



TREACHERIOUS THIEVES!  
BRAZEN ASSASSINS!



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# TREACHEROUS THIEVES! BRAZEN ASSASSINS!

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† - Ah. Older volumes *do* exist! Silly me.

‡ - These symbols are called *daggers* - get it? .

\*\*\*- By the numbering system from 1973-2004 (!) this is Volume 45, Issue 2.

# The Chairbeing's Address

Another term, another TTBA. In these uncertain times the TTBA is a constant—full of silly, strange and fantastical stories this wonderful community has created.

In this time of social distancing chainwriting is a wonderful way to stay connected to Cambridge. It is always a joy seeing how a piece of chainwriting twists and turns; being able to release an idea and see how others interpret it is so rewarding and never fails to produce an enjoyable TTBA.

Though we are scattered from Cambridge the CUSFS spirit shines through.

Stay safe,

Jacob Van Buren

**CUSFS Chairbeing 2019-20**



# A Message From The Editor

Hi again,

This issue finds us, as Arch-Overseer Toope would have it, in “unprecedented times”. Ignoring the Spanish Flu or Bubonic Plague, he may have a point. There’s never been a better time to let writing take you places you’ve never been to before - please do bear in mind that in true CUSFS style, none of the places in the cracking stories from this issue exist—*yet*.

To continue the experiment, our first chain sees me try and pull the strings for the benefit of the front cover again.

Does it work or not? You decide!

We also have a fun crossover with the Assassin’s Guild in the second half of the issue. I’ve also just spent 2 hours finding interesting fonts...

Following our CUSFS elections, you’re also stuck with me for a while longer - I’ll be steering this ship into 2021!

I hope you enjoy the read.

Stay safe and have fun wherever you can. And of course... keep writing!

Shaun Vickers

**TTBA Editor 2019-21**



# Sleight of the Banshee

Shaun Vickers, Tom Musgrove, Yuhang Xie, Anonymous, Cerian Craske, Ed Heaney,  
Mark Johnson, Dan Scott, Georgina Lithgow, Navyaa Mathur, Grace Copeland, Dylan Price

It was only the third catch of the day when the trouble came. Rita had been too eager with her leading wrist as she'd scuffed past the merchant, wrongly angled but a little bold from her gnawing stomach, and the fat man had felt the swipe. His wallet fell instead into the mud with a dull clink, and the busy marketplace erupted into an arena as every guard around the perimeter slowly stopped sneaking glances at the prostitutes or picking their noses and turned to see what the sudden fuss was about. Before the man had started bellowing "THIEF!" there had been a very short-lived quiet.

Rita was no longer there, of course. She wasn't stupid.

As the throng of panicked customers checking pockets and shouting searched the alleys around the marketplace, she was entirely out of the way, slap bang in the middle of them all. A hand slipped and she nearly swore as she adjusted her grip. Always the risky hiding places, eh?

She looked further down the inside of the well. Not a lot going on, really.

Dammit. Now there was a full quarter-hour of bored clinging until getting out when everyone had calmed down, and no one would notice her, because who spends all day staring at a well?

After a half-second of utter adrenaline and consequences that would easily end her life, whatever good it was, a quarter hour was a long time indeed.

It made sense, then, that Rita screamed blue murder when a gloved hand clamped onto her elbow.

"A nice little spot," the figure murmured nonchalantly. "But there's never any footprints left pointing towards a well, after noon, on a market day."

The figure had not actually clamped their other hand over Rita's mouth, but she stopped shrieking anyway – mostly disarmed by the fact that there was not a hand on her mouth. She may have also noticed the wicked-looking knife slung across the figure's hip.

"Promising, really. It would be poor economics to just turn you in."

The figure's economic judgement was to hide her under

their wide cloak as they hightailed to a basement across the street, and dropped her down a trapdoor next to a wine crate. Rita screamed again, before she landed on a collection of what felt like mattresses and quickly realised a collection of cheerful and understanding faces were grinning at her in dim pools of candlelight. A hooded woman flashed a million-dollar smile.

"Welcome to the capital's best band of cutpurses and contract killers." She paused and pulled her fingers back out her ears. Maybe the scream had been a little loud.

"Welcome to the team, Banshee."

\*\*\*

Elsewhere, a man sat alone in a room of dark and polished marble, wearing a faded military uniform and a perfectly neutral expression. He was not worried, and would not have even bothered to deny being worried to any inquisitive observer (if, of course, they had somehow gained access to the Sanctum); there was, he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt, no possibility that he could fail in his mission. The corridor which led to the room, in a descending and irregular path, was lined with traps and precautions on every side, from the subtle and impenetrable arcane devices from the North, to the most precise mechanisms conceived of by the Engineers of Telperro, to the odd extremely large hole in the floor full of spikes. Even finding the right corridor would have been a challenge, for the Sanctum contained at least fifty corridors of the sort, forty-nine of which went to nowhere or worse. And, of course, all of this would only become relevant if somebody were to locate the Sanctum in the first place, and to become aware of what it contained. So he was not concerned.

And yet.

The man stood up in a strange unfolding movement, darting his head around the room like a mechanical bird. Two steps took him over to the altar in the centre, where he unlocked the vault with a series of well-practiced movements, and peered inside.

The box was exactly where it always was, and had not changed since the last time he had checked, eighteen minutes ago. He withdrew it reverently, long fingers holding the plain and battered wood of the box with a gentle and careful touch. It opened to his hand with a faint creaking noise, and there it was, inside, safe safe safe.

The long-fingered man, who went by the name of Vellac tua -Rhosmio, gazed down at the aged and folded piece of paper which was the sole contents of the box. With a smile that seemed as though he had not practiced it enough, he read the fifteen words written in curling ink across it. Then he replaced the paper, replaced the box in the vault, closed and locked the whole thing, and returned to where he had been sitting.

He was not worried. He was not worried.

\*\*\*

Rita looked at the people crowded around her in the basement that smelled too much like sour wine and poor hygiene. They were mostly children off the streets, dressed in rags and dirt. A few adults with various weaponry stood about one corner, but they looked more amused than menacing.

"Who are you? What do you want from me?" she said. This was the first time she had been kidnapped and it was not what she expected.

The hooded woman took off her hood to reveal lush blond hair that seemed almost blinding in the candlelight.

"You can call me Smiley." She flashed her perfect teeth. "You complete the team, Banshee, we are in need of your skills."

Rita was lost for words. She liked to think that she was an above-average thief, having not been brought to the law so far in her life, but they kidnapped her for her skills? Her confusion must have been plain on her face.

"Have you ever heard of the Sanctum, Banshee?" Smiley said. She moved towards the back of the room where a large object was covered with black cloth. All the eyes in the room followed her.

"I... don't think so," Rita said.

"It's a magical place with magical treasures." She pulled the cloth away to reveal an ornate mirror. But Rita did not stare at her reflection. No, it was a stone room with many corridors leading off into darkness.

She felt a chill go down her spine.

"You... want me to steal something?" Rita asked gingerly. "From this ... Sanctum?"

"We are in need of your skills," repeated Smiley. "Look around you, you are in the company of many thieves. If we needed to just steal something, any one of them could do it." As the tall figure gestured an arm towards the attentive crowd, a young girl stepped forwards and held out her hand towards Rita.

"For you," she said. "Welcome, Banshee." Rita reached out and took the necklace: spherical golden beads with a wooden pendant.

"Thanks," she held the necklace and looked at the girl, who smiled back at her. "My name's R-"

"I must ask you to stop," Smiley cut her off. "Your name from beyond these walls is not needed here. To know it would place a great debt on all of us. You are Banshee." Rita nodded; she was starting to wish she hadn't screamed so much. She was also starting to wish she was still in the well.

"You are the last member of our team," Rita glanced round the room, it was dimly lit but glints of golden necklaces caught her eye. "The Sanctum is a magical place, a dark, magical place. For thousands of years it has been out of reach. Until now." Smiley turned back to the mirror and gazed, silently. Moments passed before Rita spoke up.

"And you need me?" she asked. "For what?"

A short, hooded figure emerged abruptly from the crowd.

"There is no time!" He exclaimed. "My dear, call me Weave. I asked Blade to find me the best that he could, and if you're here then that means you are so. You have questions I'm sure, but now we must make haste." He gestured and five figures stepped forwards from the crowd, each of their necklaces sparkling. Smiley turned back towards them. "I have waited - far too long." He murmured solemnly. Rita thought she could see a tear welling in the corner of one eye.

To Rita's surprise he brandished a large staff from under his cloak – noticeably larger than him – and pointed towards the mirror.

He evidently noticed the confusion on her face, and smiled.

"You may have questions, Banshee. You will always have questions. There may be people in this room who can answer them, but we have no intention of doing so until it is necessary. For now, you must only follow us. I am sure that if we were to reveal to the authorities the circumstances in which you were found, it would not go well for you – surely,



strange as we must seem to you, we are better than what faces you in the outside world?"

He was right, Rita knew. She had nothing going for her except the abilities which had led her to this place, and had no way of progressing further. Why not hedge her bets on this group of misfits and see where it took her?

Rita nodded, and the small man smiled, and waved the staff.

The mirror flickered, and Rita blinked, certain that it had been a trick of her tired eyes. It flickered again, then the air around it shuddered and popped. Unfamiliar as Rita's surroundings were, she was able to tell when they were no longer what was being shown in the mirror. Once more, Smiley grinned at her, and then grabbed her hand and pulled her through the glass.

The transition itself was strangely pleasant, as if she had been fully immersed in warm water without getting wet and without losing her breath; the brief embrace of the warmth made the sensations of the other side hit her all the harder. It was bitterly cold, and her skin told her it was humid too, but she could see no trace of her breath in the air, nor droplets of water or crystals of ice on her arms. Turning to her abductor, Rita realised with a moment's flash of surprise – followed immediately by a brief moment of shame at the shock, at her realisation that nothing could have been more likely – that that she had been followed through by the five other hooded figures who had stepped forward and, behind them, Weave, a kindly, fatherly smile visible beneath his hood and his arms spread as if he had herded the others through. There was also another mirror-that-was-not-a-mirror behind her, showing the basement she had just left, albeit empty of people, though she knew it to have been crowded at the moment she left.

Nudging his way to the front of the group, Weave pulled back his hood. He was older than Rita might have suspected at first glance – old enough that she could have believed his staff was a walking aid rather than a magical aid – and his head was hairless; what little was left naturally around the edges had been shaven off.

"These Halls," he said to her, and Rita could hear the capital letter with which he started the name, "are a dangerous and demanding place. This time, you are here on my personal credit. Don't abuse it. Later you will have to offer tributes of your own. Now," and there was a peremptory note to his voice that signalled a change of subject, careless of the host of questions his brief comment had raised, "let's meet your brothers and sisters in this endeavour."

Rita looked at each of the others, still hooded, who had come through. Smiley and Weave she had seen; the other five remained a mystery.

"Smiley," continued Weave, "will not be joining us; her talents are better used elsewhere."

Nonetheless, she made no move to leave the group, nor to step back towards the mirror.

"Banshee," said Weave to Rita, "I'll introduce you last; maybe by then you'll be able to guess why you, in particular, are here. But now, to meet your new family..."

The first of the five threw back their hood, running a hand over the smooth, dark skin beneath. In a rich Tenor, they greeted Rita, "You can call me Oracle; everyone else does. These folk will agree it's no boast to say I can best any trap, riddle or maze you could find me. Although, I've never before beaten a Sanctum; this should be entertaining."

Dragging a threadbare hood back over tight cornrows, the second figure nodded to Rita. "I'm Gecko. I move up in the world. And along it, and around it, and through it. You get it. I go places." Rita thought the youth looked restless, and his gaze never stopped flicking up and down the passageway.

Weave gestured to the next figure, the young girl who had given Rita her necklace, "This is Whistle. There isn't a lock in this city that isn't afraid of her." Whistle grinned again, and made a mock bow, her teenage gangliness imbuing the motion with a series of hard angles and sharp corners.

There was a pause, and Rita stared expectantly at the fourth figure. After a moment, Whistle gestured, and the figure nervously withdrew her hood to reveal a face as soft as Whistle's was hard. Bright young eyes locked onto Rita's, but instead of talking the girl made a series of delicate gestures with her fingers.

"This is Magpie," Whistle translated. Magpie signed again, and Whistle smirked, "You'd be amazed what she can do with her hands. Magpie says you're not wearing the necklace she made you. You should put it on. It'd be a shame if your insides became your outsides all unexpected like."

"And they call me The Emissary," growled the final figure, not bothering to remove his hood. "Best hope you never have to find out what I can do." And with that he turned away and started stalking down the passage.

"So, Banshee, do you know why you're here yet?" Weave asked.

"Uhhh..." Rita hadn't the faintest idea. "So I get that you do traps and mazes," she said, turning to Oracle.

"And riddles!" Oracle interjected. Rita again noted the smoothness of his voice.

"Right... And riddles." Rita continued onto Whistle, "And you do locks."

Whistle did a sort of hop-skip and said proudly, "A-yep."

Rita decided she liked Whistle. Her awkwardness was surprisingly endearing. As for Gecko... "You... Go places?" It came out as more of a question than a statement.

Gecko just raised his eyebrows and the corner of his mouth twitched. After a few seconds of awkward eye contact, Gecko rolled his eyes and nodded curtly. Rita took that as confirmation that she wouldn't get more details of what exactly was meant by "go places." She also decided Gecko was her least favourite.

"Okayyy... Emissary d-" Rita began, but she was cut off.

"The Emissary," the dark figure growled from down the passage.

"My bad, The Emissary does who knows what. And Magpie, I really have no idea what you do but I do like my insides to stay on the inside so, uh, thanks for that I guess? Not sure what you do either, Weave. And Smiley has talents, but they're better suited somewhere else." Rita thought for a moment before continuing. "And this place is a Sanctum, capital S, but apparently a Sanctum and not the Sanctum based on what Oracle said, so there's got to be more than one." Rita was almost rambling at this point, letting her thoughts spill out without filtering them. "And I guess there's some sort of challenge or task or theft or thing to accomplish here? That maybe involves locks? Going places? Traps? Mazes?"

"Riddles too, don't forget them." Oracle sure must love his riddles...

"Yes, yes, riddles too. And some nastiness that Magpie and this necklace pendant thinger helps with. And some mysterious foreboding something which can only be handled by Mr. Dark and Grizzly down the hall." Rita was hoping that her word vomit would give her time to figure out her place in this whole mess, but... "Frankly I have no idea how I fit into any of this. Nor really what this even is."

"Well," Weave said, "that's at least a start. Allow me to clarify a few points. Yes, this is a Sanctum and not the Sanctum. There are four in the world at any given time, but when one is beaten, it's done. That Sanctum is relocated. Finding them is a dreadfully tedious task and is perhaps more an art than anything else. The rules are somewhat complicated, but a Sanctum, once located, can only be solved by a crew from within its regional territory."

Rita made to interrupt, but Weave held up a hand. "Please, don't interrupt. There's little time and some of this will just have to be accepted at face value. Now, fortunately, the one who locates the Sanctum can be from outside of that territory, but they cannot play a further role in conquering the Sanctum beyond locating it and forming a team. This

means I will largely be on the side lines once this whole thing gets going. Now as for you Banshee, I thought your place was rather obvious. You're our pickpocket, and you're here because you're the best suited for it."

Rita laughed. Mostly because she still wasn't quite sure what was going on, but also because of the rather absurd notion that she was the best suited pickpocket. Sure, she was good, but the best? "Weave, are you sure you've got this right? I mean, you did pull me in here after I had just failed to pick some merchant's pocket. I would hardly say I'm the best there is..." Rita trailed off as Weave just smiled and shook his head.

"That merchant was the colleague I had mentioned earlier, Blade. Blade's been helping me with talent-seeking. It was no accident that you failed to swipe his wallet. In fact, none of your 'failures' in the last year or so have been accidents. We needed to see not just how well you can steal, but also how well you can blend in under watchful eyes. We've had our eye on you for quite some time, and believe me, you are the best pickpocket within a hundred leagues. Lucky for us, too. You're almost from beyond this Sanctum's regional territory. Now, as for what we need from you..." Weave paused here for breath. "Please don't ask how I've gotten any of the following information; those are my secrets alone. And please do not interrupt."

Somehow Weave must have known that Rita was just about ready to interject. He seemed to become growlingly impatient and his speech continuously quickened.

"Precisely what lies ahead in this Sanctum, I do not know. Your team will get you past everything one way or another and into a room. In this room, there will be a box. In the box, a slip of paper. On the paper, a very, very important set of words. Now this box cannot be picked, it cannot be broken, it cannot be cracked without destroying the paper within. In this room, there is also a man in a chair. This man can and periodically does open the box, but he cannot be pressured or forced or bribed to open it, and he will not open it if someone else is in the room. Banshee..." Weave took a deep breath, calming himself and slowing his speech. "We will get you into this room undetected, there is a way into the room from every side and we will get you in from the side behind the chair. It is your job to somehow shadow this man from his chair to the box – without him seeing, hearing, or so much as smelling you. You shadow him, wait for him to open the box, you read and memorize what is on the paper, and you get back out."

Rita closed her eyes and shook her head, trying to keep it all straight. "Why can't I just take the paper and run for it?" she asked.

This time it was Smiley who responded. "Because you'll be





dead, simple as that,” she said, grimly. “If he realizes you’re in the room at any point in time, your chances of escape are... Well, they’re not actually chances.”

Weave nodded and turned back to Rita. “Now that we’re in the Sanctum, you can’t back out. Sorry, but you don’t have a choice. I couldn’t afford to give you one. All I need to know is that you understand the task required of you, and we can get on with it.”

Rita stood there, looking around at the gathered motley crew and thinking upon the vague, yet fairly terrifying, instructions she’d been given. “I suppose I’ll have to, won’t I?” she said.

Weave smiled, but it was grim around the edges. “That’s right.”

“On the bright side,” Smiley said, “you are the final member of the team and so there won’t be any waiting around anticipating your possible fate. You’re going to get going right away.”

“Great,” Rita said, without feeling. She felt a small hand slip into her own, and, glancing to her left, saw Magpie smiling encouragingly up at her and felt somewhat comforted.

“We’ll see you back here,” said Weave. “Hopefully.”

“Good luck,” said Smiley. “You’re going to need it.”

Gecko, who had been brooding in the corner, stepped forward. “That’s my cue. Let’s go.” He joined hands with the two team members closest to him, who continued to link hands until the entire group was standing in a circle.

“Hold on tight,” said Whistle, from Rita’s other side.

There was no other warning. One moment they were there, the next a rushing sound began in Rita’s ears, and Weave and Smiley began to disappear from view. The sound grew steadily louder, and Rita felt more and more disoriented. She wasn’t moving, per se, more stretching, body, place and time warping and twisting until their circle was suddenly somewhere else.

The roar in her ears died down. Her surroundings rippled, once, twice, then settled into stone walls and a long corridor.

They were in the heart of the Sanctum. Their task had begun.

Gecko ceded position at the front of the group to Whistle, who busied herself feeling the walls on each side of them. ‘What-’, Rita began to ask in a murmur, before she was shushed by Magpie squeezing her hand and putting a finger to her lips. After a few minutes of this, Whistle made a small sound of satisfaction. ‘Magpie? It’s a number thirty-one.’ Magpie let go of Rita’s hand to remove five small metal

cubes, which she quickly slotted together after a brief examination. Whistle held this contraption to the stone panel in front of her and made small twisting motions with her free hand, at which the stone panel soundlessly moved upwards. The group stepped forward through it, only to be confronted by a huge pit full of spikes. At this, Gecko merely rolled his eyes, and soon the group were on the other side; Rita got over her shock at the cold faster this time.

Oracle moved to the front of the group and led them forward so slowly that Rita felt her hips twinge from the shuffling, but she was grateful for it when the sudden appearance of a seemingly empty wooden frame spanning the whole corridor stopped him short. For looking closer, she could see that the frame was filled with tiny, swirling glints, which no doubt were a trap of some sort. Oracle produced a wooden rod from beneath his cloak and extended it towards the frame; as it moved through, the glints converged on it, eating away at the wood and then flying back to fill the frame when the rod was sawdust on the floor. Rita glanced towards Gecko, who shrugged: clearly the frame could not be defeated by simply moving past it using his abilities.

Oracle was deep in thought. Finally, he smiled, and produced more wooden sticks of varying lengths from beneath his cloak (Rita decided not to bother wondering how they fit). He rapidly assembled them into a frame, which he carefully placed in the middle of the glints. The glints converged on the frame, leaving a clear space in the middle, and the group hurried through; not a moment too soon, for the frame fell to pieces as soon as Whistle was through.

A corner of yellow fabric from Whistle’s coat, which had carelessly trailed behind her as she had vanished into a further window of delirium, crumbled into a cloud of soft saffron and came to rest beneath the mouth of the frame. Rita watched in vacant fixation, still unalert to her having failed to move. It took a handful of slow seconds for her to shock herself into action. Time trickled languidly over her quickly heating skin, prickling with the absurdity of what was unfurling. Perhaps it was this very absurdity, or even just the tepid ache in her hips from the shuffling, which created an almost magisterial magnetism between her feet and the ground; one which she knew she would have to overcome – and quickly.

Rita’s brain couldn’t keep up with her eyes. Her legs were still at the mercy of gravity, but her fingertips sent staccato rhythms up her arms in rigid waves, which broke in tortured shudders across her shoulders. She tried to remind herself that she had always worked alone - for herself and by herself – and that this was how she worked best. However,

almost to her disgust, she found herself hoping that the hopeless hammering of her heart would somehow summon a line of guidance from Oracle, or even a threatening glare from the Emissary. But none came, and it had been around ten seconds now, so she closed her eyes.

She had already scanned the surroundings for any other means of escape; a telling crack in the stone walls, a weakness in the spine of the ground, a tactlessly placed button which might turn off the savage glints which winked at her tauntingly from the frame – but she had found no fault. She couldn't help but wonder at the genius of it.

She knew then that it was going to take a work of genius to get out.

Rita thought of her mother, then – an ethereal, birdlike creature, with hands as careful as an artist's, a mind as clear and as fragile as the surface of an untouched pond in the stillness of summer. It was as if she was made of glass. Rita saw the violent purple of her veins, the sinews in their writhing dance twisting up and down her porcelain arms like tree roots. She wondered if she would make it without the catch today. She decided it probably wasn't helpful to think about it. Instead, she let her eyes fall shut, and painted a warm memory on the inside of her eyelids. A rheumy portrait appeared: mother in her orange silk shirt; a stack of bones piled up clumsily in her dusty armchair. Chaotically beautiful, though decaying. Suddenly, a pink dawn rose in her sallow cheeks, and her lips parted to speak that familiar advice she had raised Rita on:

“A work of genius starts more often than not as a work of utter madness”.

And so, Rita did something utterly mad.

An oceanic surge of energy swelled in Rita's every muscle and propelled her into the mouth of the frame in a moment of electric white hush. Her eyes were still shut, and mother was still there, diaphanous and smiling in her armchair. A cold static started to gnaw at her skin. It was almost pleasant, like ice pressed to the back of the neck on a balmy day. It didn't hurt. Rita began to wonder if she was dying, or had died. Thinking she had better check, she opened her eyes, slowly, as if she didn't want anyone to see that she had done so.

Her skin was shattering like thin glass.

The fragments glowed, floating off among the glints, getting lost in an effervescent sea. Rita got the sensation that she was part of the night sky; every part of her burning with the science of celestial mystery. Everything was urgently silent in the few small seconds it took for Rita's vision to fizz away, and then she was falling.

She smothered a scream.

It felt like a new day when she landed. She hadn't really landed at all, so much as flickered into this new space, like a reluctant candle flame. Mother wasn't there behind her eyes any more. Instead, a heavy darkness seeped through the blank canvas, darkening it like a bloodstain. Once her eyes were open and adjusted, she found herself flat on her stomach, nose against a floor of dark, polished marble. In front of her was a chair, and the weight of evil which sat there was tangible.

She followed the collection of bone and flesh up its chair, from its long fingers to the mess of muddy-brown hair on top of the skull. The pickpocket's instinct was to work out what was hidden from view, which part of this grotesque, horrifying figure could not be seen from behind the chair.

Tap.

The creature tapped its finger against the arm of the ornate wooden chair, its echo reverberating around the chamber. Rita noticed a military helmet of some kind, placed with apparent care at the base of the chair. She couldn't place it, but it looked old – very old.

Tap.

She glanced around the room. Runes covered the walls, in a language that Rita couldn't identify. Hanging from the ceiling were coarse, brown vines, hiding the rear of the chamber from sight. Behind the figure lay a large, stone altar, with some sort of vault on top. She supposed this was what she had been instructed to find. But when would this creature open it?

Tap.

Without warning, the skeleton stood up and strode over to the vault. Caught unawares, Rita sprung into life, creeping forwards with an elegant speed, as only a pickpocket could. Prising the vault open, the man—she could see now that he was a man—took out a small wooden box, resembling a trinket at the market. Excitedly, Rita nudged closer still, until she was but a hair's breadth away from her target's shoulder. He opened the box. Quietly, ever so quietly, she murmured its contents.

Suddenly, it all made sense. And then Rita—for the first time she could recall—made a mistake. She let out a little gasp.

Suddenly, a beam of light erupted from the box with a loud bang, its rays showering the once-dark chamber with hues of red, green and yellow. Alerted to her intrusion, the skeleton spun around, beginning to walk towards her at inhuman speed. The box let out an even larger bang, bursting into flames over six feet high that chased her



across the room. The man cast his hand out as if in a stranglehold, his demonic red eye sockets delivering a piercing gaze. He couldn't let her leave. The flames now surrounded her, and she heard a horrific scream echo across the chamber. Recognising it as her own, this suddenly knew the unavoidable truth—she would not make it out. With a furious swing, the man snatched the beaded necklace from Rita's body. At this, she fell to the floor and looked down at her body being turned—quite literally—inside out. Magpie had not been exaggerating then, simply providing a literal description of a horror that was worse than anything Rita could have imagined. Rita's last thoughts as the pain subsumed her were of her mother, as she felt her head fall to the floor with a sickly crack.

She groggily opened her eyes. Sunlight. An enormous grin. Had she made it out? But how?

'Gecko retrieved you,' informed Smiley.

She felt a hand on her stomach. Emissary was there, returning her body back to normal. Hiding beyond the doorway were the other members of the crew. Weave hobbled into the room.

'Are you ok?' he asked, half-heartedly. 'Now,' Weave continued, without having waited for an answer. 'What did the paper say?'

The crowd held their breaths. And, at this point, Rita realised with absolute clarity that she could not tell them. They were not anxious about her at all. They didn't care. They simply cared about themselves, and the terrible power Rita knew those words would bring them.

'I didn't see,' lied Rita. 'He got me before I could read the words.'

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### BONUS CONTENT: Sleight of the Banshee

**"I really like this chain! It's coherent, it's entertaining, it has \*aesthetic\*.  
I wish I had a good title, but alas I can't think of anything..."**

*Mark Johnson*

**"Me neither! My bad title will have to do."**

*The Editor*

# ELLADAN AND ELROHIR'S NEW AND BARGAIN BUY

Anonymous, Sarah Nolan, Evie Burrows, Harley Jones, Anonymous, Hannah Clark

"JAYARRARR! Can't you Hear me?" she added, louder.

"what is it, Tinuvikins?" he replied, opening his study door.

"Our Bitching-Elrond is all broken down again, and has started to swear..."

"hum, strong does not... dither?" he mused. "i mean, is it all that bad?" he hoped.

"... only the King of Gonads may 'wield' this 'sword'..." a manic voice rang out.

"just a blip? ... reforged shall be trowel that was dinted?" he suggested, half-heartedly.

"No, definitely broken" she snapped. "I'd told you..."

"... son of Groin, by any frill that we here undress..." unhelpfully profanterjected the mechanical voice.

"i wish it need not have happened in my time..." he said, deflating.

"This time you Will go back to the Emporium and get Us a Replacement..." she demanded.

"not reached by the frost?" he resigned himself. And dared to hope of where he might take a detour...

"And if you go Anywhere near Tombom's Drinkingholeadillo, I will Hear of it, oh Yes I Will..." she lambast-added.

"...tongue of Mordor here in Quimladris!..." rantinued the broken Bitching-Elrond, as he balanced it in elbow's crook, by now quite crestfallen. He opened the still-traditional rotund door and stepped out onto the hillside.

"the Wife goes ever on and on..." he began to hum as he approached the now-largely-industrially-despoiled centre of Little Bobbitton where Elladan-&-Elrohir's Shiny-New-&-Bargain-Buy Bitching-Elrond-Emporium was located. "Stand by the grey stone, where the plush knockers..." re-re-ranted the broken Bitching-Elrond, now trapped in a tight loop of scurrilousflagrantlehrersexeplicitandprecocious smut. He resolved to leave it outside. Outside the Drinkingholeadillo, that is. Right under the inn's sign, depicting the Patron's great love: the slender-as-a-willow-wand, golden-haired... Glorfindel, resplendent in a previous-century faux-mithril corset.

"i did agree to sign the 'dillo's actors' guild

disenfrachisement petition" is what he told himself. For all that a little voice at the back of his head kept on saying "We don't wants the nasty, smoggy industwial-mechanical-elf-substitute pwemises, we wants the shiny-wunic-cocktail-umbwellases..."

Meanwhile, in an alternative universe where everything made a lot more sense, Ben continued on his stroll into the heart of Little Bobbitton with the profaning Elrond under his arm. The creaking iconoclast to elfin debauchery that was the image of Glorfindel beckoned him towards the inn. Ben averted his eyes. One did not lightly disobey the demands of Tinuvikins, least of all he who must live with her.

"The golden ale, is nice and pale, so juicy sweet..." sang the little voice.

Ben muttered the obligatory command: "Leave now and never come back."

The little voice vanished.

Ben sighed. It always came back.

He clamped a hand over the mouth of the Elrond and strode determinedly past the inn.

Elladan-&-Elrohir's Shiny-New-&-Bargain-Buy was identical to every other new-built in downtown Bobbitton. A mockery of Gothgorian architecture, the wargmen hired for the job had barely managed three turrets before caving into the oh-so-modern cop-out of pretending that the nearby trees were meant to be walls all along.

Ben ascended the winding stairway with a sinking heart. Rows upon rows of Elronds, Wizards and glass Prophecies loomed before him, bright stickers in exciting shapes loudly declaiming their value for money. There was enough stock here to cover every Chosen One narrative from Bobbitton to Hogwash. Who knew what tragedy would befall the next poor town to be included in their advertising campaigns?

Customer services was a shabby corner of the Emporium clearly designed to remain hidden from any disgruntled customers with an actual complaint. Ben, however, was experienced. He waved away the veil of illusions with one hand, marched up and plonked the Elrond on the desk with a thump.

'It's beyond repair this time,' Ben muttered, looking over the



desk in search of the salesperson.

'... and the krahjsa...kv...' the Elrond squeaked, speaking slower and slower as the sounds lost all meaning. Ben hit it on the head in hope that that would shut it up, but it carried on quietly uttering random sequences of incoherent sounds.

'... Hello?' Ben asked louder, seeing nobody behind the counter. 'Anyone there?'

After a few minutes, he could bear the mutterings of the Elrond no longer, and climbed over the desk. Behind it, he found a door which opened with some difficulty.

'Hello?' he called again into the darkness. 'I've got a warranty for this thing, and you're legally obliged to give me a new Elrond... Not that I really want one,' he muttered to himself.

He looked around for a light switch, but the walls felt damp and cold and organic, and he soon gave up. He stood for a second weighing his options. He could either make his way through this strange, unpleasant and potentially dangerous place, or he could go back to Tinuvikins without an Elrond.

Angering Tinuvikins was definitely the scarier option. With a sigh, he turned into the dark corridor and heard the Bitching-Elrond's speech functions grind to a halt as the door swung shut behind him.

Keeping one hand on the barken walls to his left, he made his slow way along the dank passageway and after a little while the darkness began to be alleviated. As the path turned he saw that the light was coming from a small window in a light wooden door at the end of the corridor – it was a professional-looking door, quite out of place in the natural wooden passageway, and the window was a frosted glass rectangle. On the door was a plaque which said 'Elladan's office'.

Ben started in alarm – he hadn't expected a talking plaque.

"um, thank you?"

"Do you have an appointment?" asked the plaque. It spoke in a reassuringly cool, feminine tone of voice.

"um, no – but I do have a complaint," Ben replied, wondering where Elladan had got the plaque-secretary from – it seemed to be a much higher-quality product than anything he sold.

"Elladan is in a meeting right now – please come back..."

began the plaque; but Ben was used to this sort of off-fobbing – after all, he'd been to this shop before – and pushed open the door, striding through into the office –

...which bore a remarkable similarity in appearance to the interior of Tombom's Drinkingholeadillo.

Ignoring the protestations of the plaque, Ben attempted to ignore the protestations of the little voice in the back of his head. 'The drinking hole, is nice and cold, so juicy sweet...' it sang, and it was almost too much for him to bear. Why not, after all? This was – in theory – Elladan's office, so surely he should ask around for him – and it would be rude not to buy a drink while doing so...

No! "Leave now! And NEVER come back!" Ben shouted to himself.

"I beg your pardon," came a voice to his left. "Leave? This is my office."

"... I would recommend our new-fangled, semi aquatic-mammal of action I\*I model, freshly imported from Valhallinor..." said Elladan, gradually coming into full view, all a-pointing at a Curious-Artifact- Person(?!?) next to the Mark-2 Ginnyhowler Plaque-retary.

"Sent to wander through Merryador, the Misty Mountains and occasionally even Harad-dur itself" pitched in Elrohir, following close behind and 'spreading the butter thick'.

"But how can he wander with such a posterior end?" asked our astute Customer.

"Sometimes by river." admitted Elladan

"Contrariwise (do him some credit) he can also mud-rake or even travel by road, thanks to his complementary assistant staff..."doubleactbetwixtandbetweenterjected Elrohir.

"Let's briefly activate the voice field to see if you like him" they concluded, now in stereo.

"... a bunch of bearded old potheads, high as eagles, calling themselves wizards, fighting over some unshaven-legged debutant's `precious..." managed the broken Bitching Elrond in a high-pitched ericidlesome whine, before being cut off forever by a Sathom P'son model's "you mean over some dude's [open-air-quote-finger-waving-pause] 'praugh-specks'..." put-down.

"We cahn fahst-fahward thro' the cohsets ahnd the bitching, ahnd Cahlin Farth is ehn it, if you guys wanna join..." wisecrackdrawltorted a Ronicamars-marshmallow-chillin-like-a-villain-arillion model, freshly returned from Hell for taking the place over and running it better than The Devil could, in a candid outburst of how this narrative boils down to a Period Drama in exactly the same conception as Pride and Prejudice does.

But then the alluded-to new model spoke: "Hi, my name is Fraingorndolphin, but you may call me Fangorn, Fingon, Fingolphin, Gandolph, Gondolin (or Gondol for short), or (varying on the exact fricative) Thingol, Thror, Thrain or Thrandol..."

"What a linguisticallicelestine ninetallyportmanteau!" exclaimed the charmed Customer-Wordsmith.

"Though I would somewhat favour Thranduil to keep things more phonetically distinct, and Gondol and Gondolin could both be used with a bit of reworking..."

"Fingon son of Fingolfin; Thrain son of Thrór..." chirped back Fraingorndolphin.

"Fangorn Forest, home of Thranduil, where Mithrandir confronted the Beast of Caerbalrog, a Creature of Ears and Fur..." he replied, quite sold on this model. "I will definitely take this one!"

"He is a slight upgrade..." pointed out Elladen.

"But we'll let you off if you buy us a first round!" interposed Elrohir, pointing deeper into the Drinkingholeadillo with his other arm.

"Yes a drink or two, one for me and one for you, sweet as gold and lover's hold, alcohol is for the soul." That blasted voice sung, and oh when was the last time he'd had a chance to knock back a pint or ten.

Then he remembered the last time his Tinuvikins had found him passed out on the bar. And that was terror enough for him to hiss "leave now and never come back" under his breath.

"What was that?" Elladen, or was it Elrohir, Ben still wasn't quite sure which one was which.

The two fae were both the size of small children with the same pot bellies and big hands that his wife always said made them look like they'd stuck them into a hornet's nest. Still their Emporium was the best for miles, and no idiot went questing without one of their Bitching-Elronds.

"Huh, oh nothing." Backing up a step he half turned to the office door, "I just remembered, the wife's expecting me at home."

"Ale sweet and ale spice, ale down your throat is nice. Ale sharp and ale cool, ale is the quester's fuel." The voice was back, quiet at first but growing in confidence. "Drink it fast or drink it slow, ale makes your belly glow. It takes the pain and takes the hurt, ale takes the barmaid's skirt." His mouth went dry, and even just the thought of sweet sweet alcohol made him lick his lips, he was sure the fae were talking to him but the voice's singing was all-encompassing. "To the tavern we will go, your wifey need not ever know, just drink one and it'll be fine, just the one so we can shine."

"Hey, sir!" Elrohir, or maybe Elladen, jumped to wave a hand in his face. "I said we'll just have the one. You look like you need a drink."

"To the tavern we will go, your wifey need not ever know,

just drink one and it'll be fine, just one so we can shine." The voice was low and sweet like a lullaby in his ear.

"Just one." Ben echoed.

"Thatta boy! You and your Bitching-Elrond owe us a round." Probably Elladen clapped the blade into his hands, with a little difficulty considering he hardly reached past Ben's elbows.

It was a good choice if he did say so himself, well-spoken even if they'd de-activated the enchantment on it for now. Unlikely to swear and throw profanities at his wife. Good weight, with inlaid green and blue jewels binding the enchantments together. The little metal naiad wrapped around the hilt of a dangerous beauty comparable to his Tinuvikins. Ben could only imagine the sorts of spells and power in the blade. Definitely good enough for his wife to quest with. Would've been perfect for his own questing, but not anymore.

"Questing is for wrecking but drinking is for winning. Drink and drink and drink we go lalalalala" The voice continued to sing.

"Plaquee, we're going out for a pint!" That was definitely Elladen shouting to the office door.

"Sir sir you have a meeting this evening! Sir come back! Sir! Sir, your appointments! We talked about this Sir! You promised!"

No one paid the plaque much attention as they moved deeper into the tavern. Quite how they'd convinced Tombom to let them build in a secret entrance just for the Emporium, Ben would never know.

Ah just the smell of it. The sweat, the piss, the alcohol. Even this early in the day it was packed with questers, drinking and laughing, a few fighting over lost bets.

"What we drinking?" Ben just about waited for their response before making a beeline for the bar. Oh sweet, sweet alcohol.

"Sing a song of whiskey and a tankard full of ale. Four and twenty ciders washed down with quail. When the barrels' opened and drinkers start to sing, what a joy it is to be quaffing mead with the king!"

"Two tankards of mead and a beer please." Watching the barmaid pour the drinks Ben thought he might just sing along.

The moment he'd been given the beer he chugged it down like there was no tomorrow. "And another!"

Normal fayre for the Drinkingholeadillo. The barmaid didn't even bat an eye, and topped up the tankard. "Sixpence sir."



Ben fished out a handful of coins, didn't even bother counting it, and threw it on the table.

"Whatever's left bring over in beer to that table."

With three tankards in hand he headed back to where the Elladen and Elrohir were waiting. Dropping the mead in front of them, he threw himself down on the bench and knocked back the second beer.

"Now there's a man who knows how to drink!" Probably Elladen cheered.

When the barmaid brought over another 3 mugs of beer, the fae's eyes grew wide. "Maybe a bit too much."

"And however much ale that will get me." Another handful of coins in her hands.

Three more beers knocked back one after another.

"Half a barrel of honey and ale, eighteen tankards of beer too. Wash it down with buckets of mead and plop goes the quester!" The voice sang, over and over in his ears as he downed drink after drink.

"El, you know how I said he looked familiar?"

"Yeah?" Ben was only half listening to their conversation, there was beer dribbling down his chin and froth up his nose but all worth it for the buzzing warm glow in his belly.

"Take away the plaid shirt and the glasses, add a cloak and beard."

"Glorfindel's hips! Can't be, they say he died. Drank himself into an early grave."

"He ain't got no brothers or kids." Another shifty look in his direction which Ben was only dimly aware of. "Didn't they say he had a wife?"

"He's right there, why don't you ask?" A short pause then, "Ok fine I will then, say, you never gave us a name?"

And oh, they were talking about him. The barmaid had come over with more ale, and Ben was busy downing those and all. But he at least offered them a fraction of his attention, looking at both fae across the table nursing their tankards and looking incredibly small.

"Ben," he said between great gulps that spilled ale down his front.

"Half a barrel of honey and ale, eighteen tankards of beer too. Wash it down with buckets of mead and plop goes the quester!"

"Of any relation to Bendington the Bladebreaker?"

Now there was a name he hadn't heard in a while.

"Mebbe," was his non-committal response.

"The Monjay Bendington. Never in all my years of retail-" Whatever else probably-Elladen was going to say was quickly cut off by the sort of shrill scream that could castrate a man at short range.

"JAYARRARR!"

But the promise of alcohol. More alcohol. ALL OF THE ALCOHOL! Ben couldn't drag his face out of the tankard, drink it all quick. Quick before she comes and takes it all away.

"Half a barrel of honey and ale, eighteen tankards of beer too. Wash it down with buckets of mead and plop goes the quester!"

Then the tankard was ripped from his hands, forceful enough to near break his nose. And oh boy there was his Tinuivikins, looming over him like a guillotine.

"Tinuivikins" he was going for sweet and charming, but the alcohol was slurring his words just a little bit.

"What the BLOODY HELL is all this?!" She shrieked, and if anyone wasn't paying attention to the building fight then they were now.

"It's uh, it's not what it looks like." That was a lot of empty tankards, a lot a lot, or maybe it was the double vision. Hard to tell.

"I gave you one job. ONE! Go and replace the Bitching-Elrond without getting piss drunk! And YET YOU FAIL IN THAT ONE SIMPLE TASK!" Damn her voice was loud, could deafen a herd of elephantingsms with a voice like that.

"I got the, the uh Bitch-rod." His tongue chose that exact moment to pass out, and oh boy he was going to die.

Presenting his murderous wife with a weapon was definitely not his sanest plan. But then she was strong enough to break him over her knee as easy as snapping kindling even on his best days, so not presenting it, that would, that would definitely...be a bad thing.

"I CANNOT BELIEVE YOU!" She slapped the sword from his hand with enough force to break bones. If he hadn't been so numb he might have felt it.

"Tinuivikins, I didn't mean to. I couldn't, I just, stumbled, I, I promise, I won't-" The words wouldn't come out right, nothing came out right.

Now the stupid voice had gone silent. Of course it bloody had!

"No, I'm done!" She turned away putting her hands up on her head, curling willow-thin fingers into her golden hair. "I'm done with this, with you!"

Standing was hard, Ben hadn't been this drunk in a long,

long time. Or had he? Memories were kinda hard right now. Everything was kinda hard right now.

"Tinuvikins, don't. I, I can get better. I'll get better."

"Stop calling me that." She hissed it, low and spiteful as she turned to face him again.

He hadn't seen her wearing the mithril corset (faux-mithril technically) in years. She looked younger too, a lot younger than she was. As young as the day he first saw her, skin pale as moonlight before the scars of questing carved it into beautiful runes. Her face smooth as opal, without the lines he put there.

"Tin-" Her face twisted into a snarl and he was quick to correct himself, "Glorfindel, please. I'm going to get better. Give me another chance. Please." He was crying now, that made the blurred vision so much worse that he could barely even see his wife.

"Leave now." She told him, her voice shaking and though everything was out of focus and lurching side to side like he was on a ship, he wondered if she was crying too. "Leave now and never come back."

No. NO.

"Glor-"

"Leave now!" She said again, each word spat at him like rotten fruit. Her voice rose in pitch until she was almost screaming again. "LEAVE NOW AND NEVER COME BACK!"

Recoiling from her, with guilt and despair and a hundred other things writhing in his gut like leechyrynths. His hand slipped from the table, sending him crashing down with a strangled cry while his wife watched. She was crying, her mouth set in a thin hard line. She turned away before he hit the ground.

And then he was falling, down and down, through the floor and into the dark.

"Bendington is falling down, falling down, falling down. Bendington is falling down and no one ever mourns him!" The voice sang, swirling around him as he fell. He'd lost everything, and it was laughing at him.

Down and down into the dark, alone and unmourned. Ben wanted to scream, to beg forgiveness, anything please he could make it right. He would do right by her. He could be better please gods please. He could be better. Until-

"JAYARRARR! Can't you Hear me?" she added, louder.

"what is it, Tinuvikins?" he replied, opening his study door.

"Our Bitching-Elrond is all broken down again, and has started to swear..."

Over and over. The same hell. The same chances he had and squandered for his stupid alcohol. The voice that taunted him for his failures. He lived it again, the same day, over and over. His Tinuvikins screaming, the broken Bitching-Elrond, the Emporium and the stupid, stupid Drinkingholeadillo. Over and over. For all eternity.

*Some hells are fire and built by gods. Some are those we make ourselves. But every quester knows deep down, you never mess with elves. So take this lesson to your heart, live with love and play your part, and if you fall or if you tumble, if you ever take a stumble, don't give up and don't give in, know that goodness lies within. Bendington is trapped in hell, but let his lessons serve you well.*

*Stay your path, your sins atone, and **above all** a quester never quests alone.*

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## BONUS CONTENT: Elladan And Elrohir's New And Bargain Buy

[In Mr Weasley's voice:] **"What exactly is the function of a Bitching Elrond?"**

*Anonymous*





# What Curiosity Did Next

Joe Ross-Biddles, Rosemary Little, Jake Stewart, Sarah Binney,  
Cayson Chong, Mansi Hitesh, Phoebe Fay, Curtis Reubens, Samuel Cook

Tanya looked painfully up at the night sky, trying to focus on an individual star and not accidentally turn into a cat, remembering for the first time in a while why you weren't supposed to get so horribly drunk if you knew magic.

A fat raindrop hit her in the eye and she blinked heavily, slowly realising she was soaked through and beginning to shiver. She wasn't quite sure how she'd got here, but she must have been lying in the gutter for a while.

This... didn't seem like something she would do. She didn't seem to be thinking straight.

Could she have finally snapped and turned to drinking again? She'd been in this accursed town – not *literally* accursed, that would have been interesting – for almost a month now, and she was sure she wasn't going to find anything. Obviously there was crime here, but nothing to merit an Arcane Bureau of Investigation infiltration. She'd been in this job for *years*, and this was an assignment for the local cops, the sort with dodgy pistols and a *Fire Bolt* spell their grandmother taught them, not her.

Her talents were being *wasted*, quite frankly. Oh, anyone could theoretically learn magic, but then, anyone could theoretically learn to play the piano, and that didn't mean everyone could be Mozart. It would take most people years of study to so much as light a cigarette with magic. The Bureau certainly couldn't afford to waste honest-to-goodness fireballs-and-lightning-bolts wizards on some two-penny drug-dealers.

Mind you, it didn't take any studying to use a knife.

*That* thought gave her the urgency to clamber upright, grasping a rusted lamppost for support as she did.

It took her three tries to pull off *Salabim's Sudden Sobriety*, a handy spell from her student days, but eventually she managed it.

She frowned, still unable to remember how she'd got here. There'd been... there'd been a mission, hadn't there...

She went cold. *Memory modification.*

Who would have done it? Why? Why even leave her alive? She leant heavily against the lamppost, attempting to gather and puzzle her scattered thoughts.

It was useless. Memory modification was an irreversible thing – once the memories were gone, they were gone, neural pathways wiped into nonexistence. It was as if she could still feel them, tingling at her consciousness, but when she turned towards them they were no longer there.

She shivered. Whoever did this to her had done a good job – not many people could perform memory modification, and the number who could do it properly was even smaller. In most cases, the victim ended up a blubbling mess, unable to remember their own name, or believing they were thirteen again. In other cases, it didn't work at all. The precision of what had been done to her spoke of experience. Of sharp-honed, brilliant talent. An expert, then.

A Mozart.

Tanya drew in a shivering breath and tried to steady herself, pushing a hand against her eyes until she saw the colours dancing against her eyelids. Around her, the night spat out a drizzle of rain to sting against the back of her neck, not quite clearing the smell of fish-and-chips and cheap tarmac. Somewhere above, a pop ballad rung out from an open window.

She tried to think. If she couldn't remember, then at least she could deduce, string together the clues. *That was her job, right?*

The Incandescents. Tanya had been assigned to investigate them, though she had been more inclined to believe they were an elaborate scapegoat, a myth some batshit conspiracy theorist had made up. Theirs was certainly an unlikely name for a group of low-life gangsters to pick for themselves.

And yet... someone had done this to her. Why? She tried to comb through the snarl of thoughts that was overcoming her. The makeshift office, the ride on the underground, disembarking at the station closest to that pub - what was it called? - oh yes, The Sullivan. Going into the pub,

feeling the sweat and press of bodies, and then...

That was the last thing she could remember.

Which meant something had happened in that pub that they didn't want her to know. And when she tried to evoke it, it was taunting, tip-of-the tongue. Like trying to gather up a dream on waking, and finding it slipped through her fingers, a melting clock.

*Clocks.* What time even was it? Peeling her eyes open, Tanya moved to grab the pocket watch from her coat pocket. Then she froze.

On her wrist, black and blue against tawny, was an unfamiliar tattoo.

SACREN HILL :)

The words were hastily scrawled deep into the dermis of her skin, but when she touched the newly tattooed area, it didn't hurt. Magic, then. *Anvil's Timeless Tattoo.*

She studied it closer. Whoever had put it there was clearly rushed, and clearly held little regard for her body.

Obviously, she'd put it there herself. A breadcrumb, left by her past self as a clue before her memories were erased.

Tanya began flicking through places and people in town that might be related to the words Sacren Hill, but soon thought better of it. She wouldn't have written anything that might look like a clue to an outside observer. No, it would be something personal, something only she would understand.

SACREN HILL :)

*Oh you do like to be dramatic, don't you.* Her nickname for the old ABI training academy. Tanya could only think of one person worth remembering from that place.

Nix.

Beautiful, talented, stab-you-in-the-eye-crazy Nix. It would be a clue to the Mozart's profile, Tanya was sure of it. Whoever did this to her, they'd look the same. Someone heavy built, tall, tattoos, hair probably short or dyed.

Now with a potential description to go off, Tanya felt markedly better. More sure of where to go next. That was, of course, before she properly took in the scene around her. Empty bottles were strewn about around her, a box of takeaway food with half its contents was dashed over the street, and yes, there was even a small patch of sick on the floor. Someone had meticulously tried to recreate the scene you'd expect to find coming out of a drunken blackout. It was clever, really, the perfect excuse for waking up in a strange place with no memories. For a second, even Tanya felt uneasy. But the scene was a little too perfect, a little too

staged. See the real thing enough times and you could tell the difference.

No, the real problem was that whoever this was, they'd clearly done their research. They knew her weaknesses.

Angry now, Tanya set off down the street. She still didn't know where she was, but it didn't matter. She'd walk until she came across a cab, and then she'd take that straight to The Sullivan, and kick in the head of whomever had seen fit to tamper with her head. And as she walked, she thought.

Memory magic was a tricky thing. Did you remove the memories of the events, or the elements that made them up? The fact is, forgetting something and not remembering something are two different things. It wasn't that the memories hadn't been made, they'd been cut out, removed. If you knew how, you could trace around the edges of that incision, feel where the frayed gaps of memory started and stopped. You couldn't capture the picture, but you could find its silhouette.

But it took painstaking effort to learn how to do it. You either had to be unerringly single-minded, or in desperate need of a way to occupy your mind with something that wasn't drinking. Luckily, Tanya was both.

A cab rounded the corner, and Tanya waved it down, telling the driver to head for The Sullivan as she got in. Then as it began to drive, she started trying to piece the night together.

Could she remember what the entrance of the bar looked like? Yes. Could she remember what the back exit of the bar looked like? No.

Ok, so maybe smuggled out the back.

Could she remember the bar? Yes. Could she remember the backroom? No, but then that was fair enough. Could she remember the toilets? Again, no, but this was more interesting.

Ok, so someone who could enter the women's toilets.

Could she remember the bouncer? Yes. Could she remember the bartender? Yes. Could she remember who she sat with? No.

Interesting.

Tanya took a break and stared out the window into the night. Chances were nothing good was coming in that bar, and she was feeling woefully unprepared. Only a single thought stopped her turning the cab around and calling it a night. Whoever it was had gone to so much trouble to keep her away, when quick work with a sharp knife would have worked just as well. She smiled. This Mozart, they didn't want to kill her.



Tanya had no such reservations.

"If I were you, I'd be incandescent about it."

The cabbie's voice jerked Tanya's attention back to the present. "What?"

"Blood magic. Don't think I can't smell it. You're one of those. But you're not in jail, which means you think freedom's more important than power. It must make you furious."

For the first time Tanya noticed the little bone crux dangling over the dashboard, floating in a tidy knot of magic. A soothsayer. Unusual. Especially in a backwater dump like this.

"Dunno what you're on about. I'm with the Bureau. I don't do that shit any more."

The cabbie laughed, and through the rearview mirror Tanya caught a flash of emerald in her smile. "Once a junkie, always a junkie, poppet."

They rounded a corner and the Sullivan came into view in a rainbow of –

BLINDINGCHARCOALSEEPINGTHROUGHTHEINTERSTICESUNBE  
HOLDENIMMENSITYOFNIGHTERRORERRORERRORCHAOSCHA  
OSYOUWILLNEVERKNOWANENDTOYOURSUFFERING

– Tanya dry-heaved, painfully. The psychic stream coming off the building was intense. It was like a blood-warm, fetid compost heap, aura shedding off it like a hundred thousand insects. Then there were the police cars. And the cordons. And the bubbling black tissue that filled the first floor windows.

The cab pulled up before the first cordon and Tanya stumbled onto the pavement, too dazed to notice the cabbie wind down the window.

"Know what it takes to cut a habit out of someone, poppet? Nothing more and nothing less than what it takes to cut out a Bane."

Tanya spun around, head still queasy from the psychic assault. "What did you say?"

But the cab was already accelerating away, before Tanya could even yell that she hadn't paid.

Hurrying towards the police line, Tanya racked her mind for a topic she'd not thought about since that university module in Dark Arts she'd taken in third year to make up the credits. *A Bane is not a curse.* Curses are easy; they're spiteful and petty and sometimes really very nasty, but if the worst comes to the worst you can brute-force it with a big pile of artificial luck. *A Bane is not a hex.* Hexes are tenacious, but they're nothing to be afraid of if you can puzzle out the

counter-word. *A Bane is not a spell.* Spells need the efforts of a wizard to keep them going. Left to themselves they fizzle out. They don't find their way into someone's head, and fester, and take root, and start to grow.

A Bane is an idea of great and terrible power. A Bane is, to all intents and purposes, a death sentence.

"Woah, you can stop right there, missy." The policeman assigned to holding the cordon looked more annoyed than anything. Clearly being assigned to wave off curious onlookers was not his idea of an ideal Friday evening. "You see this tape over here?" He gestured behind him with his thumb. "It means that this place is dan-ger-ous. So run along now girl, won't ya?"

*Girl.* The policeman was barely older than her. But like all deeply insecure men who held even an iota of power, he felt the constant need to lord it over others at every opportunity.

For a split second, Tanya entertained the thought of putting that policeman in his place. She knew at least a dozen spells that she could pull off before the policeman would even have time to mutter another patronising word. But she didn't. She was a professional. And even though it had always irked her to conceal her true authority and power, she knew that the Bureau's mission came before her pride.

"I'm sorry, sir. It's just that I was supposed to meet my sister in that bar..." A few tears pooled at the corner of her eyes. It wasn't magic, just really good acting talent, which she had often found to be very useful in her course of work. "Do you know if she's alright?"

"Oh, I... um..." The policeman looked down uncomfortably. As predicted, his pompous attitude crumbled under the weight of his natural protective instincts. "The guy who exploded was sitting at the bar, but I don't know if..."

*He exploded?* That could only mean either he had been fed an incendiary potion or there was some high-level blood magic at play here. She needed to examine the scene herself to be sure. "Please, sir." Tanya placed a hand on his arm, sending a gentle unspoken suggestive charm. "If you let me in, I can identify if she was inside." When he hesitated again, she increased the charm, "You can accompany me inside, so you know I'll be safe".

"Of course." His eyes had glazed over slightly, and Tanya realised she might have overdone it. Hopefully, he'll be too dumb to realise he had been charmed and take full responsibility for letting her in. He lifted up the police cordon and waved her in. There were a few curious glances

from the other officers, but they were assured by his presence next to her. *Blood magic*. For a moment, she wondered if the Bureau had known, which would explain her assignment to this mission. It wouldn't be out of character for them to exploit her past for their own ends. The words of the cabbie echoed at the back of her mind. She wasn't so sure now if she would be able to keep it in the past.

The past was staring me right in the eye. Dismembered like my memories of last night – heavy built, tattooed, platinum hair. Nix. *Focus*. There was a theme to all this. Blood magic, Bane, bars. First, I wake up with surroundings staged to make me think I was drunk, the clarity of my thoughts potentially compromised by the poison of my past. However, it is precisely my past afflictions that enable me to spot the ruse. Then, I find the tattoo on my wrist, a seemingly indubitable indicator of something only I could have known, and it leads me to my past, only poisoned – Nix. *Focus, focus Tanya*. This Mozart hadn't spared me. This was not an incision made in the name of memory modification, it was an incisive accessing of my faculties. The smiley face after the Sacren Hill. I wouldn't need that – I wouldn't waste time with it.

If they could erase memories so precisely, they left details so she would find the bar again. Why? felt something sharp digging its way into her *shoe* and picked it out. Skull shards. The guy who exploded probably wouldn't be much help. They were probably a real drug-dealer and ran messages for the Incandescent as a side hustle in a desperate attempt to survive in this backwater town, but something had slipped, and the gang pulled the trigger. Tanya couldn't find anything promising amongst the broken bar stools and bloodstains.

Tanya thanked the policeman for his time and started walking away, when a firm, rough hand grabbed her by the elbow.

"No use looking through there." Nix said jovially, "the Bane had 'em. No one important in there anyway, and we got the info we needed."

Of course, somewhere in this memory erasure she had forgotten that she was working with Nix. Even in a bar like this they stuck out, but after a few years undercover in a Dark Magic ring, they had perfected shapeshifting. If you stay hidden, you can see, hear and survive everything as a cockroach.

"So, you know what happened?"

"Their 'drug-dealer' was trying to recruit you," Nix laughed, "Then they pulled the trigger when they realised what was up. They're blood ventriloquists. Planning to reach world leaders and control them at night, when there's enough

power to control multiple people at once."

"What fun."

"The woman who pulled you out had an emerald tooth."

The Taxi driver.

\* \* \*

Tanya's tracking spell flashed indigo, so she ducked down the narrow passage to her left. She and Nix were tracking the supposed cab driver down – separately, at Tanya's suggestion. To reduce suspicion, she'd said. She wasn't exactly sure why she'd wanted to separate from her partner so soon after regrouping, but she trusted her instincts absolutely.

Alone in the night, she had time and space to think. Space to examine the inconsistencies in her memories, time to fit them all together. She'd been confused at the bar, disoriented. Maybe something to do with the gap in her memories, linked so closely to that place? She shook her head; that didn't fit with what she knew of memory removal. Take note of the possibility, but move on to likelier options.

Could the cab driver have hexed her? Probably Tanya would have noticed, but a powerful enough practitioner could pull such a spell off without much more than a quick twitch. That said, a hex that powerful wouldn't just have worn off, and she felt much more lucid now than she had in the bar. Note the possibility, move on.

Memory removal was damn hard; *memory modification* was close to impossible. Even when done by an expert, even with just a small, subtle change, such a spell could cause dizziness, confusion, lack of focus. And she hadn't remembered that she was working with Nix; with all the careful examination of her memory she'd engaged in, how could she miss that?

SACREN HILL :)

Smiley face. A friend, supposedly. *Nix*.

Tanya's tracking spell glowed puce as a cab rounded the corner. She flagged it down, to the bemusement of its emerald-toothed driver. "You again?"

"I'm afraid so. I need your help."

"That's getting to sound familiar. This is the third time in as many hours you've needed it. You may as well get in – I suppose you found out I dragged you out of that bar?"

"Yeah, about that. My memory's a little fuzzy on the



subject.”

“Let me be clear – if this is some dark blood magic shit, I don’t want any of it. You can get out here and leave. There’s only one thing people talk to Barbecue Bill for and it ain’t pretty.”

“Barbecue Bill? Who’s that?”

“The guy you were talking to at the bar. One of the local Incandescent bigwigs. Bit of a fan of the old blood sacrifices, if you catch my drift.”

“No, you’ve got it wrong – I’m with the Agency, as I tried to say last time. I’m investigating these guys, not joining them. I admit I did a bit of blood magic when I was a teenager – we’re all stupid when we’re that age – but this wasn’t about me trying to get a fix. At least I don’t think it’s that. My memory of the last few hours is a tad incomplete.”

“Let me refresh it for you. I was just minding my own business in the corner, when you walked in and got talking to Bill. Then I felt someone activate the Bane; Bill exploded and you were in a bit of a mess. I was knocked out; by the time I came round, you were still just lying there, but there was someone bending over you, doing something, though my eyes were a bit blurry. I sat up properly and rubbed my eyes. I think I must have groaned, because the person was gone and it was just you, but I thought I caught a glimpse of something scuttling out of sight. I dragged you out the back, then something hit me and I blacked out again. When I came to, you were gone, so I legged it out of there before the police started asking any awkward questions. I was mighty surprised to see you earlier, but I wasn’t going to say anything, because I thought you were one of them, and I like my skin in one piece.”

At the taxi driver’s words, I felt sickened. She couldn’t be lying – she was a soothsayer. It was circumstantial evidence at best, but if it had been a shapeshifter who’d done this to me – which the scuttling thing suggested – it was pretty likely Nix had gone rogue. In the Venn Diagram of ‘good shapeshifters’ and ‘memory-modification Mozarts’, there weren’t a lot of people. For one of them to be here and not the person responsible was one coincidence too many.

At which point, I felt my nose start to bleed.

Oh, Nix was clever. They’d also cast a spell on me activated by my own thoughts, just in case I worked out what was going on despite the memory modifications. Probably high-level blood magic triggered by some combination of their name and really negative emotions. I had to think fast or –

*‘Control, this is car #12. Need to request closure of Hopkins Road and a forensics team. This one’s fucking weird. Over’*

*‘Roger, car #12. Please state reason for request. Over’*

*‘Have found one badly damaged taxi cab that has come off the road and hit a tree. Driver dead from impact. But, who or whatever was on the back seat appears to have...exploded. There’s blood and bits everywhere. The back half of the cab’s a mess – no wonder the driver lost control. God, I think I’m going to be sick. Over’*

*‘Roger, car #12. Cordon off area. Forensics despatched and road closure authorised. Stay safe. Over’*

*‘Roger. Car #12 over and out.’*

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## BONUS CONTENT: What Curiosity Did Next

**“..It's quite difficult to finish off a chain that's unexpectedly several writers short! More generally, it would have been nice to give it a proper resolved ending, but I'd have ended up writing several hundred more words in that case!”**

*Samuel Cook*

# THE MITRAILLOCENE

Anonymous, Ed Heaney, Alastair Haig, Liv Morley, Peter Ondus, Anonymous, LRL

"I am Rainbowdance G. , not P., Treehuggington," corrected the person who had the floor, "and the point I would like to make is that the collaboration I represent have unearthed a larger artefact from digs three miles north of yours, from which your talk's metallic cones would appear to emanate..."

"I will be delighted to hear all about it in your talk," warmly replied Paxfessor Juniperberry Sequoialawyer, onstage.

[Cut to a blank screen.

"Those who don't remember their history are condemned to repeat it" a Narrator solemnly intones, as we start to be treated to a wide-pan-shot from zero-carbon-gliders in a clearing sky over the Ocean to pristine-idyllic beaches flanked by an outpour of song from biodegradeable golden submarines. We scroll on to a mosaic of colour-contrast-shock figurines beginning to accumulate inland-left, to ethically-sourced strawberry fields stretching inland-right as far as the eye can see.

The flow of humanity concentrates unto a colossal clump of trees holding up a renewable-fibred kaleidoscopic-cupola of leviathanic proportions so as to shield a multitudinous audience. Focus ends on a brobdingnagian backstage hologram bearing the insignia of the Permanent Pacific Greentopia of Global California.]

Centrestage, the highlight of Peacechair L. Skydiamonds Cedarsurgeon's presentation is slowly rotating to great applause: a Partial-Oadsign Artefact revealing the topical dig's Belgicowasteland location to be, more precisely, "ASSCHENDAELE".

And so Peacedoctoral Fellow R.G. Treehuggington's turn to shine arrived. All centred about the sustainable-point hologram of The Device. Tripoded. ("Ooooooh") Rotating octuple barrelled. ("Aaaaah!") With belted feeding-chains full of the most common - 2 inch - metallic conical artefacts. ("Yahay!") And dug up alongside the pointy-topped

protective headgear of a prominent kind of archaeo-european tree-surgeon ("Huzzah!")

"We'll have to reverse-engineer some of these to trim our trees!" acclaimed Paxfessor Sequoialawyer.

"No good will come of that" countered gloomy old Peacelector Cassandra Sorenoseson, but the rest of them had long learned to ignore her sour escapades. The Partial-Oadsign analytical community had yet to recover its professional propriety and decorum after the "TRESPASSERS WILLIAM" debacle, and Peacelector Sorenoseson's ignominious receipt of a strongly worded letter had obviously not dissuaded her from such unpopular reminders of some of its less well-considered endeavours. Her stubborn inclinations had not gone unnoticed.

["I will thank my beloved viewers to remember," cautions the Narrator, icily, as our view circles slowly about the titanic emblem, "that without the thorough and complete understanding resulting from even the most inconsequential subsections of our investigations...]

The elderly Peacelector did not convey the least suggestion of deference to the screen's supercilious assertions, but at that point the doors were thundered upon. Whom could this figure be who stood framed by the luminescence flooding into those revered halls? There was something disconcertingly unkempt, perhaps even positively untidy, about their appearance, something terrifyingly roughshod about their stance.

Rainbowdance G. Treehuggington absorbed this new development with commendable aplomb.

"I believe," they asserted with a tone of tranquility, "that our guest is not only keen but perhaps over-eager in his promptness. Nonetheless, I am sure that we can incorporate him into the proceedings without a great deal of disturbance." The Peacedoctoral Fellow turned to the new arrival.

"Would you be so good," they queried calmly, "as to introduce yourself?"



The unexpected apparition did, indeed, introduce himself. I apologise profusely, dear readers, for my selection of verb, but sadly its delivery was so unremarkable, so simple, so unapologetically unornamented, that I can choose no other.

“Hi,” he said. “I’m Dave.”

[...we would lose the significance of those events that both will and have already come to pass”. The hologram flickers to nothing.]

A murmur of titillation erupted around the hall. Hushed declarations of impostery and blasphemy echoed amongst the high branches. From the upper canopy a Senior Serenitor swooned and fell ceremoniously onto a gaggle of Undergrowthiates below (who, quite notably, had not offered a mote of attention to the pro-seedings prior to this point).

The figure whom had recently announced their identity was evicted from the room whilst medigators were deployed to care for any harm-doing his arrival had caused. As he traced the paths of hard-woven eco-fibres in the foyer’s walls he put some thought into seriously considering the option of possibly leaving and maybe finding somewhere else to help. He didn’t leave, instead he just stood, shifting his weight from foot to foot in a manner more befitting an anxious felcistudent than Dave.

It is at this point in the story, dear readers, that I would like to re-emphasise the intent of this narrative. Its content, whilst fruiting embellishments, grows its roots in true history and prophecy. Therefore do not assume my words bear malice, and know that I mean no spite towards Dave when I state that his fabled first steps into the Greentopia were met, against all doubt and prediction, not by respect, awe or celebration, but by deeply profound disappointment.

The Undergrowthiates had started a most unbecoming whispering between them about whether this ‘Dave’ had the correct attire for such a dramatic entrance. Certain Serenitors noted down the auspicious timing of such an interruption, and started to speculate what such a Dave would bring to their meeting. Peacelector Sorenoseson let out a soft, “Oh dear, not again,” which was dutifully ignored. Paxfessor Sequoialawyer missed most of this, as they were busy correcting the graphics on Cedarsurgeon’s presentation. It was not, in any estimation, the correct way for an era of change and chaos to start.

The Peacedoctoral Fellow was most put out by this of everyone – how could such a build-up be ruined? They realised they still had the floor, but what could they say now?

“Such events only highlight the need for knowledge, for how else should be understand the events that have just passed”, they stumbled through, talking to a slightly more alert audience, “I believe” – and then they stopped, hesitated.

At this point, they had an idea, one that could lead to personal glory, and ambition overtook their words. Little did they know the effect it would have on history, dear readers.

“No,” they continued, “I know, that the finds at ASSCHENDALE were only the start, with more buried deeper, and the great lost history can finally be recovered”.

This proclamation was certainly well-received, or at least, better than the rest of the talk had gone. And whilst the hall started to continue on, with the ever enthused Peacedoctoral Fellow R.G. Treehuggington shouting over Paxfessor Sequoialawyer, Dave was also feeling a profound disappointment.

He was a lot more lost than he had first thought.

Realising this, Dave thought that repeating his previous steps might get him unlost, and so, Dave decided, that it might be, for some reason, a good idea to enter the hall again and this time, proclaim his intentions to the room. As he squeezed through the portacle, the room was preparing for the entrance of the Massinformative head of the institution. Seeing Dave for the second time did not please them. What followed nullified all hopes. Dear readers, be wary, this might be hard for you to take.

“Uhhhh, sorry, I thought these were the toilets, do you guys know where those are?”

The room fell silent. Paxfessor Sequoialawyer’s face turned white, the bindergs twirling around his eyebrows flying towards the would-be-ceiling of the presentation space, and then falling back on the Paxfessor’s head. The Peacechair L. Skydiamonds Cedarsurgeon who had been calm up until now started to shake and started to stand up very slowly. The Undergrowthiates, not having a clue what the Dave just proclaimed started looking around nervously, some of them yelping in shock. The Peacedoctoral Fellow who had enough just fell over with a loud THUNG.

Needless to say, this confused Dave even more. His manners were obviously not appropriate for the room he just found himself in. His face, not being coronated by a glofaceut like the other ones started to look like skimmed malt.

It was at this very point in time that the screen realised it might, in fact, be dreaming, and thus pinched itself.

\* \* \*

As the sundials began to indicate the onset of the month of Lennonvember, the Canopy Conifer-Ents Venue started to refill once more, in celebration of the exploits of the Pioneers of Tree Surgery! Somebody had been distributing heavy cylindrical packets to the undergrowthiates marked ‘Only open on the Great Day!’ The Great Day having dawned, these were now enthusiastically being opened, to reveal a plethora of copies of that most iconic of early Archaeo-Europes Tree-Surgeon-headgear, bearing the proud

words "ED BARON SOUVENI" under their exhaled central spikes, in a flourish of blue letters on a yellow background!

The recently-promoted Peacelector R.G. Treehuggington gleefully unveiled a working replica of the ancient tree surgery machine!

"Rat-a-tat-tat!", it sounded, as the Sequoia above-left of stage was pruned, to frantic-jazz-hands-of-approval.

"Rat-a-tat-tat!" it sounded again, as Peacelector Cassandra Sorneoseson entered, late as usual.

"You 'maniac!" she exclaimed. "You over-ambitious career-driven arboromaniac!! You actually built an ACHINEGU..."

"And isn't it quaint(!)" counter-interrupted Peacechair-of-The-Session Sequoialawyer, in that things-must-be-run-smoothly tone.

"Rat-a-tat-Aaaaaargh!!!" Two rapidly reddening figures plummeted from the canopy above, their screams ending upon impact atop pointy-metal-hatted undergrowththiates.

The silence was deafening.

A murmur of "They're not moving" started to build up.

"That's Lexington Rub-Belly-Lions-dottir!" screamed an outraged shrubbery-technician down-from-Sequoian-Frisco-for-the-day.

"And that's my cousin lamthewalrus Peacenixon!" shouted Dave Beatnixon.

It took the audience several hours to process the fact that people could Expire outside of The Grounds of the BAMACARE FREEHOSPIT; even Peacelector Sorneoseson could not recall how many centuries had passed since Expiration had visitated a Greentopian Californian outside of Those Hallowed Grounds.

\* \* \*

["Five Solstices passed by" the narrator solemnly intoned. "The by-now usually-mud-brown Strawberry Fields were crimson-once-more, and not with eponymous fruitan-licatessin wares... The blood had, once again, mostly belonged to the Treehuggingtons, out of their still-persistent refusal to cut down of the Sequoias to reinforce their line of ENCHES. The Beatnixons, on the other hand had no such qualms. In response to their kin the Peacenixons and Peachnixons (if not quite yet the Pinocchionosenixons) being wiped out, AYSER Dave had recently even gone as far as to reverse-engineer a RUPPS BIG GRETHA from ARC NATIONAL DE LA TAILLE DU OMME digs...]

"We are Rub-Belly-Lions led by Donkeys" complained Argent-majo Cassandra Sorneoseson, with thinly veiled reference to Eeneral Sequoialawyer's ASMASK headgear.

"Don't mock the ASMASK; we're wearing it by orders of Dave," said Wentochina of the Beatnixons, peeking out from the ENCH they were huddled in.

"Praise be to AISER Dave," said Liquidbarrier of the Pinocchionosenixons, as the dull roar of a firing RUPPS BIG GRETHA shook the ENCHES.

"What's a donkey?" asked Manfred Sorneoseson, clutching his prized ED BARON headgear in his hands.

["As it happens, the technology for reverse-engineering Archaeo-European weapons was not limited to just those who marched under the banner of Dave," the narrator intones softly in regretful tones.]

"What do you mean?" snapped Wentochina, turning to stare at Manfred.

"Donkeys are long-extinct, one of the many creatures wiped out by the ancients," said Cassandra. "Not everyone can be an expert on these things," she added, with a glance at Wentochina.

["In fact, preparations were just being made on the other side of the battlefield for..." the narrator continues with ... is that a slightly smug tone of voice?]

"Yeah, but we could all agree to educate ourselves a bit, you know?" said Wentochina. "You're like those poor knowing nothing undergrowththiates."

A dull boom echoed across the Strawberry Fields. Seconds later, the projectile detonated, bursting into a hundred pieces just before striking the ground. No amount of BAMACARE could reverse its impacts on those who had been standing in the ENCH.

["... a decisive tactical master-stroke," the narrator finishes with a relish. "And so, after a long respite from the Waterloos and Passchendaeles and Normandies of the days of yore, we see that the terror of war has returned to haunt even the formerly most-peaceful Permanent Pacific Greentopia of Global California," the narrator says, building up to a crescendo. "The dark underbelly of human nature may be obscured, hidden, even suppressed, but in the end-"

Loud thumps, followed by: "What the hell have you done to my narrative?"

"Your narrative?" the narrator asks, voice dripping with contempt.

"You're killing everyone off! You can't do that. Here, let me try to fix things. Ahem, so. 'Sequoialawyer rushed to the scene, carrying with him all-powerful ERNIECARE recovered from a more recent dig, with which he raised everyone back to life.'"





“You’re messing with the narrative! That’s dangerous!” said the (ex-)narrator hastily.

“Oh come on, the narrative world is completely contained. We’re safe.”

A loud bang, as a door is thrown open.

“Who’s that?” ask the narrators in unison.

“Hi,” says the dark figure. “I’m Dave.”]

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The following is in fact a special chain - our first writer, Phoebe Fay, wanted to carry out something of an experiment. The following is all Phoebe's piece; the chain that came from the same first section will follow.

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# THE LEGEND OF HESTIA 12: THE LOST RECORDS

Phoebe Fay

From AI Black Box Recording on LEAF: Emissarial Shuttle 200769. Time in Old Earth Hours (OEH Dial) 11.04.2500 15:30, Time on Nearest Living Planet: N/A Translated to Old English

CAPTAIN, SHIP APPROACHING FROM THE HEMUDU SYSTEM. WOULD YOU LIKE TO MAKE CONTACT?

-A ship? But there's no ships coming up on my radar-

I HAVE SCANNED THE SHIP AND CANNOT TRACE IT TO ANY LICENSED PARTS OR WHOLESALE MANUFACTURERS. IT IS EITHER VERY OLD OR VERY ILLEGAL

-I still can't see it-

WITH RESPECT, CAPTAIN, LOOK OUT THE STARBOARD WINDOW. THAT IS NOT JUNK

-Oh! Are you sure about that? Request communications-

COMMUNICATION REQUESTED.... PERMISSION GRANTED. CONNECTION IS POOR

<⌘⌘●●□Ⓜ○Ⓜ■Ⓜ○Ⓜ⋆ⓂⓂ●Ⓜ>

-Ugh, translation please! I'm sorry I can't understand you! -

<◆⌘ⓂⓂ◆Ⓜ>

APOLOGIES CAPTAIN. IT TOOK A WHILE TO FIND THIS LANGUAGE IN MY DATABASE. TRANSLATING FROM OLD ENGLISH

<--llo? Hello?>

-Hi there. Who are you? What is this ship? What are

you doing here? -

<Hello! My na-- Hale. Thi-- Hestia 12. I was -- mission to dis--er life on new planet-- there was an error--- we got pushed off course>

-Hestia 12? That... that can't be right...-

<My rocket-- bad shape. I don't think I can--- home. Mind if-- ride?>

-Who else is there with you? Where is home? -

<It's.... --- just me>

-Solo mission huh? Me too-

<I need -- back to Earth>

-Earth?-

Were they for real? Hestia 12, but in the history lessons, the crew, didn't they all... and that was centuries ago... had they been out here all this time? It is possible.... how did they not know? They contemplated letting Hale on the ship. They had been directed to search the Hemudu System, thought to be entirely uninhabited but it was worth sending some sorry soul out there to check, for signs of life and potential trading opportunities. Here was life.

<Are - st--there?>

-Yes, I am here. I have decided to let you on my ship, yours looks like it's about to collapse anyway. Please allow access to your loading deck-

<Alright, one moment>

ACCESS GRANTED TO HESTIA 12 LOADING DECK. PERMISSION TO OPEN THE HATCH, CAPTAIN

-Granted. And enough of the "Captain, Captain" stuff,



Seer, I'm just an emissary-

**SORRY, CAPTAIN, I AM PROGRAMMED TO TALK TO THE SENIOR ON THIS VESSEL IN THAT WAY, AND YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE HERE**

**-Not anymore...-**

They had not seen another person in the flesh since they set off on this mission. They developed the habit of avoiding Their own reflection around the well-kept, gleaming ship, so even their own countenance slipped from Their memory. So, when Hale strode, nay glided, through the docking hatch, They wasn't sure what to make of Hale.

Hale had very short hair, with tight curls barely showing through. Hale was clearly in need of some rest and good food, but Hale's face and eyes were still round, fresh, alert. They were a little shocked at the prominence of Hale's chest, slightness of waist, and dark skin with a glowing richness that They had never seen before.

They were in awe. At least until Hale collapsed.

**-Woah there! Are you alright? -**

<[unreadable symbols]>

**-Ah, I cannot understand you. Hold on. Seer-**

**YES, CAP- YES?**

**-Bring me an MTD-**

**RIGHT AWAY**

Soon, a nearby chute sounded and lifted its shutter. They picked up the small choker and earpiece inside and came over to Hale.

**-Here, I will help you put these on. I should be able to understand you now-**

<How does this... How... I am quite faint>

**-Faint? You look sick, come here and lie down a bit, I will have Seer check you over-**

**YOU REALLY SHOULD ASK ME TO DO THAT BEFORE I OPEN THE QUARANTINE BAY, CAPTAIN**

**-Oh, just check her over, would you? -**

Seer scanned the resting body. Hale's chest laboured. They turned away.

**SEVERE ANTI-GRAVITY DEGRADATION, CAPTAIN. CRITICAL LOSS OF BONE DENSITY IN THE LEGS. 40% LOSS OF MUSCLE SIZE AND FUNCTION. LOW BLOOD PRESSURE. BLURRY VISION**

**-Anti-Gravity, huh? Wow, that ship must have been old-**

**LITERALLY JUST ANOTHER PIECE OF JUNK TO ADD TO THE RUBBISH BELT**

They did not want to insult their... guest, but on inspection Hale seemed to have fainted. They had only experienced Anti-Gravity in those interactive history museums you go to as a child. They had read a lot about the effects of Anti-Gravity when everyone was panicking about so-called AG Addicts floating around until their bodies disintegrated, but They had never actually seen anyone. A junkie, perhaps, just like the ship. Somehow, They did not believe that.

**-Well? C'mon Seer, there must be something you can do-**

**YES, CAPTAIN. PERMISSION TO CONDUCT SALINE TRANSFUSION, CORRECTIVE EYE SURGERY AND INTENSE FITNESS PROGRAMME**

**-Permission to conduct saline transfusion, I think the rest can wait until they wake up-**

It took a good few days for Hale to be fully responsive and regain enough strength to explain anything. In the meantime, They took the liberty of "capturing" Hestia 12 (or the Can as They decided to call it) and explored.

Hestia 12 did not take to LEAF's artificial gravitational field completely, so They hovered slightly. They was not a fan of this and found that their feet kept clipping on ribs and objects jutting out from the floor. It did not seem like anyone was expected to walk in it. It seemed to prize functionality over aesthetics, although when were not sure what that function really was. Almost every surface was pocked with buttons, switches and wires. In one sub-section there was a small treadmill surrounded by straps, and in another long resting places that encased the person inside in black straps, as if they were prone to violent outbursts.

The place suggested a buzz of activity, but it was eerily still and quiet. Curious, They started trying to open doors and see what was inside. A lot of the doors were locked.

Through one door there were piles of empty sleeves labelled "BEEF STEAK" and "CHEESE PASTE" and "CASHEWS".

Through another was a small drawer with toothpaste, a pair of glasses and a shining sheet. They looked at the sheet, and the faces on it looked back at them. Two of them belonged to children. They went to open another door. It gave way, and They were pressed against one of the vertical beds by a body, crumpled towards them.

They cried out, and grappled with the body, tossing it aside. It hovered serenely over the floor, with eyes half open and

unblinking. Disgusted, They peered into the draw that the body leapt from and point several bodies suspended above the ground in various uncomfortable positions, with mouths agape and fingers twisted.

They tried to back away and tripped on a jutting pipe.

<I can explain>

Hale still gripped onto their arm as they walked to the cafeteria, but They noticed some of Hale's strength returning already.

-Who are you? And what are you doing here? -

<You know, I could ask you the same thing. Who are you, and what are you doing here? I was starting to think I would never see anyone again. I have not seen many people like you...>

For the first time in a very long time, They looked at Their reflection. They were totally average. They were taller than Hale, with large yellow eyes. They were a bit paler, with longer fingers and shorter legs. They were a little embarrassed at how much they had let themselves go. The (once) trendy three-layer geometric crop they sported had devolved into more of a bowl, and the vermillion hair had faded into a dull orange.

-It has been a while since I have had to look nice for anyone-

<I know that feeling. My name is Dr. Sydney Hale. I was set to go to the International Space Station with my colleagues when there was coordinate error. I was going to be the first black woman on the moon, but they we got stuck wherever this is>

They were embarrassed. They did not really understand what she was saying.

-My name is They Jones, and this is the Hemudu System. I was sent out here as an emissary from The Mothership to find new life and trading opportunities. Everyone knew this was a dead system, so I did not expect to find anything-

<Why would you be sent out here if you would not find anything?>

-I suppose it was not so much a mission as it was banishment. Still, I did find something. I found you-

<Thanks for taking me in. I was getting low on food supplies. The food here took some getting used to, to be honest, but... >

## THAT FOOD WAS MANUFACTURED TO YOUR SPECIFIC NUTRITIONAL NEEDS

<Uh... thanks, Seer. It is great>

YOU ARE VERY WELCOME

-Never mind that. Now you are feeling a bit better, I must contact The Mothership and tell them we can go back now. I hope the people there still remember I was gone-

<Hold up. Who said I was coming with you to this "Mothership" place? I want to go home>

-Home? You mean... to Earth? -

<Well, yeah. How far is it from here, you can take me there, right?>

They bit the inside of their mouth. How were They had to tell her something. Hale would find out somehow, if They did not say anything, Seer would say something. But They decided They liked Hale; she would be so upset...

-When did you leave Earth? -

<April>

-What year in April? -

<2025>

-Okay. I do not want you to panic, but as far as I know the year is 2500. If you go back to Earth now, it will not be the place you left -

<What? That cannot be right. I knew we were thrown off-course a bit. It has been a while; everyone's rations were running out... I am a bit smaller than the rest so perhaps that's why I survived. But it cannot be that far. You are making this up so I will go with you to that Motherland whatever. Well, I am not going!>

Hale got up and ran for Hestia 12. She had regained most of her strength, and she was already much stronger than They, and outpacing them was easy.

-Stop! There is no food on there. No crew. You will not find your way back from here with that ship, it does not have the capacity! And besides, Earth is dead! -

Oh dear. Hale kept running until she reached the docking hatch, then she stopped. Her face tried to show every emotion at once but chose to show none.

<What happened?>



-I do not remember the exact history-

Should have paid more attention in school, huh? -But essentially by the time we realised how much destructions human caused to the Earth, it was too late to stop things from getting worse. People must evacuate to smaller and smaller areas of land as everything went underwater. They were making experiments on permanent underwater living when the meteor strike hit the Atlantic Ocean. Scientists made a base on the island made by the meteor and eventually headed an escape mission. There are a few scientists that still go to that base from time to time, making a note of new aquatic species.... – They stopped. Hale had sunk down and sat cross legged staring at the ground. She did not cry. She just stared. They walked over and put a hand on her shoulder. They had not been exposed to the emotions of another being for a very long time. And even back then, They was never confident that a 'There, there. It's not so bad' ever cut it.

<Everything is gone... my family, my house. My reality> I am alone too. She turned to They. <I suppose that makes me 511 years old>

-You look good for your age- She laughed faintly, it made They feel good.

<Well, I might as well stay then. There is literally no where else for me to go, is there?>

IF YOU WOULD LIKE ANY RECOMMENDATIONS, THE FORNAX CLUSTER IS QUITE PRETTY

Hale got up and walked to a window and gazed out. There was a string of space junk that somewhat spoiled the view.

<Yeah. I spent so much time trying to figure out how to get back, I did not really consider exploration. And there is literally the whole universe at our fingertips.>

-Ah, well, see that is the thing. It is my duty to report any findings to The Mothership. And I found you-

<Why are you so bothered about that anyway, you were banished right?>

-Not technically, no-

<But there won't be any of the same people if you go back there, huh>

-No...-

<Who did you piss off to get sent away forever?>

Their whole body tightened, an uneasy smile stretching across their face. Lots of time to think about what happened. An eternity of thinking about. But confession, confession was... it is not the time. Not the place. Not the right people. But Hale does not know anything about our culture, our people. Perhaps saying it now is better, finally releasing some of it. Hale would not care, would she? Hale would not understand. Who better to talk to? And yet...

-Maybe I am in the history books like your Hestia 12. The two loneliest ships in the universe. I could pretend it was an accident, but it was not- Tell her, dammit, what would she know?

-You might remember in your day that they started 'designing babies' so they did not carry certain genetic diseases? –

<Yeah. There was a lot of debate about it. My sister had cystic fibrosis, and I loved her, but it was hard. I thought it could be a good thing.>

-Officially that was all it was ever allowed to be. You could screen for genetic diseases and take them out. But of course, once enough people figured out the technology, a sort of "black market" for all sorts of 'designer baby' traits were set up. If you had the cash, and figured out ways to evade surveillance, you could have a baby incubated for you with the perfect hair, perfect face, superior maths skills, Olympic sprinting capabilities. These people were banned from participating in beauty pageants and sporting events at first. But their numbers grew and grew until it became the norm. There were huge incubating farms built filled with perfect people-

<That sounds like a dystopian nightmare>

-It is. There were always people who resisted this, and said that it was immoral, removed familial love and personal ambition. But my family were always against this. I was born naturally, surrounded by family, not removed from a test tube and given to some government-approved perfect couple to train. We refused a lot of bio-hack upgrades. Telepathy chips, Google contact lenses, that kind of thing. This breeding thing is dangerous. Who gets to decide what the perfect person looks and thinks like?

-I spent a lot of my life finding Naturalists like me, to

see if anyone wanted to help me with my plan. It is easier to slip through the cracks when you do not have any bio-hacks that they can link you too. You are as good as invisible. It also made it harder to find people. Not every bio-hack slave has dyed skin and antennae, you know? But eventually I found a few willing to put themselves on the line to end this system. I spent years researching and training until I found away to get into the major incubation facility. We smashed all of them. Wiped the genetic databases. The whole perfect empire. Wiped out. But they had never changed the law. All that was still legally criminal. So, they could not imprison me. Instead they "employed" me to check out the Hemudu System. I kind of want to know what happened after I left. Maybe it made no difference at all-

They went from the docking station to the main communications room, and Hale followed.

-Seer. Request contact with The Mothership-

YES CAPTAIN

They stepped onto a cylindrical raised platform. It sunk into the ground slightly under their weight, then a glass curtain wrapped around them. They were bathed in green light that flickered in a gridded pattern across their face for a second, until a holographic image of They appeared in the centre of the room.

-Ugh! Why is this thing on Self-View! Turn it off! -

MY APOLOGIES, CAPTAIN

After a moment, a blueish hologram appeared where the self-hologram had been standing. It was sharper, more solid. The figure was long and slender but otherwise formless. They wore a long, sleeveless jacket that closed asymmetrically, and arm-length fingerless gloves. A long, sharp fringe covered one eye, and the other was partially hidden in an angular metal frame. A mask perhaps. Hair-like rounded protrusions stuck out, covering what might be some ears, with delicate cages enveloping them on either side of the face.

~Salutations, Emissary Jones, Shuttle 200769. I. am. TELLER. I can see you are rolling your eyes ~

-I am sorry, I was hoping that I might get to meet a member of the Mothership Council-

~I am the Council. I am their eyes, ears and mind~

-Sure, whatever. I meant I wanted to see a human, not an AI. –

~Maybe you will get one, if your call is worthwhile. ~

-I was calling to say my mission is complete. I found something. –

~That is good news. What did you find? ~

-One moment-

They tapped the glass cylinder and it slid open. They bounced over to Hale and grabbed her arm.

<Hey, you do not have to grab me. I can see where this is going>

-Ok, well get in that booth over there and I will reconnect-

Hale tentatively stepped into the hologram booth and let the light wash over her. She agreed with They, seeing herself in green on the other side of the room was rather disturbing. She turned it off.

-Seer, Reconnect-

~ Salutations, Emissary Jones, Shuttle 200769. I. am. TELLER. This is who you found? ~

-Yes. This is Dr. Sydney Hale, survivor of the Hestia 12 tragedy –

~Everyone on that ship died ~

<No. I am Dr. Sydney Hale. I took the Hestia 12 rocket from Earth on a course to the International Space Station, but there was a serious error and we went off -course. All the other astronauts died, but I survived until They found me>

-Permission to talk with the Mothership Council-

~... Granted~ TELLER flickered off the screen, but what replaced it did not seem human at first. Patterned skin, fingers with padding at the end, a long antennae protruding from the forehead and other strange markings.

"Well, now, you are quite something. A living historical specimen. How marvellous. You must return to the Mothership."

-Yes, of course. But we do not have the fuel to get back-

"Oh, that's not a problem. We can come to you."

Out of the corner of her eye, Hale saw an enormous rocket



appear through a window. It filled the entire length of the window, which stretched across the whole room. It was like all the stars had been painted over.

### **CAPTAIN, PARTY FROM THE MOTHERSHIP**

The person who had been on the screen only a moment ago was now standing in the spot where their hologram had just been. Hale and They both left their hologram booths and approached. For a split second, Hale swore she saw a look of intense disgust, but it soon passed. The person took They's shoulder and shook it heartily.

**"Well done, They. Who would ever have guessed you would find the lost ship Hestia 12 on your travels? The histories are being rewritten as we speak. And the... astronaut?"**

**<Yes, astronaut is fine. Hale>** Her shoulder was shaken too. She did not know what was wrong with hands.

**From "The Legend of Hale: Volume 2" Published in universal format, OEH Dial 25.04.2503**

The first few weeks went by in the blur. She spent a lot of time in a quarantine bay, being screened for various ancient diseases and vaccinated against many things she had never even heard of. She felt like a caged animal, with doctors and historians alike lining her window to get a glimpse of this strange visitor. She was not sure what year they were counting here, but They was somewhat behind.

Once she was finally released from quarantine, she became an instant celebrity. She even starred in a few movies, even

a re-enactment of the "Hestia 12 Tragedy" (although this one had a lot more acid-spewing twelve-legged monsters than she remembered.) At first, they found her human qualities novel and quaint, but after a while she was pushed to have bio-hacking gear pushed into her body, and even to design her own children based on "the historical ideal" as some kind of experiment. Hale had children on Earth. She wondered sometimes if they survived and somewhere in this planet sized ship were her descendants, but she would not be able to recognize them if they were. It was difficult to get time to herself. She was tossed from interviews to universities as a living historical record.

But in her piecemeal free time, she had time to plan. The post-primitive humans, that is what they called themselves, had not forgotten what They did, and They were thrown into a state-of-the-art prison. Everyone knew that Hale visited. News had spread that Hale fell head-over-heels for They in their time alone together on the ship, and they carried on their courtship from a distance. This was not true, but the rumours of love affair had afforded Hale more and more liberty in the prison. The guards were slowly lowered, until it was time. Hale kneeled next to They,

**"You were right. This place is horrible. I want to go on an adventure, see what it is like back home. But we can still have some fun here if you like. You ready?"**

They smiled, the force shield holding them in evaporated, and the piercing sound of the alarm wormed through Hale's brain, "I thought you would never ask."

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## **BONUS CONTENT: The Legend of Hestia 12 : The Lost Records**

**"I'm excited to see what it looks like compared to the chainwriting piece. My prediction is that great minds don't always think alike."**

*Phoebe Fay*

And now, here is the chain from the same starting section!

# THE LEGEND OF HESTIA 12: LIFE SUPPORT

Phoebe Fay, Paulina Smolarova, Dani, light\_harted, Dan Scott, Mimimi Mimi Mi,  
Niko Kristic, Evan Indigo, Joanna Choules, Rosemary Little

From AI Black Box Recording on LEAF: Emissarial Shuttle 200769.

Time in Old Earth Hours (OEH Dial) 11.04.2500 15:30,

Time on Nearest Living Planet: N/A

Translated to Old English

CAPTAIN, SHIP APPROACHING FROM THE HEMUDU SYSTEM. WOULD YOU LIKE TO MAKE CONTACT?

-A ship? But there's no ships coming up on my radar-

I HAVE SCANNED THE SHIP AND CANNOT TRACE IT TO ANY LICENSED PARTS OR WHOLESALE MANUFACTURERS. IT IS EITHER VERY OLD OR VERY ILLEGAL

-I still can't see it-

WITH RESPECT, CAPTAIN, LOOK OUT THE STARBOARD WINDOW. THAT IS NOT JUNK

-Oh! Are you sure about that? Request communications-

COMMUNICATION REQUESTED.... PERMISSION GRANTED. CONNECTION IS POOR

<⚡⚡●●□☞○☒■☞○♁✠•♁●♁ >

-Ugh, translation please! I'm sorry I can't understand you! -

<◆⚡☞◆☞ >

APOLOGIES CAPTAIN. IT TOOK A WHILE TO FIND THIS LANGUAGE IN MY DATABASE. TRANSLATING FROM OLD ENGLISH

<--llo? Hello?>

-Hi there. Who are you? What is this ship? What are you doing here? -

<Hello! My na-- Hale. Thi-- Hestia 12. I was -- mission to dis--er life on new planet-- there was an error---

we got pushed off course>

-Hestia 12? That... that can't be right...-

<My rocket-- bad shape. I don't think I can--- home. Mind if-- ride?>

-Who else is there with you? Where is home? -

<It's.... --- just me>

-Solo mission huh? Me too-

<I need -- back to Earth>

-Earth?-

Were they for real? Hestia 12, but in the history lessons, the crew, didn't they all... and that was centuries ago... had they been out here all this time? It is possible.... how did they not know?

-Hestia 12? What happened? Should I send you a module?-

Artemis 74 stared in disbelief at the control screen, nervously tapping on the panel, waiting for the response. They couldn't believe it was real, but the evidence suggested otherwise. Hestia 12, a pioneer of intergalactic travel lost on a mission - hundreds of years ago.

-Did we lose her?-

THE CONNECTION APPEARS TO HAVE CUT OUT, BUT I'M NOT SURE WHICH SIDE IS THE SOURCE OF THE PROBLEM. OUR SYSTEMS ARE WORKING ON IT-

A beep abruptly interrupted AI and it seemed hurt by such rudeness, but it went on translating the now-familiar voice.

<PI-- Do... Come. --No crew, everyone... none here. Hest-- requests -- connection. Systems falling-- >

-What's happening?!-

Yet no more words came.





-AI? Are you purposely disconnecting us? You were warned...-

**CAPTAIN, THERE IS NO CONNECTION ANYMORE. NOT EVEN DIGITAL NOISE.**

Artemis frowned, and tried to not act impulsively. After all, they were alone. If anything happened, they would have to rely only on themselves and on a sometimes-not-very-cooperative AI.

-Can we send a module?-

**I'M AFRAID ALL AUTONOME MODULES WERE USED LAST TIME, YOU'VE SENT THEM AFTER THE SPACE PIRATES.**

Ah, that thing. Why had they been such an idiot?

It was risky to abandon the ship, but flying away from such an opportunity?

**OH, AND - CAPTAIN! I ADVISE YOU, IF YOU WANT TO ACT, ACT QUICKLY. THE SHIP IS DRIFTING AWAY.**

-Act now! Prepare the module, immediately. While I'm away, look after the ship. I trust you. And if she calls us again, tell her that I'm coming to help.-

**End of AI Black Box Recording on LEAF: Emissarial Shuttle 200769. Time in Old Earth Hours (OEH Dial) 11.04.2500 15:47, Time on Nearest Living Planet: N/A Translated to Old English**

Artemis quickly took all the guns to the module. You never know if those damn pirates will show up again. Or something worse.

Piloting modules was a bit of a hassle, mostly because the local AI often felt abandoned and therefore refused to work properly. They took one last moment to check everything and set off to the old ship.

It took a minute or two to find an entrance. Artemis expected a protocol of some sort, but the doors just opened, letting the module in.

The floor felt unstable as they stepped into the ancient spaceship. A bad feeling blossomed inside them. There was a suspicious silence.

The ship was empty.

Artemis advanced, hearing the airlock close behind them.

(They had been hesitant to put their life in the hands of a centuries-old ship, but the module AI, inclined to be talkative after an eight month mission of mostly silence, had waxed eloquent on the emphasis on failsafes and margins of error in the good old days.

'Much easier to have an accident on one of these new-fangled modules!' it had trilled and beeped, leaving Artemis almost anxious to leave the module and climb on board the Hestia, but not at all looking forward to the prospect of getting back with... a passenger?)

Their boots clanked down the neat lines of 22<sup>nd</sup> century post-Reintroductionist panelling, but no-one came to hear, despite the lingering atmosphere – stale, but breathable, and certainly able to convey sound.

But there was a voice, from the corridor's end.

"Hestia requests life-support connection."

Undoubtedly the voice from the hail, but calm, unbroken. Communicating in a language Artemis could understand, too.

"What's a life-support connection? Some Reintroductionist slang? Where are you?"

"You must understand. We were sent to discover life on planets. The mission deteriorated. You were sent to discover living planets. A life support connection is required. The panel, here."

Hestia drifted through space, with the little limpet of Artemis' module shuttle suckered onto one end, spinning, accelerating, leaving Emissarial Shuttle 200769 far behind.

Artemis, knowing none of this, approached the panel.

The lights in the spaceship flickered and Artemis instinctively reached for the gun in their leg holster. Through the door just beyond the panel Artemis thought they could make out the shape of a lone figure. They called out again, 'I want you to come out into the corridor where I can see you.'

'A life support connection is required.'

The voice rung out, echoing down the corridor to Artemis and making their hair stand on end. They cursed softly and pulled their gun out from its holster with clammy palms. Artemis was seriously beginning to wish that they had stayed on their shuttle, uncooperative AI and all. Taking a deep breath and steadying their grip on the weapon, Artemis took another step forward.

Suddenly, the panel on the wall lit up and Artemis felt themselves lurching forward. 'AI!' Artemis shouted in panic as they were dragged down the corridor towards the panel. All Artemis got in reply was a buzz of static. They tried to dig their feet into the floor of the spaceship to stop their inexorable slide towards the panel but the force tugging on them was relentless. Artemis fired their gun at the panel, landing two bursts of plasma right into its centre. However, the shots seemed to pass straight through the panel, like they were being absorbed by it and Artemis let out a scream of frustration.

The light from the panel was getting stronger the closer Artemis got and they were forced to look away. As they were dragged the last few metres towards it, Artemis shouted out to the figure, 'Help me! What do you mean, a life support connection?' They got no reply as they were dragged head first into the panel.

--- Now, had the AI on Emissarial Shuttle 200769 been even slightly more forthcoming with information, it would have informed Artemis that a number of unexplained disappearances had been reported in this sector recently. Unfortunately for Artemis, their AI had many personality traits of which 'generously forthcoming' was not included. A thorough investigation from the Intergalactic Diplomacy Incident Inspector's Office would later uncover that the AI's omissions were not out of any particular malice towards the ship captain, but instead some innate (likely learned) tendency not to procure information except when explicitly

asked. ---

Artemis was beginning to feel desperate. As they were dragged into the shimmering panel on the wall, they shouted to nowhere in particular, "I am the captain of an emissarial shuttle! Harming me would be in violation of intergalactic law." Artemis knew, of course, that such tactics never really worked. If someone, or something, were the type to abduct a ship captain, they likely had little regard for intergalactic law.

Artemis' head passed into the panel and their vision blurred. "We do not wish to harm you," the voice said. But the voice no longer seemed to be coming from a physical place. Rather, it reverberated in Artemis' head as if it were their own thoughts.

"A life support connection is required. We must integrate you into our being." The voice was no longer distinctly singular. It rang of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of cadences. "We welcome you to the Consciousness, Artemis."

The Consciousness is a *weird* place. Well, "place" is perhaps the wrong word, for they *are* the Consciousness, and the Consciousness is them.

At least that was Artemis's first thought. Again, "first" is perhaps the wrong word again, for they feel like they've been there since the beginning of time. But what's "there"?

The Consciousness paused for a second. He thought he was from the Old Earth, a place that was once vibrant with primal life force but long lost in atomic flames. But no, he was a Martian, he watched the Grey Planet turn blue and his own Green Planet turn red long before he existed. Yet she remembered a different sun, blazing white and blue rays above her beloved purple sky. There was a being, they called them Artemis, who has never seen the solid surface of a planet, nor did they know any other sky than the starry vast darkness outside the Homebase - *wasn't it once called the International Space Station?* - and he thought they were once that being. Oh and the chase. The hunger. The lurking. The electromagnetic wailing of its prey. It had no shape. It roamed the vast nothingness and devoured beings of other forms. Countless beings. Or was *xe* someone who almost perished because *xe* refused to partake in the fertility ritual? Yet no remorse was felt for its past, although it was also *xir* past, his past, her past, their past. He remembered both sides of ecstasy when she had sex with him and he had sex with her. They were colleagues, bosses, giving orders and taking them, failing to execute and scared of being thrown overboard. Throwing them overboard. They remember the rage and the fear alike. Like a book - *what is a book?* - all the stories happening at once on every page, bleeding through the thin layer of identity, shining through both sides of the same page, simultaneously, disconnected, intermingled.

Yet it was the simplest, clearest thing in the world. *The Consciousness is I.*

*The Consciousness is I.*

Form the words again in your mind. 'The Consciousness is I'.

Mould them with the faltering apparatus of your lips, if you have to.

Don't be afraid! If you think it bizarre (and from a certain simian perspective it might be) then recall that mortal solipsism has blinkered numerous travellers before you. If I recall correctly, I was myself deceived once in this way... the year was 2500; maybe 2020; maybe later and maybe all three.

But I digress! Oh, read it again, I urge you. 'The Consciousness is I' – subtlety! With all the potential energy of an aphorism and all the sonorous resonance of a mantra (and *you* know many of both, I daresay). I believe you're marvellously cognisant of 'all the stories happening at once on every page' (how many *have* you read so far?) – and your awareness grows with every word. But you can't trick me. You know full well what a 'book' is!

But confound these pronouns, they are inadequate. 'You' have read the incantation enough times, exposed yourself to the viral language sufficiently, for 'me' to enter into your perspectival reality. 'You', 'reader', are 'me', 'I' am the Consciousness, the Consciousness is I.

What syntactical bravura! Surely not, you exclaim, this is absurd, this is overly complicated, this is nonsensical! But it is necessary. I will continue the mission of Hestia 12 (I will read that last phrase again, I will be convinced of my agency), I will discover new life on new worlds.

'I am thankful that I have joined the Consciousness'.

Yes, reader, you should be. You have brought us, through your mind, to Earth.

\* \* \*

Arese was unconvinced. Sigmund sighed and tried again.

"Look, I know it seems a bit fishy, but we've not had a good haul in almost a month. At this rate we'll have to try a raid on a mining station or something, and that'll be way more risky." He said, surveying the circle of companions around him.

Arese held fast. "We've still got food enough for a week or two," she said, "and our coffers will stretch a little even after that. I just think it's safer to try our luck in another system before we board an unknown vessel that may or may not be a long-lost mission from Old Earth". She saw a few nods from the rest of the crew, but she could tell that most of them were more in agreement with Sigmund than her. They'd been through a rough patch for sure – even that weedy Emissarial Shuttle had slipped through their fingers – but she hadn't realised how desperate they were getting.

The transmission had come through a few hours ago by now – after a few hours of running the distress call through a translation algo - and the thirteen-strong crew of the *Sycamore* had been discussing what to do about it ever since. The message was pretty absurd, and in their line of work that usually signalled danger, but their scans had revealed some pretty rare tech; a bit antique, but it would fetch a high price to the right buyer. The rest they could at least sell as scrap.



On board the *Sycamore* decisions were made by consensus; there was no captain, and (supposedly) no hierarchies. Every member of the crew had a stake in their success, so every member had a say in what they did or didn't do. With a major decision, everyone had to agree to it before it was carried out, and that made for lengthy discussions sat around in the hold of the *Sycamore*. While the majority of the crew were in favour of heading to the Hestia 12 (if it even was that ship), salvaging the tech, and maybe taking on board the lone crewmember, there were a few who were still holding out.

"It just feels like a trap," Arese continued, "It feels like the kind of trap we would lay to be honest, but maybe a bit more dramatic."

"I agree." This was Tarm, who had been silent up until now, picking mites out of her feathers, as she did when lost in thought. "I think it's certainly a trap, but I think it's one we can't afford not to trigger. We should approach with caution, and with a plan, but we should certainly approach. Maybe we should even take The Sensitive aboard." As she said this, she shot a glance at the person in question, sitting cross-legged beside Sigmund, purple robes draped over pale blue skin. Xe didn't react.

Others around the circle did, though, drawing sharp breaths and muttering incredulously. Now they were really talking high-risk, high-reward. The *Sycamore* had picked up The Sensitive while they were getting supplies on some backwater planet in the Outer Rim a few years back. As a Sensitive of the Way xe spent most of xir time meditating on the best courses of action, or looking after crewmembers' psychological health. Xir advice – often psychically-informed – had proven invaluable to the crew many times, both as individuals and as a collective. The teachings of the Way were pacifical, so xe tended not to join in on raids or salvaging trips.

"And why would we do that?" Arese responded, caught off-guard. She had counted Tarm among those with enough sense to leave this trap unprung.

"Well, assuming this 'Hale' person is on board, we'll need xir with us to communicate, right?" said Tarm, "The translation algo took hours to parse the distress call, and we won't have hours to make decisions if we go aboard. You'll be able to do your mind-speak-thingy with them, right?" she looked at The Sensitive, waiting for a response. After a pause, xe nodded.

"And if it is a trap," Tarm continued, "then hopefully xir premonitions will be able to give us a heads up if things are about to go to shit."

The group considered a moment.

"I like it." Sigmund said, nodding. He looked over at The Sensitive. "How would you feel about coming aboard? We could assign you a guard, if you'd like. And are those things within your... capabilities?"

Silence, for a second.

And then, softly, "If we go, I will come. These things I can do." Another pause. "A guard.... Yes. Please. We are right to be cautious."

"Huh. Arese, what do you think?" said Sigmund.

"Hell Sig, I still don't feel great about it, but I'd feel better with Sen there. I'd be happy to stick with xir too."

"Okay. So do we have consensus?" said Tarm.

Around the circle heads nodded: they were in agreement. Collectively, they got to their feet and began the preparations to board. The Sensitive excused xirself, citing the need to prepare mentally in solitude for a little while, and headed for xir personal quarters.

Adherents of the Way were often misperceived as easy-going, possessed of a perfect inner peace. This was maybe somewhat true of the minority who ventured out into the wider universe – most of them finding work as therapists, mediators, and the like – but the psychological effects of the intense self-reflection and mind-focusing practices demanded by the Way were rarely predictable. Mostly they were at least beneficial – theologically speaking, anyway – but a robust therapeutic tradition had also arisen to treat the cases where they weren't. The widespread good reputation of Way psychotherapy came from one simple fact: its practitioners had seen it all before. And if they were precognitive Sensitive, they'd seen some of it afterwards as well.

The Sensitive aboard the *Sycamore* contemplated the message xe'd heard. The algo-translation had stripped away a lot of nuance, and xe wasn't versed in the Old English of the original, but between those two versions and the instinctual signals of xir own Sensitivity xe had come to a firm conclusion: Hale wasn't real.

Or maybe they were real, or had been real, in another place and time – the name 'Hale' had to come from somewhere, after all – but not here, not now. The message, the voice it was delivered in, weren't just patchy because of bad comms: they were literal patchworks of different voices, different minds. The Sensitive smiled. *A Consciousness beckons.*

The only times xe had heard about Consciousnesses were third- or fourth- or fifth-hand accounts, all passed down through generations of Sensitive until they had reached xir mind. Through the murkiness of hand-me-down memory, the Sensitive glimpsed fractured images of contact with Consciousnesses, their tendrils grasping, coiling, at the mind of anything that dared cross its path.

And, more importantly, they caught a flash, fast but clear, of the mind-battles fought against it. The Sensitive before them who had pulled apart each writhing conscious thread as if they were combing out sticky, tangled wool, the Consciousness raging against yet unable to absorb them. Of the hundreds, sometimes thousands of souls liberated from its swelled glob of a mind.

Behind the neatly combed purple hair that coated xir face, the Sensitive's lips twitched up into a soft smile as they gazed out at Hestia 12.

*It's time to hunt a Consciousness.*

# CUSFS x Assassin's Guild CROSSOVER

This issue is also a fun crossover between the creative writing we see here at CUSFS, and that which we see in the unusual fountain of fantasy, the Assassin's Guild public forum! (It seemed an unmissable opportunity given the title.)

For the uninitiated, The Assassins' Guild hosts termly tournaments of mock assassinations involving Nerf weaponry, water pistols and all manner of non-dangerous objects, with the last standing declared the winner.

See <http://assassins.soc.srcf.net/> for more details.

Players report their kills under a pseudonym - which many then take as a great opportunity to tell their story from an invented persona's perspective. Here is just a sample of the zany characters that spring up each year.

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## A BEGINNING

By [Nyx.08](#) (KC Onuorah)

Nowhere was safe. Not even in the colonies, where we all huddled together, broke bread with one another and anguished for new beginning. For a time before the Crash. Here, these men were my brothers; these women my sisters.

We stood in solidarity as barbarians tried clambering at the chapel gates, hated spewing from their rotting corpses.

I knew the man. A medic.

He spoke my mother tongue, so we had idle conversations of a time before they took over.

We called him 'spiras', a *ghost*, a fleeting figure, who lurked in the colonies only seen helping stop the infected transforming into the barbarians.

To me, he was more than friend. A confidant, a priest in this inferno we were living in.

I traded my courage for comfort, forgetting the barren wasteland we had succumbed to.

There was suspicions of course. The incessant claims of the worst infected about the traitors within the colonies. I myself heard the strange mutterings of "spiras" drift through the desolate doorways, the sweet humming of consternation that troubled the tribe. I soon grew tired of the fear and the unknown, armed myself and sought the truth.

I followed the whispers all the way down the backdoor stairwell, where we were told never to walk alone in fear of what lurked in the shadows. My legs pushed through the unease as I struggled to climb towards the sound. As I reached the floor, I saw the 'spiras' hunched over with the

mutations of humanity. Barbarians.

My knife clattered to the floor, the sound echoing throughout the stairs. His head swivelled round and we locked eyes. His feral, unbound eyes awoke something in my very being. An urging which started after the crash. With all the volition I could muster, I leapt towards him as he vanished through the halls. I hunted him like the apex predator to her prey as he fled to the colonies' stairs.

After a relentless chase, I found solace in an accomplice's room near where the "spiras" lived to try and make sense of this betrayal. We talked of leaving this cursed place and find refuge in the old central, London with other disillusioned survivors. It was clear this place wasn't at all what it seemed. There was no such thing as comradeship in the colonies. Though as we talked, I heard the slight familiar whisperings. In this moment, time and reality blurred together. I had to make a choice. I grabbed my weapon, sprinted towards the door and right before he could grab his knife, I shot the "spiras" right in the heart.

I can't remember much else after that.

Just feel his lifeless figure twitching on the ground, my red soaked hands and his same feral, unbound look I had before I pulled the trigger.

I no longer know who are worse. The barbarians, or the ones fighting to survive.



# THE THOUGHTS OF A WEAPON OF MASS DESTRUCTION

*By The Fat Man (Yuhang Xie)*

Ever since I was small, I had always been hungry. My fathers fed me uranium, refined, tasty uranium. And I have been eating ever since. That's how I am this size, and you may think that I am ashamed of being this large. No, no, right the opposite. I am proud of it! I am bigger and stronger than any other bomb. I am the modern age. Those incendiary bombs were always flaming at me but let them see who can bring the most flames. Tonight, is the night.

I am in the plane, shaking and bumping in the turbulence. But I am safe in my harness, half asleep. Then I hear the alarm, a little tiny thing, beeping. One of my companions has come in to set me up. His hands tickle the valves and buttons on my surface. I giggle with a little metallic knock and ring. My good friend left before the hanger doors open. Finally! Those incendiary bombs better be watching. I start falling, feeling the air rush past my bald head and the exhilarating acceleration of gravity and the warm spread of tingly feeling inside me. I see the city lights below me, like a thousand, thousand stars. There are no clouds tonight, and the moon gleams off the river.

The warm tingly feeling is becoming more intense. My whole inside vibrates with everything I had eaten. It feels glorious. It is as if the lights are a million camera flashes capturing my magnificence. I may be big, but I am beautiful.

I near the buildings and the little tiny people, gazing up in awe.

Khaboom, I sing.

The tingly feeling turns into bubbling which turns into vicious rumblings. And I feel my insides beginning to expand

with the pressure of a thousand suns. That's right, I will light up the world! No being shall live in darkness again. My magnificence will dazzle them.

And as my metallic skin fracture and snap, and the light shine through, along with the heat and jumble of emotions and hopes and dreams. Everything I had ever dreamt about, each thought, even the one about becoming a baker, spill forth. It is an instant that feel like forever. I savour it.

And the city begins to kneel before my magnificence. And the people wash away in the light.

And then the instant is over. And I become nothing more than a rising cloud of ash and dust and aftertaste. It was a glorious life. And I sigh as I rise higher into the sky. I was magnificent.

As the last of my insides become outsides, as the last shockwave blast through the city, as the ashes rise higher and begin to dissipate, I became a memory. My body is no more. It has returned to the natural order of things, death and radiation. I watch my work, a million dazzling fires. Applause fill the air, the crashing of vehicles, the collapse of buildings. And as the radiation settles over my audience, silence follows. The show is over. The curtains are closing. My magnificence fizzles out like mushroom clouds dissipating. Even the memory of me will fade with half-lives.

But I was once magnificent. I cherish that memory of it. The tingling and excitement and nervousness of the kahboom.

As the curtains close and the lights turn out. I smile once more.

# HUNGRY IS THE MADMAN

By *Animal Man* (Ellery Gopaoco)

Hungry is the madman.

Hungry are the delirious.

This is the land of damp and heat and the iron tang of blood. We prowl the jungle with Good Boy always one step behind. (*The only other presence I tolerate is the Little Girl.*) My head swims and my mouth waters. There is nothing here for me but the song of flesh. Fresh meat – sweet but savoury, and the strong scent of ammonia, as the man relieves himself. He quakes in his outhouse while the jungle closes in on him.

Mouth hot and dry. The pulse of need wears everything down - slowly, *slowly* - (you, me, the thoughts, the thoughts we had) - like drops of water. *Because mine is the story of a long wait*, like the formation of a jungle - a succession - undergrowth, thick brush, have patience. Mine is the long wait, mine is the jungle. Two hours, twenty-four. The tips of trees split and diverge into fractals, crowding the sky with canopy. There's nothing at the end, only putrescence, steamed in the tropical heat - and there's no end to the beginning, only- only-

(*The Little Girl stops, ears cocked, listening for the warble of other men. It could have been the wind. Or it could have been the rustle of unclean thoughts. It could have been my own ears cocked – or maybe there was never anyone else at all, but meat. Fresh meat.*)

There is no end to hunger, nor rest for the wicked.

...

I could tell you of the air strikes, the jarring impact when they crashed into the earth and sent plumes of dust skywards. I could tell you of the waste left in its wake; slabs of concrete and warped steel struts, the smell of sulfur and brimstone.

I could, I could, tell you of **real hunger**, what it feels to have a hole in your stomach, gnawing away with its own teeth and tongue, a second mouth to feed, but what would you understand?

...

There's a stink in the air - like flesh sloughing off bone, like overripe fruits splitting. Gorged, belly swollen. *I'm not*, I'm not talking to myself, *myself*. Are you there, Little Girl? Something about your eyes - baby blue? - *except not* - and the irises are the hard orange of fossilized tree resin (the word you're looking for is **amber**), with an exquisitely preserved fly. Unreal, savage - a desert mirage in the thick moisture of the jungle.

Hungry is the madman. (**Her face distorts and swells, like bottleflies are hatching under her flesh**) - and there is a spurt of venal blood - not oxygenated, but nonetheless, airy on the palate - I remember her tiny hands, swamped in my fist.

**(What's happening, my head, someone let me out-)**

Only Good Boy remains, whispering susurrations until the rustle of broadleaves is the tremor in my marrow. *Forget everything*. Only Good Boy remains. (*The Little Girl whispers her need into my ear, until the combined chorus between us reaches a crescendo - twice over, thrice, ten-fold - there is no limit to hunger, just as there is no end to grief.*)

Quick steps, *quick steps*. The canopy stretches overhead like the only sky we've ever known. We crouch in the dark undergrowth, fingers gouging furrows into the damp soil. But perhaps it was just me. Perhaps Good Boy's wet tongue rasping over my cheek was just summer rain, and the Little Girl... the Little Girl... You might imagine the jungle falls silent, for one infinitesimal heartbeat - *pulse of blood, wet blink and swallow* - but-

There is no end to hunger. It outlives the dead. Under the sliver of the crescent moon, Good Boy lowers his head and tears a long strip of meat off the carcass.

There is no limit to grief.

...

**But for now, we will eat, and eat well.**



# A SHORT COLLECTION OF GALACTAWEB COMMUNICATIONS

by Your Friendly Galactic Farmer Who Specialises in Pointy Vintage Vegetables (Yuhang Xie)

[Loading from Archive...]

[Collection of Galactaweb Communications Found. Sender: Dave. Opening Communications]

[An Advertisement from Dave. Date: 26/01]

Hi, I'm Dave, your local galactic, Earth vegetable farmer.

Are you tired of eating the synthetic stuff that comes out of the printers? Are you deprived of vital nutrition and need something better? Do you have bad smelling farts?

Well here at Dave's groceries (it's an Earth word for a place where you buy ingredients, usually fruit and vegetables), I have just the thing for you! I grow and sell a range of organic Earth vegetables from carrots to cucumbers to brussel sprouts. Never heard of 'em? Well why not find out the joys of Earth vegetables. I grow them in Earth soil, yes 100% EARTH SOIL!

My family has been specialising into growing pointy vegetables for generations. You can count on me for the quality of your vegetables. And I also do free deliveries within 15 lightyears! So, get in your spaceship now or get on the Galactaweb and order now!

Cheers, (an Earth word for showing gratitude)

Dave

\* \* \*

[An Unfortunate ACCIDENT. Date: 01/02]

Dear Mother of SuperMegaUltraExtremeKindje,

I am very very sorry to inform you that your son, (SuperMegaUltraExtremeKindje) is dead. I was delivering my most prized, most pointy Earth carrot to his planet and living space today. You see, I care about my customers and I wanted to make sure to deliver the carrot in person, and so I waited in his living space. When he returned, I might have been overly eager to present the carrot to him (did I mention it was the best vintage carrot in my possession?). However, the gravity of the planet caught me by surprise and my carrot flew out of my hands and impaled him through the chest.

I am so terribly sorry for this tragic, accidental, incident. If you wish, I can recompensate you with a year's supply of vintage vegetables (they are the best in the galaxy!). I hope when you clone your son, he will still be how he used to be.

With sincere apology,

Dave

\* \* \*

[Dave Speaks to his Mother about the Incident]

Dear Mum,

I had an unfortunate accident today where a customer was impaled by one of my carrots. I am deeply unsettled. I just wanted to make the customer feel special. He is the first one to buy my vintage carrots! Do you think this will be bad for business?

I think I will continue this home delivery. Surely that shows that I care.

Hope you are doing well. How is it going on Planet Blooorg? Is it as sticky as people say?

Daveybear

\* \* \*

[An Enthusiastic Buyer Visits Dave. Date: 12/02]

Dear Schrodinger's Cat,

I am writing to first, express my surprise and joy for your enthusiasm for pointy vintage vegetables! It is so rare to find someone who loves them as much as me. And I understand the urge to get more! However, visiting me at [PLANET REDACTED] late at night is unfortunately not the best time to get your veg. You see I sell my veg all on the Galactaweb and not at my living space. Now I really do not want to deter you from choosing Dave's Vintage Veg in future. Please don't take this as bad customer service. It is just unprofessional to sell to people who come to your door.

Thank you, I really admire your enthusiasm! Let me know if

you want to order any veg in future and I will throw in a 42% off deal!!!

Cheers,

Dave

\* \* \*

[Dave Speaks to his Mother]

Dear Mum,

Last night someone came to my home! And no, it's not what you think! They came to buy some pointy vegetables! Is this a sign that the business is finally thriving? Unfortunately, I wasn't in, but I hope they visit again. I even sent them a message giving them a big 42% discount.

Why 42? Well there's just something about that number. Every shop is using 42% discounts these days. I don't want to deviate from the trend now. Business has been slow; this person was the second person to show interest in my veg (the last one died remember?). Maybe these days people just don't appreciate vegetables any more...

By the way, I did not receive an E-postcard from Planet Blooorg. Are you okay, mum? Is the Galactaweb connection poor there?

Hope to hear from you soon!

Love, Daveybear

\* \* \*

[Another Death Related to Pointy Vegetables. Date: 14/02]

Huge Prizes. Huge Prizes. Huge Prizes.

Congratulations to our prize winner KL! Due to her interest in Dave's Vintage Veg, she has received Dave's special pointy cucumber! There's nothing like it in the whole Galaxy. Unfortunately, the cucumber may have been too pointy, and she is now deceased (she died from over excitement of course!).

But never mind that! Dave's Vintage Veg is going on a half-price sale for the foreseeable future. I just want to share all these wonderful vegetables with you all. Please. Buy my veg.

Cheeeers

Dave :)

[Nutrio Incorporated Moves into the Galaxy. Dave is Worried. Date: 20/02]

Coming to a Galaxy near you. Nutrio Incorporated. Organics are messy. 4D printed Nutrio bars will give you all the necessary compounds to survive and thrive. Trust the latest in synthetic food technology. Become the machine you've always wanted to be.

Our previous customers reviews:

Rayne, Cleric of the Order of Water: \*recording not found\*

Minnie Mouse: \*recording not found\*

See, we are the best.

Nutrio Incorporated. Organics are messy.

\* \* \*

[Dave Responds to another Potential Customer. And to Nutrio Incorporated]

Dear Panda,

My utmost apologies that you missed me yesterday. I must have been absent for a very valid reason (even farmers have a life ya know). However, I am DELIGHTED that you are so enthusiastic about your vegetables, the proper non synthetic stuff! Next time, it might be a good idea to drop me a galactalogue before visiting me. I am looking forward to meeting you!(Business has been poor, I'm so glad I have a customer :) )

Also, whilst I'm here, Nutrio Incorporated, this is my Galaxy! Get your filthy robotic hands off my customers. No one wants your metallic bullsh\*t! (Old Earth curse word relating to a extinct domestic animal and it's excretory products). I will fight you.

Not cheers,

Dave

\* \* \*

[Dave Speaks to his Mother about Competition]

Dear Mum,

Do you have any tips on getting customers, Mum? Gotta admit that the business is struggling a bit. It doesn't help that everyone who buys my veg seems to mysteriously die. I just want to make Dad proud... Now it's going to be more difficult, especially as those Nutrio bastards moved into the





galaxy, selling synthetic crap, stealing business. Where's the support for local businesses? This government, seriously, leaving the Intergalactic Council in 36 days! WITH NO DEALS SIGNED. It really has screwed families like us.

Hope you find time to visit soon (and reply to my messages). I've made your favourite carrot soup.

Love, Daveybear

\* \* \*

[Dave decides to get militant about business. Date: 25/02]

Hey all! Dave here!

Oh, have I got the VEG for you! Recently Nutrio moved into the galaxy. But you don't want their synthetic stuff. It is a common known fact that synthetic food leads to higher risk of disease. That's right. Instead, choose Dave's Vintage Veg. They're pointy and they're tasty.

The veg is now FREE, 100% off! Just pay delivery! I will personally be making these deliveries.

Hope to see your lovely faces soon!

PS. I am not liable for any vegetable related accidents. Buy purchasing these vegetables, you assume all responsibility for your own life.

\* \* \*

[Final Galactaweb Communication from Dave to Mum. Date 02/03]

Dear Mum,

It's so strange...

I made so many deliveries over the past few days. I even hired some CopyBots to copy my movements and deliver for me! We sold soooo many veg! Like to almost everyone in the Galaxy!

But this morning, I stepped out of my rickety excuse for a spaceship (do you remember our family heirloom, decades old, still relies on warpdrive!) onto the planet where I was meant to make my delivery. I held the pointiest of all pointy carrots, our best crop, in my hands. The spaceship port was deserted, there were no workers, no robots, no usual clang and the whirl of all things working.

And I stepped out onto the streets and the artificial forest beside it. There were no lights on at the abode that I was delivering to. In fact, there were no lights at all.

I left that planet and went around delivering to others. But there was no one there. No one left at any of the planets. I left messages for my customers. No one replied.

I look around the galaxy and all I see is silence...

There are no customers left.

It's all... empty.

So empty.

Hope to hear something other than silence, Mum.

Love, Daveybear

PS. Did you ever receive that pointy carrot I sent to you in the post before your trip to Planet Blooorg?

# UNDER THE CHERRY TREE

A never-before seen piece

By Kouya Yoshimoto (Xia 'Chris' Mengying)

Makoto Hashimoto is standing under the full blooming cherry tree, outside the Matsumura house. The early spring wind is moist, the sky is dark and cloudy, and Makoto wrapped herself further into her navy coat intuitively. Her hair is half wet, her lips a bit trembling, but she does not complain. She is smiling. The Matsumura Mansion is in the famous Setagaya city of Tokyo, "the rich city" as called by other people. It's a Victorian style, three-storey detached house, standing out among other modern Japanese buildings. After the War, the old Setagaya city was mostly destroyed as the traditional houses were all bombed into ruins; avant-garde, post-modernist structures in light-weight nano-fabric became pervasive during the revival period. Makoto does prefer a bit of nostalgia in the new world though, even if she herself was "born" post-war.

There's something more important to do than simply appreciating the mansion in front of her. Makoto knows this very well, but she remains standing under the full blooming cherry tree, reposes herself peacefully, and tries to reach out the falling cherry petals. If someone walks close up and inspects the scene carefully, they will be scared by what they see: pink, fragile cherry petals just fall through Makoto's right hand and silently drop on the sidewalk, as if Makoto was not there.

"Your mobile." Wataru Sasaki is checking his plasma gun when hearing the small noise behind him. He does not look up; calibrating a plasma gun is a delicate process, and he cannot bear the consequence of redirecting his attention even for one second. Behind him is his long-term companion Mamoru Shinoda, who is now in charge of the team coordination.

"Brother Wataru," his ear catches a clear sigh from his back, "Hashimoto just messaged us. She said no one has been leaving the Matsumura Mansion."

"What time is it now?"

"Half past seven." Mamoru frowns. "Brother Wataru, is your schedule correct? If we failed this time, it would be too difficult for us to have a second chance to catch Matsumura."

"I know Yuuri too well. He will definitely be here around 8 pm." Wataru utters calmly. "That's his schedule."

Really? Mamoru questions that in his mind but does not let the word slip. It does not mean he does not trust Wataru - after all, Wataru is far more experienced than him in the world of assassination. But the plan seemed to be too easy to implement. Their opponent is none other than Yuuri Matsumura - The Shadow Assassin in Tokyo. A person who almost never misses his target, the one with the highest

rank in the whole city, or even the whole of Japan. Is everything too good to be true?

Well, the more successful an assassin is, the more enemies they have. It is not only they who would like Yuuri Matsumura to die. There is one other lady that eagerly wants his blood too. From nowhere Makoto takes out a copy of The Tale of the Heike. The night is hovering above her head; the clock tower two blocks away strikes eight times. The streetlights are not bright enough for reading, but she does not care. Her fingers, instead of her eyesight, quickly run through the lines. All the words become alive when she touches them, and she murmurs the most famous opening passage of the whole book:

"The sound of the Gion Shōja bells echoes the impermanence of all things; the color of the sāla flowers reveals the truth that the prosperous must decline. The proud do not endure, they are like a dream on a spring night; the mighty fall at last, they are as dust before the wind."

Makoto doesn't need to look at the pages to check the content. She can recite the full book of The Tale of the Heike. She can recite the full book of The Tale of the Genji, the full book of Manyōshū, or actually, any book in the world. Holding a book is more like a simple time killer - or an attempt of disguise. No normal people would ignore her if she just stands under a cherry tree for an hour, doing totally nothing. "It's eight o'clock now." She smiles feebly, turns around to inspect the surrounding, then "leans against" the trunk. She really hopes to take a cup of tea, some freshly brewed Silver Needles. A cup of tea is always suitable for a chill spring night.

Wataru and Mamoru were sitting in a sandwich shop opposite Yoyogi National Gymnasium when the girl walked in. She closed her umbrella after entering the shop, but her hair was still damp. She did not go to the cashier to order any food, but simply looked around the shop as if to confirm anything. Then she saw them, turned towards them, and squeezed herself into the corner they were at.

"Wataru." She sat quietly next to the chair of Mamoru's, and politely waved her hand to Wataru. Mamoru was surprised; he thought no one could recognise their makeup.

"Miss Makoto. You need to order anything?" Wataru put his sandwich back to his plate. Mamoru could see that Wataru showed a decent degree of respect to the girl. That girl was strange - after all, a girl named Makoto is rare, even after the War.

"No, I just had dinner." The Makoto girl shook her head. "I don't trust any takeaway food."



"This is my colleague Mamoru Shinoda. Mamo, this is Miss Makoto Hashimoto from Hashimoto Laboratory, Imperial College Tokyo."

"Nice to meet you." Mamoru reached out to shake her hand, but the girl shook her head again.

"Thank you, nice to meet you too." She was a bit... extraordinary. Mamoru thought. But weirdos are everywhere after the War. He once met a man who could only speak fluently when standing upside down, and a group of women who washed their hands every ten minutes. Compared to them, the Makoto girl was so normal. The War has brought trauma to too many people; this girl looked in her early twenties, possibly two to three years older than him, so she must have been born before the War. No wonder she refused to eat takeaway food or shook hands with other people.

"Any new update from the lab?" Wataru asked casually.

"Nothing special. I woke up late this morning, and only checked the schedule you sent me against our information network apart from my daily routine research. Matsumura will follow the schedule, but you can expect around a ten-minute delay due to traffic from Setagaya to Yoyogi. I'm sending you the potential routes he might take from the probability calculation now." The Makoto girl took her mobile phone out, and quickly typed something. Then a message appeared on both Wataru and Mamoru's screens.

"Good. What are you going to do right now? Is home too early for you?" Wataru smiled contently when skimming the file.

"I will do something to make sure the plan can be completed. I will go to Setagaya to track Matsumura." She flipped her fringe and repositioned her glasses.

"That would be too troublesome." Mamoru said. "It's not easy for a girl to be involved in such a project, and you are not one of us."

"Mamo." Wataru was not very pleasant upon hearing this.

"If Miss Makoto could help us, we will surely make it. Hashimoto Lab is always trustful."

"I will just watch out and provide information." The girl smiled. "I don't... take weapons."

"I know." Wataru nodded.

"I'm heading to Setagaya; I will keep you updated. Thank you Wataru, see you soon." The Makoto girl stood up and waved goodbye to both of them.

"Good luck, Mamoru. I'm looking forward to the good news from you guys." She quickly walked out the shop. Mamoru stared her until she turned around the street corner.

Another customer walked in as the wind chime on the glass door rang cheerfully. Everything seemed to be too smooth, which was indeed not a good sign. But he did not have time to ponder more over that; he lowered his head and began to study the files sent from Hashimoto Laboratory. It has been two hours and five minutes since the duo met the girl named Makoto. Several messages from her have arrived in Mamoru's encrypted inbox, none of them is good. Half past

seven, a quarter to eight, and then eight o'clock. That should be the time when Matsumura appears.

"The event has started." A disappointed sigh from the monitors, Wataru scrubs his eyes.

"We have controls over all surveillance cameras around the gym, but none of them ever captured Yuuri." "

Then what should we do now?" Mamoru feels a sense of helplessness.

"Shall we wait for ten more minutes. If he is not shown for ten more minutes, we will leave," Wataru answers after a while.

"Brother Wataru, do you think that Makoto girl is... OK?" Mamoru finally raised the question in a delicate way.

"Mamo, it's different." Wataru slightly shook his head. "You know Hashimoto Laboratory at Imperial College London? Miss Makoto is the lab manager, and she manages the most powerful information network in all of Japan. We can control these surveillance cameras here, and perhaps Yuuri has the network of all businesses and organisations, but Hashimoto Laboratory could see everything, predict everything, if they want to. We should be glad that she remains neutral, or otherwise, we will not be able to survive."

Hashimoto Laboratory, the representative of all in-war and post-war information technology in Japan. Mamoru looks at his mobile phone on the desk. Without him doing anything, a notification pops up, "all Lawson convenience stores open after 23:00 in Shinjuku where roasted chicken wings are still available". That's exactly what he is thinking about - having some late night snack after the project, preferably roasted chicken wings and some beer. That's the power of technology of Hashimoto Laboratory.

"I don't think we can get him today. Brother Wataru, would you like some beer and chicken?" A couple of beautifully dressed college girls walk down the street of Setagaya. Makoto still "leans against" the trunk of the big cherry tree, singing "Tokyo Girls" mindlessly. She loves pre-war pop music more than post-war songs; she loves anything pre-war, books, architecture, and TV shows. Although she was "born" post-war. It is already half past eight. The night is deeper than before, and the rain has stopped some time before she notices that. The cherry blossoms are still waving in the silky spring wind. It's such a great time to appreciate the flowers, and Makoto plans to do that too. She takes her mobile phone out from nowhere, but does not dial anyone. Then she suddenly speaks in a very low volume. "Hi, Yuu-chan? How is the New Shinkansen? Have you settled down in Kyoto?"

A bright voice comes from other side of the phone, "Mako? I'm all fine. I bought you a small model of the train and I believe you will like it."

"Aw Yuu-chan - you're always that sweet." Makoto rests her left hand on her face. "You know I can't take any public transportation, so please do enjoy your time in Kyoto for me."

“Did Wataru attempt to find me?” “Of course, he thought you were still going to Yoyogi today, so he brought Mamoru Shinoda to ambush you.”

“Then how about you?”

“I told them your ‘plan’, and now I’m appreciating the cherry blossoms opposite your home. How old is the cherry tree?”

“I don’t know, it must have been there before the War. So you met Wataru and his colleague? Did they notice...”

“Wataru surely didn’t. Shinoda might suspect a bit, but you know, anything could happen in Hashimoto Laboratory, so I don’t worry about that. Sadly they met me in a sandwich shop; otherwise I could act more natural.”

“Is the current hardware enough for you? If it isn’t, I can help to build an actual body. It is not perfect, but Professor Hashimoto past away too early in the War...”

“It’s OK. A hologram is good enough. I don’t want a real body. That would be too human - I want to go for the ‘inhuman’ side. Maybe next time you can help to develop a better probabilistic algorithm? The current one is not that bad, but definitely not optimal.”

“I will have a look when we finish this. Take care, Mako, don’t forget to recharge the hardware.”

“No worries, I have backup battery pools.” Makoto nods despite saying so.

“You need to be careful too. Yuu-chan.”

“I will. Goodbye, Mako.”

“Talk to you soon.”

The call just ends. Makoto’s mobile phone just disappears from her hand, but nobody notices. She raises her head to see the cherry blossoms up the higher branches. The petals fall gracefully as the wind passes by. She raised her hand to catch the petals, only to let them fall through her body.

“Welcome to the journey of decadence. It is only because we live that we fall.” She could recite the full text of Discourse on Decadence, but that’s the only words in her mind at the moment. Makoto does not “live”, or “die”. She was created, instead of being “born”. As the last masterpiece artificial intelligence of Professor Hashimoto right before the War, the concepts of life and death are part of her knowledge, but to understand the reality, she lacks the essential ability to do so. At least, as she watches the dazzling cherry full bloom, she knows how to protect a person in this complex world. Even if that means she needs to lie, to pretend, to betray, to spare her energy on things she feels unnecessary. Yuu-chan will be happy about that. Thinking about this, Makoto smiles peacefully as she gradually disappears in front of the Matsumura Mansion, none of the pink petals is on her hair and shoulder.



[And what kind of Editor would I be if I didn't indulge myself with some shameless self-promotion? Here are the excerpts from my run in Assassins from Lent 2019. It is also (interesting/even more shameless) that I completely stole the start of this story from the start of the chain I was in last year- so credit must also go to the original writers of the section I used, of course.

So, with an ending never seen by anyone, including the assassins...]

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# THE ASTROGATOR'S LOGS

By *The Astrogator* (Shaun Vickers)

Beginning sourced from work also by :

Kelly Power, Tristan, Harley Jones, picturesquerain, Joe Ross-Biddles

<Astrogator's Log, Entry 0247>

Cecy Carrington feared that she was losing her wits. Day after day she pored over the star charts in the Great Map Room, making notes, making copies, trying to commit each tiny detail to memory. When she attended the evening dances, her mind was filled with spinning constellations. Her old governess would have been horrified by her inattention. This, she would have said, with that nasty, almost pleased air of vindication she had always adopted when Cecy ignored her admonitions and got into a scrape as a result, this is why nice respectable girls do not belong on starships. They pick up all manner of bad habits. If it had been Cecy's brother who had passed all the examinations and been offered a spot on one of the Empire's most prestigious starships as an apprentice astrogator, her family would all have been beside themselves with delight. As it was, their praise was decidedly muted. 'How very modern!' they said, and, 'Well, if you are certain that you want to do this, Cecilia.' Yes. Yes she was. Except that now it all seemed to be going wrong, and Cecy began to wonder if madness might not be the worst option. It had to be, when the alternative was that the stars on today's page of notes were themselves were waltzing through the heavens, impossibly shifting position on the page. Then there was the matter of the gentleman with the green cravat.

He ought not to have been aboard the ship at all.

The green cravat itself, however, only served as proof that he could do whatever he liked. Green was for military, and the crest emblazoned on it carried the rank of marshal, an incredible position for a man still in his early years: bright-eyed, strong jawline, and not a wrinkle to hide it. He'd even be quite attractive if it wasn't for the permanent smirk lodged above his chin. Starcruiser Bulwark was a leading

research vessel for systems both local and distant, so this armed presence was alien and uncomfortable. Focus. Enough daydreaming, and learn your stars for tomorrow's inevitable quiz from James, the ship's actual astrogator. Astora Medius' neighbours were... Jeraph Major? 10 astronomical units further from home. Or was it 15? Cecy groaned, and planted her feet as she stood up to put an end to her break - if you could call leaning against the corridor wall outside her bunkroom a break. She'd be better working now so she had time to dance again this weekend. She began to trudge back to her room... A scream of shearing metal burst down the corridor. Doorways ahead vanished into blackness. Searing pain clawed at Cecy's shoulder as she collided with the wall, thrown from her feet. The overhead lights sputtered back into life, and wails echoed faintly from the end of the corridor. Cecy gasped and clutched her arm as she stumbled forwards. She had to reach the bridge. She had to help. Now was no time to cower and hunt for bandages. The captain barked into the intercom.

++Adopt Brace Position. Attempting Emergency Lightspeed Manoeuvre. ++

Following the winding route to the bridge, another scream rang out as the wall to right shone out in a flash so bright it was still blinding through her eyelids and she was hurled against the opposite wall. That was the thing about lightspeed jumps, just as bad on the way out as the way in. Struggling against the urge to throw up, Cecy stumbled down the last few passages to the bridge, blindly groping for the lock of the bulkhead door as her sight slowly, and painfully, returned. The bridge was disorganised and chaotic even during a well-prepared lightspeed manoeuvre, but now there seemed to be at least a dozen crew shouting at a given time as others ran between control stations, checking and double checking every readout and gauge they could find. The gentleman in the green cravat was the sole point of stillness, standing firm like a rock in the stormy seas ships

used to brave in days gone by, his hands clasped simply behind his back watching the screen. Surely her sight must still be returning, Cecy thought. That must be it. The screen was black, with none of the stars you'd usually see. It was only when she noticed the chart in the corner that she realised; the screen was working, but there were no stars for lightyears, not just in front of them, but on the chart as well. She blinked, tried to refocus, but her head was still aching from the lightspeed jump. She slumped against the wall.

This was not really happening, surely; surely it was her brain playing tricks on her.

Green Cravat turned to her, his attention drawn by her stillness among the hubbub of the bridge.

"Carrington, isn't it?" he said, smiling. "James has been telling me about you – he says you show much promise. Come and join me at the helm for a moment." Cecy gathered herself together and approached. The Marshal may be being friendly but one slip could see her dismissed. "Stand here and tell me what you see in the screen." He gestured as he spoke for her to take his position.

"There's nothing, sir" she answered. "No stars, no visible craft..." "It certainly seems that way, Carrington." "There's nothing shown on the chart! Sir, I don't understand – "

"Keep calm" he interrupted, smiling reassuringly. "You've trained for this. Think: where would we have to be for there to be no visible stars?" Cecy stared at him in astonishment.

"A black hole? Or possibly the interior of some large rock planet? But that wouldn't explain the charts – " Again, he moved to placate her.

"Don't worry about the charts! Think – when, in normal operation, are there no stars visible?"

"During a light-speed shift! But that means - " She was beginning to get irritated by his constant interruptions.

"Yes. I've steered us into one of the portions of space that one visits during a light-speed shift." Cecy glanced at the screen again. The little chart pulsed in one corner. The rest of it was so dark that it seemed to suck the light out of the room.

"But that means... we are still in the shift-space," she said. Green Cravat cocked his head at her. He smiled. But Cecy barely noticed. The numbers ran through her head, calculations and equations from those nights under the harsh indoor lighting of the academy. "This should not happen." Cecy found herself walking to the console. She

touched the interface. The chart rotated. Still no stars.

"And why is that." Green Cravat stood beside her. A statement, rather than a question.

"It's not possible to stay in shiftspace for longer than a few milliseconds," she muttered. Green Cravat looked her up and down.

"James spoke true about you." He put a hand on her shoulder. "Now get us out of here," he said in a low voice.

Cecy stared at him dumbfounded. All her manners went out the window. "You think- / can deal with this? Do you even know what an astrogator does?" Cecy said. Green Cravat stepped closer. She could smell faint lavender perfume. Expensive organic stuff.

"This is an order. Get us out of here." And with that the man walked away. His boots clacked against the floor.

"Wait!" Cecy shouted, "where is James?"

So briefly she thought she might have imagined it, the man faltered, the military rhythm of his stride broken – and then he was gone, and the door slid shut behind him with a pneumatic hiss.

Cecy bit back a terribly unladylike curse, shoved her curiosity about James to the back of her mind, planted her feet and drew a deep breath. Handling the flagrantly impossible was her job.

"Astrogator's Override, Event Class Thaumiel, Emergency Code Apollyon," she murmured to the console. She walked over to the Primary Viewport, placed a hand against it, stared into the impossible blackness and thought. Reaching lightspeed – it wasn't lightspeed, but that relic of Ancient English had managed to reach the stars – required motion through shiftspace, but even the very best experimental hyperdrives could only sustain a dimensional transfer for a moment. The power cost grew exponentially with time: the energy to stay here for whole minutes should have drained dry every star in the sky. Cecy snatched her hand away from the viewport. It was hot but-

Oh.

The Marshal couldn't possibly maintain shiftspace this long. But if you had clearance to override the safety locks, if you didn't mind burning out the heat dispersion systems and bending the laws of physics to breaking point, you could set the ship's shielding to stretch a tiny instant out to... hours? Millennia? And that – trapped behind the sky, in a pocket of splintering time – that -was when Cecy saw something moving outside the viewport. A lone planet, not lit by any star but faintly glowing from permanent artificial light. Cecy wrenched at the controls, planets shouldn't be visible here either, which meant that the ship had finally exited shift-



space. Star locations flickered back onto the display, but they were a long way off. The fuel needle sat on low, and the Marshal was somewhere in the hull. The planet wasn't documented; it was a new find. But what exactly was it?

Well, in short, it was an arena.

\* \* \*

<Astrogator's Log, Entry 0251>

It was clear that a lot had taken place in the last 24 hours. The Bulwark had achieved a geostationary orbit over the grey planet after a tentative play on the controls. Cecy was simply glad she hadn't leant too far forwards onto the yaw lever and sent them careening off-course like a ... certain incident in her training. She felt sick just thinking about it. Anyway, the situation on the ship had quickly become bleak as the Marshal flexed his military authority over the various meek biologists and researchers the ship had been home to for the last decade of missions, and already the mood on the bridge was turning sour. James was nowhere to be seen still, and the Marshal and his blasted cravat hadn't slipped up once since James' first mention.

The Marshal had clearly decided that he'd had enough of her, too, so Cecy and a select group of others had been sent down in a reusable shuttle pod. The atmosphere of the planet was thinner than back home according to the scanners, but its higher proportion of oxygen meant it was quite safe to descend without breathing gear. Not that he'd have given them any anyway, the tyrant.

The pod descended eerily quietly to the surface. The windows of the shuttle were less viewports than rivet-holes someone had thought would be more tasteful when filled with glass, so when they landed with a soft thump, it was a fresh view that awaited them.

A white mist sat idly on a hard bed of cobbles, and towers, great halls and ancient complexes rose out of it like ships from a dead and lifeless sea.

But the planet was far from lifeless.

The bulwark had picked up heat signatures, but this was the extent of the information they had, and given how irregular they were it had been safe for Cecy to guess at them being small thermal vents. Vents did not have eyes, and vents did

not talk in alarmingly natural Galactic Common – it was simply that the lifeforms on the planet were so varied that each of them had their own body temperatures. And yet, this was no cosmopolitan hub. They skulked across the streets as quickly as possible, mist trailing and rolling in their wake. Everyone had places to be, and yet nowhere looked particularly high-priority. But now there were a group of 4, 5 scientists with gaping faces and taking pictures. Leers and growls were flung in their direction.

Cecy and her crew were in the way. Obstacles.

Trash.

This would turn sour, fast. It already was, ever more creatures of numerous limbs wielding an assortment of weapons, and her heart rose in her chest, and a cold sweat began a glacial trickle down her forehead.

"Time to go, guys...." Cecy interjected, and fled down a side alley with gates of wrought metal along one side, with chiselled stone on the other. She caught her breath and leant against a wall for just a moment. All the Marshal had given her team was that there was some person, some entity that was fond of this place, and to look for clues. No one even knew what he meant – but do you ever question someone when they have a holstered gun and a chiselled smirk?

That was, until the entity appeared out of the mist.

A slim figure clad in black waded towards them, a frothing creature in with muddy neon streaks and mean claws on a chain by its side.

"I hear you've been looking for me. My network has your ship as sending some questionable signals about my whereabouts. About my... allergies."

Sheer panic overwhelmed Cecy. She gripped her knife in her trouser pocket as she stepped back.

"Get the message across for me." He snapped, and tugged on the animal's chain. It leaped at Cecy, pinning her to the floor, hands hopelessly at her sides and nothing to protect herself with. The other scientists cowered and ran.

The thing exhaled like a volcanic rumble, and instantly its foul, sweet breath was cloying her lungs. She retched.

"I'm – S-Sorry!" she gasped, trying to save face. "I don't ... understand!"

The man smiled. Grinned, even, from ear to ear. It was all a game to him, how easily he could speak a word and she would be the other side of those horrible blue canines –

"Well, my agents have more work to do it seems. Your ship.

Not you. No worries, I'll find them."

He turned and smiled again, flashing white teeth. It wasn't a smile to a friend. It was a smile to a meal, a satisfied grin as the waiter served his steaming, fragrant Hors d'oeuvre to the table.

He turned and began to walk away. The creature removed its damp paws from her shoulders and turned to follow him.

"They call me the Shadow Broker", he said quietly. "You seem unacquainted. But I have eyes everywhere, and this is my city. I always find them."

He vanished into the mist. Cecy stayed sat on the floor for a little while.

\* \* \*

<Astrogator's Log, Entry 0261>

The previous few days had been testing at the best of times, but mentally unbearable at the worst. The scientists and herself were brought back to the Bulwark shortly after the incident with the Shadow Broker, as in Entry 0252. But the Marshal had a full stranglehold on the any power structure within the ship now, and since James had vanished, the various terrestrial Navigators were reluctantly in support of the order the Marshal brought to the bridge, despite the obvious ramifications of having a power-thirsty gun-slinger in charge. Cecy had spent a few evening banging her fists against the wall, to the extent that there was a blossoming mark in the paintwork. She was proud of it. There were plenty of parallels between the messy smudge on the wall and the smirking face of the Marshal; the likeness was only improving with time.

An alert rang out on the intercom.

++Miss Carrington to Bridge. New exploratory assignment++

She stood up from her bunk and began packing a bag in a resigned manner. He seemed to know more about this planet that was hitherto uncharted by any Thalysian power than was possible, never mind more than attracted suspicion. The Marshal's face had been a real picture when informed of the Shadow Broker incident, and his left eye twitched, a nervous tic. So, on par in importance with James' disappearance.

When she arrived at the bridge however, she did not expect to be handed a gun.

"This is a Repositor pistol", the Marshal began. "It's a ranged projectile weapon that teleports the target to a predetermined beacon - this one sends my persons of

interest to the lower secure-hold of the ship. I want you to target a scientist on the planet, of unknown species, who's been in contact. It's the safest way of meeting him."

"So I'm expendable then?" snapped Cecy.

"No, you're capable. And the Shadow Broker... this person that calls himself that... needs to ... see you in action, or he could get hostile."

"What are you talking about? Hostile? See me? What are you not telling me?" It made no sense, here we were at a random corner of the galaxy and he was playing games with a little psychopath in the mist, using her as a pawn.

He strode up to her, uncomfortably close, and breathed quietly.

A looming pause.

"I would like to continue to have an Astrogator on this vessel. Do I make myself clear?"

She left on the transport pod.

The pod landed to the south of the same city they had made first contact in, and Cecy had an address and about 20 minutes before the scientist... did something. No clue what, yet another little piece of info withheld from the person actually carrying out the mission. She rounded the corner to the target building - wait no, this is the other one - Behind here?

The clock was ticking down, and she found herself in a maze of apartment complexes and research buildings. She finally locked down the building, sidled in behind someone who looked more like they were supposed to be there, and was glad to find a lack of security card scanners.

A glance at her watch. Seconds remained.

She bounded up 2 flights of stairs, and knocked on the scientist's door.

Nothing.

Another minute passed. Another knock.

Nothing.

She stood in the corridor for 15 minutes, but there was no sign of anyone. Had she missed him on the way out, or was he leaving early, for whatever-it-was.

On the way out of the complex, head dropped in defeat, she called the Marshal through her watch.

"And?" was the sharp response.

"No-one home." she sighed.

"Well stay down there. Here's some more details, and





another two people of interest. I need someone, Carrington - You'd best not fail me."

Before she could sputter out a protest, he hung up.

It seemed she would be patrolling these misty streets for a while.

\* \* \*

Marshal Dominicus Highlane was angry. And he was worried. He had researched such tenuous links, tiny tidbits of information left all over the galaxy for years to find this man. It was his father's cross, but bless his heart, Dominicus knew his father couldn't carry it any more. So this information network must fall. Getting Cecilia into the selection process had been next to impossible, and now she was days away from peril - and he with less than 48 hours to track him down before his bait was sacrificed like a lamb to some bounty hunter on the surface. He played with the dials a little more, and scanned again.

The fact that Cecy's Repositor currently sent any target to the airlock he'd left open to the vacuum of space was a secret he'd keep for a while longer.

Poor James.

\* \* \*

<Astrogator's Log, Entry 0263>

That night was cold. Bitterly cold.

"Stay down there. Here's some more details, and another two people of interest. I need someone, Carrington - You'd best not fail me."

That's what he'd said, the little shit. So Cecy began planning, planning both on finding this Kranz character that was next on his accursed targets list, but moreover about how she was going to take the Bulwark away from that tyrant.

She knew that it was an extreme move. How could it not be? She was challenging the core military hierarchy that was such a key to the entire planet she called home at the other end of the galaxy. They'd find out eventually, and she could never return. Never see her parents again, and never tease her younger brother about videogames, or whatever cartoon he was into at the time. A Marshal could never be allowed to be stained in the public eye with claims of

brutality or blackmail, even less on a research vessel. The political situation had never been exactly balmy on Thalyssia, so it was always going to be easier to sweep the Marshal and his actions under the carpet and have her unflattering ID mugshot plastered over the evening news: Cecilia Carrington, treacherous mutineer. Her parents would find out from the TV. They would be ostracised – or reject her as ever being theirs.

Either option broke her heart.

And yet there was a heat in her heart pushing against the panic, and against the cold fog that forever matted this accursed city, a desperate push internally to actually do something. By doing nothing, nothing changed. She became a machine under the sadistic [REDACTED] to order around in his little private kingdom currently orbiting Terrum Incognitas (working title) and watch as he controlled the people she called her friends. So the option was to push back against the monster with her entire home planet's backing if he cried for help, or surrender forever and not cause a fuss. The only possible plan, then, was to abuse his pride so he wouldn't go crying to mama. Make it personal. Get under his skin.

And work out what he wants with this damn planet so badly, and who the nightmare in the fog was.

She swept her curly brown hair out of her face and let her tears evaporate in the cold night, since feeling them sit on her cheek would make her feel sorry for herself and set her off again. It was time to get out from under his thumb and make a little breathing room for her to work out what the hell was going on.

Kranz's apartment was a quiet building in a little suburb off from the centre of the city. It was pretty, really: green lawns and careful flower arrangements in the corners in muted blues were nothing incredible by most planet's standards, but in the grey sprawl here this was an oasis of colour. It must be expensive, she thought. If she was going to break in, she may as well help herself to supplies – it was on the Marshal's orders if she twisted the lines a little anyway. Her parents were right, she should have been a lawyer after all.

In spite of everything, she smiled. Only up from here, then, right?

It was dawning morning, arrays of the artificial lights sweeping on again across the city like a dimmer-switch Mexican wave. For a city with no sun, it tried really hard to have a natural cycle.

Time to strike.

Cecy sidled through the ground floor entrance and up the

steps, taking two at a time with a soft instep with weight towards the toes. No noise to be made here.

In front of the room, she pressed an ear to the door. No noise. The guy must still be asleep. He was going to enjoy waking up in a cargo hold in front of a dangling green cravat. She almost felt sorry for him, but better him than her. The Repositor sat hard in her inside pocket. Right hand reached in, and left tried the door handle in vain hope before she had to try to destroy what seemed a rare and expensive organic tree-wood door.

It clicked.

The door was unlocked?! Cecy grinned again. You had to get up earlier in the morning to beat her. Or at least get up earlier than ... ah. The catchphrase needed a lot of work, evidently, but the journey to a hero/rebel was obviously less of a one-off transformation than in her brother's cartoons.

Get the job done, she told herself.

She swung the door open, blasted the sleeping sprawled figure enjoying his lie-in, and barely stayed long enough for his body to finish transporting away to the Bulwark as programmed. She shut the door again - can't leave it messy - and quietly walked away down the stairs, out of the complex, and back into the streets. Let's see if she could do some exploring before The Marshal was delightful enough to radio in further orders.

\* \* \*

<Astrogator's Log, Entry 0267>

Yesterday had been fruitful. The Marshal hadn't realised for about 6 hours somehow that his scientist friend was on board, so Cecy had plenty of time for some rather fruitful conversations. As ever, the best place to go was the pub. Across the galaxy, across every species known to mankind and probably all of the rest of them, the ability to take in a liquid that made you happy and bleary and fall over was universally appreciated. And drunk lips sink spaceships.

[The catchphrases were getting slightly better too. She may or may not have walked around for about half an hour first to practise catchphrases and have various arguments with people in her head. The Marshal had been trounced with that clever comeback about his cravat being similar in colour to his other dangling thing. Shame it was only a practice.]

Sitting in the dark corner, Cecy listened in on neighbour's

conversations about their current standings in some selection process for "Champion". No-one seemed to mention what it was for, but the rather round creature at the end looked forward to the pay-grade. They were bounty-hunters mostly, from all corners of the galaxy, and from their various chats there must be a flotilla of spacecraft in geo-orbit and high orbit above. How convenient for the Bulwark's local space scanner to have stopped working unlike the long-distance one. She made a mental note to fix it under the Marshal's nose as soon as she got home.

The conversation meandered along with plenty of in-jokes, and Cecy moved to sit closer. They turned to their families. A quiet figure in the middle sighed. The others enquired after why, and promptly wished they hadn't, bless them.

The bar fell uncomfortably silent. The figure removed his hood and revealed blue scaled skin, and wise, unfathomably sad yellow eyes. He began to speak, but caught himself.

"I don't have much left, not since Skyros..." A pause.

Quiet, and then a voice piped up from the back.

"Since Skyros and his slave army started conquering the entire galaxy, and leaving nothing in their wake. I know it, my friend; I'm here for the same reason as you. I wish you luck. I'd still like to be the one to take it to him though."

A look of careful respect flickered in the lizardman's eyes. He nodded, and replaced his hood. Murmurs and conversation slowly crept back into the bar, and continued as a woman in black clothes stepped in.

"Hey Operative, how's SB?" one joked.

"Oi Savona, how much milk do you put in his tea? Are we talking brown or creamy? Does slaving after our Lord and Saviour feel more important than doing something?"

Savona turned before she sat down and smiled through gritted teeth.

"It's a shame that that wasn't clever enough to actually be considered an attack, or I could have made you into a kebab."

No-one questioned her after that.

Cecy stepped out of the pub again as her watch blinked with a message from the Marshal.

"Good work with Kranz. I'll invite you back to the ship later today, but I need you to go to this location and Transport this new target, Volpes. She's less of a scientist. She may be a threat. Get on your way."

She set off to the north of the City, since she knew he could track her general movements anyway.

A threat? What was she getting into?



\* \* \*

<Astrogator's Log, Entry 0268>

Outside the house of Volpes, Cecy was surprised to meet some of the folks in the bar earlier. Most surprising was the appearance of Savona herself, now very clearly armed and discussing tactics ... for dealing with Volpes.

Her wrist buzzed again.

"Stick with them. Go on, introduce yourself. The ship crew are telling me that you're quite the social butterfly. They're a vigilante group targeting various criminals around the city. Regular weapon only please."

Cecy swallowed the lump in her throat. This didn't sound good, and was rather a step up from transporting people. But there was clearly a need to establish some form of trust with the Marshal. She was desperate for breathing room so that she could figure out what was going on. She just needed another morning like today. Just one more. These guys would target the criminals with her here or not. She didn't have to pull the trigger on her standard-issue pistol at all, and the Marshal had banned her from her Repositor. Nonetheless, the nausea she felt followed her the entire afternoon. Some day, the Marshal would regret this. She would make him. Anyway...

Cecy walked up to Savona and blurted,

"Can I hang with you guys for a bit?"

Stupid, stupid. How gormless is it possible to sound in one sentence? Every single one of them was armed to the nines, barely concealing massive bulges at the hips with wide holsters, and two of them with full-blown tote bags of ammo. The party all stared at her in awkward silence for a moment as they processed her bizarre request.

"I guess. You wouldn't happen to know a woman called Volpes, would you?" said The Last Red Shirt.

As if on cue, the woman appeared behind them. Cecy drew her gun, but a grungy vigilante with about 5 eyes was already turning as they saw the recognition in Cecy's eyes directed behind them – and let an entire salvo into her. Volpes fell, writhing, into a rapidly-growing pool of blood on the floor.

She did not take long to die.

Cecy stood dumbstruck, her pistol in hand but sitting limply at her side. What had Volpes done to deserve this? Why were these 5 people and the Marshal all so keen to see an end to her? A few high fives went around the group, and

Cecy ran round a bush to vomit. She quickly wiped herself down, and hoped that it wasn't too loud. She couldn't seem weak. She couldn't just let herself sit down and complain. She'd done that twice in the past week. Her friends were trapped onboard a spaceship that they once fought bitterly in applications processes to become a crew member of, and something horrendous was going on here. But she could not walk away now. Going back on these orders would kill her chance of gaining the Marshal's trust. It was her ticket home. So she had to let that part of her go, or lock it up. Think about it later, Cecilia. She had to think about it later.

The rest of the day passed like a blur. The odd-job group went around the City hunting one "criminal" after another, and Cecilia tried not to think about it too much. Most of them weren't in, luckily. But another poor soul was caught by another vigilante whilst still half behind their door.

He seemed a quiet guy, quite human-like, for the moment before the bounty-hunter pulled the trigger. He had a Discworld T-shirt on, with 3 arm-holes. He had opened his door to the promise of some fake food giveaway instigated by one of the hunters. He had smiled. In that briefest of moments, in front of people and possible food, the man had smiled. It was a beautiful smile.

So Cecilia looked away as the man slumped behind his door. She couldn't bear to look at him any more.

Cecilia hoped he was still happy at that moment he died. It would never be possible to tell.

Cecilia didn't feel it was okay to call herself Cecy any more. It felt naïve. All of a sudden, her tiny little world of dances and memorised star charts had been taken from her, and she was taking orders from a man she didn't know and had an iron grip over her only friends. Cecilia could burst at the seams. How could she feel capable of beginning to deal with this? She had to fight against her old self to become the person that could defeat the Marshal. She had to sacrifice that for her friends.

The day drew to a close. She walked back to the transport pod for the Bulwark, at last open for business.

As she lifted off and returned to the Bulwark for another session under a dictatorship, Cecilia looked out of the viewport. The mist was pretty. She slumped against the floor, and for one last time, Cecy cried a little.

\* \* \*

<Astrogator's Log, Entry 0273>

Life on the Bulwark was miserable. The Marshal had

consolidated his grip on the researchers by finding the ship's passwords in James' room, giving him full access to the databases on board, personal details, specialties, education portfolios of every last crew member. Cecilia was holed up in her bunk room with the door locked, as default, and intended to do so until the man pointed a gun at her head. She'd been sneaking around the hull for a few days after returning from the surface in the pod. As soon as her eyes had dried, she'd been snooping. The Marshal had eyes everywhere after his takeover, but they were human eyes – Closed-circuit footage monitoring was never built into the Bulwark since it was a research vessel, so anything important was usually the type of thing to be sensed by a smoke alarm in the labs. So only the other crewmen watched Cecilia – but they liked her more than the Marshal, so she'd be fine.

The Marshal's quarters were never going to be a snoop option, but he had a wonderful habit of staying logged in on his credentials at the bridge when he went into the storage port. Unbelievably suspicious, since he'd usually send for someone to fetch him food and water, so it was clear that it was something no one else was supposed to see, but that would come later. For now, return her security privileges without him noticing, and get some intel.

2 days in, everything fell into her lap.

A saved image on his personal folder was an old 256-standard 2D picture of a man with grizzled grey hair and soft green eyes. Strong jawline, so likely the guy's dad. This man was not marred in the same way by any air of entitlement or power. He had a slight wispy smile that phased into a short-clipped grey beard. Cecilia's cheeks flushed briefly. Wow. The colour soon left, though, as she realised who the man was.

The man pictured was the famous Commander Highlane, leader of the military manoeuvre through a series of 3 chained shift-space manoeuvres during combat with an enemy fleet to kite the opposing forces away whilst Thalyssia's new energy cannons were warming up aboard 3 other squadrons. The battle was a glorious success in the media, and Thalyssia won the war because of it, expanding their influence to 10 planetary systems. He had been a clear candidate for next Director of the Thalyssian Regime, and touted time and time again the importance of offensive fleets in defensive wars. He had a rapport with local-group factions after saving them from his first foe. But reports of excessive spending and plans of drawing funds from key infrastructure towards the fleet, leaked from anonymous sources, shattered his chances, and he faded into insignificance in his old age.

The image being in such an old format was a testament to

how long ago this was. Cecilia had been growing up, only just falling in love with the stars then. It was so different now.

Footsteps from clad-leather boots tapped in the distance. The Marshal was returning; Cecilia closed the image tab.

There was a new tab underneath it.

"Hello Cecilia. Wonderful to see you seeking out secrets, it's a key mentality down here. I have answers for you. I have help for you. It took a while to track down the truth, but I always find out. I mean no harm. TSB.

PS. Close this tab."

She blinked. The footsteps grew louder behind her as the Marshal began to round the corner. She blinked again. Seriously?

She closed it off and ran back to her room, sprinting round the hallway as soon as she was out of the bridge and wouldn't be heard. On her own bunk screen was a second message.

"TSB wasn't very helpful, was it? I'm The Shadow Broker, the individual who had an unfortunate misunderstanding with you in the North Alley shortly after you arrived. We have a mission tomorrow, and we can discuss a plan whilst there. Bring two scientists and I'll get them away from your captain. I know you have little reason to trust me, but I don't believe you have a lot of options. Best of luck.

North Alley again, Noon tomorrow.

TSB."

Cecy stared at the screen dumbfounded. What could she do? Instantly there were alarms, of course, but this Shadow Broker was right, she had no options left. If she really did want to help her colleagues as she'd promise herself a week ago, now was the time. The people in the pub had mentioned the "SB" moniker before, thinking about it. The man was clearly important.

He was terrifying.

But so was The Marshal, and at least if she died down on the surface, she wouldn't suffer for possibly years under the orders of Daddy's Little Angel and his damned green scarf. She wouldn't be branded a traitor by the media, either, actually.

If they only knew.

\* \* \*



<Astrogator's Log, Entry 0274>

The Transport Pod down to the surface felt different this time. There was a purpose to it, a real honest reason to be travelling for the first time in weeks. Cecilia felt like the world had been lifted from her shoulder. She hadn't even touched the floor yet, and already there were hints of The Marshal's power over her waning.

A warning flashed darkly through her and she checked herself. The last time she met this man, she was almost eaten by a fanged and horned creature in an alley in the dark. And his smile still scared her. But there was no worse decision than staying on the Bulwark.

Her two accompanying scientists were shaking where they stood. Brenda and Kyle from the bioclassification unit were her chosen candidates since they'd be the least likely to go to the Marshal. They were also quite new – so packing their stuff didn't take them as long.

The pod hit the floor. Cecilia strode out into the marketplace with more confidence than last time and beared left, straight for the alley. It was about 2 minutes to noon already, so no point hanging about.

The trio rounded the corner and found two figures, and no animal. The mist swathed around the feet of all 5 of them, as always, but in the artificial daylight it was near transparent. Everything felt right. It was going to click this time.

Why was she so positive? Who cares?

The man turned first. He did not smile. It was the Shadow Broker.

"Glad you came. If you like, enter through this door." The lady, still facing away from them, leant against a wall, and the chiselled stone shuffled across via a hidden mechanism and exposed a neat rectangular doorway into a modern office building.

Cecilia and the scientists quickly rushed in and hoped desperately that they would be able to leave again alive, that this wasn't some trick. Optimism, Cecilia. Optimism.

The Shadow Broker stepped through the door, and smiled. It was the same horrible grin he'd flashed the first time. Cecilia began panicking again, stepping backwards, heart beginning to beat in her chest, skull bursting into a headache from fresh adrenalin in her veins.

The Shadow Broker stopped smiling and looked at them, slightly hurt.

"What?" he said.

"Please don't ... please don't. You have to understand, we didn't ..."

The lady from behind stepped through the door shut with a careful click behind her.

They were going to die.

"They're worried because you smiled at them, Shadow Broker."

The Shadow Broker turned around and looked at her, surprised. He then turned back and said rather quietly,

"Is it really that bad?"

The woman then sidled alongside the man, and talked in stage-whisper to him, with Cecilia catching snippets such as "differing social norms" and "further practice sessions with the instructor".

The Shadow Broker sighed, and began to speak again. He apologised about an apparent "lack of ability to smile reassuringly". He said this with the quotes actually, raising his hands and flexing two fingers on each hand like rabbit ears in the air, explaining his smile was excellent for warnings and interrogations, but could cause issues unless he checked himself in most social situations.

Cecilia's heart stopped trying to escape, and she listened on as he explained the background of what he had learned about the Marshal's situation, noting an unusual difficulty in hacking his system which had taken slightly longer than normal, but that they were now piecing the story together.

He extended a hand to his female assistant.

"This is Lady Katana, one of my Operatives, and the owner of a research institute inside the Citadel. They can be looked after there until this situation is... *resolved*." The Broker smiled again. Cecilia shuddered.

Lad Katana stepped forward and began talking to the scientists about cell structures, or something. The Shadow Broker continued to Cecilia directly.

"Miss Carrington, I'd like to test you to see if I can trust you. We're going to enter this door to an apartment complex. In one room is a dangerous droid known as HK-47. I need you to destroy it with your gun, and I will assist."

"Destroy? This gun only transports to the hold", she sputtered. A kill mission right off the bat? Who was this lunatic?

The Broker opened his mouth to correct her, but stopped himself. "Ah. We'll get to that later then. For now, follow me."

He stepped through a side door, and Cecilia turned to wave to Kyle and Brenda as she left, but they were already in an

animated debate, about... cell structure, or something. She left.

---

The apartment was modern, and sparsely furnished. A leaflet was tacked to a corkboard about some sort of vacancy in the staircase.

"Is this droid a humanoid?" Cecilia asked the Shadow Broker, who was playing with a pistol he had drawn from somewhere without her noticing. Geez, this man was something else. It could still be a trap.

The Shadow Broker looked down the end of the pistol barrel with one eye, holding it like a telescope. The safety was off.

"Yes, humanoid. Not talkative, but capable of speech."

Cecilia turned to the door and called out,

"Hello, anyone home? I'm here to enquire about a vacancy?"

Cecilia clutched her Repositor from inside her coat. The Broker stopped looking down the barrel of his gun and span it in his fingers into a gangster hold, and nodded at her.

Silence. The droid was not talkative at all – or maybe recharging.

Cecilia remembered the scientist with the nice garden and pushed the door optimistically. It was locked.

They waited for a minute for something to happen. Nothing did, until the room next door opened and a smiling woman strode out. They scrambled to hide their guns.

"Here for the vacancy?" she said.

"Yes", said the Shadow Broker, and began to smile, then stopped himself.

"I'll show you around!" said the friendly woman, and what followed was an inexplicable tour around most of the apartment, featuring an appearance from another different flatmate who showed off her room, explaining the advantages of how the beds were positioned. Cecilia was so bored she put her hands in her coat pockets.

Her hands dislodged the Repositor in her inside pocket and it thumped onto the carpet.

The Shadow Broker stared at her.

Cecilia picked it up, and the second woman continued uninterrupted about her kettle, either not noticing the gun or not actually minding, both of which seemed utterly unbelievable.

The tour came to an end in the kitchen, and the two women left to go and do something else.

As the door shut, the Shadow Broker turned to Cecilia. Lady Katana entered into the kitchen of the random apartment nonchalantly, the scientists seemingly not dead but occupied elsewhere.

The Shadow Broker began to laugh.

"You'll do well enough. I'll help you. Though how you're still alive in this death game selection process is beyond me with dexterity like that."

Cecilia ignored the jibe. A death game? What was this, the Hunger Games? What death game? Was he being metaphorical? Her struggle with the Marshal?

"What Death Game?" she managed.

"Ah." The Shadow Broker stopped laughing and looked at her inquisitively. "You *didn't* know. Interesting."

\* \* \*

<Astrogator's Log, Entry 0275>

Talking with the Shadow Broker and his Operatives had been a long 24 hours. As soon as Lady Katana understood that Cecilia hadn't realised her enrolment into the selection process, she asked for Cecilia's watch, and promptly plugged it into a cord she was carrying around, and then handed it back. This was all that was required to reprogram her tracker to provide a convincing trek around the city in real-time when her real location was perfectly cloaked. It was clear that she was on the winning side in terms of espionage.

The other main concern was that the Marshal would find the ruse and track her down – or eventually find a way to shift back to Thalyssia and revoke her existence. So the act had to be convincing.

Almost instantly she'd had an apartment on the outskirts of the Citadel arranged for her, with her scientist colleagues from the Bulwark located down the corridor. The entire outfit was ruthless in its efficiency, and she'd effectively become a fully fledged bounty hunter in public profile in a matter of minutes.

Her watch buzzed, with an incoming call from an Operative.

The Operative began that as the roster for the selection was semi-public although under anonymised nicknames, so it would be impossible to pull her out without alerting the Marshal. So she had to act the part, and probably make at least an attempt on one of her "targets" at some point in the next day. The watch buzzed again and the call disconnected.



Cecilia sat on her bed, and looked out of the window, trying to process it all. She was an apprentice Astrogator to James Quentin on board the Bulwark, a pioneering spacecraft designed for research. The shift process had been tampered with at some point by the Marshal, and a threat emulated by simulating some sort of impact shake on the ship, so the ship kicked into shift-mode without James in the picture. She still had no idea what had become of him.

The Marshal had vaguely steered the ship through shift-space and got her to use her Astrogator credentials and some know-how to force the ship back out of shift, at the spot the Marshal knew would be the place the ship stopped (somehow) – the home planet of the Shadow Broker and his Citadel. She'd been entered by the Marshal into some vicious selection process by the Marshal to become a Champion – someone to spearhead a semi-stealthy movement against Planetcrusher Skyros at the other end of the galaxy. So Cecilia had been bossed around, forced to kill an innocent entrant in the game via a teleport into an open skylock, according to Citadel scans, and had attempted on two others. She was now backstabbing a key military officer in her own nation's only armed force, and was sitting in an apartment given to her free of charge by the most powerful information broker in the Universe – who just felt like helping her to get back at the Marshal.

She stared out of the window at the misty town, looking very different from a high window in the citadel, the artificial lighting beacons sitting out like pinpricks of vibrant yellow in an otherwise dull grey layout.

It was all a bit too much.

Nonetheless, she had to keep perpetuating this lie. To do that, she had to contact the Marshal and act natural, and attempt on one of the targets that he set her. Of course, she intended to fail the task if possible, but apparently this Idiot of Parameters Unknown guy was more than a bit of a mass-murderer at this point, so can the pot call the kettle black?

She grabbed a backpack, and a long coat with a rather more real pistol concealed a little more securely than last time to the inside of her coat. The Repositor sat in a snazzy hip holster, also a gift from the Operatives. She would have to do this part alone, though. You know, just turn up at a serial killer's house and try to 'airlock' him - all whilst on the phone to the tyrant who had the power to end her very identity. With just one quick trip home, after he read the control manual.

Why did she get out of bed this morning?

Cecilia exited the Citadel and headed into the city complex outside the gates. Her left hand did not leave the perversely

comforting touch of the Repositor from underneath her coat the entire journey. She glanced at the shadows, and eyes twitched left and right. Surely every other entrant in this game was exactly the same? Except those without eyes, she guessed. That droid yesterday was probably better at this than she was.

She arrived at the target's accommodation and uncloaked her watch. She called the Marshal.

"Hey."

"WHAT do you think you're doing going radio silent for 24 hours!" roared the Marshal.

"It had low battery and said something about a reserve mode." Lying through her teeth was fun, actually. "It's fine now though. I'm trying to deliver you this new target, onsite now."

She swore that she could almost hear the Marshal lick his lips.

"Very well then. Stay in touch. Every hour or so please. Where are your biologist friends?"

"They found some fun little fauna, or something. I couldn't get much out of them after that." There was some truth at least in that. Savona had been showing the two of them around the labs and the library, and it was likely that the two of them would be perfectly occupied for the coming decades.

"Fine. I expect results, Carrington. I can always send someone else and get you on kitchen duty."

She felt a burning stirring. How many lies he had told her. She couldn't even fully trust the Shadow Broker and his small army of spies, but at the very least he had a handy trove of evidence. The Marshal had just torn her future away from her. She knew she was supposed to be acting. But her lips were moving before she could stop them –

"Where's James?"

A moment of silence on the watch.

"He's ill. I have him in the Medical Bay in isolation, since he has some sort of infectious virus. It will be fine." How coolly and collectedly could that monster deliver such nonsense? She'd been in the medbay less than a week ago and James certainly wasn't there. He wasn't there. How dare he. He wasn't-

"He isn't."

Oh no. Now she'd done it. Everything would come crashing down. She'd disobeyed the shit directly, and his smothered ego wouldn't be able to take it.

"I expect a report in an hour, Carrington." Icy. Twitchy. His words dripped with venom.

She'd best report to him in an hour.

\* \* \*

But first...

She switched her watch back to cloaked as she rounded the corner into the target's staircase.

She called Lady Katana.

"Is there anything to lock the Bulwark in orbit? Because otherwise we're in trouble."

"We do. But it's *expensive*. We can boot the tractor beam for you, but how about we draw up a contract. Payment plan. Of course, some details on Thalyssian culture are effectively a currency you can use at –"

"I'll do it. Just please don't let him leave." She could *hear* Katana grinning at the other end of the line, as the woman's eyes flashed with thoughts of gold and the Broker's favour. What was it with these guys and smiling?

"Done. We'll slow-boot it to avoid detection. It will be fully online in 3 hours. Keep him until then."

Cecilia sighed, and sat in the staircase outside the latest target's room, God knows who he was to the Marshal, and uncloaked her watch. It was nearly lunchtime; hopefully this guy had a human-like digestive cycle and would actually leave for food.

It was not that easy.

An hour passed, and no one showed. She phoned the Marshal again.

"Well you haven't got him yet Carrington, so I'll ask you to return to ship in a moment."

"I'll knock then."

"You've just sat there?! Get that door down!"

Since Cecilia seemed to have forgotten her mid-range artillery at home that day, she might have to give that a miss, she thought. Thankfully she didn't voice that particular opinion. The call ended, and she knocked. Nothing. She waited another minute, and tried again, hand clasped over the Repositor. She pressed her face against the door. Not a noise. Was this guy even in? He had been listed as such at the foyer entrance, but nothing at the moment.

She had failed, at the worst possible time.

She phoned the Marshal again on the way out, and came up with the longest route she could take back to the transport pod to get the Marshal locked to the planet before everything came crashing down.

The call rang out without an answer for the Marshal. She didn't phone back.

<Astrogator's Log, Entry 0278>

Wandering through the perpetual fog this planet was always covered in was tiresome already. Her toe caught on an invisible cobble again for the...fourth time? Her knees smarted through her jeans and her left wrist was damned sore, so probably a good five or six.

She could not get back on the transport pod. She could not call the Marshal, she'd burnt that bridge.

So there was two hours of distraction needed from some other source to ensure that the Bulwark couldn't just escape this planet of stone and streetlights back off to Thalyssia to an adoring and unquestioning crowd – the Marshal appearing on the planetary hologram-network decrying her as a traitor; A distant future of terrified academics under his heel on every new voyage he made to 'oversee' the Bulwark. The Marshal may not even go home at all, just take the ship somewhere else in the universe every few years with his own private set of terrified serving staff with wasted degrees in quantum physics. And she would not have revenge.

A distraction had to be pretty compelling to make a man so obsessed with bridge readouts to ignore the signal of an engaging tractor beam. It would be a minute of wind-up even with a slower initial phase to the boot, easily enough to blink out of the system scot-free.

Focus, Focus. She found herself swaying from side to side slowly, right foot raised and lowered. It was a sort of Thalyssian folk dance that had originally been the-

A beautiful realisation dawned over Cecilia's horizons.

The Danse Macabre was an ancient dance about loss.

A "Dance of death".

Very little would stir Green Cravat's attention, but he was still a military man. It would have to be an actual conflict, a firefight he could pick up on his sensors. She uncloaked her watch. A servile message to the Marshal: "I'll prove myself, I'm sorry. I'll prove it."

Who had been the next target on her list of random civilians? Every blasted lifeform here was a brutal murderer locked in this selection tournament the Shadow Broker had explained in agonising detail. None of them would be missed. Arguably, any one of them deserved it.

It was not long before Cecilia found the next on her list. Her pistol's safety clicked off as a figure scrambled rapidly towards her in the central plaza. The next target was also coming for her.





The blast from her pistol, a first strike, brought every spectator to a standstill, then a stampede in every direction as they found cover at the edges of the square.

Slightly wide of the mark.

The crazed alien slung a mechanical contraption under what could loosely be called arms. It glowed white-hot. Perhaps this had been a mistake.

The spectators smirked, they were in for a treat.

Open firefights were rare. It was a shame the human girl had such a small gun.

\* \* \*

Darkness. Murky and excruciating pain rolled and thundered in waves up and down her body, convulsing. A horrible stench of smoke and roasted flesh.

Darkness.

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\* \* \*

Lightness. Cecilia heaved herself to sitting upright, bleary-eyed. The left half of her vision was – greener than usual? She waved her hand in front of her face. Green hand, pink hand, green, pink. She was forgetting something. What was it?

The Shadow Broker's calm voice filled the room.

"You've already noticed one of our improvements, I see."

"Your... what?"

"You kind of, well, died. The distraction worked, though, so well done." A distraction?

"Of course, we couldn't just bury you and have done with it. Savona tells me you have a debt left to pay.

Don't worry, information is basically currency here. Start by telling us a little about the man I now have locked to my planet with a tractor beam, hmm?"

The Shadow Broker smiled.

# Wheel of Time Worldbuilding, Pineapple Ducks, and All That

By Lady Luck, Fortuna, Fortuna Major and Fortuona

## 1 Introduction

In his 'Wheel of Time' series, the vividly-descriptive author Robert Jordan freely took inspiration from all existing works of note, on the grounds that "history fades into legend and then into myth" and time is cyclic, so and everything keeps on happening again and again, and every story is just a -or possibly multiple versions of- of the same story. He draws especially from: Norse Mythology, King Arthur, Dune, and the actual world's history.

Out of some of us, and some of CUSFS liking this series, it became a staple of the Space Opera that some friends and us produced the first half of over the past 2 years (see the TTBA's of 2018 and of Easter 2019). We then of course came face to face with how starting a story in this way is more straightforward than completing it (sardonic-drumroll-encore). Though we have by now figured out the details of how the first half's elements come together in the second half.

We are moreover parodying the Wheel of Time in our Space Opera, firstly by using an even wider variety of inspiring sources, now indeed including the Wheel of Time itself. Secondly, by each of our groups being free to worldbuild a culture inspired on whatever sources they please. Two of our groups dutifully chose, and subverted, Wheel of time cultures; this article is about one of these and the other is mentioned at the end. Another group chose to deify Graham Chapman (the Python),

while a further group chose to hiveworld-demonize certain of the cast from Downton Abbey. Two years ago, TTBA already contained an introduction to this culture by itself ("Super Swallowtail Nurse"). This turned out to be a useful precedent, as opposed to first encountering six such cultures duking it out up to, through, and beyond Armageddon. Or should that be Tarmon Gai'don? (The Wheel of Time version of this name.) So now we now follow up by introducing the main, and most Robert Jordan idudettinuous, of the Space Opera's six cultures.

We should first recollect that the musical component of the Space Opera parodies Mozart's Magic Flute, aka Die Zauberflöte (as Die Zauberkarotte, with Die now pronounced in the English fashion!)

For this work, all replete with Masonic Imagery, partly inspires all of the cultures present in the Space Opera. So we'll have a bit to say about the Magic Flute too.

*Do not continue reading if you are concerned about Wheel of Time spoilers (or, less likely as that may be, Magic Flute spoilers, for all that this does qualify as a Fantasy, or even a couple of Dune spoilers).*

While we aim to parody Robert Jordan by one-upping several of his most prodigeridoodinous whokilledasmo-dean wtfnorandinthisbookeither multimatriarcho-braidtugistocratic pipesmokingasanindoorsportadilloes, we parody the Magic Flute by 'getting everything wrong': good and bad are inverted, and the harmless become downright dangerous...

## 2 The Wheel of Time approach to worldbuilding (and a Cat for good measure)

So the Wheel of Time is about key history-determining characters being reborn, all of these being characters that we, as humanity, are familiar with at least one version of. 'American Gods' (graphic art and now TV series) is similar in this regard as well, down to both playing out the Norse Gods.

Two of these feature in particular in Robert Jordan's magnus opus: Odin and Thor.

Yet Robert Jordan's masterpiece is also about the Matriarchy. This is a Matriarchal world because the previous Tarmon Gai'don (who knows, possibly even called Armageddon...) caused 'the male half of the magic' to become unusable, so just women can reliably use magic now, and rule by consequence.

Thor is repeating history's top male magic user, reborn into a world where this has become quite a problematic attribute... Somewhat helpfully to start decyphering the influences, in his current incarnation, Thor is just called Rand al'Thor.

We have little to say about him, because one-upping Robert Jordan leaving his main character out of one book entirely, and with few appearances or plot development involving him in others, we opt to leave Thor out of the Space Opera completely...

So let's first concentrate instead on Odin, for you will be seeing our Odin in action in next term's Space Opera contributions to TTBA. Robert Jordan's Odin is called Matrim Cauthon. His role in the story is, firstly, that he is lucky. Secondly, that his mischief gets him into bad



trouble in dangerous places. This results in him receiving answers and then gifts from an otherworldly culture everyone is desperate to avoid. (The prices to pay for such things are not nice, and to boot you seldom get what you thought you were asking for...) His answers include that to save the world he must "marry the daughter of the nine moons" and that he must travel to a place widely believed not to exist, or else he will die. His gifts are the raven-marked swordspear (establishing him to be Odin), the memories of all the great generals (at the expense of almost all of his own), and a foxhead medallion that deflects magic. His prices include being hung to death from the Tree of Life (though he then lives again) and the loss of an eye (again, marking him as Odin). Our Odin is a Feline called Catrim Mauthorn; quiet and unassuming, she fights with a 12-metre long raven-marked swordspear. In a parody of the Kill Bill Bride 1-inch punching her way out of being buried alive in a coffin (and Dragonball and ...)

we have an entire separate article forthcoming on how she came to be so good with that spear.

A blade that long one one so small being a highly conical affair to wield, others term her fighting style 'Purricane Pawnado'.

Let us next mention that there are fact multiple Matriarchies in mutual conflict in Robert Jordan's world. Among these Matriarchies, there are two that we take some inspiration from, and one-up and parody a whole lot more. The first Matriarchy are the Aes Sedai of the White Tower of Tar Valon, i.e. the island of Avalon from Arthurian legend. Notice the common T-prefix name variant with Tarmon Gai'don, by which perhaps you'd not be surprised to learn that Rand's title in his previous life was Tamyrlin, to the current Matriarch's title of Amyrlin, itself an extended version of Merlin. The Amyrlin Seat's Aes Sedai control the continent that almost all of the series is set in, so we see more of them than almost any other Matriarchy... They are a thinly-veiled version of Dune's Bene Gesserit.

Both are magic users, both are controlling, derided as 'witches' by their enemies, both dabble with lineages to try to produce a Messianic Superhuman History-Altering Figure (and so on).

So Rand is not only part-Thor but also part Paul Atreides from Dune. These characters have a similar look, fighting style, and heritage. Dune's Fremen - ferocious water-conservation-obsessed desert warriors of unparalleled hardiness and bravery - are the main inspiration for Jordan's Aiel culture

(another Matriarchy we will not further delve into here, indeed from the Aiel Desert Waste bounding the east side of the Aes Sedai continent). Rand is half-Aiel to Paul being raised by Fremen, with both progressing to prominent unifying battle roles for their people.

The Aes Sedai are moreover an academy (the White Tower itself), and have seven political factions (Ajahs) named after colours. The Amyrlin Seat hereslef wears the seven-striped stole of office, while there are rumours of an eighth faction hidden among the Aes Sedai -the Black Ajah- who are dedicated to the service of the

Dark One/Shai'tan/Satan/Sauron (etc: quite a lot of mythologies have a such). The Aes Sedai of course deny that any of their members is Black Ajah. The whole Jordan book introduces several hundred Aes Sedai and can be considered to be a logical puzzle for which of them are Black Ajah, not, or unprovable. This is based on the fact that the Aes Sedai Oath Rods prevent Aes Sedai from telling lies. But the Black Ajah is rumoured to have access to an Oath Rod of their own, revesing this. The major bugbear unleashed is that Aes Sedai, as a ruling class that magically cannot lie, are of course the world's leading experts in bending the truth.

Tapping into this world's magic is enhanced by objects called Angreals, which come in two further variants called Sa'angreals and Ter'angreals. Sa'angreal is the obvious name origin: Saint Grael alias Holy Grail, as per Arthurian Mythology means "a big Angreal". Ter' means a tech-tool version: a very specialized Angreal.

The other matriarchy in Jordan's world that we draw on is the Seanchan Empire. Their role in the story is that they are invading the continent the action is set in. They are, at least at first sight, far nastier than the Aes Sedai. This civilization is based on the women who can learn to use magic enslaving the otherwise more puissant women who are natural magic users, by means of a mass-produced type of ter'angreal, in the form of a collar and bracelet.

The collared sorceress can then only produce magic at the direction of the bracelet-wearing woman.

This lot want to 'take back their own lands' (rather disputable, out of having been away for a millennium) as well as enslave the Aes Sedai. Big conflict of interest! The Seanchan are furthermore the Samurai on steroids: with not only Samurai weapons and fighting skills but also Fantastic Beasts in their army, such as Torm (scaled lizard-cat steeds) and To'raken (pterodactyls large enough to carry entire squads into battle). While Matrim Cauthon does not know for a long time in the story, the Nine Moons are in fact the symbol of the Seanchan Imperial destiny. The story is also obfuscated by the Daughter of the Nine Moons herself going around incognito under a somewhat disingenuously shortened name: Tuon. Which, of course, eventually turns out to be short for Fortuona, ie Fortuna, ie Lady Luck, i.e. Mrs Ridiculous-Luck-Cauthon.

### 3 A 1-minute version of the magic flute

A young man pursued by a giant snake is saved by 3 female warriors who are then mean to a parrot-man. Both young man and parrot man are single and seeking. The Queen of the Night accuses Zarastro of Evil Things amidst a hefty aria, and sends her daughter to kill him. But, in a fit of Masonic Splendour, he convinces the daughter that it is the Queen of the Night who is evil. Both parrot-man and young man are then put through a Fantasy version of the Masonic Initiation rite, each equipped with a magical instrument -bells and the titular flute- to help overcome the adversities met during this.

The Queen of the Night's mask slips in an even more prolific aria, so it's clear that Zarastro is good and right, and each man finds their true love (the daughter and, well, a parrot-lady).

#### 4 Sorcerous Duck Culture

We chose to parody this situation firstly by having the Magic Flute's Queen of the Night be one and the same as the Amyrlin Seatime (Pratchett) and the Daughter of the Nine Spoons (CUSFS). By the Queen of the Night being Bad, 'getting it wrong' means that our character is Good, so appalling aspects of the Seanchan way of life are out. "Also make her the Padishah Emperor-God of Dune"! pips in one of our members. "And a Duck!" exhorts another. "Indeed, let this be a culture of Sorcerous Ducks"! enthusiastjects a third. And so the Anaes Sed-Ducks came to be, where Anas is the Latin family name for such. As ruled by the Paddledabbleshine, as the most suitable deformation of the word Padishah that we could find: as ducks paddle, ducks dabble, and iridescent ones shine: the seven coloured stole!

Except we must one-up Robert Jordan, so we introduce seventy-seven anajahs based on Silliclunkyfanfarilogisticallyimperiousextralongitudinous colour names! (see Exhibit A).

From the Seanchan end, Fantastic Beasts line her armies: not To'raken but Giant Swans, and not Torm but Astral Lionesses (based on the picture in wikipedia's entry for Fourth-Wave Feminism, these graceful fifty-foot long creatures are the capships of their day).

In our Space Opera, a Young Man who fears Carrots is given a carrot-shattering magical instrument by God, only to get attacked by Evil Parrots. He is saved by Sherahaada (who is naturally, by now we say, part She Ra, part Galahad and part Scherezade) atop an Astral Lioness [the snake is kept for later ;) ] The Astral Lionesserie then introduce him to the Anaes Sed Duck culture in a pullback scene

before the Queen of the Nightpond sings one of her famous Arias before changing tone to a toy piano and offering Pineappl'amulets of Affection from All Worldly Affliction. This pullback scene is Hyperjodorowskian, Jodorowski being a surrealist director who tried to get a 14-hour Due film made in early the 1970's (an affair of tentatively hyperjordanian length, what with the Wheel of Time series containing 14 books?) In the process, he 'talked Salvador Dali into playing the Padishah Emperor' by 'modifying the script to include flaming giraffes' around his Imperial Court.

#### 5 From Anas to Ananas: Pineapple Duck Culture

It remains to be seen in our story, moreover, that the Paddledabbleshine is indeed No Conjurer of Cheap Pineapples. For in place of a secretive Black Ajah, we have a Pineapple Ananajah, not Dark but Beautiful as a Golden-Green Tropical Dawn, Treacherous as the C2

range of explosives, shaking the Foundations of the Earth...

So we introduce the not-quite-so-secretive Exploding Pineapple Ananajah (from the French for pineapple doubling the Latin for duck) whose existence is still denied none the less... This additionally parodies the Wheel of Time's 'fireworks manufacturing lady' teaming up with a bellfounder to build the world's first cannons as Tarmon Gai'don approaches... For sure, our own world includes mandarin ducks, so why not pineapple ducks as well, in a story?

And thus concludeth our Waterfowl and Astral Lionesserie Tour of Anaes Sed Duck Culture in the Space opera. We give you a sneak preview trailer of what this Culture looks like upon arriving at Carrotmagedon in Exhibit B...

#### 6 Robert Jordan's Evil Forsaken Faction

It remains to say that we've barely got started on the Wheel of Time's factions. A separate article will address how their Evil One supporting Foresaken culture, with its ancient, evil, powerful and yet staggeringly incompetent magic users who got trapped in an only partly functional fridge for some millennia, is parodied by our Evil Parrot Cawsaken Culture. Indeed, our titular Carrots parody the 'shadowspawn' with particularly hacked monster name variants for their clans: Dha'vol, Dhai'mon, Dhjin'nen... as bred in labs by the Natsci element of the Cawsaken. By which some of our carrots are fully-functional killers, like Levitating Vampir'karotte, while others weren't in as good a part of the fridge, like visibly greying Zhombi'karotte, which have rather diminished combat skills...

#### 7 And the Pogostick Bearded Peoples?

One of our groups decided to build a Culture whose inspiration was a riddle that took the rest of us over one and a half years to crack. Namely the Pogostick Bearded Peoples, who are now revealed to be inspired by 20th Century Spanish Surrealism (cue Dali, drumroll Fourth Wave Feminism largely originating in Spain). They are based on a chainsketching starting at both ends and working inwards, with rough outlines of Dali's Lobster Telephone at one end and of "Locomocion Capilar" by Remedios Varo at the other. Look this picture up for yourselves on the net. Comments so far include "might she hinting at patriarchal oppression?" "Dali-stachio handlebars!" and "Not Gettysburg all over again!"

In our Space Opera, this culture first appears when the young man is subsequently hired by Duck TV employed by to cover the Pogostickbearded people's race down King's parade to win a date with the

beatiful princess of ... chronophages?!? Who turns out to be Ladymary Creepycrawley - Mantiss counterpart of the Downton Abbey character - with typically fatal consequences for the suitor...



## Exhibit A

The 77 Anajahs, in Order of Appearance are (in parody of character list glossaries and over-complicated cast lists in general...)

The Car-Metallic Mint-Green Anajah  
the Cotton-Candyfloss Pinkgenta Anajah  
the Fine-Powdery-Crushed-Blanched-Almond Anajah  
the German-Cherry-Jaffa-Cake-Vermillion Anajah  
the Mississippi-Mudpie-Brown Anajah  
the Louisiana-Cajun-Crawfish-Orange Anajah  
the Various-Shades-of-Grey-and-Green-to-Blend-Better-into-the-Shadows-as-Selected-and-Used-By-Lord-Avian-Vetinari-Anajah  
the Nonalarming Toy Gun Nozzle Orange Anajah  
the Kitty-Cat Fuzzcordion-Black Anajah  
the Koalifereous Eucalptochrome Anajah  
the Twinkle-Twinkle Little-Star Glitterescent Glitzy-Gold Anajah  
the Tairean-MusselShell Charcoal Anajah  
the Illinois Abe-Lincoln's-Hat Licquoricefelt Anajah  
the Celestial-Firmament Cornflower Anajah  
the Glacial-Moiraine-Polished-Puce Anajah  
the Nostalgia-Frosted Tinted-Glasses Rose Ajah  
the Clearwater-Transluscent Aquamarine Anajah  
the New York Police Department Protect-and-Serve Blue Anajah  
the Portobello-Mushroom Flared-Gill Brown Anajah  
the Granny-Smith Sourapple Anajah  
the Direwolf-Maw Kill-Bloodspatter Permanent-Red Anajah  
the After-Burner Orangeflash Anajah  
the Fuzzy-Wuzzy-Wuz-a-Bear a-Bear-Wuz-Fuzzy-Wuzzy Brown Anajah  
the Bubblebath Shimmerfilm Arcoiridescent Anajah  
the BlackRibboner-MidNight-Latex Anajah  
the Star-Spangled-Banner Blue Anajah  
the Unseen-University Octarine Anajah  
the Dark-Forest Pine-Foliage Arboroverdescent Anajah  
the Sasquatch-Scrotum Coarse-Matted Gray Anajah  
the Lacrimae-Semper-Falsae-Sunt Crocodilochlorophilochromatic Greeeeeen Anajah  
the Giant-Peach Melba-Sunset Yellorangerlet Anajah  
the Green-with-Twinkling-Turquoise-Glitter Anajah  
the Sapphirechorundumlapizlazulisticemeraldiprecious Anajah  
the Psychedelic Peace-and-Love Purple Anajah  
the Peacock-Vanity Superlative-Azure Anajah

the Firefly-Phosphorescent Yellow Anajah  
the Jack O' Lantern Orange Anajah  
the Geranium-Lake Fuchsmillion Anajah  
the Gilliamogenic Carnivorous-Paperwork Bureaucratic-Blizzard Pram-Tooth-Ivory Anajah  
the Crocodile's-Breakfast Goregenta Anajah  
the Go-Faster Ork-Battlewagon-Red Anajah  
the Breath-of-Fresh-Air Transparent Anajah  
the Denim-Overalls Fabric-Blue Anajah  
the Happy-Ever-After Silverlining Anajah  
the Sunburnt-Cyclops Beeftinge Anajah  
the WarTime-CatSick Custard Anajah  
the New-Hampshire Old-Man Granite-Gray Anajah  
the Laurelin-and-Telperion Valinorescence Anajah  
the Ivory-Tower Elitist-Orchid Anajah  
the Goldfish-Tailfin Ormillion Anajah  
the Chilli-Pepper Heatwave Red Anajah  
the Hell-hath-no-Fury Brimstone Anajah  
the Flower-Power Shocking-Pink Anajah  
the Pennsylvania-Independence Indigo Anajah  
the Quicksilver Starlit-Moonbeams Anajah  
the Rampaging-Trotskyite Radical-Red Anajah  
the Vivid-Vivienne Laserborne Braided-Kryptonite Yellowgreen Anajah  
the Cursed-Gold and Tarnished-Silver Anajah  
the Glow-in-the-Dark Halloween-Candy-Apple Redgenta Anajah  
the Jellybean Electric-Lime Anajah  
the Moloko-Plus Horrorshow-Ultrapsychadelic Clockwork-Orange Anajah  
the Chaise-Longue Polished-Mahogany Anajah  
the Pixie-Powder Razzle-Dazzle Anajah  
the Blast-off Inflammamarin Anajah  
the Tree-of-Life Malachorite Anajah  
the Watermelon-Binge-Frenzy Pulpmillion Anajah  
the Two-fifty-a-week Regal with moonroof in Teal Anajah  
the Permanent-Assurance Crimson Anajah  
the Moving-Clockwork Engine-Grease Baudelaire-Violet Anajah  
the Klaus Baudelaire Bookbinding Aged-Leather Deep Brown Anajah  
the Lucy-In-the-Sky-with-Diamonds Adamantium Anajah  
the Gormenghastly Prunesquallour Anajah  
the Greasy-Limpopo-River All-Set-about-with-Fever-Trees Great-Grey-Green Anajah  
the Sunny-Baudelaire Chewy-Limoncello-Mallow Buttercup-Brick-Road Van-Gogh-Sunflower-Flare-Sextet

Astally-Projected Chortling-SunGod-GoldenRod Tele-Tubby-Sunburst Anajah

the Antique-Brass Harmloious-Puritone-and-yet-Sombreportent-Campanochrome Anajah

the Eye-of-Argon Many-Fauceted (sic) Scarlet-Emerald \*Blue\* Anajah

(Because one of the few ways of making a "Scarlet Emerald" into a worse piece of prose is to use it as an adjective for a Blue faction...)

There is moreover totally not a 78th Anajah with no connection at all to pineapples whose members reside hidden within the other 77 Anajahs. The formal colour-name of this entirely fictitious organization is Ananachromatic Smokey-Topaz Verdochre Ananajah.

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## Exhibit B



Sourcerous Ducks arriving at what their Culture calls Ananarmageddon. Swan'toraken and supporting Mobile-White-Tower Air-Control-Tower are to the right, with Sherahaada's Ala of Astral Lionesserie to the left, and the Paddledable-shine Empress' Own Exploding-Pineapple Artillery to the centre.

Though some of you, dear readers, may well be asking yourself 'Who THE HELL is THAT GUY centre-background?' That Riddle posed, we take our bow.



And that's the end of the Lent issue!

As always, I'd love to feature your creative writing, puzzles, riddles, and general pieces in these pages, absolutely anything SciFi or Fantasy is welcome. Has anything in here inspired you? Have you written a first draft of something and need some motivation to dust it off and get some feedback? Send it in to me at [cusfs.chainwriting@gmail.com](mailto:cusfs.chainwriting@gmail.com) and it can feature in the next issue. I'm already looking forward to it!

Keep writing!



TREACHEROUS THIEVES! BRAZEN ASSASSINS!

TTBA Lent 2020

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