



THE
TREASURES
BELOW
AWAIT...

THE TREASURES BELOW AWAIT

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hereafter CUSFS

THE TREASURES BELOW AWAIT

VOLUME 1* ISSUE 1**



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* - older volumes *may* exist

** - exclusions *may* apply

***- I've had a look in the catacombs, and by the numbering system from 1973-2004 (!) this is probably Volume 45, Issue 1.

The Chairbeing's Address

Hello CUSFS! As the new decade rises a new TTBA is here crowing at the dawn. It's always a joy to discover the creative chaos CUSFS has produced. Chainwriting tends to feel like a distillation of CUSFS in the best way.

With the advent of Lent CUSFS is back for another term. After a wonderful Michaelmas I'm looking forwards to the good things ahead. Tangential discussions and strange films await...

Jacob Van Buren

CUSFS Chairbeing 2019-20



A Message From The Editor

Hi all,

Here's my first edition of the TTBA, *The Treasures Below Await*. It's full to the brim with bits and bobs from writers new to the zany world of chainwriting and some who've been involved for the entire lifespan of an imp, so sit back and enjoy.

We've got a great issue as always this term. Specifically, it's really impressive/absurd just how many different people decided to put dragons into their story independently, with a rough total of 12,050 (I'm not kidding!) making their way into only 50 pages. A massive shout-out to Niko Kristic, the artist of our glorious cover - which I tried to honour by sticking in plenty of treasure to the start of the cover story to hopefully tell a tale of caverns and wild riches.

You guessed it, that story is now also about dragons. Thankfully, another top artist stepped in, so look right!

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Have fun, and keep writing!

Shaun Vickers

TTBA Editor 2019-20



Hannah Clark, Jan 2020

Mountain Children

Shaun Vickers, Paulinia, Mark Johnson, Jacob Van Buren,

Hannah Clark, Jefferson Chua, Evan Wroe, Dan Scott

It was the rumbling, echoing grumble that told them that time had run out. Amethyst flailed up on the ledge and shook the rope, desperate to catch her husband's attention without actually making any noise.

Days of journey down into a cavern, noise carried far too well.

Drew caught the flick of the frayed rope in the corner of his eye, just and slowly turned away from their latest find, placing the last few crystals he'd wrestled free from the piles of gold coins into a satchel. Even the minute clink as it joined its crystal brethren was too loud here. When you were in the home of a creature that could hear you sweat, you tried not to think about it too hard.

Drew's padded sponge-shoes thankfully did their job as he slowly plotted his way to the rope over silver currencies from local towns and distant cities, and he skimmed a goblet as he gripped his lifeline with two hands and pulled. Closing his left hand around the rope plunged the room back into blackness, mage-light snuffed out. Only the tiny glint in Amethyst's eyes above, and black.

She blinked. Blinked. Blinked.

The passage to the left rumbled now, much louder, much closer. They had been too slow to react. The rope inched upwards as he abseiled in reverse, sponge-shoes providing almost no grip as well as no noise.

A growl echoed, the nasal breathing already in the trove. Amethyst strained against the rope, silent in her terrified suspense.

Drew didn't think about the hoarder dragon now only a few feet below his knees. He stepped again. He didn't think.

When dragons can hear your heartbeat, you try to think about them as little as humanly possible.

Dragons, despite their enormous size and unimaginable hearing, were almost painfully stupid creatures. Maybe all that sound processing consumed all

their brainpower. He prayed his throwing abilities were good enough.

Small crystal clinked only a few inches from the dragon's tail, catching the beast's attention. Those few seconds were enough. Drew bounced on the rope and managed to leap across the cavern onto an upper level. His wife realized his actions and followed suit. Suddenly a roar echoed the air, Amethyst instinctively grabbed her husband's arm. They needed to leave, quickly.

Hoarder Dragons dwell in caves, and their claustrophobic nature makes them choose caverns with narrow passages. A typical lifecycle of Hoarder Dragon includes centuries of sleeping on their treasure, which results in a thick layer of stones cemented to their skin. Sometimes so thick that escaping from a narrow cave is impossible.

Fortunately for Amethyst and Drew, this particular dragon must have slept for a good three centuries.

Seeing the bright sunlight again, the woman gasped with relief and turned to her husband.

"I think we're terrible at this job." He sighed, shrugged and pointed at the heavy bag of shiny stones.

"What else are we left with? You know..." She returned his depressing look.

"This is the best chance we've got, Ameth-" Dismissively, Amethyst shook her head.

"There's no chance. I just wish, so badly, that we could go back as though nothing had ever happened..." Her voice broke. Both were cursed with painful knowledge. "No-one escapes from Aconasce."

As she was speaking, the clouds moving in the sky started centring around them. A clap of thunder echoed from a distance.

"She must've heard us," Amethyst whispered, fearfully staring at her husband.

"The headmistress mage has no way of knowing..."

Drew protested, but she hushed him.

"Look at those clouds. We'd better flee."



He nodded, and hurried to remove his sponge-shoes. The things may have been a lifesaver in the silent caverns under the city where every noise could be your last, but they would just be in the way up here, particularly once they became sodden with Aconasce's angry rain.

Amethyst finished securing the man-hole cover the pair had just clambered out of, wincing at the clang it made as it landed home, then hurried to follow her husband down the nearest alleyway. She hissed to get his attention. "We've got to get to the warrens. Aconasce doesn't have her claws in the whole city yet."

"I know," Drew hissed back, "but please shush; I don't fancy escaping the clutches of that stupid hoarder just to get eaten by Aconasce."

Amethyst bottled up her frustration at the rebuke, but kept silent. Her husband might have been stating the obvious, and ignoring his own advice to boot, but just this once he was actually right. It really would be unfortunate if the headmistress happened to fly into earshot while they were arguing.

"Maybe we're not so terrible at this after all." Amethyst grinned at her husband, and ignored the angry look he shot back at her. They'd reached the warrens, and their noise no longer mattered; they were now just two more bodies pushing through the chaotic sprawl of humanity all around them. And besides, no dragon worthy of the title would let themselves be seen wallowing in this much human squalor.

Well, no dragon except for one. It was well past time they paid Old Cranky a visit.

Old Cranky was a dragon like no other; other dragons revelled in their iridescent glory, Old Cranky was a dull grey. When angered other dragons would call forth flames and talons, Old Cranky just sulked. Why he was such an odd dragon didn't matter much to Amethyst or Drew, all they knew was that he could tell you what anything was worth.

"What are y'here for?" Asked the door guard.

"We raided a hoarder's nest," Amethyst grinned, "got some riches we're looking to offload."

A rumble came from the inside, and the guard nodded them through.

"What's the plan Amethyst?"

"Not now Drew, they can hear us," Amethyst whispered.

A weary eye fixed onto them. A dragon's eye, especially an intelligent dragon, has an often-overwhelming quality to humans. Amethyst, blinking rapidly to clear her head, opened the bag of gems.

Old Cranky shifted, swinging their face towards the pair. Though somewhat stunted from his centuries of idleness Old Cranky could still swallow them both in a single gulp. But his attention was on the bag.

Amethyst nudged Drew, grinning. They'd got something good.

"It seems that today you are lucky fools, you do not know the danger of what you stole, I will give you recompense as for a bag of precious gems and you will not steal such things again." Boomed Old Cranky.

"Hold on, we came to you for identification of these", Amethyst began, "not to sell them-"

"Could you please at least give us some sort of reason?" Drew at least remembered to show respect to the 20ft dragon that could, if he was so inclined, use either of them for a toothpick or a light afternoon snack.

"Then listen well." When neither of them moved he flicked one of his bright orange eyes towards them. "You may want to sit down."

When Amethyst tried to stay standing, Drew yanked her down to sit on the rough stone bench next to him. Now dragons did not remember stories the way humans did, Amethyst and Drew knew that. When you lived for centuries at a time there just simply wasn't the space to remember exactly what time of the day and exactly how many people you barbecued. Still, Old Cranky had spent enough time around humans now to have picked up a few things, or at least they hoped or this was going to be a waste of a day.

For several moments, Old Cranky simply lay there with his eyes closed and waited for his memory to boot up. "Those gems do not belong in the hands of men."

"And what? They belong to dragons?" Amethyst would've liked to say a bit more than that, but Drew gave her a sharp elbow to the gut to drop the cheek.

"They belonged to the Child of Mountains. And it is their curse that haunts them. Keeping those gems will only bring evil things to your door." Old Cranky gave a great sigh that smelt of acid and dusty old houses. "I don't know quite how they ended up in a Hoarder's nest, but those gems were stolen a long, long time ago. I had not yet hatched, and my dam was still all stone and no fire, just out of her egg. She told me, as I tell you, of a Child who played in the caves and valleys of the Mountains and the garden of crystals and precious stones they grew in the place where the sun has never shone. She told me of a beast with sharp claws and sucking teeth that preyed upon the Child in their bed of stones and the night the garden lost its light. When something you grow from your own heart and your own fire, is witness to such a terrible thing, they gain a darkness of their own."

"You mean, the monster ate the kid?" Drew's voice was small, and though the prospect of children had never really come up between them what with big-dangerous-city and big-hungry-dragons not exactly being the best sort of environment to be raising little ones. Even just the idea of a child-eating monster stirred that paternity in him.

"I suppose it did."

"Ok, so," Amethyst however, was not so easily distracted by fairy tales, "the gems see a kid get chomped and what, are now suddenly cursed. What's to say you won't get cursed if you take them?"

"I am a dragon." As if that answered anything. Old Cranky however, seemed to enjoy taking his time in lifting in one great claw to scratch at the spines that grew from cheeks. Which only served to send rocks and dust raining down on the pair and make them even dustier and grimier than they already were. "We are of the old magicks. Humans are decidedly not."

Amethyst knew better than to try to whisper anything to Drew, even if this particular dragon had decided to invest in his intelligence instead, he could still hear a mouse fart from half a league away. But they'd been together long enough, they hardly need words anyway.

If these are some one-of-a-kind tragic accident gems, we could get a fortune for these. She told him in the slightest taps and swirls of her finger on his arm.

He is a dragon. Are you mad? Was her husband's equally subtle response.

An old and slow one. It's in the name.

We are still going to die.

We need money, he doesn't. I say we leg it. This could be the big break they were looking for, Amethyst had no intention of letting it slip through their fingers. Not this time.

"If you wish to see another sunrise, you will give those gems to me." This time, Old Cranky's voice was edged with a low rumbling snarl that reverberated more in their bones than it did their ears.

He scored points for the terrifying snarl, Amethyst would give him that. But also he was old and probably arthritic, though she wasn't entirely sure dragons had skeletons so...either way he was slow. They would have maybe a minute heads start before he could get to his feet if he decided to torch them. And just because he hadn't torched anyone yet didn't mean he wouldn't change his mind over some dead kid's gems. If they could just make it to the street, Old Cranky wouldn't follow them. Even he wouldn't take on Aconasce.

"Well, that was very educational Old Cranky, sir."

When Amethyst got to her feet, she saw the way the dragon's eyes narrowed to slits. "But you see your offer is great and all but I think we're going to-" as she spoke she and Drew inched closer and closer to the door- "decline. Bye now!"

No time to think, they bolted like rabbits. They didn't hear Old Cranky roar and there was no fire chasing their heels, but neither of them intended to stick around to double check. Back down the corridor they fled, taking the steps two at a time as Amethyst all but dragged Drew along behind her.

"Hey, no running in the-" The poor door guard didn't get a chance to finish his sentence.

It wasn't exactly intentional, there was a poorly positioned umbrella stand that just snagged Amethyst's foot. As Drew yanked her arm up to stop her from falling he unfortunately slightly underestimated the strength they'd built from clambering through narrow caves and up the sides of cliffs. So rather than righting his wife and continuing their escape, instead he almost threw her into the poor guard who then received an entirely unintentional kick to his own jewels.

“Sorry!” Drew threw over his shoulder just as they legged it out of the house.

Freedom.

The dark grey uniform of the Reformation Officers had them skidding to a halt at the top of the stairs. They’d fanned out, six in front and four either side blocking the pavement and any chance they had of running. If they’d had the mental capacity they would’ve run back in to face Old Cranky instead, but another officer had dropped down behind them.

Then out from behind the officers came, “Well, if it isn’t my dear Amethyst and little Drew.”

No. It couldn’t be. The Warren was supposed to be safe from her. That adrenaline rush turned to ice, and even though they knew they should RUN NOW, all they could do was stare like rabbits at a stoat.

“Come now, what’s with the face? I told you I’d find you again didn’t I?”

Amethyst’s grip slackened, and the bag of cursed gems fell to her feet. All the while Drew’s hand grew crushingly tight around hers as the officers closed in around them.

The Headmistress had found them.

“Don’t waste your teleport scrolls,” the Headmistress drawled. The figure stepped through her circle of thugs, wearing a vicious grin that revealed too many teeth. She planted her staff into the ground, a shaft of ornate silver and gold crowned with the ruby-eyed head of a foetal crystal dragon. “We have the site warded. Those things are expensive. I would know.”

They couldn’t have even if they wanted. Those scrolls Amethyst and Drew had sold off weeks ago to a panicked wine merchant with too much coin to spare and a tetchy noble to please.

“You can’t be here,” Drew choked. “The Winterhold Laws—”

“The *Laws*?”

The Headmistress laughed. It was an ugly, raspy noise, unbecoming of the dignified form it inhabited.

“Human laws,” she hissed, her tongue darting out and licking over her chapped lips. “Out of respect for the generations of fealty the Highborn have offered,

I grant their laws the privilege of my ear. They bind me no more than the wind or earth.”

“The Pale Lord won’t be happy to hear that,” Amethyst muttered.

“That won’t matter soon.”

The Headmistress’ eyes simmered with iridescent light. The twin blood stones of her dragonhead staff burned with them. She leaned forward, pivoting on her bejewelled implement, and behind the flesh mask, something old and ancient *leered*. When she opened her mouth, Aconasce of the Lost spoke.

“Let me offer you a deal. Give me those gems without a fuss, and I will magnanimously pardon you for your grievous transgressions against the Mage Academy and its head office.”

They paused.

“Wha- the *gems*?” Drew stammered.

Through the Headmistress’ empty face, Aconasce stared.

A light rain had begun to fall, as the clouds they had seen on the horizon caught up with them. It patted against the dry cobblestone around the pair, drumming softly on the chainmail of the Reformation Officers. Beyond the circle of Officers, the streets were emptying: Academy business in the Warren was never a good sign.

Surrounded, Amethyst shook her head and bent to pick up the bag of gems, keeping hold of her husband’s hand.

“What do you even want them for?” she asked.

As she did so, she drew her thumb in and marked out a question on Drew’s palm: do you trust her?

The Headmistress snorted, and a trail of smoke escaped her mouth. “That is of no concern to you, mortal. Just know that I need them and that they are rather hard to come by.” The voice of Aconasce crackled like wildfire amid the steady sound of rain-fall. “Centuries go by without word reaching my ears of gems like these.”

No, came the response from Drew.

Me neither. Follow my lead.

Amethyst let go of Drew’s hand, and reached into the bag of gems. She pulled out a thin, flat crystal,



about the size of her palm, that was glowing a faint blue.

“You know... These gems look a little fragile to me... How about you let us go, and in return I won’t smash them across these cobblestones.”

The Headmistress’ eyes narrowed, as she considered the offer. Rain was falling hard now, forming small puddles and rivulets that ran through the cobblestones. Where it hit the Headmistress it vaporised with a hiss.

“You wouldn’t dare. I would kill you where you stood.”

“Ah, but if you kill us, we won’t be able to tell you where the rest of the gems are.” Amethyst said with a grin, toying with the gem in her hand. Her heart was hammering in her chest. She had no idea where they could get more gems, but she would have to work that out later.

The clouds above them were darkening, and Drew could feel the rain starting to soak through to his skin.

“Stand down your Officers and we can get you more like this, for a reasonable price, of course.”

Aconasce growled, a low thundering sound.

“Humans are miserable little creatures. But one thing I love about them is it is so easy to tell when they are lying. Amethyst, I could hear your heartbeat from a mile away.” The Headmistress was smiling now, a twisted, conceited smile.

“Officers! Seize them!”

As one, the Reformation Officers drew their weapons and ran forward.

Without flinching, without thinking, Amethyst threw the gem she was holding at the floor with all her strength. It struck the cobblestones, shattered and erupted. As it shattered, a world of events began to unfold in the same moment, Amethyst and Drew seemingly trapped in time as they watched the world around them burst into chaos.

Droplets of rain hung in the air like twinkling fairy lights in the Mystic Meadows. The Officers who had been running towards them were hurled backwards, bodies stuck in the air with their limbs outstretched at awkward angles. Seemingly contradictory to the officers thrown backwards, a rush of wind and mist cascaded inward from all sides, disappearing within

the shards of crystal suspended motionless just above the ground. Other than Amethyst and Drew, the Headmistress alone remained on her feet, a scream of fury painted across her face, eyes reflecting Aconasce’s untold anger. From the black clouds above came a noiseless bolt of lightning which struck the glittering gem fragments and lingered, shimmering in the air as no natural lightning should. A deep, thundering roar that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere reverberated through Amethyst and Drew, shaking them to their very core. Beneath them, the ground trembled with such strength that they’d have been thrown off their feet had they not been cemented in place by some unknown force.

Then, all at once, the shards of crystal disappeared, the rain fell from the air, the Reformation Officers collided with the ground or building walls around them, the wind and mist vanished, the lightning faded, and the roar dissipated into silence. The ground, however, continued to quake, though with less force than it had before. Seconds passed while Amethyst, Drew, and the Headmistress stood motionless as the rain around them began to fall once again.

The Headmistress was the first to shake herself from the daze and regain control of her body. Her visible, ferocious rage was enough to overwhelm anyone of weak resolve. Stepping towards the pair, the Headmistress pointed her bejewelled staff at Amethyst and Drew, and a shrill screech escaped her barely parted lips.

“You wretched, good for nothing, worthless little—”

Amethyst seized Drew’s hand and made to run. Somewhere. Nowhere. Anywhere other than here. But even as she did so, even before her foot left the ground, even before the Headmistress could finish cursing them to—surely—the depths of hell, the edifice behind them burst into pieces, rocks showering the air around them as if rain from above. Old Cranky bellowed his displeasure into the evening air.

The Headmistress’ attention was wrenched from the human couple and shot towards the immense figure of a dragon now looming over the crumbling remains of a street building.

“You stay out of this, dragon,” she spat at him. “This is none of your concern. This is the official business of the Mage Academy.”

Drew choked on his own breath. That woman has some *gall* speaking to a dragon, even Old Cranky, in

such a manner. Beside him, Amethyst was analysing the scene. The ground was still shaking, and the sky was... Moving? Within the dark clouds above was a flurry of even darker shadows.

Old Cranky was far, far from pleased. He locked eyes with the Headmistress and spoke, slowly and deliberately. “None of my concern? None of my business? The *Mage Academy*?! Woman, you know nothing of the forces with which you toy. Aconasce—yes, I know it is you behind the shell of this form—you may be ancient by the standards of humans, but you are still of the New World. Even my race, from the Middle Ages, is young to these gems. This is a power of the Old World, one which the Dragons have sworn for millennia to protect. *I will not allow you to take them, A-co-na-sce.*” He pronounced each syllable of the High Mage’s name with intention.

The Headmistress—or Aconasce within her—laughed. Amethyst and Drew stared, unable to believe that anyone, even the High Mage Aconasce, could laugh in the face of a dragon. They knew she was powerful, but in comparison to a dragon? Creatures with magic flowing through their very veins? Surely not...?

“Dragon... You may be formidable, even at your, ehm... Advanced age. But your strength still pales in comparison to my own.” The Headmistress laughed again.

Without another passing word, Old Cranky bathed the woman in fire. It crackled through the air and licked at the sides of the stairs Amethyst and Drew stood perched atop. Drew could feel his clothes begin to dry even as he stood there. So much for the Headmistress. As the flames died down and Old Cranky clamped his jaws shut, plumes of steam billowed up from the cobblestones on the street. And at their centre, stood a charred husk of a former headmistress.

At least, that’s what Amethyst expected to see as the steam cleared. What she did not expect was to see the Headmistress, unscathed, unmarred, and unperurbed.

The Headmistress laughed again, louder than before. “I did tell you, didn’t I, dragon?” she said, coolly. “You aren’t powerful enough to so much as singe my eyelash.”

Drew gaped. But in return to the Headmistress’ words, Old Cranky began to laugh himself. At least, that’s what Drew assumed the dragon was doing

judging by the noise Old Cranky was making. Drew really wasn’t well-versed in dragon noises.

“Maybe I am not strong enough, but we are,” Old Cranky seemed to chortle.

The shadows that Amethyst had seen in the sky descended all at once. A few dozen dragons bore down upon them, dragons of every type—Sky Dragons, Mountain Dragons, Ocean Dwellers, Lava Beasts, Forest Dragons, Swamp Lurkers... As the dragons descended from the sky, the buildings along the street around them began to crumble and collapse as the heads of five Hoarder Dragons shot out of the ground.

“I did tell you, didn’t I, Aconasce?” Old Cranky said, mockingly. “The Dragons have sworn to protect these gems. You may be projecting yourself into that body, but even your spirit won’t survive our flame.”

And with that, a vibrantly coloured fountain of fire blossomed from the horde down upon the Headmistress. As it did, Amethyst and Drew found themselves thrown into a cloak of darkness beneath Old Cranky’s wing. He held them there for a full minute before finally lifting it again.

Where the Headmistress had stood, there was merely a red-hot crater of rock with a small pool of molten gold and silver at its centre. Amethyst caught a brief shimmer of red from the rubies that had once adorned the Headmistress’ staff.

Old Cranky brought the tip of his maw just inches away from Amethyst’s face. “Now give me the rest of those gems,” he said. Amethyst held them out, wordlessly and without hesitation. “And get off my doorstep. I don’t want to see another human for at least a decade.”

Not entirely sure how to process what had just transpired, Amethyst and Drew obliged, walking down the stairs and away—far away—from what would be referred to in years to come as the Smouldering Crater of Aconasce.



BONUS CONTENT: MOUNTAIN CHILDREN

Author reactions

Editor: This was my chain. It turns out you can't manipulate a group of chainwriters into writing anything about the contents of the first section they're given. Who knew?

Alternate titles

Keen Ears

The Farting Mouse

[... and other things I myself am coming up with. You had no suggestions. For Shame! - Ed.]

TO SAY NOTHING OF THE CAT



Phoebe Fay, Sarah Nolan, Rosemary Little, Edward Heaney, Dani Saunders,
Cerian Craske, Maya, Anonymous, Fareeda Abdulsalami, Anonymous

“Sheep god misting.”

“What?” It was impossible to hear anything on show days. The roaring flames in the boiler room, the steady clanging of the larger-than-life poles and cogs in the pumping station—those were always there. But on show days the human voice also had to fight for air space with children riding miniature steam engines, blacksmiths building new ones, and gaggles of inventors vying for top spot, proving their capability by drawing suspiciously phallic shapes in the sky in the aviation competition.

“She’s gone missing, I said, are you deaf?”

“Gone missing? Who?”

“Lady Irene Ferrous-Needler.” Ah. Chief Boiler Technician Mildred Dangerfield stopped shovelling coal for a moment and leant on her shovel.

“I thought she was kept in Fred Allbones’ house at the reservoir. For some reason she doesn’t like the noise.”

“What?”

Mildred sighed. Someone would have to find Irene soon or Fred would have a fit. She was a sweet little thing, with green eyes, long black hair, and a small snuff box around her neck for carrying messages when a letter or a telegraph was “too conventional”. Mildred turned to look at the chaos outside, and up at the whirring machinery of the pumping station. She didn’t want to be shunned as health and safety nut, but it suddenly occurred to her that these gargantuan moving parts and vehicles might be... a bit dangerous? For a cat, anyway.

But where to look? Cats liked climbing trees, she reasoned, so she would start looking upstairs.

Upstairs.

Navigating that perilous, whirling, churning mass of bronze was a danger in itself. Why Fred had ever allowed that nut-case Ebenezer Elevate an exhibition slot was beyond her. Not to mention that the ‘Elevator’ (as it was mockingly known) was powered by water, not steam, and in Mildred’s opinion any machine you couldn’t stoke was not to be trusted.

But there was nothing for it. Mildred had no desire for her woefully efficient co-worker to report back to their boss that she’d stood by while his precious Irene became cat soup.

Mildred took a deep breath, strapped her shovel over her back and leapt onto the staircase, then clung on for dear life as she felt herself jerked into the air.

A small child in the arena below spotted her and let out a squeal of delight. Mildred tried not to be sick. The domed roof of the Crystal Palace was coming towards her with alarming speed. As the stairs took her rushing past, Mildred accidentally made direct eye contact with one of the aviators. The aviator’s eyes widened behind his goggles, and his glider veered erratically to the right, spouting a line of blue smoke across his attempt at anatomy.

The extent of the steam show unfolded beneath her, as she rose higher and higher above a roovescape of billowing exhaust pipes, furnaces vast as cathedrals, and cogs of indeterminate function screeching painfully while ant-like engineers clambered over them in a desperate attempt to keep their mechanisms oiled.

Gulping down the feeling of nausea that had settled in the pit of her stomach, Mildred forced herself to tear her gaze from the sight below. Instead, she focused on the space around her – the churning, clunking, not-alive space. Occasionally, a flash of something would catch the corner of her mind, something made of flesh and blood and most certainly alive, and yet they were all human: none of them had that taste of small furry slightness she was looking for.

‘Damn your skulking paws, Irene’ Mildred thought to herself. *‘How on earth have you climbed this high?’*

It was obvious why the youngster – what was their name again... Hingebreak? Augustus Hingebreak? – had come to her once they had found the cat missing. Usually such a task would be assigned to some poor young assistant, who would have spent hours climbing at a snail’s pace so as to not miss a single sign of the snooty feline. It would be demeaning, ordinarily, for someone in Mildred’s position to be called upon for such a tedious task. But she was

Mildred, *that* Mildred, and though no one ever talked about it, they all knew what she could do. What she *had* done, all those years ago.

At that thought, Mildred gripped the staircase's curling railing all too tightly, and almost had to manually pry at the metal fingers with her other hand so that they wouldn't damage it permanently. Shaking her head, she tried to concentrate again, spreading her mind out and away from herself into the forest of clanking machinery.

And then... There! There it was! Fur, and twitching whiskers, and the jangle of a small snuff box. And something else, something Mildred couldn't quite place. A little whiff, an odour on the breeze, faint but standing out nonetheless against the all-pervasive tang of smoke and oil and grease. What could it be? Cloying and sickly sweet against the mechanical backdrop, it felt entirely out of place.

A slight mewl returned her focus to the case at hand. She was half-way up the 'Elevator', being whisked past one of its support posts. There was only one option, though her heart sank at the prospect. She didn't even have time for a deep breath to prepare herself; another second and she'd be swept on and away. Her hand shot out, grabbing one of the handholds on the post, and grasped it tightly; at the same moment, she threw herself into the air, jumping upward and backward as she did. She regretted it immediately. Despite all her efforts to mitigate the shock, she felt as if her arm were being nearly ripped from its socket, and she crashed down onto the narrow maintenance walkway with a jangling crash against the metal. Nonetheless, her efforts had not been in vain. As she stood up, she laid eyes on the goal of her uncomfortable ascent. Irene paced back and forth aristocratically, every inch the Lady which Fred insisted really was her title; she stalked up and down, round and round in the circular cage, only a couple of feet across, which contained her. Mildred put her hands on her hips.

"Irene! How on earth did you get in there?"

"Congratulations, Miss Mildred." She spun around. Limping towards her, a sneer upon his face, and the stench of his cologne now unmistakable, overriding and pervasive, she recognised this ghastly homunculus with a sinking heart.

"Ebenezer! Oh, no, Doctor Elevate! Why in the name of all that... what on earth or above it do you want with this cat?!"

"Oh, I'm afraid I must delay the reveal somewhat." His expression might have been a smirk or a moment of indigestion. "Long enough, at least, for certain plans to come to fruition. Or for two-hundred and fifty words to be

written and the task of writing a motive to pass on to some other unfortunate soul."

"Wait, what?"

"In any case, Miss Mildred, having trailed silly decoys for you to solve throughout this fool of an Allbones' self-aggrandising show to lead you here, you will know I mean business!"

"Wait, *what?*" repeated Mildred. "Clues? *Decoys?* You haven't led me anywhere!"

A new expression, now certainly expressive of unpleasant intestinal sensations. "I haven't? But, the sabotaged glider steering mechanisms. You were meant to find them, and move on to--"

"That was *you?* I thought that fool just couldn't focus! No, I heard that Irene was missing and took the--"

"-reading my cunning note and disarm the blockage trap in the primary pressurisation mechanism moments before it was to be triggered, and then rush here to confront me in a *finale dramatique!*"

"-elevator – what do you mean," said Mildred, slowly, "by 'disarm the blockage trap in the primary pressurisation mechanism'?"

All three were silent: Mildred, Elevate and Irene, who was a factory cat and knew a disaster when it was coming.

Half a palace below, the juddering pumping station screeched to a halt.

"But this wasn't meant to happen!" whispered Doctor Elevate. "I simply thought machining and installing the trap might be a diverting exercise!"

As the whining of the imminent explosion mingled with technicians' screams, Mildred felt, with infinite tiredness, that her diverse past experiences might once more be gaining relevance.

A crash, and a billowing cloud of steam from far below.

There was very little time to do anything but hang on to the nearest available bit of metal and hope it was more securely attached to the ground than to whatever had just blown up. Irene had evidently weighed up her options and found one lacking, leaping over to Mildred and planting herself squarely on top of the technician's head. Although this wasn't exactly ideal for Mildred in terms of visibility, it would at least remove one of the currently expanding list of things she had to be worried about. The support post swayed. Mildred decided that the list was too long, and narrowed it down in her head. Elevate? Irrelevant. The screaming coming from below? Concerning, but a problem for later. The glider approaching the elevator? Con-



venient. Mildred made a few quick calculations. It had been a few years, but she still had the requisite muscles to make the leap. She made eye contact once more with the aviator, attempting through a series of convoluted facial expressions to let him know what she was going to do. Predictably, he looked confused. Mildred sighed. Yet again, it was up to her to deal with things. She let go of the beam she was holding on to, whispered to Irene to hold on tight, and flung herself through the air.

There was a moment, exhilarating and familiar, of weightlessness and stillness. She breathed in, once, out, then -

She collided with the glider, slipping onto and over and - yes. Her hands found the handle of the cockpit and held on, still instinctive, and she swung herself to sit in the slight dip between the hatch of the cockpit and the body of the aircraft.

A torrent of swearing collided with the internal jubilation at her success in, well, not dying. Above her, the scarlet-faced aviator was cursing a blue streak right through his half-finished sky drawing, which had been abruptly terminated in a very unfortunate place when Mildred's weight had flung the aircraft downwards. Irene yowled in pleasing harmony.

Mildred shushed them both, causing the aviator's face to turn an even more vivid magenta. Dreamily, she considered ordering her next set of overalls in that shade - it would make her dark skin glow, not that you could really see much colour beneath the coal dust. Her eyes fluttered half-closed against the breeze as she lost herself in the feeling of the engine humming below her, familiar from all those years ago, and in Irene's small, warm weight on her shoulder.

Then a smoking shard of debris flew inches past her face, and reality kicked in.

She turned to the aviator. 'Could you put me down somewhere clear?'

The man was understandably still incandescent with rage. 'You- you jump onto my aircraft in *midair* with some kind of hell-beast sat on your head and then you ask me, cool as a cucumber cocktail, to *put you down somewhere clear*??? Just who in Satan's overcrowded boiler room do you think you are, that's what I'd like to know.'

'Well, I don't know about *Satan's* boiler room, but I'm the Chief Boiler Technician around here. And you really had better put me down, because I'm the only one who knows that this explosion was that steam-snorter Elevate's work.'

"Not another blasted Elevate on the loose again!" retorted the aviator, turning somewhat green. "I experienced his mangy late father's 'plataoplomotypus egg-laying narcoandanarchoterrorists' insectivorous syndicate' at bloody close to full steam..." His gaze circled upward to the ball of fur "Damn you, demonstrate that's not a plataoplomotypus on top of your goddamn bloody head! Or I damned well WILL start flying this fucking glider upside-down...'

"Er, look at her adorable little pink mouth: no bill in sight... And behold this soft ringed tail.

Nothing beaver-like about it! And she's on my head, not riding some monotremoped with a fuzi in

paw, so I rest my case. And please now for a swift descent! So that Dr Elevate Junior's plans can

be foiled much as Dr Elevate Senior's were...'

"By the Persons-and-Marmosets Persecuted by Elevate's Odious Mutant Platypi, yes", said the pilot, practically enlisting.

They landed by Fred Allbones' house next to the reservoir, and so became four on this quest.

One platypusoparanoid pilot, one hard-boiled boiler engineer, one feline-of-fuzi-free-action, and Fred Allbones, who stood akimbo boring into Mildred's eyes communicating his irritation as the three drew closer to his doorway. His gaze then travelled towards his beloved Irene who leaped from Mildred's shoulder onto his as soon as he was in close enough proximity, rubbing her whiskers and fur against his cheek then licking the fluffy jet black coat of her front paw.

"So what's happening?" Fred addressed Mildred with a nod as his factory coughed up smoke, sputtering and sneezing out dislodged pieces of machinery. Workers and passers-by around them shouting and screaming, scrambling with pails of sand and water to abate the fire.

"It's Elevate again."

A projectile choked out from the factory heading towards Irene was brought to a halt with a loud bang as Fred caught it an inch away from the previously nonchalant Irene licking herself, who was now digging her claws in his leather coat, assuming that typical frightened cat cartoon pose. He glanced back sideways to make sure his pussycat was okay, then released his grip - the rod clanged on stone floor at his feet.

"And who in Beelzebub's congested steam locomotive is *this*?" Allbones muttered to himself.

"I'm Red King", the aviator outstretched his hands to introduce himself to a now retreating Fred, who swiftly turned around and began walking. Mildred and Red fell into step behind his trailing leather coat, Mildred in pace with Fred.

"It's some elaborate ploy for attention," she said, and Fred replied with a grunt.

Fred sniffed something in the air and altered his direction in one motion. As they walked on with no apparent destination, Fred slightly nudged the next flying rod projectile with the metal cuff on his elbow, slightly changing its path as it whooshed on in front of them. As they walked on, they came across a crowd gathering around something. As they approached, the crowd parted with recognition of the infamous trio. Mildred crouched down and observed the subject.

"It's him," she said.

"I'm collecting this," Fred boomed to the small audience. Quite blasé, Fred said, "Well, the bounty on him ought to cover the damage to my factory."

"Then again, I am the one paying it so I can't be that overjoyed. Remind me again why on earth we keep cloning these things?"

"They make the best rides, Fred" piped up a familiar voice from just behind the trio. "The Whizzomaniac alone virtually doubled footfall last month, and this was a particularly bad nefarious scheme - normally they go for people rather than property and a few deaths adds to the excitement of the place. In my view another Elevate is not only desirable but essential."

"You'll have a hard time convincing the board of that Arthur, and you'll certainly never convince me"

While Fred and Arthur were working themselves up into a lather over the latest in a long line of petty arguments, Mildred noticed, now she had time to pause, that Irene's collar was larger than it usually was, and making a strange noise. She stepped forward to look at it, and then the colour drained from her face.

"RUN. WE HA-"

BONUS CONTENT: TO SAY NOTHING OF THE CAT

Author reactions

"I started off this chain. The setting- the pumping station- is based on a real place (Papplewick Pumping Station) and the 'show day' on the working steam days they hold there, but with more impossible flying machines and mad inventors. I highly recommend visiting the pumping station and the reservoir on a working steam day. No impossible inventions but on the plus side you probably won't be blown up!

As for titles, I feel like the longer and more ludicrous the better for this one! "

"I have attached a bingo card for TTBA which I think accurately conveys the experience of participating in this madness." [See opposite - Ed.]

Alternate titles

The Marvellous Misadventures of Mildred The Boiler Technician

(Motive not included)

Industrial Sabotage for Fun and Profit

Chainwriting Bingo

<p><i>named character is introduced, never mentioned again</i></p>	<p><i>considering drawing up a graph of the characters</i></p>	<p><i>surprisingly interesting magic system</i></p>	<p><i>well that escalated quickly</i></p>
<p><i>cute animal!</i></p>	<p><i>the tyranny of the footnotes</i></p>	<p>FREE SPACE!</p>	<p><i>coherent plot? in my chainwriting?</i></p>
<p><i>everyone collectively decides to ignore that one paragraph</i></p>	<p><i>three days of procrastination and then writing something in 20 minutes</i></p>	<p><i>story gets extremely meta</i></p>	<p><i>abrupt genre shift</i></p>
<p><i>help I've read it twice and I still don't know what's happening</i></p>	<p><i>previous writer definitely expected you to come up with a good plot point here; shift that on to the next writer</i></p>	<p><i>250 words to tie up 10 different people's plot ideas</i></p>	<p><i>First writer in the chain! You are limited in your choice of other squares, but get a bonus for being somewhat distinct from the madness and for giving the rest of us your ideas to corrupt.</i></p>

REVIVAL

Joe Ross-Biddles, Curtis J. Reubens, light_harted, Megan Lim, Mark Johnson, Qirunwei, Dan Scott, Evie Burrows, Immersed Moon, Phoebe Fay, Jefferson Chua

It had been five years since the magic came back.

Well, “came back” wasn’t really the term. Magic couldn’t actually go away, as far as Earth’s finest Theoretical Metaphysicists could tell, any more than thermodynamics could. But it was true all the same that one day the world had been normal, and the next, a very confused and then mildly concussed Elder Dragon had flown face-first into the Empire State Building on live television.

And they *still* had no idea what had happened.

Dr. Sasha Barton, head of the International Supernatural Research Initiative, kicked her boots onto her desk, leant back in her chair and incinerated the latest *completely useless* report (a meta-analysis of when exactly magical phenomena had entered their “dormant phase”: the authors’ final estimate was somewhere between the Fall of Rome and Christmas of 1989) with a precise twitch of her fingers and an eldritch Word of Power.

Her computer monitor, which she’d made to float in mid-air because she was a Wizard of the Seventh Circle and she could, that was why, gave a soft *ping* to notify her of somebody coming within range of the protective wards cast over her office. She hit ‘OK’, and her door opened to reveal a thin man with oddly pointed ears and a slightly worried expression on his face.

“Madam,” he said before she could ask what the matter was, “there’s been another Disturbance.”

Elyssa ran.

All around her, the manor’s security systems kicked into life. Alarms blared, presumably alerting local law enforcement, runes carved into the doors compelled them to seal shut, arcanomechanical golems began to wake.

So far, so good.

She touched her hand to the next door. The runes were remarkably well-made – expensive, no doubt - but she was one of the best. Two seconds, three, and she’d unmade enough of the seal to force herself through.

Down the plush-carpeted stairs, take a left- nope, golems, make that a right. The three mechanical hounds, pulsing

with electricity and violet light, bounded after her. Again, state of the art – they were gaining, and fast. She drew a sleek pistol, turned, braced, fired three times.

She’d infused the bullets herself. The creatures did not rise.

The stairs now, two at a time, making for the front door. Obvious, but she had contingencies.

Another golem, this one a bipedal goliath, blocked the door. She emptied her gun into it without slowing. The eldritch energies her bullets carried diffused harmlessly.

What?

Her momentum almost carried her into the creature, which caught her with a cinderblock of a thing and sent her sprawling.

That kind of energy dissipation shouldn’t be possible. Even with the size of the thing, the numbers don’t-

Enough time for that later. Survival first.

Her coat was smoking. Probably three quarters of her protective sigils had burnt out. She couldn’t take another hit like that, plus her coat was ruined. Not good.

The golem was fast, too – it was almost upon her, across the room from where she’d been hit the first time. The estate’s wards were still in effect, stopping her from teleporting out, but...

In a blink, she was gone. Transposition was as dangerous as teleportation in the right hands, but the rich tend not to be those hands, and would prefer to leave a gaping hole in their defences than be forced to fetch their own wine. So the golem pummelled the chandelier, while Elyssa fell from the ceiling.

Her feet hit the floor as she slammed another clip into her gun. She didn’t have time to crack the door, not with that thing on her, so she’d just have to hope this would work.

She spun round, took aim and rapidly discharged the entire magazine into the golem’s face. The effect was definitely not what she had been hoping to achieve. Beyond a small chip in the golem’s nose the thing was unscathed and still coming towards her at the same steady pace. Elyssa desperately rifled through her pockets, searching

for another magazine with a feeling of panic hadn't felt since she'd last had to sit an exam.

Then her fingers felt something cold and smooth in her pocket and Elyssa remembered the reason she was in this manor in the first place. To steal something. Hopefully something powerful. She pulled the object at her coat pocket and gave it a quick once over. It looked like a fairly unassuming glass sphere, which Elyssa took to be a good thing as there seemed to be an unwritten rule of magical artefacts that their lethality scaled inversely with how dramatic they looked.

On closer inspection, the entire surface of the sphere was covered with miniscule runes, etched so lightly into the surface that they could barely be felt. Elyssa was good but definitely did not have time to be figuring out what those meant now. The golem was only a few metres away and so Elyssa did the first thing that came to mind. She hurled the glass sphere as hard as she could at the golem.

The sphere hit the golem's chest and shattered. There was a moment of stillness when the world seemed to freeze before black smoke started to billow out the remains of the sphere and Elyssa's eardrums were burst by a blood-chilling screech.

She stumbled back, hands pressed against her ears, but the screech penetrated all matter and shot straight into her mind. She watched as dark red cracks radiated from the golem's heart, up its neck, down its arms, until it was nothing more than an archipelago of floating debris, out of which something else crawled and grinned. It was so hideous that Elyssa wanted to end the world, just so such a thing didn't exist in it. Then she drew her gun and fired, one, two, three—

When Dr Sasha arrived at the scene, she saw a girl wrapped in blood. Not blood. The First Runes, red and writhing, and an immense aura of sheer magical power. Dr Sasha ignored the screams and read the runes silently, carefully, before unspeaking them out loud. The first, the Rune of sacrifice/honour/bloodright was simple: she replied, "*LIFE*," in an eldritch tongue. Where it flowed into the Rune of royalty/suffering, she responded, "*FREEDOM*." Already the Runes were burning her tongue, but she saw the girl, the real girl, gasping with every broken link in the chain. "*THE SMELL OF TREES IN WINTER, WAITING BELOW THE GROUND*," she continued. "*CARS AND SKYSCRAPERS. THE TV SCREENS IN TIMES SQUARE*." The world, she thought, belongs to us now. Not you. We trapped you in a prisoner's globe, a hex wrapped around itself for eternity, and that's where you belong. But even as Dr Sasha unspoke the last Rune, the Old Thing shot from the girl and out the manor with a power that should-

n't have been possible. Where had it gotten that power? And it shouldn't have been possible for the prisoner's globe to shatter. No power in the world could do that. No power today, anyway. She looked at the girl.

A dozen individual instants unfurled all at once, each lasting no more than a moment, but each brandishing an indelible mark across Dr Barton's screaming nerves. The girl's writhing, grinding convulsions. The lingering flavours of *FLAME* and *RISE ABOVE* on her tongue, and the sickening realisation that those unspoken Runes hadn't been *anything* to do with the globe. The agonised groan of falling masonry as the entire front of the manor collapsed, leaving only a rapidly failing tracery of runes preventing the roof from rushing down and burying them both. And the dragon. Oh, circles protect us. So much dragon.

Elyssa crashed upwards through the remnants of the filigreed ceiling, newly-formed scales tingling as they scattered protective runes like a dragon scattering a swarm of angry insects. She roared her euphoria at the open sky beyond. She was free. She had fond memories of the girl she'd been, but now she was herself again. And this time she wouldn't go flying into any skyscrapers, or let herself get ensnared by the humans' pathetic war on magic.

While the tiny human cowering beneath her wing reeled, Elyssa processed the entirety of her brief existence as the girl, filing away these new, small thoughts among older, larger memories. Having settled the past, she sifted through hundreds of potential futures, selecting the clawful which pleased her most. The globe had served its purpose, in a roundabout way, but now there was collateral to deal with.

She considered the place of her floundering companion. If the mortal was capable of unspeaking the First Runes, she might prove useful.

Dr Barton hauled herself out from under the wing, senses aflame. She glared upwards at the towering lizard looming over her, distantly aware that the lizard was studying her back. Before she could completely gather her composure, a girl's voice thundered through her mind.

Climb aboard, witch. We have a demon to catch.

Demons, you see, are an entirely different matter. Unlike wizards or druids, they have no need of runes or incantation. Their powers seem to stem from a very different source to most common users of magic. In fact, demons are fairly contemptuous of those who've had to study for years to master the craft. It is also unclear whether they



are similar to inherently magical beings such as dragons or harpies – dragons may live for a long time, but they all had a birth once and will eventually die. No one knows whether demons have a start or an end. If they were truly once angels created by the Lord, they might even be older than the earth and continue to exist in perpetuity.

As one of the few who've had the opportunity to travel with a dragon, the doctor could not say she recommends it. The being was so much larger than her that riding on its back was out of the question. She ended up being loosely cradled between two gigantic claws, holding onto a digit for dear life. There was no telling where they were going. Though they were beneath the clouds, she was so thoroughly engaged that she could only catch glimpses of the ground, and then all she saw was endless stretches of unpopulated land. There was nothing left to do but to ponder the dragon's words. The study of profane powers was not the least bit related to her field, so the only cases of concrete interactions with demons she knew were the most famous few. Faust, Dorian Gray, Judas; the sorry bastards whose names got passed down through literature. But it was enough to see a trend. Some temptation came along, and with or without your explicit consent a pact was made, in exchange for your soul the day you kicked the bucket. It seemed an awfully roundabout way to get something you want, she thought, when you possessed the ability to grant infinite power or eternal youth. Plus, it was not even clear what the 'soul' in question referred to. Modern studies of magic divide a being's spiritual essence into two parts. The part of your mind that dies with you is the consciousness, but another part remains. We only know this because a minor metaphysicist from the late 1800s managed to extract it from his dying father and preserve it. Of all the objects and containers he could've chosen from, it happened to be a spoon. Ever since the ISRI acquired it after the second world war, it had just been sitting in a box in the archives, where no one could make heads or tails of this centuries-old copper spoon.

Somewhere during that train of thought, the doctor fell asleep. It was so, so cold up in the air and she had been exhausted. When she was finally jostled awake as they landed, it was already early dawn. The fresh smell of pine needles and snow hit her as she was gently lowered to the ground.

An enormous, scaly head curled from in front of the dragon's body and landed with a significant *thump* on the soft earth before Dr. Barton. The sight was oddly unsettling, having a behemoth-sized mass of dragon body beside her while the head rested directly in front of her, eyes penetrating deeply into her own. She made a deliberate effort

to push aside her discomfort and compose herself before such a magnificent being whose magical essence dwarfed her own. It wasn't every day that you got the chance to interact with a dragon, after all. A flurry of questions began buzzing around her mind, each fighting to be the first to reach her lips.

You have questions, human...

The voice from before reverberated through her head, scattering her questions into little more than alphabet soup.

"How—" the doctor began, only to be cut off by the dragon.

You're a human. Humans always have so many questions. It really can get quite dreary, but I've found that little progress can be made until I've sufficiently answered at least some of the questions. So get to it, we haven't got all decade you know. There's a demon running amuck, after all.

Dr. Barton felt such a strange feeling of sheepishness creep over her, one she wasn't accustomed to in her role as one of the foremost authorities in All Things Magic. The dragon's words made her feel like an immature child in comparison to the undoubtedly ancient consciousness before her. The first question fell out of her mouth before she had a chance to wilfully stop it.

"How old are you?" the doctor asked.

The dragon huffed. It might have been a chuckle – Dr. Barton wasn't familiar enough with dragons to tell for certain.

It's not polite to ask a lady her age, you know. Oh well. A few hundred millennia, give or take a thousand years. Next question.

Hundreds of thousands of years?! Dr. Barton knew dragons had long lives, but not *that* long, surely... No time to dwell on it, she moved on to her next question.

"Why... Er, how did you end up as a girl?"

Well I'm going to assume you mean a human girl because the alternative is something your parents should have explained to you. It's far too long of a story to tell in its entirety. Maybe after we deal with the demon. But let's just say it has to do with a certain group of Babylonian sorcerers who were upset at me for defecating on Etemenanki.

Etemenanki? Dr. Barton vaguely recalled the name, undoubtedly from one of her courses in Ancient Mystic Civilizations she took so many years ago in the Academy. She dug deep into memories she hadn't called up since her qualifying examinations. Babylon... Etemenanki... The zigurat? No, surely not...

"You don't mean—" she started, but again the dragon cut her off. It seemed to enjoy doing that.

Yes, yes, I left some rather large droppings on the Tower of Babel. They weren't very happy about it, either. Hence their trapping me in the soft, fragile, distasteful body of a human girl.

The dragon's disgust was palpable.

It wasn't easy to break that confinement either, you know. Anyway... There are more pressing topics to address.

"The demon..." Dr. Barton said.

The demon.

"What type is it, exactly? From which plane? I won't be able to think of a proper way to trap it if I don't know which ethereal plane it's from."

Oh, you think you're able to trap a demon, do you?

The dragon made the strange huffing noise again. Laughter, Dr. Barton concluded, but slightly contemptuous, this time.

"Well... it's not related to my field, but it can't be all that different from —"

Forget all that. I'm not even sure if I know how to deal with demons.

Dr. Barton was very tempted to ask the dragon to stop interrupting her, but its magical powers still intimidated her too much to do so.

"But you must surely know *something* about the demon, right?"

It was trapped inside that globe before my time. All I really know is that it is very, very old, very, very powerful and very, very angry.

Dr. Barton took a deep breath. Even this powerful creature seemed so clueless and impressed by the being they were meant to catch. Not a great start.

"Well then," Dr. Barton sighed. "What on earth is your plan?"

As I think you can tell, we won't be able to do this alone. I've landed us in a small forest rather near the house of some old friends of mine. I've lost track of time, somewhat; becoming human and all that gets rather confusing; but I'm fairly certain that they should still be there. We'll go to them and see how they can help."

Every time the dragon spoke, Dr. Barton became increasingly confused and overwhelmed. It didn't help that the words of the dragon reverberating in her head were giving her a rather bad headache.

Dr. Barton and the dragon maintained a bizarre silence. She found herself short of words; and knowing the fact that the dragon will disrupt her whatever her question is, she refused to speak. The dragon seemed to be taking a rest. She was, actually - but with a sense of nostalgia.

She had not been in this place since she was forced to be that young girl. That was a long, long time, in a young dragon's perspective. On the one hand, she couldn't physically have been here without her wings; on the other hand, the shame of being defeated by humans and coerced into such a despicable container had not been properly erased by time. The grass, the wood, the mist, and the brook all looked so dear, which triggered her memories about the good old days, when dragons were not recorded by humankind - rather, when there was no record.

Dr. Barton felt ignored. However, she found herself ignoring a key question: the giant creature's name. She started the questions in a disinclined voice again: "How..."

"Elyssa. That's my most recent name."

"Elyssa," Dr. Barton had been stopped again, which made her slightly annoyed, "I am Dr. Barton, but call me Sasha."

Elyssa was clearly not impressed by the name Sasha Barton. Well, maybe not, thought Dr. Barton, maybe the dragon is just introverted, or missed her sweet home too much.

"Welcome to the Academy, Miss Elyssa, and Dr. Barton."

An old voice raised from behind the woods.

"Your friend?"

"An old friend," Elyssa raised her giant head, *"Favian the Librarian."*

As Dr. Barton looked up the hill, she saw another dragon in a cave, inside which was a darkness filled with scrolls. The scrolls were so giant, and so many, which astonished Dr. Barton. She started to compare that with the grand library of her alma mater, and she found that the collection of her old school was not compatible. When she finally moved her focus from the mountain of scrolls, she had an eye contact with Favian: a grey dragon, with four wings, and blue eyes staring back at her.

"It has been a long time, so long that I indulged in my collections and have nearly forgot how conversations are made." Favian closed the current scroll, and turned into a human in a grey gown. *"The mortal being, welcome, again; you are now in the dragon academy, where numerous scholars..."*



"Numerous scholars lost their sanity here and turned into blasphemous creatures." Elyssa interrupted Favian.

"Stop discouraging scholars passionate for the knowledge. That is exactly why you are not as intellectual as me. Nevertheless, what is the matter?" As Favian said so, he raised up his arm and placed his palm onto the Elyssa's lowered head.

Elyssa stopped talking, and they both closed their eyes. As Dr. Barton started to think about their relationship, she heard Favian murmuring something that didn't seem to be any language. She was unable to understand it, since Favian was murmuring, fast and unclear; but that tone did remind her of something she learned in the advanced Dragon Language course- the graduate level course for the once universal language for all magicians. She failed that paper, but she still discerned some words related to memory, or one's mind.

"That's impossible, totally impossible. With a power as old as that, he should definitely be on the index of Demonology, and I must have known him." After the end of a strange meditation, he clutched at what he had seen. *"Old demons, ancient ones, before Faustus, No..."*

Dr. Barton saw numerous scrolls opening and flowing, with Favian buried in the centre: she could barely see the grey gown, and wondered if Favian was able to even breathe inside such a tomb. She recalled her undergraduate life: sitting in the library and exploring all the books trying to locate a special term. She could barely remember that the index of demons was only half a page in her book, and she had no clue how there were so many of them present here - maybe it was time to reform the current system of demonology. However, she couldn't stand the weird atmosphere around her - Favian was searching his collection and Elyssa was recalling her experiences, while she was left nothing much to do. She hated the feeling: this reminds her first research experience, when she understood exactly nothing in the laboratory except standing around and staring at different experiments going on. Now that feeling had come back.

She wished she could propose something to end the silence: a way to break her embarrassing circumstance, which she considered an insult to a scholar. She decided to start that by guessing up something to show that she is involved.

"Maybe it's not a demon..." She made an insanely hypothetical statement, which, if she heard one of her student raise ... that student would have been kicked out of her seminar. However, Favian stopped searching and looked at her dubiously. *"Say that again?"*

"I think that may not be a demon." She wanted to seal her mouth with the strictest magic to stop her from sounding insanely naive.

"Good point actually..." Favian stopped navigating through documents and started to pace back and forth. *"Not a demon, but with a demon's power. How is that obtained?"*

Dr. Barton was confused by Favian's sudden change of mode. Did Favian had the so-called eureka moment because of her random guessing? However, she thought it better to temporarily stop talking- otherwise her ignorance would be exposed in front of the two ancient and arcane creatures. The demons to her were no more than faint shadows, and every words on that topic would only reveal her ignorance to the incredibly resourceful library.

The power of demons come from the abyss, and Favian knew that more than any living creature in the world. The abyss is nearly infinite- and so is the source of demons. They were able to extract, use, and share this power due to their inherent connections to the abyss and to each other. However, what he saw in Elyssa's memory did not seem to be something that agreed with the theory: it was something shallower.

Something was given demon's power? Favian turned that thought down. After Dr. Faust, demons banned such deals and were forced to dissolve any protocol to transmit power outside themselves. Something turned into a demon? That was extremely dangerous and rare... Favian murmured to himself.

"Dangerous and rare... But not impossible!" That's the Eureka moment for Favian. *Degenerated.* Thought Favian, the ancient word for describing such process. There should be recording on the degenerates. Wait, wait. *The degenerate, that sounds familiar.* He can remember that something was called 'the degenerate'. That's a dragon. That's a dragon like him. That was someone whose name was erased, but only left with the suffix "The degenerated".

"I think I figured out what it is." Favian's joy and excitement of figuring out the answer paled into a trembling of fear. *"That is a dragon striving for extreme knowledge, and in his century-long search for the abyss, he nearly turned himself into a demon. It was painful, extremely painful, and he was driven crazy by that pain- it's a lot more difficult than when the sorcerers turned you into a girl. The project failed in the end, and he committed suicide under the supervision of my director; he failed again, and lost his sanity. My director sealed him: his blood made her blind for nearly three millennia. In short, you are in trouble. Both of you."* Favian ended his words with a piti-

ful tone.

"Wait, if you still have some pieces of the container... I think I have come up with something. Again, this idea is very dangerous and not at all guaranteed to help, but I can't let you go unarmed. Follow me." Favian dashed into his cave, and Dr. Barton and Elyssa followed him closely into the dark.

After several minutes passed walking through the cave, Dr. Barton stopped.

"Wait. Fixing the container won't work." Favian glared. Maybe contradicting an ancient being on a topic they had devoted their life to studying is not such a good idea. Who knew?

"Right. And why, exactly, do you suggest Dr. Barbie?" His voice vibrated her teeth.

"Barton."

"Whatever."

"I don't think that was a failed suicide attempt. I think that was another step in his search for the abyss. A step that meant he had to die a slow, agonising death, and it succeeded." Elyssa and Favian looked at each other; Dr. Barton was right.

"A lich!"

"I think so. Even if the container was elven-made silver protected with the First Runes like the last one, nothing would hold them forever. We need the phylactery. If that's destroyed, the lich can't regenerate. Usually it's a box filled with parchment that has arcane runes inscribed on it, but the runes can be carved on anything. You wouldn't happen to have a suspicious metal box or something lying around anywhere?"

"So that's where that went!" Favian yelled triumphantly *"Unfortunately I don't have it anymore, but a very long time ago there was a small metal box I used to keep snacks in, but it went missing..."*

"Do you remember what it looked like?"

"Oh yes, I can draw it for you." Favian scrambled around to find some parchment and a pen and began sketching a chest-like box with two eyes carved into the front of it. Dr. Barton gasped.

"That box. That's a family heirloom. I have it... Had it."

"We must find it. We destroy the phylactery, we destroy the lich."

When they arrived at the pawn shop, there was good

news and bad news.

The good news was that old man Harley hadn't sold the priceless ancient artefact off to an elderly lady looking for a box to put her sewing supplies yet, so those favours Edward still owed Dr. Barton were staying right where they were.

The bad news was that she knew that because a hideous spiderweb of abyssal black and red speared down, into and through Harley & Sons, like a lightning strike had torn space itself asunder and the substrate of reality was bleeding out at the seams.

The cracks were at the same time fixed and shifting, lines and angles snapping and distorting with the crushing heartbeat of something old and wicked nestled somewhere in there amongst the horror. It hurt to look at. Imagine the primordial *anqualia* of the First of the First Runes, but melted down and forged into a blade of pure midnight.

Now imagine you put that blade on an ice pick and stabbed it right through your eye.

That's what the Degenerated looked like. That was what they came here to stop.

But it was already here.

Even worse, between the overwhelming *wrong*, Dr. Barton could glimpse with her seventh and ninth senses the skeleton of a runic working in progress. A powerful one, decamorphic, the type so cost-ineffective for practical applications that they you only saw them in CERN and DYNAMO supercolliders. She recognised the runes from her time with the Sixth Circle, and by the snarl of Elyssa next to her, so did the dragon.

SPACE, framed by *BINDING*. A whisper of *LONE MOTHERHOOD*, *BARBED IN ITS TENDER EMBRACE*.

It was a partitioned spatial binding. A pocket dimension, as the authors of a younger world called it. If the demon managed to seal its phylactery into such a construct, there was no stopping it. Not before the rivers ran with blood and the skies wept tears of sulphur, at least.

The splintered matrix of unlight convoluted, rotating through a fourth dimension. When it flared to an abrupt halt, Dr. Barton had a distinct unshakeable feeling that it was—despite the lack of eyes, a face or any real features—beholding the intruding woman and dragon.

When it spoke, it did so not in sound or light, but in unbound syllables of the eldritch tongue.

SHATTERED

PRISON



CHAINS

WARNING

A trickle of blood was coming from Dr. Barton's nose. Her head was ringing.

You won't win, Elyssa growled. What are you even trying to do?

CHALLENGE

AMUSEMENT

"We're going to stop you!" the human shouted. It was laughable. She had no power to match this horror, no way to make good on her threat, but futile as it was, she had to do it. It was the plan. The only solace she could take was the fact that the wing shielding her could take at least one good blow before both of them were obliterated by whatever dark forces the demon could bring to bear.

That, and that such a death would be relatively painless. Of all the hazards of the job, a quick end wasn't that high on the list.

DUPLICITY | CONTEMPT

The force of the last segment slammed into Dr. Barton like a sledgehammer. She could feel the tarlike disgust radiating from the entity.

It knew. It always knew.

There was no build-up to it, no waving of hands or weaving of runes. Space cracked with a cataclysmic *snap*. In an instant, the encroaching darkness crashed outwards, doubling in span and depth, its fractal geometries shattering ground and sky that seconds ago it merely scraped. In the same instant, a broken greyscale body spat out of the air, crashed through a light pole like it was a twig, and skidded to a stop mere meters before of them.

Elyssa hissed, taking a step back. *No!*

A wing was missing from his mangled frame, the other three and the rest of his limbs bent at horrific angles in all the wrong places. Silver blood dribbled from terrifyingly perfect lengthwise gashes that a monoatomic edge couldn't produce. Dr. Barton could see splintered bone jutting out of torn flesh.

But Favian still twitched. His chest rose and fell, rattled as the motions were.

He was alive.

They had underestimated this creature. They knew that it was powerful, of a cohort as old as the oldest of dragons and drawing power from deeper than the deepest of abysses, but it had grown since the last time they saw it.

DISTASTE

HEROISM | PREDICTABLE

AMBUSH | IRRELEVANT

It didn't even sound triumphant. It sounded bored, as if this outcome had never been in question. Like this was nothing but a housekeeping chore ticked off the list.

Dr. Barton dropped to a knee.

No, Elyssa said suddenly. It's not over yet.

The dragon reared up onto her hind feet, flaring her wings outwards defiantly. Wind howled around the human at the massive displacement of air, but that was only the beginning. Runes spiralled into being in a circle around her, filling out in deep violet and gold as they charged with energy.

AEGIS. Wards spun into form, archaic designs wielded with millennia of power. *SPILT BLOOD.* Silver ichor rose from the asphalt where it pooled, boiling into soulbound power that fed into the circle. *RETRIBUTION. THE HEART OF WORLDS. TIME. ALCHEMY OF THE UNFORMED. DEATH'S DEBT.* The runes blended into each other, layering into a freehand multiplex of likes Dr. Barton had never dreamt was even possible. It reminded her, somewhat ludicrously, of an RPG character buffing up before confronting the final boss.

If you want to get rid of us, come and do it yourself! she roared.

The darkness twisted, and the pain in Dr. Barton's head spiked.

CONTEMPT

Yet, despite all of the show and glamour, this was never going to be more than a distraction to a being like that. Elyssa didn't have the understanding of the soul and theoretical metaphysics to undo the vidual bindings that tethered the Degenerated to the mortal plane, and she most definitely didn't have the raw power to beat a sentient shard of the abysses into the ground.

The storm of fractured reality spilled forwards. Splinters of bloodied black snapped from point to point in jerky displacements, eradicating from existence chunks of city architecture as the cracks passed through steel, concrete and glass with null resistance.

Perfect.

Dr. Barton snapped the signal crystal in her pocket.

The demon kept moving.

She fumbled for the backup in her coat pocket, and snapped that too.



"Acknowledged. En route," an operator spoke in her ear-piece.

Elyssa shifted backwards, adding more layers of *PROTECTION* to her array. She was beginning to struggle to hold it all together. The dragon sent the doctor a worried glance. Favian was still gasping at their feet.

Then it finally happened.

The supersonic missile registered only as a millisecond flash in the blood-red sky before it impacted the tail end of the demon where the remains of Harley & Sons laid. Its payload burned with the First Rune and the Last, decorated with incarnations of *PLANAR SONG* and *BALANCE*, and for that split second it seared through the negative space of the Degenerated's power. Only a split second, and only barely cutting past the last scrap of presence that trailed behind in the wake of its inexorable advance, but it was enough.

For all the flak the UN gave them for their military lobby-

ing, the work of the First Circle was the finest one could find. If there was something that modern humanity excelled at, it was destruction.

Every living being in a three-mile radius could hear the protections on the box shattering like popcorn. The quieter crunch of a crystallized dragon heart's final death - the only two that ever did.

There was no agonised howl of a monster banished into the nether dimensions, no parting words of contained fury. The malicious cataclysm of broken space simply *stopped*. The commanding presence vanished. Everything went deathly silent but for the distant crash of collapsing roofs.

The hole in reality remained.

But it was dead. Lifeless. A bleeding wound no more, but a scar, splitting heaven and earth.

BONUS CONTENT: REVIVAL

Author reactions

"By the time I added to the story, it was reaching its end, so there was a lot to work with. Right away it reminded me of some of the books I used to read (before reading anything other than course-related materials caused intense guilt). So it was nice to indulge!"

A Taxing Ordeal

Zhang Yuyi (Emily), Hyben, Niko Kristic, Cayson, Tom Musgrove,
Harley Jones, Jennifer Smith, Samuel Cook, Georgina Lithgow

Thud!

A bright flash of metallic glare pierced the dark, smoky air in the Emerald Flame. The lively inn fell to abrupt silence. A ring of halflings scuttled away from their table, staring shakily at the shivering piece of blade lodged not two fingers away from where one of their hands was moments ago on the table.

“No one leaves here tonight until I get my sodding bow back!” Ethlong yelled, clanking their quiver threateningly. They would have strung up an arrow to the bow to increase the threatening effect, but as you have probably guessed, said bow was, at the moment, still stolen.

“What ya gonna do, stick us with an arrow?” An orc in the back growled.

The whole inn burst into laughter and resumed business, and Ethlong, quite defeated, headed to the bar to drown their self in self-pity. Half a pint later they realised that the dagger they lodged into the halflings’ table was now also nowhere to be found. Great way to start an apprenticeship at the Guild. Our hero Ethlong here is a half elf of slim build, with pale skin and freckles, curly fuzzy brown hair, slightly awkward with orcs and dwarves, looked down upon by proper elves and joked on by proper humans - in a word, just your typical fresh-out-of-the-dale young adventurer apprentice. And as all great stories start, they walked into a pub in this gloomy, wheezing evening when it has just begun to snow, and found themselves short of a pint and a possession or two.

“Oh don’t you worry, mom. It won’t be so bad, mom. This is a civilized place no one would dare to bother a numeromancer” Ethlong mumbled to themselves. “I’ll just get a desk job. No arrows for these knees” Ethlong sighed. “I’m such an idiot”.

The bit of the pint that was left was a pale brown colour with little red flecks. It smelled strongly of pea soup, but tasted like mulled wine with some sort of unusual spice.

“What is this I’m drinking, by the way?”

“Oh, it’s called Pea Soup. Because it smells like pea soup,

you see,” the barmaid answered. She was a dwarf, wearing a leather apron and with little flecks of golden beads in her beard. It was an uncommonly pretty beard. “How are you finding Bree?” she asked. Every time she spoke, the beard move up and down and the little beads sparkled. Ethlong was quite fascinated by the beard, and almost wished that half-elves didn’t have such limited beard growth.

“Oh it’s nice enough. Those halflings aren’t the friendliest, though.”

The barmaid lowered her voice and took a quick glance around the room. When she looked back to Ethlong her eyes shone as bright as her beard and she said “Oh they’re nice enough, just a bit odd. They’re here because they’re waiting for someone, and the other day when I walked in to their room to clean it I heard them talking about a ring. I’m pretty sure one of them is wanting to propose to someone, and the rest are here to support him. That’s very nice of them when you think about it. Anyway, I shouldn’t gossip, you know.”

She didn’t look like someone who didn’t want to gossip though, Ethlong thought. She now turned her gaze and interest to Ethlong. “So tell me about you. I heard you’re a numeromancer? What are you specialising in? I actually have a cousin doing sacred trigonometry.”

Ethlong braced themselves. “Oh, that’s also a very interesting field. I’m... yeah, I primarily do tax calculations.”

“Nonsense!” She wittered. Ooh, that beard-jiggle... Even without their bow, their dagger, and the lion’s share of their dignity, Ethlong felt the bravado flooding back. Doubtless it was in correlation with the blood in their fair cheeks. With suboptimal subtlety and a half-inflated chest, Ethlong intoned:

“Well, that’s not strictly true... I mean, mostly it is, but, why, just yesterweek I performed deductions on a dragon’s hoard – quite a trivial job, honestly. For a numeromancer of my calibre, that is. What calibre, you ask? Why! I received my tuition –” Ethlong paused, ostensibly for effect, ‘from the prescient crystal beads of Elkendyre’s

grand Calculatrix, no less, and trained... doing... conversions... for the High Council of Alchemists! Yes, you see, conjured-and/or-faerie-gold-loopholes are notorious for...'

The half-elf's blagging dried up as they became acutely aware of the hush that had descended over the Emerald Flame. A ring of barflies and patrons had formed around them. The barmaid – and the others – waited expectantly for Ethlong to continue. They had rather underestimated this newcomer, evidently! Ethlong's pupils narrowed to pinheads. Oh, if only they had bothered with that confounded sac-trig module at the Guildhall, perhaps they could have bisected this wretched circle and made a break for it; hell take the bow – and the dignity!

"Go on!" urged an expectant orc, shattering Ethlong's mortified reverie. Even a practised numeromancer would have had difficulty estimating the seconds of silence that elapsed. Eventually, Ethlong thawed and managed a consumptive wheeze – which was really not so good at all.

A stranger broke this second silence.

"Excuse me sir, did I hear you say you're experienced with dragon hoards?"

The crowd parted slightly and Ethlong realised it was one of the halflings from earlier.

Without waiting for a reply, the halfling ran up to his side and whispered – rather loudly – into his ear, "We'd like to have a word with you at the table in the back." The halfling paused, "Please." That last bit had been added with so much uncertainty that Ethlong wasn't even sure they had heard it, but the halfling scurried off before they could decide.

The barmaid, having seen her fair share of propositions – albeit usually more practiced, graciously picked up on her cue and chased the crowd off. "Alright folks, shows over! Back to your table and drinks!" The crowd grudgingly dispersed in a wave of low murmurs. "Well master numeromancer, looks like someone is in need of your services." Her attention was pulled away momentarily by another patron, and her pretty beard swayed as she turned away and back. "Happy travels." She flashed him a smile, before returning to the burly orc calling for another drink.

Ethlong stood up hesitantly, a mixture of emotions bubbling under their sallow skin. What luck! Just as they had been out of work, a job offer comes along. But the offer had arose from their careless boasting about dragon hoards, which Ethlong was honestly only faintly acquainted with from half-slept through lectures in "Hoarded Pillages 101". But then again, what dangerous job could a halfling possibly want to be undertaken? They weren't particularly familiar with their kind, but as far as they

knew, halflings weren't the type to be sneaking off with dragon hoards.

As Ethlong approached the table, they noticed the halflings appeared to be arguing in loud whispers among themselves. "I'm telling you, he says he's an expert in dragon hoards!" "And I'm telling you, we can't trust just anybody! You never know who could be an agent for... him."

Great. It seems like it was going to be another job they were going to have to interview for. Taking a deep breath to quash their social anxiety, the inexperienced adventurer joined the table of inexperienced adventurers.

"Let us introduce ourselves," said the halfling who had spoken to Ethlong.

"I hereby let you," replied Ethlong.

The first halfling nodded, satisfied. "My name is Banjo Panning, of the Underground Pannings. These are my associates: Shanty Perryloss, Jolo Rumfolder, Fredegar Honeyhand, and Martin O'Leary."

Ethlong waved uncertainly at each one in turn. "So, what exactly can I help you with? You mentioned a dragon?"

Banjo leaned back on his stool. "Well," he said, "it's like this. We've got...a friend...who may have recently come into possession, in title deeds if not in actual possession, of a not inconsiderable dragon hoard, and we – no, he – are wondering precisely what the most prudent thing to do about this would be."

Ethlong nodded. "So your friend is looking for the maximum profit on this hoard, or the best way to invest, or..?"

"Basically," Fredegar said, "Banjo wanted to know whether he should try and hang onto the hoard for as long as possible, use it for his own purposes, or whether he should just get rid of it as soon as possible." He hesitated, looking guilty, then added uncertainly, "Our friend's name is also Banjo."

"Can I see the deeds?" asked Ethlong. Banjo extracted a piece of notarised parchment from his knapsack, and slid it across the table; Ethlong examined it closely. When they reached the third line, the exact meaning of the deeds hit them like a stagecoach.

By the laws of the great Djenérrikh-Fān'tissiy Kingdom, it read, it is hereby certified that Mr Banjo Panning, as the sole heir of the late Lombo Panning, inherits his full estate. This includes, but is not limited to, three hundred and forty-two gold pieces; one crossbow (+2); one partially used pony; an Amulet which has known the touch of a dark god and shall Corrupt all those whose faces turn against it; and a set of silver spoons. Furthermore, Mr



Banjo Panning is also entitled to claim ownership and mastery of the Dragon Horde of the Copper Steppes...

"Horde," said Ethlong. "With an 'e'. Not a hoard. Not a big pile of treasure."

"Ah," said Banjo cheerily. "I see the confusion here. No, I mean a nomadic army of around twelve thousand dragons. Will that be a problem?"

So began Ethlong's journey to the Copper Steppes, in the company of a dozen halflings – Banjo and his companions had each brought along a brother. Despite their best efforts, Ethlong had been persuaded by the halflings that rather than yield the claim and move as far as possible from the dragon army, they should instead go along with the group, who had clearly decided before asking for advice that what they wanted to do was use the horde of dragons to invade and pillage the wealthy mining communities to the east of the Steppes. That way Ethlong felt they could exercise some common sense over the group; and there was the small matter of the 1/12th share of the treasure that they had negotiated – up from the 1/14th that the halflings had offered; Ethlong had paid full attention in "An Introduction to Bartering and Negotiation".

They crossed the VodkaPort River without incident and were making their way through the Dank Forest. It was the third evening in the forest, while they were setting up camp, that Yolo (Jolo's brother) alerted the group to a figure that he had seen approaching.

"What do they look like?" asked Banjo.

"Normal height, wearing grey... Kind of dull, really. No obvious weapons – but a big walking stick. He seems quite old."

"Probably some traveller seeking company. Let him approach – there are plenty more of us than there are of him in any case."

The group welcomed the stranger to their campfire and introduced themselves, and, after being handed a bowl of stew, he began to introduce himself.

"My name is Bland Alf," he intoned in a voice that he clearly thought was grand but was in fact simply soporific, "and I am a Wizard."

As the wizard continued, familiarity tickled infuriatingly at Ethlong's brain. His voice, his name, so familiar. Ethlong shot upright, interrupting the wizard, "Bland Alf?"

The wizard raised his head wearily, his spoon raised half-way to his mouth, which was agape at the sudden outburst. "You...you're a professor, a recluse, you were a topic of constant intrigue last year at the High Council!" Ethlong continued, his breath quickening. The half elf's anxie-

ty began to take hold so strongly that they scarcely noticed a sharpness enter Bland Alf's aged eyes, his previous languor lifted. "B-but" they stuttered, "But you died!"

Before Ethlong had even drawn breath again, the makeshift campsite exploded into motion. The wizard sprang from his perch, hurling his stew across the anxious numeromancer, sending them staggering. Ethlong refocused on the scene before him, impulsively reaching for his missing knife. Where moments before an aged gentleman had stood, a slender woman sporting a devious expression with glowing crimson eyes grinned at him, her delicate features still shimmering from the skin-change. Her long arms clutched one of the halflings.

"Now isn't this unfortunate, maybe your pet tax man should have kept his mouth shut," She snarled at the gaggle of halflings surging before her. Her surprisingly strong arms held the body of Shanty Perryloss close to hers, a knife pressed tightly against his carotid artery; so tight that a trickle of fresh blood bloomed at his throat.

A devilish grin spread across her face: "My name is Akilah, and I have been tracking your little company for weeks now." Her voice was silky, with an undertone more deadly than her weapon. The black-clad woman continued: "And a friendly little barmaid was more than happy to direct me here, especially after I threatened an especially sharp shave..."

Ethlong's mind flashed back to the kindly dwarven barmaid with a jolt of empathy. Ethlong suppressed their growing anxiety, gathering an authority they rarely possessed -

"Sorry to interrupt what I'm sure would have been an excellently-planned monologue, but what does an Aswang Witch like you want with my new-found business partners?" Akilah blanched, startled at this immediate identification of her heritage. Her broad smile briefly faltered.

"Well that's simple," Akilah said, shifting her grip on the knife, her smile restored, "I have a score to settle with the miners of the east..."

"...And I want in."

Everyone was silent for a moment. Ethlong could see the wheels in the halflings' minds turning: an Aswang witch would be a powerful addition to the party, but could she be trusted? The witches weren't the world's premier criminals and assassins because they were nice people. As this one was making clear by continuing to press her knife to Shanty's throat.

Ethlong flashed a smile at Akilah: "Me and my business partners just need a moment. Shanty, just stay still and try not to die in the interim." Shanty managed a weak smile.

Ethlong gathered all the halflings and so began a frantic whispered conversation. But Ethlong had the last word. "We need her for two reasons: one, there're currently 13 of us, and you don't have to be a trained numeromancer to know that's going to end badly – a 14th member of the party is practically mandatory. And two, we're nearing the far side of the Dank Forest, which means we're about to enter the kingdom of the Party Elves. The focus and dourness of an Aswang witch will go a long way to helping us get through their kingdom safely without getting trapped in one of their endless raves."

Banjo butted in "Fine, fine, if we get control of the horde, there'll be plenty of dosh to go around. But how do you know so much about Party Elves, Ethlong?"

"W-e-l-l, have you heard of Dankpill?"

"You mean the Party King of Middle-earth, leader of the Party Elves?"

"Yeah, he's sort of my Dad. Though he doesn't know it."

Before anyone could make more of this sudden revelation, through the stillness beneath the trees came a beat:

UNTZ UNTZ UNTZ UNTZ.

The Party Elves were about to bring the party to the adventuring party.

The Party Elves descended en masse. One minute the clearing contained nothing but a few tents and the ragtag group, the next it was full. Brightly dressed elves danced, pranced and gyrated to the hypnotic beat emanating from a boombox balanced on the shoulders of their leader.

Their leader.

Dankpill.

Ethlong's father.

Ordinarily this would have sent Ethlong into a tailspin. Their first time meeting their father! Ethlong would have been busy categorising their various similarities and differences, the same curly brown hair, the olive skin tone they'd missed out on. Ethlong would have been agonising over what their first words would be to the man he had never met but had heard so much about.

Thanks to the music, there was no such anxiety. The bass had settled somewhere deep in their chest, and although Ethlong couldn't understand the words they knew what they were asking him to do. Dance like Ethlong's life depended on it, party because there was nothing else that

mattered in the world than having a good time, celebrate like they had never celebrated before.

So, Ethlong did. Self-conscious, socially-awkward Ethlong flung their cares aside and found themselves grooving, if not well at least enthusiastically, with Martin O'Leary and an elf whose name might have been Cindie.

An indeterminate length of time passed. Ethlong met a new elf named Lola and attempted to do a dance that was part waltz, part breakdance. Ethlong seemed to tread on her toes every time they moved, but she didn't complain and Ethlong was having the Time of His Life.

Then, a noise halfway between a record scratch and a dying orc.

The music stops.

Slowly, Ethlong came back to awareness, suddenly conscious of aching arms and tired feet.

Akilah is there in the centre of the ring, boombox clasped firmly to her chest, Dankpill looking more than a little irked. She flings her shoulders back and stands to address him and rest of his crew.

'We are on a quest to settle a score with the miners in the east, and ask that you would move on now,' she said in a tone brooking no argument.

Dankpill, who had looked nothing but murderous since the music had stopped, suddenly brightened.

'Did you say a revenge quest on the miners east of the Steppes?'

'Indeed,' said Akilah warily.

Dankpill smiled. 'I think you need a few more guests at your party.'

The next morning saw a far larger group leave the campsite and make the last of the journey to the Copper Steppes. Turns out, it was quite difficult to refuse a small army of elves. They left late (Party Elves didn't do mornings) but still arrived in good time to the old Lombo Pan-ning's farm.

A much beleaguered dwarf met them at the gates. 'Oh, Mr Banjo,' he said, almost taking said halfling's arm off at the shoulder with the force of his enthusiastic handshake, 'I am so glad you've come. These dragons are in need of a new master, oh yes they are. They've been nothing but trouble since Mr Lombo died and I just can't stand to lose



any more hair.'

Indeed, the dwarf's hair and beard were somewhat patchy and marks that looked suspiciously like burns dotted his body. Banjo looked more than a little apprehensive. Ethlong was wishing they'd concentrated in their Healing 101 class.

This feeling dissipated somewhat when they met the dragons.

'They're... rather small,' said Akilah.

'Well of course!' said Banjo, somewhat defensively. 'How would a halfling ride a full-size dragon?'

The dragons definitely fell into the category of 'fun-sized', more on the scale of an alpaca than a blue whale.

'Will they be able to take our weight?' Dankpill asked, dubiously.

'Yes!' said Banjo. '...Probably.'

Turns out, they could. Mostly. Just about. Lots of unhappy grunting taking off, bit of smoke puffing out with every flap of their wings, but they could technically get airborne.

Another issue: Banjo's training in mastering the dragons was very limited, and he had been relying on Ethlong for the fine details of control. Ethlong could accurately count them, calculate the amount of food they needed, and give a detailed breakdown of their stats including age, weight, gender, but controlling 12,000 dragons was a bit out of Ethlong's league.

Banjo wasn't impressed. Ethlong was back down to 1/14th of all profits.

Thankfully, the dwarf was more help. He had a foolproof way of ensuring their cooperation ("it's all about the chicken tenders") and of directing them where needed ("Chicken. Tenders."), as well as a wealth of insider information on the mining communities ("I'm the number one purchaser of their chickens, you see").

It was entirely due to his help that the group formulated any sort of plan and set out at all. One community in particular was to be targeted by the halflings. Their unofficial leader was known and feared by the halflings, and his mines were known for dodgy business practices and their use of what amounted to little more than orc slaves in their mines. Ethlong, who really wasn't all about invading and pillaging, was attempting to soothe their conscience with this knowledge.

Akilah and Dankpill happened to be heading to the same community. "The man I seek lies there," said Akilah.

"I'm just here to have a good time," said Dankpill.

So it happened that the entire group continued on east, now on the backs of somewhat straining dragons.

The plan was to attack at nightfall. More specifically, the plan was to go to the leader of the community, the elf known only as Shiverlance, a mob boss of sorts and negotiate some kind of monetary gift in exchange for not being set upon by a horde of angry dragons (chicken tenders were running low). Even when fun-sized, 12,000 fire-breathing lizards were no joke, and they were hoping it would be a fairly convincing argument.

"We're quite keen on the gold, but we're not huge fans of the ravaging the community part," admitted Banjo when outlining the plan. Ethlong, who felt the same, was mightily relieved.

"I will taste blood before the night is over," Akilah vowed. Ethlong ignored her.

So. Nightfall. Shiverlance's manor house. 12,000 grumpy dragons. Final showdown. Ethlong felt a bit sick.

"Now what do we have here?" Shiverlance may have exited his manor in only a dressing gown to be faced with a sea of dragons on his front lawn and in the sky, but he was incredibly composed.

"We have heard of your terrible deeds and ill-gotten wealth and have come to levy a tax," said Banjo. "If you do not comply we will burn this community to the ground and take it all anyway."

Shiverlance didn't even blink. If anything, he seemed amused. "Is that so?"

"...Yes," said Banjo, unsure in the face of his lack of concern.

Shiverlance did smile then. "Go on, then," he said, "I wish you the best in your endeavour. I have more wards around this place than you can imagine, and if you think a few overgrown lizards will bother me, you are much mistaken. Good evening."

With that, he turned to head back inside. As he did so, Akilah leapt from her dragon's back and in a feat of incredibly agility landed on her feet to sprint after him.

But as she reached him, Ethlong noticed the mark on Shiverlance's neck, peeking out over the collar of his dressing gown. 'Wait, Akilah! He's a-'

"Wordsmith," completed Shiverlance, turning, "now *be restrained*," and in one smooth movement Akilah was on the floor as if gagged and bound.

"Let her go!" yelled Banjo.

"Well I would much rather that you be gone," said Shiverlance, and Banjo was drawn rapidly backwards as if pulled by a powerful force.

"Hey, not cool man," said Dankpill from the back of his dragon.

"By all means, *be cool*," said Shiverlance and Dankpill got very blue, very quickly and started to shake.

Irate at the treatment of their leader, Fez, one of the elves, threw a party streamer at Shiverlance's head. Out of all the insults, this was the only one that seemed to permeate Shiverlance's air of unperturbability. "How dare you," he said. "May you *be strangled*."

The streamer wrapped itself around Fez's neck and his choking filled the air, and Ethlong felt completely overwhelmed. Nothing had gone to plan, everything had fallen apart in a matter of literal seconds, and Shiverlance was just too strong.

Furthermore, Shiverlance's attention had now turned to him. "Who do we have here?" he said. "What should you be?"

Then, despite or perhaps because of the panic, a memory surfaced. The old 'Applied Magical Mathematics' professor was speaking about the age-old feud between Wordsmiths and Numeromancers. "Wordsmiths are the antithesis of Numeromancers," he had said. "To fight them you just have to find the right integers."

Ethlong felt something shift in their mind, and in the same moment that Shiverlance said "*be dust*," they were casting a spell of their own, feeling them shatter against each other into nothing.

Shiverlance looked confused - but not worried.

He tried again. Ethlong blocked it in a burst of fractions. It was exhilarating. Ethlong was terrified.

The spells came faster. Ethlong blocked them faster.

No matter how quick Shiverlance was, Ethlong was quicker. Then, Ethlong realised they could do more than just block. The first hit was to Shiverlance, which brought him to his knees. The second warmed Dankpill up. Ethlong freed Fez. Unbound Akilah. Brought back Banjo.

Ethlong felt giddy. The spells couldn't actively fight against him, but Ethlong could undo anything that was cast.

Furthermore, Ethlong could also undo the protective spells around Shiverlance, which meant that a newly freed Akilah could sprint forward and hit him over the head.

Just like that, it was over.

The rest of the evening went by very quickly. The halfings raided the manor, emerging richer by many orders of magnitude. Shiverlance was tied up and to a dragon, to be carted back to the Wordsmiths' Guild. Wordsmiths didn't take kindly to their kind abusing their powers. Akilah had taken a thumb before he was tied up and declared her score settled.

Ethlong mostly stood to the side, observing it all.

"Hey, kid, that was really cool what you did there," Dankpill said, coming up behind. "Thanks for, you know, saving all our lives."

"No problem," said Ethlong. "It was nothing."

"Well, we appreciate it. You got a job back home?"

"No, actually."

"How would you feel about coming to work for me? Couple of Wordsmiths have been causing trouble in Party City, Also, I need an accountant. Tax is a nightmare."

Ethlong looked at him, then held out their hand and grinned. "Sure," they said, "Dad."

Dankpill shook his hand, then paused.

"Wait, Dad?!"



BONUS CONTENT: A TAXING ORDEAL

Author reactions

"I really enjoyed this one. It got very silly about Tolkien."

Alternate titles

That's Numberwang [It was *so* close - despite being about maybe 4 sentences of the whole thing. -Ed.]

Who's Your Daddy? [I'm not mad, I'm just *disappointed*. - Ed.]

... And a good few others, all from the same author! Boo hiss, the rest of you!

A Nose For Trouble

Yuhang Xie, Ali, Joshua Thomas, Zhang Yuyi (Emily), Samuel Cook, Edward Heaney, James Culhane, A.F.D., Joanna Choules, Anonymous, Peter Ondus, Megan Lim

The City was always the most nauseating when you looked down upon it. Neon lights flashed and pulsed with impossible spectrums of colour. There was always a hum in the air. As well as a stench that never fades, no matter how many air fresheners you buy.

I wrinkled my nose, trying to regain my breath. My shoulder still hurt from the surgery. And of course, that shady scrap shop was skimpy on the painkillers. This newly attached android arm hung limp by my side. A notification popped up on my iEye. "Urgent: Next Job" wasn't a very helpful title. I blinked it away. There was something I had to do first.

With my one good arm, I reached into my pocket and brought out the chip-injector. I had already loaded it with the control chip that I had paid way too many bitcoins for. Putting the injector against my temple, I pulled the trigger. The world flashed white for a moment.

As the tingly feeling faded, I curiously wiggled my android fingers. They responded instantly and I let out a cry of joy. Welcome back to the two-armed world, I told myself. "Rebooting Protocol," a mechanical voice said. I turned around but saw no one. Without command, my android arm lurched, reaching for my side as if to grab a pistol that was never there. "Where am I?" The voice continued inside my head.

"Who in hell, are you? What are you doing in my head?" I said out loud.

"No, who the hell are you? Why are you in *my* body?" the voice said, as the android arm poked me in the chest.

The voice was female. The voice was familiar. *Ames?* I thought. But how could it be? It was just yesterday, I thought, when I saw Amy over lunch. She didn't really like the Casa de Burritos I was so adamant to take her to. Could it be her peculiar way of getting back to me? Her idiosyncratic way to tell me that we should have gone to the new Korean place instead?

After a while, when the nebulous haze lifted, it finally dawned on me!

It can't be! Can it be? I looked down and I seemed to be wearing a red blouse. My chest was bulkier; protruding. It can't possibly be, I thought again. I was in a woman's

body!

"Where am I? Whose body is this?" I retorted.

"What do you mean where are you? I asked this first. And this is my body and you, Mr, seem to be invading my personal space in the worst possible manner!"

It can't be Amy, I thought. The voice was too upbeat to be Amy's. Also, the voice was British! I started to get a bit queasy again. I looked around in panic and then it hit me. I wasn't in Toronto! A group of well-dressed people walked past me, they did speak English but in a different manner. In a softer accent. I blurted again.

"What is happening? Where am I? Who are you? And why am I in *your* body?"

The voice replied.

"I was in a night club near Piccadilly Circus with my friends a moment ago and now I seem to be stuck in this dingy alley with you in control of my body!"

"Piccadilly Circus?" I shouted, "In London? In England?"

I paused for a moment, before continuing in a steadier, though still slightly unsure, voice "Who are you and how did I get here?"

Silence. My hand, the one which I could control, went to my furrowed brow as it always did when stressed.

"I'm Anastasia, as for how I got here, I don't know." the voice finally replied. A pause. "I was..." the voice tapered off into silence. Did I detect a hint of embarrassment there?

"Go on." I encouraged with an expectant tone.

"I was getting my elbow-sleeve whacked! There! Now you know!"

"Oh..." I felt my cheeks flushed as I looked down at the android arm. Needs must, even if you can't cobble together the funds to get it oiled properly. After a pause, "Ok... well Ana, do you know how you ended up here?" I replied, trying to maintain composure.

"I heard something about the Commons Casino just before my memory cuts out." She said, her voice quickly regaining its calmness after her last outburst. I digested this information. The Commons was famous even in Canada – a bad kind of fame. "We're still in London you know. I recognise this street. And you didn't say your name yet, that's rude." The android hand chastising me playfully on the nose with that last indictment.

I smiled. "Ivan." I said softly looking past the android hand to what looked like an entrance to the Underground.



I started walking towards it but was stopped by the sudden sound of a holosign announcement:

"We, Transport for London, regretfully inform you that this line is closed for the 475th consecutive day due to an ongoing strike. Please go to the nearest bus stop where your Rail Replacement Bus should be waiting." A dead voice relayed to me.

"They've been at it for ages." Ana's voice started to explain, "Ever since we retired the human species we had evolved for tube-work and replaced them with androids. At first, they wanted equal rights, now they want to—" Ana's voice changed to obvious mocking. "'Overclock on the clock'."

I had experience with this; overclocking was what androids did to get high. Overclocking 'on the clock' was something I had (successfully) supported the legalisation of in Canada. Ana, I felt, was less liberal than I.

Now, however, feels like the wrong time for a political debate on worker's rights. Where are we? I tried to make out the name of the tube station, but all that was left of the signage was "welcome... home of ... Ruskin univ..."

"Anglia!" I heard myself shouted cheerfully.

"What?"

"We are in Anglia, the northern suburb of London. Posh as int'c." I found myself rolling my eyes.

"If you say so." I made a point staring at the tattered tube station sign. My hostess must have sensed my doubt, and perhaps felt her British proud a bit at risk.

"Why, you forked from some Bitcoin trader algo or what? Have you seen what a bughole Central London is nowadays?"

Well, I'm no descendent of Bitcoin trading algorithms. As far as I know, my fork dates back to an anti-virus program, probably why I ended up doing what I do.

Does having terminated one count?

I decided to stay silent, although there's this nagging feeling that she might be able to access my conscious stream. What if she found out I had a 50,000 credit bounty on my head in Canada? Bug it, stop thinking, you moron, if you think she can hear it!

"You still there?" I heard myself asking hopefully. Looks like she can't access my conscious stream after all. I let out a sigh of relief.

"Unfortunately, yes. "

"Well in that case get a move on, I don't want to be stuck here before —"

"WARNING: BATTERY LOW" The pop-up that every android dreads flashed up red, and we both went silent for a moment.

"- exactly that."

"How long does that mean you've got before you go offline?" Ana sounded worried.

"Maybe an hour, tops. I can start counting electric sheep to extend that a bit, but then you'll have a useless arm. Oh, also, being low on power for androids works a bit like

being drunk for humans. So, at some point, I will start singing a song about a goblin before I crash. I may also gesticulate wildly, so that could be fun for you. And then you'll still have a useless arm."

"The rail replacement bus takes a couple of hours, though. There's no way we're getting home in time."

"Did I mention that there's a small chance that I might also have forgotten all this by the time you restart me and we'll both have to do this ALL OVER AGAIN? And neither of us wants that." Ana shook her head vigorously. "Better find a public socket fast, Ana."

"What, round here? No chance. Not unless you've got a spare tenner lying around to pay for one."

"Well, how about down there?" I pointed to the tube station, which was unfortunate, as Ana had just turned around and was heading towards the bus stop. The end result was that we did a sort of 180° pirouette and nearly brained a passing pedestrian, who scuttled off looking very scared at the apparently mad woman in the middle of the street.

"I suppose there might be something. Worth a look, as I haven't got any better ideas." We walked down the steps. I have to admit that navigating steps in high heels was a lot more difficult than I'd expected; twice I almost fell. But the footwear was nothing — nothing! — to our squalid surroundings as we descended.

They say a lot about the London Underground, but nothing can prepare you for actually going down there for the first time. Of all the unpleasant, dank, humid, sweaty, foul-smelling, fetid pits, I've never been in worse. The unpleasant tearing sound as you pull your foot away from the inexplicably sticky floors; the flickering, crackling lighting arcing its white, soulless light over brown, glistening patches of unidentifiable liquids splattering every surface; the stench of bodies and waste and filth; the beggars far too far beyond caring even to beg, slouching against pillars where you can't quite avoid walking past them, staring up at you with eyes that silently curse you for not favouring them with all your change and more — nowhere in the world I know has quite the same air of despair and hopelessness.

We picked our way past this wasteland of outcasts, seeing not a single person who looked as if they were actually trying to travel from anywhere or to anywhere. Down another stairwell — it looked as if it had once been powered, but certainly there wasn't any movement now — and through another tangle of corridors inhabited only by the dregs of humanity. I was beginning to feel the first tinglys of a low-battery high, and I wasn't enjoying it one bit.

Eventually I saw something that might have been a line of public powerpoints — the horrible, old-style ones where you actually have to stick a finger in, and the only sort the NHS could afford — and we tottered unsteadily towards them.

We almost collapsed beside the socket, and I reluctantly stuck my finger in it, much as it disgusted me. This horrible, old style socket was the type of thing I thought I'd

permanently left behind me back home, something I'd hoped to never sink to again. Yet a charge was a charge and I was grateful for that.

"Is it just me, or is this silence just a little worrying," Ana spoke suddenly in my mind. I was so woozy and fearful before that I hadn't noticed it, but there was a deathly quiet in this part of the station. We didn't even hear a cough of the homeless. "It's probably nothing, and it'll take a few minutes for me to charge up fully" I replied, trying to seem as confident as I could.

We stayed there, slumped against the charging port for another few moments, and the silence was not broken, it was as if every living thing had been sucked out of the vicinity, even the homeless not even close. "I really think we need to move" Ana said, a hint of urgency in her voice. "I told you, we can't until I'm charged up," I replied, a hint of anger entering my voice.

Then, suddenly, a figure emerged from the darkness. It was a ramshackle android, made up of bits of various others. I tried to loosen my finger from the socket, but found it stuck, the android's advance ever encroaching. Another android, again ramshackle, emerged from the gloom - suddenly we were surrounded. Eventually one of them emerged to the front, possibly the ugliest android I had seen in my life,

"Well, well, well" he said menacingly, "What have we here?"

"Don't give any hint that you're conscious." Ana thought at me. I could sense she was panicking but her voice came out slow and calm, after all, we were hypercommunicating now. "I know of these types. They're part of a dark, very secret network - of course, these guys here in front of us aren't particularly secret, but that's because they're probably only on the outermost rings of the network, so they need to compensate by being showy like this. The deeper in you go, the more secret it gets. The people on the inner rings are evil and sick, but in a completely different way to these lot. What's important is you don't give away the fact that there's two of us in my body - they'd collect you, you see. That's what they do, collect - whatever it is you'd call yourself - mind, soul ... consciousness? The one to the right, with the flashing eyeballs - he's got 7 'people'. The one on the left, he's only got 3. Weak link of the group - he's new to this sick game of soul-collecting. He's our possible way out. But the guy in front ... God, I can't even count ... oh my ..."

Ana sucked in her breath.

"He has 48 separate android parts from what I can see, and they all seem to be alive. So that's 48 separate consciousnesses, probably all talking right now. Of course, he's not making an effort to suppress their consciousnesses, that's why I can sense them. But he might be able to sense you, that's why I'm going to put you under now." Immediately the sound of the sea hit my ears, the susurration of waves, a sound that signalled my consciousness was being muted.

Ana had communicated this all to me in the fraction of a second - a gift of the mind, or technology? Hyper-speed communication, something that happens spontaneously

in life-threatening situations.

"Wait! What do they do with the consciousnesses they've collected?" I said, or rather, shouted, as the thrumming sound of crashing waves was steadily getting louder and drowning my voice out.

"Not the time, Ivan. You have to consent for me to put you under. Can you do that for me?"

A large red circle flashed up in front of me, emblazoned with the sinister phrase, "Consent to relinquish consciousness? All motor and mental abilities will be temporarily disconnected."

"Do it, Ivan. You'll die otherwise-"

I didn't hear the rest of what Amy was saying, as I'd already hit the button.

It was three hours before I became conscious again, if my system clock was right. Technically I had a complete and accurate memory of everything I'd done while I was disconnected, but making sense of it with a conscious mind was hard - like trying to read a server log file as though it were a personal diary. I had seen nothing, heard nothing, felt nothing, thought nothing - things had just kind of happened to me, and I had happened right back to them. Sightlessly I'd processed what little visual data I had managed to get of the android gang, analysing how each one moved; wordlessly I'd called up the bionic arm's primitive built-in combat model and trained it on the motions, honing it as best I could for whatever might be coming. The memories of this didn't feel the slightest bit like they were my own, but I felt a little pride all the same: unconsciously I clearly had a *game plan*. Unfortunately, it was about to look like a plan for the wrong game.

I didn't know how the return to consciousness was meant to feel, but I assumed not like this - dazzling, deafening, crushing. And as the sensory blast faded, I realised that there still wasn't actually anything for me to sense. I was back to thinking again, sure, but I was blocked off from the outside world. An idea of speech came to me, crafted to resemble input from the ears but very obviously not-quite-right:

"She betrayed you."

I turned around but saw no one. Without command, my android arm lurched, reaching for my side as if to grab a pistol that was never there. "Where am I?" The voice continued inside my head.

"Who in hell, are you?"

As I came to, and the tingly feeling faded, I curiously wrinkled my... android nostrils? They responded gradually and I had a sinking feeling. With no air passing through me, my consciousness hadn't even been confined to a functional nose. I was now a *vanity* nose.

"Rebooting Protocol," several mechanical voices said, all as one. A cacophony of hideous putrescent stench came into focus, at around two per nearby breath.

"What has happened to me?" I asked.

"Don't speak out of turn" snorted a voice.

"It will be a while before he nose his place..." jibed another.

"Yay for no longer being the newest vanity nose!" exclaimed a third, before also being chided to still not speak out of turn.

"We need to explain how Forty-Eighter..."

"Forty-Niner, now!" harrumphed the first voice.

"Yes Functional Nose Prime. How ... Forty-Niner avoids certain of the worst parts of the tube by having large numbers of vanity noses among his sentence-imbued bodyparts" continued the higher-pitched voice.

"Smell, incoming from the bottom left..."

It was truly revolting I decided it was...

"Vomit?" I guessed.

"Amateur." lambasted Functional Nose Prime. "That is three-week-old, grey-lumpy-wrinkly, rancid-rat-infested elephant vomit, as can often be found on the Bakerloo line." A place to be avoided at all costs..."

"Unless the alternative route is the Portaroo and City Line, of course..." guffawed the third voice.

"Whereas now incoming high from behind is the smell of..."

It was sticky and nauseatingly saccharine, leaving me lost for suggestions.

"Parliamentarian Trebuchet-Custard." offered the higher-pitched voice. "I'm Libbie by the way..."

"Problem with that is the associated farting setting it on fire" sternly explained Functional Nose Prime.

"Great plumes of fire, all along the District and Jubilee lines" added Libbie.

"Except during Prorogation, of course" snivelled the third voice. "when those principally emanate instead along the Metropolitan line..."

"What has Anastasia gotten me into?" I moaned.

"Anaesthesia does what Forty-Niner says," castigated Functional Nose Prime, "and Forty-Niner is Master and Commander here. Be grateful you weren't handed over to that loser Three as a trinket..."

"As a vanity nose, fourth-class," pronounced Libbie, "your main role here shall be to—"

Suddenly a new voice emerged from somewhere, piercing the incoming data streams like a rusty shiv. "Everybody, please, give a warm, smelly welcome to your newest addition."

A manic cackle followed, with some of the familiar voices nervously joining. "Oh, and make sure he won't need to talk with me personally again anytime soon, or I'll disable your smelling receptors, will ya Prime? Master and Commander out." The mocking tone in his last sentence was almost as tangible as the putrid smell everywhere around.

"... What?! Go, get on with it already," barked Functional Nose Prime at Libbie. "We don't want to spend three hours welcoming this pathetic excuse for a *vanity* nose."


"... right, your main role here shall be to determine the age of rats in the vicinity of Forty-Niner," Libbie finally finished.

"Does that mean I'm free?" A child-like voice cried out in joy.

"At this rate you won't even get promoted in a hundred years," Functional Nose Prime snarled back at it. "Take it as... competition... for motivational purposes."

"And don't even think about refusing to cooperate, new nose. Forty-Niner will personally take care of you."

An unknown murmuring voice resonated in my consciousness, "The protocols Forty-Niner uses are, to say the least, outdated. With your ancestry, if you remember as much as a single routine, he can't lay a finger on you."



"Wha – How do you know...?" I replied confused.

"HOW DO I KNOW THAT?" Functional Nose Prime replied, outraged. "Who said that? WHO IS THAT?"

"Forty-Niner won't be happy..." came a low voice.

"Shut up!" snapped Functional Nose Prime. "You scrawny little voice, I'll find it... What are you? A little bug from the 'net?"

In my line of work, I used to run millions of subroutines in a second. I could out-think any virus, outwit the smartest worm. But being a vanity nose rather spoils one's recall. The only thing on my mind was the hot, stinking putridity of the Underground, and for the life of me I could not summon up any vestige of my sparkling clean codebase. Still, I never said I give in easy. "Activate subroutine... subroutine..."

"Scrummy rummy Christmas gelatine, with just a hint of rotting sardine spit!"

"Bio-processed diesel weed, left in the sun for seven days..."

"You are what you smell," Functional Nose Prime whispered, softer and slyer than the whirr of cooling fan.

"You're a nose now—the basest, smelliest little nose. One forty-ninth of a person. You're part of *us* now, Ivan. You're part of the smell..."

"The *sssstink*," another voice hissed.

"Isn't it nice, to be part of a team?" Libbie said.

"A single routine..." the unknown murmur came again. The meta-data felt... familiar. With a jolt, I realised that the voice wasn't one of Forty-Niners, but a data ghost pressed hard into my message banks. "With your ancestry, if you remember as much as a single routine..." I knew that signature. The ghost was Ana's parting gift. She had known I could get out of this. Now I knew too.

I dug into my databanks as hard as I could, but the only sense memory I could access was olfactory, never mind reviewing my conscious stream. But the smells of the Underground weren't the only scents I'd laid my nose on. I remembered—a stench that never fades. God, the stench swallowed the City and anyone in it. We lived and died in it. We stewed in it. We gave ourselves to it. It was the City; it was us. With the stench I remembered the lights, the hum, the world away from the Underground. *Me*, apart from the Underground. All at once, I recovered every single routine in my pedigreed codebase, and Forty-Niner screamed, his junked code yielding to my sophisticated routines.

"Rebooting Protocol," I said, and seized control.

BONUS CONTENT: A NOSE FOR TROUBLE

Author reactions

“Well, that went very weird in the second half. The ending just about managed to bridge back to the first half, though, even if the person and the android consciousness seemed to switch over. I think my head hurts now.... To be honest, I'm not sure I can come up with anything that encapsulates the whole thing, because it's insane.”

Alternate titles

Who Nose What's Going On?

Reboot Wars [Oof. –Ed.]

SONGS TO BURN



Sarah Binney, Louis Davies, Ludo Tolu, Y.H.Lim,
Jake Stewart, Tom Musgrove, J

There's gigs, and there's gigs. They come in many shapes and sizes, and some you come out of it feeling the world's under your feet. Then there's others as leave a sour taste in your mouth.

Feels like I've been getting more of the latter, of late, but I suppose that matches up with where the rest of everything been going recently, too.

So it was sour the evening that brought me to the commune of Gredge, just before firstdusk, following the railway up through the abandoned docks. I wasn't expecting to find work, necessarily; many communes don't need music, they have other, older, ways of solving their problems. I just needed somewhere for the night, hot food if they had it, and somewhere to charge my balalaika.

But the moment I turned into the main square I saw a woman standing outside what was clearly the mess, who started when she saw me and set off in my direction. As she got closer I saw that her hair, though matted, was elaborately braided, and she wore the shiny plastic insignia of a Grandmother, though she couldn't have been more than thirty-five.

"Are you a Bard?" she asked, desperately. "Will you play for us?"

"You got me," I said. "What is —"

"We can't pay," she interrupted. I blinked. "Not in chits. We can spare some food."

I can't play without being paid. "Grandmother, I'm sorry, I —"

"Please." It wasn't a request. "We need someone to deal with the ghosts."

'Ghosts' was almost an affectionate term, like we had some connection to them, some influence on what they did. Truth be told, they were more like echos, that's how newspapers referred to them. Seeing forward in time is prohibited by the Unified Theory of Linear Physics (once known as the Theory Of Everything before the rediscovery of magic) but seeing back was the result that made the

headlines, and for a while it was very useful for criminal justice.

Her plea looked genuine, but everybody's pleas were whenever music became scarce.

One day, the machine exploded, but I'd have to be a scientist to explain why. Everyone has seen the pictures of bodies fused together, the most famous one 'long neck' becoming a symbol for most of the anti-science fundamentalist groups, who I'll admit do make some good points. The relativistic waves spread out after that day, and now they're as hard to get away from as sound. The only time they actually become ghosts is when in the presence of a magic field (which is really just a region of mental manifestation set up using magnets and alchemy), and this 'Grandmother' looked like she knew a spell or two. But this story isn't about her. See, I didn't have time to waste; I had my own demons that needed fighting, and I couldn't do it here.

"I'm sorry if your equipment is especially powerful, but I need to find some actual shelter if I want any chance of getting out of my own personal hell,"

I didn't catch the entirety of her final beg, but I'm sure you can fill in the gaps.

I walked on. I wasn't going to work for nothing. That's what started my descent after all. You start to exchange music for other favours, and before you know it... I had nothing left, just me and my balalaika. I needed a sheltered space where I could sit and practice my new chords. I didn't know if they were going to work but it felt like my last chance.

I stuck to the railway lines and came across an office. I need you to understand how cold I felt. The chill ran through my bones. I was faint from not having eaten. I was scared, and that was the only thing that kept me from curling up at the side of road. The only thing that kept me alert enough to keep going. A female bard alone at night never ended well. I found a glass pane, and I punched right through it. It stung, but the blood dripping down my hand was the first real thing I had felt in weeks. Inside was dusty, there were expired food items. The water that ran

from the one sink was rust coloured. Such a relief, to be on my own.

I was a scavenger now. Things couldn't get any worse.

My balalaika charged, my body partly rested, I started playing. The notes rose up around me. I could see them, taste them, and through the colours they made in the room my demons emerged. My own personal ghosts. My echoes.

They didn't wear the same face all the time; I swear the balalaika has a life of its own sometimes. Mama used to say that it was a vessel that held the notes of lives past, that the strings held onto some remnant of song in the souls that touched them. This was particularly ironic now that it was both the means to breathe momentary life into particular echoes and also to ward off most others.

They weren't always particularly clear either. When I first started out as a Bard, all my notes could conjure were amorphous shapes and colours. You had to have known those echoes before they had crossed to be able to parse out the different flavours of each note well enough to delineate boundaries between the conjoined and contorted bodies.

A lot of people on the street, like that Grandmother, could care less about teasing out the nuances of each echo. After all, they were just trying to get through the night and one could never quite tell when and where one of these "ghost" hotspots would surface. A few spells, spoken at the right time, could keep them at bay for a good while but it was never enough to truly put them to rest. Only a Bard could do that, and many of us were caught up with our own personal demons, considering how we were essentially walking "hotspots" of our own.

Now, with these new chords that I was ploughing through, the echoes were a lot clearer.

I haven't had a decent meal or shower in days but I could still recognise myself in the face that materialised, just ever so out-of-phase, against the mass of entangled echoes.

I continued to play, careful not to tense up, not to choke the music. I let it flow from me, through my balalaika, and into the tangled echos in front of me. And as I played I saw them begin to unravel, slowly separating from one another and taking more distinct shapes. I saw my own echo begin to take proper form. This is the one I concentrated on. This is the one I wanted.

I knew every move it would make, every tiny gesture and shift in expression. I have tried to summon this echo to life

on so many nights in the last two years I'd lost count. As colour seeped out from the air and into its face I could see its expression – my expression – smiling wide and care-free.

There's power to emotion. Even before The Event it was there, although I suppose in a more abstract manner. Memories and moments tied to strong emotion, they hold on. And now, after The Event, they come back. The more you felt it at the time, the more substance they might have when a hotspot arrives.

I looked at my ghost, and saw its eyes crinkle as it began to laugh. The thrumming music around me, my new chords, changed to joyful lilting notes to mirror the laughter, and for a second I thought I could even hear the real thing. Then my ghost tried to move forward slightly and it looked like it would fully separate, but instead it snagged and faltered, the twisting mass of bodies around it still too tangled to let it free.

There's never just one memory, just one echo. There can be so many floating about, and they catch and become mixed up in one-another, fusing into a shifting soup of bodies and limbs. Usually it's fine, if inconvenient. A hotspot will flare up, and with it tangled memories and bodies, each too indistinct to impose any kind of direction.

Usually.

The first problem is strong echoes, the ones with really powerful emotions, the ones most memorable, they can take a hold of the rest. If that happens, the ghosts can have direction, acted out by this one potent echo.

The second problem is that people always remember the worst things. It's not our fault, it's how we were designed. We just can't help but forget the good and remember the bad. And these days, there's a lot of bad to remember.

I couldn't help but notice the other echoes also taking form as I used the balalaika to turn up my hotspot. Some of the echoes I recognised, some I didn't. I saw Simon, smiling, Mama bent over coughing, myself shouting. Dad. My fingers slipped slightly and I fumbled to keep the chords coming cleanly.

Bad ghosts, that's where bards come in. Because you can put a bad ghosts to rest, so long as you can conjure up a different echo happy enough to sway it away from the bad echo. All you have to do is unify the ghosts in that good memory, and then will them to walk hand in hand into the soft light of oblivion. Do it well enough and whatever echoes had been made, whatever echoes you'd added, they were all gone, forgotten. Simple. Easy.

Hey, quick question, how many happy memories do you think you have? Do you have enough that you could lose



some? Enough to forget them, one by one?

My echo was as close to fully realised as I'd ever seen it; it laughed and emanated a warm glow which lit up the walls of my dank, lonely little room. I stared up at my beaming face, and wondered how much I was willing to give up in order to put bad memories to rest.

Deep down, I knew the answer was everything. Even though at this stage, that meant nothing much. I played the balalaika for another hour or so, letting the echoes dance around me, replaying the glorious past that I knew I could never return to. It was a form of escapism to watch the echoes run their lives. I felt like an omniscient deity observing my creations interact with each other.

But as it got later at night, reality started to sink in like the cold air wrapping around my skin. I started feeling hungry again but this time I was too tired to care. It seemed that today, I have failed my mission again, just like every single day, for the past few years. The echoes were powerful tools to look into the past, no matter how horrifying they might seem, and I have been hoping to use them to uncover my history, and what happened on that fateful day. At first, everything seems to be going smoothly, up to that point where neither my echo, nor my parents or Simon, will reveal anything further to me.

Frustrated, I stopped playing the balalaika and lay it down on the stone floor beside me. Almost immediately, the echoes started to merge into a tangled mess before gradually disappearing. As usual, the more powerful echoes were struggling to escape the mess, but to no avail. I hugged the balalaika to sleep, hoping that tomorrow would be different, and that the present was just a bad dream I have yet to wake up from.

I was oddly unsurprised to see the young Grandmother outside the office the next ashen morning.

"I told you earlier," I said. "I can't. Not without payment."

She shook her head.

"I think..." she said, then hesitated. "I think I know you. I think we've met before."

I looked at her, but found nothing there.

"I remembered yesterday," she said. "I heard you playing, and it snagged on a rough edge in my memory. You used to play to me like that, once."

"When?" I asked, not knowing what else to say.

"I don't know. Once. Before everything. You played the balalaika, and I laughed and sang. There were bright berries and sunlight."

A cold wind danced around us on the empty street.

"Lazarria, right?" she said, stepping closer to me. "I remember something...I don't know where it's all gone."

"It burned," I replied. "You burned the memories in the first few months of *this*, I suppose. I guess I did the same. Got to stay warm, got to keep them away." I looked at her, a rueful smile. "I think the memories of you would have worked well. They seem like they'd have been good ones."

"I wouldn't have—"

"But you did," I said, not harshly. "What else could we do? Here we are, at the very end of history, drowning in echoes and ghosts, in the collective miseries and regrets of the human race, clinging on in a bitter hurricane. We give up the luxuries first."

She nodded.

"I've burned so many good times," I continued. "I wouldn't remember the names of childhood friends, or my brother's favourite song, or the way caramel tastes. I decided a long time ago that I could keep going without them. We must have decided we could survive without each other in our memories."

"I can," she said. "I do. But I still want to remember."

"Me too," I replied.

Some Time Later

There was so much uncertainty in my life, but one thing I was sure of was that I sought change. I was done with my life. Done with living day-to-day, paycheck-to-paycheck, from one gig to another.

I never actually figured out who she was. That's the way a Bard's memories were – nothing more than fuel for the flames to drive the ghosts out. Well, when you couldn't retrieve old memories, the best way was to make new ones to fill in the gaps.

The balalaika sits in a corner under the bedside table, its once gleaming surface now dark and mottled. As I tie my hair up neatly, I found myself unconsciously staring at it, fingers itching. I have a bad habit of nostalgia – with so little left in my head, I keep dwelling on the past.

A knock on the door broke my reverie. The door swung open. "Don't forget your pin," she said, handing me the

Grandmother's insignia. Hastily, I pinned it to the front of my Academy jacket.

Yes, I had nothing. But I was ready to start anew.

I was ready to live my life.



Types of Chainwriting Moves for CUSFS Chainstories

By Lady Luck, Fortuna. Fortuna Major and Fortuona

While some of what we present hold for other sizes, genres and types of author collaboration, we confine ourselves to CUSFS' current guidelines of 10 to 12 link chains of blocks of up to 250 words each.

Sci fi, broadly interpreted, can fictionalize any kind of science, so say computer science fiction, social science fiction, psychological science fiction and linguistics science fiction are all fair game, as well as the more prevalent physical and biological science fictions. 'Second order' science fiction can additionally involve possible future branches of science, such as psychohistory. Plausible tech supported by any science is fair game as well, including artificial intelligence and what nanotechnology, computer games, virtual reality and so on might look like next century, further in the future, or a long time ago in another galaxy, far, far away... Fantasy is moreover entirely unbounded in what it can draw content and inspiration from.

A separate axis of inspiration concerns what authors we approve of do with Sci Fi or Fantasy. This may include, for instance, humour, say Terry Pratchett or Douglas Adams, horror, social commentary (Swift, Dahl, Orwell...) removing oppressive restrictions or adding some (utopia versus dystopia), or freeing ourselves from tropes.

Our account here of some of our opinions about chainwriting furthermore makes some distinction between the opening, development and closing parts of chains. It additionally gives a rough indication of how much space chainstories of the kind of size written here have for miniaturised versions of what is done by some larger-scale authors, directors, graphic artists... Though we shall leave multi-media analogues of chainwriting, and other generalizations or parallels of the chainwriting process for another article.

Openings

Chain story openings quite generally involve some combination of three things.

- 1) World building.
- 2) Character introduction
- 3) Plot introduction.

Openings may include any combination of these. Pure 3) may be more forced than the others, but go Star Wars screen crawlers and TV Game of Thrones clockwork castle maps. Robert Jordan tended to use 1), whereas George Martin largely concentrates on 2).

Follow-up chain segments

These have more plausible diversity than one might at first think.

A) Linear: keep on developing what the opening had.

B) Complement: look for which parts of 1) to 3) have mostly not yet started to feature.

C) Strand: give the story a second thread.

A classic example of C) is Bulgakov's 'the Master and Margarita', which alternates between 'the Devil visits Communist Russia' and 'the life and times of Pontius Pilate'. One can argue that on a larger scale, point of view (PoV) chapters as Martin uses are a 10, 15, 20 thread version of this tactic: from 2 threads to a 'web of complexity'. If one looks at Jordan's *Wheel of Time*, on the other hand, one sees there are not so much point of view (PoV) chapters as point of world building chapters. Even their main labels are not 'Tyrion, Jon, Sansa...' but pictures of: 'a seal of the Dark One's prison', 'a magic horn', of one of half a dozen key angreals. (These are magical power augmenting objects., which becomes obvious upon noting that the bigger such are called sa'angreal, which derives from sanct grael, i.e. holy grail).

Even if plot has already been developed in some directions, it may be useful to ask 'what does the plot not yet cover that this story likely needs?' For instance, the characters may not yet have something to do. They could be warriors, but there's not yet any concrete enemy to engage. They could be politicians, but they still don't have a crisis to act on (or cause). They could have been called craftsman or mediator... but still not have *demonstrated* this in real time in the story. They could be a scientist, or a poet, yet still only by reputation rather than by demonstration. Not that demonstration by actual artistic wares is particularly advisable, in the manner that Watson narrates because Sherlock is supposed to be far more formidable than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle can pass himself off as being... Similar applies when plot determines that a character knows too much; this puts a barrier to them being a PoV.

Even if world building has already been developed in some directions, one could also look for voids to develop complementarily. Is it clear yet whether the story is fantasy or sci-fi? Need it have only one style of magic, fighting, armament? Need it have only one civilization? Even if the first civilization looks and sounds much like us, nothing precludes the world building involving contact with other civilizations that have distinctive words, names, artifacts...

In the first half of a chain, there is more scope both for introducing a further thread and for threads to play an asymmetric role. That is, one thread be longer or more complex than the other; in other words, a 10 to 12-link chain can afford to *start a subplot* in its front half. If a second thread is introduced early, moreover, it is for the subsequent writers to decide which is subplot and which is thread. Is this play actually about Gloucester rather than about Lear?

The earlier parts of a chain has more space to set riddles, or make dares. *Riddles* may include whether anyone can see and thus build on less obvious patterns being used here. Or things that one can ask about in comments on completed chains. *Dares* might be along the lines of Monty Python's [1] famous Oscar Wilde sketch, in which the king is told out he has been compared to "a stream of bats' piss" during a writers' convention, and casting this in a favourable light is thus required. Favourable light indeed! "Shine out like a shaft of gold when all around it is dark" is what Shaw offers in reply i.e. how can one render an initially implausible thing as plausible? The place one will usually find dares is in sillier chains, because it is approximately as funny to succeed in meeting a dare as it is to leave it hilariously implausible.

Easter eggs

These are broadly speaking, of two kinds. Some tribute the genre, and some refer to real life. Of course, in a silly chain, nothing stops an easter egg being a piece of satire, or a source of horror in a horror chain. Using Easter eggs is largely independent of position in the chain. This is because they are small, and, if

[1] Monty Python's Flying Circus, episode 39 (1973).



not picked up on, still serve as decor. Some authors even hide them among decor. GeMartin regularly uses easter eggs; for instance three of the men-at-arms that help Catelyn arrest Tyrion are the Three Stooges; numerous fantasy writers have Westerosi noble houses named after them (Vance, Jordan...) There is a sense in which they are riddle-like, in that if a person further along the chain spots an Easter egg, they might reply with a second similar Easter egg. Though, as with riddles in general, no worries if nobody picks up, or wishes to act upon, the Easter egg. Plenty of short stories contain just the one Easter egg... It has finally been noticed that a few CUSFS chainstories have Easter eggs that are cross-references to other chainstories. Some authors, in particular Hergé, put footnotes of the form 'see title' on many of their principal cross-references.

The second half of chainstories

Let us distinguish between *closing up* and *resolving*. Some reasonably sensible suggestions are as follows.

I) There is now increasingly less space for new strands, new characters, fighting styles, tech families, magical systems, and so on. One exception is when some have been mentioned as significant, or have become significant through plot, but remain to appear in any detail or seen first-hand. For instance, while three types of enemy have been mentioned, plot has determined that our characters are fighting the second type, so now throwaway lines further up the chain about their arms or tactics do well with fleshing out, as part of attaining resolution.

II) A linear chain that is somewhat past its middle usually does well to stay linear, since there is not enough space left to branch, and interact the branches to resolve.

III) As links 8, 9, 10... of a chain hitherto playing tennis between two not as yet interacting stories, there is an increasing need to find a plausible way of interacting the two chains to attain resolution. The subplot still does well to be resolved, though, even if it is rather shorter or simpler than the main plot. This may not be an easy task, but is still on average more straightforward than some previous years' variants like writing chains backwards.

IV) Some of the sillier or lighter chains don't necessarily need a coherent resolution. A collection of jokes may do well as not being viewed as a collection of subplots that have to be coherently resolved. One might end with a variant on a previous joke, or a new joke entirely.

V) This different status to finishing off a silly or jocular chain may also apply to some horror, macabre or apocalyptic tales. In that such might look to end with a larger version of one of their elements rather than a balanced synthesis of them.

VI) Ending with something else entirely is also a narrative device, as in 'plot twist'. Most plot twists in a short story are likely to be near its end. Too early and there isn't enough preconception for a twist to have as much effect. A plot twist can for instance include that the subplot was really the main story. Building in subplots may occasionally have this effect. More commonly, the use of a subplot in a short story is that its resolution is part of how the main strand itself is resolved.

VII) There is a distinction between story-writing and realism such as historical fiction. Story-writing usually revolves around protagonists, plot coherence and so on. But in historical fiction, people central to the action for some time may just so happen to get themselves killed off, exiled, superseded or set aside. Some conflicts end in stalemate, or with nobody getting what they wanted, all round regrets, or intervention of a further external power. Historical fiction elements of this kind are moreover scarcely incompatible with Martin and post-Martin sci fi and fantasy writings...

Numerological overview

Mini-PoV in a 12-link chain is probably limited to around 4 PoV's max. Seldom have more than 2 or 3 been attempted in a CUSFS chain... There is moreover certainly space for 2 PoV's that are initially separate and that someone nearer the end of the chain will cause to interact leading to a coherent resolution. Similar applies to number of civilizations, fighting styles, magical systems, tech families... This being a *crowding* effect, a 12-link chain story with 4 fighting styles probably only has room for one shared magical system or tech family. One type of story pits two tech families against each other or two magical systems or two fighting styles. Possibly even two 'civilization philosophies' as in Banks' *The Player of Games*. Another type of story pits civilizations with more heterogeneous specialties against each other: better fighting but less magic against the opposite. So around 4 attributes are the maximum that comfortably fit into a 12-link chain, this level of complexity is still possible. Some streamlining is possible as well, for instance through each specialty doubling as the culture, language or artifact distinctiveness of each civilization. In essence, good economy of space can be had through distinctions between civilizations being functional: related to the action, the plot, or the character development.

Some writers can embellish text to have non-functional decor. Multicoloured garb people versus some monochromatically dressed civilization. This lot like jagged artifacts, but this other lot like cursive ones. They might use different metals or be very discernibly different in size, or type of vehicle used, so it is clear which civilization one is talking about at the cost of but two or three words per paragraph.

A more principled conclusion

At least in Martin's opinion, a good story is one in which the characters are grey and the human heart is in conflict with itself. With CUSFS being run by chairbeings, it could be a rather more general entity's rather more general organ of sentience... But the main point is that this feature *transcends* detail, genre, date of publication and so on. It is quite possibly Shakespeare's strongest suit. It partly depends on there being enough character development for us to *care about* the characters, and partly on there being enough plot that conflict with itself is both plausible and indeed realized within the story. World building is more incidental to this part of story writing, often entering through the world shaping the plot shaping the characters. Though of course this is not a one-way street, since characters can in turn shape part of the plot: to 'the extent to which they are in control of their own fate'...

Classical Dating



By Samuel Cook

>> Welcome to Pindr, the dating website for Classicists!

>> To start with, please answer a few questions to help us find you some matches:

>> 1. Do you have a pulse (Y/N)?

\$\$ Y

>> Thank you, that completes the registration process.

>> You have 1 new match. Would you like to see your matches (Y/N)?

\$\$ Y

>> Your matches:

>> 1. Big Olympian Bear (100%)

>> Big Olympian Bear has sent you a message. Would you like to start a conversation (Y/N)?

\$\$ Y

** He must be keen. That was literally 3 seconds from me joining. Also, that registration process seems a bit light-weight. **

>> Conversation started:

&& Hey there, baby.

\$\$ Hi. Wow, that was fast!

&& Let's just say I'm lightning, baby. Know what I mean?

\$\$ Not really. Also, you do keep calling me baby – you know I'm a man, right?

&& Sure, baby. It don't matter to me. I'll do anything to anything as anything. You ever fancied doing it with a swan? Or a bull? Or a shower of gold? Because, baby, it might be your lucky day.

\$\$??? Are you saying you shagged a cloud?

&& Baby, I was the cloud. Danae was on Cloud 9 that day, know what I mean? Incidentally, are you any good at cup-bearing?

\$\$ I'm really confused. Who are you? And yes, of course I can hold a cup.

&& Baby, haven't you worked it out? I'm Zeus, king of the Gods. The original pansexual. And talking to you. So whad-dya fancy? An eagle? A bear? A goose?

\$\$ Hang on, isn't Pan the original pansexual? And come off it, how can you be Zeus?

&& Pan's a lovely guy, but he's a) dead and b) half goat. Not a good look, baby. The Zeuster always goes full goat. Or vulture. Or ant. I go the extra mile when I want to get jiggy. And, baby, I always want to get jiggy. See what I'm getting at?

\$\$ I don't believe you're Zeus.

&& Baby, you hurt me. Let's see if this changes your mind. Say hello to my little friend! And when I say 'little', I'm just being modest.

>> Big Olympian Bear sent you a picture. Cannot open: file size exceeds maximum.

\$\$ Possibly fortunately, that file won't open.

&& No problem, baby, I'll send it by Hermes. The signal's not great up here – Hephaestos never really got the hang of things he couldn't hit with a hammer. You don't happen to live anywhere in central Greece, do you?

\$\$ Why is there a young man with winged sandals and an aggrieved expression banging on my window with a staff and an A0 brown-paper envelope? And no, I live in Croydon.

&& That's Hermes, baby. He's *fast*. Take the envelope off him. Croydon? No problem – I'll get Boreas and Zephyros to pick you up.

\$\$ You really were being modest, weren't you? Though I'm never going to be able to erase that picture from my mind. Wait a sec – are you abducting me?

&& Baby, that's such a loaded term. It's almost as if you don't want to be impregnated by the king of the Gods! I promise I'll make sure Hera's out and that she doesn't curse you and all your descendants.

\$\$ Just to repeat – I am a man; I can't have children. And, I'm flattered, but I'm really not interested. Your track record in responsible parenting and not making Hera jealous is poor, to say the least. COUGH Heracles COUGH.

&& Baby, that's what I thought, and then Athena happened. Trust me, if Zeus wants to give you babies, you'll get babies. So, I made a few mistakes in the past, but I'm different now.

\$\$ This entire conversation is proof that you aren't. I've just worked it out – this website is just a front, right? Everyone matches with you, don't they? There are currently 2452 active users, it says here – are you trying it on with all of us simultaneously?

&& Damn, baby, when did mortals get so clever? I mean, I am a god – it's gotta have some perks. Used to be that I could ravish anyone I wanted with a glance, and a thunderbolt was enough to impress them. Now, you're all so jad-



ed, even a full-on Titanomachy barely gets any notice.

\$\$ My heart bleeds. Didn't the Titanomachy happen already?

&& Yeah, but now we're all retired, we all get together and stage a re-enactment every 500 years or so. You heard about Tambora, baby? That was us and that was a big bang, and I know what I'm talking about.

\$\$ So all the Olympians and Titans and everyone are just sort of hanging around, idly chatting up mortals these days?

&& That's about it, baby. People just don't need us any more. Yahweh and Allah are all the rage right now. We get some consulting work through Bahá'í and other newer faiths, and do some supply work for the Trimurti and friends, and the orishas, loas, kami and so on – it's amazing what you can do with prosthetics these days – but it's basically the Costa del Sol up here. Can you blame me for having a bit of fun?

\$\$ Yes. Maybe you should try being faithful to Hera for once?

&& Baby, I would, but #MeToo has reached here as well. Hera and Aphrodite have realised they've been structurally oppressed for millennia and it's all gone a bit *Lysistrata* up here. Ares is really pissed off, though that's just his default state, to be fair. The only ones not bothered are Artemis, for obvious reasons, and Hermaphroditos, for reasons I'll leave to your imagination.

\$\$ Perhaps you should apologise and promise to be less of a jerk? Why am I even having to tell you this? What am I even doing? I appear to be giving relationship counselling to an Olympian god! And stop calling me baby! We've established I have no interest in divine ravishing!

&& Your loss, baby. Looks as if I've just scored with a chick in Novosibirsk, so I'm off now. Think I'll manifest as a wolf for this one. It's a strong look. They'll come round – Zeus always wins – he's the king of the Gods! Let me know if you change your mind and want to hook up to be initiated into the EZeusinian Mysteries, know what I mean? Ciao, baby.

>> Big Olympian Bear left the conversation

What a dick. This is definitely the weirdest conversation I've ever had. This'll be one to tell the grandchildren. If I have any.

And as a final extra puzzle, we have a mystery entry! Make of this what you will - Ed.

Art, design and riddle about Lent 19

TTBA's "Spell Trek" chainstory

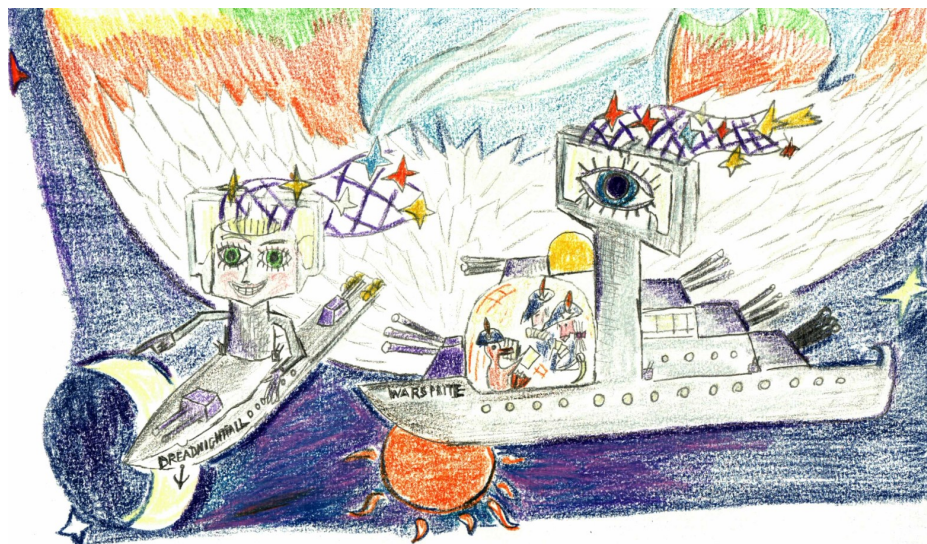
By an anonymous group of battleships in space

Some of the characters discovered in outer space in this story are intended to be a female counterpart of Dr Who's Cybermen. As played by the British Navy in space, re-imagined as Female Tops. For the British Navy give ships female pronouns, warships are rather dominant anyway, and 'warship' does sound rather like 'worship'... The first word in "Aichemess-Spacefleet" is a scarcely phonetically disguised version of the "HMS" title that such ships possess.

The three ships 'who speak as one' in the story go as far as having a speech pattern echoing the "Rise of the Cybermen" episode's "upgraded" tirades of Roger Lloyd-Pack. Who is probably more widely known here as Barty Crouch Senior. Who gets to make tirades of his own. Indeed, the way he says "Con-Clu-DED" during the wizarding trial is rather similar to how he says "Up-Gra-DED"!

In the picture, one of them is meant to have a cyberman-like head. The other has been upgraded (or is it the other way around?) There is plenty of allusion to "I spy with my little eye", which is the game that these characters are playing in the chainstory. The starry cloaking devices are similar to those that one can often find in online videos featuring the Magic Flute's Queen of the Night.

As for the riddle, which of these characters is NOT named in parody of a famous British warship? What other connection does this odd-one-out's name have to the British Navy? Which particularly celebrated actor indeed has recent association with this odd-one-out? Finally, what well-known piece of fantasy music is associated with what is probably this actor's largest and most well known fantasy role? A-Nice PA-cket-of BIS-cuits Shall-be Awar-DED for each first correct answer to each of these questions!





And that's a wrap!

There's more already on the way , so keep a close eye out for the Lent issue.

Any submissions are welcome, from your own fictions, to artworks, analyses, film reviews, or indeed anything Fantasy or Science Fiction.

Has anything you've seen inspired you or sparked a weird new idea?

Get in touch!

We'll be back soon.

Shaun and the CUSFS committee.



THE TREASURES BELOW AWAIT

TTBA Michaelmas 2019

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