Something*'. Sorry."

"Oh. Well, I suppose we'd better pop along to it anyway."

They set off.

"Well this isn't much." Aliss sighed, about half an hour later.

"I said that." snarked Ivan.

"Unhelpful. Are you sure this is the one? I mean, these stones are all very similar."

The stone, allegedly of Flagley, was much like many of the other medium-sized boulders that littered the forest. In fact, it was exactly like them. Perhaps there was a user guide somewhere? Aliss started to look around.

"FLAGLEY" said the back of the stone.

"You can talk!" said Aliss.

"YOU CAN HEAR ME?!" said the front of the stone¹⁰, "OH MY! YOU MUST BE THE SOMEBODY FROM THE PROPHECY!"

Aliss then explained that yes, she was the Somebody from the prophecy and that the stone was actually shouting and didn't need to be *quite* so loud, and also, just on the off chance, did it happen to have any magical powers that might be useful for, say, uniting the people of Nordrum?

"Well, now you come to mention it..."

"Yes?"

"No."

"No?"

"No." The stone grinned smugly.¹¹

"Oh." Aliss thought for a moment. "Why not?"

The stone seemed taken aback. "I'm sorry?"

"Why don't you have any special kingdom-uniting powers? I mean, me and my mount," – she tapped the rather irritated-looking Great Riding Anteater with the tip of her sword – "we've come all this way on the word of a prophecy that *specifically calls you out*, and you're telling me that you're not actually important? Not at all?"

"Well..."

"I'm not finished. Even if you don't care about the prophecy, or the fact that you're a *goddamn talking stone and why the hell is there a talking stone in the middle of a forest if it doesn't have at least some use*, what about the narrative structure? This isn't a prologue; it's not even the end of the second act. This is the finale, the second half of act three, the work of the final person in the chain, and he's practically at his word limit already! So let me

¹⁰ which was actually the other way round to previously advertised.

¹¹ Or at least it would have, had it had a face. It sounded smug, anyway, and the image of a

hypothetical smugly-grinning rock face was evident in its mind, if you were the type to read minds.

ask you this, you stupid hunk of granite: is this how you want the story to end?"

The rock thought for a moment. "No, I don't suppose it is."

Aliss, having rather exhausted herself ranting, perched upon the Great Riding Anteater. "Then would you like to change your answer?"

"I guess so. I do, in fact, have a world-altering, unite-the-people-of-Nordrum spell handy, and I was just waiting for the right person to come along."

"Well, here I am," grinned Aliss. "Cast it!"

A sigh from the stone. "Fine. Here we go!"

* * *

It wasn't every day that residents of the Vale had their village flattened by a horde of rampaging wyvlings. Every month? Now that's not too far off.

Fortunately, there were always plenty of people around to help rebuild, folk from all over Nordrum that had the uncanny knack of knowing where and when a wyvling attack would hit. They would turn up, rouse whatever middle-of-nowhere village was to be hit, help defend it and then help rebuild whatever got knocked down. No-one quite knew how they did it.¹²

And so it was forever more.¹³

Sombody Do Something! – Extras

Alternative Title Suggestions:

Doing Something

Somebody Who Did Something

"I'm so pleased with how this turned out. Clearly we've all read far too much Terry Pratchett for our own good. More footnotes would've been nice, though. I'm still very confused about whether Ivan is supposed to be an Anteater or an Armadillo and whether the person who introduced him did this on purpose. It certainly worked out very well in the end." - *Robin*

"I'm still really confused about why the anteater has scales. I mean, that would make them Great Riding Pangolins, which is a development I had not foreseen but do not disapprove of." - *James*

The Editor has now had enough of: Footnotes. To be fair, there were fewer than seemed likely at the start, when I was worried that all eleven people would contribute two or three each, but they kept happening at a decently amusing rate, and nicely complemented the general fun being poked at the fantasy questing genre.

Also, keeping track of whether Ivan was supposed to be an anteater or an armadillo. I believe the consensus is anteater, and any armadillo-like traits he may exhibit is due to the fact that he is a Great Riding Anteater and therefore somewhat exotic and fantastical.

¹² There were stories of the girl that led the defences, that said that her scaled battle mount was a psychic armadillo that could tell when the wyvlings would rampage, but that was of course ridiculous. Armadillos don't have scales.

¹³ I mean, not truly permanently – prophecies past are soon forgotten, and forever so quickly becomes yesterday's news – but that's a story for another day. After all, I'm well over my word limit already.

Curse of the Sapient

Harmonic Spectra

The Being gazed at the Pale Blue Dot.

Some dub them Garden Worlds, flirting between the edge of zones that would transform them into icy tundra or barren deserts. The perturbative forces of nature, that influence the dynamics of vast galaxies, somehow fail to break their cosmic balancing act. Such a feat cannot last – a home so hospitable almost certainly spurs the growth of the Sapient, and with it the balance is broken.

Curiosity matched only by zeal and ambition, the Sapient does not allow its humble origins to stifle its influence on its surroundings. Spoiled on their Mother World's resources and a sense of *knowing* bequeathed by evolutionary pressure, the Sapient is able to invoke action that Nature never could have dreamed of. Bound across the deepest trenches of an ocean with no gills. Construct soulless automatons to venture where no living being would. Even resist the clutch of their home's gravity and set foot on foreign worlds. Pure magic. The Being smiled sadly. The impossibilities of antiquity become laughable, and physical boundaries dissipate in the face of their ingenuity.

The thrill of defying their limitations compels them to extend their influence far past what is necessary or safe - such is the Curse of the Sapient. Like a flower in winter, the illusion of an unbounded world that persisted in their infancy withers away, as they realise the Garden World that reared them struggles to provide for their appetite. But they developed the science before the wisdom to wield it. They push further, and further, until the once clear blue turns black and the green landscapes all but cease to exist. The Garden World dies.

The Universe's most remarkable and sombre phenomenon. The Man gazed upon his home, and wept.

The End of History

Samuel Cook

The strobing multicoloured light appeared around the corner of the corridor.

“Dammit,” thought Florence, “that’s the tenth time today. The Bayzeids must have really wanted to protect this place,”

The light passed over the expedition members, bringing the usual tingling feeling. Ze looked down.

“What’s it going to be this time, I wonder? Nope, definitely no tits, but, yes, definitely a dick. Makes a change from alternating all bloody morning. About the same size and shape too – bonus! However, I do now seem to have suddenly grown a great big bushy beard. By Bayzeid ruin exploration standards, that’s pretty minor, let’s be honest. I remember that time I went from being a tall, thin blonde to being a short, stocky guy with all-over body hair and the endowment of a horse. The unisex jumpsuit chafed just a little until we mercifully wandered into another Benderbeam.”

Florence thought back on the history of Bayzeid exploration. Humanity had encountered them, or, more accurately, their remains, in the region surrounding the Crab Nebula a few decades ago. So far, the working theory was that the supernova back in 1054 had wiped them out or caused them to migrate to another part of the galaxy. No one had so far found a Bayzeid skeleton, drawing or representation, so we still had no idea what they looked like. All that we had were these extensive ruins on several planets. Some of the complexes were the size of continents, but whether they were towns, temples, art or something else entirely was still a mystery.

What had been established, based on the architecture, was that the Bayzeids were about human size, had a particular fondness for the hexagon and had arms/tentacles/manipulators near ground level, given the position of all the door control panels. Given that the ruins were

almost entirely subterranean, it seemed reasonable to assume they were also some sort of burrowing or tunnelling organism. The ruins had also yielded various strange pieces of technology that scientists were only just beginning to understand. They’d already helped develop more efficient and more powerful starship engines, and seemed to be promising breakthroughs in teleportation, faster-than-light and replication technology. Florence privately thought this was something of a pipe dream, but it did mean that Bayzeid ruin exploration was a very well-paid endeavour, and a comparatively safe, if disorientating one.

The ruins had also yielded another clue about the Bayzeids: they were almost certainly very biologically different to humans. This was borne out by the Benderbeams. They’d been jokingly given that name by the first expedition, which was made up of aggressively masculine jocks, to enter a Bayzeid ruin and encounter them. The beams appeared to be some sort of defence mechanism, given that they were always most frequently encountered around artefact-containing areas – presumably old barracks, factories and the like. “Beam” was something of a misnomer, actually – they were more like ambulating ball lightning crossed with a disco ball that patrolled corridors – but that just didn’t make for as catchy a moniker. It wasn’t uncommon to encounter several of these a day, but eleven in half a day was definitely well above average. The only effect of the beams on humans, whatever the Bayzeids had designed them to do, appeared to be to cause them to randomly change sex chromosomes, physical appearance and gender preference. There was only one constant in Bayzeid exploration: you never came out the same shape you went in.

Whilst this constant metamorphosing had no long-term health effects, as far as the entire medical profession had been able to detect, it did make family life rather difficult. Not knowing if your husband would come back as your wife rather put a strain on relationships. It

was also uncertain what would happen if you were pregnant and encountered a Benderbeam. Experiments on people had been discouraged on ethical grounds, but the results on mice suggested it all got very messy. Ruin-runners, as they called themselves, therefore tended to be a rather insular, misanthropic and solitary bunch. No one had been able to reverse engineer the technology behind the beams yet, so it wasn't as if you could get yourself reset to your original appearance – ruin-running was a commitment, not something you dallied in. It wasn't a career you chose if you liked people or wanted a normal life.

Ruin-running had also led to a wider social change. After the first expedition filled their entire storage capacity with logs of each member's repeated name, appearance and sex changes, rather than actual data, it had been decided that it wasn't really worth worrying about. As such "ze" had become the universal third-person pronoun (along with its derivatives: the possessive "zis", objective "zer" and reflexive "zimsel"). It just saved the bother of having to check what shape everyone was at any given time, even if it did mean that you sometimes sounded as if you had an outrageous French accent. After your first encounter with Benderbeams, you quickly realised gender was pretty subjective anyway and that it didn't really matter what you looked like – it was what you felt that was important. Such sexless terminology had quickly been adopted by various groups in wider society who, for whatever reason, felt straitened by the binary gender order imposed by conventional language. A related change meant that all ruin-runners had adopted gender-neutral names. Despite everything, it still felt a little odd to be calling a stunning blonde "Ian", or a shaven-headed bodybuilder "Jennifer". It was just easier when everyone was called "Ashley" or "Sam". Florence obscurely felt that this was letting the cause of gender deconstruction down somewhat, but it took more than a few decades to overturn

thousands of years of ingrained binary culture and language, even when you'd repeatedly experienced the full spectrum of human sexuality. Passing through a Benderbeam, Florence thought was always a bit like a strange version of that old show, the Generation Game, clips of which ze'd seen when ze was younger. You ended up whatever shape happened to be on the conveyor belt when you passed through the beam rather than what you actually remembered.... "The Generation Game," Florence mused. "That could be a gameshow worthy for a remake."

Zer musings were interrupted by a shout from the vanguard of the expedition.

"Artefacts! A massive room of artefacts! And I can see more rooms through this one!"

If this were true, it sounded as if they'd hit the motherlode. Usually, you only found one or two artefacts on an expedition. A roomful was virtually unheard of. It had only happened once before and Leslie Croesogenes, who had led that expedition, was now the richest being in known space. Roomfuls were entirely unknown. This was huge.

The entire expedition, all 20 of them, was now in the first room. Chris, at the front, hadn't been lying. It was a veritable cornucopia of artefacts; admittedly, of unknown function, but just with an aura of being able to do things to physics that, were there a Physics Police to enforce the laws of physics, would get the artefacts life in a maximum-security facility, sharing a cell with a very friendly guy called Big Ron. These artefacts radiated *Science* and were likely capable of creating effects the graphs of which would look similar to the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, had it been jointly painted by M.C. Escher and Hieronymus Bosch, with strategic artistic oversight by Mandelbrot. In other words *Weird Science*.

People started picking up various artefacts and, in Florence's opinion, rather stupidly pressing any obvious buttons or levers, shaking them and generally acting as if they thought an

uncontained fusion reaction a few inches in front of their face would be a rather nifty event. Despite the artefacts' vaguely unsettling, even menacing aura of technology, it was possible they were just a very advanced corkscrew, but, based on what previous artefacts had turned out to be, Florence felt this was unlikely. Randomly poking bits of advanced alien technology rarely led to a happy ending, at least for the pokers. Ze was drawn towards the next room instead, where there was a particularly large, if rather dull-looking and rusty artefact on its own in the centre of the floor. It looked as if it were a machine for doing something. Quite what, ze didn't know, but it seemed worth investigating. Ze randomly poked it. The world went black.

Upon returning to consciousness, Florence's first thought was "Why did I poke it?" This was also zer second thought. And zer third through to 48th thought. Zer 49th thought was "Why can't I see anything?" Zer 50th thought, which should have been 60th, but had got fed up of waiting and took an illegal shortcut, was "What's this strange noise?" It sounded as if it were a man talking in a foreign language: "Weeble plop qxrtghvs cherchant fwitzpog plcsdgaxrt sprechen". Suddenly, it stopped and the voice declared "Subject language identified. Neo-English of the 28th century in the calendar of Sol 3." Florence was now very confused and more than a little concerned. Another voice, this one sounding more feminine, started speaking.

"Welcome, Subject Sol 3 Alpha to the Zoo. Do not be alarmed. You are perfectly safe. There will be a short period of disorientation and blindness whilst we adjust the environmental settings to those optimal for your species. An Interlocutor will be along shortly to answer your questions."

As the voice finished speaking, Florence became aware that zer surroundings were growing lighter. Ze appeared to be in a room made to look just like a typical 28th-century Earth lounge. Zer lounge, in fact. There was

even the cage with zer Martian Predatory Hamster in. There was one difference, however. One entire wall of the room was transparent. Looking through this, ze could see someone approaching. The indistinct, but vaguely humanoid entity stopped in front of, for want of a better word, what Florence was calling the window. It spoke in a pleasantly neutral tone.

"Hello. We are the Interlocutor. We appreciate you may be a little alarmed at your sudden spatial translation, but, please, relax. It is perhaps best if you ask us any questions you might have first."

Florence thought. Something about the Interlocutor's speech bothered zer. Ze realised it was its constant use of the third person. Ze felt ze'd have to clear that one up before being able to have a longer conversation with it. "Why do you refer to yourself as "we" all the time?"

"Because we are we. We are a projection of the gestalt consciousness of our race invoked by the local computer systems. In our experience, you are an unusually perceptive being. Our mode of speech is rarely the first matter that comes to our guests' minds."

Florence felt as if ze'd somehow scored a point. Ze was oddly pleased by the Interlocutor's comment. However, ze was probably about to disappoint...them? A fairly obvious question was urgently making its presence felt, doing the mental equivalent of banging the door so hard it was threatening to come off its hinges. So, ze asked it, even if ze hated zimself for being so unoriginal. "Where am I?"

"That is a more typical question, in our experience. You are in the Zoo. As demonstrated by your discovery of and interest in the Machine you found, your species has clearly reached a sufficient level of development to be worthy of our attention, hence you were brought here to help us learn about you and to be the eternal type specimen

of your people in the greatest exhibition in the universe.”

Florence considered this. Ze didn't like the mention of “eternal type specimen”, but at least the Interlocutor hadn't said anything about imminent disintegration or something. Another obvious question surged to the front of her mind, trampling over the hosts of lesser, but more original ones vying for zer attention. “May as well get it out of the way,” thought Florence. “Who are you?” ze asked.

“You would call us the Bayzeid. We built what you have termed the ruins and made the artefacts. Did you not wonder why everything was so well-preserved, puzzle-like and functional? We imagine you thought we were all some sort of space bees, what with all the hexagons and the low-down handles. Our little joke, we are afraid. The artefacts are expected to require some experimentation, but any reasonably-advanced civilisation would be able to get them working and find more, whetting their appetite for further exploration until they found one of the Machines. Indeed, the Machines are not accessible to those who are not sufficiently advanced.”

Florence had wondered why anyone had colonised the particular planet they'd been exploring, which had a hideously hostile chlorine atmosphere and orbited a temperamental binary star. It was only recent advances in technology that had made it accessible. This now made sense. Meanwhile, the Interlocutor continued talking, in the same measured tones.

“Our passion is collecting and information. Every time a new species reaches the appropriate level of technology, it is almost inevitable that they will shortly stumble across one of our Machines. By that point, our bio-scanners, which you call Benderbeams, will have gathered enough information about their biology, genetics and psychology to allow us to welcome them appropriately. The random biological changes also serve as a test of determination – only a species interested in

advancement will wish to deal with them. Rest assured, we've moved past the whole anal probing phase. That was...a regrettable policy decision by some of our more extroverted elements, who have now been...discouraged.” The Interlocutor seemed to be lost in thought, as its voice trailed off at the mention of these “extrovert elements”, but it quickly rallied and continued. “The first member of a new species to touch a Machine is transported here, to the Zoo, to assist us in our passion. Bayzeid representatives will be making contact with the rest of your party and species shortly, once you have assisted us. Do not be concerned about your friends – we have erased you from history. No one will be dismayed at your sudden disappearance, as they will not even notice, and they will be allowed to leave with their latest haul of artefacts. Witness our magnanimity. We do not seek to conquer, only to understand.”

This had taken a rather sinister turn; too sinister for Florence's liking. “So, you just kidnap people?”

“We prefer to think of it as a mutually-beneficial information exchange”, replied the Interlocutor, completely unruffled.

“Once I have assisted you, will I be returned to my home?” replied Florence, asking the question that was uppermost in zer mind after the Interlocutor's previous response.

“Ah. I fear you misunderstand. As far as the rest of your species is concerned, you no longer exist. In fact, you have never existed. This is the Zoo. We believe you are familiar with the concept. You are an exhibit. You cannot leave. We will do everything we can to make you comfortable and we will ensure others of your species are brought here to keep you company and assist in procreation. We are collectors. Primarily of species. An extended family unit of Sol 3 natives would be a perfect addition to our Biped wing. Be assured that the rest of your species will benefit greatly from contact with us. There is much we can teach them. By touching the

Machine, you have saved more lives and benefitted your species incomparably more than anyone else in your history. It is merely unfortunate from your point of view that that same history will not record you.”

“Bugger.” thought Florence. Maybe imminent disintegration would have been preferable.

The Continuing Adventures of Mr Pickles, the Wizard of Botolph Lane

Isobel Sands

Mr Pickles was napping by his fire one evening when his cat Snoozleby came tearing down the stairs and dived under his armchair, knocking over the side table and upsetting the teapot on the way. Mr Pickles yawned and stretched. He had been having a rather excellent dream about cheese, but it was very difficult to scare Snoozleby and he thought he should probably see what the matter was. He waved a hand absent-mindedly and the tea flew up from the puddle on the floor and returned to the teapot, which settled back on the table once it had righted itself.

Mr Pickles got down on his knees, awkwardly because they ached in the cold weather, and peered under his armchair. He could just see Snoozleby's bright gold eyes shining in the dark. They were wide and scared.

"Snoozleby, old thing, what on earth is the matter? Is there a ghost, or what is it?"

The houses of Botolph Lane were very old, and travelling ghosts liked to come and stay in the attics from time to time. Mr Pickles enjoyed their company, and had been under the impression that Snoozleby didn't mind them.

"Sssss! Not ghosts, ghosts not scare me! Is something in top attic, with slithers!"

"Okay then, old thing. You stay right there and I'll get you some fish, and you can tell me all about it." Mr Pickles knew that the spell that let Snoozleby talk didn't work so well when he was scared, so it was best to give him time to calm down.

In a little while, Snoozleby was eating tuna from a dish in front of the fire and purring to himself, and between bites he told the story. He had been hunting mice in the very top attic, when something had moved behind a pile of boxes. He had gone to investigate, but then

whatever it was came out from behind the boxes and he had caught sight of a strangely-shaped something with a tangle of tentacles slithering and suckering along the floor, coming straight for him. And in the tradition of cats everywhere, he had leapt two feet vertically in the air and then run away as fast as he could.

Snoozleby didn't tell Mr Pickles that last bit, but Mr Pickles knew him well enough to guess.

"Okay then, Snoozleby, how about you and I go and see what this tentacle thing is? You know this is a big house for just the two of us, and sometimes strange things find their way here and want to stay awhile. They don't mean to scare us. Here, I'll wear the flat hat."

As everyone knows, a wizard's magic gets stronger when they wear a hat. Mr Pickles had several hats for this purpose. He had a traditional pointed purple hat with stars on, for public use, but he also had a big soft flat cap, which was Snoozleby's favourite because he could sit on top of it. And this worked well for Mr Pickles too, because cats are even better for magic than hats. Mr Pickles put the hat on, and put Snoozleby on the hat, and they began the climb to the very top attic.

The very top attic was full of old boxes of books and strange stones and glass bottles and skeletons of some of the smaller and less dangerous mythical creatures. It had all built up over a long, long time, because there has always been a wizard of Botolph Lane, and wizards understand that old things generally want to be left alone. It was this old magic in the upper attics that was so attractive to ghosts and other unusual guests.

Snoozleby emerged through the trapdoor in the floor, followed by Mr Pickles' hat, and then the rest of Mr Pickles. Snoozleby had his claws dug tight into the hat, and his tail was all bristly. There was something with slithery tentacles in this attic. He was not leaving the hat.

Mr Pickles had cast a spell to make his beard glow, so that he didn't need to carry a candle

up here. He shifted some piles of boxes, carefully, but didn't see anything. Then, he noticed something which looked very much like the mess made when a cat leaps into the air just in front of a tall and wobbly pile of books. Just in front of this was another pile of boxes, and behind this one he could just about see something that might have been a slime trail in the flickering beard-light.

Mr Pickles followed the slime trail cautiously as it wound around other piles, as if something had been investigating the heaps of interesting junk. He nearly jumped when he realised that a tuft of white fur on top of a stack of old globes and telescopes did not belong to a stuffed animal, but to a large rabbit that was watching him intently. Its nostrils flared and twitched as it realised he saw it. It was a very big rabbit; Mr Pickles could only see the head, but it was almost as big as a horse's.

"Hello there," he said kindly, "we didn't mean to disturb you, but maybe you can help us. Have you seen anything with tentacles up here? Only Snoozleby thought he saw something with a lot of tentacles."

The rabbit was silent for a moment, and Mr Pickles wondered if it could speak. Most animals could, at least a little, after spending a while in the upper attics. Finally it opened its mouth and made a noise which was half a yawn and half a gulp, but also quite clearly a word.

"Friend?" said the rabbit.

Mr Pickles smiled. He liked having friendly visitors.

"Of course, rabbit. My name is Mr Pickles, and this is my cat, Snoozleby. Do you have a name, rabbit?"

The rabbit thought for a while, and then tossed its head and yawned another word.

"Harold," said the rabbit.

"Well then Harold, have you seen anything with tentacles around here?"

The rabbit thought for a while, and then tossed its head again.

"Harold."

The rabbit moved out from behind the heap, and Mr Pickles stepped back in surprise as he saw that, instead of rabbit legs, Harold had a mass of tangled tentacles which slithered and squirmed across the floor like an octopus's. He was huge, the size of a small horse, and his body bobbed up and down as his tentacles moved.

"Oh, I see," Mr Pickles said, "you're not a bunny rabbit at all! You're...hmm...a bunny and an octopus...yes, I think you're a buntopus, aren't you, Harold?"

Harold nodded, and bounced up and down making happy rabbit noises.

"Pickles friend?"

"Of course, Harold. You're very welcome in my attic for as long as you like. Isn't he, Snoozleby?"

"Snooze-by friend?"

Snoozleby was still very tense and prickly on Mr Pickles' hat, but he purred, grudgingly. Mr Pickles knelt, awkwardly, and Snoozleby and Harold touched noses.

And so life goes on more or less as usual for the Wizard of Botolph Lane, but every now and again when it gets very cold in the top attic, he finds himself with an extra companion on the rug in front of the fire.

An Ace Up Your Sleeve

Tom Ruddle

Some thieves would say that larceny is just a job. Others, with higher visions of grandeur, would liken it to an art. Whichever you term it, there's no denying that there's a set of conventional wisdoms that any self-respecting criminal will attempt to follow. High up on that list is "Don't go too high-profile" and they don't get more high-profile than a star cruise. Whilst the patrons are normally pretty rich, they're also normally old and paranoid, the captain has a list of everyone aboard and escape from the ship is impossible unless you use an escape shuttle, which is equivalent to putting a big sign on your ship saying "I'm guilty - please shoot me down."

Genna Mentell had had this wisdom drilled into her since she was young. But then she'd never been one for rules and conventions anyway.

"Are you sure you're prepped?" Genna's sister Jyn asked.

"Unless you think that standing him up is a better path to his jewel cabinet and you'd like to change the plan right now?" Genna said sardonically, while rooting around in her bag to check for the fortieth time that the tools she needed were still there, which of course they were.

"OK, OK, no need to be sarcastic," Jyn said as she stood next to Genna, so she could see both their reflections in the mirror. It was her favourite game, to try and spot the minute differences between the two twins. She had to be sure that no-one else could, especially in the midst of the con.

"I'll tell you something, wearing these fancy dresses is a whole lot better than that mining scam we did down on Arabor."

"I dunno, the cruisers are just obnoxious - there must be some nice rich people, but they sure aren't here."

"Are you forgetting that red muck in the miners' camp? And at least the people here have enough manners not to treat you like an idiot."

"Maybe to you," Genna muttered, before resuming conversation.

"You're not the one who's had to get close to this slimeball in order to pull this off. I'm just glad I didn't have to pretend to be suckered into his bedroom."

"Well, you know, it would have made robbing his private safe a lot easier. Stab him and make off with the loot."

Genna looked shocked before realising that Jyn had the half-smile on her face that indicated she was joking.

Throwing a memory orb at Jyn, she continued. Silas Rakshesh, the mark, was precisely one of those old, paranoid cruisers that the conventional wisdom warned about. The only reason, Genna surmised, that she hadn't been invited back to Silas's room was that his paranoia about being robbed would have (rightly, as it happens) stopped him.

"How does the outfit feel?" Jyn asked.

"It's fine, stop worrying. It's just a dress," Genna replied. She knew this was unfair, though, as it was much more than just a dress. This was a very fine piece of technology, invented by her sister, and that was the only reason that Genna held off from mentioning the itchiness of the circuitry built into the cloth.

"Wish me luck," said Genna, as she slipped out of the room. She'd only got away with not wearing the ridiculous high heels her sister had

got her by pointing out that if it all went south, running in high heels was not exactly practical.

Jyn sighed. "You won't need it," was her only response.

Silas Rakshesh was the kind of man who liked to be liked. He liked to shine a spotlight on his gallantry and philanthropic works, but underneath he was as scheming as a two bit merchant from the lower levels. Genna had seen this in her studies of him from paperwork and from a respectful distance. The key thing she noticed, which would play well into their dealings, was that Rakshesh was obsessed with the chase. It didn't really matter what the chase was for: women, fame or antiquities. All that mattered was that they were hard to obtain. Originally, Genna had hoped that it would mean his security would be lax, but besting scoundrels fitted well in with his charming lawmaker persona.

After sitting beside him at dinner, Genna excused herself and returned to Jyn. Rakshesh had managed to wangle a seat on the Captain's table and she had dutifully played the part of an interested admirer, ensuring that she drank enough to keep up, but not enough to let anything slip.

"So, what's the deal?" Jyn asked.

Before Genna said anything, she took off her dress and put back on her normal shorts and shirt. "Ahhh, that's so much better," she said, as she scratched a particularly annoying itch.

"You told me it was perfect! Shit, I thought it might be itchy - you should have said!"

"I had other things to think about at the time. Just get on with it and analyse the dress, will you?"

Jyn tutted and ran a portable scanner over the dress. What Rakshesh hadn't known was that the dress was essentially made of sensors - if anything that looked for a signal got near to

the dress, it would record the information in the sensor. The great bit was that it would also record the strength of the signal, so they could figure out precisely where the signal was coming from. At the end of the meal, Genna had allowed Rakshesh to hug her, so any electronic information that Rakshesh had on him was transferred to the dress, including, crucially, his room access card. The hug was important, because the card has to be only a few millimetres from the reader to prevent people from playing this exact trick, by holding the reader in their hands, for example. It hadn't been easy for Genna to avoid contact with anyone else on the way up, but the Captain's table gives you a certain kind of kudos and staff had given her a wide, respectful berth.

"Ah, there we go," Genna exclaimed. "Left pocket, easy as that."

"Let's not get too excited, shall we?" Jyn was a lot more cautious than that. Connecting the scanner to a display where she'd already been running software that let her analyse the data captured by the sensor, her mind let go for a moment as her fingers drifted across a keyboard.

"If you want to use the left pocket data, go for it. I'll come visit you in prison every week."

"What?"

"You're right. Maybe every other week."

"Don't piss around, Jyn. What's wrong with it?"

"Sure, the card will open any door in Rakshesh's quarters. It'll also trigger a silent alarm that goes off in the Blues HQ."

In spite of herself, Genna laughed. "The cheeky bastard! He's expecting to get his pocket picked."

"Well, you laugh, but that's all the data we've got. Back to square one - maybe a bodyguard

keeps it or something - no, there's no way he'd trust them..." Jyn said as she rubbed her face in exasperation.

Genna looked back at the display, which by now was displaying a 3d model of the dress's data. There had to be something.

"Weep not, sis. What's this at the back of the dress?"

"I saw that, but that's right on the side. Unless you two got more couply than I expected, it must be some waiter who nudged you without you noticing."

Genna was fairly sure that no-one had touched her except Rakshesh and was a little offended that her sister expected her to mess up. Think, think.

Genna suddenly stood up. "Got it. Rakshesh's cane was in his hand as he hugged me and the handle must have touched my side."

Jyn clapped once as she went into full ramble mode. "That totally makes sense, because Rakshesh comes on this star cruiser all the time and he never leaves that cane..."

"It's just a good job we don't have to actually get hold of the cane," Genna said, cutting through Jyn's flow. "Download that data and let's get on with it."

The star cruiser was about to dock and everyone was busying themselves with luggage, getting ready to set down on Yunar Marina. Genna and Jyn were also busy, but for an entirely different reason.

"Wow, this kind of get-up looks a whole lot better on you," Genna said.

Today, it was Jyn's turn to wear the stylish clothing that Genna had kept to herself for the last few weeks. Today, Jyn was Genna.

Jyn half-smiled. "I know that, factually, that can't be true since we're identical and all, but

I'm taking that. I'm the better looking sister. And older, don't forget."

Genna ignored the jibe and instead looked back at the detailed notes that she'd left her sister.

"What's his favourite speeder model?"

"Really? We've been through this so many times. I know his catchphrases, his likes and dislikes and I even know your fictional life story," Jyn sighed.

"Just answer the question."

"He prefers the Nova line, but the 1000 series by Urbatech will always hold a special place in his heart," Jyn said monotonically, as if reeling off a takeaway order.

"Why?"

"Because his grandfather used to own one. Don't test me, sister."

There was a sudden knot of fear in Genna's stomach as she got up, satisfied with her sister's answers. It was always hard for her to put her sister into the field like this. It was fine when she went; that's what she had been trained to do. But her sister, whilst an expert in technology and culture, would find it very difficult to improvise if it all went wrong. Besides, she knew that Jyn didn't like it that much. Genna only put her into these kind of situations when she had to, but the ability to be in two places at once was too good to pass up.

It was at this moment that a knock came at the door. Genna's heart rushed into her mouth - visions of angry Blues swarmed into her mind but she steeled herself. If it was the Blues, they probably wouldn't have knocked that nicely. From Jyn's quick hand signals, Genna quickly vaulted up onto the top of the antique four poster bed, using a dresser as a springboard.

She was thankful she did, as the next second, she heard Rakshesh's voice calling, asking to see her one more time. Jyn wasn't fazed and quickly took the opportunity to leave the room and leave Genna to it.

Dressed in much more simple clothes (but fine enough to pass muster), Genna made sure her hat covered most of her face as she quickly covered the distance from their room and Rakshesh's suite. The duplicate card passed its first test, with a sleek robotic voice issuing forth from the speaker as she passed it over the sensor. "Welcome, Silas. For..." Genna quickly muted the sound. Up until now, she could have just pretended she was lost, but it's difficult to pull that in a private stateroom. Taking out their scanner, she quickly discovered that all the inner security measures had been disabled. He clearly found that they got in the way, but that didn't mean she didn't have to keep an eye out for over-interested droids, for instance.

Passing through another door, Genna started to feel comfortable. This was what she liked. Just her, a safe and some very expensive artifacts. The room was exactly as she had expected after looking through some ship plans she had swiped while on a tour with Silas. There was no way anyone was taking the safe away - it was molecularly bound to the floor and the sides were made of solid metal, which would require hours with a drill to crack.

However, looking at the safe made her heart sink. It seemed that Rakshesh had left his big reveal to the very last second. Most safes simply had an electronic keypad, which, using Jyn's tech, would have been relatively simple to crack. However, it seems that Rakshesh was unwilling to trust the cruise's security and had surrounded the keypad with a second lock, equally tough. However, this was not electronic. It was made of metal. The 10 button keypad led to a complex series of tumblers and bolts that silently mocked her.

Genna, though, was not one to give up. She had to hope that Rakshesh was as paranoid as she thought and would check his treasures every night. Jyn's dress had more than one ace up its sleeve though. The shiny material did not just contain sensors - it also left a small quantity of resin of Jyn's discovery on whoever touched it. Bringing up the scanner again, Genna set it to scan for this resin. Fingerprints suddenly showed up on the keypad. Genna breathed. It wasn't all over.

Obviously, Rakshesh wouldn't use a code with only unique digits, but Genna's keen eyes could see the small differences in fingerprints as he had rotated his hand slightly with each press. Three 2's, one 3, one 4, one 7 and two 8's. Too short to be a date, so that ruled out a lot. Genna put these numbers into a program she had written, which searched her notes on this operation for any combination of the numbers. No results. Genna silently punched the metal, then immediately regretted it. It must be something known only to him, like the registration of his first speeder. She thought about brute forcing it, but she knew any time spent in this room was just an opportunity for Rakshesh to return and besides, he probably had defences against that.

As she got out her phone to text Jyn to get out, something clicked. The keypad in front of her was identical to a phone keypad with one difference - there was no letters on the keypad. Tapping at her phone, she quickly downloaded some software that would list all the words possible to be made from those number presses - there was no way she could have possibly done that in her head; each number has three possible letters, so across eight numbers in any order, the number of possibilities was massive. However, even as she thought about this, the phone was displaying a list of words. One in particular stood out: Urbatech, the name of the manufacturer of his grandfather's speeder. It just couldn't be a coincidence. Genna punched in the code.

There was a quiet click. And a beep.

The safe lay open in front of her and Rakshesh's outer lock fell to the floor. Genna wasted no time in sweeping the smaller jewels at the front of the safe into a small bag – there would surely be more security devices on the large ones, so there was no point on overstretching herself. Besides, bigger jewels are harder to pawn. She had to make sure no-one could open the safe until she was well clear of Rakshesh. Pointing the scanner at the safe, she overloaded the energy cell that powered the keypad, hoping that this would put the safe back into factory mode, locking down the safe until a developer was called in to replace it. However, the screen that met her was even better - MANUFACTURER RESET. PLEASE ENTER NEW PASSWORD. Genna smiled, thought briefly and tapped in a password.

Remembering to wipe the pad, Genna decided that now would be the best time to get the hell out of there. Deciding that the door might be a bit obvious now, she scanned the plans in her mind for an exit, although there was nothing obvious. Going back to the old-fashioned way of just looking around, Genna spied a small vent, although she was sure it led to the outside corridor. If there were any Blues out there, she was done for.

"Here goes nothing," she muttered. Vaulting over an ornate box, she crashed feet first through the vent. Genna quickly rolled and looked around while staying low. Thankfully, the corridor seemed to be as quiet as the grave.

Picking up the wood from the vent, Genna snapped open her phone.

"Jyn. Hi, yeah, it's me. So you know when I said it would be easy? Well..."

Jyn sighed. "Are we running again?"

Bring the Fog and Mist

Danielle Saunders

Above the waves, out of reach of spray and flying fish, the albatross glides. It is almost motionless, riding the winds. Its descent is slow and effortless. Even when skimming the crests, it ignores the food it could find mere feet below the balmy surface: it is not hungry, and its flight has a purpose that is not foraging. Instead the feathers of the albatross slide infinitesimally, flight curves leeward to windward, the climb begins again.

The albatross soars. It is beautiful.

The flight alone had made many of the original aerothermal researchers shed private tears of joy and awe. Since those days at one of the earliest meetings of the Renewable And Maintainable Power Symposium - everyone loves a catchy acronym - more and more features had been added to aid and abet the original AlbaDrone mission: monitoring and maintenance of the massive World Government offshore wind farms.

At first, the centrepiece had been its inaudible shriek - an ultrasound scanner with which the bird could tirelessly test for cracks. Inaudible to humans, at least; it had the unexpected bonus of discouraging live seabirds from nesting. Much more energy-intensive than its long glides - so the next step had been sleek solar-cell feathers. Not to mention the killing-grip spanner-talons, and the extensible arc-welder tongue. (The inbuilt GPS system was hardly worth mentioning, although some frantic improvements had been made after several albatrosses had disappeared without a trace just east of Florida.)

In short, to reiterate: the albatross is beautiful. It is also utterly unconcerned with anything but wind and water and its next destination, some hundred miles distant. It has some rarely-used routines to dodge the odd over-curious seagull, but little else can interrupt its purposeful flight.

The quaint wooden boat, becalmed maybe fifty feet below its outstretched, near-motionless mechanical wings, is completely ignored, as are its listless crew.

The crew, however, do not ignore it.

The albatross was designed to take evasive action on gulls, genuine albatrosses, maybe a lucky flying fish. Nothing so small or fast or singularly deadly to the metal creature as a bullet. A bullet could tear struts and short circuits, but who would shoot an albatross? It maintains wind farms. It ensures a global power supply. It has saved hundreds of lives.

It also, unfortunately, looks rather a lot like a genuine albatross, at least to a salt-addled sailor from fifty feet against a cloudless sky. And the crew of the boat are hungry. There is a crack. The albatross twitches, crumples, begins a final descent.

Genuine albatrosses do not normally inflate bright orange floats on hitting the water. Nor do they emit inaudible, pulsing distress songs on government radio frequencies on being shot. The albatross was very expensive. The wooden boat will not be becalmed for long.

How to Make a Dragon

Rory Hennell James

Introduction

Dragons are cool¹, everyone knows that. Unfortunately, all "adults" know that dragons are also fictional. Given we currently live in the wealthiest and most scientifically advanced period of human history so far²³ I propose we start to do something about that. Such an endeavour could provide vast new knowledge about the evolution and development of the species we see around us and improve techniques for the study and genetic modification of organisms. But more importantly - dragons.

Why not start with dinosaurs?⁴

In seeking to create dragons, perhaps the most obvious place start is with dinosaurs. Like dragons, dinosaurs were - at least in some cases - large, scaly and possessed of large teeth. Admittedly, they were also probably feathered, but this can be dealt with. Some suggest that finding dinosaur bones may have originally inspired myths of dragons, so it would be fitting for them to provide the reality of dragons as well.

Regrettably for both this noble endeavour and the equally noble endeavour of Jurassic Park, the reality of chemistry gets in the way. Studies in fossilised moa suggest that the half-life of DNA in fossilised tissue is about 521 years.⁵ Though dinosaur fossils are under different conditions, the prospects of recovering DNA over 7 million years old in useful quantities are pretty much nil. So although cloning mammoths doesn't look impossible, dinosaurs will not provide the basis for our dragon; instead of going forwards from dinosaurs, we must go backwards from birds.

Atavism to the rescue

Whilst we don't have any dinosaur DNA available, we have plenty of bird DNA lying around.⁶ Birds are descended from (/are) dinosaurs and so provide the next best source of the genes we're looking for. You may think that genes for dinosaurs would be lost after 65 million years, but studies of the atavistic *talpid2* mutation suggest otherwise.

Researchers studying limb formation in these mutants noticed that instead of forming beaks, these embryos formed the beginnings of snouts and alligator-like round teeth.⁷

Studies across the animal kingdom have shown that the different anatomies of different species are controlled in large part by *Hox* genes expressed early in development; once serious dragon research starts it shouldn't take too long messing around with the genes of a large bird such as the Andean Condor to produce something much more dragon-like. Starting from birds has the added advantage that birds can already fly so less fiddling of genes for bone structure and limb development is required, some birds such as the Hoatzin even have claws on their wings.

On the topic of limbs, it is necessary to decide whether our dragon should have two or four legs. Some settings categorise two-legged dragon-like creatures as wyverns, but many simply call them dragons and omit four-legged beasts. Given birds have four limbs, and redesigning the entire skeleton is likely to be tricky, it seems simplest and most sensible to create a two-legged dragon.⁸

Concerning Fire

Though it is not common to all settings, most dragons can breathe fire;⁹ this forms the final stage of the development of our dragon. This

¹ Not literally.

² Or do we?

³ Probably.

⁴ See below.

⁵ Holdaway and Bunce 2012

⁶ About 22,000 tonnes, give or take

⁷ Harris 2006

⁸ To start with...

⁹ Those that can't are probably just jealous.

part of the project requires a completely original system as no organism breathes fire. However, many birds can spit, notably the Fulmar which secretes a foul-smelling oil into its proventriculus which can then be spat at predator. Production of the secreting cells in our dragon, but with enzymes to produce a more flammable oil could allow it to spit fire. The ideal oil would need to be something sticky with a fairly slow burn to ensure whatever it landed on had time to heat up and ignite, something quick burning might produce an impressive blaze but is unlikely to really damage the target. However, if fire alone is the primary concern, something easily ignitable is best.

Spitting fire is not quite the same as breathing fire, but has the advantage that the proventriculus and the oesophagus don't hold a huge amount of oxygen. Producing a flammable gas, say methane from bacteria, in the lungs would allow the fire to be breathed, but the refilling of the lungs on inhalation would provide a risk of scorching or even igniting the delicate tissue of the respiratory system.

Of course, spitting flammable liquid does not a fire make.¹⁰ What is needed is an ignition system. Pyrophoric substances such as diphosphane ignite on exposure to air. If a small amount of this were also secreted into the proventriculus, or from a gland in the mouth at the same time as spitting, the fluid could ignite as it passed through the mouth and voila, your dragon spits flame. With a little creative neuroanatomy such an arrangement shouldn't be too difficult.

Conclusions

So there you have it. With a bit of thought, creating a living, breathing dragon doesn't seem *that* implausible. It's been said that the

first space elevator will be built fifty years after people stop laughing at the idea. Given how far science could advance in the time it might take for people to stop laughing at this idea, I feel confident in making the same claim. With just a few small countries' GDPs, you could have a dragon of your very own.

Rory Hennell James TLS¹¹ MaP¹²
DNHboDbWD¹³ Hons¹⁴

¹⁰ Unless you try putting out fire with gasoline
http://youtu.be/9_Dwl1DrNn8

¹¹ Totally Legitimate Scientist

¹² Maybe a Pyromaniac

¹³ Definitely Not Hell-bent on Dragon-based World Domination

¹⁴ Honest

Arrakis... Dune... Desert Planet

Sarah Binney

Little is known of the Fremen, the mysterious desert people who populate the surface of Arrakis. Fifty years ago our scholars recovered this fragment of manuscript from a cave high in the mountains; now, after decades of hard work, we have been able to translate its mystic Arrakeen secrets. It is thought that this represents an essential part of traditional Fremen religious ceremonies, but for now it remains yet another secret of Arrakis – also known as Dune, the dessert planet.

INGREDIENTS

250g plain flour
1tsp baking powder
½ tsp salt
1 tsp Spice¹
¼ tsp ground mace
Pinch pepper
Pinch ground cloves
1 sandworm egg²
250ml sour cream
110g molasses sugar
10cm stick ginger, peeled and finely grated
Zest of 1 lemon
1tsp Water of Life³
225g unsalted butter
250g soft brown sugar
For the butter icing
100g butter
200g icing sugar
Dash milk

For the decoration

Various items such as cinnamon powder, desiccated coconut, granulated sugar, and gummi sandworms

¹ Research indicates that whilst Cinnamon does not allow prescience it is the nearest Earth substitute.

² Can be substituted for 4 chicken eggs if sandworms not available.

METHOD

1. A beginning is a very delicate time. Take care whilst preheating the oven to 180°C. Line a 20cm cake tin (preferably hemispherical) with baking parchment.
2. Whisk together flour, baking powder, salt and spices in a large bowl.
3. In a medium bowl mix together egg(s), sour cream, molasses, ginger, lemon zest, and vanilla.
4. Beat butter and soft brown sugar together with a mixer until light and fluffy. Beat in flour mixture in batches, alternating with sour cream mixture.
5. Empty into tin and bake for 45 minutes. If it appears to be burning, do not fear. Fear is the mind killer. Instead insert a fork into the centre and if it comes out clean remove from oven. Leave to cool.
6. Make the butter icing: Mix together butter and icing sugar until smooth, adding a very small amount of milk until it is at the right consistency (runny enough to spread on the cake but stiff enough to hold a peak).
7. Spread the icing on the cake. Terraform by sieving sugars and arranging decorations over the top to create a planetary landscape.
8. Arrange gummi sandworms over the top and serve to unsuspecting CUSFSites.



³ Should be replaced with vanilla essence if consumers do not wish to die in agony.

A Defence of Grimdark

Sam Ottewill-Soulsby

Lego Batman: 'I only work in black. And sometimes very, very dark grey'.
The Lego Movie

The rise of Grimdark as a sub-genre is one of the most striking recent trends in fantasy fiction of the last twenty years. Authors characterised as 'Grimdark', have dominated sales in fantasy and, if we accept the common identification of George R.R. Martin with this movement, come to define the field in the public imagination. It has also proved highly controversial, inspiring ire in commentators from very different standpoints. In this short piece, I want to provide a cautious defence of the sub-genre, and suggest why it speaks to some fantasy fans.

Caveats to begin. Not all grim, gritty fantasy is created equal. A lot of it is crap. A lot of most branches of fiction is crap. Being dark is not a substitute for such necessities as plot, characterisation and a decent writing style. Nor am I advocating that all the realms of fantasy be turned into a dystopian hellhole for my sadistic delight. Fantasy is a wide genre, defined by its capacity to do just about anything, and there is certainly room for sweetness and light. A fantasy novel does not have to be 'gritty' to be enjoyable or meaningful.

Defining 'Grimdark' is a tricky business. The term itself has pejorative connotations, evoking the Imperium of Warhammer 40,000, and is more frequently employed by critics than defenders. I use it here as a convenient label to refer to the works of a collection of writers such as Joe Abercrombie, Glen Cook, Mark Lawrence and Richard Morgan who might well resist such identification, but nonetheless share certain similarities. Their worlds are bleak places, where authority is corrupt or incompetent, populated by complicated, morally divided or heinous individuals, trapped within systems of oppression. This is often equated with a sense of 'realism'. Leo Grin, in his critique of

Grimdark, perhaps paints us a clearer picture when he says:

"Think of a Lord of the Rings where, after stringing you along for thousands of pages, all of the hobbits end up dying of cancer contracted by their proximity to the Ring, Aragorn is revealed to be a buffoonish puppet-king of no honor and false might, and Gandalf no sooner celebrates the defeat of Sauron than he executes a long-held plot to become the new Dark Lord of Middle-earth, and you have some idea of what to expect."

Daniel Abraham has noted strong parallels between Grimdark and cinematic noir, featuring fallen protagonists in a morally bankrupt world.

Many of the criticisms of Grimdark as it has been written are sound. The overwhelming majority of books in the sub-genre are dominated by the perspectives of white, male protagonists. Problematic handling of race and gender issues has been observed in many of these works. In particular the lazy use of the rape of women and other patriarchal tools of oppression for shock value has been rightly censured. The equation of 'gritty' with 'realistic' has led some to ask if Grimdark in fact reinforces existing power imbalances by making them seem natural. I believe that Grimdark is capable of moving beyond these problems, that they are bugs rather than inherent to the sub-genre. The acknowledgement by Joe Abercrombie of his flawed handling of homosexual characters in *Last Argument of Kings*, and the recent publication of Kameron Hurley's *The Mirror Empire*, a dark, gritty epic that interrogates gender structures by presenting a world with a wide variety of different systems, few of which resemble the patterns of our world, gives me hope that Grimdark can correct some of the mistakes of its past.

The sub-genre has also been accused of being about cheap thrills and gory voyeurism, amusing a debauched audience with scenes of elaborate cruelty. Here the critics miss the point of what they read. The purpose of writing a Grimdark world in which oppression and

violence are present is not to condone, but rather to condemn. Joe Abercrombie describes 'a slightly weird double standard applied of, 'I find this thoroughly horrible and disgusting therefore the author must have intended me to be titillated and entertained!' The appalling things that take place in these books are meant to horrify the audience. Grimdark places its characters and its readers in uncomfortable places in order to ask questions about power, justice and morality. It serves to raise the stakes and undo one of the perennial issues of fantasy, its predictability, by placing its protagonists in danger.

Since its inception, Grimdark has been in conversation with the wider fantasy genre, aiming to disrupt and complicate the traditional narratives. Fantasy is frequently set in faux-medieval realms. While we should be wary of trying to impute too much 'realism' or history into fictional works of the imagination, one of the marks of a compelling fantasy series is the internal logic of its world building. The existence of a monarchical feudal system demands a certain organisation of land use, ownership and political allegiance to avoid being nonsensical. The presence of knights with a chivalric code implies the glorification of martial valour, an economic structure which feeds and equips said knight through the surplus produced by others, the elevation of a military class in status and (depending on the nature of the chivalric code) a complex of binary gender roles.

This package is rarely interrogated by classic fantasy. Grimdark, for all its preoccupation with high status males, prods at the contradictions of these structures and, in the words of Dennis the Constitutional Peasant, reveals 'the violence inherent in the system'. In particular, Grimdark is concerned with the nature of power and how it is wielded, in the self-corruption and compromises required to possess it. This is most clear in the treatment of monarchy. In traditional fantasy, problems traditionally arise from the existence of a bad king but are solved by their replacement with a good king. Grimdark challenges this by considering the underlying problems of monarchy (take that Louis XVI!), suggesting

that the challenges faced in these situations are either endemic to the underlying substructure, or at least beyond the capacity of one individual, however well meaning, to easily fix. Wielding power requires the ability to make deals, to convince others to do as you want them to. Grimdark explores the nature and consequences of that ability and the staining negotiations it imposes.

This may make the sub-genre sound po-faced and over serious. Grimdark actually depends upon gallows humour and a highly-developed sense of the ridiculous. In its employment of chance and coincidence, Grimdark suggests the inability of its protagonists to control their environment and the events which take place in it. It also does away with fate as an actor in human affairs. Grimdark is often at its best when it undermines the narratives try to impose upon their environment, showing the hollowness of their words through the use of dissonance. If fantasy is a staged court portrait, Grimdark is the jester gurning at the Prince, showing the fragility of the impression of harmony by upsetting the symmetry and decorum of the image.

Commentators often examine Grimdark's propensity to depict carnage and horror, sometimes worrying that it deprives violence of its consequences. At least in the depiction of warfare, this violence serves as a telling rebuttal of fantasy's tendency to obscure the terror of armed conflict by scoping out of great battle scenes, or portraying them as simple tests of skill and wit, where only armed warriors are in danger. The battles of Grimdark are brutal affairs, with all participants terrified, but above all they are ungainly and ugly. Warriors lose control of bodily functions, get confused, and kill the wrong people and trip over things. Commanders lack information and rely upon luck. The dangers of 'collateral damage' becomes central. When Starks and Lannisters war, it is the peasantry that suffer. In Jorg Ancrath's psychotic rampage through the pages of Mark Lawrence's books, we can hear echoes of the *chevauchée* of the Hundred Years War.

Grimdark questions the virtues of martial valour, inviting us to inspect the workings of worlds in which armed force and coercion predominate. The way in which the trope of the fantasy barbarian is treated is of interest here. Steven Erikson's Karsa Orlong is a terrifying image of what such a being would feel like, alien in his manners, relentless in his contempt for civilisation. Abercrombie's Logen Ninefingers as the Bloody-Nine is the perfect embodiment of his society's conception of masculinity, revered and remembered in song long after all others are forgotten. But the very qualities his people inculcated and respect in him, his unquenchable fury and capacity for violence, are incompatible with actually being a member of that society. Having created their perfect man, he must be cast. Logen is trapped in a cycle of violence that he cannot escape no matter how hard he tries.

The depiction of flawed characters in complex circumstances that is a hallmark of Grimdark, rather than diminishing the importance of morality, actually make questions of right and wrong more important. Good and evil are not embodied in nations, armies or causes, which are shown to be complicated and often uneasy abstractions concealing a whole range of opinions and views. Grimdark instead provides a meditation on the nature of evil. There are no evil races of human and while some irredeemable monsters do stalk the earth, the majority of antagonists have reasons, sometimes quite compelling, that make them do what they do. The line between antagonist and protagonist is frequently blurred as a result. We are asked to understand the forces that lead to acts of evil. We are shown apparently good people placed within circumstances that give them no good choices, trapped either within structures of power or the mistakes of the past. We are shown bad people who do good things for the wrong reasons, or who still see themselves as good people. We are asked not to forgive, condone or withhold from judging, but to comprehend, and to consider the extent to which our own ability to be moral derives from our environment.

There are few dark lords intent upon world destruction. Instead there are legions of thugs and bullies, little people given power to prosecute their petty grudges and demands, desperate people driven to extremes, tired, scared people deprived through their ability to empathise through despair. This background noise of casual oppression provides a more compelling image of evil than the maniacal dark lord. Many of the victims become part of the systems of oppression, perpetuating them by performing them on a new cycle of unfortunates.

The battle for good and evil takes place within characters, as they try to map morality onto the exigencies of survival and their own frailty and lack of information. Often they get it wrong, badly, performing acts of cowardice and cruelty. But despite its bleakness, Grimdark is not a genre of hopeless nihilism. The portrayal of petty acts of cruelty also serves to highlight and celebrate the heroism and importance of small acts of kindness and mercy. Whenever a character manages one of these deeds it is a victory, because these moments are not guaranteed, but form part of a difficult, sometimes hopeless, struggle for redemption. Acts of selflessness become all the more precious because of their rarity. Doing the right thing isn't always possible, but even when it is, acting in such a manner generally has consequences, usually negative. When characters perform a good deed it comes at personal cost, and must be done for good inherent in that action, rather than in the hope of reward from an uncaring world.

There are no purely benign forces, no fate or destiny to correct the fortunes of the world. Humanity is battered by chance and luck and by the corruption of its own social structures. If there is hope for alleviation in this world, it depends entirely upon the actions of the same humans who created much of the misery. Even when there is good will, ignorance and incompetence may scupper all prospect of rescue. Few authors address this as well as Steven Erikson. His ten-book epic, *The Malazan Book of the Fallen*, while detailing sufficient atrocities and wasted lives to earn its name, stands as a paean to the virtue of compassion,

made to shine all the brighter because of the darkness. To call Grimdark a genre of despair is to misunderstand it. It is above all a message of hope, of the heroism of compassion in an arbitrary and difficult world.