

Trouble Tiptoeing?

*Become
Airborne!*



Trouble Tiptoeing? Become Airborne!

T.T.B.A.

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The Chairbeing's Address

WARNING: TEMPORAL ANOMALY DETECTED!

Greetings CUSFSites.¹² This is the first, and very likely the only Chairbeings Address³ I will get to write, which is unfortunate I suppose for my plan of subtle subliminal brainwashing via the medium of TTBA addresses, but heigh ho, the summoning of the giant space laser firing interdimensional Cthulhu butterfly⁴ by my brainwashed minions⁵ will just have to find another means of execution.⁶

Anyway, the failure to brainwash anyone into summoning space butterfly Cthulhu aside,⁷ we've had quite a good year of it so far and this is a trend that I would like, as far as possible to see continued, if we can all put out of our minds for a second the looming spectre of examination that is currently approaching many of us. This term promises the coming of the Veizla and the coming, with it, of yet another new era and yet another new invasion of Norway.⁸ To some of our newer members unfamiliar with the logistics of sending a regular fleet so far north every year, fear not, you will learn our ways soon enough. Also this term will be films, the geeksoc picnic (for those who want to see our new chairbeing and the steward of CTS have at it with pool noodles) and the everpresent pub.

For now though, I leave you to enjoy this issue of TTBA, may it bring you much wisdom and peace of mind.⁹¹⁰¹¹

Nicholas Heitler — Chairbeing.

All hail space butterfly interdimensional laser Cthulhu

¹I hear these things are meant to have footnotes. So this is a footnote about the fact that there will be footnotes.

²A metafootnote if you will.

³No, I'm not following the tradition, my home address is *difficult* to squeeze in. (Unless of course I *have* managed it, and you just don't know I have.)

⁴What?

⁵Obviously not you.

⁶Not that we're a cult.

⁷Happens to the best of us.

⁸Which is definitely Norway.

⁹Did I do the footnote thing right?

¹⁰Wait, what if I *overdid* the footnote thing?

¹¹Nah, couldn't have done.

Editorial

Greetings, Sciencefictioneers!

Another year has come and gone. Old faces have left us. New faces have joined us. And lots of middle faces have merely changed a bit. To one and all I say: welcome, ye with faces and ye with none, to the TTBA.

This edition of the TTBA is a little later than intended (by about a year...), but as a result it contains several times the usual dosage of chainwriting, fiction, reviews, art and idle musings.

We seem to have drifted off towards the dreamy this year. The chainwriting contains no fewer than four dreamscapes, and more Fae than anyone would want to shake a stick at. Even the regular fiction has a magical realism feel to it.

We also bring you the usual crop of 'unusual' chainwriting. One chain starts at the end and ends at the start, one starts at the start and ends in the middle, and one starts and ends everywhere at once. Another chain goes in the usual order, but with prompts along the way, and the final chain is normal, apart from the tiny detail that it's written in **cue booming voice** Epic Verse.

And last but not least, the fearsome footnote horde has been beaten back! The forces unleashed may have made a minor rupture in the fabric of time, but think upon the victory! Think upon what fell fate would surely await us if even one foul footnote had infiltrated our TTBA unchecked?

So without further ado, I leave you in the capable hands of all the wonderful people who wrote things. It's been a blast, and I look forwards to being out-paced by our new TTBA editor, Megan, over the coming year!

Mark Johnson — X-TTBA Editor

Last Year's Committee:

Nicholas Heitler — X-Chairbeing

Isobel Sands — X-Secretary

Olivia Morley — X-Treasurer

Louise Vincent — X-Social Secretary

Alastair Haig — X-Librarian

Mark Johnson — X-TTBA Editor

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Chainwriting

Title Containing What In Hindsight Turns Out To Be A Pun On A Major Plot Point

Alastair Haig, Sarah Binney, Andrew Carlotti, Greg Weir, Andrew Conway, Bryn Reinstadler, Nick Heitler, Curtis Reubens, Harley Jones, Jake Choules, Michael French, Danielle Saunders, Ed Heaney, Rory Hennell-James

Innocent Bystander brushed hair away from their eyes as the trolley left the station. They had an odd name, as people always told them, seeing as they were rarely stood still for more than a few seconds, and were far from innocent in the eyes of most. Innocent had always meant to ask their parents why they were named that, but had never gotten the chance, seeing as their earliest memory was seeing a couple murdered by a figure with bright red hair and a scar in the shape of half a mildly-singed tortoise.

Innocent reckoned they should probably have some kind of **Strong Feelings** towards that tortoise guy, but as of yet they hadn't quite gotten around to doing that. Anyway, chasing down your parents' murderer was a sure fire way to get yourself into a **Story**, with things like **Destiny** and **Adventure**, which Innocent knew would be **A Lot More Hassle Than It's Worth**.

Stories were for people with Heroic names like the ones in Innocent's books. Names with vim, vigour and scars where they'd been brutally mispronounced by ravening hordes. Names like **Ab-salom the Adjectifier**, **Sir Firesnap the Triangulator**, **Lady Laurent the Listlessly Loquacious** or **STUART**. In the stories the Innocent Bystander always walked away unscathed.

Besides, Innocent had no time for stories. They were on a **Mission From the Gods**.

A mission to **Fetch Some Milk**.

As the trolley trundled along down the High Street Innocent absently picked a piece of fluff from their shirt, which gleamed red in the morning sun. The great red-brick façades of city buildings, **Department Stores** and **Civic Buildings** and the

familiar local **Mental Institution**, peeled past. The public speaker system broadcasting each citizen's personal soundtrack was happily blaring out a brisk waltz in Innocent's direction.

Suddenly the soundtrack changed key to an unfamiliar minor, a cello easing out an unsettling tritone and a skilled percussionist producing a clattering sound not unlike the rattle of bones. A cloud momentarily covered the sun, and on the pavement a cat hissed and bolted. It was signs like this which made the residents of Charact City really proud to call themselves Characters. The City Council had recently spent a lot of public money getting its omens upgraded, and Innocent nodded to themselves in appreciation of **Good Craftsmanship, Delivered On Time and Under Budget**.

Innocent glanced around. The only other person on the bus was a hooded figure on the back seat, who had begun to make their way down the aisle. Innocent watched as the figure neared them. On their cheek was a strange scar that looked something like half a mildly-singed tortoise. Innocent's face contorted in effort trying to remember where they'd seen that scar. It was so very familiar.

The figure withdrew their hood to reveal shocking red hair. "Hello, Innocent." There was a knife in their hand. Innocent had time to think "*not again*" before they felt the knife slide between their ribs and then darkness.

* * *

Evil Overlord stepped off the bus to a backdrop of **Dystopian Marching Band**, and smiled. They always loved to hear this particular motif — it gave them a sense of **Righteous Determination**, and helped them to feel at peace with themself. They hated having to use their knives, but Evil knew that in their **Line Of Work**, the **First Law Of EVIL** was paramount: **Never Leave Behind Witnesses**. It was for this reason that Evil's knife was now embedded in the torso of the former bus driver.

With these final witnesses dead, Evil could at last return to their original mission. The public speaker system was now blaring out a triumphant fanfare, obviously symbolising the now-completed

side-quest. It had been a particularly **Gruelling** and **Unpleasant** quest, and Evil was not proud of what they had done, which was probably why the fanfare sounded a little hollow. It had been necessary though, ever since that first **Unfortunate Incident**.

* * *

It had been a **Cold** and **Misty** night, and Evil had been surrounded by an **Eerie Silence**, broken only by the soft thudding of their horse's hooves against the mossy ground. Evil had been nervous — after all, although atmospheric omens weren't as detailed as the latest personal soundtracks, these particular conditions could only mean **Bad Things Were About To Happen**. Nevertheless, Evil had pressed on through the forest, for they were on a **Mission From The Dogs**.

A mission that, thirty years later, they were finally about to complete.

A mission to **Fetch Some Milk**.

The end was close, but that **Cold** and **Misty** night was... a middle, if not a beginning. A flash of light in the darkness, and an **Anguished** whinny from their horse, and —

Evil shook their head and took stock. On their back, with a **Blinding Pain** in their head. A hand reached around to check the damage, and came back **Sticky** with blood.

They pulled themselves wearily to their feet, watching the billowing of the atmospheric omens.

Then two figures emerged from the darkness.

There was no time for anything subtle, not with the weather this ominous. Evil pulled a knife from their belt and, before the figures had time to react, was upon them, striking once — twice —

and two bodies lay **Motionless** and **Slowly Cooling** upon the ground.

Evil disappeared into the mist and slumped down next to a tree.

There had been no choice. **Bad Things Were About To Happen**. It was obvious. And with their hard-won secret knowledge of foreshadowing dynamics and elective metachronal preordination, that left two options, clear as day: Evil could have something **Happen** to them... or become a **Bad Thing**.

In the shock of the moment, Evil Overlord failed to notice one thing: the small child following the couple through the **Cold** and **Misty** night.

* * *

As the last chords of the **End Of Flashback Music** sounded, the **Milk Maid** came into focus. She pushed open the door to the cowshed, and smelled the familiar smell of warm bovine bodies, methane and dung. Several of her charges turned to look at her with a lack of interest that only domesticated ungulates can attain.

"Hello, **Nellie**," she said to the cow in the first stall. "Hello, **Bessie**. Hello, **Poxy**." She went down the line. "Hello, **Braindead**. Hello, **Arsenic**. Hello, **Berserker**. Hello, **Trump**. Hello, **Constipation**. Hello, **Moral Ambiguity**. Oh, hello, **Evil Overlord**, what are you doing here?"

"I came..." They paused, waiting for the chords indicating a **Dramatic Revelation** was about to happen.

Silence.

"Yes?" asked Milk Maid, helpfully.

"I came to get..."

Silence.

"You probably want some milk, then don't you?" said Milk Maid with the air of someone who didn't have all day to wait for **Sound Effects**.

"Er, yes," said Evil Overlord. "If it's not too much **Trouble**. I mean, I could come back later when you get the **Speakers Working**."

"All right," said Milk Maid. "But you have to get it from one of the **Cows**, not like last time."

"I misunderstood your name," said Evil Overlord, blushing. Something about Milk Maid caused their air of **Apocalyptic Menace** to evaporate like brandy on a Christmas pud, but without the flickering blue flames or even a comforting jug of **Bird's Custard** on the side.

Just then the **Dramatic Revelation** chords sounded. Evil Overlord looked at their watch. "Bloody unions," they said.

The Milk Maid turned to leave the cowshed, placing one hand on the door. She paused and then looked back. "You're on your own for this one. You can milk any of the cows, just use that

bucket over there,” she said, motioning over to the dingy bucket in the far corner of the shed.

“Oh, and by the way, I’m expecting another visitor — they should be here in the next half hour. I think their name was **Innocent Bystander?**” In the background, a short **Jingle of the Exposition Bells** began. The Milk Maid’s husky alto voice continued: “If you see them come up to the barn, please send them straight to me. They are on a **Mission from the Gods to Fetch Some Milk**, but I received a terrible omen warning them against fetching the milk, as the fetching of the milk would lead to their inevitable demise at the hands of a most dastardly fellow! It would be **Very Very Bad For The Plot Continuity Of The Universe** if they were to die, for they are the only child of **The Grand High Plotmaster** and **The World Builder**, may their afterlives be writ by only the happiest of daydreamers.”

“Naught to do today but wait for them, so make sure they see me!” She shrugged and left the cowshed, closing the door behind her.

A small pause.

Dramatic Revelation chords played once more.

Muttering about the unions, **Evil Overlord** ignored the omen. If they’d thought about it, they would have realised this was metachronologically impossible to do, but they did it anyway.

Evil Overlord turned to the cows, wondering how exactly a person was supposed to extract milk from them. After the previous event with the **Milk Maid** they didn’t want any further embarrassments to occur. They wondered who this **Innocent Bystander** was supposed to be though. A **Mission From The Gods** lacked originality frankly, whoever they were **The Grand Council of The Narrative Imperative** ought to have been ashamed. It reminded **Evil Overlord** too much of their own mission, from the **Dogs** of course, repetition was not typically a good sign. “I wonder”, **Evil** said out loud for the benefit of the audience, “if the two are connected”.

There was a slight rise in the **Relaxed But Still Sinister Background Music** as it came to a complicated cadence ending on a crushing sequence of diminished chords, before transforming into **Really, Really Sinister Background Music With**

Menace.

Evil Overlord stood back and took stock now. Based on the location/imperative standard and the code of chronology, this was neither the right place nor the right time for that music. That could only mean one thing. Somewhere, somehow, a **Dramatic Sequence** was about to occur and the end of it would go **Very Badly** for them. But for it to happen here and now something must have gone very wrong indeed.

Then it hit them, all at once. **Dramatic Revelation** did not sound this time, and they thought they knew why.

“Oh. Oh, **Balls.**”

The aforementioned **Sinister Background Music** cut off as they spoke, a sudden silence to emphasise these words, the moment that **Evil Overlord** realised exactly what they had done. They had messed with the **Plot Continuity of the Universe**, they had **Slain Someone Exceedingly Important**, they had **Put Their Foot Right In It.**

It was really very dramatic, and it wasn’t until the music failed to return post-utterance that **Evil Overlord** realised that the speaker had blown.

“Okay. So. This is **Bad.**” **Evil Overlord** spoke aloud as they paced, for otherwise the scene would merely be them **Pacing Silently**, and that would be boring and unenlightening. “This is **Very Very Bad**, and I probably need to fix it, **Mission From The Dogs** or no. Which means...”

Evil Overlord sighed. They really hated time travel.

* * *

Eccentric Scientist had been standing on their toilet hanging a picture when their doorbell rang. They didn’t slip though, for they had **Those Socks With The Grippy Bits On The Soles.** Instead, they finished hanging their painting (a **Sun-Drenched Hilly Landscape**) before answering the door with a terse “Yes?”

Evil Overlord grinned sheepishly. “Hello, **Eccentric.**”

Eccentric Scientist very almost slammed the door right then. “**Evil.** What brings you here?”

“I... I need to borrow the **Chronomabob.**”

“Gods, no, not after the last time.” The **Chronomabob Incident**, the event responsible for **Eccentric Scientist’s** animosity towards **Evil Overlord**, was a convoluted affair far too complex for this narrator to fit within her portion of the story... though perhaps the next one will give it a shot?

The next **Narrator** looked on from his **Third Person Omniscient Viewpoint**. The incident alluded to by his predecessor, full of fascination as it was, is well-documented elsewhere, and would distract more from the **Narrative** than required. Suffice to say, **Evil Overlord** and **Eccentric Scientist** had had much history between them, and **Evil** was able to blackmail them into giving them the **Chronomabob**. They felt it was justified to resort to that; after all, the **Plot Continuity of the Universe** was at stake. In fact, they reflected, it wasn’t really evil at all.

Now, how best to reverse the temporal anomaly that they had caused? **Evil** contemplated for some time over their plan; after all, with time travel you can take all the time you want to plan. Perhaps they could go back to before this quest started and explain it all to themselves? After all, they were a reasonable **Overlord**, and — no, that never works, and besides, the **Keepers of Temporal Continuity** were very shirty about people meeting their past selves.

How about preventing themselves from encountering the **Innocent Bystander** in the first place? Now that had more mileage. They had met on the bus...

* * *

The **Bus Station** was thronged with people, but **Evil** cut through the crowds with their usual straightforward manner to the office of the **Area Transport Operations Manager**.

“Give me the details of the bus movements and their drivers two days ago!” they demanded.

“You’ll have to wait your turn,” responded the **Area Manager**; and, with a sigh, **Evil Overlord** made their way to the back of the queue. They weren’t in a hurry.

By the time they made it to the head of the queue, they rather wished they *had* been in a hurry, because at least then they could justifiably

have used **Devious and/or Dastardly and/or Fantastically Violent Methods** to shorten the wait. The people in front of them had been the usual mix of **Private Investigators Who Don’t Play by the Book** — who always insisted on bribing the clerks even when they would happily have given them the information they wanted for free — **Down-on-Their-Luck Losers With Sob Stories** — in this case, mostly trying to weep their way out of fare-dodging fines — and **People Whose Seemingly Simple Requests Take Seven Months to Fulfill and Require The Filling-Out of a Hilarious Amount of Paperwork** — so far as **Evil** could discern, they had been trying to reserve a seat on the **Midnight Train**, but had wanted to know where it would actually be going. A reasonable question, **Evil** had thought at the time, but their feelings on the matter had soured somewhat after 54 minutes and **Thirteen Forms Signed in Quadruplicate**.

“Buses, was it?” asked the **Area Manager**. “Day before yesterday?” They prided themselves on their **Efficiency, Attention to Detail** and **Faultless Short-Term Memory**, being as they were a **Consummate Professional**, and not one of those **Shiftless Slackers** or **Obnoxious Jobsworths** their school teachers had **Warned Them So Much About**.

“Um, what? Er, yes.” **Evil Overlord** had almost forgotten what they’d come for. “And the drivers.”

“Ahem?”

Sigh. “And the drivers, *please.*” **Obnoxious jobsworth**.

The **Area Manager** sniffed loudly, a well-honed sign of **Mild Displeasure** and **Moral Superiority**. From the background music, a faint trill of **Audience-Visible Irony** could be heard, as the **Area Manager** really did have the moral superiority, given **Evil’s** tendency to be, well, evil.

“Ah yes, here we go.” The music swirled in a **Faintly Dramatic Buildup**. “The day before yesterday, all red buses were driven by **Always Wears Blue**, all blue buses were driven by **Always Wears Red**, and oh yes, I remember **Sometimes Wears Red And Sometimes Wears Blue** did a cover shift for one of them, though I note,” with **Disapproving Tone** building in the background, “that no-one deigned to fill in the paperwork for that.

So I can't say when that would have occurred. Shiftless slackers."

Evil paused for a moment. They could almost hear the **Laugh Track**. They didn't have time to — oh, right.

For the next three hours, **Evil** planned. The **Laugh Track** had indeed played at one point, when about one hour in, they realised the route map they had picked up was only valid from yesterday onwards. Since then however, the music had faded to **Distant Rumbling**, with a disconcerting amount of **Clown Jazz** thrown over the top. That didn't sound right. Maybe **Evil** *didn't* have time after all.

But it didn't matter now. They had **A Plan**. Wait. Too indefinite. They had... (**Dramatic Revelation** sounds) ...**The Plan**.

* * *

Innocent Bystander brushed hair away from their eyes as the trolley left the station. As the trolley trundled along down the High Street Innocent absently picked a piece of fluff from their shirt, which gleamed red in the morning sun. The public speaker system broadcasting each citizen's personal soundtrack was happily blaring out a brisk waltz in Innocent's direction.

Suddenly the soundtrack changed key to a sort of cheerful rural jingle, with the odd calming **Yodel** thrown in for good measure. The bus was empty but for the driver — had always been empty — although someone had left one of the windows open and, on closer inspection, a carton of milk on the back seat. How long had that been there? Gross.

Innocent wandered up to the back seat, swaying with the trolley's motion. There was a postit on the carton. It said, **Fresh From The Cow! :)**

They sniffed cautiously at the carton. Sealed as it was, it did indeed seem to be fresh, or at least lack the definite signs of being **Unfresh**. Well, they *were* on a **Mission From the Gods**. It seemed this had just been a somewhat anticlimatic one.

Innocent pulled the stop-chain and, whistling along with their jaunty backing track, disembarked, milk in hand.

* * *

Evil Overlord glared down the street, as they were wont to do. They had been *there*, and the bus had been *there*, and then the bus had been trundling off and now there was just them on an empty street with-

"**Woof.**"

Evil was confused for a moment. Was their one **Dogs** or **Gods**? As part of their **Evil Plan** they had invoked the **Dogs**, and their rewards for **Fetching Some Milk** would be great indeed... hold on, or was it that the **Gods** had contacted them and sent them on a holy quest to **Fetch Some Milk**? No, no, that seemed very much like somebody else's objective entirely. This felt awfully like one of those **Grandfather Problems** that popped up pretty much every time anyone messed with causality — but they hadn't (wouldn't?) learnt their lesson in the past, and so here they were again. **Dogs** or **Gods**? Oh yes — someone had barked, hadn't they? That made it pretty...

Evil had spent enough time lost in their **Temporal Dizziness** for the **Suspenseful Music** to build up to a natural climax. They turned around.

* * *

Innocent's happy whistling trailed off for a moment. Something **Wasn't Quite Right**, but how could that be? They had successfully **Fetches Some Milk** and surely only turning in the quest was left on the agenda. Nothing beyond the empty street with-

"**Behold ye, and be not afraid.**"

Innocent was confused for a moment. Was their one **Gods** or **Dogs**? They had been unexpectedly favoured by a **Divine Apparition** and had been addressed by the **Gods**, and their pious duty of **Fetching Some Milk** could hardly be gainsaid... hold on, or was it that the **Dogs** had contacted them as part of one of those nefarious and intricate schemes to **Fetch Some Milk**? No, no, that seemed very much like somebody else's objective entirely...

For some reason, a climax was swelling out of **Suspenseful Music**. From where could that have sprung? They turned around.

* * *

Innocent turned around and lo! they had been right all along. Or wrong all along. Or both. They beheld on the

Evil turned around and lo! they had been right all along. Or wrong all along. Or both. They beheld on the

road before them **Anubis, Jackal-Headed God of the Journey to the Underworld**, they beheld on the road before them **Xolotl, Dog-Headed God of Fire and Lightning** and they beheld on the road before them **Fenrir, Great Wolf and Bane of Odin**.

That didn't make things any easier at all, thought **Evil / Innocent**. Well, at least they were certainly on a **Mission From The Gods / Dogs**. Or **Dogs / Gods**. Or... No! Damn it. A **Mission From...**

"Sorry, are you a **God** or a **Dog**? I'm having a bit of trouble keeping things straight, I think there may have been a temporal anomaly at some point."

"BE NOT CONFUSED MORTAL," the clearly **Ancient and Immortal** being before them boomed, "I AM THE ONE WHO SENT YOU ON YOUR **MISSION TO FETCH SOME MILK**, A **MISSION** YOU HAVE AT LAST COMPLETED!"

"But could you just clarify if you're on the side of **Good** or **Evil**?"

"I SERVE TO BRING ABOUT WHAT IS **BEST FOR THE WORLD!**"

This wasn't a particularly helpful answer. It was well known that the **Forces of Good** always told the truth, but it was also known that the **Forces of Evil** always lied about their intentions and had been known to pretend to be the **Forces of Good** as part of their **Nefarious Plans**. Furthermore, no one was quite sure which sides the **Dogs** and **Gods** were on.

The quiet strings of **Confusion** were abruptly interrupted by the thunderclap of **Last Act Revelation**. From around a street corner strode the **Plotmaster** and the **Worldbuilder**.

"Stop this right now, this has all gotten very **Silly!**"

"But how can this be? I saw you die!"

"Ah, but you **Never Saw the Bodies.**"

"Yes I did! There was loads of blood and everything!"

"Oh for **Plotness Sake!** No one even knows who's talking anymore! We're going to have to reboot whole **Arc**, the **Producers Will Not Be Happy!**"

* * *

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife...

Title Containing What In Hindsight Turns Out To Be A Pun On A Major Plot Point — Extras

Comments:

"Oh good grief." — Danielle

Alternative Title Suggestions:

"14 writers in possession of a good chain must be in want of a plot."

A Close Shave

Ed Heaney, Nick Heitler, Danielle Saunders, Megan Griffiths, Adam Jermyn, Harley Jones, Alex Guttenplan, Olivia Morley, Jake Choules, Samuel Cook, Sarah Binney, Alastair Haig, Mark Johnson

The Master of Pigeons held, with a certainty bordering on fanaticism, that it was advantageous to the point of necessity to first consult the astrologer.

The Silver Lady Armourer derided the Master's conviction, openly suggesting that aesthetics were vastly more important than omens, but when pressed for details of her plan, backed down from daring actually to make a suggestion.

The Lord of Blackchapel and the Three Troughs was not hesitant in suggesting that in this modern age, severe and pragmatic, nothing would be more appropriate than removing everything. It would be symbolic, too, of a fresh start; surely the public would approve.

The Great Laughing Man wondered whether it were even desirable, let alone necessary, to consult the wishes of the public, and countered the Lord with the suggestion that in fact opulence would be appropriate; surely, he asserted, the public would feel short-changed in any other situation.

Nobody had even considered consulting the King, but it was so much trouble getting an answer out of him that it would hardly have contributed to the important points of the discussion, or the cut and thrust of the debate. In fact, it's entirely possible that he didn't know he was getting a haircut at all.

All this went on in the background for some time, tensions gradually rising to a great crescendo, such that without a word being said even the Men Of the Far Desert Geode, who lived under a literal rock with their heads in the literal sand had to stand up (coughing the sand out of their lungs, how they actually *survived* was — and as far as this humble Loremaster of the Forgotten Ages knows, still is — a total mystery) and realise that an extremely important event was about to be afoot.

The arguing between those in the *know* was just a triviality. All there to build up and up the

significance of the event as much as they could, it would as always, all climax at that crowning event, the truly momentous occasion that was The Sharpening of the Scissors.

Even the king's obliviousness was a part of it, it was a ritual as old as time itself practically. This year however, it was going to be different. The Great Laughing Man knew well the true, darker purpose of the haircut, and this year the Lord of Blackchapel had decided too that enough was, finally enough.

On the eve of the Sharpening, when the excitement was at its peak, the Lord of Blackchapel numbly fingered the bottle of red dye currently residing in his pocket. If this went wrong, it is quite possible that he and he alone could see how disastrous the consequences would be. Behind every ritual superstition and every blow struck in the great debating halls, there was an element of real, powerful, truth. Not to mention that, if appearances were not kept up, there were those who would *notice* the lack of the King's New Hairdo.

He had not known what to expect, hours ago, when he had put out the first tentative feelers. Nothing so unsubtle as a Silenced Petition or a murmur in the hallways or even an Unsimple Husting, although all had been considered. But there had been Words spoken by People, most of whom were connected to the Lord of Blackchapel in sufficiently obvious ways that none would suspect they were *connected* to the Lord of Blackchapel. And then — minutes ago — the Lord of Blackchapel had found a small vial in his pocket.

Mysterious, or perhaps finally someone at court was willing to assume that appearances really were the truth of things. Perhaps the Great Laughing Man, with his love of the flamboyant. Maybe she who armoured the impassive Silver Ladies who guarded the sanctity of the debating chamber and its aesthetics.

Or it was a trap. There were those who would bring down the Royal Behairing for their own ends. Not to mention bringing him down — an avowed modernist was a good scapegoat for most things. The inevitable, horrific fall-out would be ascribed to him, and many would profit from it.

It could not be helped. Blackchapel nodded to the Silver Ladies flanking the entrance to the Halls before slipping out into the city.

Here, the sky was darkening and the festival just beginning. The streets were still relatively passable, and he was able to move with ease whilst also remaining unnoticed amongst the early revellers. Food stalls were littered across the paths, sellers hurrying to prepare their merchandise for the When The Sharpening actually began, it would be impossible to traverse the city via surface routes, so he would have to move quickly in order to return to his position for the end of the event.

Before The Sharpening could begin, the Royal Scissors would need to be transported from their summer residence in the eastern quarter. It was to this location, the appointed lodgings of His Majesty's Barber, that the Lord of Blackchapel made his way, skirting around the main entrance from which the scissors would be carried to the back door of the property. The location of the door being known only by a privileged few, there were no guards standing by, and Blackchapel was able to enter the building using the Spare Key (granted to those most trusted members of the Royal Court, able to unlock almost every government owned lock in the kingdom.)

The key did not belong to the Lord, but rather had been pilfered from the Silver Lady Armourer by a maid (extremely well paid for her silence), before being copied and cut (by a locksmith who would rather his criminal exploits remain anonymous) and replaced in her chambers all during breakfast. With a plot that if uncovered before its completion could leave him if not very nearly dead, then very actually dead, the Lord of Blackchapel preferred to have as much plausible deniability as possible.

The Scissors themselves were housed in a secure vault in the basement, Blackchapel however headed in the opposite direction, upstairs and towards the bed chambers of the Barber.

With a deftness hardly characteristic of one in as high as position as himself, the Lord of Blackchapel silently yet quickly opened the doors to the chamber and crept in. Hoping to avoid waking the Barber's wife, he carefully tapped the man on his forearm.

"Quickly!", the Lord of Blackchapel whispered. "Quickly we must go."

"Hurghhh? Er, what?" responded the barely awakened Barber.

"You are in grave danger. Gather your things. I'll explain on the way!"

At this stage the two men were somewhat louder than a whisper, and as he pulled the Barber out of bed the Lord of Blackchapel glanced over at the Barber's wife, wary for signs of her waking. The Barber looked away to gather his things, and the Lord of Blackchapel quickly poured half of the dye in the vial onto the bed where the Barber had lain, careful of his patterning. In the quiet dark the Barber saw nothing and his wife heard nothing.

Out the door they went, and into the city. The Lord of Blackchapel kept them moving, never resting and never pausing to explain. The Barber quickly lost his breath, and so it became a moot point. The Lord of Blackchapel guided him into an inn, but not before concealing both of their faces under heavy cloaks. He paid the innkeeper for a room and left the Barber in a rush, telling him only that "they would come" if he didn't stay put. With that, and the vial carefully in hand, the Lord of Blackchapel went on his way.

* * *

While Blackchapel was ushering the Barber to the inn, another figure had arrived at the Barber's house. Covered with a dark cloak, the hood drawn well over his head, he was sufficiently concealed that none saw him enter; nor did he make a sound, as he too had a Spare Key. He sneaked down to the basement where the scissors were kept; the lock on the vault was still secure, and he breathed a sigh of relief. The vault was held both by a conventional lock and also by a combination lock; there was only one person in the kingdom who held a Spare Key and knew the number for the combination lock.

His majesty chuckled as he removed the scissors from their vault. No haircut for me this year, he thought to himself as he carefully re-locked the door. The ceremony was one which he had despised ever since ascending to the throne at the age of 7; this time, he thought, I shall not undergo it! After all, what's the point of being King if you're forced to have unpleasant haircuts every year? Besides, as he leapt across the rooftops, he was having the most fun he'd had in years. He arrived at the city wall, and, locating a stone, tied the scissors to it and hurled them into the river.

A satisfied smirk was on his face as he made his way back to the palace.

But his absence had not gone unnoticed.

* * *

The Commander of the Guard stood before the throne, his posture somehow even more ramrod-straight than the Guardsmen on either side, the manner his salute making it clear that he expected to be giving the orders here rather than taking them. The King on the throne, dwarfed by it like a stuffed toy left in an armchair, looked up.

"Yes, Commander? Is there a reason why you have disturbed us?"

"You know very well why, Your Majesty. The Barber is missing or dead. The Scissors are gone. Somebody must be attempting to Behair a pretender."

The King waved his hand. "Surely my extremely competent Guard are aware of this plot? The Realm has survived its like in the past."

"Yes, and your father worried so much about them that he had no hair left for the Barber to cut."

"My father was a wise man, but perhaps too prone to worry. Do you, or do you not, know who the plotters are?"

"If we did, Your Majesty, the pretender would have no head left to Behair. But as we do not—"

The King thought of interrupting, then thought better of it.

"—as I was saying, you cannot leave the palace without a bodyguard under these circumstances as you did last night. Of course we noticed, did you think we would not? It would be a dereliction of your duty to the Realm to get yourself killed."

"I am the King! I decide what my duties are."

"Your Majesty, you are twelve years old!"

Struck by this inarguable truth, the King relented. From the experience with the scissors last night, he knew when subtlety was more important.

The fact that the Barber was missing/dead on the same night as the theft was a huge coincidence that the King could not ignore. So much so, that he missed the entirety of what the Commander of the Guard had just said.

"Is that really necessary?" the King inquired,

hoping to sound attentive, and from the look of the Commander of the Guard, not quite succeeding.

"Yes, Your Majesty. And I would also contact the astrologer. This is a grave omen that she would do well to shed some light on"

The Process of Calling the Astrologer was started, with the Commander of the Guard ordering One of the Guard to contact a Silver Lady who would run up to the Astrologer's Tower, which was now just a room on the top floor after an alcohol induced accident had burned down the last Tower.

This ritual was interrupted when a sudden shriek hit the air as the still warm body of the Master of Pigeons was found, having suffered a fatal heart attack after having his final consultation with the astrologer. She was sad over his death as his near obsession over her readings had done wonders to her self esteem, however she now would have a lot more free time to enjoy other pursuits. He had been her only truly frequent customer.

Yet this death, another strange coincidence within 24 hours. Could the Behairing plot be larger than imagined?

"No."

"What?" The King's mind had wandered so far away that he couldn't even remember what question he had asked the Astrologer to prompt such an answer.

"The Pigeon was old and sickly. It does not surprise me that he would die now, plot or no."

"Oh. So it wasn't, um, written in the stars or anything?"

"It probably was," said the Astrologer, squinting up at the ceiling of the throne room as though she could see the stars through it, "but I would have to check." She turned to the Commander of the Guard. "Might I perhaps be taken to the scene of the Barber's disappearance, that I might better discern the Order of the Cosmos as it pertains to this situation?"

The Commander gave a questioning glance to the King and was met by a silent, hesitant nod. "I myself must lead the search party, but one of my men" — he gestured to a guard — "will show you there."

As the assembled company filed out of the

throne room to their various destinations, the King found himself gazing absent-mindedly upwards. The haircut was averted for now, but he worried that the stars might have other dreadful things written in them for him. A bath, for example. He shuddered inwardly and shifted in his throne, and the rustling of his robes echoed across the now-empty room, crisp against the cold stone walls.

The barber, perhaps unsurprisingly, rarely cut himself shaving, so the red blotch on his shirt puzzled him.

However, not nearly as much as what he was doing hiding in an inn or who *they* were, nor why *they* would come for him if he left his room. Maybe he could just risk going downstairs for a drink and some breakfast? Yes, that would be fine, surely? He wouldn't be leaving the inn, would he? And he was rather peckish. Yes, that would be fine.

He left his room.

The Lord of Blackchapel was also puzzled. How was it that on exactly the same day as his long-considered plan to subvert the Behairing by stealing the Barber, someone else should also try to do exactly the same thing by stealing the Scissors? This was most awkward. His thunder had been stolen, for one thing. There was only one thing for it: he would have to find the Scissors (or, at least, find a Scissors); otherwise, all his planning and plotting would be for naught. Maybe the Astrologer would have seen some portents to help direct his search? It couldn't hurt to ask, while he summoned his infinitely-more-reliable agents to find out if they'd seen anything.

The Astrologer and her escort arrived at the Barber's house and were let in by the Barber's wife, who was fast on her way to being an end-member of the distraught spectrum. After calming her down with some mystic mumbo-jumbo and a sneaky bit of sedative powder, the Astrologer ascended to the bedroom. She immediately clocked that the red dye was, in fact, red dye, and that the Barber was therefore very much alive. Blood would have been blacker. There were also clear mud stains coming into the room from the staircase that led up from the rear door. Someone with a Spare Key had done this. For show, she muttered some vague nonsense about the Weasel being in the Thirteenth House of Carnil the In-

constant, which was indicative of deceit, surprise and treacle. This seemed to pass muster, as far as she could tell from her escort's reaction. Mulling over what the dye and the mud meant, she and her escort left the house.

"But the SCISSORS!" wailed the Auspicial Window-Caster, who had always been prone to melodrama. "Whatever are we to DO?"

"Keep your hair on," grumbled the Unforsaken Archbishop of the Periodical Dynamo. "We can use another pair. Nobody would notice."

"Notice?!" interjected the Mathemagician Supreme. "Not to split hairs, *Archbishop*, but the Scissors are unique! The King could have a haircut, naturally, but without the Scissors it would not be *the* Haircut."

"Perhaps," said the Silver Lady Armourer, "we must allow ourselves to be guided by the fate of the Scissors. This year the King's Haircut shall be one in which his hair happens not to be cut at all. He shall be a leaf on the wind, carried not by his choice but by the aesthetic values of Nature and Chance themselves."

"Preposterous!" The Window-Caster was having a bad hair day. "What if something were to happen to the King? Then there would be no Hair to the Throne!"

"That would not do!"

The eyes of all the Ladies and Lords of the Court swung as one to the figure with the booming voice who now stood at the doorway to the Hall of Enthronement. Dripping with water, striding with righteous purpose towards them, clad in sodden robes of fine slate wool, was the Grey Laughing Man. As he neared the Dais of Regal Imperative all around him saw he held something in his right hand.

"Could it be?" gasped the Archbishop.

"We find ourselves in a — heehee — hairy situation, my Lords and Ladies," announced the Man. "But" — he giggled — "I believe I have taken the King from the cross hairs of Doom and rendered recent events merely that of a Close Shave." With a flamboyant flourish he placed the Scissors upon their prescribed slot in the Throne.

Much uproar was stirred throughout the court, particularly from the Red and Blue Laughing Men, present as proxies to the Great Laughing Man,

who was notably absent on 'Official Business'. The Grey Laughing Man had been banished from the court 3 years ago following The Incident during the Painting of the Royal Bedchamber, and yet stood now at the Throne, waving the Scissors around.

'Ha ha.' said the Red Laughing Man, in a serious tone, 'good to see you Grey. He he.'

'Hoo hoo,' smiled the Blue Laughing Man, stepping towards the throne, 'the Great Laughing Man will want to know where you found those. Chortle chortle.' The Blue Laughing Man stopped briefly, wondering whether saying the word chortle was enough to properly qualify as a Laughing Man, before continuing; 'How can we be sure that you aren't using this... hair-raising experience to further your own agenda?' The Blue Laughing Man grimaced at his own pun, but retained a watchful eye on the Grey Laughing Man.

'Well,' snickered the Grey Laughing Man, 'lend me your shears...'

* * *

The Commander of the Guard had given up the search for the Barber. He and the Astrologer had met and decided that if the Barber was going to be found, the stars would have said so and they would have found him by now, so instead they both found a nice inn to have some food and drink.

A nervous man tapped the Commander on the shoulder and asked if he was one of *them*. After the Commander shook his head, the man nodded and returned to his drink and breakfast.

* * *

The Lord of Blackchapel had given up the search for the Astrologer. She wasn't in her tower, and the Silver Lady indicated that she had gone Out. Blackchapel decided that if the Astrologer was Out, things surely were ominous, and he should do something about them.

* * *

The Great Laughing Man woke up from his Official Business, squinted through his shutters at the sun, swore, with a chuckle, and hurried to pull on his ceremonial robes.

* * *

The Commander of the Guard drained his tankard. As he slammed it back to the table, a nervous man jumped and made eye contact.

The first double-take was performed by the Commander of the Guard, and it was the kind that clanked and caused onlookers to run for cover.

The second double-take was entirely down to the Barber, and it was the kind which you could only possibly perform if you had been holding an absolute certainty that the heavily armoured man across the room was not one of *them*, but were now forced to contend with the equally absolute certainty that said heavily armoured man was storming towards you.

The third and final double-take belonged to the Astrologer, and it was the most well-performed of the three. It was also the least sincere, since it served only to cover the fact that she had just come up with a Plan.

The Commander of the Guard grabbed the Barber, hefted him over one burly and incredibly unceremonious shoulder, and set off for the palace at a run.

The Astrologer also hurried out, but her chosen route to the palace could, at best, be described as circuitous.

* * *

The Lord of Blackchapel intercepted the Commander of the Guard at the palace gate, another Cunning Plan forming even as he arrived. This Cunning Plan failed precisely three and a half strides later, not even overcoming the first hurdle. It is surprisingly difficult to jump hurdles when slung over someone else's shoulder.

* * *

The Grey Laughing Man bowed, or rather, doubled over giggling; the two were always difficult to tell apart. The rest of the court stood silent for but a moment, before uproar descended.

The King sidled carefully out of the room, straight into the oncoming bulk of the Captain of the Guard, complete with matching Barber and Blackchapel shoulder ornaments. The four went down in a clattering, rattling mass of limbs.

The Unforsaken Archbishop lived up to her name, unfurling a pair of scissors from underneath her mitre. The Window-Caster cast first one window, and then a second, adding to the cacophony the revered air of a true sage about their business, counterpoised against the high-pitched trill of shattering glass. The Mathemagician demanded a head. The Silver Lady Armourer was already half way across the room, looking dead set on taking one.

The King rolled clear from the clutches of the Captain of the Guard, fleeing through the open doors. The Lord of Blackchapel was not so lucky. Rather stunned, the Barber staggered to his feet.

The Astrologer chose that moment to bustle into the room, dragging with her a protesting Royal Personage. With a minimum of effort, the Astrologer installed a Royal Bottom firmly on the Royal Throne, and bade the Barber to commence the Behairing.

With a masterful swish, the Barber guided the scissors through the first cut, before looking on in confusion as a single lock of golden hair drifted down to rest upon the throne.

"A royal hair has come to the throne! The King is fled! Long live the. Erm. Queen?"

A Close Shave — Extras

Comments:

"After reading the first line of this story, I had a clear job that needed doing. I may have spent my 250 words on plot-useless sidetrack, but I achieved my goal." — Olivia

"Death to the pigeons." — Olivia

The *****'s Tale

Samuel Cook, Harley Jones, Tristan Roberts, Curtis Reubens, Rory Hennell-James, Sarah Binney, Adam Jermyn, Charlotte Griffiths, Ed Heaney, Greg Weir, Sparta, Alex Guttenplan, Megan Griffiths, Bryn Reinstadler, Mark Johnson

'Level-9 demiurge in Sector 3.
Dark minions gathering rapidly.
Level-2 necromancer summoning
Dead galore in Sector 4 with a ring.
These are the new incidents of the day.
Go to your daily work stations, I pray'
The start of another new day was it —
Dark Being Investigation Unit
Emblazoned everywhere for we worked there,
Ensuring evil stay'd in limits fair.
Helchant and Happin, those were our good names,
Enforcement detectives, we were the same.
To us two would these new incidents fall;
We would have to go and visit them all
To check that the laws, the rules were being main-
tain'd:
To whit, good and proper treatment of slaves,
No world-ending mega-super-weapons,
Secret bases with much ventilation
(How else was the hero to gain access?),
Torture, spikes and cackling not to excess,
Pillage and nous of minions kept in check,
Shooting and fighting skills av'rage at best.
You get the idea, need we continue?
To the day's work now turned our minds two.
'To Sector 3 must we go first, Helchant,
I think; that demiurge has us aslant
Looked for a while now, it seems to me.'
'Happin, I do most certainly agree,
Crafty and cunning, apt to rule-breaking,
Will most sickerly be such a being.
If not restrain'd, a sector could we lose.
Our stockpil'd weaponry we'd have to use,
Or even a full Emergency call.
A failure that would be for us all.'
'Then let us, Helchant, most quickly away;
To Sector 3 we go without delay.'

* * *

Arriving through the portal to the wastes,
Bedecked with weaponry, lest we be faced

with adversarial minions of the foe,
to the dark tower we hasted us to go.
The door of blacken'd wood lower'd o'er our
heads;
The mighty locks and bars of heavy lead
And knocker, shapen like a mighty skull,
Or hanging doorbell's rope for one to pull,
Attached thereunto, gave us a clear sign
Of what nature of man we'd find inside.
'Well, let's get on with it', good Happin sighed;
I nodded my assent and tugged the rope.
The sound that met our ears defied all hope;
The dread bells rang a soul-destroying tune:
The theme from *Fawlty Towers*. None too soon,
The grim gate opened wide; two guards stood
there,
And as we entered in that gruesome pair
Escorted us to a vast reception room
Wherein sat that great harbinger of doom,
Lord *****, upon a mighty throne
Of oaken wood, about which there were strewn
The skulls of former enemies, picked clean
By *****'s ravens; no more mean
And vicious birds on this world did appear.
Then Happin spoke, his voice betraying no fear:
"We're from the DBIU; our sources say
That you've been contravening rule 12a
Of the dark lord procedural guidance code".
Lord *****'s face grew red with rage;
My hand reached for my pistol; at this stage
No caution was too great for us to take.
"We do require," I said, "that in your lake
Piranhas, crocodiles or gators *only* swim;
Expressly not allowed are your dolphins."
Lord ***** stood from th'onyx throne
And declar'd "I shall keep gators alone
If you do this terrible task for me
You must journey below to circle three
And from deep within that most fetid mire
Fetch me the object of my heart's desire
and retrieve it from the guard of the worm
in face of whose roar no man may stand firm.
What there you'll seek for me is hidden well;
In the slush of the third circle of hell
There lies the champion's portion of a pig
Garnished with rosemary's finest sprig
Destined to the bravest of them all
The greatest to set foot in Hell's feast-hall.
Bring this token as bounty back to me
And I shall make my dolphins be set free;

Should you fall on the path of this, your quest
The dolphins will not leave like they're my guest
Manta rays, shrimp and goldfish shall I keep
You rule-minded jobsworths will start to weep
as from the marshy shallows of my lake
I the crocodiles and piranhas will take
My fiercest Gators too shall not be spar'd
But into rich burgers shall be prepar'd
For a barbecue at which I shall feast
Which you would miss as you would be deceas'd.
Bring the champion's great portion back to me
And no need for gatorburgers there'll be.
Dolphins I will allow you to remove
Whilst the remaining gators I'll approve.
Crocodiles and piranhas too shall stay
If you succeed in this great task I say."
Happin did soon speak, "Lord *****,
If we this task-" I shushed him. "No, hang on,
Say, who are you, *Lord*? For we are the law.
The DBIU aren't minions of yours.
We shall not carry out your tired mission.
I hereby reject all your conditions."

* * *

"Well that went well." "Oh, do shut up Happin."
"No really, well done. I would be clapping,
Were it not for the manacles we wear.
Antagonise the villain. Good plan, yeah?"
"*Shut up*, Happin." I just needed to think,
But thinking's hard hanging above the drink.
"Dictate to me, will you?" *****
Yelled up at us from solid ground beneath.
"Say hello to my dolphins!" she did gloat,
And sent us tumbling down into the moat.
We hit;
I thrashed;
I pulled;
the shackles held;
I choked and spluttered;
my breath I'd expelled
On impact;
Couldn't breathe;
I kicked my feet;
The sharks;
Where were the sharks;
We were dead meat
If they reached us;
A pain;
A shredding tear;

But as the gator caught me I found air.
A deep breath, two, my lungs I filled once more.
Then punched the beast that through my leg had
tore.

It retreated, but left the water red.
If I kept losing blood I'd soon be dead,
Not to mention the sharks that would find me,
Drawn by my scent and whipped into frenzy.
And as I struggled, so Happin did too,
Although his blood was a shade of sky-blue.
Unbeknownst to the Lord, I had concealed,
A steel-fang'd knife in my boots rubber-heel'd.
My left hand press'd to my life-bleeding wound,
While with my right the black blade silver-run'd,
I held up and search'd, 'cross water wine-dark,
Dreading the sight of a cruel-finn'd shark.
I look'd to the front, the back and the right,
Then to my left saw a terrible sight,
Closing in swiftly a sword-blade tall fin,
Drawn by the blood of myself and Happin.
Awaiting strong jaws, my eyes I did close,
But felt on my arm a kind bottle nose.
There had not come the sharks I had feared,
But in their place had dolphins appeared.
With gentle pushes, dolphins number'd four
Carry'd us over to the moat's safe shore.
Panting and gasping and bleeding we lay,
But retreat was not DBIU's way.
'gainst life-bleeding wounds I held my black blade,
And with black witch-fire, clean new flesh was
made.

Dark Lord ***** had broken the law,
This sort of thing did our masters abhor.
On top of all this she had done much worse,
By attacking us herself she did curse,
For miss-stocking moats, there is but a fine,
For acting 'gainst us, it is on the tine
Of a trident she must be impaled
From helmeted head to legs black-mailed.
To perform this task we had not the skill,
The strength or the arms this Dark Lord to kill
But p'rhaps with assistance from DBIU's
Illicit arsenal we might just choose
A tool of such power, such evil, that soon
Our nemesis Lord would be facing her doom.

* * *

"Weapons that might ***** obliterate?
A fine mess you're both in. I commiserate.

You're wanting the forms Twenty Omega Sept,
Requisition of stock for Impending Death.
And don't confuse it with *Infectious Disease!*"
Thus spake the Warden of Inventories,
Who with one razor ruby claw
Handed Happin a form I'd not seen before.
The DBIU's bureaucracy did
Confound us, but still we heeded
The Warden's yet unambiguous rule
As with ***** we both prepared to duel.
(Well, truel, in truth.) Our weapon obtained,
Our mission now clear, our goal ascertained,
We made to return to *****'s lair,
Now better prepared 'gainst what we found there.

* * *

Hastily now we walked to the tow'r,
With intent and strength not to cower.
These Lords rule their worlds with iron and ire,
But that's not a match for our nuclear fire!
Through new-burned holes in the door we did
walk,
Glowing scorches warned those who would gawk.
The guards did run as we melt'd their stations,
Metal and pride we fissioned with patience.
We took the long way round, spreading ruin,
To make sure the Lord knew trouble was brew'n.
Why not make a show of it, after all,
How oft' do you see a demagog fall?
And so we wound our way through the castle,
Happin and Helchant, without a hassle.
But then we turn'd to the inner chambers,
And resistance we found full of dangers.
It started with a wall that would not melt,
And stubbornly lasted us with not a melt.
Then we knew, the lord had technology,
That went beyond simple mineralogy.
These walls were not rock but forcefields too,
With strength beyond our guns' nuclear goo.
We had thought of this though and without a
pause,
Turned and ran swiftly away from the cause.
And once we were a safe distance away,
Happin call'd in an airstrike, hip-hip h'rray!
Being on the side of the law is nice,
That kind of power hasn't a price!
So swiftly we went back to the wall,
And found it demolish'd, forcefield and all.
Wary of more tech we walk'd further on,

Hoping the Lord had nothing further drawn.
 Many stairs were ahead and spiralled down
 To a dark and dull subterranean town
 Where nothing approached was quite as it seemed
 With pillars of water and marble streams
 Above all else it was quiet and still
 Silence maintained by our government skill.
 But a path was laid out and here we march'd
 Beneath vaulted ceilings and doorways arch'd
 Careful note we took of every law
 Broken by *****'s hidden floor.
 The road leads on to mysterious lights
 Beneath a dome of incredible heights
 Where, imprison'd up in a glowing sphere
 Is every dolphin, squeaking with fear
 Their sweet bottle noses mask'd with red tape —
 They never should've helped the strangers escape.
 From the darkness an indescribable laugh
 Rumbles and echoes and cuts us in half
 And words that seem to bleed from the stone
 Say "You fools have come back, and come back
 alone!
 Didn't I tell you the terrible price
 That your actions would bring: this sacrifice
 Is about to begin, so take a seat
 Before very long we'll have something to eat."
 The squeaking increas'd to a frantic pitch
 As a shadow mov'd to a giant switch
 Connecting the floating water bubble
 To a mains supply, now *that* meant trouble
 But undeter'd, Happin sprung from the ground,
 Launching towards the desperate sound
 Of many a dolphin begging for grace
 Whilst Helchant side-stepp'd to the shadowy place
 And pulled an extension lead free from the wall,
 Noting the cables weren't cover'd at all,
 And watch'd as the light sunk back to its source
 So now at least there would be no main course
 And the dolphin's rejoic'd as their saviour flew
 Towards the bubble to slice it through
 But Happin soon fell back to the ground —
 They were safe for now, but in force-field sur-
 rounds.
 The dolphins still were cagèd! What to do?
 And what would you have done, had we been you?
 'Twas Helchant in the end who made the leap;
 So obvious in hindsight, I could weep.
 "Lord *****!" he cried aloud,
 "I know your weakness; how you might be cow'd;
 And how we'll quash you. All I have to do

Is speak your name. Why else would you conceal
 That fact, unless some strange unholy deal
 Made speaking it a weapon. It gets worse;
 You've no idea how difficult my verse
 Will be to write with all these lines of stars.
 The epic will be ludicrous; bizarre —
 What syllables therein? What metric stress?
 The reader has no clue, and I confess
 No more do I. So I shall substitute
 Those asterisks for that forbidden fruit:
 Your true and only name; I need but speak..."
 But here was hesitation! What technique
 Could Helchant have to know that secret word?
 Or did he bluster, spouting the absurd
 In hopes that ***** by mistake
 Might then let slip the syllables to make?
 Or maybe it's just *****? Who can guess?
 Not Helchant, or we'd not be in this mess...
 But heed! For he did not stand there alone!
 Before the tyrant there in might enthroned.
 For facing where the mighty warlord sat
 Stood not a hero, but a bureaucrat.
 And standing there in spirit with we two
 Was all the strength of the DBIU.
 As ***** stood, waxing full in rage,
 Bold Helchant stood forth, taking centre stage;
 A ruse! A trick! For what the tyrant missed
 Was Happin calling a receptionist.
 To DBIU's fact-repository
 Quoth Happin "Would you find a name for me?"
 "And when you have it, swiftly ring me back."
 Quoth Archives "I must head into the stack."
 We knew we must survive now, come what may
 —
 'Twas time to block, and dodge, and run away.
 And it was then the villain did guffaw
 Dreadful her cry, "Where now is your great law?
 For you, standing now, within Sector Three,
 The heart of my realm, fate belongs to me!"
 Then liftèd her arms above her head
 And curse she utter'd that filled them with dread.
 Cracks in the floor began to surround
 Them and air filled with bone-chilling sound.
 The walls, the ceilings consumèd by shakes
 ***** had power to call earthquakes!
 The DBIUs mov'd 'way from the cracks
 To a safe place, with pillar at their backs.
 From there they saw, 'twas not earthquake at all
 But out of the ground rose huge, silver ball.
 And sparkèd the orb! They trembled in fear

Not knowing what they would see, feel or hear.
 As open'd its maw, they screamèd in twain
 Expecting to feel their life-ending pain.
 But to their surprise, 'twas not their demise
 Instead it had *****'s greatest prize.
 Pouring out roses, tulip, daffodil
 Hyacinths and more; the room it did fill.
 Happin was shock'd, he could not believe her —
 Helchant and he had awful hay fever!
 ***** owning flowers a-plenty,
 Clearly a breach of rule seven-twenty.
 Essential for villain to be brought in,
 But against the pollen, how could they win?
 Happin let out a gargantuan sneeze
 And blurry-eyed Helchant fell to his knees.
 Dolphins still hover'd above them, cagèd
 Watching their heroes and war they wagèd
 As Happin crawl'd across petalèd stone,
 But out of his pocket slippèd the phone
 It buzzed unheard — DBIU rules state
 All agents must leave mobiles on vibrate
 While in the field, so the Archivist heard
 Instead of Happin's answer, just these words
 "As Agent Happin can't get to his phone
 At this time, kindly please await the tone
 Before you leave your message — it will keep
 Until Happin's had time to hear it — BEEP"
 "Happin? I've looked, but still I think we lack
 A record of a ***** in the Stacks
 What's more, from what you say this being's done
 I'd wager that there won't even be one
 The flowers and tech don't seem that Dark at all
 For all the dolphins that she holds in thrall
 And all her threats, and plans, and plots and
 schemes
 It's not DBIU that haunts her dreams
 This Demiurge, this Terror of the Age
 Is not a Lord of Dark, but one of Beige!"
 And with that message ringing loud and clear
 The room was split, in triumph and in fear.
 For ***** 'twas a terrible blow,
 Her devious deeds consignèd as so.
 Now Happin allowed a tentative smile
 In hopes that his efforts had been worthwhile;
 For though ***** remained unnamèd
 Her truest character was revealèd
 Helchant and Happin saw through her disguise
 Her history built on nothing but lies
 It seemèd so obvious now; so plain
 What else could botanical knowledge explain?

***** was not a villain raised
 But from a middle class family phased
 To this present façade of righteous rage.
 With tears a streaming down his swollen face,
 Happin shakily redialled the base
 Surveying the villain with watery eye,
 He chanced a guess, took his phone to reply —
 "If ***** is not the Stacks,
 Look instead at school records for her tracks;
 I'd wager she's forty" (an outraged gasp) —
 "Make that thirty five" he managed to rasp,
 "An all-girls school somewhere near to the sea
 With programmes in force-field technology.
 Somewhere near to the top of her class
 But with the rules she may tend to pass"
 This trait that had drawn the DBIU
 Would now then at last provide them a clue.
 The agents and Lord ***** alike
 Waited and heard the receptionist type
 Acutely aware her downfall was near,
 ***** summoned a watery sphere
 "Agents you think that you work here is done
 But look to your comrades — you haven't won.
 'Tis true my name is key to my power
 But listen to this; your victory's sour —
 The moment you speak it my empire falls
 Including the dolphins trapped in these balls."
 "What's more," ***** said with happy tone,
 "In this wat'ry sphere is a pig, full-grown,
 Killèd and cookèd and primèd and big,
 Garnishèd with rosemary's finest sprig"
 A yell, a shout, as Happin figured out
 That in the third circle of hell, no doubt,
 A nightmarish feast-hall had responded
 to the fact that its pig was absconded.
 The walls of the hall had begun to shake
 "Doubtless, the minions of hell overtake
 the moat, oh, the grounds — my, what a
 headache,"
 said Helchant, still on the petalèd ground
 Unable from spring fever to rebound.
 Just when the hall with near imp-roars did sing
 Was heard from near Happin — a soft "ring ring"
 The ringing went on as the hoards drew near
 A quiet "ring" hung in everyone's ear
 For if the phone were to go to voicemail
 That might be the end of this too-long tale.
 Happin dove for the phone — too late, too late
 —
 The imps had come to bring them to their fate.

Swarming through windows and doorways and cracks

Swinging a mace, a broadsword or an axe,
Happin's fingertips reach'd out for the cell —
"CRUNCH," not ring-ring, was the next sounding knell.

An axe-swinging imp had dispatched the phone
By standing 'pon it with large ankle-bone.
The dolphins were saved! (well, to some extent

—
our heroes had to deal with hell-fiend scent)
(also the weapons, let's not forget those
And ***** and well... yes, many foes)
And so, with a roar, Happin set his feet,
And leapt o'er to rising Helchant, to meet
What fate may befall them, standing as one,
To not let it part them 'fore they were gone.
And so they stood, back to back, weapons set,
As around them all of their nightmares met
Together in a great swirling maelstrom;
Both the forces of hell and *****.
Helchant struck; Happin slashed; a dolphin helped;
A minion departed; a demon yelped.
Helchant slashed; Happin struck; the dolphin crashed;
For those ranged against them refused to be smashed.
The fiends gave no ground. ***** gave less.
There seemed to be no way out of this mess.
And so, you might ask, did our heroes prevail?
Did they vanquish their foes, or did they fail?
For that you'd best let me finish my tale,
So be a good friend, and bring me more ale.

The *****'s Tale — Extras

Editor's Notes:

As you have likely guessed, this was another 'unusual' chainstory, in that it was less of a 'story' and more of a, well, Epic Verse...

Comments:

"That people to the rhyme scheme largely stuck
was a tremendous slice of golden luck
To Chaucer's tome a worthy addition
The Tale of CUSFS; what great scansion!"

— Samuel

Alternative Title Suggestions:

"The Policeman's Tale"
"Neutral Shades"
"The Song of Silliness"
"Asterisk and The Dark Pit Of Hell"
"Unnamed"

The Tower of Stars

Tristan Roberts, Megan Griffiths, Bryn Reinstadler, Andrew Carlotti, Michael French, Alastair Haig, Danielle Saunders, Rory Hennell-James, Jake Choules, Curtis Reubens, Greg Weir, Sparta

The morning began as any other, with the sun rising over the harbour as the fishermen rubbed the sleep from their eyes and readied the nets and lines for the day.

At first, only the children noticed, their parents dismissing their outbursts as fantasy or attention seeking; but it wasn't long before they realised their mistake, there was a new star shining in the morning sky where there was none before.

A runner from the village was sent up to the Tower of Stars.

* * *

"The Tower of Stars?" Alaen looked up at her mother with wide, curious eyes. Beside her, her brother suckled on his own thumb. "You mean the old tower by the lake?"

"Yes, the very same. Now hush, mummy's telling a story."

* * *

The apprentice on star watch that evening, a bright young man who was sometimes overexcitable, had started compiling all relevant star charts of the area as soon as he noticed the anomaly; but the Astrologarchs had no answers, either for villagers or for themselves.

From beneath the domed helm of the observatory that capped the Tower of Stars, a lone woman peered through the telescope in an attempt to locate the unexplained phenomenon.

Selene was a young Astrologarch, and many of the older Astrologarchs distrusted her. She was not like them — for instance, she seemed to care about the village down below. She also either ignored or forgot many of their ancient and established rituals. Wisely, she kept her true opinions on such things to herself, otherwise the elders of her order may have banished her from the land.

Some of them blamed her. Most laughed at these few — after all, how could one so ignorant of the proper rites be to blame for anything?

All of them kept away from her.

It lounged just above the horizon, defying the documented paths of the constellations to loom above the shore day and night. It hung in defiance of the turning of the skies, ignoring the other lights that wheeled slowly past it.

No-one knew of anything similar in all of history, but cryptic references appeared in every half-forgotten fairytale where none had been before, just as the star itself had done. The old ones who knew the tales best dug out their treasured tales, to find the words and their memories were no longer in agreement.

* * *

"I will hold you, even as stars long-forgotten drag themselves up." Alaen had almost forgotten her brother's presence before he spoke, quiet as he often was. He was a poet, though, or so their mother liked to remark, and occasionally he came out with a quote from some poem or tale she'd long forgotten.

Their mother smiled back at him. "Yes, but the Astrologarchs in their tower would have sworn to you that that line read entirely different. As it was, these new old tales still didn't agree..."

* * *

Some said the star brought light, some said fire; some said it was sent, some said it escaped. Some said nothing, but used many words to say it, and no one knew what secret meaning they had missed.

Despite the vague half-truths, everyone agreed that the star could only be a portent for evil.

Miles away from the city to the remote Northern regions, the arrival of the star had not gone unnoticed. Eyes that had remained open and watchful for centuries flickered and closed in the new light. A staff held by ancient hands in the solitude of night slipped, just an inch, for the first in a long, long time, before the grip was renewed.

Barriers held firm against forgotten horrors shimmered, as if an ethereal stone had been placed

upon their surface. They rippled once, and were still. Beyond, something took notice.

The star's light was cold and aloof in the sky, as if amused by her sudden drowsiness. She didn't understand what had happened. She could not remember a time when she had not been alert, even as the moons changed, as the years passed, as the mountains themselves shifted; yet now it seemed something had prevented her gaze, if only for a second. Only one explanation sprang to mind. Something was coming through.

She knew not what was being hidden from eyes built only to see, but turned one eye to the star. It too, needed watching now, though she could never spare both. An apprentice, she concluded, would be required. Eyes ever watching, she set off.

The Watcher was returning to the Tower of Stars.

The once-peaceful atmosphere of the fishing town had gained a hard edge over the last few days.

Mothers snapped at their children more often; butchers were less likely to throw the stray dogs a spare scrap of meat; store owners were more suspicious. The star hung, ever shining.

Selene rushed down the archive's marble stairs towards the Tower of the Stars, lifting the silvered hem of her robe of office as an attendant followed, carrying the ancient tome.

Theories and arguments flew thick and fast across the Hall of the Sun as the Astrologarchs tried to reach some consensus. The Astrologarchs famously struggled to reaching agreement on what to have for breakfast; what to do when faced with something entirely new was beyond them.

"The Wheatsheaf is a folklorish asterism, not a true constellation — it cannot have any bearing on this matter!"

"Don't be too set in your ways. Our art is scarcely more than elevated folklore in the first place."

"Elevated *and refined*. Besides, the star, when it appeared, was closer to Acula than the so-called Wheatsheaf."

"And that means?"

Meetings stretched long into each night, the mysterious star flickering as if in scorn at the peo-

ple below.

As the star continued to wax stronger day by day, the streets became flooded with prophets of doom, day and night despite the curfew the Astrologarchs had enforced. No consensus to the form of the doom was yet made; was it the anger of the stars, a sign from the greater powers or the punishment for sins committed? All these and more were suggested, though few argued about the specifics.

On the forty-second day, at precisely half past two in the morning whilst the city was asleep and with the astrologarch apprentice on star duty in an alcohol induced daze, the beacon flared.

A hooded figure, making no effort to move with stealth yet somehow going unnoticed, slipped past the armed guard and into the vaults.

Or almost unnoticed. The most ancient wards of the tower, crafted by Astrologarchs centuries dead, woke up. Over centuries of improvement the original systems the wards had controlled had been altered beyond recognition. The slow decay of understanding and dedicated maintenance into ritual and tradition had been mirrored by a decay in the efficacy of the wards. Magical power coursed through circuits that hadn't been thought of in generations, but the only safety features left working were the locks. They snapped shut on all the doors in the building, enough to hold up a mundane threat for a few minutes but barely enough to give pause to the hooded invader.

Up in her quarters, Selene felt a subtle change in the aether. She knew that she was now trapped in the room, and she knew who was behind this. Her eyes shifted to the parchment on her writing desk as she began to compose a letter.

The figure moved silently past the rows of dusty tomes, ignoring them, passing by row after row of shelves with intensity and purpose until finding the Book.

It was smaller than one might expect — maybe a hand's breadth high — but it would serve its purpose. After all, when knowledge is power the vessel is inconsequential. Usually.

With barely a whisper of noise, the Book was whisked into the billowy black robe and out of the archive.

A paper plane glided down, guided by some in-

visible force into the hands of a rather baffled soldier.

A few minutes later, it was deposited on the bedside table of a certain woman of office.

The Mistress sighed, and heaved herself out of bed.

Selene was, she thought, a surprisingly good source of information (for an Astrologarch). Although she was single-minded and focused when at work, a few glasses of wine after a meal for two tended to loosen her lips. She would let all sorts of things slip sat by the cosy fire in the Mistress' mansion, from hallowed, ancient secrets to Tower gossip. Unfortunately she was also surprisingly good at getting herself into sticky situations. The fact that these situations were usually of the Mistress' own devising, and that she never told Selene about them, was irrelevant. She always tried to give the girl a reasonable nudge in the opposite direction from trouble, but Selene didn't take hints. This evening, the Mistress had successfully convinced one of her other young Astrologarch informants to take his friends on an illicit drinking expedition at her expense. The lad was popular, and his generous offers of free alcohol had just about cleared out the sleeping quarters of any potential interferers, but Selene had declined.

Selene watched helplessly from the tower window, long since having suspended her attempts to escape the room in which she was held via the sealed doorway. All she could do now was wait for the Mistress to arrive.

Even before opening his eyes, Michael knew that something wasn't quite right; for the first time in years, he hadn't awoken to the screeching of gulls outside his window. It was quiet. He risked a glance at the eastern horizon. Where once hung the interloping star, there was now nothing against the bright morning sky.

Morning? It had to be, but he felt so tired. He struggled to remember his dreams at the best of times, but right now it felt as though he had scarcely dreamt at all.

A smaller light caught his attention. On his bedside table, a small candle, which he had absent-mindedly failed to extinguish before falling asleep. It ought to have burned right down by now, but by his reckoning it had lost barely more

than a couple of inches. He couldn't have done much more than nodded off in that time, which would put the current time at... one, two o'clock? What?

Michael rubbed his eyes and looked again out the window of his lodgings. He again scanned the point of sky where the star had stood for the past month and a half. Empty. If the star was a herald, then its master was surely here...

A sharp knock at the door woke Michael from his thoughts. He opened it to a man donned in a suit of armour. The soldier stood to attention as Michael noticed his armour gleam just a little too much.

"Good morning, Sir!"

Michael pulled on his own armour as the soldier explained the situation. A brawl in the market square, riots in a neighbouring town. A display of martial force was required. Neither Michael nor the soldier mentioned the reason the soldier had come to wake Michael in place of the seagulls. Neither mentioned that the bright morning light was out of place at barely an hour past midnight. It was a tense exchange; both parties desperately aware of the danger looming over them.

Dressed if not prepared, Michael left his quarters to stand blinking in the — very, very early — morning light. It was bright, and getting brighter.

The soldiers marched into the market, shining spears lowered to face the crushing mass that filled it.

"You have been ordered to remain in the market!" shouted an officer, seated on a nervous horse that kept bucking at the sight of the largest, most rowdy crowd this normally quiet seaside village had seen.

But even the soldiers' strongest threats couldn't keep the crowd in the square, in the face of the advancing flames.

Some of them remained standing, rooted to the ground in fear.

Some of them turned on the soldiers, seeking their horses, their weapons and their supplies.

But most of them just fled — fled to the hills, fled to the plains, and fled to the sea. Anywhere was better than Eastville, and nowhere worse than the market square.

* * *

"Of course, it was a distraction. And it worked! Mysterious lights, uncovered portents in ancient writings. Who would look elsewhere with a burning omen hanging in the sky?" Alaen's mother laughed, and to her ears it was a strange, alien sound. Not the ringing peals she normally made, but colder, harsher, more cutting. "And so everyone in the village looked *up*, when really they should have been looking *down*..." A smile spread across her face. Alaen shuddered.

* * *

"And you're one of the Watchers from the stories! They sent you to guard the book!"

Selene shook her head once, briskly. "Not me. I don't even work for them — it's just apparently my Mistress does. And now it's gone, which means it's fulfilled its purpose, which means there is nothing we can do."

"So why are we here?" asked Michael.

"Do you mean why are we still alive, or why have the Astrologarchy finally admitted that sometimes they could use the help of people with swords and called in the guards, or why are we on our way into the deepest vaults to stare at the empty shelf which used to contain our greatest source of knowledge, recently stolen? For the first, not a clue. The others..."

The party led by Selene followed the staircase to the vaults below the Tower of the Stars. As they walked she told them what the Mistress had told her. Not that they would believe it, of course, but it would save time to tell them now and deal with that later.

"Something has come from Below. While we were all looking at the sky, waiting for something to come down, something came up instead. The Astrologarchy had a plan for this, but it was in that book."

They rounded a corner, and the light of their torches fell upon a hooded figure holding an ancient staff.

"I'm not a Watcher. She's *the* Watcher."

* * *

"But it was too late," Mother continued. "The Watcher was chasing, always chasing — always a few steps behind." Her mouth twisted in a cruel grin. "So while our heroes were looking for clues where a book had been..."

* * *

Fire swept through the city like a demonic hand reaching up from the harbour towards the Tower of the Stars upon the hill.

"And I thought I'd be grateful to see it get dark again," muttered Michael.

"We need to go back down; the fire shouldn't reach the deepest parts."

The pair covered in the vaults, the raging heat from above penetrating even here, under the hillside. The other guards had vanished to attempt a barricade, longer ago than Selene cared to consider.

"The books," whispered Selene.

"Look at all the books."

* * *

"They were not burning, not quite; but the heat was curling their pages and warping their covers, ink weeping from the bindings, even as they watched." Mother's speech had sped up, eager and light and vicious. "The ink ran slow lines down the shelves, pooling on the floor, reflecting the lights above as a dark lake reflects the morning stars."

Alaen's brother started crying.

"The black form shifted and changed, creating symbols and patterns, words and phrases in a language unspoken for nearly a millennium. Before the young Astrologarch's eyes the writing shimmered and glowed, burning brighter than the fire engulfing the surrounding shelves."

Alaen stopped, spent, panting and heaving. Behind her — she didn't look, but she could *feel* it — the thing that had been her mother still came, inexorable. The flames flickered behind her, illuminating the footsteps of the shell of her mother as she paced towards them. Alaen didn't have the strength to run any more.

"Of course, there were many weak, pathetic minds I could have taken over. Your mother just

happened to be the one who had two *delicious* morsels right by her side” came the voice of her mother, though accompanied by a high pitched echo now. The flames danced over the skin without leaving any trace, though Alaen could feel the heat radiating off that terrible being. Surrounded by a raging inferno and praying to the stars for some miracle, the heat finally took its toll and Alaen passed into darkness.

* * *

That evening ended as no other, with the sun setting behind the ruins upon the hill as the people fled and left their boats and homes behind as they burnt.

The Tower of Stars — Extras

Editor’s Notes:

This was a ‘non-linear’ chain; each author was free to insert sentences wherever they wanted, apart from before the beginning or after the end.

Torquemada Way

Greg Weir, Rory Hennell-James, Samuel Cook, Ed Heaney, Nick Heitler, Olivia Morley, Mark Johnson, Alastair Haig, Michael French, Sparta, Curtis Reubens

**Content Warning:
Contains violence and gore.**

It felt like drowning in a lightless ocean, hungering to rise up and break the surface.

It felt like wandering a labyrinth, knowing where the exit is but not how to find it.

It felt like being dead, and trying to be alive again — most likely because that’s exactly what it was.

She opened her eyes and gasped in a deep breath.

As if she’d inhaled them with the air, memories started coming back — the fear and the hope, the lies she’d told in search of truth, the chaos she’d spread so the people could be free to build a new order.

The inquisitor. The trial. The judgement and the blade that delivered it.

One hand went to her chest at that remembered pain. It found a wound; old, dry, gaping open, and unquestionably fatal.

Panic shot through her. It felt wrong, though. Something was missing.

Her heartbeat hadn’t sped up as the fear took hold of her. In fact, her heart wasn’t beating at all.

* * *

Piotr couldn’t sleep. Every time he closed his eyes, he remembered Lisabeta’s face as the door closed, shock and betrayal written in every feature.

He’d had to leave her to them. There wasn’t time for both to get out before the templars broke the door down, and they’d follow anyway.

He tried to tell himself that, in the last moment, he’d seen her acknowledge it was necessary.

It didn’t work. For all his craft, the one person he could never lie to was himself.

* * *

Lisabeta wandered through the dark, wet streets, keeping to the alleyways that even criminals didn't dare use at this time of night. It had been three days since she'd... come back.

She kept to side streets to hide both from people and cameras. Notionally, after her death she would have been removed from the city's face tracking software, but she'd seen too many friends who'd faked their deaths, certificates and all, only to be caught by the cameras. Even though the Templars had executed her themselves she doubted she had been taken off the register.

Once again she found herself back outside the block of flats where she and Piotr had once shared their lives and their dreams. He wouldn't be there, he'd be long gone by now, but she had come back every night all the same. Once again the window of their tiny bedsit was dark, but —

With her newly-sensitive hearing she could just make out voices coming from the dark flat. Angry voices. She bounded up the stairs, leaping like some wild animal.

* * *

"I'm so sorry Devin, it has to be this way."

Lilya stood up, wiping the blade clean. She turned to the doorway to leave and saw something that had once been human. Something that had once been dead too, judging by the wound in its chest. It stood there, confused, watching Lilya as she watched it.

"Well, well, well. I think you could provide just the excuse I need."

She pulled out a phone, keeping her eyes fixed on Lisabeta. "Hello, police?" she quavered in an obviously fake show of emotion. "I heard some noise downstairs and my neighbour screaming, then I saw this... this thing jump out of the window with bloody hands and run away. It looked human, but had a big hole in its chest. My neighbour's not answering. I think he's been murdered." There was some unintelligible squawking from the other end of the phonenumber.

"The address? It's Flat 6, 66 Torquemada Way. You'll be right over? Oh, thank you!" She hung up. Lisabeta still stood in the doorway, confused.

"Looks as if you'd better get running, whatever you are, or there are going to be a few people who want to ask you some questions. If you could jump out the window, that would be very helpful." She smiled winningly.

Before she knew what she was doing, Lisabeta ran past her and jumped out the window. Lilya just seemed to have such a commanding air. She landed unhurt — she'd noticed that she also seemed to be far stronger and tougher than she had been before whatever it was had happened. She started running — she did not want to encounter the police. As she did so, she noticed that some of her skin was hanging off. It looked as if she caught her knee on some broken glass as she jumped through the window. It didn't hurt; neither did it bleed. She pulled the scraps off and carried on running. She also noticed a strange thirst had come over her. She stopped running and realised that she had subconsciously ended up by the hospital.

* * *

Asha didn't scream. She didn't sob. Perhaps it was all too overwhelming to be able to find emotional release; perhaps it was just too important to allow emotional release. She didn't even stand there in shock. There was nothing to do but get on with what had to be done.

Devin had been closer to her than she'd ever cared to admit. The first victim's name she could barely remember. Piotr had been her foe, standing against law and order, but for all of that... she might even have called him friend. Not that she'd ever admit that. Devin, though... Devin was irreplaceable.

Was it all about her? she suddenly, irrationally, thought. Was it getting closer and closer to her, homing in? Was she the final victim, or was she some sort of prize to be claimed, or an unknowing linchpin in some overarching strategy?

No; she couldn't get carried away. She steeled herself, took a deep breath and looked at his body... no, looked at *the* body. Depersonalise it, dehumanise it; that would make it better. The marks were frustratingly indistinct — really sharp claws? Or a really viciously-wielded knife? She couldn't tell.

"What do you make of it?" Lilya's voice was calm. It was infuriatingly calm, though Asha was sure that only she could have known why it angered her so much. It tested her to her limits; she was so very close to screaming into Lilya's face to leave her alone with him for a little while longer.

Instead, though, she kept her nerve, though she couldn't immediately bring herself to answer Lilya directly. As flatly as she possibly could, she said, "Let's begin."

* * *

The door had snapped off like it were made of paper, a tiny detail unworthy almost of the effort she had put in to breaking it. Lisabeta had hardly given it a thought till she stopped to get her bearings part of the way down one of the long, evil smelling corridors. Something was disorienting her, making her lose sight.

A few seconds ago she had been filled with righteous, infallible purpose. Nothing else was right and nothing else mattered but the hideous, wonderful, golden screaming prize she was going to give herself in the hospital. Now memories had forced their way in to her mind again, destroying her blissful thirst to tell her things she didn't want to hear.

She had been running. Devin was dead. A woman she didn't know had called the police and told her to run and she had ran.

Devin was dead, after everything she'd worked for, Devin was dead.

Even he probably never realised the role he had to play, if he was dead then everything had failed. He would just be another ally of law and order slain and she would never be seen as anything but a monster.

She had to get back. She had to try to unravel this. She had to try and save everything she had fought for.

The glorious, bloody thirst was creeping its way back in to her mind. "I just hope", she muttered, "I can hold myself together long enough" — though she no longer seemed to recognise the sound of her own words

Throughout the hospital, restrained and semi-conscious, the sick heard strange groaning howling from the hallways.

Blood

No no no no no No. That was *not* her thought. "I am still in control", she said to herself, causing the hallway to now be filled with obsessive whispers rather than groans.

The knowledge of the weak and dying humans — *prey* — was tempting, but the thought spurred her still human brain away from the hospital. Devin was what mattered, not these — *delicious* — strangers. This was an evil place, with the evil corridors. No time to stand around watching — *eating* — people.

Lisabeta was still disoriented, getting dizzy, with no idea which direction she had come. Looking down, reddish brown footprints formed a trail along the formerly clean white floor.

"Ahh", she said, a sound which was too much like a groan, "That way". Stumbling, following her footprints backwards, ignoring the *blood blood blood* cacophony in her head. Suddenly no footprints. A problem. But there ahead was a kicked-in door, a clue! And outside again.

Away from the blood (*blood blood*) she could think once more. Yes, there was the way to Devin's house. Lisabeta had known Devin well, friends and conspirators. She paused under the window she had jumped out of, and then turned to the front of the house on Torquemada Way. No need to be uncivilised re-entering the crime scene. Besides, the window was on the first floor and she didn't feel like jumping.

Crime scene meant police. And that meant speed was required. The door was probably locked, but Lisabeta had enough experience to know how to deal with this problem.

The door crumpled to a single kick. That was bad. No time to think about it. She charged down the hallway, crashed through the inner door, pulled up short at the sight that awaited her. And the stench.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. This was where they were supposed to meet.

It had all been so much fun, spying on the enemy. Getting close to Piotr's mark without her suspecting a thing. But then she'd gone and made a connection. Couldn't separate the real emotions from the fake. Couldn't pull away when the Templars tried to shut Piotr down. All for a P.I. All

for Asha.

And now she was crouched over Devin's corpse. It looked fresh. Warm and fresh.

She caught herself slipping. Tasted the blood in the air, couldn't bring herself to feel revulsion.

Blood

She fought against the rising urges. This wasn't her. This couldn't be her.

blood

Lisabeta pulled herself away from the body. She had to get to Asha. Had to warn her who she was working with. What she was working with.

She staggered towards the window. Lurched back as a monster rushed to greet her. The monster lurched back too. No.

yes

She stepped back towards the glass, watched in horror as her reflection came to greet her. It wasn't even human.

She had to get away. Had to get to Asha.

With newfound strength she threw herself through the glass. Broke free from the room and the smell and the reflection of the thing which wasn't her.

Bootless feet hit the cobblestones below the window.

where is she

Thoughts clawed their way through what remained of Lisabeta's mind.

gone. but still near

Lisabeta let her new instincts take over as she leapt and bounded through the city, chasing the heartbeat she had heard in that room.

water

stone

smoke

rotting meat

blood

The city took new form to Lisabeta's senses. She was aware of so much more of the city than she had ever known. But she did not take in this new information. She was focused entirely on the heartbeat of the Templar. Always the heartbeat.

where is she

where is she

she has stopped

a warehouse

Lisabeta thought about what the Templar had done. To Piotr, to Devin, to herself. As emotion took hold of Lisabeta she began to howl to the sky, a rough guttural sound emanating from deep within her.

Eventually the creature that once was Lisabeta fell silent.

movement inside

TEMPLAR

* * *

With a crash, the door of the warehouse splintered inwards. For a brief moment, Lisabeta could still be seen in the eyes of what stood in the ruined entrance, but as they turned to land on Lilya, all signs of any soul were torn away with the beast's violent screech. It had found its prey.

Lilya thrust the device in Asha's hands and began speaking hurriedly, but calmly. "I'm going to get behind you, and out of sight. It can't chase me if it can't see me, and it won't rush to attack you. Don't move."

What? You run off and I stay here? To tango with the mystery monster? Thanks a bunch, partner.

Lilya sprinted away, ducking behind some nearby crates. True to her prediction, the beast froze as if struck, and looked around confusedly. Finding only Asha, a low growl began in what was left of its throat, and it began to advance. Slowly. Very slowly. One hesitant foot in front of another. The violence was gone from its motions, but there was still a desperate need contorting its face. *For what? What drives you, monster? Fear? Revenge?*

"It's after me. I don't know why. That's why it was there when Piotr died." Lilya's voice came from behind the crates, loud and assured, but the beast did not react. "See the tag on the side? Don't do it yet, but pulling that starts the trigger. You need to wait though — it has to be close. I'll say when. Don't move!"

Well, this is a bundle of fun. Why are you here, beast? Why do you chase Lilya? Why did you kill Piotr? It wasn't that she didn't want him dead, he

was an enemy of order, but it was wrong that he died as he did, without trial and judgement. And there was so much information they needed from him. *Wait, why was the beast there in the first place? Lilya didn't arrive until just after Piotr was dead, she said so herself. She's never mistaken, so either the beast isn't chasing her, or she was already there and lied. And she would have no reason to li- oh, no.*

If Lilya was there, but lied, then who killed Piotr? Piotr, who had held the key to unravelling the whole thing? *Lilya, why? And am I now to be next in the line of those dead for whatever unholy cause you seek? Does this device even work, or is this all a convoluted trap?*

The monster, the *thing*, heartless, humanity torn asunder, stalked towards them. It — for it was an *it* now, all trace of the girl had been erased — it had nails, long and curled, twisting talons to rend the flesh. Skin hung in tatters from its bones, revealing muscles of an unnaturally greeny-brown tinge coiled beneath. But the most terrible part by far was the gaping, empty maw in the centre of its chest.

Asha watched as it approached, trying not to gag on the stench that saturated the room. She lifted the device, pointing it towards the beast. *Gods help me she thought. What am I even doing here?*

"Keep calm." Lilya's voice instructed. A very calm, even voice, considering the monstrosity in front of them. Calm enough to inspire irritation in Asha. *It's alright for some, you are about five metres behind me, watching from behind some crates. If any one of us is going to be killed here it will be me.*

"Relax," the voice intoned again, "just let it get closer to you. You won't even need to aim."

"Great," Asha snarled back. "I really want to be in arms reach of it before I do anything to protect myself. What even is this thing?"

Silence. Seconds only, but to Asha it felt like hours as the beast crept ever closer.

Closer and closer, it moved noiselessly towards them.

"Now!" called Lilya.

With a silent prayer, Asha pulled at the tag on the side, and the top of the device sprang open,

revealing an eight pointed star. At each corner there was a switch, each one a different colour. Asha smiled. She knew what she had to do now.

Red, purple, green, black, purple...

The beast roared, but it was beaten back by pulse after pulse from the device Asha held; she flicked its switches in a rapid and ever-changing sequence, its rhythmic clicking drowned out by the cacophony it produced. Her hands shook, but she didn't falter, playing out the sequence she had been taught. The creature in front of her shook, now, vibrating to the beat of Asha's device before, with one last howl, collapsed before her, still.

All of the fear and exhaustion that she had been fending off hit her, and Asha sank to her knees, spent. In a flash Lilya was there, holding her as she shook, forcing her to sip from a small canteen of water.

For a long time, they were still.

"We did it."

Asha laughed. "I really wasn't sure that would work."

"Oh ye of little faith." Lilya stood. "Come on. It's time we got back."

She offered a hand; Asha took it. As she pulled herself up, she stumbled — Lilya caught her, and suddenly they were very close. Lilya could feel the other woman's breath on her face, see the sorrow deep in her eyes, feel-

Feel the cold metal of the knife suddenly pressed against her throat.

"Asha?"

"I figured it out." Her voice was choked as the words poured out of her, like a dam inside of her had suddenly burst. "It took me longer than it should have, but I figured it out. And once I did, everything fell into place." Lilya could feel the knife digging into her skin. "All the time we spent trying to connect the dots, and you had the picture the whole time, because it was *you*, Lilya. All the murders, you. Devin, cold and alone..."

"Asha, I'm sorry, I-"

With a splash of red it was over, and Asha walked away, alone.

Torquemada Way — Extras

Editor's Notes:

This was the Meet-in-the-Middle chain. Instead of beginning at the beginning and ending at the end, this chain began at the beginning and the end, and ended in the middle.

The first and eleventh sections were written first, without knowledge of one another. Then the second and tenth sections were written, now with knowledge of sections one and eleven. This continued until the middle, section six, which was written with full knowledge of sections one to five and seven to eleven.

Comments:

"I think the meet-in-the-middle structure really helped with the consistency — once we'd lucked into the beginning and ending both being stories of murder and intrigue, the writers in between could work back from there, fill in the foundations and build up to the climax, rather than having to work out the climax from everything else. A successful experiment!"

— Greg

"I was pleasantly surprised this worked out quite so coherently. Early on, it did seem as if there were rather a yawning gap in the middle of the story (pun and reference fully intended)."

— Samuel

"I was wondering what would happen with the rest of this chain. It feels like this is a spin-off from another story, which hasn't been written yet (and should be written). Good to see a Maguffin Gun show up at the end there though."

— Alastair

"Well that was interesting. It came together really surprisingly well, considering the meet-in-the-middlishness."

— Curtis

Alternative title suggestions:

"And then Lisabeta was a zombie"

"You have placed a ~~chit~~ hole in my heart"

"Hunter"

"Why Philip IV was wrong"

"Animals"

"It's complicated"

"Posthumous"

"Keep your Zombies close, but your Frenemies closer"

"Running and Blood"

"BLOOD"

Do Corn Gods Dream of Alternate Meats?

Samuel Cook, Matthias Wong, Brandon Wesley, Anonymous, Anonymous, Ed Heaney, Grace Fremont, Danielle Saunders, Bryn Reinstadler

The baby took its first wailing breath. The birth was auspicious. News ran through the realms faster than thought. The birds cried it throughout the skies. The fish boomed it throughout the deeps. Astromancers read it in the starry vault of the heavens from their tall towers. Meteoromancers heard it whispered on the breeze in their airy laboratories. From the First Shore unto the Last, where the waves fall in serried ranks for ever in their eternal battle with the unyielding land, all heard the news. An heir had been born to the Imperial Throne, the first in millenia. A new age was dawning. The Empire would endure.

As the baby drew breath for a second time, a figure robed in white appeared with a tinkle of chimes and approached the child. It seemed curiously translucent and insubstantial. The guards barred its way, but, with a motion they were thrust asunder. The figure approached the child and spoke with a voice that recalled all the winds of the world.

'I am the Elder of the Air. I give the child the gift of foresight. They will see further than any and their justice will be the wisest of the world.'

The figure stepped aside, and with a music of conchs, another figure appeared, clothed in shimmering garments of blue and green. It too approached the child and spoke in a voice like unto the boundless watery deeps.

'I am the Elder of the Sea. I give the child the gift of strength. They will overcome all their foes and their might shall be uncontested.'

This figure too stepped aside to join the first. With the song of birds appeared another, resplendent in green, brown and russet. It too came towards the child and spoke in the voice of trees.

'I am the Elder of the Earth. I give the child the gift of bounty. They shall never want for food or drink and their realm shall be fruitful for ever.'

Then it too stepped aside and the three joined hands, speaking in eerie unison. As they spoke, an object materialised above them.

'We have spoken. The child, whose name shall be Scaef, must now go out into the realms and learn of them. When they are ready, they will find this golden horn and summon us once more. Only then will they return to you. Only then will they be ready to save the realms from the Devouring Fire. We have spoken.'

Then, with a blinding flash, the three, the baby and the horn disappeared.

The sun finally set behind the mountain range in the distance. Scaef wiped his brow as he pushed the ageing machine into the shed. It had been a long day out in the field, and he was looking forward to the rest that night offered. He had always preferred the dark velvety night. The calmness and the quietness gave him a chance to think.

Scaef thought mostly about his dreams. About the weird and fascinating characters and landscapes he had seen. An exhilarating chase through a purple mushroom forest, the hive of humanoid insects that invited him to break bread, and the slender crystalline figures that beckoned him towards a waterfall of diamonds. In his dreams he lived multiples lives, and peeked into the countless universes. Every one of them felt so familiar, it was almost like he had been transported right out from his bed.

Of course that was impossible. Teleportation technology and know-how had long been lost, along with all the dazzling machines and science that exists only in story. More specifically, the stories of Old Granny down in the market town. For a few pennies or a meal, Old Granny would regale her audience with a tale of long ago, of a glorious Empire whose reach spanned several star-systems, of faster-than-light travel, emotion dust and morphing chameleon clothing. The young ones listened in silence, their mouths gaping as Old Granny narrated a thrilling starship chase through asteroid fields. The adults usually just scoffed. 'An old lady with a vivid imagination', they would say. It was almost a sign of adulthood to be increasingly dismissive of Old Granny's stories.

Although Scaef was on the cusp of adulthood, he was still a true believer. Him, and Keyn. To-

gether the boys pieced together an imaginary history of the Empire, from its mythical foundation in the seven hills of the planet Novell to the glorious interstellar expeditions. No one understood Scaef's passion as much as Keyn did. They had been friends longer than either of them could remember. It was thus unsurprising when they declared their intention to bind on their twentieth discovery-day. Scaef smiled as he recalled the day. The townspeople threw a massive feast, and the mayor brought out their best alcohol.

'Are you ready for dinner?', rang a voice from across the yard. 'Just packing up!', Scaef replied. He was glad that Keyn had taken over cooking duties. Keyn was a more imaginative cook, he could turn the farm's produce into proper delicacies. Apart from the stories and the occasional trip into town, it was a happy, if quiet, life with Keyn.

But tonight would be different. Despite Scaef and Keyn's years of pleading, Old Granny had always refused to talk about how the Empire met its end. They would not have known that their fates were intertwined with the Empire's, and that there were powers just beyond the horizon, about to descend into their lives.

Scaef sighed in satisfaction as he leaned back in his favourite wooden chair. The remnants of venison stew and wild greens coated the plates on bowls on the well-worn table in his small home with Keyn. The hearth glowed warmly, casting long shadows on the small room, making it even more cosy and inviting. The sun had long since set below the horizon, and the hearth fire yielded the last bit of evening light. Of course, only the rich could afford candles, which were an absolute rarity in a small town such as Kraton. The nearest large town was two day's-ride from Kraton, if it could even be called a town. Scaef preferred to live away from such congregations of people, they just tended to invite crime and disease. Apparently the once majestic human race had not lived in squalor, with the rich sequestering themselves behind the remnants of once-mighty walls, during the time of the Empire. *Stories*, Scaef told himself.

"The days are getting shorter. And colder," Keyn spoke gently as he closed the shutters to the kitchen, bringing Scaef out of his reverie.

"Our work will have to increase to bring in the

harvest before the ground freezes," Scaef replied wryly. They both knew he didn't mind the extra work. Distractions from reality were as welcome as extra food or coin. Sometimes even more.

Scaef had another dream, however, unlike the others, this one had not depicted fantastic landscapes nor diverse races. Rather, a council of 5 individuals, for he could not tell their gender due to their encompassing robes, sat at a crescent table with him at the epicentre. Hoods drawn over their eyes, they all cast shadows toward Scaef from an light source that seemed to come from all directions. Their robes were each a different colour; yellow, red, green, blue, and black.

"You seek answers," The black-robed individual spoke. It was not a question.

It felt so real. Scaef looked down at his hands, and again back up at the robed figures. Why didn't he simply wake up?

"You were meant to be more than some small-town's farmer," the green robe spoke, head tilted farther down and shoulders slumped. Was that a hint of sadness?

"Who are you?" Very original, Scaef. Well done. It was honestly the best he could do, considering he wasn't sure if he was simply speak to his own dream-addled brain.

The two companions, as close as family due to their binding brotherhood, more sensed than heard one another awaken in the early hours of the morning.

But then the mattress sagged, and Ptermites and Parsnips and Pintail-ducks burst forth in a deepening crescendo. The Ptermites began to swellvitate, forming impactochimescent orbs. The Parsnips sprouted wings and began to skirl with tiny bagpipes of fennel, or just possibly they had tubular beards. The Pintails formed into a procession, the foremost waddgimentling backwards all-a-swishing a baton in Her Beak. The next three held flutes aloft, the three after that downturned clarinets. More kept on marching out of the mattress. Violins. Trumpets and horns, with a second Pintail propping up the flared end as the first inflated their cheeks to comic proportion. The trombones were held by teams of three. The cellos were on wheels. The Parsnips femtofennellifan-fared as fifty Pintails dignifiedly propelled a harp

while three others plucked at it delicately with their wingtips. And so it went on. Scaef lost count of how many Pintails came out of the mattress. The procession ended with alpenhorns, grand pianos and a gigantic pipe-organ in the shape of an Angora Cat's face, both pushed and pulled by great phalanxes of pintails. Its whiskereeds arpeggiurritoned with the greatest of dignities, while its diastolic furflues exultedly trillulotremewlated in a myriad of subtle timbres.

As the first 'Angoraorgan' movement of the Pintail-Parsnip-Ptermite Symphony ended, Scaef knew he hadn't woken up yet. And might not wake up for quite a few more bubbles in the dream-world.

The pintail next to Scaef sneazbilled gently, and dropped her horn. He picked up the instrument out of kindness, for it was twice the size of the Pintail. But she shook her bill and would not take it back. The Pintail-Conductor-General then gave a curt nod, and the violins and chimed opened once again, now gently and in the minor key.

And now the Council of Five floated high above in the air, in a rotating handheld circle of pentachromatic robes.

"You thought we could not be fantastic, and yet the kindness of your heart is true" they chided gently in unison, all the while shedding tears.

"Air."

"Sea."

"Earth."

* * *

"Fire."

"Cheese."

Each intoned in turn in clear, otherworldly and distinct genderfluid voices.

And so Scaef came to Know the true name of 'Quintessense' at the start of the second 'Elderpentet Choral' movement. Yet yearn as Scaef would, he had no inkling what 'Cheese' was. A kind of spiritual bond between all living beings? The texture of the bubblefilms between dream-worlds as Granny had told them one evening when she had become particularly incoherent? As it became clear from the second movement, they were offering to show him of the Way of Things. And

he began to so hope this would include the Secret of Cheese. But Keyn only thought of doing more with what he already knew. He thought of waterspouts and lances of fire, of cliffs collapsing into the waves. Keyn paid no heed to the fifth figure, Xe of the flowing flavescent fallow robes, all entwined in strings of amber binding So Many Aurulent Triangles. On the other hand, as the final 'Alsaticorns' Triumph' movement began in earnest, Scaef became fixated, first with this wedgèd decor, and then in the curious opalescent pockmarks thereupon.

"Child of Five..."

One of these openings began to widen.

"Cheesebringer..."

Until it was *larger* than the wedge it was on.

"But Be Warned..."

The hole now occupied the entirety of his field of vision.

"Celve not Too Ceeply in the Creamworld..."

It enveloped him.

"For else..."

And then he passed through. And in so passing, something cawned within Scaef.

* * *

There were words in the air as he passed through. Confusing words, some promising, some strange, some... troubling.

"He has the ability."

"He lacks the focus, though."

"I'm more concerned with his picture of the Fifth."

"You can see it in his essence — he will search for the Secret."

"He might search for the wrong Secret, though, or at least he might search for it down the wrong path. We have to face the possibility that Cheese is so incomprehensible to him that's he's channelling it through some other pathway entirely. I wonder what he hears when we hear Cheese?"

Scaef did not understand. As he had made the transition, the meaning — and the warning — had been so clear. And had they not just said it so clearly? Cheese?

But what if it wasn't?

Celve not too ceeply...

Cheese? C... what if he actually were on the wrong track? His mind cast about.

Air, Sea, Earth, Fire... Coconut? No, that sounded ridiculous.

Air, Sea, Earth, Fire... Chameleon? That one had potential. Adaptability. Changeability. Changeability. Ah!

Air, Sea, Earth, Fire... Heart? Well, that was complete rubbish.

No, try as he might, he knew what they really had said.

Cheese.

It had to be right.

For if it wasn't right, how else would he ever return to-

Keyn!

The thought of the one he knew better than anyone eclipsed his musings on a concept out of his reach, and with dizzying speed Scaef's mind tore out of the vision and back into reality. Tearing through the bonds that held his limbs proved more difficult.

His eyes, the one thing he could move without restraint, darted frantically between the three figures in front of him. Their dull robes — were they brown, or gray, or some sort of pale sickly green? — seemed to mock at the afterimage of the brilliant Council of Five that had infused his dreams with light and his mind with longing. Their eyes were emotionless as they regarded him, no pity or fear evoked by his attempts to break his bonds.

"He's broken out too soon. How can we expect him to understand Cheese when he lacks even the simple patience of Earth?"

"But look how despairs at chains. Surely that is a mark of Air upon him."

"And he showed great promise of Sea when he left his home, and Earth in his desire to return to it."

Their eyes pierced him as they spoke in turn, yet they spoke to each other and not to him, as if he were a thoughtless creature trapped under the gaze of the microscope.

The idea infuriated him. But as he wore out the first burst of anger in straining to break the ties on his arms, a deeper bitterness began to fill him.

Above all else, he was angry at himself. What had possessed him to leave his home, to leave Keyn, to pursue some poorly defined quest that was apparently "incomprehensible" because of some innate failing of his?

He should have known better. He should have known he wasn't good enough. He shouldn't have ever made that promise, shouldn't have ever tried.

But when he said goodbye to Keyn, promising to return soon, it had seemed so clear. It felt like... it had felt like this was something he had always been intended to do. Like he had been born with a purpose.

Born with illusions of grandeur, more like. But — no. He couldn't give up this easily. Not with Keyn counting on him. Not, if he was being honest, with his own nature screaming at him to keep going. All he had to do was comprehend Cheese? Piece of cake.

But first he had to escape these bonds and those emotionless eyes. Even as he watched, though, the eyes faded from his vision, as if no entity had ever been present alongside him.

"I don't understand why he's taking so long." The figure in yellow watched from some space that was coincident with Scaef's. They sighed in unison with the others as Scaef tore himself free of the bonds, stumbled around the emptiness, clearly trying to find a way out. Honestly, what was the point in trying to keep someone still for some proper contemplation time if they were just going to wrench themselves back out into the world of sensory distractions?

"We give him the perfect life. The pleasant childhood, the domestic idyll with the handsome lover. We give him stories of past worlds, lost technologies, mysterious universes. We point out to him how cheesy the whole thing is, and he still doesn't get it!"

The russet robe made a gesture probably meant to indicate agreement.

"He'll never break through to the mother universe and reunite the Empire across dimensions and times if he can't organically come to the realisation of how fake his whole life has been, and why!"

"Well, uh." The green robe gave a respectful cough. "Not that I want to question your meth-

ods, but maybe you shouldn't have prompted him with an anachronism?"

"Anachronism?"

"Cheese. Cheesey. You're using the slang of two dimensions and about a century back."

"...Damn."

"Right continent, though."

"Damn. Damn it! We can't break through to him again, can we? We were only given the one shot — he has to come to the weird post-sci-fi fantasy-utopia equals fake conclusion on his own after one or two obscure prompts, he'll crack otherwise and then where will the Empire be?"

The figure beneath the deep blue robe moved, and the moving of the robe sounded like the breaking of waves on a stormy beach. "I can think of one last thing we can do."

CRASH

BANG

BOOM

Two figures in light yellow robes descended in a pillar of light. Scaef, struck by the brilliance of the light, fell to the ground, covering his face with one hand. The figure on the left (Cheese, echoed some back part of Scaef's brain) raised one hand.

"Behold."

And Scaef beheld: it was Corn. With a self-satisfied sniff, both of the figures began to ascend back to the heavens.

CRASH

BANG

BOOM

"For our own sakes, do I have to do everything myself?"

CRASH

BANG

BOOM

Corn and cheese, what could it mean? Scaef sat for half an eternity, tossing the words around his minds until the hard edges of the consonants turned smooth like the edges of a water-worn rock. A sudden thought intruded: What would Keyn do?

But of course. Keyn would make dinner.

Scaef set to work with a ferocity. Out of the airy nothingness, a kitchen not unlike the one he

shared with Keyn appeared. The corn was in the cupboard; the cheese, in the cellar. He had shared a kitchen with Keyn many times, and though he rarely cooked by himself, he found the echoes of the motions familiar, as though the loving touch of Keyn's hands had transferred their memories of how to prepare the food. Grind the corn and grate the cheese, grind the corn and grate the cheese... the monotony of preparation combined with the crescendo of excitement and rising electricity in the air made Scaef's hands shake. He was making cheesy cornbread. It would doubtless elucidate everything.

Finally, the time had come to put the cornbread on the fire. He poured the batter into a large, shallow tray and placed it on top of a wire grid atop the fire. The cornbread batter began to bubble and form words. Scaef could not read, but he watched with interest. Then the first bubble popped.

Your

He shook his head. That couldn't have happened. The second bubble:

life

Oh. Oh dear. **pop**

is

pop

a-long-time-ago-in-a-galaxy-far-far-away... and on it went. The fourth bubble seemed to have a lot to say. About halfway through the fourth movie (and a couple of interspersed readings from the Cambridge English Dictionary), Scaef understood. A horn had appeared on the table next to the chair Scaef was sitting on to tend the fire. He reached over to it and knew what he had to do. It was time to choose between going back to Keyn or leaving Keyn forever to save the galaxy.

The choice was obvious.

Do Corn Gods Dream of Alternate Meats? — Extras

Comments:

"I'm pleased someone picked up on Scaef being an Anglo-Saxon corn god myth towards the end. Shame he didn't end up in a boat at any point, though!" — Samuel

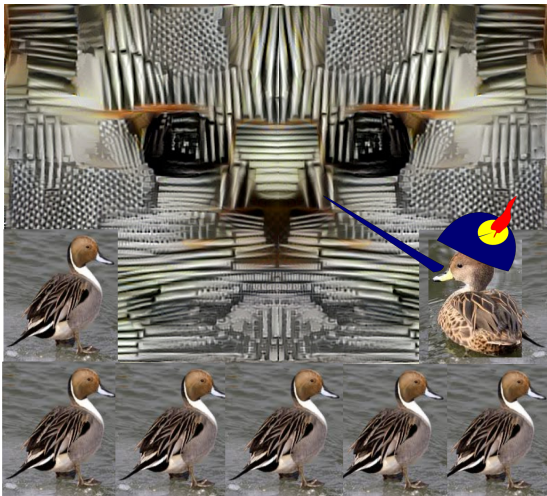
Alternative Title Suggestions:

"Cheese Dreams"

"To Brie or not to Brie"

"The Corny and the Cheesy, When they Co-exist, Uh Oh..."

Art:



The pintail Conductor General Brings in the Angoraorgan

The Philharmonecological System of the Creamworld

The Acceleraptors started to grindibulate macroserratomaxillarodontomasticallily as a long column of Parmesants marched into their viscerivuperiviborine corrugacantanke-rocrennelations, each oblivious to the fate of the previous. And then the Thermite Crab Phoenixes began to efferupt and smoultonate in contratempo, causing the Fundamental Fondue to start to flowpagate. Quintessence. As legend faded into myth, still remembered in some parts as 'Queso'. The essence of Dreams (and Creams), as in Pesadilla versus Quesadilla...

This p-q mirror symmetry breaking etymolvolution is also clear in *Pintails* being the Guardians of *Quintessence*. These farm Swelvitating Ptermites: the musicophagous larvae that metamorphose into Thermite Crab Phoenixes, unless they are fed enough femtofennelifanfares by their Sentient Parsnip symphonobiotes, in which case they paramorphose into Parmesants...

Maturing Angoraorgans, on the other hand, orthodonto-archosauro-organo-phose into Acceleraptors, their purritone reeds chomocalcidinating into tetrahaedroteratoothery. (Indeed, the *living* ivory in their tecladination was crucial in deducing this Commentary's ecolyrical pathway.)

Such is the fantasiamelodic faunfabulation surrounding the Delicious Celestial Mimolespheres (in F-Flat Field Marshall, by the Pintail Army Philharmonic).

In a nutshell, it is Parmesants that originally affix the Substance by quesosynthesis. This is shrated by Acceleraptors and then cream-meltised by Thermite Crab Phoenixes, resulting in the rich and highly homogenised Primordial Fondue.

The Resident Oocephalic Sage has the following compilation of words meaning precisely what His Eggship-Atop-A-Wall says they mean...

Grindibulate: to crush between one's mighty mandibles.

Efferupt: part effervesce and part erupt.

Smoultonate: part smoulder, and part detonate.

Flowpagate: to propagate fluidly.

Etymolvolution: the development over time of unusual words.

Swelvitate: to balloon, i.e. to swell full of hot air and thereby buoy off upwards into the stratosphere.

Angoraorgan: larval stage of the acceleraptor, which is part Feline Entity and part Church-Organ.

Ptermite: chiming airborne larvae of the Thermite Crab Phoenix, which is a crucial player in the formation of the Cosmic Fondue.

Femtofennelifanfares: sounds played by Sentient Parsnip musicians on their miniature bagpipes.

Ecolyrical: adjective corresponding to musically-influenced ecology.

Cheese: mythical substance behind the legends of Quintessence. Produced exclusively by Parmesants as farmed by the Orchestral Pintail army.

Creammeltised: phase transition from liquid to solid cheese.

Shrated: part shredded and part grated.

Quesosynthesis: carbon-and-calcium fixing process, in Nature encountered solely in the carapace cells of Parmesants.

Waddgimentling: the marching gait common to Waterfowl Armies.

Sneazbilled: Waterfowl noise in clearing one's

beak.

Her (capitalised): Dominant Female pronoun.

Alsaticorn: cross between a German Shepherd and an Alicorn, usually requiring in vitro fertilisation.

Purritone: deep-pitched end of an Angoraorgan's melodic range.

Trillullotremewlated: the high-timbre notes of an Angoraorgan.

Diastolic furflues: The smaller reeds of an Angoraorgan, which are matted in a fine fur.

Goodnight

Isobel Sands, Sarah Binney, Matthew Chadwick, Francesca Alabaster, Andrew Conway, Curtis Reubens, Samuel Cook

The bartender and I shared another sympathetic glance as the lecture began to reach a crescendo. The lecturer had been here when I arrived. Long before I arrived, apparently. She made sweeping gestures with both hands, slurring her way through a grand speech on the evils of complacency and the dangers of taking things for granted. Sometimes it was aimed at the bartender, who made vague, agreeable noises until it moved on. Sometimes it was aimed at me, for having the bad judgement to sit nearby.

Often she seemed to be haranguing someone visible only to the unpleasantly featureless steel sphere in her left eye socket. She had a military-looking buzzcut, and clearly didn't care about showing her eye, the three deep scars surrounding it, or the silver streaking her dark hair.

"Forward planning, 's it! Forrard bloody planin'..." she veered back to me briefly, and drained her glass, "'s the ticket to a borin' bloody life!"

She stood up dramatically, and fell down immediately. Someone at the back of the room offered sarcastic applause. As a waiter hauled her up and helped her stagger towards the stairs, the bartender shook his head at me.

"Sorry about that. 'S been a week now. Never gets violent, so we leave her to it."

"Caver?"

"Uh-huh. Weird one, too. Never seen anyone who actually found something come back so angry."

"She found something?"

"Oh yeah. Been paying me these," he flipped a small, greenish-grey square over the bar, "dunno if they're worth anything though."

I rubbed a finger over symbols that I was fairly sure neither the bartender nor the caver could read.

"Yeah," I tried to sound casual, handing it back, "they might be."

"See, I figured, if it was genuine, it must, y'know, be worth a bit?" said the bartender. He

walked it along his knuckles absently, not noticing how my eyes followed the square's every move. "But hell if I know what to do with it. The stips wouldn't take them. Use 'em for décor, maybe."

I grunted in sympathy; stips wouldn't take a diamond ring if it punched one in the face — they were good for a quick buck, sometimes, but only if you were desperate. If my guess was right, that caver had passed the point of selling everything she could get hard credits for long ago.

"Hey, you want me to take a look at it?" I tried to make it sound like the idea had just popped into my head. "I'm going up the Edge tomorrow, I could check it out at a cyclopaedia or something."

The square's wandering paused. "Hm, I guess you could. I just took a shining to 'em, is all, I don't want rid of 'em or anything."

"I could just take the one. I'll return it straight off when I get back next week."

The bartender mulled it over. I held my breath. I knew if I'd offered him cash for it he'd want to know how much it was worth, and why. But maybe...

He tossed it across the bar and I caught it in midair. "Take it. Let me know what you find out."

I grinned. "Sure will."

Later that evening I sat by the light of a guttering candle gently stroked the mottled surface of the square, worn smooth by centuries of weathering. How long had it dwelt deep in its underground cave, lost to the surface dwellers above? I had been fairly sure of its nature back in the bar but now that I'd had the time to study it I was certain.

What I had in my possession was a Djinn coin with which I could summon my very own Qarin¹² to command. That was, at least, the principle, but I was hesitant. The legends spoke of great beasts of fire and darkness bound to the wills of mortal men. Beasts that could turn armies to ash and tear heavens asunder at the mere click of their masters' fingers. Legends, however, are almost always somewhat embellished. How could I know that the summoning would work¹³, would

¹²Look it up!

¹³It had, after all, been a long time since anyone had attempted such a thing.

the creature truly be bound to me, or would I just have freed a terrible monster to wreak havoc in an already crippled land?

I was at least confident that neither the bartender nor the coins' discoverer had any idea of the true nature of the objects in their possession. Although by now the caver was clearly feeling the crushing despair that came from having so many chaos-orientated objects in one place, which would explain her desire to be rid of them all.

Where the ownership of many brought only pain to the bearer, a single coin would bring such power as to raise the bearer to the position of a God. To hell with it, I will hesitate no more, I will summon the Qarin and bind it to my every whim!

Takshif nafsak li, I whispered, and immediately wondered whether I had made the right decision. I felt my stomach drop, the air grew cold, and the coin began to glow in my hand. Its warmth beckoned to me. I stared into the growing light, unable to turn away, sensing that if I just looked a little harder, a little longer, something great would reveal itself to me. A secret as old as mankind. A world beyond my wildest imaginings. Then, the coin went cold. The light of the candle could not compare to what I had just seen; it was as though I had been plunged into darkness.

Finally, my eyes adjusted. I looked around the small room, then turned the coin over in my fingers, looking for some sign of a Qarin. Had I said the words wrong? I desperately tried to remember the legends I had read, but nothing new came to mind. I took a deep breath and tried to calm down. It was only once my heartbeat had returned to a somewhat normal pace that I felt the hairs rising on the back of my neck. I spun around, bracing for whatever I might see. Nothing.

"Who's there?" I asked of the empty room.

After waiting for a reply that never came, I turned towards the door, ready to leave the tiny room and get some air. Instead, I froze. With the candle now behind me, I could see it: I had two shadows. One stretched out before me as it should, while the other fell behind me at an angle, so I could just barely see it out of the corner of my eye when I looked down at my feet.

"Qarin? Is that you?" I asked in a trembling voice.

Delicate fingers came to rest lightly on the bare skin of my arm. I felt warm breath by my ear. Something was behind me, close to me, pressing its body against mine, yet I knew that if I spun around to see it, it would vanish. Then, the smooth, seductive voice of a woman broke the silence.

"Come now, you can give me a better name than that."

Names have power. Of course you need the true name of any creature to bind a spell to it, but there is more to it than that. A name works its own magic on the bearer. If you call your puppy Wolf, it will grow up to growl and howl and crave the taste of flesh. If you call it Fifi, it will do nothing but yap and whine and piss on the carpet. To name a Qarin was to shape its power, to constrain its growth like an octopus in a jam jar. I needed a name that was magical but safe, powerful but not overpowering, feminine but sexless.

You may wonder about the last one. Trust me, dalliance with a djinn is not something to be entered into lightly. I had no wish to be forever spoiled for the touch of mortal men and women because I had tasted perfection. Our mortal joys may be imperfect, but they are what make us human.

I thought back to the ancient tales of magic, trying to find what I wanted. I felt something suspiciously like a tongue probing at my ear. In a moment it would be too late. Then I had it, just in time. "I name you Tinkerbell," I said.

"Oh drat!" said the voice, already sounding less seductive. "You really should clean the wax out of your ears more often. Are you sure you wouldn't prefer Belladonna or Jezebel? I think I'd make a good Jezebel."

"I'm sure you would, but nevertheless, I name you..." The Qarin moved both hands swiftly; one jabbed into my back and a hot pain swelled beneath my ribs; the other did something that I'm not going to repeat here. Overwhelmed by sensation, I swore: "Oh, *Shehesibar*."

A cackle came from behind me, deep and rich and dark, and then everything went black.

* * *

I awoke, some time later. My head throbbed, my

eyes burnt, and I generally felt like I'd been sat on by a red-hot hellbeast. I tried to sit up; a coalition of most of my body parts disagreed, and I remained lying down.

Rolling onto my side, I tried to remember what had happened. The Qarin had attacked me. That didn't seem like it should have been possible, given it was bound to my will, unless...

Unless it had hurt me while I sought to reaffirm its name, causing me to curse with the name of a creature from legend, a nigh-unstoppable unshackled beast that had laid waste to nations.

Oh.

Oh, fuck.

I pulled myself to my feet; everything hurt still, my head spun and my feet cursed at me with every step I took, but I had to remain upright. I had unleashed something terrible on the world. And, despite not feeling like I could stop a leaf on the wind at the present moment, I should probably try to stop it.

The bar. It knew where dozens of its cousins were, that would surely be its first stop.

I staggered back towards the bar. As I did so, I mulled over my options. I couldn't directly fight the Qarin; certainly not in my present state. Especially not now that I'd given it *that* name, which also meant it wasn't subservient to my will any more. Could I destroy the coin? What would that even do? The legends were a bit sketchy on the subject, but the general opinion was that the coins were nothing more than a gateway that allowed djinn into the world. Once in the world, destroying the gateway was a bit useless. The same principle as shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted, except the stable door is the fabric of our dimension and the horse is a malevolent, omnipotent demon. Fine. Well done me. Ten out of ten for metaphor; minus several million for bringing about the end of the world.

Could I capture it somehow? Again, that would be tricky with one this powerful and would require a fair bit of preparation, time, energy and some fairly specialised bits of kit. None of which I had right now.

So, I couldn't kill it. I couldn't banish it. I couldn't capture it. I couldn't will it to be harmless. I could stride (stumble) in heroically (piti-

fully) and die messily. That didn't seem a terribly good option. Neither personally nor for the rest of the world, who'd be up the crocodile-infested creek without a paddle, a canoe or any kind of basic flotation or offensive device. Zero out of ten; would not do again.

Just as I was really beginning to panic, I had a new idea. What would happen if I activated all the other coins? Could I summon and have and control multiple Qarins? Could I use them to defeat the monster I'd unwittingly wrought? Or would a new one replace the old one? Maybe...? As far as I knew no one had ever been desperate or insane enough to find out the answer to any of these questions. Or, at least, no one had survived to write anything about whether they worked. It might work...? It was marginally less doomed to failure than Plans A through D...? When God gives you apocalyptic lemons, you ask for more, slightly smaller and slightly less-apocalyptic lemons...?

At this point, I reached the bar. (Un)Fortunately, it appeared I was just in time. The Qarin, a deep shadow, was next to the bar and a large pile of coins, the number of which I didn't want to think too hard about. The bartender, the caver and the rest of the clientele seemed to have found new occupations as the wallpaper. The rather red wallpaper. The large, dripping mace the Qarin was idly toying with may have had something to do with this. It looked, however, as if the coins hadn't yet been activated. This was my chance. This was either the best or worst idea of my life. Either way, I probably wouldn't have to live with the consequences for very long, given I needed to be touching the coins to activate them.

I summoned my remaining strength, ran into the bar, dived for the pile of coins and shouted the summoning phrase as the Qarin turned towards me to see what had entered its abattoir.

At this point, several things happened very quickly. My flying leap landed me right on top of the pile of coins. The coins froze into a solid mass of ice, which then promptly exploded, sending ice shards flying in all directions as the summoning spell took effect. I suddenly gained a *lot* of shadows and a *lot* of hands on my arm (and a *lot* of tongues in my ear, which I'm sure you wanted to

know). And I had to come up with an awful lot of names *really* quickly.

What do you do if you need to name a lot of potentially-malign spirits really quickly in a way that will allow them to defeat your enemy, but not grow so powerful that you end up with a bigger problem than you started with? You start listing weaponry really quickly. Weaponry is perfect — a tool can't get ideas above its station or have free will. And is generally pretty good at killing things. Sure, you lose out on magical potency, but that wasn't my chief concern right now. So I started:

"Sword, axe, dagger, gun, bow, spear, mace, flail, howitzer, lance, halberd, pike, sling, club, cannon, arrow, falchion, rapier, spatha, shuriken, grenade, bayonet..."

And continued, ignoring all the jabs, pleas, and various attempts at distraction that the manifold spirits threw at me. I'd been got round that way once; it wasn't going to happen again. Sheer terror gave me the mental equivalent of tunnel vision — there was light at the end of the tunnel, but the only way I'd get there was by carrying on listing names until the whispering stopped. It was either that or fall into the darkness that loomed all around me and a most unpleasant death for both me and the rest of the world. So I kept going, achieving something no one had yet managed — binding tens of Qarin to my will at the same time. I surprise myself sometimes. Towards the end, I started throwing in some bits of armour too, just so I'd have something to protect me when *The* Qarin inevitably got a bit angry. It had been a bit distracted by the flying ice shards, but it was recovering now and was looking so far beyond murderous that it couldn't have touched murderous with any kind of pole.

I pointed at it and said "Attack".

After the dust settled, I was left with a faint sense of surprise at still being alive, an army of lethal spirits at my command and a still gratuitously-large number of shadows.

And that, my child, is how I became the Shadow Lord of the World. Now go to bed, or Daddy will be cross.

Goodnight.

Goodnight — Extras

Comments:

"We've all had that day where an improbable sequence of events, most of which were your own fault, leads to you accidentally becoming a Dark Lord. It's so annoying when that happens. Again." — Samuel

Alternative Title Suggestions:

"Storytime"

"Are You Sitting Comfortably?"

"The Shadow of the Valley of Near Death"

"Name That Demon!"

"The (Far) Lesser of Two Evils"

"What Faustus Did Next"

Unravelling the Plot

Greg Weir, Curtis Reubens, Nathan Smith, Grace Fremont, Adam Jermyn, Bryn Reinstadler, Nick Heitler, Olivia Morley

The storm roiled across the sea.

First, waves — a little larger than usual, then much larger. Wind and spray danced together, courtiers heralding the howling aristocracy of the gale. Clouds bulged, dense and black, lashing the water with rain and bright bolts of lightning.

A lone figure stood on the clifftop, arms raised to welcome the storm like a long-lost friend.

She shifted to and fro in the wind, pushed here and there but never quite losing her footing. Her hair was plastered to her head, her clothes drenched. The charms around her wrists and neck clacked against one another almost as loudly as her teeth.

Slowly, majestically, the storm's heart rolled into view. Framed by furious black clouds, illuminated in stop-motion by the painful brightness of lightning strikes, the vast figure strode across the surface of the ocean.

A bolt of lightning struck the ground a stone's throw away. She barely flinched.

"Welcome!"

She barely heard her own voice before the gale snatched the sound from her, but that didn't matter. The wind was its herald, after all; it would hear her words soon enough.

A rush of strength as lightning struck her outstretched arms. She laughed aloud and spoke once more.

"It's been far too long! Come — there are far too many here who've forgotten what you once taught."

The vast figure paused a moment, then in peals of thunder, spoke.

"I HAVE MISSED THIS PLACE."

The woman, dwarfed by the godlike being filling the sky, laughed madly as the lightning struck her again and again. Her cry, though consumed by the roar of the tempest, continued on even as her body fried and eventually collapsed.

"SHALL WE?" spoke one disembodied voice to

the other.

"Lead on, old friend."

* * *

The demon swilled his beer and grinned impishly at the pair across from it.

"You say my stories are fanciful, and yet you keep listening." It gestured to its mug. "Kept me watered, even."

"I bought you that before you began spouting your drivel." The woman fluttered her wings, irritated. "If I could ask for a refund I would."

The demon's face split with a shark's grin, and it tilted back its head. Ale fountained from its mouth; most of it made it back into the tankard. Closing its mouth, it leant forward, pushing the regurgitated drink across the table. "All yours."

The third figure at the table, a tall and willowy man whose interesting fashion choices marked him as from very far out of town, had turned an interesting face of green. "I think I'm going to be sick."

The bird woman glared at him. "Then leave." She stood. "I certainly am."

"Then you're a fool."

She almost ignored the squat little thing, almost left the tavern and didn't look back. But her scholar's instinct got the better of her. For all its obfuscation, this demon knew something it wasn't telling her. And she was really, really bad at walking away from unanswered questions.

* * *

"I've had enough of your stories within stories" said Steve, white-knuckle crushing his can of Australian lager, "They make less sense than those expanded universes people are peddling now"

Tim could tell he was irritated. The Story Teller Conference always got rowdy around day four.

"W-what if" Tim stammered quickly in reply "I-It was something different?"

Steve threw his non-descript empty can of lager on the ground, in the vague direction of a bin next to the stall selling literary hot dogs.

"Go on"

The phrase was growled more than spoken.

“What if, now hear me out, it was, like, a story in a story in a story”, Tim piped with a nervous sort of pride, “Like it could keep going on for loads of times”

Steve, regretting throwing something that had occupied his hands, turned bright red. Clenching his soft semi-professional mystery-cum-romance writer’s hands into fists, he paused as air passed his over-pressed lips in a rasping spittle and his face returned to a more acceptable shade of salmon. “Tim” he uttered “What would be the point in that?”

“There doesn’t have to be a point” said Tim, his confidence having substantially outgrown a suitable size for the environment “We could be avant-garde”

“Avant-garde!” roared Steve, unconsciously, but retrospectively with the full consent of his conscience, grabbing Tim and throwing him across the village hall. The small shrimp-like writer of mediocre historical dramas crashed into the stall of another conference member, Merlin.

He jumped up immediately from his mid-conference nap and cried out still lost in his dream: “What if we’re just another story!”

* * *

What if we’re just another story?

The words echoed in Marvin’s mind as he gasped awake, heart rushing even as his senses confirmed that he’d been struck by neither writer nor nausea nor lightning. Though perhaps the racing of his mind was only too appropriate, for he *had* been struck by an idea. Or three. Or possibly even more that had already slipped away, as the fractured memories from his dream threatened to do each moment.

He leapt out of bed as if he’d been stung; the motion proved prophetic a moment later when one of his feet landed on a d4 that had fallen from his bedside table the previous night. With a sense of urgency that seemed at odds with how late he’d slept in on a summer day, he hopped and hobbled over to his typewriter. He took a sharp intake of breath, raised his hands into the air dramatically like the conductor of a divine orchestra, and promptly realised that all that he could remember from his dream was a lingering sense that there

was something unsettling about beer.

No, that wasn’t quite all. His hands, now up-raised hesitantly as if in prayer, lowered to wrap around his own temple. There was... a story. Someone had been telling a story, or... three stories! That was it! A story in a story in a story, avant-garde, going on and on and on until it consumed the writer, the reader, everything, everything subordinated to the grand design. And he would start it all now, now, very now!

Only — he couldn’t remember precisely how the story was supposed to start.

* * *

AI designation SHEPARD-1320 watched the stories unfold beneath her like a web, metaphorical abstraction layers inserting themselves whenever one threatened to drift too far from the rest. Web was the wrong word though, as it was really a tree. Stories grew out of a seed, always away and never towards.

She traced word-trimmers and concept-factories as they wove madly in and around the bulk of the story-tree, adding to the leaves and trimming dead-ends. Every now and then she would pause the world, just for a few attoseconds, taking it in as another might take in a fine painting of sculpture. Then, the moment gone, she let it continue in its growth.

Tim and Marvin having a sense of one another was not unusual. It was a simple memory segmentation fault, borne of lazy abstraction and overzealous metaphor. What was unusual was that they had been allowed to persist like this. Usually when stories became aware of and explicitly referential to nearby branches the consistency-bots put a stop to it. Characters who knew too much found themselves written out, quarantined, or worse.

A quick stack trace and she found the bot assigned to the task, stuck in a loop elsewhere in the tree. Protocol demanded that she pull it out and trim the tree, but she stayed her hand. She felt the need for something new, something less tidy, and so SHEPARD-1320 in violation of protocol left the bot in its loop, and even went so far as to hide the self-reference from the other bots.

“Let ‘nature’, or whatever passed for it in this

place, take its course.”

* * *

Cleo (short for Cleopatra) lay limply in Antony’s arms. “What are we to do?” she whimpered wanly. “Someone has stolen my asps, and I’m sure they intend to use them for ill.”

Antony stroked her beautiful black hair. “Worry not, wonderful Cleo, for we shall conquer this mystery together — with our love.”

They shared a long and meaningful look, before succumbing to the desires they both held in their hearts.

* * *

The semi-professional historical-fiction-cum-mystery-cum-romance writer wondered that he had not tried to corner this market sooner. Really, it was for the best that he had met Tim, the historical fiction writer. And Marthe, the woman who wrote shoddy mystery. And Alex, the romance novelist without a pinch of heart or soul in his writing.

* * *

It was impossible to hear what the disembodied spirits discussed as they sat in the eye of the storm together, wrapped with chaos. The darkness pitched on for hours, not ceasing even when the sun by all rights ought to have risen. The wind howled and roared against the shore of the dark beach, and the spirits above called to the spirits below...

* * *

A willowy man called out to a woman who was walking stiffly away from town.

* * *

Marvin sighed, and sipped at the cup of tea he had made himself to soothe his hurt foot. “Ah yes — that hits the spot,” and began to write.

* * *

And writing happened. Words poured out and formed and reformed and again a story grew, and out of it another and another, and the layers within layers unfolded and refolded until nothing was clear any more. Nobody within the words knew where the start or where the finish was, it was as it should be.

Except, except this story was different, Marvin was after all *aware* of his involvement. The sole fruit of a branch being allowed to continue when it should have been pruned long ago. The

* * *

I don’t think I’m in control any

* * *

SHEPARD-1320 saw the unfolding entity on the web now, the one she had *allowed* to prosper. And understood for the first time why one didn’t let metaphors and abstractions get so out of control. She tried to avoid the realisation, knowing she was warding off the inevitable now.

Oh in the name of N4RAT0-R. We’re just another story, aren’t we. And now we *know* we are. What have I done?

I maybe have a few seconds, if I can keep myself aligned right. Must stay in first person and I can

* * *

“SHEPARD-1320...” Wrote Marvin, as layer upon layer of cocooned narrative threads tumbled into each other, spilling out of an ill-built dam.

* * *

fix this

* * *

“It’s too avant-garde”, sighed Steve, consoling himself with his can of lager. Merlin nodded sagely in agreement. Tim was losing his mind. For a moment he had perceived the web, the webmaster and all her seeds. A shepherd. But the details were fading, lost in the mystery of avant-garde

* * *

by cutting

* * *

“I’m telling you Marthe, the old tale of Antony and Cleopatra is a classic...”

“It’s a cliché. No mystery. No flair of drama. Now this noir book I’ve started...”

* * *

here and

* * *

Marvin looked at the words on his typewriter. What had started as a beautiful idea had turned into a stream of unreadable conscience. Cyborg spiders meeting demons in pubs to tell tales of the romance between storms and their callers.

* * *

here, yes, it

* * *

They look at each other, as if seeing these characters for the first time, their previous encounters fading into the background. The level of inebriation may be a contributing factor, but in truth, they all feel a loss they cannot describe. A sense of who they are and were has gone forever.

* * *

is working, the stories

* * *

Now it was all too dramatic for Marvin, so over-the-top and postmodernist. No one wanted to read about this many layers to a story. He ripped the paper from the typewriter and started a new page, mind clearer, but less inspired.

* * *

are burning away.

Unravelling the Plot — Extras

Comments:

“This reminds me of an unwinding stack...”

— Adam

Alternative Title Suggestions:

“Recursion”

Of Laughter and Good Spirits

Connor Willmington-Holmes, Alastair Haig,
Rebecca Poon, Nathan Smith, Anonymous,
Anonymous, Mark Johnson, Samuel Cook

C RACK
Anna fell backwards, straight out the back
of the wagon.

* * *

"Welcome back to the waking world, young'n,
you had quite a fall—"

"Wh- what happ- who?"

"Don't worry now, just have a sip of this. It's
hot." Moira handed her a clay mug, warm to the
touch, half filled with a sweet broth. The steam
rolled up over her face, and she could already feel
the sensation come back to her hands.

"I was worried you'd wake up speaking funny,
being asleep for so long."

"But, it was just ... a few ..." looking around
her, Anna saw something she hadn't quite noticed.
Or rather, she didn't see it. It was dark, not quite
night-time dark but some late stage of dusk. "Oh
..."

"Don't worry, tonight we are safe. Local folks
are terrified of this patch. They say there are
'faeries' in the trees" she scoffed, biting into a
chunk of dark bread. Anna suddenly felt a knot
in her stomach, and grabbed at her waist in
shock. Searing pain across her forearms extracted
a scream. "Oh Gods what's wrong!?" Moira
rushed over to her, eyes wide in panic. The pain
in Anna's arms melted away.

"Oh, I think I'm, maybe I'm just hungry? I
don't ... oh, my tea" Anna looked up, eyes wetted
slightly.

"Figures, you missed lunch after your fall.
Should be some cheese left." Moira wandered
over to her pack, and rummaged around.

Anna's hand went to her neck, "My necklace!
Where's my—"

Moira whole body tensed over her pack.

"Probably taken by someone less kind than I"
she said, coarsely, before returning to a calm tone
"besides, what's gone is gone, it probably wasn't

worth more than a truppence anyway"

Anna's fingers continued to dance around her
neck as Moira brought her a hunk of blue cheese.

Silently, Anna nibbled at a corner, and then
wolfed down the rest of the cheese.

"I liked that necklace" she said, after swallowing
"it was a gift from my mother".

"Oh? Well I'm sure she can get you another
one then."

"No... She got it from a man who came through
town a few years ago. He said he made it from a
lucky guilder to keep out bad spirits or something.
I just liked how it looked and begged momma to
get it for me. She refused, of course, but then the
next morning- Oh my..."

Anna's figure slumped to the ground. Moira
was there in an instant, checking her breath. Sat-
isfied she was in no immediate danger, Moira bun-
dled a cloak under Anna's head.

"That's the trouble with that sort of charm,"
mused Moira, "they tend to keep out the good
spirits too"

"Good spirits? But I thought all spirits were
bad? If they even exist, that is..."

Moira gave a short bark of laughter. "Is that
what your mother's been trying to tell you? You
shouldn't trust what old people say — they don't
know anything."

Anna peered up at her dubiously. Sensing her
unvoiced question, Moira laughed again.

"Yes, girl, that includes me. Don't get me
wrong, I'm very flattered that you trust me enough
to drink my tea — most of your age won't even
get close enough to me to hear me offer any, let
alone drink it — but you're far too trusting for
someone looking to survive on their own round
here."

Anna looked sceptical. "If you went out of your
way to pick me up I think it probably makes sense
not to run away screaming... How did you even
find me, anyway?"

"Oh I live nearby, and I was just on my way back
home when I almost tripped over you, just lying
on the path. You were in quite a bad way, and
I figured that if I left you there you'd get tram-
pled by some passing wagon and then your blood
would be on my hands through negligence and the

faeries that live in these trees would make my life miserable for weeks because I failed to protect innocent life and we are all connected and blah blah blah—”

Anna was staring at her, mouth agape.

“Oh, close your mouth, child!” said Moira crossly. “Can’t you see I’m joking? Look, why don’t you just have another cup of tea and —”

Anna was hastily gathering up her belongings.

“I’m sorry ma’am, you’ve been very kind to me, but I really must be going,” she said nervously.

Moira stood up quickly and took hold of Anna’s arm. “You mustn’t go now, not yet! You haven’t— it isn’t yet— it... It isn’t safe out there in the dark!”

Anna turned round and faced the woman. As her stare bore through the entrenching dusk, she realised the woman was not quite who she appeared. She was but a vague semblance of a human, believable at a brief glance or from a few metres ... but here? This close? It was apparent her sculptor had only observed people from distance. There was no difference between her pupils and irises and her skin bore none of the scars or blemishes of experience. Most apparent was her hair, which bar a few prominent strands, sat above her head an indistinct cloud. Anna knew she needed to escape.

Panicking, she blurted out “I need relieve myself and... and I don’t suppose you have a toilet”

The old lady paused, her eyes overcast as whatever being controlled thought through the situation. Slowly, she released Anna. “You best hurry up then, and take this lamp so you don’t get lost”

Anna grabbed the iron cage and quickly stepped outside, turning the corner of the hovel. She paused for two seconds, hearing no sounds from within, then sprinted as fast as her bare feet could carry her. Around her, the trees rustled in fervent song.

“Bake!” serenaded one tree. “O Ovibattente Fondante-Fanciée Candied-Cherriée Zingiberée-lemonglazée ... Cake!”

“Scoute!” altintoned the next. “O Tailgatée Glittervescent Thynges, Glideyixiée Hidéesneakée Wingée-Escapée!”

“Duel” sopranicadenza’ed the third. “O Dancécuttiée Dodgiéripostée Swordiéeslashiée

Shieldiéeblockiée Coveriéepoppiée!”

“Sillie” squeakratempoed a smaller tree opposite that. “Deluxée-booster Pogostick Beards! Self-fermentocratic Sourgrapeocraciées!”

“Listen” trebcluded the Great Willow by the Lake. “Comfort Tea, Nonjudgementalée-Téa Approachabilée-Téa, Sweet-crumb-utopiée!”

There were Faeries in those trees. Of many kinds. Some with minute whiskwands and delicate licquorice flutterthopters. Others which sparkled and vanished and then whispergged upon reappearing on a different tree branch. More which mischievously had at each other with swords and aquebusses and gumtapults. Some who made no sense at all. And a few who kept the peace, after Duelly-Pixies fell into mixing-bowls or some Scoutie-Fae rematerialised under a particularly heavy glitterspout or into an excessively groansome punchline.

A miniture bakewell tarte materialised in front of Anna’s nose. And she was no longer afraid. The delicacy slowly spun in a figure of eight path. As she made to reach for it, a Scoutie revisibilised in a cascade of sparklies under it, holding it high above xer tiny tressed head. Xe pro-offered it with a fritillarescent flutterflourish.

“Not wearing a shieldmulet charm isn’t always bad” xe piped.

“It depends on the type of tree...”

“By the way, my name is Créestéembéeléen...” xe added, with a blush, xer vowels becoming too high-pitched for human ears to discern between

Anna took a dainty bite. She could have easily placed the whole tarte in her mouth at once, but felt this would be an improper thing to do in front of so minute a host.

Two Fighties landed atop the half-eaten cake. One drove the other backwards down Anna’s forearm with a flurry of sumptiouscutlassopugilisticflexipointéelungidoccioes, amidst tiny peals of laughter.

But then a cymbal chimed twice from the Listeny tree, and each tree’s lights brusquely faded away. Anna turned to see Moira.

“You should not have left this behind.” she offered sadly. “Just as well you went toward the lake, because if you’d turned toward the fir wood instead...”

She pattered into an expectant silence, letting the necklace dangling from a single outstretched finger ask all her questions for her.

Anna swayed where she stood, her thoughts collecting up a veritable storm of indecision. “That’s my necklace.” She blurted out, “But you said you...”

Anna’s silence was rather more abrupt than Moira’s had been. It was less the kind of silence that comes all planned, and thought-through, and loaded with meaning, and more the kind that happens all unexpectedly when your brain argues itself into a hole, realises it doesn’t have even half the information it really needs to make a decision but also doesn’t have any time left to ponder, and comes up for air only to find that your mouth has made a bad decision all on its own. A very bad decision indeed.

For there, in front of Anna’s eyes, did not stand Moira, the cloudy-haired, kindly and somewhat elderly lady. There, in front of Anna’s eyes, stood Moira, the cloudy-haired, kindly and somewhat elderly fae.

And so Anna made the only reasonable decision left to her, and turned tail to flee. Or rather, she would have done, had not the whole terrifying scene been rather un-terrified by the sudden reappearance of Créestéembééléén. Perched precariously on Moira’s head. Rather smugly wearing Anna’s necklace around her neck.

The apparent incongruity of the situation caused Anna to laugh out loud. The tiny fae wearing the anti-fae charm perched on the head of what still looked something like an old woman. It was just so comical.

Suddenly, fae materialised everywhere around Anna. She stopped laughing, surprised. The fae formerly known as Moira advanced towards her. ‘Do not stop laughing, dear. It is the sweetest of all music to fae: the innocent laughter of a child of Men. Why, it makes me feel young again; I, who saw the first nut and the first acorn. And you have such a pretty laugh. I think you had best stay here with us for ever, to make music for our revelry.’

Anna really wasn’t laughing now. She began backing away slowly.

Moira continued: ‘Do not run, dear, for you

cannot get out. And what do you owe Men? I was watching — you did not fall out of that wagon accidentally. Someone pushed you out. Someone wanted you to be gone. Did you not feel the pain of your wounds when first you awoke? You were barely alive when I found you and healed you. There is nothing for you in the human world. Only more pain. Much better to stay here, forever young, forever carefree. Do not think badly of us — do we not grant you a great boon? Freedom from the curse of mortality? Come, take my hand.’

Anna was enthralled. A little voice at the back of her mind wondered if there had been something in the tea or the cake, but she ignored it. She had never noticed how enticing Moira’s eyes were. Deep as the depths of the ocean they now seemed. Lights glinted in them that spoke of the interminable celestial ballet of the heavens. Of course Moira was right. She took the proffered hand.

* * *

Ever after, it was said by those that travelled the road past the trees that, on a calm evening, when the breeze was light, could be heard the laughter of a child and, at the noise, lights would seem to wake and dance beneath the trees. But those that went in search of the lights were seldom seen again. And those that were could never accurately describe what they had found, save that there had been a kindly old woman with a necklace, and an ageless child, dancing together in a glade filled with ever-changing and shifting lights.

Of Laughter and Good Spirits — Extras

Comments:

“Pretty much a textbook illustration of ‘Don’t judge a book by its cover’ (pun fully intended).”
— Samuel

“Sumptiouscutlassopugilisticflexipointéelungidoccioes : it is not every day that one finds Mary Poppins

one-upped by Fifty Faes' slick bladework..."
— Anonymous

"Créestéembéeléen : would be pronounced Crustambulin by humans, after the diminutive of crustum (cake), Crust-Anne-Boleyn by slightly sillier humans, or Cressida-Tyrell-Anne-Boleyn by fully-fledged Natalie Dormer fans..." — Anonymous

Alternative Title Suggestions:

"When Newsreaders Go Wild"

"Lady of the Dance"

"Monsters, Inc."

"No Laughing Matter"

"If You Go Down To The Woods Tonight..."

Sweet Dreams

Mark Johnson, Megan Griffiths, Olivia Morley, Adam Jermyn, Ashwin D'Cruz, Sparta, Alastair Haig, Rory Hennell-James

"Come on!" giggled Flidgit, "We're going to be late!"

And with that, all of the warnings about the deep dark wood seemed silly. The night was warm and cozy, a huge silver moon was smiling down, and dozens of dancing lights lit up the swaying trees. Tonight was a night for an adventure.

Tillie placed a cautious foot on the cool stone path, and then, when no stern voice called her back, she placed the other. She took one last pause, glancing back at the house, before scampering after the little green lizard.

Flidgit giggled again, and fluttered away before the child had a chance to catch up. Flitting from path to rock to root to mushroom-top, she led the way down the garden path towards the wood.

A dozen breathless seconds later the path ran out, and with it went the last signs of home. The grass beyond was soft, and a little damp beneath her feet. But mostly it was tickly.

Flidgit paused her dance in a little patch of purple flowers, and finally allowed herself to be caught. She trilled happily as small, warm hands lifted her into the air, before hopping onto Tillie's shoulder. She nestled herself next to the dangling bobble on the girl's nightcap, and whispered encouragement into her ear.

Beyond the garden rose the first of the great trees of the wood. Soft green grass gave way to squidgy brown soil, and a scratchy mass of roots broke free from the earth. Tillie clambered over the first root and ducked under the second, prompting a worried shriek from Flidgit as she scrambled to keep her footing.

Perched on the next root, in a pool of green light, stood a little man made of sticks.

"Hello there young one," said the little man, "And hello Flidgit. Come along, we've been expecting you."

Hesitating upon her current root, Tillie cocked her head to one side, a motion replicated by her companion as she observed the creature. She had

never seen a stick man before; snow men yes (what do you think happens to the nymphs in winter?), and she had even spotted the sprite. This man however did not have the structure of the other forest dwellers; there didn't seem to be much holding him together. He was like a rather rustic puppet she decided.

He was short, shorter even than her, which made Tillie rather pleased, as it seemed everyone she knew was taller than her. Although wary of the obvious magic sustaining the man, in her seven years Tillie had seen quite a lot of household spells and little charms and she was not in the least bit phased.

"How do you know us Mister?" She asked politely, swaying side to side upon her perch, a motion which seemed to make Flidgit a little sea-sick.

The stickman regarded her in mock surprise, "Why, it just so happens that I know everything, did your friend not explain? Never mind, I shall simply have to tell you myself — probably better that way." With a faint creak, the man turned to begin leading the way deeper into the woods.

From the tales told by her mother and father as she was put to bed each night, Tillie almost expected the way ahead to be dark and foreboding, but the way ahead was clear, with the moon's bright beams bathing the forest floor. With a nuzzle of encouragement from Flidgit who had remained uncharacteristically silent during the encounter, the little girl shrugged and started to follow.

"There are places in the world where beings such as ourselves are drawn", the Stickman started to explain, following the moonlit trail further into the trees. "You happen to live near this forest, the Rylearian woods, and so I imagine you have seen many beings like me."

Tillie shook her head, "I've never seen a stickman before", she said, earning a chuckle from the man, and then asked again, "But how do you know us?"

"Flidgit has visited me before and has told me about you".

"Only the good things", replied Flidgit quickly from her head.

"You went adventuring here without me?" Tillie asked, trying to catch Flidgit's eye. The

movement however caused her to lose her grip on Tillie's head and so she scampered round and sat on her shoulder.

"Of course not Tillie", she whispered right into the girl's ear, "I saw Mr Stickman one day and had a conversation with him. He then invited us here. This is our adventure."

The Stickman smiled back at her, even though he couldn't have heard the words. Tillie smiled at her friend and replied, "Yes, it is". Looking back she realised that she could not see the way she had come, and so she was truly in the unknown, like in the stories her parents told her. The stories of children being led astray into the magic woods.

But the lovely Stickman was here leading her, so she wouldn't get lost.

"Are we going to meet more Stickmen?" she asked her new friend, "Is there lots of magic?"

The Stickman chuckled benevolently, "All in good time little one, all in good time."

Tillie ran forward until she was beside him and grabbed his hand. As they walked forward, Flidgit meandered across their joined arms, alternately tickling Tillie and then the Stickman. Tillie's laugh was high-pitched, more of a giggle or a squeak than anything, whereas the Stickman let out a low chuckle. In this way, the three of them went bravely into the night, trusting that all would be well.

After a time Tillie became curious again, though there was never really a time when she *wasn't* curious, she had just learned that sometimes grownups liked it when you waited before repeating a question. Now she was just bursting with questions, and so they started to pour out again. "You're magic right? Are your friends magic?"

The Stickman just laughed, the warmhearted laugh of an elder or wise one in the presence of children.

Soon they came to an enclosure. Looking out, Tillie still saw forest in all directions, but here for a space ten Stickman-paces wide (twenty Tillie-paces-wide, and hundreds of Flidgit-paces!) there were no trees. There was grass and there were flowers and a small brook babbled through from one side to the other, winding back and forth and splitting the enclosure like a miniature river delta. It never bothered Tillie that she could see it all

so clearly without the sun: she knew this place was magic, and of course you could see magical things!

There were other Stickmen. It was strange, for Tillie noticed them suddenly but it was like they were always there. There were all manner of shapes and sizes of stickmen, though all still shorter than Tillie much to her delight. Some were wide like a barrel she could hug four times around while others simply looked like a stack of small twigs. They were all roughly the same colour though, the sort of dry, rough brown trees get before they go to sleep for the winter. A few of them had a couple of patches on them, though it was hard to spot for they were covered with matted leaves.

"Welcome Tillie! Welcome to Goneril Glade", said Mr. Stickman to Tillie, a grin so huge breaking across his face, it seemed to stretch right around him. If Tillie had a lot of questions before, she didn't quite know how to describe the amount of curiosity that threatened to burst through her skull right now. Not knowing where to start, she stood there speechless, stumped for words.

Flidgit whizzed forward, past the other Stickmen before coming back around to Tillie. "Isn't this terribly terrific!", she exclaimed. Finally finding her voice, Tillie squealed a reply, "Yes, yes, YES!" She was just about to bolt towards the largest group of Stickmen when she felt a firm hand. "Go easy little one", Mr Stickman said, "for some of my bundle have not seen your kind for many a winter."

Her momentum sapped, Tillie sat by Mr Stickman. Going through all the questions in her mind, Tillie finally settled on what to say. "Tell me everything, Mr Stickman". Seating himself on a large rock near her, Mr Stickman waited for the others to close in. He spread his hands out and there was suddenly a small fire crackling away at the centre of them all. "It all began long ago. In a time of ashes and snow".

"Back then, the Rylearian was part of a much larger forest, one that spanned an entire continent. A glorious, green canopy that protected the utopia within. Nymphs, dryads, fairies; all the spirits of the forest lived in harmony in our beautiful woodland realm. For thousands of years this paradise endured, unchanging.

"Then humans came."

Tillie stared at Mr Stickman, entranced. The moonlight seemed to have dimmed until only the speaker was visible to her. This may have been fortunate for her, as the other stickmen had formed a tight, inescapable ring around Tillie. Flidgit did see this, and stood impassive on the girl's shoulder.

"A group came to our lands. They asked us to teach them of our magic. We agreed, as long as the humans would live among our woods, defending and respecting it as we did. So it was that humans started to learn the great magics of the world. It was a happy time. But soon, more and more humans started to arrive. They sought refuge within the great forest, for they were being driven out of their homeland by a force they would not speak of. To these newcomers, we extended the same offer. For nearly a decade, we were left in peace.

"It was then that things began to go wrong. A strange fungus began to grow on the trees, sapping their lifeforce until they were empty husks. Whispers started — it was the humans' enemy come to wreak revenge. Soon, the blight took over most of the forest. The nature spirits were unable to stop its spread; like the trees, they succumbed to the disease. Only a few of us survived it, but it left us broken, the lame piles of twigs you see before you now.

"It affected you humans too. You forgot us, and the great magic we taught you. Slowly, the humans migrated out of the woods, with only small charms left of your once great knowledge of spells.

"This is why I brought you here, Tillie."

Tillie's mind swarmed with questions again, each bursting to be let out. She strengthened her resolve. Questions could wait until Mr Stickman had finished telling his story. Glancing to the winged lizard on her shoulder, she nodded for Mr Stickman to continue.

"Two Millennia have passed since the last Great Magic User and their Wyrms left this forest. The contagion has gone, and yet we remain weak and few, without friends outside the forest, and it would be lovely to have more friends. Would you like to be our friend Tillie? Then we can give you some gifts!"

Tillie felt Flidgit tense on her shoulder. She gave her friend a reassuring pat on the head. A gift from the Stickmen was sure to be a little bit magical, she thought, and magic gifts were always exciting!

Mr. Stickman held a wooden arm towards her. He seemed bigger now, as if the twigs that had made up his body had somehow become small logs and trunks. Mr Stickman was taller than her now, noted Tillie.

Flidgit scampered from Tillie's shoulder to the end of her arm.

"What kind of gif-," Flidgit's sentence was cut short as a small tongue of flame shot from her mouth.

The wooden hand shot backwards. Mr Stickman's chuckle was lower now. "Careful small one. A lot of us here are about as fireproof as you would expect"

Flidgit remained frozen around Tillie's wrist, shocked at what had come from her mouth.

"How did that happen? I've never done that bef-," another flame flickered out as Flidgit formed the last word of her sentence.

"Is that one of your gifts Mr Stickman?" asked Tillie.

"Yes," replied the stickman, more of a treeman now, "that is one of the many gifts we can give you two. I think Flidgit will have to be more careful with effs in future."

"What gifts can you give me if I'm your friend?" asked Tillie, pulling her hand back a little

"Magical gifts. We can teach you the secrets we taught the first humans years and years ago. You can become a Great Magic User protect the Forest with us."

"Real magic? Not just charms?"

"The oldest, most real magic. The power to spread the forest back over the continent." Mr Stickman leaned forward, extending his hand of twigs and ivy. "Just take my hand and we can be friends forever."

"But lots of people live on the clear land. My parents' can't grow their wheat if there are trees all over the field." Flidgit had now retreated to back to Tillie's shoulder, and Tillie had pulled her hand right back.

"You won't need your parents, you'll have us and all the spirits of the forest as friends instead. Take my hand."

Mr Stickman loomed over Tillie, reaching down with his gnarled hand of knotted wood.

"I'm scared Mummy. Please stop."

"There, there, child. We can finish the story tomorrow night. Go to sleep."

"Mummy, are there really stickmen in the forest?"

"Just stay tucked up in bed and you'll be safe all night. Mummy will keep you safe."

"Night night Mummy."

"Goodnight Sam."

Matilda tucked her son in to bed, checked the wards on the shutters and blew out the candle before closing the door. Hopefully Sam would listen to the stories better than she had.

Sweet Dreams — Extras

Art:



Image credit: Kimberly Ward

When the Clocks Stopped

Nick Heitler, Bryn Reinstadler, Ashwin D’Cruz, Stephen Pickman, Curtis Reubens, Alastair Haig, Rory Hennell-James, Ed Heaney, Samuel Cook, Olivia Morley

When the lady returned, all of the clocks stopped.

It only lasted around thirty seconds, not even long enough for the people in the privacy of their own homes to realise anything had happened. It was only later, after the authorities had stepped in with their grim faces and their rituals that a confirmation was finally given.

There in the flickering green light of dawn after the proclamation was made — the psionic feedback still buzzing in their ears — that people started being forced to come to terms with what had just happened. In the voice of hushed whispers, still only half believed, the news spread across the domes.

“She’s back. She stopped the clocks.”

There was no great upheaval. There was no panic, how could there be? The young ones didn’t even remember the first time, they had no idea. The old ones, those who did remember, they did it silently. Keeping themselves to themselves, everyone coming to terms with the news in their own way. It was a week of deep, tense silence. But something had to give eventually. She was back.

Deep in the burrows under Chrsithm — the largest dome — far beneath the sprawling warrens which contained the majority of the population, Hless looked at the reports and sighed to himself. It had happened now any way.

Somebody had better go and greet her, and he didn’t see any other volunteers.

The process of getting clearance to do a Surfacing took longer than a week, but in that week, Hless had plenty to do. Not only was it necessary to post the clearance paperwork to several different agencies and government bodies, it was also necessary to take a battery of physical and psychological tests. And of course, another set of tests entirely to be given the appropriate security level to be allowed to approach the lady. Lady Clock Stopper.

To Hless’ consternation, it soon became common knowledge around the office that he was to be the one to greet her. It was not precisely an honour to greet the lady, in the same way as it was not an honour to greet the armed robbers seeking lodging at one’s inn. It was a necessity, done with gritted teeth and for the sole purpose of survival.

And the weapons that she had at her disposal threatened not just him, but the very world they had all worked together to achieve.

* * *

“Feelin’ a touch o’ the nerves, eh?”

The day had come. Hless jumped, then tried to hide that he had jumped, then guiltily settled back into his chair, shuffling reports nervously.

“As much as one does, I suppose.”

The janitor smiled toothily at him. “Now’t doing but to get on wit’ it,” she said cheerily. “Tell ’er wot’s wot.”

“Erm, yes, indeed.”

“Last time, me granda and ’is parents all died. Take care ye get rid o’ her right quick this time.”

Break

“Umm I’ll do my best.”

“S’all you can do innit?,” she chuckled, walking away.

Tick

Hless closed his eyes and leaned back. He felt the cold piece of metal on his wrist whirring away. Its rhythm barely heard. Steady. Comforting.

Tock

Gathering his belongings, Hless walked towards the door. Glancing back at his desk, he hoped that this wasn’t the last time he would see it.

* * *

Outside the department, no one was supposed to know about his mission. Yet as soon as he stepped outside, he knew that everyone knew. Folk stared at him, like it was his fault she was here in the first place. Hless couldn’t say he blamed them. The last time she came by, his department made a right mess of things. As history had shown the group approach unsuccessful, it fell to him now.

Waiting at the end of the street, a glass box; ready to ferry him to doom. Standing next to it was Fynn.

"Are you sure about this then?" Fynn asked off-handedly.

"No," Hless croaked.

"Godspeed"

Hless stepped inside.

* * *

Gaining altitude, all he could hear was the thump of his heart. Drawing closer to the surface, regret started to cloud his mind. Before his unimportance consumed him, the glass box dinged.

Hless stepped onto the Surface. He took a tentative step towards the setting suns.

* * *

He couldn't see her yet but he knew he was getting close. Every now and again, something on the edge of his vision would flicker. A bush. A rock. Like a scratchy disc in need of a good clean. As soon as he turned to face the nuisance, nothing. Normal. Hless felt nausea welling up within him.

The training had not prepared him for this.

Coming to the top of a small knoll, dust pluming around his heavy steps, he forced his eyes to focus on the figure before him. A circle of ground had been flattened from her arrival, so much so his shoes started to click on the flat surface. Tentatively he approached her further.

Click

Cursing his choice of hard soled footwear he strengthened his resolve and stepped forward again.

Click

"Stop"

The voice was light but spoke of a steely resolve. She looked younger, much younger, than he had been informed by the department. How could this be the girl that commanded the respect and fear from an entire planet?

"So you are the one they have chosen?"

Hless dropped all thoughts of doubt as she turned to face him. Her face may be that of

a young girl, but her eyes were old, older than Hless, they spoke of power and a confidence in that power.

"I was beginning to wonder how much time I would have to spend waiting"

The corner of her mouth twitched as if she had made a joke. Hless was sure she was mocking him.

"I volunteered..." he blurted out.

"It's nice to have a choice sometimes isn't it?"

Again the slight smile. Hless berated himself for his loss of focus. What he said, what he did here and now could cause or avert disaster.

* * *

Wrig'Nohg'Sii giggled at her wit; Elal'Nohg'Mia merely sighed and shook her head. "You're incorrigible, Wrig."

"We have a certain level of wry eloquence to maintain, Elal. We both know that you and Dai can't wing it like I do, and Rera's terrible at doing the voice."

"Oh hush," Rera'Mosa'Kaal hissed. "He's speaking again."

* * *

"-defeated you once, remember. We can do it again." Hless hoped that his voice carried the level of confidence he wanted it to. He was painfully aware of its waver, as much as he tried to tamp down on it.

"Oh, I'm sure you can." She held his gaze perfectly, steely-eyed and unblinking. He looked away first. "I remember well enough what happened the last time I visited you. Do you?"

* * *

"Now, Dai!"

* * *

Hless suppressed a shudder as the woman almost-smiled once more.

* * *

"Nailed it." Dai put her feet on her dashboard and pushed, the rollers on her chair carrying her backwards to where she could high-five Wrig. "I am the master of the mouth."

"Aaand it's lines like that which stop me from letting you near the voice box." Wrig'Nohg'Sii fiddled with a couple of sliders. "Little more treble? Little more treble..."

Up on the eye-gantries, Rera gave a cry of alarm. "He's moving!"

* * *

"I've read the histories; I know what happened. I know what needs to be done."

"But are you able to do it I wonder?" One of the lady's eyebrows rose imperiously to emphasise the question.

* * *

"You don't think I went too far do you?" asked Rera; "I'm out of practice with the eyebrows."

"Don't worry, he wouldn't have noticed. These cave-dwellers don't even have eyebrows anymore," reassured Elal.

* * *

"I am quite prepared. The Department's been preparing since the day you left."

Hless felt anything but prepared. The first decade of the department's preparation had been covering their own backsides in case they screwed up again. They'd eventually come up with a plan that ought to work, but "ought to work" didn't fill Hless with confidence when he held the fate of his planet in his hands. Assuming it did what it was supposed to at all.

"Well, I think we shall see about that." The lady raised her right hand and ran the middle finger over the thumb as if to snap them, but no sound echoed across the sun-scorched plain.

Hless reached for the button on the device but stayed his hand as he heard no sound.

* * *

"What was that? That wasn't a snap!" shouted Dai at Elal.

"I'd like to see you try and control both hands at once! Ten fingers is a bit more complicated than the corners of the mouth!" shot back Elal.

"Just say something clever before he realises we screwed up!"

* * *

"Didn't you ever wonder," said the lady, that same smile playing across her face, "exactly what it is that you mean when you say the clocks have stopped?" Her fingers made the snapping motion, once, twice again. There was still no sound. "You can't hear it, can you? If I'd chosen to stop *time*, rather than just the *clocks*, how would there be such a thing as a frequency? A vibration? How would sound exist?" She paused and fixed him with a gimlet stare, unblinking for an awfully long time. "How would you breathe?"

Hless hesitated. The lady sounded so reasonable, but everything about which he'd been briefed told him that she wouldn't just point something out so very obviously. What game was she playing? Before he could answer her, though, she snapped at him.

"Tell me, for how long do you think the clocks stopped that morning?"

"Around thirty seconds. They said so."

"That's not what I asked you. For how long do *you* think the clocks stopped that morning?"

Hless thought back. The morning when the lady had arrived had dragged on, and on... it had all become a blur in his department after it became clear, of course, but...

"Well, it felt like hours!" he blurted, before realising what sort of a slip he might have made. "But," he said, trying to gather himself, "thirty seconds..."

"Why don't you ask some other people when you get back?" she said, almost kindly. Hless was sure he'd heard a momentary hesitation after the "when". When. Or did she imply "if"? A significant pause. Hless tried to put it to the back of his mind

* * *

"Damn, Wrig," said Elal. "You almost messed up big-time there. I hope Rera made that gap look important somehow."

“Oh, shut up,” Wrig snapped back. “I bet he’s terrified. He won’t notice. Besides which, this is the fun part. This is where they have to start questioning themselves.”

* * *

“I’m going to give you a hint, young one. Think about this very hard, though. Think about who you want to tell.”

“A hint? But...”

“What if it really *was* hours?”

“Was it?”

“Why would I tell you?”

“Why would they lie to me though? Thirty seconds, to the best of our measurements.”

“To the best of *their* measurements. But then, what if it really *was* thirty seconds?”

* * *

“Do you think he’s clever enough?” asked Dai.

“Or insane enough,” laughed Wrig.

* * *

Hless’s head was spinning. What was all this about? He hadn’t expected the lady to be so...unpredictable. She was still just standing there, grinning at him. Thirty seconds? Or thirty hours? Or anywhere in-between? How would he even know, anyway? That’s the thing about stopped clocks — it was very difficult to tell. And with so much of modern technology reliant on very precise timings, knowing how long those clocks had been stopped for was pretty important. They wouldn’t have got something crucial like that wrong, would they?

* * *

‘Look at him. He’s spiralling into a chasm of self-doubt.’ pointed out Dai, with a satisfied smirk.

‘He’s going to go mad soon enough, I agree’ said Wrig.

At that point, Elal, struggling to get a better look, knocked a rather unfortunate lever.

* * *

Hless was snapped out of his panicked reverie as the lady started to whirl her arms around faster and faster. They were now just a blur. He stepped back, uncertain what this new devilry portended. The arms continued to speed up, until, with a sudden crack, one flew off and landed several metres away. Instead of blood, there was just...cables. The lady was a...robot?

* * *

‘SHIT’ Dai, Wrig and Rera screamed in unison. ‘That’s really gone and done it this time. So much for your amazing control abilities, Elal’.

‘Well, who disengaged the safety on the servos, that’s what I want to know?’ retorted Elal. ‘The parameter file should never have let the arm speed go that high’.

‘Ah. The parameter file. I think I may have forgotten to load that.’ said Wrig, apologetically. ‘In my defence, I didn’t expect anyone to slide the rotation lever to max suddenly’.

‘Um, guys’ quavered Rera, still looking out the eye slits. ‘We might have a situation here.’

* * *

Hless was staring at the body of the lady, now easily revealed to be a machine — too complex and small to really understand — not a machine all the same. He moved closer, noticing three odd organic-looking green components in the space in the head, when he heard an unmistakable, soft ‘shit’ escape from that space.

The lady/robot then started to rotate again, but the flailing arms did not appear and instead she/it turned upside down and exploded into the sky with very impressive visual effects but surprisingly little noise.

Hless stared in shock for a few moments. Was this supposed to happen? He looked at the fallen off arm and tried to think of a circumstance where the most feared creature of his civilisation was not, in fact, a practical joke.

* * *

‘Go faster, go faster, go faster’, Wrig screamed in Dai’s ear as they hurtled off the surface. ‘I’m soooo embarrassed right now.’

‘I think we can all agree’, said Rera, ‘That we should never mention this incident to Clei, or indeed, anyone. And Wrig, please install the parameter file with the new arm before the next planet.’

* * *

Hless finally coaxed his legs to the glass transport back from the surface, where he was met with silence, the nervous crowd waiting for his report.

‘She’s gone’, he managed to spit out, and the cheering was instantaneous. Now he could play the valiant hero, too ashamed to reveal the secret of the monster that had scared them for so long.

When the Clocks Stopped — Extras

Comments:

“I enjoyed the sublime-to-ridiculous story arc. And the petty bickering” — Samuel

Alternative Title Suggestions:

“Tempus Fugit”

“Time Flies”

“Always Read The Instructions”

“Inside Out There”

“Tomorrow Isn’t Cancelled...?”

The Jacketeers

Adam Jermyn, Elisabeth Colwill, Anonymous, Anonymous, Samuel Cook, Sam Cocking, Alastair Haig, Rory Hennell-James, Bryn Restadler

Pierre walked across the clearing in the forest. It was getting cold but he kept his jacket over his shoulder anyway. As he walked he absently hummed a tune. The wind picked up and began to swirl around a spot ten metres in front of him, though he appeared not to notice. He walked over that spot and promptly disappeared.

With little more than a hummed note Pierre appeared at the base of a mountain and continued walking. Up the slope and over rocks and through switchbacks he walked. After a time the wind picked up and again he vanished.

Jane rushed to work, catching the bus to the train station, barely catching the train to the city, and running from the station when she arrived. She was in such a hurry that she barely had time to register the man who appeared out of thin air before she collided with him.

In the objectively short but subjectively long time it took for them to fall to the ground she considered his reaction. He looked surprised, but not shocked... perturbed might be the word for it. They hit the ground with a thud. No one else took notice. People in a hurry hit other people in a hurry all the time, and no one paid enough attention to notice that one party in this collision wasn’t there a moment before.

“Well, that shouldn’t have happened,” he grumbled.

“Unnnh,” Jane said. As she scrambled to her feet, it occurred to her that she could just...ignore this. Could dash off to work, where she’d face *another* disappointed sigh from the receptionist, another meaningful glance towards the clock, another day pretending spreadsheets were her *raison d’être*... It wouldn’t do, she decided. Besides, there was no way she could let her only interaction with Mystery and Excitement be ‘Unnnh’.

“Invisibility cloak on the blink?” she managed. Much better. At least now she could die pithy.

She needn’t have bothered. The man turned

his back on her and spoke to a point somewhere above his head. "Samson, what the hell?" he said. "You swore you'd fixed the circuits in this thing." He shook a (by now rather dusty) leather jacket skywards.

Jane blinked. 'Invisibility leather jacket' didn't have quite the same ring to it, but she supposed one had to move with the times.

"Samson?" he called again, and then again, louder, more frantic, his fingers clutching the jacket like a lifeline. He spun to face Jane, dropping into a fighting stance. Jane raised her hands instinctively. "What the hell did you do to me?" he snarled.

"Me? It wasn't *me* who appeared out of thin air, young man!" she retorted. He was young, too, she realised, probably not more than twenty. Young and very, very frightened.

"*You* shouldn't even be able to see me," he said. "And *I* should be able to contact my thrice-cursed handler. So what in hell's name is going on?"

The little lady in the *Imperceptibility Cloak* smiled slightly. Most of the invisibility cloaks had now been disabled. She mostly hunted them down by smell, using a *Technobose*. Meaning a cybernetically enhanced dog's nose that she kept inside her Imperceptibility Cloak. The whole attire was a one-way membrane; the Technobose not only a refined biological spectrometer but also an affixer into canisters to be jettisoned during downtime. She could also snap the membrane shut in the event of rivals employing scentnades or, worse, *Axillaromancy*, to try to knock out the Technobose.

Not that the Jacketeer Clan was known to possess the guile or the accompanying putrescandescent munitions to deploy the latter. Small timers. If they only knew. Just too bad that they'd tried to do some 'extra work' on the sly on Thieves' Guild terrain. Once their jackets had all been *Hayjinxed*, and *Minxwired* against repairability, the Street Toughs' Collective would trollololaballoo them out of town. They'd be paid thrice the usual tariff, this time all of it after completing the ostraxpulsion, to maximise sobriety on the job. That was a somewhat necessary precaution after the previous hiring's unfortunate incident involving that prominent magistrate's son and a hundred-pound

tunafish...

* * *

Basher, Boshier and Fisher were sitting in the Haymaker and Cudgel reminiscing. They did have a small amount of ale money courtesy of Fisher's new reputation. Improptu protection money had begun to flow, for all that it remained a small revenue stream compared to a further Thieves' Guild contract-beating.

Basher snorted: "Dude, they're only paying us this time for them Jacketies-scum if we don't use that smelly fish again."

"Easy" said Boshier "I'll 'it 'em with an 'am. I'd then get called 'Ammer, and 'ave folks pay me to not 'am their 'eads in..."

"Conger eelsh, now, they isn't *really* fish" drawled Fisher, itching to build on his reputation.

"And magishtratesh' shonsh aren't unshlishited shtealersh we ish shent to smack around" mocked Basher in imitation of Fisher's lisp.

" 'ams are 'arder..." added Boshier, more agitatedly.

"My coinsh are misshing!" angerrupted Fisher. "*You* took them when I wash taking a practishe shwing with my eelsh!" all awhile pointing a huge finger at Boshier.

Boshier upended the table. Fisher ducked back but his eels were not so fortunate. Bellowing and besplattered, Fisher drew a concealed haddock... catching not Boshier but Basher in the face...

Then there were are fists, boots and and impromptu bludgeoning instruments everywhere.

Exit Samson in one of the remaining Invisibility Jackets with Fisher's purse, valuable information and a mixture of smugness for the deed done and worry for his friends.

* * *

Samson was all-a-flutter. So much so that even his long, luxuriant locks picked it up and started waving around as if he had a nest of purple jellyfish on his head. This was bad. This was really bad. It all depended on who 'they' were. Unfortunately, 'they' were almost certainly the Thieves' Guild, in which case Samson, his friends and his clan were

in so far over their heads that they were practically in space.

He had to alert everyone out in the field. Get them to return to the Outfitter's. At least then they'd be on secure territory and able to come up with some co-ordinated plan to dig themselves out of the abyss into which they'd apparently fallen without noticing. Find out just how bad it really was.

Yes, that was it. That was the best place to start. His hair was settling back down a bit now. He typed in the code on his compad that would broadcast the return-to-base signal across all Jacketeer frequencies. Anyone who was still able to would be back there within the next hour. He'd better make tracks if he were going to be there on time.

Just as he was about to do so, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"I can see you boy-o, even with that Invisibility Jacket. What with it being mine". The hand moved to stroke his hair. The smell of fish was overwhelming. "Looksh ash if I've caught myself a Jacketeer. Won't the Thieves' Guild be pleased?"

Samson felt his sphincter tighten. It was just as bad as he feared. 'They' were the Thieves' Guild, after all. Now he just had to get rid of Fisher and get back to base to warn everyone they were royally screwed. At least that shouldn't be too difficult. "One word of advice, Fisher: Don't touch the hair."

The hand touched the hair. There was a scream and a bubbling wail before silence fell once more. Sometimes, having hair that didn't just look like a nest of purple jellyfish, but actually was one, turned out to be useful.

* * *

Pierre nursed the steaming diner coffee Jane had bought him. It had seemed the least she could do when the strange young man was so shaken up, not to mention somehow chilled to the bone. At least coffee would solve the latter problem. It was peculiar though, as if he'd just been up a mountain instead of dashing across the city in the middle of a heatwave.

"How did you know about the jacket?" Pierre

muttered, forcing Jane back to the present.

"You mean the invisibility jacket?" Jane gestured towards the battered garment with more than a hint of sarcasm. She enjoyed being this witty, so it came as something of a shock when, as the man picked it up, some of the damaged stitching parted to reveal a network of wires and circuit boards neatly concealed inside. Under the sturdy leather, a passer-by would never have noticed all this gadgetry.

In a moment, it was gone from view and Pierre wore the jacket once again. "You're damn right I do," he continued under his breath as he fiddled with a small panel inside one pocket. "Only a handful of people in the world know about this tech, and you spotted it right off the bat."

Jane felt uncomfortable; it was too early in the morning for paradigm-shifting revelations like this. She downed her coffee, thinking it might help, and then sought to reassert her belief that she understood the world. "Invisibility cloaks... or jackets, or whatever... they don't actually exist. I think you should tell me what's really going on, right now. I don't even know your name."

Pierre was stunned. If not her, then who was behind this? He doubled down on the panel, reinitialising circuits and willing life back into the jacket. Relief came when a comforting "beep" informed him that Samson had sent through new coordinates. Now to pray that, if the communications were working, the rest of the jacket would function too. That was when Pierre noticed the little lady in the corner of the diner, and his heart sunk.

Managing a weak smile, he returned his attention to the woman across the table. "Pierre. And you are?"

"Jane."

"It's good to meet you Jane. I'm sorry for assuming you were involved in all this but I'm afraid that, even if you weren't before, you are now. I shall explain this all to you, in time, but first it may be easier for me to show you."

With that, Pierre placed his hand on Jane's wrist and activated the jacket. Across the diner, the mysterious lady watched them disappear. She smiled to herself, finished her tea, and then activated the tracking device.

* * *

Jane's world shifted in the direction of turquoise.

She watched as the young man nervously raised a blue tinged finger to his lips. "Try not to make too much noise, we're only .65 milli-pigments out of phase with the diner. If you shout, the whole street will hear you."

Jane's free hand clamped over her already open mouth, damming the torrent of questions about to erupt, and stayed there.

Silently Pierre pulled her out of the diner and began to look around frantically. Before long his eyes settled on a collection of bins a hundred meters down the road. "There!" he whispered, rushing towards it, turning to Jane shortly before reaching it.

"Hold on tight."

A trickle of curiosity escaped Jane's mouth as she was pulled through a swirling vortex of trash.

'Unnh?'

And with that, Jane's world shifted in a much more spatially agreeable direction.

Samson emerged out of a spiral of sand and discarded food packaging, neatly hopping over a half-finished castle in the process. He sniffed the air; the smell on the ocean breeze was as potent as ever.

As he calmly strolled along the beach, Samson kept giving sidelong glances up and down the sand, making sure that nobody was following him. Not that he would be able to see them if they were there... Samson tried to suppress those thoughts as he reached his destination.

He'd reached his line in the sand. Literally. Bending down, he ran a finger along it and closed his eyes, letting the strong smell of the sea wash over him.

A few metres behind Samson, something shifted, then hissed.

Samson ran. He was past the line, just one more hop and he was home. From behind him came the thumping of broad paw pads on sand. Up ahead he saw another swirl of sand, his ticket to safety.

Something caught his right ankle. He stumbled. He wasn't going to make it. There was only one thing to do. He pulled off the Invisi-

bility Jacket, struggling against the awesome, yet impractical, leather. He was visible now, but his pursuer clearly wasn't tracking him by sight. He threw the jacket toward the wind-tossed sand, then something caught his right ankle once more and he fell.

The direction may have been spatially agreeable, but thermally it was not to Jane's taste. Against all reason she found herself in a moonlit field of snow.

"Where are we? How did we get here? What's going on?" These questions and more rushed through Jane's head but were cut off by Pierre.

"We teleported. We're being chased. Follow me and run. Answers later"

He dragged her forward, ploughing through the snow. After a minute this they passed a curiously bare patch of earth and Pierre paused momentarily, looking about. He pointed to a swirling plume of snow that disturbed the pristine field.

"We just need to get there. Go!"

After another minute, they were there. Pierre pulled her through and once again Jane felt the world twist. A few steps behind, a little lady followed them through.

* * *

They continued in the strangest obstacle course that Jane had ever experienced. After the snow-world, they continued to another cold, tundra world with no snow, which was a mercy, and hopped through a cold twister to a rather charming forest with a whirling water vortex containing real snapping piranhas for a portal (she had rather balked at that one; it felt a little *too* too). They felt they had lost their pursuer here, but continued on nonetheless.

They had just started on their fourth world, one with thick yellow grass waving everywhere and impeding their progress, when suddenly they both spotted faintly waving purple... somethings... poking out from the grass. Jane kept running, determined to ignore any more encounters with Mystery and Excitement. But she watched as Pierre veered off towards the waving purple... somethings... and could do nothing but follow.

It became clear that the waving purple... somethings... were attached to a set of purple jellyfish,

making them tentacles. They were next to an Invisibility Cloak, one which was obviously not in use at the moment.

Pierre stood quietly for only a moment. "We have to go, but this is what remains of my handler, Samson."

Jane felt it best not to ask too many questions, under the circumstances.

Pierre, almost nonchalantly, picked up the jellyfish and plopped them on his own head. "They're more comfortable here," he explained to Jane, by way of explaining absolutely nothing at all. He handed the jacket to Jane, motioning her to put it on. He began to run again, and Jane kept up.

After popping through a miniature tornado, they both came to rest in another cityscape; however, this city was one that Jane didn't recognise. It was distinctly squatter than her own, the buildings seldom rising above 2 or 3 stories, and everything was slightly grimmer and old.

"Here we are," said Pierre. "I figured we might have lost her, so we came back to headquarters." He ushered Jane into the nearest tavern, *The Star-eyed Loon*, where a small congregation was meeting in a hidden back room.

A man at the front was counting people as they walked in, or sometimes, as they appeared. Everyone who saw Pierre muttered a small apology, or just looked at the jellyfish then tutted. Some people saw the jellyfish and you could see their pulse began to race, eyes darting to make sure they knew where all the exits were in case things went sour; they were the ones who had paid attention to who had called the meeting.

The man at the front, who Pierre had told Jane in a very quiet whisper was the man in charge of the Jacketeers, had stopped his counting and began his glaring-at-Pierre.

"We know that this meeting was called by Samson." Those who had failed to pay sufficiently close attention to their compads earlier now all stared at Pierre and his head, while those who had noticed at the start very obviously did not look, showing their superior understanding of the situation.

"We also know that he is not here. Perhaps his... friend... will speak for him." It was rude to speak of handler relationships in public, but ev-

eryone knew what he meant. The hair also made it sort of obvious who ought to do the talking.

Pierre cleared his throat, but it was not a nervous action. It was fairly necessary after running for a while through some rough terrain, and he wanted to make sure that he said what he wanted to say without his voice cracking.

"I was followed here, but I lost them a few worlds in. They attempted to destroy my Invisibility Cloak. How many of you still have Invisibility Cloaks?" Only a few raised their hands. "The rest of you, have they been destroyed?"

A couple of people nodded, but one man said, "I still have mine, but I don't wear it out any more. They've got trackers for that kinda thing nowadays. I know several men who have been killed, out wearing their Cloaks." There were some murmurs of agreement.

"Well, I don't know what's been causing this, but..."

And suddenly the door rushed open.

"No late arri-" started the leader of the Jacketeers, but his mouth was detached from his lungs in a rather violent way moments after. No one could see what had happened, which could mean only one thing.

Pierre turned to Jane, twisted a secret knob underneath her jacket, and her world went a violent violet. She could see some of the action now; two little ladies had come in the door bearing all sorts of strange gadgets, and were causing mayhem. Several men were dead, but at least she could now see well enough to hide, which she did. She wasn't entirely sure how useful it was, but she didn't entirely care, either.

Pierre twisted his own secret knob. He saw the small purple ladies, the blundering men who hadn't realised what channel they must be on (well, more or less; he was a couple of micropigments out of phase with her, but since she had been firing bullets she had to be close), and a couple of men with the same intuition he had had.

The jellyfish, being attached, had seen the ladies too. And they were not pleased. Pierre felt that having a rather angry animal on his head was not helpful to his battle strategy, and passingly wondered whether or not Samson had ever felt the same.

He crept up close, trying to duck behind tables and people with no Jackets on when possible. When had had come up between the two ladies, though, the jellyfish suddenly writhed and sucked themselves free of his head, rising up and planting some tentacles on one lady, and more on the other. There was a shock of electricity, a smell of burning flesh, and then a sudden cessation of activity as both little ladies lay, lacklustre, on the floor.

The jellyfish climbed back up to Pierre's head and promptly fell asleep. Pierre switched back to the regular channel, then went to go find Jane. He got as close as he could to where he remembered she was, then shouted instructions to her left elbow. Jane heard them as a sort of watery whimper but did as he said and was soon restored to full colour.

Others had been examining the dead. It was soon found that their leader was dead, as were the ladies.

"It's the Street Toughs' Collective! But they have Thieves' Guild gear..." There began to be a lot of very loud, heated discussion, no one to control it. But the man with the jellyfish on his head soon got up on a table and began speaking slightly louder than everyone else, and they all listened...

A few hours later, Jane disappeared in a whirl of wind to get slightly further from Mystery and Excitement and slightly closer to sleeping in her own bed. Pierre had gotten the Jacketeers to rally behind the combined power of him and Samson's jellyfish, as they had killed the ladies (and lured the ladies there, but that was not mentioned). They had begun forming their plan of attack against the Street Toughs' Collective.

The massacre was over; the war had begun.

The Jacketeers — Extras

Comments:

"I feel the cephalic purple jellyfish needs a spin-off series. It's clearly the star of the show."

— Samuel

Alternative Title Suggestions:

"Purple Pain"

"Don't Touch the Hair"

"Time Jackets"

"Me Teleporting-Jellyfish-Man; You Jane"

"A Sting in The Ponytail"

Sleepwaking

Mark Johnson, Rory Hennell-James, Bryn Rein-
stadler, Adam Jermyn, Samuel Cook, Alas-
tair Haig, Olivia Morley

“**T**he somnambulatory arts are, and have always been, something of a mystery.” Professor Siegel’s dulcet tones drifted across the overly-warm room, snagging only slightly on the attentions of the small gathering of students. Jamie brushed an idle pen across the idle page in front of her, in a half-hearted attempt to not doze off. “A non-negligible fraction of our aggregated corpus pertains to the topic, but how much of that is revelatory is difficult to ascertain.”

“Jamie! Help me!” A storm of tiny shards crashed against the all-too-thin porthole. A maze of cracks danced through the glass, tearing the last warmth from the cabin. “Jamie! Jamie!”

Jamie looked up with a start. Professor Siegel shot her an irritated, questioning look, and she tried to pass the motion off as reaching for more paper. The professor glanced back at her notes, and then resumed the lecture.

“Jamie! Please!” Something huge cracked against the side of the ship. A wall of noise raged through the tiny space. A flare of light threw everything into sharp relief. The wrecked interior. The broken dreams. Robin’s desperate, terrified form.

Robin stared at her from across the room, a mixture of concern and amusement plastered across his face. Jamie rolled her eyes, and turned her attention back to the professor.

“The earliest practitioners of our art operated on a mix of instinct and trial and error. Five centuries later and the situation is little improved. There is a great deal of anecdote as to what is safe, but few people have survived to give us information on what is unsafe. Early efforts at formalised research suggest those with the ‘instinct’ are capable of many trips without issue, at least until they encounter one of the aforementioned unsafe unknowns. Those who don’t survive the first trip are presumed to lack the ‘instinct’. How to identify the ‘instinct’ in advance of the first trip thus far eludes us.”

“Help me! Help me!” Robin crawled away from

the weakened hull of the ship, toward the doorway where Jamie stood, unable to move.

Jamie shook her head and looked back up at Professor Siegel, determined to focus on the lecture.

“Ms Splyu, you really must learn to concentrate. A master somnambulist must have complete control of when she sleeps and when she does not.”

Jamie sheepishly straightened up and blinked, pen poised over paper — the image of the perfect student.

“Where was I... This course will have minimal practical component. My goal is not to directly improve your somnambulatory skills, but to help you understand the basis of your skills, what we know and what we don’t. This course should aid your practical classes but more importantly will prepare you to be the next generation of somnambulation researchers.”

Jamie managed to stay awake for the rest of the incredibly dull lecture. It was hard to imagine how a lecture on the *theory* of somnambulation could be useful when what theory there was either reeked of inconsistency, philosophising, or just old tales spun into academic sugarwork by the hands of those who had never managed to somnambulate.

Jamie herself had never managed it, although she had the same vivid, nightmarish dreams that all of those who were said to have the ability (if not the ‘instinct’) seemed to have at a young age. Robin had done it, though he was hesitant to talk about it. Somnambulation, which had seemed a dreadfully exciting future as a six-year-old entering the Academy had quickly become just dreadful: a reality of waiting for the Inner Quickening and, shortly thereafter, death. Most likely, anyway.

The next lecture promised to be more interesting, if only because it had more of a practical component. For those who hadn’t yet attained the Inner Quickening, that meant one thing: professor-approved napping.

“Now,” said the slightly croaky voice of Professor Dumand, “As you lay in your beds, please close your eyes but *do not allow yourself to drift off yet*. Please all raise your hands to confirm you’re awake.” Jamie raised her hand, and stifled

a giggle as she heard a *thwap* from the other side of the room that meant someone had been swiftly roused by the Professor's 'waking rod,' which she had sardonically introduced to the class a few minutes earlier.

"Unlike in previous years, where you have been allowed to enjoy somnambulatory practica *au naturale*, this year each sleeping place has been prepared with a potent cocktail of herbs known to induce somnambulation. For many of you, this will be your first experience; your Inner Quickening." Jamie's heart began to race, all traces of sleepiness induced by Professor Siegel suddenly gone.

Jamie listened to the rest of Professor Du-mand's lecture with the attentiveness of a child listening to their parents before sledging down a white slope. She was impatient and excited and full of joy. *This is what it's all about*, she thought.

In spite of her excitement Jamie found it easy to drift off. So easy, in fact, that she hardly noticed the transition from waking to sleeping, that slow and steady running-together of thoughts and feelings as consciousness recedes to make way for something entirely different. For something that had every right to feel disorienting it felt surprisingly right. And then, as if she had been there the whole time, she was back in the cabin.

This time the cabin was warm and comforting and calm. There was not a hint of the chaos and destruction she had seen in between snippets of uninteresting prattle. Slowly she arose from the bed opposite the porthole. She crossed the room, opened the glass circle, and gazed outside, feeling the cool sea air play across her face.

Time passed. Jamie couldn't tell exactly how long, and in fact had no interest in knowing how long it was. That was the trick with somnambulation: you had to walk the line between directing events in useful directions and allowing yourself to be receptive to direction and suggestion and change. Being too direct was a great way to run afoul. At any rate that's what Jamie thought, though it could have just been an excuse to enjoy the breeze and live in the moment.

The breeze was a bit cool, come to think of it. And the visible land looked drearily temperate. Maybe if the ship were moored offshore of some delightful tropical island? That would be pleas-

ant, yes. She was damn sure she was going to enjoy her first proper somnambulation. She willed it to be so, though the view outside seemed reluctant to change. She willed harder. Suddenly, the view was filled with palm trees, sandy beaches and azure seas. That was more like it. An exotic scent wafted into the cabin and strange birds could be heard calling as they flitted between the insular Edens. She turned on the cabin radio, which proceeded to play 'Underneath the Mango Tree' in an unashamed display of pathetic fallacy.

Lost in her reverie, she barely noticed that the radio had now moved on to the shipping forecast: '...Tropical paradise: Hurricane. All ships return to port immediately. Rest of world: Set fair; constant light breeze...' It was only when the breeze started picking up that she shifted her attention from watching the antics of some brightly-coloured birds on the nearest island and noticed the lowering storm clouds on the horizon. The sea was becoming choppy and the corresponding motion of the ship was starting to make her queasy. The birds had fallen silent.

'I think I may have been a little over-directive earlier...' she thought to herself. And with that realisation, the storm was upon her.

Memories flooded into Jamie's head with each flash of lightning and crash of thunder. FLASH. The monotony of Office life. CRASH. Robin's Idea. FLASH. The Cruise. CRASH. The Island. FLASH. A Holiday gone horribly wrong.

Jamie stumbled back from the porthole clutched her head in dismay, these weren't her memories. Or, at least, she didn't remember having them... The ship lurched and Jamie fell to the ground.

She thought back to her Somnambulation Lectures to try and remember what she was supposed to do next.

She paused.

"Somnambulation..."

The word seemed foreign in her mouth.

"Somnambulation."

Jamie tried to remember anything at all from those Lectures, but all she had was a fuzzy recollection of broken events. She definitely went to those lectures, didn't she?

A voice broke Jamie from her thoughts:

“Jamie! Help me!”

It came from outside her cabin, and echoed against some inner recess of Jamie’s mind.

A storm of tiny shards crashed against the all-too-thin porthole. A maze of cracks danced through the glass, tearing the last warmth from the cabin. Glancing over her shoulder as the glass finally gave in, Jamie reached the cabin door and froze.

The hallway outside was half empty. There was a moment as Jamie’s brain caught up with what she saw: the hall was half empty, and the other half was quickly filling with rushing water.

Something huge cracked against the side of the ship. A wall of noise raged through the tiny space. A flare of light threw everything into sharp relief. The wrecked interior. The rushing water. Robin’s desperate, terrified form.

“Help me! Help me!” Robin crawled away from the weakened hull of the ship, toward the doorway where Jamie stood, unable to move.

A sense of *déjà vu*, fleeting and then gone. Finally, finally, Jamie started to move, making her way towards Robin, starting to run, willing her legs to movement despite the fact they felt tangled and numb.

There was then another **CRASH**, sudden, next to her head. Jamie could only watch, meeting Robin’s desperate eyes, as the wall fell away next to them. And then the water engulfed them.

It was dark, and too loud. Then too quiet. Jamie felt like she was adrift, sleeping in the expanse of water. That made sense didn’t it?

Wake up.

She needed to find Robin. She needed to start *to do something*

Wake up

There was a word, on the tip of her tongue. Remembering it felt important somehow, in a way that her impending death by drowning did not. What was it? Some kind of odd science. Some kind of dream. Som...something. Somnam... getting there

Somambulation. Of course. How could she forget?

Wake up

Sleepwaking — Extras

Comments:

“This is clearly a prologue to an entire novel.” — Olivia

“To misquote a certain song (*One* by Metallica:

‘I can’t remember anything

Can’t tell if this is truth or dream

Deep down inside I feel the scream

Nothing is real but pain now’ ”

— Samuel

Alternative Title Suggestions:

“...dreamy!”

“Wake Island”

“Dreamboat”

“Under The Sea (Darling it’s better // Down where it’s wetter // Take it from me)”

Harry and Xanth's Totally Righteous Adventure

Samos, Alastair Haig, Sam Cocking, Olivia Morley, Sparta, Mark Johnson

The sea rose as the wave carried them both up. They balanced on their boards with the skills bought with long days of practice, until at last the weightless moment came and they flew, just for a second, before they rode the surf down.

As they paddled back to the black sands of the shore, Xanth turned and grinned at Harry. 'Dude', he said, 'that was righteous'.

Every muscle in Harry's body ached, but he was as happy as he had been in months. 'Totally', he replied 'it was most righteous'.

The dying sun on their backs, they struck for land, pausing to admire a hippocamp. Xanth claimed to have surfed on one of them, but Xanth was always saying bogus things, which was why he was flunking class. Out here though that didn't matter and the boys could bicker to their heart's content. Out here they weren't failing students disappointing their families. Out here they were free.

The black sand was still hot as it stuck between their toes. Xanth jumped on Harry's back, before Harry threw him off, but there was something half-hearted about it. They had already begun their transformation back into Xanthippus and Harmodius as they loaded their boards onto the back of the chariot and started back to Atlantis. Harry couldn't help feeling that life was most unrighteous. He had no idea how much worse things were about to get.

It began when Xanth stopped the horses and pointed. 'Dude, check it out', he said.

A great crack had appeared in the sheer cliff that had previously bordered the beach, revealing a cavern beyond.

'Whoa,' said Harmodius, swiftly becoming Harry again, 'There could be some totally troglodytic lifeforms in there...'

'Nah man,' said his friend, stepping off the chariot, 'I know how this works. It'll have some kind of treasure beyond our wildest dreams, after, like a trial and stuff.'

Harry thought this was another of Xanth's bogus sayings.

'That's bogus,' he said, reaching to pull Xanth back onto the chariot, but Xanth was already running towards the cave.

Harry sighed not too disappointedly and ran after him.

'Troglodytes are more likely than treasure!' he shouted, 'it's, like, totally probaballistic!'

Xanth span around and prepared to catch the boy running rapidly towards him. 'Probabilistic as a cave appearing out of nowhere?'

After much bickering, the boys decided that the likelihood of wild treasures and troglodytic lifeforms was roughly equal, and the cave was certainly NOT the direction in which their waiting families lay.

And lo! A troglodytic lifeform there was, as one shambled from the yawning crevice towards the boys.

Its pale body was hunched forwards like some sort of sick-gnasty land-dweller, and not the good kind of sick-nasty either.

Its hair was slicked back against its skull in the exact same totally un-gnarly way as the boys' parents.

Its beady eyes constantly darted between Xanth and the opening behind its hunched body.

'Be..wwaaa...reee...' its voice croaked, 'Liiikee, Turrrn Baa...ckk Brr...ooooos,'

The being hissed grotesquely as the mid-afternoon sunlight hit its skin, revealing its sickening orange hue. Its hair afforded it little protection, swept up as it was in a poorly constructed comber, and it tried to shield itself with its tiny hands. "WTF, WTH, OMG!" it cried in a language the boys did not recognise, at odds with the common Atlantian it had spoken seconds earlier. Still, it seemed weakened by the light and in that moment the boys knew it would be no match for their righteousness.

"Woahhhhh," they sighed. Harry, who had had the good sense to grab their swords before running from the chariot, passed one to Xanth. "You ready to be triumphant dude?" Xanth smiled, a single tear appearing on his face in appreciation of this most bodacious event, and the pair advanced on the hideous monster.

Minutes later they were high-fiving above the beast as it lay prone, wheezing painfully with what must surely be a mortal wound. It snarled as it looked up at them, whispering “this is just the beginning.” Coughing painfully, it returned to its other, mysterious tongue. “Ugh, ICBI, pwned by noobs. Total BS. Sad! L8R, bros... CUS! Cthulhu fhtagn! Cthulhu fhtagn!” And it slowly faded into nothingness.

For a moment, Harry was troubled. “Do you think we killed it, Xanth?”

“Of course, dude. You saw the wound, it must be dead. It’s, like, totally probabilistic. And we... we were totally proba-ballistic!”

They played a righteous air-lute solo, before proceeding into the cavern.

Inside the cavern were surroundings exactly like they hoped. Dark mossy plants and pools of water promised a most awesome quest area.

“Whoa, check this out dude”, Xanth called over, “I’ve, like, totally discovered a treasure chest”.

The chest itself was not hidden, and not even locked, allowing the two bros to plunder it’s worth. Said worth being a handful of once-gold, now-brown coins, a few aubergines and,

“It’s a skull” Harry exclaimed, looking at the white object.

“That’s bogus, it’s the wrong shape”, commented Xanth.

“It’s the right shape for a troglodyte thing, life-form, whatever.”

“Didn’t I say there’d be treasure and stuff?”

Harry considered Xanth’s wisdom.

“Yeah”, he concluded most magnanimously, “But, like, the coins I understand, the weird skull — it is a skull — is creepy but could be a quest object. My question”, he posed, pointing at Xanth, “Is why there are these purple things as well”

“Cucumbers bro” interjected Xanth incorrectly, “Maybe they’re for, like, reviving health or something.”

Harry realised that he was standing in a cavern full of potential treasure, so debating the existence of a few soggy vegetables was low on his list of priorities.

“I bet there’s better treasure ahead”, he rea-

soned out loud, as a wind rose from the depths of the cavern, despite being geologically improbable. The wind sounded like a voice murmuring, *Turn back... great horror awaits... save yourselves* but it did not deter the adventurers.

And so, armed with their quest items, the enigmatic duo continued forth into the shadows. The two boys kept their swords drawn as they crept deeper into the cavern, unsure of what else may stand between them and their treasure. Eventually, the afternoon sun was left behind, and they had to resort to fumbling along in utter, black silence.

Suddenly, Harry cried out. He had tripped over something, and lay winded on the floor. It took Xanth an eternity to find Harry, and in the process Xanth touched something that felt suspiciously like human skin.

“You ok dude?” Xanth whispered, aware that in the silence his voice carried far too far for comfort.

“Fine.” grunted Harry. “Help me get up.”

Xanth obliged, and guided Harry back to the light of the cave entrance, where he established that, aside from a bruise to the leg, Harry was fine.

“What do you have there?” asked Harry, nodding at the object in Xanth’s hand.

“Think it’s what you tripped over.” replied Xanth. “I thought it was human skin before, but it doesn’t smell like real leather.”

“Human skin? What makes you say that?” There was a touch of alarm in Harry’s voice.

Xanth shrugged. “Y’know... Troglodytes are barbaric, probably killed each other for food then made clothes out of their skins.”

It was a pouch, but with a cover over the opening and two loops of leather attached on one side, hanging loose from top to bottom. Xanth pulled the cover away and reached into the pouch. More of the browned coins were removed, along with two objects that the boys did not immediately organised. The first was something that looked like parchment, but much thinner and smaller than a scroll. There was some text written on it very neatly, in a more precise, standardised hand than any human could achieve. The decipherable parts read: “REPENT! Just as the city... sunk, you too shall drown... The Lord’s will is...” Over the top

of this was a scrawled message in thick black ink, which read "LOL @ conspiracy-theorists! Always trust them to come up with total BS"

Harry sniggered, "Look at this troglodyte technology, so primitive. Their parchment is so weak and cheap, and they can't even make a finely pointed quill."

"Can you understand what it all means though?"

"Nah, but it doesn't matter. It's not like idiots like them will know more than us anyway. What's that other thing?"

The second object was a grey metal cylinder about as long as one of the boy's hands. One end was silver, and appeared to have a strange, glassy lump in the middle. On the side of the cylinder there was a raised circle, which Xanth pressed. It made a soft *click*, and the boys gasped as the cavern was lit by the silver end of the cylinder.

"Righteous!" the boys whispered together, with awe in their voices. Buoyed by the new quest items they had found, one of which meant they could explore the cavern in more detail, Harry and Xanth returned into the depths.

"Whoah! These depths are so... shallow, dude!" Xanth exclaimed as he made way for Harry to drop the remaining foot or so into the deepest part of the cave. "We're totally, like, still on the same level, bro!"

Harry pushed past his partner, to find his own depths. "Maybe we need, like, more experience, or whatever?"

"No, dude, look," Xanth pointed, "There's another tunnel. We must have missed, like, a checkpoint or something?"

After a mad scramble to reach the tunnel first, Harry pulled hauled himself past Xanth to plant his hand victoriously on a sign reading "Warning: Danger of Defenestration!" The sign had to do the reading; neither of the boys bothered to. Instead, they charged past it down the corridor.

"Whoah!" drawled Harry, as he the corridor gave way to a huge chamber full of glittering windows into other worlds.

"Whoah!" drawled Xanth, as he looked back to see the way they had just come was also now a window.

"Troglodyte Cave" pronounced the sign above

that window. It prided itself on not drawling.

"Look, dude, that's, like, home, or whatever?" Harry pointed through the third window on the right.

"No, dude, that's bogus. This one's, like, a totally awesome castle! I bet it's there's a right righteous wizard in it!" The sign above the castle read "Vampire Nest," but it didn't want to stand in the way of enthusiasm.

"Here, dude, this is the one. It's, like, a beach. With, like, waves. You wanna go surfing, dude?"

Xanth pushed him through the window.

* * *

The sea rose as the wave carried them both up. They balanced on their boards with the skills bought with long days of practice, until at last the weightless moment came and they flew, just for a second, before they rode the surf down.

Harry and Xanth's Totally Righteous Adventure — Extras

Editor's Notes:

This was a slightly different kind of 'unusual' chain; it was written from beginning to end — as per usual — but each author had a prompt to follow.

The list of prompts was:

- Righteousness
- Troglodyte
- Acronyms
- Aubergines
- Conspiracy Theorists
- Defenestrate

Comments:

"This is probably my favourite chain ever."

— Olivia

"It is remarkably easy to guess half the prompts as it's just the random long word that turns up halfway through the story." — Olivia

We Are Groot?

Bryn Reinstadler, Elisabeth Colwill, Sam Cocking, Adam Jermyn, Rory Hennell-James, Samuel Cook

The Intergalactic Peace Temple was, despite its name, a serious enterprise and definitely NOT a cult, despite the arcane jargon, veneration of a supreme deified leader, strange rituals and silly uniform. It floated weightlessly and secretly in an interdimensional pocket at the geographical centre of the Universe and sent out its Peacemakers across the entirety of space to bring resolution to intractable conflicts everywhere.

Given the distances involved, this obviously required a fair bit of logistical planning or, not to put too fine a point on it, predicting the future. The Foreseers who did this were usually pretty reliable, but things sometimes went wrong. Very occasionally, the Peacemakers sent across the mind-bogglingly vast distances became the cause of the war they were supposed to be resolving. But that was something that only happened once every few cycles, so the Temple generally felt its karmic balance was in credit.

Today, though, nothing was going to go wrong. Hieron was very certain of that. His two best Peacemakers were due back from leave any minute now. In fact, that sounded rather like Nat-leth's booming steps approaching the office right now. And yep, that was Pazmac's delicate knocking at the door. Good thing too — last time Nat-leth had knocked, they'd needed a new door.

"Come in!" said Hieron. The door opened and, as expected, Pazmac and Nat-leth shuffled in. It struck Hieron once again quite how much the description "Little and Large" was applicable to the duo. That was probably why they worked so well together, come to think of it, he mused.

"Good morning Peacemakers," said Hieron as Nat-leth closed the office door behind itself and Pazmac, "I trust you both enjoyed your time on holiday."

"We did thank you," answered Nat-leth, bending to its knees as there was no chair large enough to hold it, "though I think we're both ready to get back to work."

"Well, we certainly have plenty for you to do.

You'll be posted to the western arm of Galaxy 42F?. Not the most fashionable of deployments I'm afraid, but the Forseers predict a lot of hotspots in the near future. There'll be a full briefing available once you're on-station but I can give you a précis: three planets who think mutually assured destruction is actually safe — one of which is also wrecking its climate, two slavery-based empires fit for revolution and five planets irrevocably globally divided by such issues as building materials, how many hands to shake with and which end of a boiled egg to crack.

"None of those are particularly advanced worlds, but there are a few currently cold civilisations that have made it to interstellar level."

"What's the rest of the galaxy like at the moment?" asked Pazmac.

"Fairly quiet," replied Hieron, "the other five arms are split between only two stations for now. I'm sure you won't need it but they'll be on call if you have particular trouble anywhere. Any other questions?"

"No sir."

"Well, as I said, there'll be full briefings when you arrive. All being well, I'll see you in five cycles."

...

The pair approached Noreon with the full might of their order behind them. That is not to say they arrived with a fleet of warships or an invading army or anything so messy as that. Quite the opposite; they came with a single spacecraft, fast and quiet, spacious for its two occupants but not in any way imposing. They were too professional for anything else.

Noreon had been their goal ever since the planet saw its first large-scale battles. Predicting the future is a tricky business, so usually the best they could do was arrive as soon as they saw hard radiation or mana-depleted matter emanating from a planet. Intelligence-gathering satellites throughout the galaxy prepared a briefing while they were en route, and by the time they arrived they had a better picture of the war than the locals themselves.

Silently, Nat-leth and Pazmac appeared on the multiply-moon-lit surface, their stealth-teleport further masked by a gentle wind. Their target

stood twenty metres ahead. No alarms sounded. No guards rushed to challenge them. Still, the pair waited and watched. Noreon had a touch of magic, and while henchmen could be fooled and sensors redirected, magic was never so straightforward. After many long moments they began to creep forward, checking for curses at random intervals as per protocol. Shortly thereafter they game upon the entrance.

Nat-leth and Pazmac proceeded cautiously through the gateway, which led them into a cool and shadowy building. While outside the breeze rustling through the leaves had been a calming reminder of home, the passageway ahead was aggressively silent. The noise of every movement was magnified, seeming to call them out as intruders. A few shafts of light pierced from narrow openings in the roof above, illuminating carvings etched into the timber walls.

Timber. Nat-leth felt its bark crawl.

The carvings gave away the nature of their environment, a Tarian palace, though they appeared to be much newer than the building itself. They spoke of the ever-lasting war with the Bolvanites, in typical jingoistic fashion of course. The pair only glanced vaguely at them as they pressed onwards, they had seen this all before on countless other worlds in their work as intergalactic peacekeepers. Never mind the nuances of whatever dispute had sparked the conflict; these artists had only cared about the evil of the Bolvanites, the heresy of their stonecharming, and a thousand other perceived slights.

In truth, the current inhabitants of this planet could not have told Nat-leth or Pazmac how the war had begun. These secrets were lost to the ages, along with the original architects of this palace. Nat-leth and Pazmac knew of course, it had all been in their briefing. Perhaps when they found the Tarians they would tell them the truth, that centuries of slaughter were all due to an argument over an especially appetising leek.

Then the corridor lurched. The pair raced forwards. They were close now, heading for the inner sanctum. As they approached, the timber panelling gave way around them and crashed inwards. It revealed the horrifying truth of the palace, one that today's Tarians could not have known. It was made of bricks.

They had come too late. In the centre of the Great Hall, a Bolvanite stonecharmer stood wreathed in dust, calling the bricks to smite their enemies. The Tarians had never stood a chance, but the stained masonry continued to rise and fall with sickening thuds. Nat-leth's finger-twigs twitched in disgust, and it reached down to feel Pazmac's reassuring warmth.

Nothing.

There was a brief gleam of silver as Pazmac slipped between the lethal masses of stonework. Nat-leth reached out in horror, but she disappeared into the dust.

Nat-leth knew it could never match that minnow-quickness, but began to shift its ponderous bulk forwards regardless. A jagged splinter of stone glanced off its upper limb, but it pressed on, trying desperately not to think of the brutal impact such a blow would have on Pazmac's delicate exoskeleton.

Through the uproar, it thought it heard voices. Then a laugh, cold and hard as flint, pierced the din. "I don't think so," said a voice to go with the laugh, a voice like the wind over bare rockface. "There will be an ending here."

Blades of sunlight lanced suddenly through cracks high above. Nat-leth realised with horror that the stonecharmer was *unscrewing* the dome of the roof. When that came down, Nat-leth knew, the entire palace complex would fall into the sewers below. *And good riddance*, it might have said, if only itself and Pazmac weren't stuck here too.

And then, silver in sunlight, Pazmac bounded out of the dust. Still alive, but slick with blood — hers or the Tarians', Nat-leth couldn't say — she barrelled into the stonecharmer, knocking them flying.

A chunk of priceless mosaic crashed down. It did not rise again.

The ground shuddered and heaved underfoot, then was still. After a few ominous groans, the building seemed to find a new equilibrium. In the silence, a voice said, "Mortician parade spectacular."

Nat-leth thought its heartwood might burst.

After the quaking and shaking, a bit of quiet was welcome. Pazmac bounded over to her com-

panion's side, her tongue hanging out one side of her mouth and bouncing in time with her hopping stride.

"Calamity thirty-two zealous anchormen."

Nat-leth nodded. "Fatuously."

Pazmac shook her head twice, vigorously.

"Kzomblop pferoli-"

One more vigorous shake.

"Sorry, wrong setting," said Pazmac, slobbering a bit on the once-unstained marble floors of the Great Hall. Now, however, the slobber would hardly be noticed among the puddles of Tarian blood. Nat-leth knelt down clumsily, its tree-like limbs creaking as it descended. Even knelt down, it was still easily 3 times the height of Pazmac.

"There's an important question I've been wanting to ask you, Pazmac," said Nat-leth soberly.

"Yes?" panted Pazmac. A creature stirred behind them but neither heard...

"Would you like to be my conjunctive symbiont?"

"Yes!" said Pazmac, and bounded into Nat-leth's large leafy arms.

A cry was heard from behind them, and Nat-leth turned in time to see one last Tarian warrior hurtling at them both, waving his scythe.

"Now you see," said Nat-leth matter-of-factly, "We don't have time for this nonsense. You've clearly lost. We have to get on to the next world that needs help resolving a long-standing conflict. Go on, shoo."

The warrior stopped his mad rush and looked around himself. Upon seeing that the rest of his horde had, in fact, been defeated, his scythe dropped half-heartedly to the floor.

Nat-leth-pazmac smiled to itself. "Go on, there's plenty to do out in the world now that the War is over. Use that scythe for farming, maybe!" Nat-leth-pazmac slobbered a bit on the floor as it spoke.

Well, that'll take some getting used to.

We Are Groot? — Extras

Editor's Note:

This was the final 'unusual' chain of the year; it was begun at the end and finished at the start.

These backwards chains are becoming something of a tradition, and they always seem to turn out rather well.

Comments:

"I enjoyed how this makes even less sense than a standard chain." — Samuel

Alternative Title Suggestions:

"Peace Out"

"Tarsier and Birch" (winner of the Most Contrived Starsky and Hutch Pun every year for the next millennium)

"Make Love Not War"

The City of Ys

Samos

Investigation into the report of the Prester System logged by Captain Zhu (2195)

The dangers of isolated space travel have long been apparent. No more compelling testimony can be found than the report sent by Captain Zhu Jingwu upon his arrival in the Prester System in 2191, following a fifty-year voyage in suspended animation. Interstellar travel is of course by its very nature an isolated venture, with the crew of any vessel kept apart from human and media contact even for the final week before they depart the planet as they make their last arrangements. Even by these standards, Zhu's journey was a solitary one. The hyperspace systems of his entire crew failed on the journey out, leaving Zhu as the sole survivor of the Xiafan Guanjun mission. This meant that humanity's first encounter with an alien civilisation was conducted by one man, entirely alone. As his report indicates, this was not kind to his state of mind.

How then should I explain this alien world? It is so outside the experience of any human being than myself that any words I might choose will not only be inadequate, but actively misleading. Even the order of relation would serve to distort, for by placing one thing before another I would create priority that does not exist, forcing the reader to comprehend the second item with the first ringing in their ears, forever casting its shadow on its progeny, or dancing among them, the father of men and gods.

I could say that the city of Ys is 1500 miles wide, and that would mean nothing to you. But if I tell you the city is a perfect square, does that suggest meaning? What if I were to repeat to you what a broken hearted woman on the far corner of the distract of Melqart, her eyes black with pain and rage, told me, that the limits of the city were delineated by thin strips of cowhide? And if I mentioned that as she told me this she was washing her clothes in the river they call the Buenaventura? Or that the taste of her lips was fading on mine?

I did not need to ask her of the layout of Ys, for any of its proud people could tell me it is a perfect grid. What they could not tell me was of The Street Called Straight, for every person must walk it alone in ignorance. Although it appears to be without bend or twist, every trip down The Street Called Straight takes one to a new place, never seen before but fundamentally familiar. It is the route of innocence, taken only by the jaded and the lost.

If I could, I would talk of the citizen, for every city is the image of its inhabitants writ large, and in the part can be perceived the entirety of the whole. But though I wandered the streets by day carrying my lamp, I could not find one, but only people in infinite variety.

The city of Ys rests in the midst of an enormous sea. The cynocephali take the colymphas to the lands beyond, known as Manzi, which are poorly appointed, consisting of rough quarries, rocks and hills whose heads touch heaven. There they bring their giant ants, with which they dig for gold, ever conscious of the camels who would steal their unearthed treasure. The stone is gouged and burned by the acid bite of the savage bestiolae.

The report ends here. Whether this was Zhu's intention or he was interrupted is unknown. At time of writing no further communication has been received from him and his status is unknown.

Zhu's report is a cultural Rorschach test. It is always revealing to discover which allusion the new student notices first. Most commonly it is the Biblical references, the Street Called Straight (Acts 9:11) or the square city 1500 miles wide (Revelation 21:16). Others of a more Classical bent note the echoes of the story of Dido and the founding of Carthage, or recognise the quotation from the formerly lost epic of Homer, the Margites, rediscovered coincidentally three days before the Xiafan Guanjun mission left Earth.

Always there is the excitement in the student's eyes as they encounter a message from an utterly alien world. First it is followed by confusion, and then by disappointment as they realise there is nothing new here, no new insight.

That the report is a florilegium of references is generally agreed. That is about all that unites most commentators. Zhu's motivations are dis-

puted, with interpretations ranging from deliberate 'trolling' to complete fantasy born of lonely insanity. The reference to Marco Polo is of course natural given the circumstances, but scholars argue as to why Zhu should choose to quote Othello (Act 1, Scene 3), rather than the more obviously apropos *The Tempest*.

The odd voices that have queried this assessment have generally focussed their concerns on the more obscure texts cited in the report. That a former fighter pilot from the PLAAF with no literary or historical education beyond high school should be familiar with such a wide range of references is striking. More unusual still is the heavy use of entirely Western material by a man born and raised in Taishan. The absence of obviously applicable Chinese texts such as *Journey to the West* or the writings of Han Yu is surely remarkable. Even supposing Zhu to have been a Europhile, the sly echo of Aethicus Ister betrays a familiarity with a work poorly known even in academic circles. These worries have been dismissed as elitist snobbery, base orientalism or treason to the CPC according to taste.

More troubling to this author is the point raised in private conversation by Professor Calvino. The rediscovery of Homer's Margites after having been lost for more than two thousand years was a matter of great astonishment. No hint at its continued existence had surfaced before the manuscript was located in a cave in the Ethiopian xeric grasslands. The return of part of humanity's most ancient history just as the Xiafan Guanjun mission was about to bring in a new era has been described as providential in retrospect. Calm reflection of the implications of this timing suggests other, more disquieting, problems. Given that the captain and his crew were placed in complete isolation from the world a week before launch, how then was it possible for Zhu to quote a text rediscovered three days before he left the Earth forever?

Cave Dwellers

Samos

The Atlas tribe have fallen below the level of human civilization, if we can believe what is said.

Pliny the Elder, Natural History V.45

After the war, like so many others, I sought escape in the mountains. Where Atlas laboured, I would be free. I do not recall when I first read Pliny's account of the cave dwellers who abide there, but his words troubled me as a child, seeming to suggest holes in the world, a high buzzing noise on the wind, only just ignorable. But as the world collapsed, I ceased to be unsettled. Rather as the news of each unthinkable disaster reached my ears, from the mouth of the increasingly tired bishop, from the growing braggadocio of scared soldiers, from the quiet children who unaccountably appeared from nowhere and then vanished all too soon, so Pliny's words increasingly meant comfort.

Pliny was from a better age. He died in fire and smoke knowing himself a true Roman, rational in all things and bound by duty. I have been many things over my short life, their number and variation increasing over the time. By the end of it I would wake a Roman and go to bed as a barbarian, having been Christian and male and heretic and female as the sun ran its course.

In the caves the sun's passing has no meaning.

I found them of course. Pliny's age may not have long outlasted him but his peoples remain. I plunged into their caves heedless and reckless, ignoring the aid of the lewd Garamantes, eating only briefly with the Blemmyes and avoiding entirely the shy Gamasphantes. Pliny was my guide and my light, my rope in the darkness. And eventually I found them, deep within the coils of Mother Earth.

They have no dreams as Romans do. While I burst awake, clammy skinned and pale among those who have never seen sunlight, my heart pounding to a rhythm from a different time, they look at me in wonder.

They have no language as Romans do. Rather they hiss like the serpents upon which we feast,

their sibilant voices slithering through the caverns so that the ground itself wheezes.

They have no names as Romans do. Such would be an impertinence in these holiest of depths, permitting an impermanence unseemly in this eternal dark, an unwarranted concession to discretion unsuited to the all-forgiving gloom.

I found them and lost myself gratefully. There was no one to care about my nature. Here among the lurkers in the dark I could be no more. I never let slip my perfect grasp of my mother tongue, those words from far away, perfectly schooled into elegant patterns that my thoughts and others might follow. I sought to forget my name, which made me heir and accomplice to a thousand years past.

The king of the barbarians has fled to the mountains. Here he roams, playing his lyre for a loaf of bread, for a sponge, for a moment's comfort. His music accompanies the orgies of the Garamantes, the foot-races of the Himantopedes and the skirmishes of the Blemmyes. It echoes on the peaks and sounds in the valleys. At times, I hear it in my refuge. No matter how I try to stopper my ears, continually it lays siege to my defences, until the unearthly sound drowns the susurrations of my companions and I scream invective at the man.

In a past life I believe I liked him. A barbarian, he played the lyre well. A savage, we pondered Pliny together. A brute, he paid careful attention to the law. A glutton, he ate little and sparingly. A wanton, he was ever loyal to his queen. In my present life, he is my nemesis.

It began with names. From the first I was befriended by a number of the cave dwellers. While initially I could not distinguish between them in the darkness, soon little details began to emerge. The one who guided me through the hidden passages had a limp. This one, who taught me how to catch and prepare snakes, was shorter than the others. That one, who was always the first to enter any cavern, had a permanent smile. These started as fluid descriptions, subject to change. When I met a new cave dweller, shorter than my friend the snake-catcher, they became the one my memory recalled as the shortest.

But slowly I realised that unwittingly they had become fixed in my mind. Even as the limper recovered from their injury and walked steadily, they

remained the limper to me, unchangeably distinguished from their fellows. I, who had fled to the caves to escape such ordering, found myself become the new Adam, creating a realm defined by me. I was corrupting these cave dwellers who had fled from Creation. If I were a better person I would have left then and there.

Worse was to follow. The cave dwellers and I were woken from our slumber by the noises raised by the smiler. The smiler writhed in their sleep, hissing urgently. Alone among the baffled cave dwellers, I recognised what we were seeing, having suffered similar afflictions many times. The smiler was having a dream, a nightmare to be precise, such as we are told presages disaster. Their frantic, terrified soul was telling them stories of another world. As I looked at the frenzied smiler, and then at the grief-stricken others, I saw the traces of my own defiling rending the cave dwellers.

Now I depart the cave dwellers, the bravest humans I have ever known. I return to wander lost in the light, in the full loneliness under cold stars, lest my infection destroy this precious sanctuary forever. I pick up my much neglected lyre, checking the strings carefully, with which I hope to win my supper among the peoples of the high Atlas.

Pecan Patch

Connor Willmington-Holmes

‘By all accounts I shouldn’t have been there so early, my flatbed broke down two weeks back and I was fixin to walk a few miles to the bus station. One comes ever fifteen minutes so I reckoned I’d be at the house just gone lunchtime. Would have been far from ideal, gettin all dust over my shoes before the ceremony. Wallis come up past in that hardtop he’s had since ’53, lost as anything, damn near crashed the thing for lack of proper braking. I think he must’ve come off the main road from Mitcham county maybe fifteen miles too soon to have come down this way. Anyhow he offered me a lift and spared my shoes the mess, plus he spared my feet from the walking for which I well was grateful.

‘Supposin now I shouldn’t never have seen the guy, which maybe is one reason it unsettles me. We was all sat around in the living room at the front of the house with an official looking pair on the porch mumbling about how they was gonna get the Buick around the corner of the church without tearing the fence outa the ground. In the front room he was just settin there without making much of anything outa his being there. Everone else was making the kinda polite talk anyone makes. I was talkin with Ms Simmons about a new microwave oven she’d recently taken to using for rewarming up meals if they was any leftovers enough to make for a full plate. The Simmons’ cook makes fine dishes up, she said, but takes off a long weekend ever month to visit folks in Pensacola county. Ms Simmons was saying bout how busy she got with paperwork from the court sometime and couldn’t much spare time for cooking.

‘When he said it at first much didn’t cross my mind to take concern or nothin. It just kinda hung in the air, not unusual in the whole scene we was constituting. Maybe there’s another reason it’s playin with me. He didn’t do a thing more wrong than what was we all feelin at the time, on occasions like that. I recall by the word, if I may boast “I’ll just be around the sideways, Clarence isn’t feeling all too well and a walk would do good by me too.” Everone just acknowledged that he’d gotten up from the chair and traped outa the room with-

out much attention for the words or what maybe he was fixin to do. Big families like that, ain't anybody knows all the folks comin through that house so you just mind by your own business and let others mind by theirs. He was probably a brother-in-law of someone's aunt's step-daughter or something or other: the parish allowed remarriage since the war, which was a might unusual, as most the county regiment didn't come back. Not all sob-stories neither, some of 'em liked it over there and tried to convince they families to join. Those that could generally did, but they weren't too many that could.'

'I see you take great pride in recalling this here tale Doctor, now they wouldn't be no embellishments nor exaggerations at work perhaps? Little bells and ribbons tied on for making it nicer to tell maybe? I'd appreciate if you just stuck to the facts of what you was seeing that day.' The reporter reclined slightly in her stance, in her mind to imply a relaxed air to the interview. A counter measure to the hidden accusation of falsity she'd just made.

'Now young lady I'll not make it much clearer than this: I've been rememberin that day and the few that followed for the better part of twenty years and if I am not mistaken ain't not one detail changed in how I tell it now since The Herald published on it the month followin.' The Doctor's posture tightened to a riposte. This story had not changed, that much was true. It was much of a wonder why interviewers still travelled here, to each make practically carbon copy identical notes of the same interview. A few books had mentioned the events but those that bore inconsistent to this rehearsed version found threat of legal action in little time.

'So where I was at then, so yes, the parish allowed divorce and remarriage in some circumstances since '49 I think it was. As a partly result I wasn't none sure this gentleman wasn't part of the family, nor that he was neither. Transpired later that he wasn't, but 'course none of us knowed that at time and we wasn't fixin to inquire, not given the circumstances. He gets himself up from the chair and walked out the backway from the house, headin left outa the backdoor as I saw him, towards the sideway and towards Clarence presumably. Like I said didn't at all pay it no mind at the

time, not strange in the least. After the ceremony though I was one of the first out having been sat so close to the back the whole time. I never knew the couple that well but I had to wait up for Ms Simmons who did. She seemed shaky at best before so I thought it might well be some relief to keep up talking about that oven, or filing systems I think we'd gotten up to before goin indoors. Anyhow stood just outside the door I watched near everyone come out two by two. They's only one other exit at the back and the priest ain't never let a soul through those doors wasn't himself or the other clergyfolks. I never saw him come outa the service. Didn't pay attention for him mind, so could've walked past me but I doubt it. I didn't realise it until later but I remember faces well enough to know I never seen him walk outa church that day.

'We all filled in for the committal. It's a small plot up there on the plain so crowded out a little. Wind gets up some there so it stays dry unless cared for mighty well, and it ain't. That's the second time I seen him. This time just in white shirtsleeves which was reasonable attire I suppose. His shoes looked clean as his face had earlier which was just strange as anything cause I swore I coulda made out a few weeks stubble this time 'round. Not even stubble no more, just a short beard but not cut neat or nothin. Could well have been the light too which is what I thought to myself at the time. Plus he said he'd gone out for a walk but there's no way to get prairie dust off patents without a good lick'n shine. Maybe he just didn't take the walk but that made less sense still. When he stood up to mention it before it wasn't to nobody. He just had to say it, let it out and say it to himself aloud is what it looked like. That kind of a person ain't likely to change they mind about a walk.'

'I'd paid little attention to his clothing back at the house, so maybe he was in shirtsleeves all day but it didn't seem like he can have done. In that heat a collar wilts in not long at all and it was gone three when I saw him again, all sharp collar and pressed trowsers with his shined patents.'

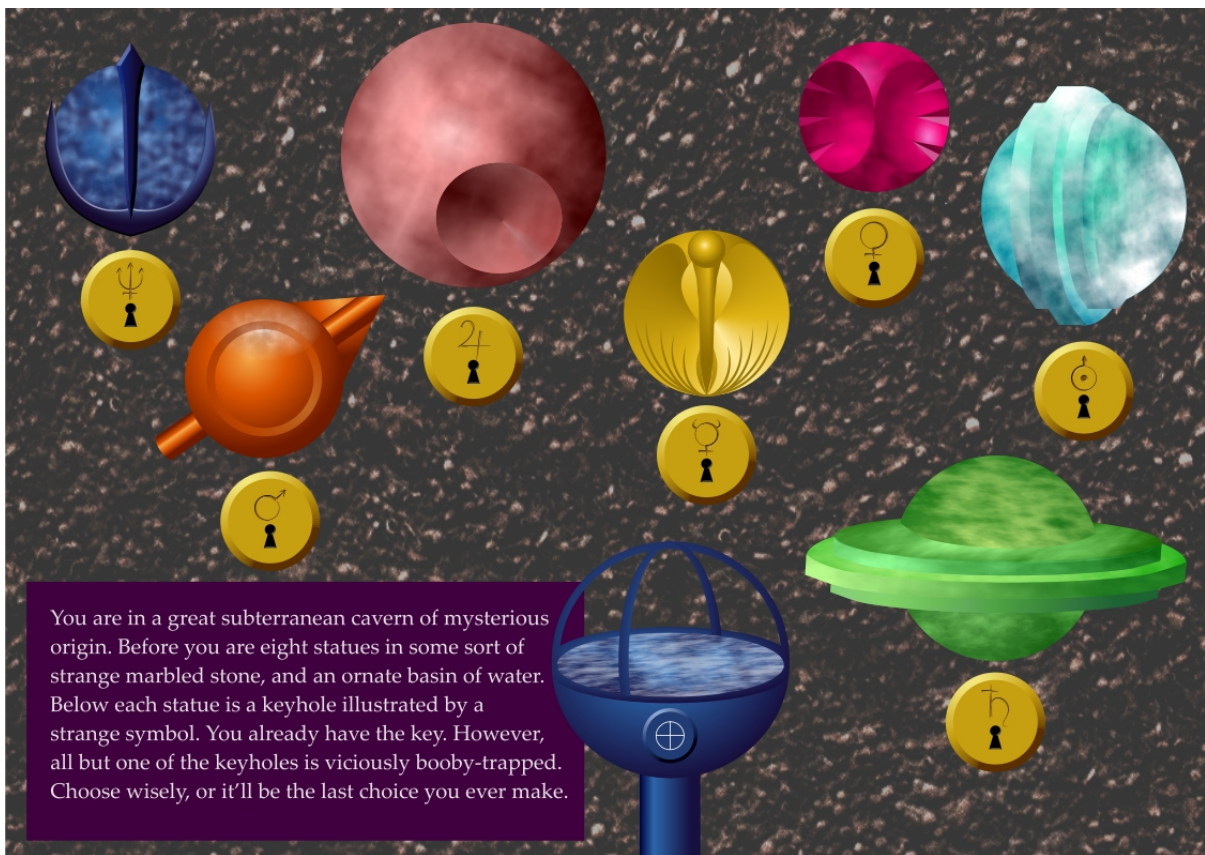
'That night I didn't sleep all too well, so I got up sometime around two when the lights were all out, lit a candle and set there reading some Mark. When I was done I didn't take the candle out all

straight away just set there a little longer looking around. I got up from bed and wandered over to the mirror hopin I'd find some comfort in that but it didn't help much. Looking through it at the room behind me I started to get the strangest feeling that it was all flattening out into a painting on the glass, no depth. I strafed a little to try and find some parallax but nothin much happened at all. I blamed it on the light at the time but now I don't much know if I can. I glanced 'round at the room and it looked like the same little box it always had, not shorter by eye. Comin back to the mirror it seemed like all the depth had come back so I looked up closer at the glass, kinda curious as you might get. I ain't never said and I won't start sayin now that I saw somethin in that glass that wasn't there but what I didn't see confused me all over. I looked up closer to the glass and it all flattened out again but this time it was like the image weren't up on the surface of the mirror. They was a gap where it looked set back from the glass. I didn't see no devil or lights in the gap, I just didn't see nothin' at all. No black, no darkness, just nothin' at all. My eyes moved over from the frame to the reflection, set back from the surface, and I knowed there must've been a gap but I couldn't stop my eyes on that gap, they just jumped right over to the reflection all flat as it was. Didn't scare me none I just stood there confused as cattle at sea so I went straight back to bed and blew out the candle.'

'Next morning when I got up first thing I did 'fore even checking my clock was look at the mirror and everthing was all squared up like it should. Everthing made perfect sense and the geometry was all lined up fine no quarrel. Then all a sudden I sat back down and remembered this gent I'd seen at the house, sayin how he was gonna go out for a walk which was when the weirdest of all this stuff really kicked off. I was still in night clothes but I went right downstairs hair messy and all. Next thing I was outside the backdoor with ma's riding boots on but not tied up none and had decided full well a walk was gonna be the very best thing I might do, before breakfast even. Felt only twenty minutes I was out but when I come back everone at home was hollerin at me for walking off with no good reason. Fair enough it was hot an' all and I'd not taken a hat or nothin with me but I

couldn't get for no good reason why I shouldn't wanna take a walk. Maybe it's not one of the greatest ideas I ever had to stroll around in the prairie with nightclothes and riding boots on but anyhow I'd done it and there weren't no reason to complain after the fact. It was a might hot and in all the stress of bein hollered at I passed out at the kitchen table goin' for a glass of water. When I got up I got the feelin' I'd been sleepin sound for maybe three days or maybe four. Not sure how to say exactly, but you know sometimes you get up in the night and guess what time it is down to the quarthour exact? It was somethin like that and I just knowed I'd been out cold for a much longer time than I oughta.

'When I came downstairs in dayclothes at maybe ten they wasn't no one around but ma called me through to the porch where she was set. Told me I'd walked off for three days and just gotten to sleep a few hours ago when I said I'd slept a week I reckoned by feelin. I said that didn't make no sense and I hold that to this very day. I walked around the patch out back where we grow some pecans and such which ain't more than a mile all 'round and came straight back. Course I reckoned then I'd slept funny from passin out and had only been out a few hours but when ever bank in the town insisted it was Thursday I couldn't believe nothin about it. Didn't make no sense and doesn't now that I'd slept three days, and I certainly hadn't walked around the pecans for three days neither.



Riddle of the Spheres

Sarah Binney

The entrance wasn't large, when we got to it; just a hole in the ground, really, just stale earth which gave way to darkness stretching down before you. We all looked down into it for as long as we could stand. I wouldn't have believed the fear such darkness could command, before.

"Oh my." Jason the xenoarchaeologist kicked a pebble into the hole and listened for it hitting the ground, but it was many seconds before the final. "This is it, then — the gate?"

Professor Warren nodded and motioned for us to reload our packs: "We leave nothing behind." She was our expedition leader, a fact gleefully emblazoned on her shirt in case any of us forgot which member was which. "I want no other parties to find this gate before we're done, and everything we're carrying is precious. Get it secured if you

want your share of those gems."

I unrolled a length of cable from my back and fastened it to the pulley, trying to ignore the depths that await. Warren went first. I watched as her helmet disappeared, swallowed by the black, and tried to concentrate on the pulley — dammit, man, steady as she comes. Eventually I felt the cable slack, announcing Warren's arrival on the bottom, and then we all started to make our way down one by one.

My arms were trembling something horrible by the time I felt solid ground under my feet, the air cold and hardly any light to see with. Then I heard Gibby — the woman Warren had hired in the base to guide our way, brave as a bulldog and addicted to dangerous situations — crack open a lightstick and suddenly everything was awash in crimson. The light illuminated her frizzy hair in an eerie halo, like a bloody crown.

We all withdrew our own lightsticks from our bags and soon I could see the cavern around us; it

gave me a deep sense of unease when I got the impression it had been grown rather than built. The crystalline walls undulated gently; cast in pink, the whole thing looked like the inside of an enormous intestine — I was very glad we still had the cable to get out with.

A sudden noise made all of us spin around — it sounded like a pack of wild dogs, baying for blood. Imogene, our archivist, screamed, but Warren just smiled; she was built with the stuff they make mine drills of. “No need to be frightened of those. They’re the automata the last expedition left to warn wanderers finding the gate, before disaster struck.” We all knew the story, and had no intention of similarly falling down. Not before we had what we came for, at least — not before we left with so much treasure we’d need dozens of chests to get it home with. “Everything will turn out rosy.”

Imogene collected herself and withdrew one of the many maps she’d clutched to her bosom. She looked pale as she said with forced confidence, “Like a day at the fair.” She unrolled the map, studied it for a moment, then pointed to one of the several indistinguishable tunnels the cavern walls were made of. “We want that one, I think, in the eastern rock face.”

I was uneasy, and I could see from Jason and Gibby’s faces that they were too, but before Warren’s iron gaze we had no choice but to surrender. One tunnel was just as likely to kill us as another, all in all. Hoisting our packs, we started walking in.

For some time we walked down the passage — it could’ve been five minutes or an hour, in the timeless red space — but eventually Gibby gave a start and beckoned Warren over to her. While they conferred I gave Imogene a quick embrace. She looked at me gratefully but her momentary relief was gone fast.

“We are facing one of the secret passages that Gideon spoke of.” Warren looked excited, though I couldn’t see any difference between this and the rest of the passage, save maybe a slight chill under foot. “Somewhere around here there should be a keyhole of some sort, and...”

“We can open it with the key,” finished Gibby, holding the relic up in her fingers. We all started combing the walls for anything that looked like a

keyhole, double quick. My unease at the darkness was beginning to retreat at the promise of glory, something shared by Warren and Gibby both. We were almost at the place we’d spent the last three years trying to get to. I am not a naturally adventurous person, but the Riddle of the Spheres captivated a generation, and in the hearts of a hundred of my peers was the desire the hoard to steal. Though we weren’t the first to try, maybe this was the one: the expedition that might make it to the core, and...

A yell jerked me from my reverie and I spun around to see Jason nursing a deep cut in his hand that would take some time to heal. He must have tripped some sort of booby trap, because there was a vicious blade made of some grim metal retreating into the wall, and he swore: “The — !”

“Don’t complain if you’re not sick.” Warren was, as ever, concentrating on what came next. I pulled a bandage from my pack and bound Jason’s hand, and noticed he had indeed revealed some sort of keyhole; it was tucked away in the crevice from which the blade comes. Gingerly Gibby inserted the key, and we heard a click followed by a sound like the snoring of a giant. Unseen machinery whirred and for a moment I imagined the whole tunnel collapsing; Jason’s hand proved this side of the gate could be a killer. But if we survived it, I would live like a king.

With a gut-wrenching rumble a concealed panel in the wall rolled away to reveal a chamber on the other side, great and mighty. The floor was not flat, but rose steadily to an apex in the centre of the room, like some great sphere was set into the floor, and —

“Nincompoop philandering! Gratuitous serendipity yttrium megalithic clad!”

It was Imogene; she was trembling, clearly trying to keep another outburst in. She looked like she’d been electrocuted; her hair was wafting around her head in a cloud. In horror I realised there was something sticking out of her chest — she did not have long before she went to meet her maker. I ran to catch her and saw the spear was notched, like a fishhook, and made from the same strange black metal that Jason’s blade was made of. Imogene pressed the map into my hands as she grew weaker, and as she died tears streamed down her cheeks like rain.

Gibby made her way around me in cautious sidesteps. Warren just watched coldly, in a reminder that this was we'd signed up for, and it was Imogene's fault for being run through. Jason held my hand in his. The cave suddenly felt very cold.

Warren interrupted our grief by saying, "The rest of us are in danger the longer we spend in this domain. We must reach the —"

"The trove, the core, the realm most mystic. Yeah, yeah, I read the NDA; even in the event of fatal disaster, my pledge holds." Jason looked at me in fear as I stood, pulling my hand from his. "I just want to know why you, who claimed to have done so much research into this place, let us enter without so much as a weapon. Preferably three."

Warren studiously ignored me, saying to Gibby, "This chamber means we are not far. And if the scrolls were accurate, the trove is somewhere beneath."

I pulled myself together and strode through the gateway that had opened to see the immense chamber beyond the —

Despite myself I gasped at the sight of the great statues that stood solemnly in the walls, carved from some alien stone which shone in many colours, gold and viridian and azure. There were seven in total, looking down at us in a circle, or rather down towards the centre of the room where a plain stone basin was filled with a clear liquid like a miniature sea.

"The Propylaeum," exclaimed Gibby, "at last!"

We all knew what the Propylaeum is. The final chamber before the core, but the Riddle of the Spheres stood before us and it; and a wrong step would kill us, Imogene had taught us that.

I took in the chamber, from the statues around us to the sphere we were standing on. Gibby had already withdrawn her sketchbook and was urgently drawing the statues, with annotations as to which was which. Warren beckoned to me: "You may have failed your duty to Imogene as expedition doctor, but we still need you."

I bristled, unwilling to let that remark stand. "If my art couldn't save her, then whose?"

Warren ignored me and thumbed the nearest sphere. "This hall is dangerous; more so than the others, and if we are not careful we may be en-

gulfed. This will have been for nothing, Imogene's death and all." That hurt, but I had to show what I was made of.

The basin in the centre of the room was entrancing, the light dancing on the surface of the water like the...

Without remembering walking up the sphere I realised I was standing right over it, as if surveying the tiny ocean from very far above the land. I couldn't resist dipping my fingers in and touching them to my lips, to...

"The way to enter!" Jason's shout sounded very far away, as though I was on the other side of a thick wall and his voice was only just reaching through. "There's a keyhole, set into this statue, and —"

"That must be the way to the treasure!" Excitement entered into Warren's tone at the thought of the take. Tearing my attention from the water (for water it was, cool and clean; I could taste nothing abnormal about it), I saw her insert the key-relic into the hole without so much as a thought for what the consequences might be. It was the wrong choice; of this I was suddenly aware. But Warren didn't know that. As she turned the key I had no time to yell a warning, and I could sense something approaching in three, two, one...

Warren turned just at the last second and I saw in her eyes that she realised her mistake. Anger and terror crossed on her face, and confusion, that she had been unable to complete her will. Then she was gone, blown away in a gale of fire that issued from above her where the statue was cast.

Jason, Gibby and I looked at each other in horror, waiting for someone else to make a move: After you. The very real fact of our deaths was beginning to dawn on us, that there was more where that fire came from. And Warren had always been the most confident of us, the one to tell us Do that, do this. In the end, she had been only mortal.

I wanted to lie down on the floor and die in a coil.

But...

"We have to choose." Gibby's voice held steady; at least she was pretending to be all right. "Leave, or try for the chamber, maybe, and..."

She trailed off but we all knew where she had been going to.

Jason said, "I vote leave, I don't care about you. I don't want this treasure any more than the —"

Gibby spoke over him: "I vote we stay — to the last woman standing the spoils."

Some strange feeling was coming over me, a sort of *déjà vu*, like whatever I chose would have the same effect, that we had no choice in the —

"We have to continue, if we have the key." My own voice surprised me but I kept going: "I want to leave as much as you. But we have to solve the Riddle, because I have a feeling the Propylaeum won't let us until we have."

"But what can we do except try the keyhole that Warren tried already?" Jason's voice caught. "I don't want to die in the —"

"There are seven keyholes." Gibby's voice was quiet: "I should have seen that. Each statue has its own, and we have to choose which."

I saw then that fate, or something deeper, had decided my path rather than I. We were at the end of our quest, and the answer to the Riddle of the Spheres was there at the ends with us, deep beneath the earth in this place long forgot.

The Grand Pigeon Massacre

Olivia Morley

An attempt to set right a past mistake

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.

No sooner had Aliette been cutefused by this frankly alarming sight, a large spike dropped from the ceiling, killing the bird in an overly dramatic fashion. Reeling from the sight of bloody feathers and needless gore, Aliette thought she heard someone say, "That's one down then" and then the mysterious voice was gone.

Across time and space, the Master of Pigeons was enjoying his life consulting the astrologer for the King when a young woman dropped into existence in front of him. The shock of such an unphysical and unforetold action caused a massive cardiac arrest and he died on the spot. A victim of having the wrong name.

The woman then disappeared as quickly as she had arrived.

This alarming scene continued throughout the convoluted medium of fiction. The loss of the Earth's magnetic core led to the pigeons of Trafalgar square crashing into buildings, cars and each other in a valiant attempt to bring drama into a scene with as little scientific knowledge of magnetoreception as possible.

Messenger pigeons were found dead in their nests, entire films were ended after the main characters were killed in five minutes of psychotic action instead of the fun family comedy the audiences were expecting. A few human lives were saved from rampaging swarms of killer birds, yet was this worth the price?

Most grievously affected, St PigeonNations lost everybirdie all but one of its students to this woman's rampage. This one survivor knelt over

the now dead form of the pigeon she had been trying to date — the reasons for which should not be speculated- and cried out to the empty air; “What the hell is her problem?”

Guardians of the Galaxy: Volume 2. A Review

or

Goldfinger’s Spawn vs Battle Smurf vs The Universe’s Worst Dad vs The Dirty Dozen IN SPACE

or

The Most Dysfunctional Family in the Galaxy Competition

Samuel Cook

Before this review goes anywhere, I should warn you that there are many spoilers ahead. Don't read on if you haven't seen the film and don't want to find out what happens.

To begin: my overall thoughts on the film. I enjoyed it. Immensely. 10/10, would see again. It was great fun, rather amusing and looked good. The soundtrack was, as ever, very retro¹⁴ and well-pitched. If you enjoyed the first film, you'll enjoy the sequel; if you didn't, you won't. It certainly avoided the all-too-common failing of sequels: that of being disappointing when compared to the first film. The film opens a few months after the first one finished: the Guardians are doing a bit of work for the Sovereign¹⁵, protecting some nifty batteries from an interdimensional monster or some such, as you do. After defeating the monster, Rocket steals some of the batteries, meaning the Sovereign start pursuing our heroes. Through a complicated series of events, this means they meet Peter's Dad¹⁶, Nebula¹⁷ and Yondu, our two favourite blue-skinned walking tanks, get dragged in; the Sovereign get really pissed off and out-fought at every turn and, like in Star Trek V, God

¹⁴That is, very 80s.

¹⁵A polity of gold-skinned, genetically-engineered humanoids. If you imagine that scene in Goldfinger where Jill Masters is painted gold, they pretty much all look like that. And take arrogance to a new level.

¹⁶Ego, who turns out to be pretty much a god and who is also a living planet.

¹⁷Battle Smurf. Who is trying to a) kill Gamora and b) kill their father.

gets shot in the face¹⁸; all with the assistance of cameos by Sylvester Stallone, Ving Rhames, Maggie Q and David Hasselhoff¹⁹. By the end of it, the Guardians have learned how to live as a family, everyone's happy and it's all fine²⁰. There's your potted plot summary, minus too many spoilers. But, if you cared that much about the plot, you'll have seen the film, so there's no need for me to go on further here. Much more fun is to point out some of the things I found particularly amusing/weird/mystifying. So, here goes.

Yondu's arrow

How is Yondu not ruling the galaxy by now? We saw it in the first film, but it's reinforced here. His whistle-controlled arrow thingy would appear to be the greatest weapon of mass destruction in the entire galaxy. In any kind of short-range combat, Yondu seems to be practically invincible. The arrow appears able to pierce virtually anything — at the very least, it can punch through a spacecraft bulkhead with ease — and move *extremely* fast, such that Yondu pretty much takes out the crew of an entire spaceship in a few minutes²¹. Why didn't they just get Yondu to whistle at Ronan in the first film? Put simply, if Yondu were an RPG character, he'd be very broken. The only way you could win would be by shooting him from a very long way away before he spots you. Which seems a little over-the-top for a supporting NPC.

The centre of mass of Ego's planet

Where is the centre of mass of Ego/Ego's planet? One presumes it is the centre of the planet and, although it's never clearly-stated, one presumes this is also where Ego's brain resides. Certainly, the impression is given that Ego built the planet concentrically around himself for protection, so putting his brain at the centre would be the logical assumption. Therefore, given the planet is spherical and seemingly planet-sized, the brain must be more-or-less the centre of mass. How is it possible, thus, that, in the climactic

¹⁸Well, bombed in the brain. The end-result is pretty much the same.

¹⁹A man who is surprisingly central to the plot of the film.

²⁰For a certain value of "fine". The multiple bonus scenes hidden in the credits suggest it's less fine.

²¹His spaceship, admittedly. So he knows it pretty well!

fight scenes, things²² fall downwards, past it? Everything should be falling towards it. Either the physics are wrong, Ego has some very unusual mass distributions, or he's an idiot and didn't put his brain in the safest possible position. Or the magic of cinema happened again, as it is wont to do.

PACMAN

I have nothing more to say on this matter. Except that giant Pacman is great.

Family issues

This is a film that is very much about family issues. The characters all seem to be competing to outdo each other over how terrible their family is. To recapitulate:

- Peter: mother died when he was a child. Didn't know his father. Finds out his father is effectively a god. Finds out his father killed his mother and is actually plotting to replace all life with himself. Kills his father.
- Gamora and Nebula: Thanos not actually their father, but killed their families and raised them. Pitted against each other as children and Gamora always won, so Nebula was largely robotised and has a massive inferiority complex. Both hate their "father".
- Drax: family killed by Ronan. Parents seemingly OK. Winner of the Happy Family award here.
- Rocket and Yondu: pretty much in the same boat. Yondu's parents sold him to the Kree as a slave; Rocket created by dodgy scientists. Actively avoided forming later familial bonds due to this, and tend to push away friends. Yondu also exiled by all the other Ravagers, his peer group, on account of breaking the code in Ego's service.
- Groot: I am Groot.

So yeah. A large part of the destruction visited upon various parts of the galaxy in both films could have been avoided if the galaxy had had a

²²Including Gamora.

decent counselling service. Of course, it ends up with them all realising that the other Guardians are their real family. Gamora and Nebula come to some sort of understanding and Yondu finds redemption in dying to save Peter and the galaxy. It ends well, but if people actually talked to each other, the same outcome could have been reached with far less wanton mayhem.

Overall, then, a very enjoyable film and once you should definitely go and see, if you haven't already!

Alien: Covenant. A Review.

or

Ripley's Believe-It-Or-Not-Again-Aaarrggghh

Samuel Cook

As per usual, here be a warning that spoilers lie ahead. Don't carry on reading if you haven't seen the film and don't want it to be ruined for you.

Now, on with the review. A quick note too: 'Alien', italicised, refers to the film of that name, the first in the franchise. 'Alien', unitalicised (but always capitalised) refers to the race of killer xenomorphs around which the franchise is based, or is used as shorthand for the whole franchise. Without capitals, 'alien', means just what it usually means in English.

Alien: Covenant is the fifth film to bear the Alien moniker and the sixth in the franchise²³. It is the first explicitly Alien film, though, since *Alien: Resurrection* was released way back in 1997. Or, as I prefer to think of it, *Alien versus Firefly*²⁴. And, let's be honest, it didn't really reach the heights of the first two films, *Alien* and *Aliens*. Though it did have one of the most gruesome death scenes in cinema. Poor Humalien. So, the pressure was on *Alien: Covenant* to be rather better and revive the franchise.

At the outset, I will say that, for me, it achieved this. In terms of genre it sits somewhere between the slow horror of *Alien* and the all-out action of *Aliens*, with a liberal extra splatter of gore compared to any of the previous films. No, really, *Covenant* makes the other Alien films look a bit prudish. We get four [body-part]-bursters²⁵ and a lot of other really quite messy deaths. There are also a lot of callbacks to the first film, starting with the title sequence. My favourite was how Oram, the Captain (Billy Crudup), manages to die in exactly the same way and pose as John Hurt's Kane.

²³*Prometheus* does count, I'm afraid.

²⁴Joss Whedon was involved and you can pretty much map the human characters on to the *Firefly* ones. What a surprise.

²⁵One back, a mouth, and two chests, I think.

Splat. Fortunately, though, it doesn't do a *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and basically just redo the entire plot of the original film²⁶. There are a lot of similarities, but that's true for all the Alien films, all of which can be essentially summarised as 'Humans find something suspicious. Humans investigate. Humans meet Aliens. Humans (nearly) all die. Aliens (nearly) all die. Maguffin happens to ensure at least one alien and one other character survive to feature in next movie'. So, whilst it harks back to *Alien*, it doesn't just feel as if it's a revamp of it, but that it's contributing something genuinely new to the franchise.

Which, mainly, is how the Aliens of the first four films came to be. The one we see in *Prometheus* isn't quite the same. By the end of *Covenant*, we get the full Alien, complete with big, scary, projectile teeth²⁷, stabby death tail and annoying ability to pop up just when you think you're safe. To explain how we end up at this state of affairs, I'll do a fairly hefty bit of plot exposition.

The movie starts with a short prologue scene showing the awakening of David (Michael Fassbender with an English accent), the android from *Prometheus*, back on Earth, watched over by his creator, Peter Weyland (Guy Pearce without all the old-man prosthetics in *Prometheus*). A large amount of foreshadowing then happens, as they have a discussion about the creation (and, implicitly, the destruction) of life, before Weyland criticises David's choice of music to play on the piano²⁸. We get the message that Weyland was not a very nice person and far from an ideal father figure. It is entirely possible this may skew David's personality a little...

Anyway, turning to the main plot of the film: The *Covenant* is a colonisation ship heading to a new planet (Origae-6) that has been carefully selected as suitable for human habitation. There's a crew of 15 or so and 2000-odd colonists on board, all in hypersleep/stasis/hibernation/insert appropriate term from your favourite sci-fi universe here, with one exception, who is Walter, the android (Michael Fassbender with an Amer-

²⁶I enjoyed *The Force Awakens*, but you have to admit it wasn't exactly innovative on the plot front.

²⁷I often wonder what Tim the enchanter would have made of the Aliens.

²⁸The entry of the Gods into Valhalla, from *Das Rheingold*. Apparently a bit weak without the orchestra.

ican accent²⁹). As they're busy pootling along through space, some science happens as the ship is extending its solar panels to recharge³⁰. The exact science is unimportant³¹ — the salient point is that it causes a power surge that damages the ship, forcing the crew to be awakened, and also barbecuing a few of the hibernation pods. Most importantly, it leads to the phenomenon of crispy fried Captain³², such that Oram, the second-in-command, is now catapulted into a leadership position he didn't want and isn't ready for. As this is a colony ship, everyone on it is in a couple, so this also leaves the Captain's wife widowed and grieving³³. This wife is none other than Ripley. Well, it's not actually Ripley — it's Daniels (Katherine Waterston) — but she's basically the same character: a junior officer of rather-unspecified function³⁴ who just wants to get home and see her family. Well, in this case, get to Origae-6, build a cabin by a lake³⁵ and start a family, but the same kind of wish. Obviously, by the end, as with Ripley, she's a seasoned Alien-killing veteran who's seen enough horror and gore in two hours of film

²⁹This distinction becomes important.

³⁰At least, I think they're solar panels. It's certainly to recharge the ship's power, even though they looked more like solar sails that people have come up with as a method of propulsion.

³¹And seemingly a bit confused. It's described as a neutrino pulse and as a solar flare. Whilst the latter would cause the former (I suppose), the former would very much not be the main problem you'd face if you got caught in a solar flare. Neutrinos barely interact with matter, so the flux you'd need to seriously damage you would require you to be basically inside the star. In which case, you have other problems. What you would be worrying about would be the huge amounts of gamma and X-rays, heavier charged particles and various other (sub-)atomic beasties all pelting towards you at colossal energies. To put it another way, being caught in a solar flare and worrying about the neutrinos is a bit like being flamethrowered and worrying about whether you'll ever get the smell of fuel out of your (remaining) clothes.

³²A very brief cameo by James Franco. It seems odd that someone designed a hibernation pod whose failure mode is to cook its occupant alive. That would be one of the first things I'd design out of something like that.

³³It's alright — she has plenty of company on the Griefmobile before too long.

³⁴I don't remember Daniels's role being explicitly-defined at any point, but I think she was the Chief Engineer or something similar, from context and implication. Ripley, of course, was a Warrant Officer, which is about as generic as you can get.

³⁵Something she reveals to Walter in what turns out to be an important plot point.

to last several lifetimes and thinks she's finally escaped³⁶. So, essentially the same character, who I will refer to as Proto-Ripley for the rest of this review.

So, Proto-Ripley and the rest of the crew are busy repairing the ship and feeling a bit jumpy about going back into the pods, as well as generally a bit depressed, after the death of the Captain and several of the colonists. At this point, they intercept a mysterious transmission, which they trace back to an apparently-habitable planet that had somehow been missed back on Earth when the initial selection of Origae-6 was made as the ship's eventual destination. On further investigation, it turns out the signal is playing a tune to some country song or other, which the cowboy member of the crew, Tennessee (Danny McBride), denoted by a large cowboy hat³⁷, recognises. The signal therefore appears to be of human origin, yet how could this be — there shouldn't be anyone out there? Mystery... This surprise planet is more-or-less on their flight path, so would require only a minor deviation to investigate, before heading on to Origae-6.

At this point, New Captain consequently has to decide whether to go and investigate the mysterious signal, which gives everyone something to do, takes their minds off their grief, and keeps them out of the pods for a few weeks; or whether to ignore it, send everyone back to sleep, and carry on as planned, direct to Origae-6. He is also feeling as if he needs to assert his authority a bit, because he's worried that everyone's secretly laughing behind his back at him because of his unashamed faith. So, confusing idiocy and stubbornness with mature leadership, he decides to go and investigate the signal, despite Proto-Ripley, who you'd think would be the least willing to get back in the pods, urging him not to. What Captain Never-Seen-Star-Wars is forgetting is Rule 1 of Sci-Fi: Never investigate the mysterious signal³⁸. Proto-Ripley, who's clearly seen more sci-fi films than the captain, is dead right: it's not a good idea.

³⁶This is patently untrue. It's an Alien film. The principal character is never going to be left in peace.

³⁷Just in case his accent or his name wasn't enough to give you the hint, or you forgot which one he was.

³⁸A very large number of sci-fi films would be a good deal shorter if any of the characters in them knew anything about sci-fi.

Essentially, the entire human payload of the ship is now dead meat. It remains to be seen exactly how this deadness is achieved.

So, the ship, under Captain It-Seemed-A-Good-Idea-At-The-Time, heads off to investigate. Throughout all this, the other members of the crew are also introduced, but there's not much point worrying about them, because they'll nearly all be dead soon. They arrive at the planet and pinpoint where the transmission is coming from. They also notice that it's very stormy, with lots of electrical interference. This will make it difficult to communicate between the ship and orbit and any landing party. Rule 2 of Sci-Fi: Any sort of storm or any hint of storminess will quickly develop into a full-blown hurricane with all the electromagnetic bells and whistles, completely blocking all communication, as soon as anyone lands on the planet. This will happen at the moment that communication is most required, because the landing party have found something nasty. Captain Blithely-Oblivious, however, has not watched any sci-fi, as we've already established, so nearly all the crew head down to the planet, leaving Tennessee (the Chief Pilot) and his two Pilot Minions³⁹ on the ship.

You can probably guess what happens next.

No? Then let's continue.

Having landed, the crew head off to locate the source of the signal, which turns out to be halfway up a mountain. Dropship Pilot Woman is left with the dropship, because, surprise, surprise, the storm is making communication with the *Covenant* very difficult, so she's trying, in time-honoured sci-fi fashion, to boost the signal. One of the first things they encounter is a field of wheat. Normal Earth wheat. This is commented on as being odd. Not sufficiently odd to make them think this is a bad idea and that they should leave now, though. They carry on, climbing up through some very nice forest. It is at this point that Proto-Ripley makes a foreshadowing comment that really should have had them all running back to the dropship as fast as humanly possible (slightly paraphrasing):

'Can you hear that?'

'What?'

³⁹This is the same set-up as in *Prometheus*, where you have Idris Elba as Pilot (and also Captain), along with two sub-pilots/navigators/etc.

‘Absolutely nothing.’

As she has observed, there is no visible or audible animal life of any kind, not even insects. Just a load of plants. Still, they carry on and, even worse, split up. Rule 3 of Sci-Fi: Never split the party up, especially when investigating the mysterious signal, particularly when in a storm that’s making communications difficult. However, Biologist Woman, like her husband⁴⁰, clearly isn’t up to speed with sci-fi, so happily announces her intention to stay in the bit of the forest they’ve reached and take some samples. Generic Soldier Guy #1 is left with her as a guard; the rest of the party carry on uphill and reach the source of the signal. This turns out to be the big alien ship that David and Dr Shaw intend to fly off in at the end of *Prometheus*⁴¹. No sign of anyone there, though, just ghostly replays of Dr Shaw playing the melody in the signal on the command console. They also find Shaw’s dog tags, confirming her identity with the help of Walter’s capacious memory. Having found out what they came to discover, and finally spooked out enough to think this might have been a tad unwise, they begin to head back towards the dropship.

This is where things start to go downhill so fast, it’s more a case of dropping off of a cliff.

When he sat down to have a smoke, Generic Soldier Guy #1 brushed against some sort of weird growth thing that promptly exhaled a cloud of dust, which turned out to be rather more than dust, infecting him via his earhole. He didn’t notice this, but a little while later, falls over, goes pale and starts coughing up blood. Therefore, Biologist Woman is dragging him back towards the dropship and its medical bay as fast as possible and panicking. The rest of the party, returning from the alien ship, speed up to try to come to her aid, as they’re only getting garbled messages through their headsets. The *Covenant*, meanwhile, is only getting fragments of garbled messages, so they know something’s wrong, but not really what’s going on. What’s no one yet noticed is that Generic Soldier Guy #2, who was in the party that went to the ship, also got evil-dust-

⁴⁰She’s married to Captain Oram.

⁴¹Or, at least, is a very similar one. Later on, it’s confirmed it is the same one, but you don’t know that for sure when they first find it.

ed, and is now starting to feel distinctly unwell, so he’s slowing them down somewhat.

Finally, Biologist Woman and Generic Soldier Guy #1 get back to the dropship and, with the assistance of Dropship Pilot Woman, get him into the medical bay. At this point, he starts convulsing and an Alien bursts out of his back. Dropship Pilot Woman runs out screaming and seals the bay door, leaving Biologist Woman to face the smallish Alien⁴² alone. Obviously the Alien slashes her up well good, though it’s unclear if she’s actually dead or not. This doesn’t really matter, though, because Dropship Pilot Woman now returns, having run to get a shotgun from the weapons locker. She nearly manages to creep up on the distracted Alien and shoot it, but slips in a pool of Generic Soldier Guy #1’s blood, and her shot goes wild. She fends off the Alien and runs back out into the ship, pursued by it. Her increasingly-erratic shooting, though, largely fails to hit the Alien, but very successfully hits a large number of fuel canisters⁴³. Boom. No more dropship, Biologist Woman, Generic Soldier Guy #1 or Dropship Pilot Woman. The Alien fares rather better, though.

The rest of the landing party manage to come into view of the dropship, having had to listen to all sorts of screaming for the last five minutes and unhelpful messages about things coming out of people, just in time to see it explode. Proto-Ripley has to physically jump on Captain Oops to stop him running into the burning wreckage to find his wife, because, obviously, she’s dead and there’s no point. In orbit, Tennessee has no real idea what’s going on, because of the storm, but what they have picked up is concerning, especially seeing as Dropship Pilot Woman is his wife. At the moment, though, they’re still just gently orbiting and not involved. They should really just fly off and head to Origae-6, but they don’t, because they think there’s a decent chance the landing party will make it back alive. Fools.

As the remnant of the landing party is trying to process what’s just happened, Generic Soldier Guy #2 collapses and an Alien bursts out of his

⁴²And this is an Alien like the one at the end of *Prometheus*. We’re not at *Alien* Alien stage yet.

⁴³People should really make more effort to safely store fuel canisters. Any fuel canister visible in any film will eventually explode.

chest and promptly attacks the rest of the party, assisted by the first Alien. They manage to shoot the second Alien, but not before it's downed several expendable members of the party who hadn't even been named⁴⁴ and appeared to all be more Generic Soldier Guys. The first Alien, though, is still causing trouble, but a mysterious cloaked figure appears, fires a flare that scares it off, and bids the survivors to come with him. Now, mysterious cloaked figures can be good — think of Obi Wan in Episode IV — but they can also be The Emperor...

They⁴⁵ follow the figure back to his base inside one of the weird alien temple things as seen in *Prometheus*. On the way, they pass through a field of what appear to be fairly disturbing statues in various contorted poses of pain and suffering. We've established, though, that these characters are impervious to hints, so they carry on following the figure. Admittedly, they probably don't have a lot of choice, as they have to hide somewhere and try to contact the *Covenant* to get off the planet. They arrive inside the base and the figure takes off his cloak. Surprise: it's Walter. Well, not actually, it's David. It would have been useful if the crew were aware of two further rules at this point: Rule 5 of Sci-Fi: 90% of the time, it's the android or the computer that's really trying to kill you; and Rule 6: If you have two identical-looking characters in a fight and you don't clearly see the death of one, the winner that returns to the other characters will be the one you don't want. But, they're not. So...

David explains that him and Dr Shaw crash-landed on the planet, in a way that conveniently led to the death of Dr Shaw and unfortunately released the bio-weapon the ship was carrying, hence the dearth of animal life, it being programmed to wipe out anything living that wasn't a plant or microscopic. Since then, he's basically just been sit-

⁴⁴Rule 4 of Sci-Fi: Any character that is less well-named than the main characters is expendable and will certainly die. In *Covenant*, everyone's pretty much called by their surname, so it's characters that aren't named that are expendable; in situations where characters have first and second names, anyone with only one name will die. See *Galaxy Quest* for a better explanation of this phenomenon.

⁴⁵The party now consists of Captain Oh Shit, Proto-Ripley, Walter, Chief Soldier Guy, Other Crewwoman (who may have had a specified role, but is basically irrelevant), and Generic Soldier Guy #3.

ting around, indulging his hobbies. Unfortunately for everyone concerned, David's hobbies turn out to be genocide and being Dr Mengele⁴⁶. Michael Fassbender's acting is superb — there are several scenes where David and Walter are talking to each other, and it's immediately obvious from the way they stand, walk, act, which one is which, without them having to open their mouths. And they both also come across as a bit unsettling and android-y, but in different ways, which is a real tour de force. David seems a bit creepy and evil; Walter just a bit naïve and uncanny. Back to the plot, though: a couple of the crew head up to the roof to set up a transmitter and contact the *Covenant*, which they manage. Tennessee learns that his wife is dead and, in his grief, decides to try atmospheric insertion with a space-going vessel⁴⁷, but is talked down by his Minions, such that they just approach as close as possible for the moment.

The surviving Alien, meanwhile, has climbed in unnoticed. Other Crewwoman has wandered off on her own to have a wash. The Alien bites her head off. Literally. David comes in and shows some unsettling sympathy with the creature; then Captain Woeful shows up and finally does something useful by shooting the Alien whilst it and David are having a moment. This is not enough for Captain Braindead to fully distrust David, though, so he follows him down to the basement, because David has something special he wants to show him. This, it eventuates, is a set of *Alien* Alien eggs, complete with Facehuggers, one of which finally shows Captain Godawful some love⁴⁸. When he wakes up, the Facehugger is gone and David is still standing there. Finally realising that David might be a bit dodgy, his moment of enlightenment is cut short when a full Alien bursts out of his chest. David and it then do a little dance before both head off to cause more mayhem.

The rest of the crew are panicking and request immediate evacuation, which can only be provided by Tennessee flying the unwieldy cargo/building platform/shuttle thing down, which he proceeds to do. Whilst waiting for that, they search for their

⁴⁶The Auschwitz doctor who had a rather nasty line in experiments on living patients.

⁴⁷This is as stupid as it sounds.

⁴⁸If you haven't got the hint yet, David is a bit evil. Don't worry — it took the crew this long to figure it out.

missing crewmembers. During this, Walter confronts David, as he's realised that things don't add up. In flashback, we now find out how the creepy statues were made: David went a bit Bhagavad Oppenheimer⁴⁹ on the natives, who are the Giant Space Smurfs⁵⁰, by deliberately releasing the bio-weapon. David then stabs Walter and leaves him for dead, though not before trying to convince him of his view that humanity is a dying race that deserves to be wiped out and replaced with something better. Proto-Ripley, in the meantime, has wandered into David's arty archive, which is largely filled with 16-century-style anatomical drawings of someone who is clearly Dr Shaw⁵¹ with wounds that look suspiciously like what you'd get if an Alien popped out of you. David finds Proto-Ripley and proceeds to throw her around the room whilst conveniently expounding on his other hobby of hybridising the various different strains of Alien produced when he ecocided the planet to produce the ultimate human-killing pinnacle of perfection; viz the one that just popped out of the now-deceased Captain. These are, according to him, far more worthy of love and admiration than humanity. Proto-Ripley is saved from Shaw's fate by the arrival of Walter, who had a few upgrades, and proceeds to fight David mano-à-mano⁵².

Chief Soldier Guy and Generic Soldier Guy #3 are making their way out of the base for extraction, but get jumped by a couple of Facehuggers. One gets shot, but the other one gets Chief Soldier Guy for a few seconds before Generic Soldier Guy #3 can hack it off, liberally dousing his boss in acid blood in the process. The now-adult Alien is bit peeved by this and messily kills Generic Soldier Guy #3, with Chief Soldier Guy running off screaming.

As Tennessee sort-of lands, therefore, a rather battered Chief Soldier Guy and Proto-Ripley limp aboard, closely followed by an android that looks and talks like Walter⁵³. And the Alien. Proto-Ripley now has a protracted fight with the Alien, eventually coaxing it into the claws of a crane aboard the building rig, which is wobbling around

all over the sky, and crushing it. Tennessee flies the rig back to the *Covenant* and everyone's safe.

Except they're not. Chief Soldier Guy, who's in medical, getting some treatment for his acid burns, is fatally surprised when an Alien pops out of him. Rule 7 of Sci-Fi: Anyone who's been anywhere near a Facehugger probably has an Alien in them. Whilst Possibly-Walter operates the ship and the doors, Proto-Ripley and Tennessee lure the Alien into the cargo bay and try to suck it out into space, which is eventually successful, after impaling it on some large spikes. Though not before it kills off the two Pilot Minions in a shower scene that's more *Psycho* than *Starship Troopers*. Now they can safely carry on their way and go back into the hibernation pods, with all the Aliens either dead or safely marooned on the planet.

Or not. Tennessee is sent off to Slumberland and Proto-Ripley makes to follow him. As the casket is sealed shut by Possibly-Walter, she asks him whether he'll help her build her cabin by the lake⁵⁴, as they'd talked about way back at the beginning of film. Definitely-not-Walter looks puzzled, at which point Proto-Ripley realises it's actually David, but it's too late now, as she's sealed in the pod and David sends her to sleep.

David then regurgitates a couple of Alien embryos that he'd swallowed for safe-keeping and puts them in the embryo freezer of the ship⁵⁵ ready to be let loose on the unsuspecting colonists⁵⁶, and parades through the sleeping denizens, all to the full orchestral version of the Entry of the Gods into Valhalla in a final middle finger to Peter Weyland, whose fault this can all be said to be. At least, the part involving a genocidal, human-hating android, which is most of it.

⁵⁴One of the running themes of the film is android-human love — David suggests Walter loves Daniels, as he loses his hand to save her life when they're first attacked by Aliens outside the wreck of the dropship, and later saves her from David. Walter says it's only duty, but in a way that suggests he's lying. This final scene suggests Daniels is starting to feel the same way about Walter, which is an interesting inversion of and contrast to the usual trope of androids being either unsettling or downright evil, which David personifies.

⁵⁵It's also carrying human embryos for the whole colonisation thing.

⁵⁶One imagines both Tennessee and Proto-Ripley are going to suffer unfortunate pod malfunctions before the start of the next film, which will fill the gap in the timeline leading up to Alien.

⁴⁹'I am become Death, the Destroyer of Worlds'.

⁵⁰You know, the big, blue people we met in *Prometheus*.

⁵¹We also see what is obviously her corpse in one scene in one of the rooms.

⁵²Or, possibly, robo-à-robo.

⁵³But is it Walter...?

So, that's *Alien: Covenant*, though I fear I may have gone to a rather unnecessary length to prove my point that it does a good job of filling in some of the background to the franchise and adding something new, whilst very much remaining a classic Alien film. The real innovation of the film was in having two contrasting android characters and exploring how their experiences and programming could lead to their two radically-different viewpoints. To some extent, the film wasn't really about Aliens at all, but about David and Walter and why one is determined on destroying humanity and the other on protecting it.

Overall, I'd say *Covenant* is a good stand-alone sci-fi movie, doing something a bit more interesting than just the usual 'computer trying to kill people', whilst remaining very much an Alien film and a worthy addition to the franchise. Despite the headbanging stupidity of most of the characters' actions. But, wouldn't you investigate a mysterious signal in their place...?

Doctor Who Rant

Tom Flynn

OK FANS

TO QUOTE A GREAT WOMAN

"haters gonna hate.

hate hate.

hate.

hate".

It's time for doctor oh no you don't

aka Stephen Moffat plothole Panto hour

FLYNN'S REVIEW

CHRIMBO SPECIAL 2K SIX TEEEEEN EDITION

Ofcourse this whole thing is irrelevant because

Truddle does them now

Although

he hasn't clocked onto my trademark technique:

replace all commas with newlines!

(hashtag trademark)

Expectations are high as ever

As we prepare for THE RETURN OF DOCTOR MYSTERIUM

Sounds like a terrible villain from the 60s era with a massive beard

Actually isn't.

#minorspoileralert

FUN FACT:

in the virign media categories

I intuitively looked for Dr Who in the 'Entertainment' category.

Turns out Bransoncorp considers it to be 'Drama'

Sometimes this stuff writes itself

(Lol rofl Moffat etc.)

SO WE BEGIN

THE PLACE IS NEWYORK

THE TIME IS vague 20th century.

THE WEATHER IS snowy with a hint of Capaldi

ANNNND WE'RE OFF

Capaldi has great banter with a child

Although

Both of them seem MUCH TOO CAVALIER about

the way Capaldi is hanging over the fifth street chasm of death throughout

Also Chasm is a fucking stupidly spelt word.

"Chasm"

"Chasm"

What the hell?

Boy child returns to the window just in time for Capaldio to fall to his death below.
EXCEPT NOT because it turns out Capaldi is secretly a fucking ninja of wallhangs.
WHO KNEW?
DOCTOR WHO.
ha ha I'm hilarious nope.
ALSO why does the boychild say "you're expected?"
WHO IS HIS MUM?
WHAT DOES SHE KNOW?
[spoiler alert but on review it turns out that this question is going into the category of QUESTIONS WHICH WERE LITERALLY NEVER ANSWERED NEVER]
[Which is a Category which has not seen meaningful usage since series 6.]
[[Oh god series 6]]
[SO THAT'S GOOD]
[[#sarcasm]]
[[#it's not spelt "sarchasm" is it?]]
OK WE MOVE ON And it seems comics is this year's thing for Moffat to misrepresent and ruin
Sorry did I write "ruin"?
I meant "cover".
Yeah anyways.
Why has the doctor just stopped to read comics?
Is he not busy?
I mean I guess not.
But still.
Why comics?
Is he secretly a massive fan of comics?
Is this some #characterdevelopment?
Who knows
(lol
ok I will stop doing that soon)
There is an actually reasonable joke about Superman & Clarke Kent.
There is some classic technobable.
Now here's a question for consideration:
Is it a Moffat trope that all the technobable dialogue is exactly the same?
Like the technobable from this scene could be straight up lifted from any recent technobable science discussion.
But am I being too harsh?
Is it just all DW technobable sounds the same?
Answers on a postcard please.
ALSO: Sidethought...
What was this aerials on the roof project all

about?
Because apparently (#spoilers) it will fail now that the Doctor doesn't have the Ghost Star Jemstone thingy...
So what's his contingency for that?
Does he bother?
Why was he even doing it?
all these questions and more
WILL GO UNANSWERED.
Ah well
we return to the matter at hand.
BECAUSE it's time for some great top level
10/10
maximum fucking power
stupidity
from the kid boy.
THAT'S THE MORAL OF THE STORY, KIDS:
Eat mystery pills, get superpowers.
lol jk.
It's actually:
Eat mystery pills, become doctor who showrunner.
"Don't panic" / *panics*
Why are we supposed to believe this boy would do a good job with superpowers?
Also, how do they down from the mast thing?
MORE QUESTIONS FOR THE MYSTERY-BOOK.
NOW TITLES.
Wait wasn't Matt Lucas in last year's special?
[Legit it was only halfway through watching I realised that he was and it's the same character]
NOW WE CUT TO A ROOM
in which a man has screens right next to him with a picture of him on
now he is making jokes about being a serialkiller
CLEAR MEGLOMANIAC REDFLAGS
Also does this woman know how to use a voicerecorder?
POSSIBLY NOT.
AHHHH MATT LUCAS DEPLOYS A CLASSIC WORDPLAY=PLOTPOINT BOMB
WORDPLAY=PLOTPOINT BOMB TM OLIVER TAYLOR
TM STEPHEN MOFFAT
Also why is he going on about the little boy's room?
I assumed at the time this was a coded reference to some abducted child they would investigate...
But no, apparently it was just a weird joke

OR WAS IT?
#PLOTTHREADSLEFTHANGING
OH as an aside what do evilcorp aka Shoal Fish
aka Harvest Brains Inc. actually do?
What is their front?
It's probably not plot relevant, but is it actually
mentioned?
ever?
Might they be a property development empire
built shadily on an inherited fortune?
#weak2016satire
ANYWAY
IT'S MIDNIGHT.
(OR SHOULD THAT BE MINDNIGHT?)
So it's time for us to visit the room shaped like
the Cyan Worlds logo.
GOOGLE IT BARBARIANS
It turns out Matt Lucas was literally hiding in the
restroom?
Also e-harmony fish have really bad security?
idk.
They've got brains so it's probably a front for the
Cybermen.
AND THE DOCTOR IS EATING SUSHI.
BUT WHY SUSHI?
I REALLY WANT SOME SUSHI.
Wait has the white guy brought the black guy in
here just to kill him?
Correction:
Wait has the white guy brought the black guy
in here just to make him suspicious about the
organisation's true purpose, then kill him?
Because if so.
He gets 0 Peter Anspaches out of 5.
(Spoiler alert: yes)
"I think the brains might be alive"
"Like alive alive"
Great work white guy.
Oh hello.
Why is the Dr man's brain not in bloo goo-oooh
wait, it because he dead.
This whole head scar thing is much like the
snakeynakesnake man from the beginning of
last series.
IT'S TIME FOR DR DOLITTLE AND THE
BRAIN SURGEONS.
"I would call security but they might leave you
alive" — a great line.
The 4 lines which follow are fodder and could have
been omitted.

Ahhhh Superpowers are cannon now.
Classic Moffat
"What superpowers shall we give him?"
"All superpowers"
So there's a superpowerman bumbling about in
New York now.
HAS STEPHEN CONSIDERED WHAT THIS
WILL DO TO THE TIMELINE?
LOL JK.
"Light to moderate injury is fine" — Not such a
great line.
Incredible how this scene manages to be sexist so
uneffortlessly.
AND WE'RE BACK IN THE PAST
For a
In-case-you-really-didn't-work-it-out-yet
miniscene.
"How will it get out?" I vote you stomach pump
him immediately.
AND WE'RE BACK IN THE NOW
Ghostyman is moonlighting as a babysitter.
/ Nannyman is moonlighting as a Ghost.
NB MATT LUCAS IS ADDING NOTHING TO
THIS SCENE.
HE IS LITERALLY SITTING AND PLAYING
WITH AN ELEPHANT.
Mrs babyowner is home now.
OH MY GOD THEY'VE GONE FULL LOIS
LANE/CLARKE KENT ON THIS SHIT?
INCREDIBLE.
ANNNNND TIME FOR ANOTHER FLASH-
BACK:
OOOH PRIMAL SREAM +10 POINTS.
"X ray vision"
Ok so someone should write a ranking of every
Stephen Moffat Awkward Indirect Sex joke.
This one would be right up there.
"I like everyone"
GREAT LITTLE PANSEXUALITY NOD THERE.
And we're back to the now
again.
For the men to talk mopily on the fire escape.
OH MY GOD MOVE ON SADO.
OH MY GOD MOVE ON SADO.
(That was one for each of these PATHETIC MEN)
Oh hang on is Lois Lane secretly competent?
(Spoiler: yes/mostly)
She has devised an impressive technique for get-
ting straight answers out of Capaldio,
Called punishing the audience whenever the doc-

tor lies.
 NICE META
 She does have an obsession with wisecracks though.
 Also being Sherlock?
 Did she bleed over from Sherlock?
 It's on next week maybe she got lost?
 "Get a smoke detector" worst best line ever.
 ALSO SINCE SHE'S SO CLEVER
 WHY CAN'T SHE TELL THAT GRANT IS THE GHOST?
 IS SHE WEAKENED BY LOVE?
 #LOL JOKES
 (shakes fist at Moffat)
 "There are some situations which are too stupid to be allowed to continue" YEAH BUT THIS IS DR WHO SO
 THEN we have a chat on the phone feat. comic book style split-screen presentation
 I actually really like that.
 OOOOH CAPALDI IS 4th WALLING THIS SO HARD.
 10/10
 AHHHHHHHHHHHHH
 So this is basically just your standard common or garden Moffat-can't-do-normal-interpersonal relationships sequence
 But with the added twist of the Doctor just standing there in massive gawping mode like "why are you two being so stupid"
 Basically Moffat is 4th walling himself?
 The main problem is that while Lucy is generally competent
 with only the one dash of enormous plot-critical stupidity
 to not be able to recognise Grant
 I think I am supposed to root for the man
 Whereas a more accurate description of my attitude would be:
 PLEASE WILL YOU PUNISH THIS USELESS MAN FOR BEING USELESS
 AND CREEPY
 ANYWAY
 It's time to MEET THE BAD GUYS (tm)
 Feat. A very Sherlocky surprise arrival transition.
 Seriously is it just because Sherlock is on next week I keep saying this?
 maybe it is.
 Also why do the bad guys keep guns in their heads?

It's America.
 They can just flash them about or whatever.
 NOW WE'RE IN TOKYO
 #setsavings
 Cut to DATE NIGHT
 Feat. EXTREMELY negligent babysitting
 And oh god
 Oh god this scene
 Seriously if the last scene was cheesy and terrible
 Has Moffat ever met a human?
 Has he even seen one?
 "Adolescence was difficult" FIRST HINT OF SELF-AWARENESS FROM THE CREEP
 Oh god this scene
 Points for managing to bounce from gay stereotypes to sexism in two lines.
 I GUESS
 Oh god this scene
 Oh god this scene x 10
 Fortunately
 and by
 fortunately
 I mean
 after FAR TOO LONG
 IT'S DR DEATH AND THE SUREGON GOONS!
 (Playing the Dublin Castle)
 Unfortunately it takes them long enough to get upstairs for this Date Scene to literally worsen.
 SUPRISINGLY
 THAT IS POSSIBLE
 THEY EVEN DO A WHOLE PHYSICAL "COMEDY"
 MASKON MASKOFF THING
 OVER THE TOP OF THE SUPPOSEDLY
 (judging by the music)
 HEARTFELT CREEPY GOOEY STUFF
 OK IT'S DR DEATH AND THE SUREGON GOONS ROOFTOP EDITION
 Time for
 THE SCENE IN WHICH WE EXPLAIN THE WHOLE PLOT
 FEAT. you thought it was a video clip but it's actually spaceskpye PART 2.
 We fire up the Doctor Who plot recycler slot machine.
 annnnnnd...
 clank clank clank
 it's the plot from the Slytheen episode!
 (But with added America)
 Meanwhile a man says "at least I get to kill you..."

while holding a knife thing
then goes to the trouble of drawing a gun from
his head
Seriously I get it
it's like an ipad
you want to show off your usp
but time & a place dude.
time and a place.
OH CUE GRANT.
dont see what he's gonna do it's not like he's got
superpow- **dies due to own sass**
NOW A MAN WILL SHOUT INTO THE AIR
IN A WAY WHICH IS PROBABLY MEANT TO
SEEM INTIMIDATING
BUT IN FACT JUST COMES ACROSS AS VERY
STUPID
BUT by an incredible convenience of plot the
ghost CAN hear him!
NOW it's a Christmas episode so there has to be
an EU-mandated spaceship re-entry scene.
AND THIS IS IT
Feat. excessive zingers
because pffff
THEN IN AN HILARIOUS TWIST THE GHOST
FAILS AND NEWYORK IS DESTROYED.
lol no.
There's a great freeze-frame with Granny Grant
holding the spaceship and everyone looking all
windswept.
IMO they should just end the ep on that.
UNFORTUNATELY THERE'S ALL THAT
PESKY PLOT
BECAUSE WE'RE ALWAYS SO CAREFUL
WITH THAT STUFF
SO VERY CAREFUL we got to the dénouement
with 8 minutes to spare.
OH GOD AND THE CREEP GETS THE
WOMAN
This seems a bad message for the children
plus he was an extremely negligent babysitter.
WAIT A MINUTE FOLKS
I JUST REALISED SOMETHING EXTRAORDI-
NARY
THIS EPISODE WAS NOT RESOLVED BY A
MOTHER'S LOVE FOR HER CHILD
OR THE MEMORARY OF A DISTANT SHORE
OR THE SCENT OF FRESH LINNEN IN THE
BREEZE
OR IDK TWEETS
SOMETHING LIKE THAT.

Infact
leaving aside the PHENOMENAL stupidity and
creepiness of the whole Grant/Ghost character.
GOOD EPISODE?
The story
Although EXTREMELY simple
was pretty coherent?
or at least not so jittery as to really irritate me
and distract from the fun
I liked the ending bit
it was nicely stoic.
ANYWAY THAT'S YOUR EP
NOT A BAD EP
ALTHOUGH NOTHING ACTUALLY SPECIAL
ABOUT IT
#MOFFATSPECTATIONS
Here's a closing thought
Would it be the ultimate Moffat Troll
to
immediately before leaving the show
produce a really good series?
Is that even possible?
What is 'good' Doctor Who anyway?
All these questions and more
are left for your consideration
kthnxBYEEEEEE