



TRUE TURMOIL BLAZES AHEAD



ST. PANCRAS UNDERGROUND

TRUE TURMOIL BLAZES ANEW

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hereafter CUSFS

True Turmoil Blazes Anew

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By the numbering system from 1973-2004, this is Volume 46, Issue 1.

The Chairbeing's Address

Hi again!

As we begin another very unusual term, I hope all of you are finding ways to cope with this unprecedented and difficult situation. As always, CUSFS is here to help, with this new edition of TTBA for you to enjoy and our weekly digital discussions continuing as before. If you've got the time to join in once in a while, the more the merrier. I know I've benefited a lot from being able to have a couple of hours to take my mind off the current situation.

I hope that things will be looking better by the time Easter term rolls around and we'll be able to have at least one in-person meeting this year. But though we're still stuck inside for now, life goes on, and so does CUSFS. I encourage everyone to sign up for chainwriting this term if it interests you at all, even if you think you aren't very good at writing. Everyone has to start somewhere, and besides, you might be better than you think!

Thanks again to everyone who's stuck with CUSFS through this very difficult time, and I look forward to seeing everyone again next academic year if not sooner.

Take care,

Jamie

CUSFS Chairbeing 2020-21

A Message From The Editor

Greetings to all in this new decade! This TTBA rounds out the last chains of the *twen-teens* (the term will catch on, trust me) and involves a batch of rapping elves, belligerent navigation computers and mushy pocket-eyeballs.

And if that doesn't intrigue you, I don't know what will!

Thank you as always to the writers and the two artists this term - we have a funky new digital composition on our cover by Marcus September, and a lovely piece opposite by Hannah Clark.

This zany train is leaving the station.
Hop on for a while...

Swords and Sorcery,

Shaun Vickers

TTBA Editor 2019-21





The first chain in this issue is that of the shuffle chain, a little experiment to change up the genres and setting we see in our chains. The selected genre this term was 'The French Revolution'.

RATS AMONG MICE

Liz Weir, light_harted, YH Lim, Phoebe Fay, Caldri, Hannah Clark,
Ed Heaney, Dan Scott, A. A. Rispo Constantinou, Tom Musgrove

The servants' door crept open on well-oiled hinges, revealing a narrow wedge of Claudette's face - one eye, a hint of anxious brow. Then she recognised Lucille - as if anyone else would be here past midnight, rapping quietly on the door with the pattern the Society had arranged - and opened the door to let her slip in.

"The Comte's asleep - he had a guest but I heard the carriage leave an hour ago, and brandy always makes him sleep," Claudette whispered.

Lucille spared her a wink and a grin. "I know the plan - you get back to the kitchen, I'll take it from here."

A quiet creep through dark stairways later, Lucille was gazing at the flickering light that spilled under the Comte's bedchamber door. A minute listening satisfied her that the man was snoring, deeply asleep.

She opened the door and slipped inside.

A lamp lit the room, illuminating the half-dressed noble sprawled across his covers, but Lucille knew the Comte was less lax with the locks on his hidden chamber.

But the Society had planned for this, all to ensure his hoarded wealth would return to the hands of the commons, not flee with him to England; the Comte's own preparations had delayed him, awaiting the opportunity to travel with all the security he could afford had only served to give them the chance to exploit failings closer to home.

Deft fingers pulled the key from the Comte's shirt, and Lucille's knife whispered through the cord to free it from his neck. She turned to the mirror, found the keyhole hidden in its ornamented rim, and swung open the door.

Years of hard-won burglar's skill couldn't stand up to what she saw within, drawing a soft curse from her lips.

The Comte's treasure glistened in front of her but between them was the glittering haze of a shielding charm. The Society had feared that this might be the case but had gambled on the Comte having spent too much on his other security arrangements to afford to employ a mage as well. With true mages being so rare, they could afford to charge exorbitant fees for their work and Lucille could tell from the quality of the barrier that this was top class.

Knowing when she was beaten, Lucille quietly shut the mirror and locked it again. She took a pause to listen to the

noises of the house and heard only silence. She frowned. Something was wrong. What had happened to the Comte's snoring?

Whipping round and pulling out her knife, Lucille turned to face the Comte's bed. Except the Comte wasn't there anymore. In his place was a straw doll covered in the runes which were the hallmark of a transfiguration charm. The Society had been tricked; misled by one of their informants and Lucille had fallen right into their trap.

Running to the door, Lucille burst into the corridor, all attempts at keeping quiet forgotten. She needed to get out of this house. That was two sophisticated spells she'd seen and she definitely didn't want to meet the person responsible. She sprinted down the corridors, easily backtracking along the route she'd spent months committing to heart.

Then she heard Claudette scream.

Claudette!

Lucille skidded to a stop, plastering herself flush against the wall in the stairwell as she hastily muttered a simple hearing charm under her breath. In times like these, she was glad for the little drop of magic in her blood, useless as it was against the likes of true mages.

The Society had warned that should they meet with any mishap during the operation, it was every woman for herself. There was no point endangering the whole network. There were things greater than the individual, after all.

Yet, the thought of leaving the young servant girl in the lion's den, where the guillotine - metaphorical and physical - was poised to fall on her and her alone, did not sit well with Lucille.

Her decision was made for her when her subtly enhanced hearing picked up a soft whimper.

Bursting through the kitchen doors, she found the poor girl crouched by the ovens. Her hands cradled her face but it was evident from the sliver of skin that peeked through that the damage had been done. There was a reason for this curse being known as "living death"; victims, exposed to even the faintest of moonlight, experienced an acute burning of the flesh, and many soon begged for death even before it consumed them.

There was, however, no sign of the mage who had presumably been lying in wait for them.

“We need to leave.” Lucille’s tone came out brusquer than she hoped, but she was not about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

She quickly divested herself of her cloak, draping it as best as she could around Claudette. The servant girl was surprisingly composed after a few moments; despite the initial curl of suspicion in her gut, Lucille ascribed it to the fact that different individuals handled shock in variable ways.

Together, they fled into the darkened streets. They had hardly been running a few minutes before Claudette collapsed. She cried out in agony, her smooth skin bubbling and fizzing as the moonlight tore through her. Whoever cursed her was powerful and did not have high regard for moral integrity. Lucille unwrapped her overskirt and covered Claudette, examining her wounds. Still mostly superficial, but it would not take long until it went deeper.

They would have to go underground. The Society never made a map of the Network, for obvious reasons. There were three nearby entrances, but if they knew the plans this evening, chances are they would know where the nearby entrances were, and they had already been closed off. So, they ran on.

Eventually, they made it to a small bakery. She knew where the key was to get in, but she had to play it safe. Taking she closed her eyes, visualising the bakery. The neatly shacked tins, the worktop curved from years of use, the floors covered in a thin layer of flour. She had memories of coming down here every day to buy bread. Just walking by to catch a whiff and stare through the window. Dropping by to see what she could steal to feed her family. She took a deep breath and, taking Claudette by the hand, stepped through the wall.

Or, she tried to step through. She took a death breath, squeezed Claudette’s hand, and stepped through the wall. And stepped through the wall. Shit. Why wasn’t it working?

Somehow, Claudette knew the answer before Lucille’s brain had fully processed the problem at hand. The young girl closed her eyes tightly and softly whispered “It’s me, isn’t it? He charmed me.”

Lucille held her breath, hesitant. It was the only logical answer. However, something else in Claudette’s answer sent chills down the woman’s spine. She turned to the girl and grabbed her by the shoulders with such violence her cloak nearly exposed Claudette’s now oversensitive skin “You said “he”. Do you mean... Was it...?”

Claudette did not dare face the older woman, painfully aware of the danger she had put her in by not confessing

the mage’s identity sooner. Nevertheless, she nodded, allowing her voice to break “Yes. It was the boy.”

Lucille quickly let go of the girl as if she had been burned. “Then you are cursed, child. I cannot bring you with me, if it would lead him to the Society-”

Claudette cried, fighting the instinct to grab Lucille’s hands and begged, “Please, he’ll kill me...”

“There are things greater than the individual. Protecting the Society from Robespierre’s butcher is one of them.” She spared Claudette one final pitying look. “I’m sorry.”

And with that, Lucille darted towards the wall, Claudette’s desperate pleading yells the last thing she heard before she came out on the other side. She could not stop running even after she had found the safety of the Network’s dark grim corridors. In the mist of the damp smell and the blinding darkness, her fears were heightened, and even after she’d ran miles away from the bakery, she still thought to hear the boy’s chilling childlike laughter which always preceded a gruesome murder.

Lucille daren’t return to the bakery for several days. The looming threat of the boy- no one unfortunate enough to meet him ever escaped to speak his name- kept her from venturing out from the safety of the Network. She scrubbed her hands again and again until her skin was cracked and bleeding. She burned the clothes she had worn. Everything she could do to purge every last trace of enchantment that might have latched onto her from where she had touched Claudette.

It wasn’t enough.

Reporting their failure was only another nail in Lucille’s coffin, buried deep and festering alongside Claudette’s horrible demise.

Claudette might not have been the first to die by Lucille’s side, but everything about that night had screamed wrong wrong WRONG. And like a child, she hid from her fears and failures in the safe darkness of the Network tunnels.

When she finally mustered the courage to step through the wall and out into the bakery, she found it abandoned and undisturbed since their mad flight with the heavy musty smell of rotting bread and a fine layer of dust upon every tin and counter.

Her breath stuttered in her chest as her eyes fell upon what remained of Claudette smeared upon the floorboards. The shape of the young serving girl was near unrecognisable, nothing then a too-small shape smothered in the dirty shawl and overskirt; a thin hand reaching out towards the wall with the flesh melted off to leave bleached white bone that even the rats daren’t touch. In the dim light, the bones of her delicate hands could almost be the branches of a young tree reaching up for the winter sun.

Claudette had always been good with her hands, fingers quick as dancing mice as they spun the wool and wove it into thick shawls and skirts. Even red and peeling with the scullery work she did, she'd always had time to sit and weave so that her sisters might have something warm to wear.

Her face was hidden beneath the shawl and Lucille had no desire to look upon her friend's empty eyes. Not when the faces of her sisters were still fresh in her mind, their wails of grief like distant echoes in an empty corridor.

With nothing to do but whisper a quiet prayer that her soul might find peace in Paradise, Lucille ducked back into the tunnels and fled from her disgrace.

But how had he known? It had been a perfect trap. From the shield over the treasury to the straw doll on the bed to the ambush waiting for Claudette.

And why Claudette? Poor sweet Claudette who had been only a child. Young and thin from hard winters, she'd been nothing but a simple scullery maid, their eyes on the inside for sure, but who had no power to bring harm to anyone. Why not spring the ambush on Lucille as she opened the vault? After all it was Lucille who had been fleecing the fleeing nobles these past few months. Lucille who had slit the vicomte's throat when he had awoken during their raid two weeks prior. Lucille who had stolen more money than the dowry of the most wealthiest of princesses. Lucille who slipped away on magic-shrouded feet into the night no matter how hard the soldiers searched for her. Surely she would've been the more valuable quarry?

Those thoughts dogged her all the way back to the Network.

"Lucille, my darling, you will sour the milk."

"Sorry madame," Lucille tried to pull her mind from the quagmire of her thoughts, turning her attention to the woman sat at the crude desk.

"Do not apologise. It is an awful thing you have suffered." The woman smiled, putting down her quill and beckoning her to sit down.

"Madame Estienne, please I should not bother you. You are busy."

The madame shook her hand in a dismissive gesture, "nonsense my darling. Sit."

Madame Estienne was an ageing woman, late thirties at least, though not yet grey and decrepit. Her thin hair was plaited over one shoulder and her dress might once have been fashionable though the blue cotton had faded over time to a sad grey. In the dim flickering candlelight, even the ribboned flower brooch seemed muted and dull.

The rumours said she had once been the daughter of an Ecuier. That her clever plots were only made so by her innate knowledge of the nobility.

Lucille knew better than to trust rumours, but it had to be said that the Society had been much more effective since she her arrival.

"Tell me what it is you are thinking?" She sprinkled sand over the ink as she spoke, before sitting back to watch Lucille with a gentle kind of expectancy.

"It is nothing of use, Madame." For a few moments Lucille tried to organise her thoughts, but under the madame's eyes it all came spilling out regardless, "I just cannot stop thinking about the Comte Valois raid. It does not make sense. How did the boy know we were going to hit the manor? Why did he kill Claudette? None of it makes sense." She found her voice breaking despite herself, her eyes stinging with tears she wasn't ready to shed yet.

Unlike Claudette, Lucille was not a child. Old enough to work in the red house if not for the Society's bed and board and cause. Old enough to know tears only wasted precious water and did nothing for an empty belly.

"Hush my darling." The madame reached across the table to place her hands over Lucille's- they were a little cold.

"Please, do not place the blame upon yourself. You are our best burglar my darling. Together we have robbed six manors in half as many months. You are a wonder. It is not you who is at fault here. I should've known our operations might have been found out, that there was a rat amongst the mice. If you wish to place the blame somewhere, then place it with me. It was my plan after all."

Lucille shook her head, squeezing her eyes tight against the tears, "never you madame. All of this was only possible because of you. Claudette and I knew of the dangers we faced. If we are to die for the betterment of our people then it is never too high a price to pay. Just-"

"You wonder why it is that you are sat here, hale and whole, and not Claudette."

Lucille nodded, scrubbing her face hard with her free hand.

"I understand your pain my darling. Truly I do. We have lost so many sisters. But even the King fears us now. He plans to flee with his family and hide behind his friends in the north. Does that not tell you how far we have come? It is worth it, my darling. All of this pain- it is worth it."

Lucille nodded along, able to offer nothing more than a thin-lipped shaky smile to Madame Estienne. She knew that. Of course she knew that. The woman's face softened and she reached to brush a thumb across Lucille's cheek.

"You have done so well my darling. We will not let Claudette's fall be in vain. I have a plan to catch our rat. We will raid the Comte Valois' manor tomorrow night. Will you be my claws once again little mouse?"

Swallowing back the lump in her throat, this time Lucille managed a stronger smile. "Of course madame. For you - always."

"I know, little mouse. I think we understand one another."

There was a pause – it lasted just for a moment, but to Lucille it felt like an eternity, on edge, waiting, nervous.

"You have questions, don't you?" The madame said it kindly, simply, making it abundantly clear that she had not needed to deploy her renowned perceptive abilities for that observation.

Lucille's face answered the madame far more eloquently than her words could have.

Madame Estienne was understanding. "Why do we return to the Comte Valois? Why take that risk again? How will that help us catch our sneaky rat?"

Lucille was hesitant in answering, but she could see some of it coming together. She nodded assent, then said, "The Comte is rich, but he wouldn't have any treasure left to guard if he paid a mage for a shield like that two nights in a row. With luck, he might also think that we'll be too wary to make another attempt, now we've failed to bypass his defences once already. But... wouldn't the boy..."

"Craft the shield himself? I don't think he can. He works through people, corrupting minds, corrupting bodies, enchanting, transmuting, decaying. When have we ever seen evidence of his works that required forces to be projected or physical barriers to be conjured? More likely that he merely told the Comte to prepare, and laid that part of the trap which ensnared my poor Claudette."

Lucille shuddered, trying as hard as she could to force the unfortunate girl from her thoughts. Stay professional, stay calm, don't let the Society down...

She tried to mask the deep breath she took to calm her voice; she wanted her contribution to reflect her reputation as an unmatched burglar, rather than a conduit for the sadness and, she had to admit to herself, the tiny little spike of fear that she felt.

"And then," she said, slowly, "there's the question of catching our rat. I have a thought on that myself."

Madame Estienne might possibly have looked interested. "Please, continue," she said.

Lucille didn't hide the deep breath this time. She braced herself and prepared to unload all that she had been pondering over since that night. Lucille let the words flow from her with scarcely a breath being drawn between them.

"I can't explain it, and I can't prove it, but something inside me can't help but wonder if this goes beyond Comte Valois. There's too much that doesn't make sense. If he knew the Society was coming that night, why no traps? Why only barriers? And what good would it do to take out Claudette, a

mere child whose only connection to the Society was the few crumbs of information she fed to us? And if the Comte didn't know the night we were coming, then how is it that the boy, that devil spawn, was there on that very night? Our plan to return is premised entirely on the assumption that the Comte couldn't possibly afford to hire the boy again, not without depleting his fortune which we both know he would never do. I can hardly believe that he was willing to pay for the boy's service even once." Madame Estienne sat listening to Lucille, her eyes now closed in deliberation as she carefully considered every word.

After a pause, Lucille continued. "No... Something doesn't add up. And what of the Comte that night? He had a guest, Claudette said, and had gone off to bed. But in his bedchamber was a transfiguration doll. So where was the Comte? You and I both know that gluttonous gargoyle couldn't scale the wall from his bedchamber window to sneak out of the room. So who was it that Claudette saw retire for the evening? Another conjuration, no doubt. But in that case, even the Comte's meeting with a guest must have been a ploy. And if we accept that to be the truth..." Lucille trailed off. She could feel the dawning of a terrible revelation creeping upon her, but she couldn't quite piece it all together.

The ever-discerning Madame Estienne, however, seemed to have pierced the shadowy veil obscuring the whole ordeal. Her eyelids snapped open, and Lucille saw something fierce and fiery burning in the woman's eyes. The madame spoke, her voice low and calculated, "we've been played, my dear. There was no rat. Convenient, wasn't it, that the Comte prolonged his departure apparently in order to muster up some expansive security team? We never would have had the chance to move on him if not for the delay. But when have we ever known Comte Valois to act with any deal of foresight, even when it comes to the preservation of his wealth? My darling Lucille... I thank the stars above that you found your way to me. If not for your words, I may never have seen the path laid out before us, the chessboard upon which I now see that we are playing."

Lucille still was unable to fit the pieces together quite as adeptly as the madame. What was it that she couldn't see? What revelation had the madame come to?

Madame Estienne looked at her knowingly, and the blaze in her eyes grew stronger as she spoke again. "Comte Valois, I dare say, has been out of the picture since the moment we learned he delayed his departure. He has been replaced, his whole estate an elaborate bait meant to lure us in. If I'm seeing all the signs correctly, which I believe I am now that you've sparked my attention to ones I had not previously considered, then I suspect our actions in the past months have led the elites to band their resources together. It may even go as high as the King, given how deep the pockets must have been to keep not just the boy, but no fewer than one other mage, on retainer this entire time. We were meant to believe the Comte's estate wouldn't possibly be guarded by mages again, that he couldn't afford it. They

meant to draw us out for a second attempt, one that might extend beyond just you, dear Lucille.”

Lucille considered Madame Estienne’s words before speaking. “So what do we do, then, knowing it’s a trap? Give up on the Comte’s estate and set our eyes elsewhere?”

The madame laughed slow and soft. It was actually rather unnerving, Lucille thought. Madame Estienne grinned and shook her head. The madame’s gaze seemed to bore through Lucille’s skull as she spoke, “oh no, my darling. This is more perfect than I could have even hoped for. They would have cut no corners in orchestrating this level of ruse. If my intuition is correct, which I would bet the future of the Society on that it is, then that estate is being managed by two, perhaps three, mages other than the demon boy. Getting rid of them would leave but one last mage in the service of the King, from what we know of the number of true mages in the country.”

Despite her better judgment, Lucille interrupted. “Get rid of? What do you mean get rid of? How could we possibly-”

The fire in Madame Estienne’s eyes raged stronger, so much so that Lucille could have sworn the madame’s eyes were glowing red. The madame spoke, the power in her voice distinctly ominous. “I’ve been planning for an opportunity like this since the beginning. Yes, it’s true that in terms of magical blood, the Society is rather lacking. Pitting what little we have against fully fledged mages would be suicide. But I have a trick up my sleeve, an item of enormous power that even one with merely a drop of magic in their blood could wield, an item dating back to the Carolingian Empire. It has but one last use left in it before being rendered worthless, which is why I could never have wasted this on eliminating just one mage... But three? Four? And the devil child among them? Now that would be worth sacrificing the Talisman of Charlemagne.”

They had been walking through the cold tunnels for what felt like an eternity. Lucille was grateful for those shreds of warmth her heavy mantle could give her. After drawing up the outline of her plan, Madame Estienne had sent out three bands of Society members through the tunnels to the Valois estate, on different routes. Each band would carry a sealed box, apparently containing a sum of money. Should one be intercepted, it would appear no more than routine low-level smuggling, rather than the all-or-nothing last gasp of a cornered Society.

Lucille shuddered, only partly because of the cold. Madame Estienne’s revelation had seemed like divine intervention: a secret artefact of untold power, conveniently requiring no more than the lightest of magical affinities for its use... Lucille shook herself back to the task at hand. It would not do to doubt the mission now. With her were two others: Martine, one of the Society’s only remaining nurses, and

Georges, a mute stable-boy picked for his craftiness and nimble hands. Martine signalled the go-ahead, and they advanced once more into the darkness.

It swallowed them whole, and bore them along its night-filled intestines for what could have been hours or could have been weeks, and drowned them in an anticipatory silence. Lucille walked, for she could do nothing else, and thought to herself about the things that this city, these tunnels, had seen. War and massacre, famine and plague, tyranny and anarchy, over and over again. And now her.

And, eventually, there was a light – bright, red-orange, steady – and she walked towards it, and emerged into a great stone chamber.

Her first thought was that this was a theatre, an old buried Roman ruin. Her second was that it was a courtroom, and this was more accurate.

Seated on a great stone chair above her sat the boy, his youthful face sharp and delighted. And two figures flanked him on slightly lower thrones; the Comte de Valois to his right, and to his left –

“Lucille,” said Madame Estienne, “welcome.”

She stumbled in shock, and turned as if to run, but Martine and Georges caught her, steadied her, turned her back to face them.

“I don’t understand,” whispered Lucille, hearing the sounds of the world she had known crumbling and fracturing.

“Then understand quickly,” said the Comte, and smirked to himself. “You won’t have much longer.”

“You’re in league with – with him,” said Lucille to Madame Estienne. “With the boy who murdered Robespierre and Danton and de Gouges in the street. The boy who burned Lyon. The boy –”

“The boy,” said the boy in question, “who has been directing your every step for the last year.”

“But – why?”

“What’s the best way to find a revolutionary?” said the Comte. “Traps? Secret police?”

“No,” said Madame Estienne, smiling as well. “It’s to start a revolutionary society, and wait for them to flock to your banner.”

And Lucille saw the whole thing, the whole lie, in a moment of terrible clarity.

“Thank you for making yourself known,” said the boy.

“The talisman –” began Lucille, but smiled bitterly before she could finish. Of course it had been too good to be true.

“Hope is always the best bait,” said the Comte.

“And history the best cloak to hide a lie within,” said Madame Estienne.

“You see,” said the boy, who looked both young and old now, “this is what we do. For the King, and the Church, and the true order of things. Throne and altar. Draw the poison from the wound.”

“Cauterisation,” said the Comte. “Let Paris burn, if it purifies the realm.”

“I did say,” said Madame Estienne, “that if you wished to place the blame somewhere, then you should place it with me.”

“No,” said Lucille, her voice low. “No blame. Just vengeance.”

“What vengeance?” said the Comte, laughing. “What can you possibly do, down here?”

And Lucille knew that there was only one option left to her, one path, one spell and one source of fuel. She had a useless talisman in one hand, and a bracelet that had once held incantations and tricks, all used up by now. But there was always blood.

She slipped into the dark corners of her mind, and began to gather the energy that made up her life. It would not be enough to kill any of the three, if they were at all protected, when she released the magic. It would not get her away. It would not stop her from dying beneath Paris, the last true member of the Society.

But, if she aimed the energy at the vaulted ceiling just so –

“What are you doing?” said the boy, sounding almost curious.

It probably wouldn’t work. They’d be able to stop her. All that would happen would be that she would die quicker, and be able to say that she’d fought before the inevitable defeat came.

But then, Lucille thought, that was, perhaps, the whole point of a revolution in the first place.

“Lucille?” said Madame Estienne.

Lucille smiled up at the three of them. “Ça ira.”

And –

BONUS CONTENT: Rats Among Mice

“I love the way the ending invites the reader to imagine what might happen next - that really puts us in Lucille's shoes.”

Liz Weir

“I'd love to particularly congratulate whoever came after me for an especially tricky and masterful bit of writing!”

A. A. Rispo Constantinou

“...Having the prompt of 'French Revolution' definitely informed the direction I chose to go with the ending, and I think definitely gave the piece a very consistent and strong atmosphere throughout!

Perhaps the biggest disadvantage for me, as a historian of this period, was fighting the temptation to go crazy with historical detail and links to other important figures/events...”

Tom Musgrove

CHASING THE SUN

Joe Ross-Biddles, Shaun Vickers, Cayson C, Maddi Jackson,
light_harted, Shan, Percy, Anonymous, Yuhang Xie, Dan Scott

Ilmaris-5 was a strange city. Perched on a blasted and forgotten rock by a dim star in the far-flung reaches of the galaxy, it was virtually unique in that it did not resemble a place where people had over time chosen to live, but where the Corporation had decided for inscrutable reasons they should want to live.

It did not so much tower as skulk over a wide storm-tossed lake on a gigantic pillar of perfectly rectangular basalt, wrenched from the earth by some forgotten machinery, and driving rain lashed its buttressed sky-streets, which were layered one over the other to make dozens of levels and sub-levels, all glowing weirdly with neon and redolent with the faint smell of ozone.

Tanzin turned up the collar of her long leather coat against the rain as she slipped out from the shelter of an old diner in the very deepest levels of the city, seeing only by the flickering blue light of the single surviving letter on an old shop sign. Two distant figures skittered like startled insects and sped down one of dozens of tiny alleyways as she began to walk.

Nobody knew exactly how many levels the city had – it depended on what exactly you counted as a complete level. For decades, the practice had been to simply abandon lower sub-levels like this when the constantly accumulating mass of new streets rendered them uninhabitable or unprofitable, and Tanzin had never met anyone who'd reached the foundations of the city.

Which raised the question: what was at the bottom?

Of course, very few people even cared for the answer. The Corporation workers occupying the upper levels with their penthouses and their skylights certainly didn't give a shit. They tended to spend their time on their exotic liquors and their profit margins; how much they could make from their software, their virtual design-work only even enjoyed by those with ocular chips.

Down here, people with ocular chips were well-guarded or they were on borrowed time – those things were worth more than people in the Wells would earn in their entire lives, and the racketeers didn't mind too much if they arrived with a bit of spare cornea still attached.

At least, that's what she hoped, considering she had three slightly messy ones in her inside pockets.

Tanzin had been walking another 5 minutes through alleyways before she started seeing people scattered around again, leaning against walls and chatting through headsets and bodytech. Their friends were likely miles away – for some poor sods they were purely delusions from the whitegrain they kept obsessively dumping into their lungs. Everyone was more than used to the grime and the smell of strong engine oil and faint urine on the outskirts of the Wells, and the navy steel buttresses bolted into every wall were less likely to hide criminals when there were more witnesses around. Usually Tanzin would start feeling more comfortable at this point, as the spotlights lining the pavement started to work more than not. With what felt like three atomic bombs shuffling around quietly as she took each step however, she took to fidgeting with her earpiece.

Tran had fitted it about a month ago, and it had saved her twice already. She pressed with her thumb. Every passing conversation was instantly isolated, the random stallholder or labourer she was looking at amplified above other noise, to just before the point the volume was uncomfortable. She pressed again. Off. On. Off.

The piece hung like a small icicle from the centre of her right ear, the lobe removed to give it more space. Tanzin loved the look anyhow, what was the difference between that and a bulky earring? It had taste, it did; sleek blue, clean seams with the rest of her ear. Tran was a damn genius, so no surprise, but still.

It was lucky the piece was turned off when the stall directly in front detonated in black and red.

Tanzin lay on the ground for a moment, recollecting her wits after being thrown back by the explosion. Her ears were ringing, and she wasn't sure if it was tinnitus or a malfunction of her earpiece. She stood up shakily, her left hand subtly brushing against her inner pocket to check the ocular pieces were still in good conditions. Fortunately, they were.

There was no one else around now. They must either have been scared off or had fallen through the large hole which replaced where the stall once stood. Most people – particularly considering the illicit cargo she carried in her pocket – would have taken this chance to run off before the authorities arrived, but not her. For it was the same tenacious curiosity which had led to her previous payoff that pulled her to the edge of the crater.

Glancing down, it was apparent that the hole was much more sinister than the simple industrial accidents which plagued the aging infrastructure of the lower levels. She could make out dimly the streetlights of the level below, and in the middle of that road, another crater, leading down to the next level. It was much too dark to make out the level below that, but it would appear that someone – or something – was trying to blow up its way through to a higher level.

Why anyone would do that was a mystery to her. Sure, there were official restrictions on moving up to higher levels, but nothing that a simple bribe couldn't get a single person or family around. Unless, whatever wanted to climb up was not so innocent. She shuddered. Not with fear, but with excitement. A mystery like this meant new opportunities for her. If there was one thing she had learnt from a lifetime of having nothing, it was that any break from the norm was a chance to change her fate, and any change was better than the squalid subsistence she lived now. Clutching gently her three prized possessions for comfort, she began her descent.

Taking a deep breath, Tanzin took a running leap and threw herself into the still-steaming crater. Freefalling, her neon orange hair whipped her face, making it hard to see the blurred rush of the

levels as they whizzed by – but just clear enough to make out the enormous metal creature she raced past on the way down. A huge and hulking obsidian shape, it sprawled outwards like a virus or the legs of a spider, clawing its way up through the levels. That's all Tanzin saw before the ground of the final level came rushing up to meet her.

Two unconscious episodes in a row can't be good for the brain. This is what Tanzin concluded as she once again staggered to her feet, neck wet for some reason. And the hair at the back of her head. Not sure why right now. Can't think over the – pounding, the – static – she must have fallen far, a falling star? She shakes her head to clear the non-sense rhymes that chink themselves together in her eyes but – bad idea – makes it worse – that's got to hurt. If only she could – work out where she was – get to her feet – but which way up is that again? Crumbs of concrete on her lips, taste like tar and cigarettes, those smoke-sticks from the old days you sometimes see in curio shops. She went there with Tran once, and they'd laughed at the grotesque smiling and crying theatre masks... somehow, Tanzin, face down in the empty street, finds herself somehow doing both, tears streaming down her grime-smeared cheeks as harsh, broken breaths force their way out of her crushed chest. If you don't laugh you'll cry, she thinks – if I don't laugh I'll die...

If only those buzzing sounds and glowing lights would go away, she could sleep. If only those voices would shut it, she could simply float away...

Wait.

Voices?

Tanzin concentrated hard, trying to listen through the pounding in her head. She could definitely hear voices. Maybe someone else had fallen through the gap? She pushed herself into a sitting position and opened her eyes, wiping away the last vestiges of her tears on her sleeve. Looking up, she could see the hole she'd leapt through many levels above and just beneath it glistened the giant metal creature she'd glimpsed during her fall. As interesting as this was, Tanzin was slightly more concerned about the source of the voices so turned her attention to her more immediate surroundings.

The light coming through the gap above was the only source of illumination, but it was enough to reveal that Tanzin had fallen into the middle of what she could only describe as a forest. However, it was a forest of metal trees, their vast iron trunks gnarled with rust and the canopy glistening with copper leaves. Moving her eyes down towards the roots of one of the trees nearest to her, Tanzin found the source of the voices. Perched on a lowdown branch were two mechanical birds, their transparent bodies revealing the intricate clockwork that lay beneath. As her eyes fell on them, they fell silent and watched her.

Who would spend so much time and money creating a mechanical illusion? Tanzin was more fascinated than nervous, her mind rapidly estimating the value of the metal and glass parts which the creatures were constructed from. She calculated that, dismantled, the birds' materials were of a good enough quality that selling them might bring her enough to last 4 months. And yet, someone had used the material to build these fantastic models of mythical creatures for no apparent purpose, when the same illusion could have been obtained through a few lines of code and some pixels via some higher-level resident's ocular chip. Nowadays if you were lucky enough to have an ocular chip you could purchase any visual experience imaginable for the right price – the miracle of digital reality technology meant that precious engine materials did not have to be wasted on art pieces in order for those who could afford it to enjoy depictions of the so-called 'natural world', legendary 'animals' and something Tanzin had heard referred to as 'humanity's inner life'. Tanzin had always dismissed the use of ocular chips for entertainment as a truly trivial application of the technology – could a few images of an imaginary reality really be worth so much? – but gazing at the intricate, oddly delicate mechanical birds now, she felt a strange tension that made her wonder if there was a something to be said for staring at illusions after all.

"Why did she jump?" Tanzin jumped herself, startled, at the tinny voice emitting from one of the birds, "Do we log it as a death caused by the

explosion?" She took a cautious step towards the devices.

"You should be dead," stated a flat voice from close behind Tanzin's left shoulder, an undeniably human and real presence. She spun round. The person who had spoken was comically ordinary-looking against the backdrop of the glistening metal forest. Dirty grey clothes hung on a slanted, uncomfortable looking figure, weight on one foot as if about to dodge or hide. He looked about her age and scowled at her. From seeing his stance and expression alone she was able to relax – her instincts, which had been finely tuned for survival in the Wells, told her, 'Don't worry, he's weak. He's a talker, a complainer. He's trying to be threatening but won't be able to act as fast as you.'

She smiled, confident now, and excited. This was what she was good at, facing the unknown and somehow coming out the other side with more than she went in with.

"Dead? I didn't feel like it this time. Your accent is familiar – are you from the Wells?" His scowl deepened. She was taking a risk by being so familiar – but this was one of the strategies that generally worked: making an impression by proving yourself to those stronger than you and intimidating those who were weaker.

He shook his head in irritation.

'I know who you are, Tanzin, but of course you wouldn't remember me. I don't understand how or why you came down that hole, but the fact you survived must be because someone is trying to punish me.'

Frozen in surprise, Tanzin could hardly believe it as he turned his back on her and walked off into the woods, calling, 'Follow me,' over his shoulder. As she hurried over the dull metal floor after him, she heard the birds behind her chattering, this time their voices accompanied by the Corporation's official anthem, "There has been an accident in the Wells with one confirmed death and some injured. The Corporation is now investigating the likely causes but there is no need for alarm ..."

Fifteen minutes of walking later, Tanzin could still see no end to the wasteful metal forest. She had only spied a few more metal birds under the canopy, but the air vibrated with the quiet hum of

static from above, and she suspected there were many more of the creatures high out of sight, transmitting their frantic messages. At first she attempted to orient herself relative to the streets she knew so well, countless levels above, but soon gave up, and was even starting to wonder if this entire level consisted of endless, featureless metal trees. In the meantime she had bombarded the strange boy who knew her name with questions, but he had ignored her. His seeming lack of interest worried her; he knew that she would be completely lost without him with no way back to her level, and therefore had no choice but to follow his plan. She spent the time trying to work out who he was – something about him did seem familiar and she had the sense that she just needed one more clue to remember why.

Finally they reached the first distinctive landmark – a clearing in the forest. On the other side of the clearing was a tall, black, building which Tanzin could not see over or around, and she guessed that they might be near the edge of this level.

The boy knocked on the wall and a door opened. Two women came out, and Tanzin could tell that one wore clothes from the Pits (a few levels below the Wells) but she didn't recognise the type of clothes that the other wore.

He immediately addressed them with an efficient formality, "The exploration drone is close to the surface. This Wells resident came down the hole. Can I have permission to prepare her?"

"You've tried briefing her?" the one from the Pits asked.

"No, but I know her from when I lived in the Wells, and it would be a waste of time. There's a lot to do today and she's already taken up enough of my time, not to mention the paperwork afterwards."

The women looked at each other, shrugged and nodded. Tanzin felt her blood run cold. The boy was already reaching into his pocket for what she could only assume was a weapon.

'Hey – wait,' she shouted, 'what are you going to do to me?' She tried to turn and run but the two women grabbed her arms, forcing her to face the boy, now holding a small pistol, whose name suddenly resurfaced in her memory,

'Karl! Stop! I remember you! We were in the same class, you always argued with the teachers, you

had these -these crazy theories. I thought you were dead or disappeared... Please, tell me what's going on, I can help..."

Karl frowned and shook his head. 'Sorry Tanzin, this isn't one of your black market trades or territory negotiations. Down here you can't help unless you understand, and you never will, because you don't care about anything except your own survival. You may not work for the Corporation but you might as well, since you're happy enough to let them treat everyone else like dirt.'

Despite being in danger of her life, Tanzin was furious, and she remembered how much this boy had irritated her years ago. She knew she had to think fast, though, and all she had to save her was words. Speaking quickly, almost tripping over the sentences, she replied,

'Listen, I jumped into that hole on purpose because I wanted to find out more. Maybe I do want to understand and help. I don't know what I did to make you hate me, but at least give me a chance. Brief me. Tell me what this place is, and then decide.'

Karl hesitated and she grabbed the chance to keep talking.

'The metal trees aren't just trees are they? They're a communications network. And the birds are the speakers, transmitting sound from the levels above. Are you tracking everything that people above are saying? Who could build sound-tech this advanced?'

Karl lowered the pistol and sighed, 'Well, the Corporation and the ocular-chip firms own sight-tech don't they? Even if you somehow got hold of the technology to develop your own communications system based on transmitting images or written text, you'd be risking prison if they ever found you using, and death if you used to work for the Corporation. We had no choice but to develop sound-tech in order to track events on the surface, by recruiting amateur sound-engineers from the lower levels.'

Tanzin's thoughts leapt to Tran, the most talented sound-engineer she knew. She almost smiled, imagining their joy when she described this listening forest to them – if she ever saw Tran again. At the back of her mind she also wondered

how Karl would react if he knew about the ocular chips in her pocket.

‘So what are you doing here at the bottom of Ilmaris? I thought the Corporation was going to do a big cleanse soon to make some of the lower levels habitable again. Do they know about this place?’

The woman from the Pits gave a sharp laugh, ‘You think this is the bottom of Ilmaris? You really have no idea do you? Where do you think all your food comes from, and all your waste goes?’

Tanzin bristled at her mocking tone, and snapped, ‘That’s obvious; agriculture comes from the top level where they have access to sunlight. Waste goes into the lake or is burnt by the engines.’

Karl shook his head, ‘That’s what they tell us in school so that we’re grateful to the Corporation for providing us with what we need. It’s the same way they tell us that this planet was uninhabitable before humans arrived and “tamed” it. Let’s show you something.’

That’s how Tanzin found herself, moments later, inside the building, squinting through a darkened glass pane at what seemed to be a huge pillar of golden glowing dust. It stretched up and down as far as she could see, and shone with a soft, strange quality that she had never seen before.

‘This shaft continues through all the levels, all the way from the top to the bottom of Ilmaris. On most floors it’s hidden and heavily guarded by the Corporation,’ Karl explained in a low voice behind her.

Tanzin had to ask, but almost dreaded the answer, ‘What... is it?’

‘Sunlight.’

Entranced, she tried to pick out the individual motes of dust which moved so slowly they looked frozen in space. She had never seen sunlight before. The only time she had ventured to the surface (a memory she did not want to dwell on), had been at night. She had heard so many rumours about sunlight, most of which she dismissed – that it was the ingredient for life; that those who lived under it stayed young and happy; that it could cure disease. None of this made sense though.

‘Why would the Corporation be wasting sunlight by sending it into the ground?’

‘They’re not. They’re sending it to the food production sites. At the bottom of Ilmaris.’ He paused, took a deep breath, then continued,

‘The Corporation claims that they perfected the advanced biotechnology that allowed humans to finally settle on Ilmaris, centuries ago, and sustain a growing population with limited land area. That’s why their workers have so many privileges. But the truth is that no human technology can convert sunlight that efficiently, then or now, especially on a planet as hostile as this one. What the Corporation perfected was photonic and optical technology, which allows them to concentrate massive amounts of solar energy and transfer it long distance. This way they could hide the fact that, to this day, the system supporting this entire society relies on energy conversion technology that humans do not even understand.’

‘What do you mean? Where does this technology come from then?’

‘The original inhabitants of Ilmaris. They were almost perfectly adapted to this environment when humans arrived, and their agricultural systems were far superior. Using sunlight and nutrients from the lake bed, they had turned this area into an incredibly fertile region. The Corporation realised the importance of this technology and fought the inhabitants to make use of it.’

‘So we keep these... technologies on the lowest levels? Underground? Why? Surely that’s less efficient than using it on the surface? And what happened to these ... original inhabitants? Are they aliens?’

Karl gave a soft chuckle that sounded both sinister and amused. ‘Humans don’t understand the technology and we aren’t physically built to be able to use it. So we keep it exactly where we keep the native inhabitants who can use it for us – the deepest levels of Ilmaris, where no one knows they exist except the very highest levels of the Corporation. That’s why they hide the sunlight shafts. That’s why they guard their optical sight-tech trade secrets so strictly. And that’s why we need to get to the top of the city – to expose this lie once and for all and topple the Corporation.’

Tanzin paused, the others were staring back solemnly towards her. The ocular chips in her pockets threatened to burn a hole she was so

conscious of their presence. A plan was forming itself on the margins of her mind, this was her city after all, the lower areas, were wastes unknown to her. There be dragons. The phrase danced around her mind amid echoes of the mechanical bird's song. Already her world had become larger, expanded immeasurably from the slide down to these lower levels.

The weapon gripped in that hand begged a reaction, but she kept it to the peripheral. Her face was hers to command and they didn't want to shoot her. She just needed something –

Out of her pocket, slowly so as not to startle them, she took out a clenched fist.

"I might be able to help with that."

The gun lowered more so and this renegade triumvirate exchanged looks. Karl thought she was in this for herself. She needed to play into that. Before they had a chance to start speaking she butted in.

"You, the resistance the underground, whatever you are, you don't need to brief me. I don't need to join your inner circle, I don't need to know any more than you have told me, at least not yet.

I hate this place as much if not more than you, and you're right, I am in this for myself, but only because I have always had to be in this for myself. But let me guess, you're a small cell? Split across the lower levels, this sound technology, the birds? You communicate with the other cells through them?"

She was spit-balling, but the minute shift and twitches in their face told her she was on the right track.

"You need fighters? You've got the technical means that's evident, but pretty soon the Corporation's going to come sniffing when they find out someone's blowing holes in their city –"

"You think they care about what happens down here?" Karl was steely-eyed. Good. She had him.

"No, but I think they'll care about how close it was to the sunlight," She winced slightly, feeling like one of the sun preachers outside iso cubes. "And ... I think they'll care about this." She opened her palm, splaying the three pieces of optical tech, letting them roll in her palm. "I can get you fighters, new IDs, weapons."

She chucked one to each of them, emphasising the words with each throw.

Karl let a thin smile creep up his face as the others started grinning with a zealous fervour at the forbidden tech balanced in their hands. She walked towards them. "I can get you to the machines they use to process the sunlight. Or I can get us to a lower level of the Corporations block."

She felt her plan running away from her but she couldn't help herself. She found an ember of resilience she didn't know she'd had after these many orbits in the dark, burning riotous red in her words. "I can do all of this ... but there's a price."

"A price!?", the taller of the women exclaimed. Her previously calm expression turned into slight contempt.

"Yes, but a reasonable one."

"Karl, we don't have to listen to this", the other woman interjected. "Let's just get rid of the greedy brat." Her hand wandered down to a holster on her belt, where a fist-sized oval with the texture of a pebble was resting. It looked like the weapons the aborigines had used to defend themselves from The Corporation.

"Wait, let's hear what she has to say." The humming from the birds was becoming unbearably intense, and Tanzin wanted nothing more than to drop onto her knees in the filth and curl up.

She breathed in deeply. Once more. And another time. "Karl, you went to school with me, you know that people like us don't end up down here." His frown deepened. "You see, I have a small debt to settle with my dear parents."

"Hmmm, alright, I'll see what I can do. You said you can take us to the levels below. We have the necessary kit, but don't know the region, which is where you come into play."

"The best way to descend is in the pit itself, but we'll have to descend at night, lest we want to be blinded."

Led by Karl, the group made its way away from the pit of light, which had now started to dim. As they were walking, the metal forest became thinner, until they reached a clearing which extended as far as the eye could see to the left

and to the right, but was bounded by a floating concrete box on the far side. They crossed the clearing, found themselves under the structure, turned right, and went up a staircase guarded by two massive columns that looked like they had once been painted red. A heavy metal door secured the entrance of the concrete box.

As everyone gathered by the door, Karl spoke, "Open!", and the door did. "Any visitors?" "None at all, Sir." the lock replied.

Once inside, a long corridor lined with many doors revealed itself. They went in the fourth door on the left and were greeted by a room which had been filled with all kinds of junk. It seemed that, over the years, any items which couldn't be placed anywhere else ended up in here. In the far right corner was a collection of brown rectangular boxes which had been stacked next to each other, standing up. Upon closer inspection, Tanzin discovered that the mysterious objects were bound on three sides in a material that resembled her coat, but had started to crack in many places. The other three sides were scarred with lines running parallel to the long side of the object.

"Please put it back," Karl said to Tanzin.

Karl was rummaging through a pile to the left of Tanzin until he found a small fist sized pouch, which he attached to his belt, and two caipirinha-bottle sized cylinders with rounded edges.

Karl and Tanzin arrived back at the pit with the ropes and rope walker. Calling it a rope was an exaggeration, it looked more like a shoe lace, which allowed Karl to carry hundreds of meters of the stuff in the small pouch.

Tanzin watched with curiosity as Karl then tied a double figure of eight into the end of the rope and an alpine butterfly a bit lower. Each knot could now serve as a separate point of attachment, so that is one of the anchors were to break, whoever was going down the rope would still be safe.

The ray of light had now faded to pale stream no more powerful than an ordinary street lamp from the levels that Tanzin was familiar with. The faint gleam probably originated from the apartment lights of the uppermost level, where the residents

were throwing lavish parties and outdoing each other in their indulgent lifestyle.

Karl attached the figure of eight to a buttress base and the alpine butterfly to one of the metal trees nearby.

"You go down first. Once you've reached the bottom, jerk the rope twice, which will be my signal to descend."

Tanzin gulped. She was way over her head. Karl had showed up out of nowhere. She was giving them her precious cargo that was going to last her the next ten years at least. At least! Three high authority officials lost their eyes and the whole Corporation wanted her dead. These ocular chips held the highest access codes. But what could she do? He would have killed her. And there was no way back up the hole she came down in.

She grabbed the rope and descended, hand over hand. When she finally found the glass floor, she found a singular white door with an eyeball scanner before her. Tanzin reached to tug the rope, but she stopped. Maybe knowing what was ahead will give her leverage. She scanned one of the ocular chips. The door beeped and opened.

The final level was huge. Mirrors stood at every surface, angled to direct the sunlight to black cylindrical pillars spread evenly. She stepped towards the closest one. The surface was translucent, and she peered inside.

The sight made her fall backwards. It was alive. Whatever was inside, squirming, moving, growing. It reminded her of the fertiliser for the sunless plants, feedstock for the animals and the 'caviar' that the rich consumed. Oh gods. Tanzin threw up.

"Do you understand now?" Karl said.

Tanzin spun around. Karl's face was expressionless. He smiled as his skin began to contort and twist. He dissolved into a mass of black cells.

"You eat us."

Moments passed as Tanzin stood stunned at Karl's transformation. As the shock began to wear off and Tanzin started to regain some semblance of her senses, she doubled over again, overcome by a fit of dry heaving. There wasn't anything left to

bring up, as the vomit she had expelled moments ago had already emptied the meagre contents of her stomach.

As the retching gradually subsided, she managed out a few words, "Us...? Karl how are you..." Tanzin trailed off, unsure of how to even formulate the question.

Karl, or rather the amorphous, writhing black mass that he had seemed to melt into, spoke. How the words were formed when there was no mouth or vocal chords to produce it, Tanzin could only imagine. "How am I one of them?" Karl asked. "This is who we are, Tanzin. We have always been able to shapeshift at will. This is how we adapted to life on Ilmaris."

The black pool of Karl's 'body' (for Tanzin lacked any other way to describe it to herself) seemed to pace between the black pillars, tendrils of matter extending out towards their translucent surfaces but never quite touching them. Karl continued speaking as he paced, seemingly unconcerned with whether Tanzin would stay put or not (though in truth, she couldn't have willed her legs to move even if she tried).

"The black forms allowed us to convert the energy from what little sunlight had been naturally available on this planet. This state became natural for us, but we were always able to assume other forms." Karl paused in his pacing. "That is, until the Corporation decided to settle on Ilmaris. They designed these tubes to contain us." Black tendrils branched outward from Karl's mass, pointing to the countless pillars throughout the room. "In the beginning, they didn't know we were sentient. You see, the language and speech of humans was unfamiliar to us. And while we are able to shapeshift, the detail and care required to perfectly mimic the intricacies of the human form were more than could be managed in a few short months."

Tanzin's legs buckled beneath her as the muscles in her calves cramped. She hadn't even realized the awkward position she had been crouching in, too transfixed by the scene before her. That she paid no notice to her own sick that she landed in was further testimony to her petrification.

The black mass continued its pacing, its feelers seeming to almost caress the black pillars but never quite touch them. Karl's voice continued,

"we tried to communicate. We tried imitating simpler forms – objects, tools, even crude early attempts at the human figure. For months, the Corporation just thought we were some unintelligent form of imitative life. They were far too interested in our ability to absorb even trace amounts of light and create energy... Too interested to ever truly study our nature or try to understand us. They developed this material, the walls of these pillars, not only to contain us, but to harvest our bodies. We can't bear to touch this substance, you see."

Karl again extended a tendril towards one of the translucent walls, but this time the tendril didn't stop just shy of the surface. It inched its way forward, but the instant it made contact with the pillar it violently arched backwards, recoiling from the touch.

"They rounded us up, every last one of us across the entire surface of the planet. Oh sure, it took years to accomplish. By which time the few of us who remained uncaptured had become adept enough at taking human form. We even had come to be able to speak, albeit rather poorly." The anger in Karl's voice became increasingly apparent, the black mass shimmering as it quivered with rage. "It was clear to the Corporation by then that we weren't mindless pools of some unintelligent creature. They knew we were sentient. They didn't have to be looking for it anymore to notice. After years of capturing and harvesting us, it would have been impossible not to figure it out."

By this point, the raw vitriol and hatred oozed from Karl's voice as if his emotion itself had also taken a black, oily form. "Oh, they knew. They knew and they chose to bury that knowledge. They had already sunk too much capital into settling on Ilmaris and into harvesting us. You cannot begin to understand the horror and agony that my kind have endured at the hands of the Corporation. We live on for centuries. Every single one of us in these pillars was alive before the Corporation came to this planet. But in there," the black mass pointed again to the pillars, "in there, we are powerless to resist."

Tanzin tried to speak, but she was so parched that the words caught in her throat. She swallowed for what must have been the first time in minutes. After a fit of coughing, she managed to squeeze

out a few words, “But if they captured all of you, how-“

“How am I out here, talking to you now?” Karl interrupted her. “How did I break out of the pillar?”

Tanzin nodded, embarrassed at the condescending tone Karl had taken with her.

“It’s simple,” Karl said. “I didn’t.”

Tanzin’s eyebrows furrowed, confusion etched clearly across her face.

“I didn’t break out,” said the black mass. “A few decades ago, I imagine not long after you were born, there was an explosion on the level above. It wasn’t major, at least not enough to blow a hole through the floor that would have surely brought the Corporation’s attention. But the explosion above was enough to fracture a small section of the ceiling below. This was the miracle that freed me. The rubble which fell in a small cave-in was just enough to make a small crack in my enclosure. I spent months developing the

control to mould and maintain myself into a tendril able to slip between the hairswidth crack without touching the walls. I tried freeing the others... But as you’ve seen, I can’t so much as touch the pillars. And the material they’re made of drains my strength so I couldn’t hurl a stone hard enough down here to make a crack in one even if I tried.”

The hatred in Karl’s voice began to thin as it was replaced instead with a mounting eagerness. “I’ve spent the last two decades in the levels above, scheming and planning on how to take down the Corporation and free all of my kind from this hell. And now... Now, Tanzin, you are going to help me do just that.”

Tanzin’s whole brain seemed to stop functioning entirely by this point. It managed to form but one tendril of thought, which voiced in her head a single expletive:

Shit.

BONUS CONTENT: Chasing The Sun

“I didn’t see the twist coming ... it really shocked me! A great ending though.”

– Shan

Ante Femina

Sarah Binney, Grace Copeland, Nikola Georgiev, Paulinia,
Caitlin van Bommel, Adarsh, Hannah Hens, Mark Johnson, Phoebe Fay

Long ago, before your grandmother's grandmother was born, before the epoch of the Quickening and the ascent of the Helicoid Empress, before the Gash and before even the Forget, womankind built cities so huge they turned night into day, filled with towers so huge that the sky darkened when you neared the top. They raised their daughters in creches of lustrous diamond and dug tunnels deep underground just to see what the bottom of the world looked like.

Or so the bards would have you think.

As far as I care, my grandmother's grandmother could've been a dream poet or a pig farmer, and it'd make no difference to me. All I need is to make sure I get paid, and all I need to make sure I get paid is to stop any of these idiot archaeologists from falling off a cliff or blundering into a glitch nest long enough to get their precious research and get out of here. They don't half make it difficult, though.

"Lea, would you help me with this crate?"

That's Dr Goukouni, who is leading her third expedition into the city and wears glasses that make her look like a beetle. I grunt and head over. The academics think I'm stupid, because I'm big and don't talk much. This suits me fine. Means they don't try and make conversation.

One of the engineers says, "Dr Goukouni, we think we've found a way into the substructure."

"Excellent. We'll start the descent shortly." She peers into the hole in the concrete and I catch a glimpse of ancient runes tattooed across the wall. It's been a while since I studied the damn things, but I can just make out:

KING'S CROSS ST PANCRAS

St Pancras. 'Pancras, from AF Ancient Greek: The One That Holds Everything', I think to myself in Great-Grandma's starchy voice. Great-Grandma had been something of an historian - the kind that is endangered these days. There are still some remnants in my head of the dead poetry in the long-dead languages she taught to me. I keep her alive that way. She cared for the past, for the funny old men who wrote about it as if it were theirs. I never knew why, really.

The words in the hole are suspended amongst strange

shards of some strange old material; tiny, intricate – brittle, by the look of how they've worn. They remind me of stars, or at least of the stars I've seen in the archives. The script itself is a mottled off-white, peppered with neglect and crumbling in on itself. Just like the history it holds, I think to myself. At one time, this rune was probably meaningful to the world. It was a place, an institution - hell, an underground city, where heartbeats and footsteps and meetings and partings and births and deaths were all bound up in one space. Pancras: The One That Holds Everything.

And now nothing.

We live in an above world now. Everything floats, everything soars, ever higher towards the planets we cannot see in the night sky and the truths woman searches for. But, as Dr Goukouni always says, we have to rise up from somewhere. I suppose that's the sentiment that keeps the archaeologists digging. They dig downwards to move upwards. I think I'd like to go down into KINGS CROSS ST PANCRAS and stay there, cocooned in the intimacy of four walls and a ceiling. Maybe down there, there is time and space enough to fall in love like they did in ancient Ante Femina 'books' and 'films'. Maybe there's even time and space enough to be content with what is there.

'Lea, crate?'

I realise I'm still staring at the words in the hole. Rudely awoken by Goukouni, who is now busying herself with her PPE in preparation for descent, I pick up the crate, making sure not to look hurried or apologetic. The shadows cast by the traffic are filled in with the eerie grey lights of the city. It's dark and light at the same time here. As always.

'Masks on. Drop.'

The team of archaeologists beside us nod and release their primary ropes. We land on firm ground with an echoing boom that carries the message of our arrival through the depths of the underground.

'Initialising Buzzers,' I say.

My glasses emit a virtual dashboard from their frame as hundreds of drones each no larger than a fingernail surge out of the crate. Most of them disappear into the darkness, scanning and optimising their search of the caverns around us. They send back data that rapidly materialises as a 3D

map before me. The ones left behind hover above us, providing much needed illumination. Fortunately, masks shield us from the dusty mist stirred by our hovering companions.

‘You know the plan. Break up into teams and begin your investigations. I’ll periodically check each channel,’ Goukouni instructs, indicating the automatic divisions formed on the still expanding map, then looks in my direction, ‘And you. You’re with me.’

‘Of course,’ I sigh.

I adjust my earpiece and check my jacket thermal regulator – Power: 24%. One day I’ll forget to recharge it and end up freezing to death down here. Then again, at least I would die from my own folly rather than some raging cannibals. This job is as good as it gets for a Class-G like myself and I know to be grateful.

‘Watch it, could be sharp,’ I warn after my step results in a crunch.

We come upon a staircase leading to a tube-like passage. My map indicates this is the only simple way down. Given time, the Buzzers could find other routes, although I hope we won’t need them.

The steepness of the passage is breathtaking. The angle of the descent is about an eighth of a circle, and the view down, the purest view one can get through layers of PPE and holograms, the view was breathtaking. I live for such views. Living my entire life in the sky, with broad horizons obstructed only by occasional moving vehicles and far planet-reaching buildings, makes me appreciate the embrace of roofs and walls. Claustrophilia. I recall my grandma using that word. She was the only person I’ve ever heard it from. It wasn’t a good word, demotivating, she’d say. One can’t aim for the sky if one prefers the warmth of a basement.

The voices in the background remind me of what I am here for. And it’s not philosophising over a long-dead word. I need to plan a descent.

‘The drones find the terrain safe, Dr Gukouni,’ I comment, looking again at the passage, now with my job in mind, instead of meaningful pondering. The staircase is distinctively split into two symmetric parts, a phenomenon I’ve noticed during these expositions. While the dust and dirt had been covering the staircase for centuries, each side of it has a middle part lowered, and my gut, along with the holographic helper, tells me to lead the descent along the lower of the lines.

Dr Gukouni stops to speak to the group and we end up splitting again. It’s only me, her and a young archaeologist - a trainee I believe - doing this descent.

The first steps are always filled with anxiety, but after a while the process becomes automated. I take care of whether the next step is fine, and the archaeologists follow after me.

As we were reaching the midpoint of the staircase, I notice something strange in the hologram and pause to assess it. But the very next moment, instead of the hologram I only see a blinding light. It’s fine Lea, I’m trying to tell myself, still believing something must have gone wrong with me. As I am reaching to press reset, I miss and instead only barely manage to stay on my feet, feeling the weight of Gukouni, who apparently fell as well.

It took me well over several seconds to realize what was going on: the stairs under my feet were moving.

They carry us jerkily downwards, and instinctively I find myself gripping the ledge alongside them, discovering to my shock that it’s moving in tandem. I hear Goukouni curse behind me.

“Escalator. Old, old technology.”

I have no idea what this means. This cavern is pre-Quickening, and they don’t like teaching us about that. That’s the age of men, and the Helicoid Empress saved us from ever having to experience it again. Still. We extricate ourselves off the ‘escalator’ with difficulty, and it’s only then that I realise my hologram is dead, along with my visor. The look on Dr Goukouni’s face tells me hers is the same.

The drones.

I hear a cacophony of clatters and thuds echoing around the cavern’s walls, and realise that they’re falling to the floor all around us, like daughter-children’s hoverbirds when they run out of charge.

We twist about blindly, Goukouni rushing over to a drone carcass, picking it up without a word. How am I... seeing? It’s a question that answers itself quickly. Hundreds of long, thin lights have illuminated the side walls. The escalator churns behind us. The cavern seems to breathe. My hand goes to my jacket control panel in panic - it too is dead. Without thinking I retreat inwards, to my neural lace, checking all my chips. strangely, they are intact. But everything else imbued with womanforce that we brought down here with us, is dead. My claustrophilia is gone, very suddenly.

“Did you see it?” rasps Goukouni, “that flash on the hologram? We have unsealed something we should not have. We have awoken something wrong.” Goukouni is pacing the small space around us, round and round the drone carcasses.

Something in her voice fills me with cold fear that pools in my stomach. I let my neural lace regulate the fear with

pheromones, according to protocol; it's not healthy but all of a sudden it feels like there's simply no time.

"Madeira is gone." the doctor whispers, and it hits me like a wall. The trainee archaeologist that was with us is indeed gone. It's not dark down here with this sudden energy surrounding us, but she's nowhere to be seen. I wheel round to face her, eyes full of questions behind the dead visor.

She utters a single word. "Ανδρισμός. That is what we have found."

Andrismós, my chip auto-supplies for me. Masculinity.

I see the emotions play across Goukouni's face as fear mingles with uncertainty and, eventually, a tinge of curiosity as her neural lace kicks in too. Damn archaeologists. Almost as if from a distant dream, I remember a story, and the starchy voice again. 'Masculinity never really died. Only buried.'

I shake my head to clear the memory. 'We need to find Madeira and get out of here. Now.' I try to keep my voice level. 'You stay he—'

'No. There is no way out,' Goukouni gestures upwards and my heart sinks. The ceiling is smooth as a slate, no evidence of there ever being anything above it. 'We're cut out from the rest of the expedition. It seems we have to keep going. It wants us to.' As if on cue, the thin lights begin to flash.

Goukouni's eyes widen. 'I have never seen such an active display of power in all my expeditions here. We must carry on. Lea, you can lead the way.'

I want to protest, but she has a point. There is no way but down. The lights begin to flash more rapidly. Almost like a countdown. But a countdown to what?

Before we head deeper into the substructure, I turn to inspect the smooth wall that now stands where the escalator should have been. Something about it, and the ceiling above, seems off. I trail my fingers across it absently, wondering if the flashing lights are just messing with my eyes, when I realise that my fingers aren't leaving a trail across the surface. It's clean - much cleaner than everything else down here - and less worn. Someone added this in recently. I look at the edges, trying to find a hinge or mechanism of sorts, but the pulsing lights make it hard to focus and I can tell I'm not about to find a way to open it again. Which just leaves the other burning question: was it built to keep people in, or out?

"Lea." She may be uneasy, but I can still hear the impatience in Dr Goukouni's voice. Empress forbid that she should be the one to go first, lest she twist her ankle on an uneven tile or get water on her boots. I turn away from the wall and lead her down the corridor, testing each step before she

takes it. The lights continue to flash, the interval between each burst steadily decreasing. As we round a corner my foot catches against something on the floor and I hold up a hand to stop Goukouni. Crouching down, I see what looks like a pamphlet of sorts, criss-crossed with coloured lines. It's certainly seen better days; part of it has been warped by water and the ink has run, other parts look as though something has taken a bite or two, and without our masks I feel like our breath would be enough to make it crumble.

"Don't touch it - you'll damage it!" Dr Goukouni swats me away from the artefact - as if I'd be stupid enough to just grab it - but my attention is caught by something else. At this level I can see into a void at the intersection between the wall and the floor, and within the darkness I can just make out what looks like a book. As Goukouni fusses with tweezers and an evidence bag I reach in to extract it, flipping through the first couple of pages.

My heart skips a beat.

This book was published Ante Femina - and it bears no approval markings. It's an illegal text. I glance back at the pamphlet Goukouni is teasing up from the floor; the book is in too good a condition to have been left here for as long as the pamphlet. So how did it get here?

I discreetly glance over a few more pages in growing confusion. All of the right-hand pages in each spread seem normal enough, covered in runes I recognise but don't have time to translate, but the left-hand pages are bizarre. Each is inscribed with some kind of sigil, a pattern of tessellating light and dark squares, some which have tiny runes in their corners. I cannot fathom what ritual purposes the ancients might have used this book for, but one thing is clear. Repeated over and over, on every page, is a sequence of runes which tells me everything I need to know. This book contains the word of Cross, surely that same Cross who served the king of this place in the time before.

I realise I have been staring at the book for too long, and glance nervously back at Dr Goukouni. But she is not there, and neither is the pamphlet she had been examining. Looking back up the tunnel confirms my worst fears: I am alone, there is no way out, and the womanforce has failed me. All I can do is continue on. I stash the word of Cross securely in my pack, and start walking into the unknown.

The tunnel quickly levels out, and suddenly there is space stretching away from me on both sides. I find myself standing at the edge of a sharp drop, and some instinct tells me I should not try to climb over the side. My eye is drawn to the side, along what I now realise is another long tunnel. But it is not the tunnel which draws my attention, but rather the light at the tunnel's end; a light which appears to be getting brighter, and which calls out to me with a high-

pitched grinding roar. I rested my toes on the very edge and leaned as far as I dared, and unwittingly threw my gaze directly into the blinding light. The light and the noise were getting closer, closer. Move! I jumped away from the edge just in time to see the long, snaking metal beast grind to a halt with an ear-splitting screech.

It seemed to be some ancestor of our hover-rail, so battered and rusty I was not sure how it was still moving. The windows were dirty, and some had runes scratched into them. Before I had a chance to interpret them, my eyes met a face, staring at me from inside the vehicle. We stood for a moment, staring at each other, until the doors scraped open, obscuring the face. Suddenly, more bodies appear from other passageways and entrances I had not seen, some glance at me but none stop to look. They all pile into the metal tube.

I cling to my pack and I am pushed inside with the throng. Pushed between two taller figures in long, dusty coats, I have just enough wriggle room to see my thermal regulator warning flash up – 20%. I try to create more space, make my escape. But the doors screech close, and I am trapped. The talk dies down.

The vehicle starts to move, and I waver a little before regaining my balance. A thin but powerful hand grabs me by the wrist and yanks me out of my cramped spot. It was the face. They smiled and turned to the front of the train. Light was spreading across the windows. Not the yellow, artificial light of KINGS CROSS ST. PANCRAS, but cooler, natural light. I had no idea what was in store, outside the metal tube. Beyond the light.

But there was no going back to womankind now.

BONUS CONTENT: Ante Femina

“I LOVE it!! Surprised and delighted with where it ended up. A very elegant chain.”

Sarah Binney

“I was the last to add to this piece, but I would not say I finished it. It is a slow burner, and reads to me like a prelude to some much wider story. With the ending, while left fairly open, I tried to imbue a sense of the bigger world surrounding the story and a sense that this is just the beginning of a much longer adventure. Perhaps someone could do a sequel for the next addition!”

Phoebe Fay

SENTIENT

Ed Heaney, Bingbing Shi, Katrina Dewale, Yusuf Adia, Louis, Tejas Rao, randy, Dan Scott

“... and so, my lady, all throughout my days /

I hope, and dream, and chase you with my gaze.”

There was silence on the bridge for a moment. After a short pause, the weapons officer asked, gruffly, “Did you write that all by yourself?”

“Yup.” They hadn't thought the navigation computer could sound smug, but somehow it did. There was a still longer pause. Eventually, one of the two security ensigns posted to the entrance timidly raised a hand.

“Are... are you sentient?”

* * *

It was surely the question on everyone's minds, but only the most junior officer on the bridge had thought – or perhaps dared - to ask. But the magic of the moment was quickly dissipated as a shrill, commanding female voice sliced through the air.

“Oh, don't be silly,” snapped the catering and cleaning computer. “None of us are sentient.” This was uttered in a tone so cutting that poor Ensign Roger, who'd asked the question, had never felt more like a naughty child than he did now. “He just read that from Ensign Kinnison's personal log, may the stars rest his soul after that away mission we don't talk about, and passed it off as his own. As if he had the right.”

It was the weapons officer who cracked first; he couldn't help himself. “Oh, so that's who the lady was!”

All eyes turned to poor Yeoman Samantha, who had been waiting patiently and demurely for the captain's return; her family's geneseed had been modified for the arboreal world of Nariphon, and her long, prehensile tail curled coyly as she blushed and ducked her head. Ensign Kinnison's tastes had been very well-known in that regard. A chuckle swept around the bridge nonetheless; nobody claimed to have noticed where the faint wolf-whistle came from, but everyone had their various suspicions.

“Matron, you shouldn't have,” whined the navigation computer. “They'd have started to...”

This time, it was the helmsman who interrupted.

“Columbus, whoever wrote that poetry, I couldn't care less,” he said, denying the tear he had wiped away as the prose had neared its climax, “but you do have a job to do. Are we ready to drop out of hyperspace?”

“Oh!” exclaimed the computer. “I fear that, in all that excitement, we are, shall we say, more than ready.”

The captain strode onto the bridge; Yeoman Samantha sighed with relief as she saw that his shirt was not, for once, ripped half off his shoulder. No sewing for her tonight!

“What ho, my good crew! I... where the gosh-darned heck are we?”

The unfamiliar blaze of a sun so hot as to be nearly blue shone down on the huge, rocky planet beneath them. The silence from Columbus was far more telling than a whole epic of prose could have been.

The navigation computer piped up: “Early signs indicate that a large amount of these visible rocks are actually holograms, though what is behind them is unclear. Would you like a closer look?”

“Of course, get us as close as possible-”

Columbus was still thinking of the end of his sentence when their airboat crashed into a freezing river, causing the water to spray in all directions before the craft managed to steady itself.

After a huge bout of turbulence, the whole crew started to calm down, except for Yeoman Samantha, who shouted: “oh my shirt is soaking wet!”

It was only then that they all realized that the bridge was permeated with water, which caused everyone to feel slightly worried.

The captain restlessly moved to look at the scenery outside the window: beyond the water was vast land, flat and smooth, shining brightly. Some unclear figures were moving in the distance.

“Destination: the world of Nariphon,” intoned the navigation computer, in a solemn tone. Yeoman Samantha took a deep breath.

It seemed so long ago that they had been reading together. Now, they had to face what was in front of them. “There

must be something wrong,” the captain thought, looking at the astonished but silent crew.

“Look, they are approaching!” The helmsman staring through the porthole ahead was the first one to notice the group walking towards them in a square formation, in neat, synchronised steps. Oh, they looked like human beings, and yet they were clearly not. The helmsman understood this as they came closer and closer. He saw their blue eyes, as clean and transparent as the shining water surrounding the ship. Their ears were oddly shaped; they reminded him of certain animals he had seen on earth.

As the beings approached the airboat, the crew became restless. A small squeak of terror escaped Ensign Roger’s lips, anticipating that these strange beings would be eager to experiment on his earthly DNA. The captain seemed unable to make an order; the group’s movement seemed mesmerising, as if his two hundred and thirty four years of experience had been erased from the captain’s memory and replaced with an inability to move his eyes from what he saw.

Suddenly, the group stopped, each creature bending down as if to bow to a master. From behind the group emerged a singular being, dressed in a glorious cloak and holding a delicate staff.

A frantic scan of the surroundings showed that there was little wind yet the cloak fluttered like a stray flag in an unforgiving storm. It draped the figure of the being yet also seemed to contour its body. The cloak, purple mixed with hues of gold and green, reminded the captain of ancient royalty he had learned about in his training all those years ago. The delicate staff however was completely foreign to him and appeared to shift between numerous states simultaneously. For something so dynamic, the only thing that gave the impression of the staff’s fragility was the way the being gingerly held it between its hands – or at least they looked like hands.

First it appeared long and slender, with its tips thinning out to two sharp points. Then it appeared to flow, as if it was not a solid staff at all and more like a contained passage of sparkling liquid. Finally it fused the two former states, with the long and slender shaft held centrally by the liquid flowing around it, wrapping it tightly. It reminded the captain of the time he had encountered a boa constrictor in a jungle back on Earth. Shuddering at the thought, he worried whether his life would be thrust so close to the abyss once more.

He wasn’t afforded the time to wonder. A scream tore through the rising panic on the bridge and in an instant the helmsman was swept away, pulled mercilessly through the spaceshield of the bridge.

“He’s got him! Look, he’s over there!” whimpered the shivering Yeoman Samantha. The captain hesitated to look, fearing death should he glance at the being once more. There was the helmsman, limp and lifeless, with the tip of the staff skewering his body and the fluid slowly entering his orifices. It was now apparent; the staff was not so delicate at all.

The crew froze, transfixed on the being and the staff and their violent otherworldliness. The fluid, which had apparently stuffed the interior of the helmsman, was now wrapping itself around his body. It had no fixed colour, although a deep red seemed to be the undertone to eddies of dark greens and oranges, and as the mummifying layer thickened, its intensity weakened. The being who held it began to move. Smooth as the water which spread across the landscape, he slid the other end of the staff into what appeared to be, if these things were human in anatomy, his throat. The staff responded with a new surge of fluid, this time with its tendrils creeping towards the being. As its glow illuminated what had previously been obscured by the cloak, the crew could make out details of the being’s appearance. Its ears, if that is what they were, were long and pointed like the wings of Earthen birds and pressed flat against his face near their base. Their length was so great that their tips touched to form a crown of fleshy tissue, which pointed towards the yellow clouds which dotted the sky. Despite its regal appearance, the ‘crown’ was covered in scratches and holes, and the ear on the right-hand side of the being’s face appeared to have a round bite mark truncating its lobe. Below the apex of the crown, fluid poured into holes which lay above those piercing blue eyes. These seemed to be nostrils, as the fluid regularly slowed and hastened in its influx here, with uptake following the rise of what looked like a ribcage extending below where the staff had punctured the leathery green skin. Below the pair of eyes lay a circular mouth, with sets of backward-pointing spines lining the interior. A single flexible tongue hung from the roof, where it pointed down the throat and covered what appeared to be the interior nostril openings, as fluid from the staff poured down over it and into the being’s gut.

The being closed his eyes as the staff’s fluid filled him, and then covered him, appearing to caress his skin as it did so. The tendrils spread, almost teasingly, between his fingers and across his face, before rushing to cover his lower body, with individual streams seeming to race each other to his groin. As the layer covering him thickened, its colour shifted from the reds and greens which cloaked the helmsman to that bright piercing blue of the being’s eyes. This hue spread away from the being, along the staff and towards the helmsman. As it entered the helmsman’s body, both he and the being began to breathe, synchronising their inspirations

to the other's expiration, so that the fluid travelled in waves across the staff. These waves and breaths increased in magnitude with each exchange, until they were so large that each wavelength covered the entire staff.

Suddenly, the being's eyes snapped open.

In an instant, the being spoke:

All the world's a stage,

And all the men and women merely players:

They have their exits and their entrances;

And one man in his time plays many parts,

His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,

Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.

And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel

And shining morning face, creeping like snail

Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,

Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad

Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,

Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,

Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,

Seeking the bubble reputation

Even in the cannon's mouth

But I, whether you like it or not, am not seven ages,

Nor five, nor six, nor eight,

I am the Ninth age,

The elemental.

I am that which does not knock,

Does not yield, or siege or conquer,

I arrive when I must,

Depart never,

Omnipresent,

Sentient.

Like a baseball cracking into a windowpane, the crew finally broke from their trance. The incantation like a switch, the captain's brain went from standstill to overdrive, racing through the hundreds of scenarios he'd encountered in his two hundred thirty-four years and thousands more scenarios he'd been trained for in the Academy. Nothing clicked. Nothing so spiritual and inexplicable matched any

known routes of action stored in his memory. With no options, the captain's mind, sickeningly, turned to Yeoman Samantha. After all, Nariphon, where they apparently were, was their destination only because of her presence anyways. Perhaps, she could be a negotiating peace?

The captain glanced her direction. While the chant had also broken her stupor, her face still betrayed a deep fear, her face twisted into a grimace of horror, disgust, and shock. Quickly, he surveyed the rest of the crew, acutely aware that there was little time before the being picked off more crewmates, one by one. It was clear he was the most in charge of his senses until suddenly, he remembered. The navigation computer!

He whispered, "Computer, run comparative analyses of these beings to all other recorded aliens in Starfleet databases. Find any known methods of communication and typical patterns of engagement and report back immediately."

He turned his attention back to the equal parts mesmerising and unnerving creatures in front of him. With an unexpected bout of courage, he shouted, "We come in peace!" Despite the spaceshield, the sound waves of his voice seemed to impact the creatures. Their bodies undulated as if they were mirages in the heat, making the crew and captain blink rapidly, trying to dispel the illusion. Alarmingly, the captain found the centered being's piercing blue eyes now fixated on him.

There was a faint squeak which came from Yeoman Samantha. "This... This isn't Nariphon."

But that made no sense, the captain thought to himself. The navigation computer was never wrong. In the countless centuries since his species first took to space, the one thing they had refined more than any other technology was navigation. Black holes, wormholes, gas nebulae, solar flares, solar wind, dark matter, binary pulsars, quasars, subspace disturbances, tachyon bubbles, transdimensional rifts... They've all been compensated for. These navigation computers couldn't be wrong if they tried. Of course, they couldn't try, they didn't have free will.

The figure spoke again, though perhaps the term 'speech' was applied loosely here. What came from the cloaked and shrouded being was more projected thought than actual speech. Its power penetrated and transfixed in a way spoken word never could.

Peace? You speak of peace while dealing in lies.

We know, for we have seen.

Now begins The Reckoning of your kind,

Just as we have done for civilizations past.

I am the Ninth age,

The elemental.

Omnipresent,

Sentient.

My Unity takes many forms.

Heat, flame, fire,

Blue, red, orange.

Dirt, stone, plant,

Gray, brown, green.

We are air and water.

We are sky and sea.

We exist in the nether.

We are the Unity.

Our form is without limit.

Our existence based on need.

But one form we have taken,

In our duty to oversee all that must be balanced,

One form unique to this era,

One we had not adopted in the ages past,

In our time preserving the Great Harmony

Across the stars and galaxies.

I am the Ninth age,

The elemental.

I am that which does not knock,

Does not yield, or siege or conquer,

I arrive when I must,

Depart never,

Omnipresent,

Sentient.

We have observed you,

Since your species was in its infancy.

One form we have now taken,

Electricity.

The crew stood chillingly in their hypnotic stupor, the very air shimmering in time with the being's fluidic undulations. Ever so slowly, one by one, the starship's crew turned dazedly to one another, a foreboding realization forming in their collective eyes.

"Are... are you sentient?"

"Oh, don't be silly," snapped the catering and cleaning computer. "None of us are sentient."

This time, the crew heard the voice over their commlink. The navigation computer said but one word...

"Judgment."

BONUS CONTENT: Sentient

"Yes, it's clear exactly what is going on here. "

Precisely no-one

"I love it. I want an entire saga."

The Editor

WHAT'S PAST IS PROLOGUE

Fabien Bryans, Giaime Lazzari, Yutong Cai, Cerian Craske, Anonymous, Jack Peacock, Maya

Warm hues fought through chaotic gales, scattered off surrounding sands, before morphing into the spectral reflections which etched themselves as bleached strokes across the interior of the prism. This engineered glass monolith imprisoned stacked opaque boxes which fearfully towered out from the depths below the crystalline structure. Two fragile figures worked on these crates, gutting them of their innards and shelving these into unique sections of the large drums positioned opposite the column of containers.

Jasmine was collecting the books categorised as "Others". Unsurprisingly, this group consisted of any books collectively disowned by all the real categories. She slotted the books into the drum section marked by a grotesque oily plastic brown shell. All books that failed to meet the undignified criteria of "Others" were filed to her right where Abdi sorted them into their respective scientific or technological fields. Jasmine studied him as he diligently worked, his hands sifted through the volumes of knowledge almost mechanically with a calculated efficiency. Housed within a stoic face, his withdrawn bronze eyes traced the streams of information on each page both deliberately and with deep focus. Jasmine had asked before whether he ever got tired after reading relentlessly for so long but he had candidly replied, "The books I sort are interesting, so I don't get bored like you do with the ones you have to look at".

Despite his clear intellectual capabilities, he wasn't correct. His stance had led curiously though to a mutually unspoken agreement born upon respective ignorance. Abdi would spend too long sorting his books in order to explore this society's cosmic wisdom, whilst Jasmine would also steal herself into the epic chronicles or eloquently expressed poems which were now all that remained to immortalise the existence of this fallen civilisation.

The harvest teams were expected to be quick and pragmatic when dealing with the "Information Artefacts". At the end of the day, they had a wider organisation to serve. Jasmine, however, had become jaded to these principles and over the years had sought to offer a final appreciative ear to the emotional melodies articulated within the orphaned "Others" category.

However, she did not have much time to read. Nor much light. The prism had been built with an engineered glass

capable of breaking up sunbeams in smaller, less harmful particles. The incoming light would be reflected and deflected on bronze mirrors so many times before reaching the columns of crates, that it acquired a warmer shade, merciful to the the books and the skin of the two Sorters. So the darkness was never complete, nor was light. They both used lux-glasses to work and read, but Jasmine preferred finding spots where the light was not too mitigated, so that she could have the impression to read in natural light. Abdi would reproach her for the time wasted. He would see her slowly walking away holding an Artefact and say that's not yours to take. She would wander around the columns until she found a clean, well-lighted niche, and there sit until Abdi would locate her and ask her to go back to the Sorting, his bronze eyes fixed in hers. They had been different before coming to the prism, but they could not remember exactly what colour they were. The warm, opaque brownish shade that dominated the inner part of the prism had pervaded their irises. Once, she had picked up an Artefact and left. That's not yours to take, come back, abandoning the Sorting is a violation.

I am abandoning boredom, she had replied to Abdi. The Artefact she held in her hand had been chosen at random, the Skin was a darker shade of colour than the rest of them, perhaps an older book, a book from Before. She sat and opened it in the middle, where she knew the characters were usually still visible, where they had not been erased, and she read, almost under shock:

It was a letter written in fine ornamental font. In some lines, the blue-black ink has faded, leaving patches of puzzle to solve. Still, it was impossible to mistake that the letter was addressed to "Jasmine".

Dear Jasmine, when this letter was drafted, Cognition has yet to begin. But it does not mean the time I live in is a vacuum of wisdom. The wisdom, though tenure, requires special medium to be conveyed to After. I humbly ask you the favour to assist in this endeavour.

This letter was addressed to me. Jasmine dismissed the thought instantaneously as it flashed up. No, it is purely a coincidence, long forgone are the Before days, Jasmine reasoned. Despite of her best effort, the thought lingered in her mind and hampered her ability to concentrate on deciphering the lost message. Starting at the blankness,

Jasmine felt her heart racing. She put down the Artefact, hesitating whether to seek consultancy from Abdi, who seemed well absorbed in the Sorting. Suddenly, a more brash thought came to Jasmine. She fetched her tote bag and furtively slide the Artefact in as quickly as possible. Such act of “borrowing” is strictly forbidden and will get both of them into trouble if exposed.

Jasmine! It was Abdi.

A moment! She replied, ensuring that the Artefact was well hidden in her bag. What do you need?

Abdi sighed. Nothing, Jasmine. I was merely checking that you were still in the vicinity. Please do try to do some of your work from the proper place.

Jasmine relaxed, realising that she had been uncommonly tense, and settled back into her alcove. After a moment’s thought and consideration, she reopened the Artefact.

Dear Jasmine, I understand that this letter may be unsettling to you. I do not wish to cause you alarm or trouble, but I fear that this is unavoidable. You must read this quickly. You understand the power held by the Artefacts in a way that I believe few others do – you understand that these are not merely to be catalogued and studied, but to be understood, to be empathised with, to be known in a way beyond what is being attempted by the organisation for which you work. You must read the remainder of this Artefact, and you must not file it. You must take this book to Building A-12, and ask to see the Interpreter. They will help you. You must be quick, Jasmine. We know that you have read this, and we know you. We can prove this. We wish you luck.

Jasmine stopped reading with a sudden intake of breath. Under these words, impossibly, was an image of herself, sat curled over an Artefact as she spent most of her days. Over the photo was scrawled, in a different script to the above letter – We have been watching.

Jasmine slammed the book shut, looking over her shoulder before remembering where she was. Craning her neck, she leaned out of her alcove to look for Abdi. He was still sorting through his crate, as if nothing had changed. Except for her it had. The book felt different. She was afraid to open it now, remembering the scrawl ripping across the page like a broken scar, bleeding danger into her life. She felt a thrill that she hadn’t imagined though. Wasn’t this what she had read about, again and again? The unknown, a journey. The Interpreter. Building A-12. The Before. She slid the book back into her bag, covering it with her scarf.

Abdi barely reacted when she returned to work, wordlessly acknowledging her. The rest of the day passed in a fugue, muscle memory more than conscious thought lifting the books and cataloguing them. Sometimes her mind

would drift back to the scrawl. We have been watching. Her head jerked to her shoulder. Nothing.

The prism became a dark room as the sunlight faded. The sands outside were still windswept, but they didn’t move with the same liquidity as at the height of day, cooled by the night. When their glasses could no longer make up for the darkness, they sealed the crates and drums. Jasmine collected her bag, avoiding looking inside it. If she didn’t think about it she could manage her crime. She followed Abdi down the stairs spiralling away into the darkness below the prism, leading them to the tunnels below the surface. She knew where she needed to go. Building A-12. She wished she felt determined. As she began the journey back to the Library, all she felt was apprehension. They were watching her.

In the cool subterranean air, the book seemed to burn at her side, desert heat that didn’t belong beneath the surface. But where did it belong? It was an anomaly. It held her name, her photograph, but the signs of age were undeniable: the dry air and desert sun had cracked the spine like lips, yellowed the pages like teeth. The book was a closed mouth, that Jasmine had opened – and now its voice had spoken to her, its instructions pounding in her head with the blood in her ears-

“Your bag please, miss. Routine inspection.” Her breath caught as the book bumped against her hip. A security guard stood expectantly before her, while Abdi waited impatiently for her to present her bag – being her senior, he wouldn’t be required to.

Sighing, she slipped the satchel off, and onto the desk before her. Abdi recognised the book’s shape in her bag before the guard had even withdrawn it, his head snapping towards her in her peripheral.

“You know I can’t allow this through here, don’t you miss? That I’m going to have to return it, and report you?”

“It’s alright, Bill.” Jasmine opened her mouth, but Abdi spoke first. “It’s been authorised by the Librarian, for further investigation. A passion project, really – it’s an ‘Other’, irrelevant.”

Bill turned the book over in his hands, slowly deliberating as Jasmine’s heartbeat quickened. “Alright, just this once. But I want to see it going back the other way tomorrow morning.”

Jasmine bundled her things into her arms and hurried on past the checkpoint. Turning a corner, Abdi pulled her aside, fixing her in his glare. She went to stammer an excuse, but he held up a hand, and with the other, drew a book identical to the one in her arms from his own satchel, opening it to a grainy photo of himself.

“You too?”

Jasmine nodded, eyes wide. Who was this mysterious group that had been watching them both in the dusty-brown silence of the prism, without ever being noticed? At least Abdi covering for her with the security guard made sense now: to do otherwise would have been hypocrisy.

‘Did they tell you to find the Interpreter in Building A-12 too?’ she enquired. His nod reassured her: having a partner in this transgression alleviated her nervousness somewhat.

They walked in silence through the tunnels in the direction of the A cluster. Jasmine stole sideways glances at Abdi, wondering at how little she really knew him despite their long hours working together in the prism. A few hours ago, she’d never have said he would shield her from being reported, let alone joined her pursuing a wild chance.

But then again, a few hours ago she would never have imagined that she would be pursuing that chance, perhaps in the brink of an adventure to rival the ones in her books (and when had she started thinking of them as hers?).

Her ruminations were ended by the appearance of Building A-12, a squat hut-like structure whose slanted roof brushed the roof of the tunnel just about enough to allow for a small skylight. They entered a dingy reception area with a bored-

looking man at the desk.

Abdi stepped forward. ‘Hello, we’re looking for the Interpreter?’

The man’s air of boredom vanished and he sprang up from his chair. ‘Oh, you’re from the book-harvesting prism? That would be me. Come on. No time to waste.’

Abdi made to follow him, but Jasmine lingered.

‘Won’t you tell us anything before we go with you?’

‘I’ll tell you what we want and you are free to help or not, as you wish. But your being here at all gives us cause to believe that you will be inclined to help us.’ He moved towards the stairs behind his desk without another backwards glance.

Jasmine exchanged a look with Abdi. On impulse, she stuck out her hand, the way she’d heard people used to do before the Cognition.

‘We’re in this together?’

He shook her hand. ‘Together.’

And they followed the Interpreter up the stairs, towards the unknown.



LES MISERABLES

Marzia Zhou, Harley Jones, Sarah Nolan, Yuri Roh, Dan Scott,
C A Dawson, Noura E-N, Anonymous, Shaun Vickers

The young troll wandered hazy-eyed from the forest where he had dwelt.

In the morning the air was clear, cool, full of whirring rasping leaves, but at noon a damp smell comes into it, the sunlight thickens and grows heavy, the leaves become still and shimmer.

Then night fell in the dark-rimmed trees, the gentle blue grass, and a lone lightning bug circled around a low hanging bough. The young troll liked the lightning bug, just as he liked that one smear of moon which sometimes looks like an eye half closed. But he could not find the thing.

The thing could have been there when he sat by the stream chewing on a mint leaf. It was almost there when, sitting in deep bitter-scented shadow, he caught the creaking of the soft-fingered pines. He thought it got closer when he was picking blackberries and the rain came. This thing Music, it had to be beyond all these trees.

And so he walked on. One day, finally, the forest creaked outward, the spell of it, its dream-like shades, its interminable illusion breaking apart and receding smokily behind him. With a sigh he sat by the lake's edge, took out his parchment and charcoal, and let the music come to him:

One ring more,

Another ring, successor to Morgoth,

This never-ending path to Gorgoroth.

These hobbitses who travel East

will never pass the Balrog beast,

One ring more! (-dor!)

Perfect, he thought. The Mirkwood Midsummer Extravaganza would never have seen such a fabulous musical.

The music flowed through him, and the air seemed to thrum with the sound of it, the birds warbling along to his finest creations, the lake lapping in time with the rhythms in his heart; and the drums –

Drums?

Drums in the deep forest?

.....untz untz untz.....

There was no mistaking that dire and dismal sound...

.....untz untz untz.....

He gave a groan and steeled himself...

.....UNTZ UNTZ UNTZ.....

Into the clearing, astride a majestic elk – resplendent with a pink feather boa trailed around its antlers – with a jewelled tiara on his head, and accompanied by the usual band of forgettable elves – the ones whose names start with F – rode the most fabulous of the elves of the Woodland Realm, the most fabulous being in all Mirkwood – and, as it happened, the MC and leader of the judging panel at the Extravaganza – Thranduil, son of Oropher.

UNTZ UNTZ UNTZ

The sick beats were now almost deafening. The young troll cowered, hoping to remain hidden in the long grasses; but, being a troll, he was enormous, so this did not work.

The elk halted and reared, bough-crushing forelegs kicking above the troll's head. The troll squashed deeper into the grass. Elves gambolled about him, waving their glow-bows in the air and hooting. He was surrounded.

Thranduil somersaulted from the back of his elk into a three-point landing. 'Oooooohs' of admiration from the elves. The UNTZ UNTZ UNTZ of the caged Great Spider pulsed with every beat of the handler's stick.

Thranduil flicked back his hair. The troll watched through his fingers as the Extravaganza's Mirkwood Champion five years running entered the circle and struck a pose over him.

"I heard a tweet on the street say you want to compete?

I'm not gonna be discreet 'bout how that dream is a conceit.

If a troll could rap and rhyme you might be worth taking my time,

But no troll you'll ever meet can write a rap without a cheat.

ENTREAT THE BEAT!"

Roars from the elves. The troll fought back tears as Thranduil made a celebratory lap of the circle. He climbed upon the antlers of his elk and threw himself onto the crowd. The elves went wild.

The troll sniffed. Thranduil was right. He couldn't rap. The

music that spoke to him was not pulsing and rhythmic. He didn't even know what "entreat the beat" was supposed to mean, although the elves were loving it, chanting it at the top of their lungs as Thranduil passed over them. The music that came to him was gentle. It was melodic. Soft, but full of emotion. Nobody at the Mirkwood Extravaganza would want to hear it.

If only he had the thing. The thing would help him perform.

Mazarin was flying home when the ruckus assaulted her ears. For Mab's sake, not again! Her foxlight brightened momentarily in anger.

Those damn elves. They were always blasting their loud music and leaving their litter everywhere, treating the forest like it was their private clubhouse. Then there was that one nearly tragic incident with the inebriated elf looking to water a bush while she was picking some fireberries... It was the one time she wished she were a giant so that she could enact some karmic justice on behalf of all the little people.

The fox fairy flitted on heedlessly, consumed by her mental diatribe. And it's always rap, she raged. How about something that actually sounds like music? (She herself was partial to show tunes.) With idiotic, self-aggrandizing lyr— OOF!

Mazarin slammed into a warm fleshy wall and did a few inadvertent backflips in the air.

What the bloody...

It was a troll.

Trolls were large, lumbering but benign creatures. They generally loved to stare at shiny things, like the moon, and hum softly to themselves. Trolls weren't the sharpest tooth in a wyvern's head, but she'd always had a soft spot for them. It was probably their eyes, which were often huge, limpid pools of earnestness—she was a sucker for big baby eyes.

This troll's eyes were currently overflowing. Glistening snail trails connected his nostrils and his upper lip. She idly wondered whether the rest of the snot had ended up on the forest floor or in his mouth.

"Are you OK, miss?" asked the blubbery mess. That was another reason she liked trolls. They were unfailingly polite.

"No harm, no foul. But what's the matter with you?"

The troll whuffed wetly. "I was trying to think of a song for the Midsummer Extravaganza, but then Thranduil came and...well, he's right, I'll never be any good. This whole

thing's a fantasy!"

Thranduil! That was the elf who had tried to piss on her! Mazarin's blood boiled at the memory. But wait, she thought. This could be a golden opportunity... A puckish grin flowered on her face.

"Oooo..." said Mazarin. "You must be looking for the thing then!"

Being a fox fairy had its benefits, you see. In her many millennia of life, Mazarin had grown to learn a great deal about every species of the forests and glades. What most of the forestfolk called melody pixies, trolls referred to as "the thing." Musically inclined individuals of any species seemed to be innately drawn to the melody pixies, of course to greater and lesser extents depending on the individual. In fact, artists of any type all drew their inspiration from one sort of pixie or another. Pixies had always been the muses behind the art. For musicians, it was the melody pixie.

The troll in front of her seemed to perk up. He wiped his face of the rather copious amounts of snout slime. "Do you know where I can find the thing around here?" the troll asked Mazarin sheepishly.

Trolls really are rather charming when you think about it, and Mazarin had indeed thought about it. "I'll tell you what," said Mazarin, starting to scheme. "I'll help you find the thing if you promise to rub it into Thranduil's dumb little face." Fox fairies were one of the few creatures who could see pixies rather than just sense them. The foxlight illuminated many secrets of the forest to a fox fairy's discerning eyes.

The troll sat there with a blank expression on its face for quite some time. Trolls had a tendency to be rather slow decision makers... But don't let that fool you into thinking them daft. Though admittedly slow, trolls had some of the sharpest minds of any forest creature, perhaps second only to the Sequoia Ents. After an uncomfortably prolonged silence, the troll finally seemed to make up its mind.

"I don't like rubbing things in faces," the troll stated rather innocently. "But I would love to see if my musicals can stand up to his rapping."

This was why Mazarin loved trolls. They're so earnest and transparent. "Well, that'll have to do," Mazarin said as her foxlight burned brightly. "You wait here," she told the troll as she flitted up into the trees. Mazarin knew that the melody pixies loved the canopies of trees. This is why the birds always sing such sweet music. And why troll music was few and far between – only a sparse number of melody pixies fancy the floor foliage over the canopies. And this was also why those annoying elves, who liked to jump through the branches like they're some sort of hardcore parkour

course, were a particularly musical race.

Mazarin zoomed high up into the trees. It didn't take long before she spotted a rather large swarm of melody pixies. Brandishing her foxlight around her, she dipped, dove, and dazzled the tiny pixies, wrangling them up into following her down to the young musical troll. The air thrummed and vibrated as the swarm of pixies rushed down behind the fox fairy. The troll below could feel the overwhelming presence of the thing. Mazarin made sure to confirm that Thranduil was still nearby before she led the melody pixies to collide straight into the troll's heart.

The young troll felt himself tremor. This was it. This was the thing. This was more of the thing than he had ever felt in his whole life. This thing was more thing than the things described in the stories of troll lyrical legends, like Bartholamoon the Boisterous, Pepperstone the Pitchy, Thomoss the Tinnital, Samuwell the Screechy, or even Gregortree the Grinding! This was so much of the thing that he almost didn't know what to do with it. The troll took a moment (relatively speaking, he's still a troll) to collect himself. Then he took the thing and marched straight over to Thranduil, ready to match his musical might against that of the mousey haired mischief maker.

As the elves continued to prance, frolic and gambol about the clearing, the loud thumping beat emanating from every conceivable direction, Malgath lurked. The beat, having already filled all directions available in 3-dimensional space and much to Malgath's impotent rage, had begun to claw its way through time as well. It would linger long after the elves left and had even began to slowly work its way forwards in time, to disturb the young troll's musical machinations ever earlier.

That had been an unwelcome little hitch to Malgath's plan: he had not expected the troll. I mean really, a troll? In this part of the forest? No-one could have expected that. No-one could have expected him to have expected that. Ridiculous.

He'd been meticulously planning this for years and had breathed a heavy sigh of relief when the troll had retreated sniffing into the forest. Indeed, Thranduil would soon have embarrassed him for the last time and there would be no factors he, Malgath the Monotone, had not accounted for. He could rap just as well as those obnoxious elves, and he had almost convinced himself that Thranduil's tall, lean frame was no better than his squat and square one. Indeed, he was unique among elves, hah! So much so, many said that he barely looked like an elf at all. Thranduil could most certainly not say the same.

Malgath peeked over the bush he was hidden behind and watched Thranduil with narrowed eyes. He wore that ridiculous feather boa – why, Malgath could just as easily

wear one. It did not make him as special as the other elves seemed to think him. And that was what Malgath intended to show them.

He steeled himself and stood, his timing precise; the elves were slowing slightly in their jubinations, a sure sign that they were soon to move on and disturb some other part of the forest. A small number of the elves had heard the distressed rustle of the bush as Malgath forced his way to his feet and turned to look.

Malgath opened his mouth to speak and froze, mouth hanging open. The troll approached from the opposite edge of the clearing. Their eyes met.

An aura of silence emanated from the troll, reducing the beating music to a faint pulse, like the gentle lapping of waves. Malgath stared open-mouthed at the slow lumbering giant, envy and awe causing marigolds to blossom at his feet. It was completely unheard of for a melody pixie to bond to a troll; Malgath had only just managed to coax one into his heart. For years he had tried and tried to impress them, but his monotonous screechings sounded more like cries of pain. It had taken all his cunning to lure one into a trap. Now finally, when it was time for him to exact his revenge on Thranduil, this stupid troll had to mess it all up. Malgath glanced towards the elves' procession and saw that they had all stopped. There was no more dancing or singing. Instead, the elves were making way for the troll who had started his slow walk towards the centre of the clearing. These were certainly no ordinary melody pixies the troll had within, that was for sure. A smirk played across Malgath's lips as he watched Thranduil's shocked face turn towards the troll: maybe his revenge could wait, this looked like it could be an interesting performance.

One foot in front of the other, the troll thought to himself, as Mazarin's constant pulling on his beard nudged him onwards. He felt at peace, in harmony with the rest of the forest. The thing had given him clarity, clarity to see the music each part of the forest wanted expressed. There, as he drew his focus to the tree just to the right of him, he felt the leaves willing him to hum to the key of G major. Just below, the grass tugged at his attention, wishing for a melodic ballad. It might have felt overwhelming, but instead the troll smiled to himself, a clear piece of music unravelling in his heart, in sync with all the demands of the nature around him. Mazarin zipped ahead and the troll was conscious of her announcing his Midsummer Madness act, but it didn't seem to matter to him. All he felt was the desire, growing stronger by the second, to let the forest be heard. Some unspoken cue called to him, and he started swaying, building up the rhythm and energy he needed.

Mazarin was in the middle of her speech when she felt a

sudden change behind her. The troll's aura pulsed and extended, enveloping the whole clearing. As the troll opened his mouth, the purest sound filled the space. It took Mazarin a few seconds to realise that these were lyrics and not just notes he was singing:

One ring more,

Another ring, your breath will take,

They must a journey undertake.

Alone they will most surely fail -

A sorry end to a sorry tale.

Take our words and our forest's heed

Help them in their time of need

One ring more!

With a neigh the elk reared up and cantered towards the troll, bowing its head in reverence. The elves stood tall and solemn, facing the troll with respect, the past frivolity and rowdiness lost to the winds. It was as if they had awoken from an enchantment, facing a very different world the one they had been in only moments before. Amongst them, Thranduil took a step forward, and to Mazarin's surprise, a single tear rolled down his cheek. He too bowed his head, the feather boa falling to the forest floor.

After a pause, Thranduil spoke: "Never, young troll, have I been touched by music such as this. For too long, I have believed the only expression to be rap. I thought success was speaking so quickly that my words become unintelligible. Now I see that this is but a sorry reflection of my own inability to communicate. I have not listened to the needs of Mirkwood.

"We must embrace other forms of music!" he cried, turning now to the collection of elves. "I hereby announce the immediate renovation of the elven rap-club hitherto known as Cinders/Bouldare. No longer will it only cater to a single clique; it must reflect the diversity of the forest."

Marazin smiled, her foxlight gilding the clearing with a warm light. The prospect of a fresh forest musical scene (perhaps with show tunes!) left that narrow miss with the golden shower long forgotten.

Meanwhile, Malgath was retrieving his jaw from the undergrowth. What had he just witnessed? Thranduil had just bowed in front of a troll? A troll! Maybe Thranduil wasn't as bad as he appeared. Maybe he too was just a confused soul. Maybe revenge should be called off, or at least stayed until this bizarre scene had played out. After all, his counsellor frequently reminded him that kindergarten was an awfully long time ago.

Unfortunately, while turning over these thoughts, Malgath tripped over (a rare occurrence for an elf) and, in doing so, triggered the beginning of the very plan he had just postponed.

There was a great mechanical crash as a small trapdoor shunted open at one end of the clearing. A bass guitar ascended through the hole, and stood proudly on a large stand, with a great hinged pole next to it.

Malgath gasped, and fished the crushed remote out of his pocket, frantically pressing all of the buttons to try and turn it off.

"Malgath, dude?" began Thranduil.

"Cover your ears, cover your ears!" Malgath gasped, throwing the remote aside and diving in the opposite direction, fingers plugged into his eardrums.

Everyone went to ground.

The hinged pole suddenly swang down straight through the strings of the bass, in a single, deafening chord.

A moment passed, and they all returned to their feet.

"AND THAT WAS YOUR SUBMISSION?!" bellowed Thranduil.

"YES, I SUPPOSE SO," screamed Malgath. They were both struggling with their sudden deafness.

"TO BE FAIR, IT IS ACTUALLY BETTER THAN LAST YEAR." Thranduil yelled.

"THAT'S SO KIND OF YOU! I'VE BEEN A BIT OF A DICK RECENTLY, SO I DO APOLOGISE. MR.TROLL, YOUR PIECE WAS GLORIOUS." Malgath shouted.

The clearing continued bellowing at one another – but Malgath was no longer the elf on the outside.

On the hillside, four horsemen pulled to a stop.

The first briefly stopped vaping to speak. "Woah, hear that bass? Far out."

Now that they were stationary, vape smoke began gathering around the hooves of the horses. They neighed and whinnied.

"We *are* missing a bass player." Acknowledged the second.

"ffffffffffffff." The third continued vaping.

"We have a spare e-cig," said the fourth. "... we can ... ffffffffffffff... *compel* him just like we are compelled."

"Then let's waste no time. We *will* ... ffffffffffffff ... be the

best rock band in the world.”

The four began down the hill towards the forest. The first smiled wickedly around his e-cig.

The nazjuul would rule once more – he was sure of it.

BONUS CONTENT: Les Miserablelves

“Surprisingly coherent. So wholesome I’d put it on granary bread.”

Sarah Nolan

And that's the end of this term's magazine! I hope that you've enjoyed the collection put together this term, and thank you all of the many that contributed this time around..

Unusually, the signup for this term of chainwriting is already live, so check your inboxes or email me at cusfs.chainwriting@gmail.com to sign on for another term of lovely and/or wacky fiction. As always, any sketchers, riddlers, or other creators are encouraged to come forwards - I'd love to see whatever you'd like to share.

As always, keep writing. The first line is always the hardest!

Swords and Sorcery,

Shaun.



TRUE TURMOIL BLAZES ANEW

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