

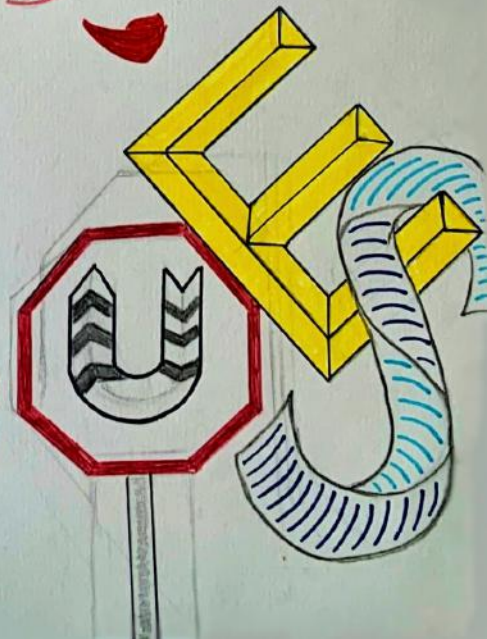


T H R O U G H

Battle Town



EDEN OF ANDROMEDA
St. CEDAR
PLANETARY ZOO



TRIUMPHANT THROUGH BATTLE-TORN AVENUES

TTBA Magazine - Easter and Summer 2020

A production of the Cambridge University Science Fiction Society

hereafter CUSFS



Triumphant Through Battle-torn Avenues

VOLUME 1• ISSUE 3••

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• - *Victory is upon us, My Liege! Our armies have returned!*

•• - *Unfortunately, they have in fact defeated the wrong kingdom.*

••• - By the numbering system from 1973-2004 (!) this is Volume 45, Issue 3.

The Chairbeing's Address

Hello everyone!

A new year, a new TTBA, a new experience for us all. Though times are uncertain, and anxiety is high for many of us, rest assured that CUSFS is here to keep everyone entertained and connected.

Chainwriting will be running as normal and is a great way to relax and stay in touch, and of course our weekly discussions will continue (in an all-new digital format).

While my grand plans for the society and eventual world domination might have been slightly ruined by current circumstances, rest assured that regular service will continue as planned as much as possible, despite a certain sensation of impending doom. And besides, we probably have the most combined knowledge of surviving in a post-apocalyptic wasteland out of any of the Cambridge societies, so I'm sure we'll be fine.

In all seriousness, no, the world is not going to end. But if it feels that way to you, if you just need that little spark to help you get through your day, hopefully CUSFS can do

something to help.

Take care,

Jamie Gerstein

CUSFS Chairbeing 2020-21

A Message From The Editor

Greetings to one and all, welcome to this very overdue instalment of TTBA goodness! There was a looser set of genres this time, and I got in my fave title for a TTBA so far (I know, I'm biased).

All the same, turn the page for tales set very near and very far, with the cobble roads we're all very used to jostling for column space with a tale of an astronomical zoo.

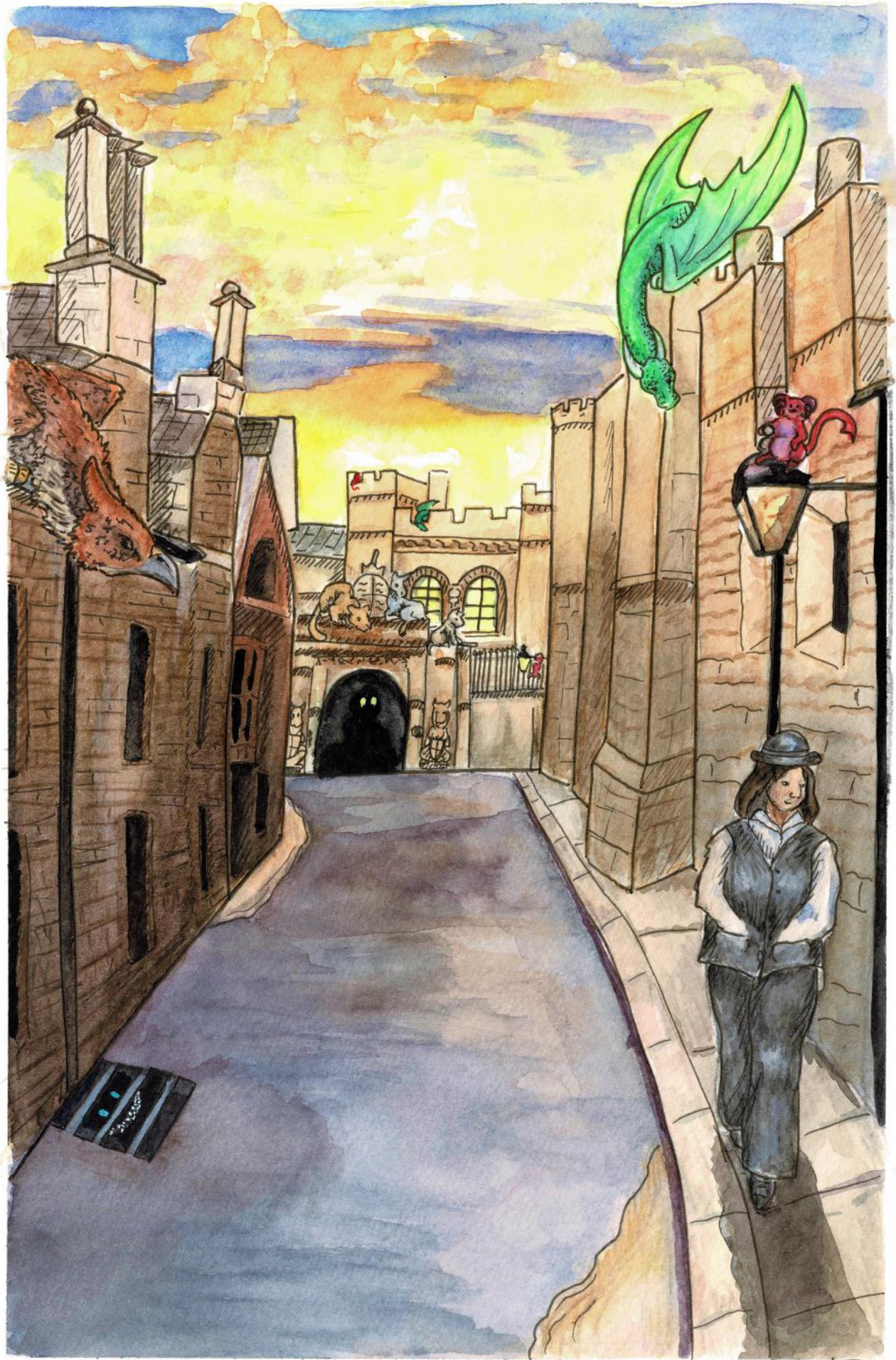
I hope it sparks joy!

Swords and Sorcery,

Shaun Vickers

TTBA Editor 2019-21





Richard

THE PORTER'S LOG

Harley Jones, Paulinia, Grace Copeland, Evan Wroe, Mark Johnson,
Phoebe Fay, Dan James, Hannah Clark, Sarah Binney

The chimes of Great St Mary's rang out across the sleeping city, tolling midnight, as it had through centuries; through the mist, across the fens and down the Cam the sound echoed; and reached the gates of St Cedd's College, where all was not silent. As Professor Chronotis returned from dinner at another college, he observed some sort of struggle at the front of college and quickened his pace. The sound of cursing and swearing was faintly audible, but – this was odd – only one voice. As he approached, he saw clearly what was happening – only the porter struggling with the gate.

"I say! Don't close up too quickly," he called out.

"Ah, professor; good evening," replied the porter breathlessly. "I can't close up even if I wanted to, I'm afraid; bloody thing's stuck. I'll get no sleep tonight if can't lock up..."

"Shame, shame. I'd offer to help, but my back isn't what it used to be, and..."

"Oh, I couldn't ask you to help, professor; but it will look bad for me tomorrow – this is my first night shift, you know."

At this Reg looked more closely at the porter. "Oh, new here, are you? Forgive me – welcome to St Cedd's! It all blurs together when you've been here as long as I have, I'm afraid. Still – I'm sure you'll fit in."

The porter found this odd. Susan was, after all, the first woman porter the college had ever had. She had hoped to stand out a little.

"Thank you, professor. And don't worry – I'll get the gate seen to tomorrow."

They bade one another goodnight, and the professor shambled inside. Susan sighed and turned back to the gate, resolved to get the thing shut properly – the cosy porters' bedroom firmly at the front of her mind – but suddenly noticed a movement at the edge of her vision, up above the gate. Surely there wasn't someone up there? She flicked on her torch and shone it up at the coat of arms which stood proudly above the entrance. It seemed still – no – surely not?

One of the yales winked at her.

Susan stared up at it, and it began to twizzle its horns – cheekily grinning at her. Suddenly – without warning – the carved wooden beast leapt down from its place and approached her.

She felt goosebumps emerging on her skin. Her torch illuminated the beast's head and then a familiar face made her feel a sudden relief.

"What are you doing here at this hour?!" She silently barked at the beast. Keeping the monsters in place – that was an unwritten duty of all porters, a duty she was discretely informed about only after officially becoming one. And only after *being introduced* to some of the monsters had Susan started believing in them.

"Hunger - Hunger I'm, ma'am," the beast mumbled. At least it's well educated! Susan thought and sighed. Among all things, she didn't expect to discipline more monsters than students.

"Fellows are not for eating!" She was sharp, but kept her voice down, making sure none else could possibly hear them. The beast moaned.

"Students forbidden not?" The monster squealed hopefully.

"Absolutely forbidden!" She suspected the beast remembered there was a new porter on a duty and tried to take advantage of it. But Susan wasn't going to allow the beasts to undermine her authority.

"You should go and try to hunt down a duck," Susan suggested but was unsure about what this type of beasts ate. "And you shall be out of the streets at this hour! Students are still out! Fellows as well, as you saw! You know why you can still dwell in this town!" She looked around, making sure none saw them.

The beast whined and then went back where it came from, placing itself back into the coat of arms. If she just didn't witness it with her own eyes, she would never believe the wooden beast has ever moved. *At least now I know where you live*, Susan noted, keeping her eyes at the stationary coat of arms.

Her hands fumbled for the gate, convulsing and blind without the help of her vision, which was still trained on the hungry yale. She wasn't sure what she was expecting to see; perhaps a shallow rising and falling of its weathered wooden stomach; perhaps a thin bluish vapor from its nostrils as it breathed – perhaps she just didn't trust the thing. It seemed almost a shame, to have had the ancient innocence of such a masterpiece revealed to her to be a mere veil which



shrouded a timeless beast; alive and threatening, with horns as gorgeous and deadly as newly fashioned swords. Uncertain thoughts poked and prodded at her head, which was still tilted upwards to the coat of arms, when the gates shoved themselves shut, giving her trembling hands a cold nudge as they did so, and shunting a tepid breath of dark air through her hair. She scrambled for the sight of the yale once more. It winked again.

Susan's lips attempted a ragged motion, almost forming the shape of a 'thank you', but what came out was more of a dry pant. The thought of the cosy porter's bedroom that had been getting her through her first night shift had suddenly become dark and unappealing, so she decided on a short stroll. Perhaps she hoped, rather foolishly, she would be reminded on the way that not everything in Cambridge was weird and wonderful and terrifying. She started across the cobbles, noticing how polished they were, thinking how that unique dull gleam could only be achieved by centuries of comings and goings, the constant yet fleeting friction of journeys against what seemed an eternal pathway. With every step, she felt the heat of history heaving from every stone brick, every wooden beam, exciting the deep midnight air and stirring a powdery calm inside her. Watching the city at night felt like watching a river flow – it was alive in its sleeping, dappled in the lilac hum of moonlight, and moving ever so gently with the lumber of drunk students and the lilt of the wind in the trees.

Her feet carried her hazily out of town and towards the common which led on towards the river Cam, where the streetlights cast a dingy light over obsessively trimmed stretches of grass. They looked almost like untouched pools in the night; glassy and undefined. Suddenly, Susan felt silly in her little black porter's hat, and the waistcoat was tight and oppressive around her bust. She sighed irritably and undid the buttons. St. Cedd's had never had a woman porter before, why would they have thought to make waistcoats that accounted for the possibility of breasts? Perhaps she should raise that with the head porter. But not too soon – she was new, and probably didn't have the right.

She let these thoughts dizzy her for a moment and went to take off her hat to let the sunless air graze her stifled scalp. But before her fingers could grasp the rim, a gust as furious as an explosion rumbled across the common, lifting up leaves and her hat and the hairs on the back of her neck and throwing them down just as sharply. She barely made a half turn before there was another; a hot wind flung over the emptiness. And another. It was as if a helicopter was landing before her. Indeed, something was landing. Susan could just about make it out through the blariness cast over her eyes. Something red – dusty-looking - the colour of the bricks

used on some of the old colleges. Something soft, descending with the struggle of a thousand soldiers in battle, but slowly as a feather. Something *with* feathers.

She hadn't noticed that she had fallen back on the ground until her feet began to twitch with the impulse to scramble away, back to St. Cedd's, back to the porter's bedroom, the thought of which was becoming more appealing now by the second. But she couldn't move. The thing in front of her glowed like the embers of a fire, and the gravity of it arrested her. Body of a lion, head and wings of an eagle. Eyes like bullets. The griffin from the crest of St. Francis's College. This one was very far from home.

"Apologies, my lady, I did not mean to startle you." The griffin spoke, slowly and deliberately, its voice thick and slightly hoarse.

Susan – obviously startled – sat in shocked silence for a second. Then, remembering herself, she got to her feet, dusting off as she did so.

"Well," she laughed nervously, "you certainly startled me. But no harm done." The griffin towered over her, intimidating even if it didn't mean to be. She breathed out and turned to find the hat which had been blown off her head. Adrenaline was pumping through her, and panic gripped her body, but she fought to control it as she fumbled in the dark for the hat. The griffin waited.

"So... what brings you out so far from St Francis'?" she said, back turned to the griffin, hoping that she sounded more collected than she felt.

"I heard tell of a new porter at St Cedd's – the first new porter in Cambridge for some years – and so I sought you out. I have a question, if you will oblige."

"Oh.." she said, turning, "of course, ask away."

The griffin leant down to look more closely at Susan, turning its head slightly so that one wide hazel eye gazed into hers, a matter of feet away.

"Tell me: why did you want to be a porter?"

That caught her by surprise. "What is this, a job interview?" she said with a laugh.

"Please. Humour me."

"Well. I'm at my best when I'm caring for people. Before this I was a doctor for a while, but that got a bit too much. Porters care for the college, and for its members." She smiled to herself, proud of her chosen profession. She looked up into the griffin's eye, and realised, adding, "All its members, that is: students, fellows and monsters alike."

The griffin was silent for a while. It regarded her,

impassively. Was her answer satisfactory? Why did it even care? And then:

"And what would you do were the safety of a college member threatened? Student, fellow..." it paused a breath, "... or monster?"

Susan tried to impart some emotion from the griffin's face, but it was alien to her. Was that sadness? Anger? She may as well have asked the same of a crow. But the question concerned her all the same.

"Is something the matter at St Francis? I can contact the por..."

"Please." Said the griffin, cutting her off. It turned and started pacing, flexing its massive wings in what appeared to be agitation. "The question."

Susan paused.

"If the need is not urgent, I would take it up with the other porters, the head porter, and any other relevant parties and we would discuss the appropriate course of action. If the need is urgent, I would seek to resolve the situation myself as promptly as possible, without attracting undue attention of course."

The griffin's body rippled as it shook its feathered head, pawing the dirt.

"Well, Susan of St Cedd's, the need is most urgent. Monsters have been disappearing from St Francis', from across the colleges of Cambridge. And I'm afraid the other porters can be of no help. You see, I do not know which of them to trust." It turned and fixed its hazel eye on her. "I do not know which of them are to blame."

"I... Well..." Susan paused, letting the monumentality of the griffin's words wash over her. "Okay. I'll help. Of course I'll help. But I... I have no idea where to begin."

"Thank you, Susan. You are a paragon of your order." For the first time since it landed, the tension went out of the griffin's form, as if some great burden had been lifted from its shoulders. "As for where to begin? I can set you on the right path. Come. The Convocation of the Crypt awaits."

The griffin led Susan through a maze of colleges, each seemingly older than the last. Before long, Susan had lost all track of where they were, and certainly had no recollection of any of these colleges' existence. But her key still opened the way, and so she followed on.

Eventually the griffin stopped at a stone structure with no

distinguishing features, bar the words "Staircase III" engraved above the entryway. A plaque bearing the names and room numbers of the occupants stood proudly to one side. Ominously, the lowest floor was labelled simply "The Crypt."

"I cannot follow you now. Human stairs were not designed to suit my kind," the griffin gestured to its talons, "Go. Down below. I will be waiting."

Susan entered the building and began to descend. The steps were smooth stone, no doubt worn down by centuries of academics passing this way before her. The staircase was narrow and gloomy, and Susan noticed with a start that what little illumination there was came from candles set in recesses along the walls. "How old is this place?" she wondered.

The narrow stair became a narrow passage, and then a low-ceilinged room. In the shadows cast by stout pillars, *figures* moved.

"Greetings, Susan of St Cedd's" A voice like grinding metal boomed out of the darkness. Susan squinted in the direction of the voice, barely able to make out an oozing monstrosity with an impossibly large mouth. It seemed to be chewing on a pair of handlebars. "Welcome to The Crypt."

"Yes. Thank you. The griffin of St Francis said some of you were... Um... Dead?"

A shadowy figure clutching a long pole stepped out of the shadows, and gurgled, "Not *dead*. No. Not that. I have not borne any across the Cam in some time. They have disappeared."

"So... you want me to find them?"

"We know where they are. They are on gates, roofs, in courtyards and libraries. They are not missing. Their living forms eroded."

"I'm very sorry to hear--"

"Most of the porters don't seem to care. It is less hassle, even safer, not to watch for monsters. But, the griffin Storm-Over-The-Ocean trusts that you can keep Cambridge safe. For many, it's the only place where we can live alongside humans."

"Yes, yes. I understand. What can I do?"

"Look here," A faint line that appeared to be a claw stretched out and pointed to the East Wall of the Crypt. Names, many in a script she did not recognize flickered from within the stone. Some stayed in place, while others trailed across the wall in a familiar pattern.

"So, these are all the monsters in Cambridge?" A grunt. Susan looked closer. Every now and again the names were



dark and cold.

“When a monster dies, their name disappears. But these names were... extinguished.” Susan tried to remember the colleges the names represented. The map was unclear, but the damage was vast.

“Why?”

“When Cambridge was founded, it came with an oath to shelter the many magical creatures of these isles from those who may want to hurt them. The first members of the university cast transformation spells, hiding monsters in plain sight. It appears that someone has decided to strengthen these spells. They are nothing more than statues. It can be reversed, but it’s very dark and difficult magic.”

Susan decided no good would come of voicing how unbelievable this all was, at least for now.

“What is it that I should do?”

“If Storm-Over-The-Ocean trusted you with this information, then the Convocation can trust you with this task. I fear it must be you. Our brethren, these names, only dissipate during the day, when we cannot roam free. The mage only operates when they know we can’t seek them out, we need mortal assistance.”

Susan said nothing in the expectant pause the spectre left for her to fill. She silently tried to put everything straight in her head, inadvertently urging him to continue.

“To strengthen magic like this requires arcane prowess of the highest degree, someone well-versed in the sorcery that birthed this city and keeps us alive. The ancient texts required to learn these abilities are only housed in one place... here. Our arcanist is in Cambridge, though we know not precisely where-”

“And I must find them?”

“That is but the first step. Once located, the ritual must be interrupted, then, Granta willing, the damage reversed. That last step is the hardest and requires components that our wizard has likely already gutted the city of.”

“Then finding them is our priority?”

The ferryman bowed ostentatiously and swept an outstretched hand across the mural, as though offering Susan the floor. She stepped forward.

“Well”, she thought aloud, her mind still ricocheting. “The list must be truly ancient, there are colleges named here I don’t recall... even after my uninterruptable history lesson from that drunk Fellow at our first formal.”

From the darkness, a slit of light in the shape of a tight-lipped smile illuminated the room briefly. An apparition in

the shadows had enjoyed her nervous joke. Rather than unnerve her, she felt the tension in her shoulders and breathing relax, and an idea entered her head.

“But there are a few I do know. Here’s St Cedd’s, and Orvaness Hall next door, there’s St. Francis in the bottom right. Now...” She paused. “Notice how there are a few, more central, colleges that are almost completely erased; there’s only one creature left in Lady Mary, and it’s a vast campus! I suppose if we mapped these all out, and worked out where these historical colleges were, we could triangulate where the threat is coming from, given the magic is likely strongest near its source.”

The grin in the darkness widened, and its bearer stepped forward.

“I likes this one sir.”

Susan couldn’t quite hold the back the full body flinch at the dark shadow that materialised over her shoulder, scrambling away with her mouth opening in a silent shriek.

The ferryman only rolled its eyes, or at least the movement of its head beneath its heavy cowl and the short sharp sigh suggested that it did. “Susan of St Cedd’s, I present to you Teeth-in-the-Dark, the eyes and ears for this Crypt.”

Teeth-in-the-Dark summed up this particular monster well. It didn’t really seem to have a corporeal shape, more like writhing shadows that coiled in on themselves over and over to give it the vague sense of being solid. If Susan had to guess, she’d say it was a kind of dog, about the size of a terrier and floating eye-level with her. Its eyes were glowing bright blue, flickering like the candles on the wall. But its teeth were what really grabbed her attention: far too big for its mouth and shining white so that she couldn’t seem to look anywhere else.

“Nice to meet ya Susan. I looks forward to our partnership.” It gave the best approximation of a bow it was able to.

It took Susan a few precious seconds to find her voice where it had been cowering behind her stomach. “The pleasure is all mine, Teeth-in-the-Dark.”

“Ah, you can call me Shuck, lady. All the rumours do.”

“Teeth-in-the-Dark will give you what aid they can.”

“What college are you from?” Susan couldn’t remember seeing any dog statues around any of the colleges. Certainly nothing shaped like this.

“Oh I ain’t got a college, lady. Went bust ‘bout what - two centuries ago?” Shuck turned to the ferryman for clarification.

“And a half.”

"And a half."

"I'm sorry to hear about it." She couldn't imagine what losing his home must've been like.

"Nah don't youse worry 'bout it. I gots you now, don't I?" With a wicked grin, Shuck curled around her neck like an overly-affectionate cat and sending shudders straight down Susan's spine as she sprang away with an undignified squeak.

Any sympathy she might've had dried up at the sight of Shuck rolling in the air cackling like a gremlin.

"Please don't do that." She lifted her hand to rub the sensation of ghostly chills from her skin.

"Never gets old."

"Try to behave, Teeth-in-the-Dark."

"Didn't you find it even a little bit funny boss? I heard mice 'more braver." Shuck rolled over onto his back right under the ferryman's cowl, looking for all the world like a cat that got the canary.

More so for a distraction than for any actual reason, she took her phone from her back pocket and the bright light of it lit up the Crypt. There was a sudden scuttling as something- please don't be rats- chased the darkness as it fled.

A good thing was that, it stopped Shuck's teasing as its eyes trained on the phone. In the white LED, its body seemed to disappear, fading out at the edges so that it looked more like a B-list movie cgi effect and infinitely less terrifying.

"Do you mind if I take a photo of this?" She gestured to the inscriptions. "It'll help with my investigation."

"If you must." The ferryman waved a skeletal hand in her direction. In the light, she noticed the bones of his hand were made of polished marble.

It took a couple of attempts to get all the names in, but at least it meant she could work in the comfort of the porter's lodge as opposed to this -frankly terrifying and incredibly cold- crypt.

"Once I've found out where the magician is, I'll come back. Is that alright?"

The ferryman inclined its head, "thank you Susan of St Cedd's."

"Cool thingabob lady. It's got the writings in it too."

Susan swatted Shuck away as it tried to drape itself over her shoulder to look at her phone.

"Be well on your journey. We of the Monsters' Court wish you speed and safety."

Susan inclined her head, lifting her hand in a bit of an awkward wave to the ferryman. Before making her way back out of the Crypt.

Outside the griffin, Storm-Over-the-Ocean the ferryman had called it was curled up like a cat. At their approach it uncoiled to sit straight, looming over her just a little. Its feathers had turned a washed out bronze in the moonlight, its throat and chest almost white and flecked with black like the breast of a kestrel.

"Storm-Over-the-Ocean me ol' slow motion! How ya been?" Shuck crowed as it flew forward to wrap itself around the griffin's neck with its teeth pulled into a wide white grin.

"Teeth-in-the-Dark."

Griffins didn't have eyebrows as far as Susan could see, but it made a good impression of drawing its brow into a frown.

"Awh, youse not still mad about me stealing your lunch?"

"That swan was a gift and you knew it." The griffin snapped its beak in Shuck's direction, sending it skittering away with a cackle.

Maybe it was the years in the caring industry, but Susan knew a fight when it was brewing. Despite the survival instinct warning her about putting herself between a gremlin shaped like a dog and a giant griffin, she stepped out between and held up placating hands to Storm-Over-the-Ocean.

"I think I know how I might be able to help you. I'm going to go over all the extinguished names and look for a pattern. That should give us a place to start looking."

"She's a smart rumour ain't she?" Susan swatted at Shuck before it had a chance to try and drape over her shoulder again.

"Well, I suppose it would explain why They sent you with Shuck. No one creeps and sneaks like that little rat catcher." The griffin actually hissed then, opening its beak into what she supposed was meant to be a sneer.

"Flattery will get youse everywhere."

"Where are you headed now, Susan of St Cedd's?"

"Back to the porter's lodgings. I need my laptop and a map. Also, it's freezing."

"You wants a hug?"

"Definitely not."

Shuck just shrugged, or did the best approximation of one, and floated beside her head just on the wrong side of her personal space. "Rumours."

When Susan looked to the griffin for clarification, it rolled its



eyes. "It's idiot for humans."

"That's rich coming from the birdbrain who thought their reflection was a rival for how many centuries was it again?"

"There is a Lady of the College present, you are lucky I will not stoop to violence." The hiss the griffin made sounded like a pit of disturbed snakes, vibrating in her bones as much as her ears. But at least its expression softened as it turned its attention back to her. "Allow me to escort you to your college Susan of St Cedd's. It is not much but it is the least I can do to lend you my aid."

That brought a genuine smile to her face for some reason. The way the griffin opened up one wing just enough to shelter her from the drizzle that started to come down. The warmth radiating from its feathers just enough to stave off the worst of the chill. It was one of the kindest things anyone had done for her since she'd started working here.

It was strange how a griffin, a terrifying creature walked out of the bloody violent legends of this island, had treated her with more civility than any supervisor or colleague or manager had over the course of her studies and career. Funny that.

Susan had honestly lost track of the hours lying on the bed and marking each of the disappearances on the map with a purple sharpie. Three empty mugs of hot chocolate were clustered at the foot of the bed. There was also a saucer, licked clean, when she'd finally caved and poured some out for Shuck.

Apparently, monster dogs didn't get chocolate poisoning.

The personal space had lasted half as long. Every moment she looked away the ghost dog had shuffled closer until she'd eventually relented and let it put its head on her arm as her eyes flicked from phone to laptop to map.

If she closed her eyes and ignored the cold chills, it kinda felt like the little dog she'd had growing up. It was...nice.

The sun had pulled itself up into the sky by the time she'd marked the last casualty on the map.

"So, what we looking at lady?"

"Ok, so you see these here," she pointed to the dense cluster of crosses around Duke's Parade, "and here," another dense cluster along the Master's Passage, "and here," around the chapel of St Rex's.

"Yeh they all close, so what our mark's in there?"

"Exactly, so the three worst colleges affected are St Rex, Lady Mary and St Fae. So if I connect those together--"

"Our mark's in the triangle!" Shuck jumped to its feet, tail

wagging and eyes flickering to a blood red as it looked down at the map. It was a little disconcerting to be honest.

"Maybe - but there's one thing that's bothering me. You see this college here," she pointed to St Mabb's, just next door to St Fae. "There's barely any cases there at all."

"St Mabb's don't have much monsters anymore. Lost a lot in the bombings they did. I finks they only got a half dozen."

"And yet only a single name has been extinguished. St Fae went from over thirty to two."

"Whats you saying lady?"

"If I were a wizard up to no good, I wouldn't want to attract any unwanted attention. So I'd set myself up in a college with not many monsters and leave them be while I did my work. That would keep suspicion off the college until there weren't enough monsters left to stop me."

"You think scary." There was a wicked grin on Shuck's face and in the darkness of Susan's room it made its teeth practically glow.

"I was also thinking we pay St Mabb's a visit."

"I likes you even better."

Sneaking out of the college was easy. She was a porter, so no one questioned her as she grabbed her trench coat and strode out with far more confidence than she felt. Shuck, it turned out, could shrink its size until it was no bigger than a newborn pup and hid itself under her bowler hat.

"Looks out."

She heard Shuck whisper the warning moments before a voice called out to her, "Susan wasn't it?"

Turning on her heel, the tension drained out of her at the sight of the Fellow from last night. Her face slipped into an easy smile, the old man was nice if a little eccentric, but refreshingly normal after spending the night researching monster murders with a ghost dog.

"Professor Chronotis. You're up early this morning."

"Supervision. It's those rowers, always getting up so damned early."

Susan chuckled along politely, trying to follow along to his rantings but far too tired to actually stand a chance.

"They work you newbies hard, look at you, bags under your eyes already." He reached into his bag and pulled out something wrapped up in a napkin. "Here. I swiped it from the breakfast table on my way out. You look like you need it more than I do."

"I can't take your breakfast from you professor."

"Oh please, I insist."

"Thanks." Unwrapping the napkin, there's was a fresh croissant still warm from the oven. Those hot chocolates seemed a long time ago now and her stomach made a pitiful noise.

"Did he bring bacons?" Shuck whispered to her, then giving a sad whine when he realised there wasn't any.

"Where are you headed to? If I might ask?"

"St Mabb's, postal duties and all that." The lie was surprisingly easy to give, slipping out as naturally as breathing.

"I'm headed that way myself. How about I give you company for the trip? A young woman-" she was not young thank you very much - "such as yourself ought to be careful walking around in the wee hours."

Well, it had been nice while it lasted. But the fellows here were hideously outdated. Only years of practice stopped her face from souring at the comment, and she gave him a thin lipped smile. A mantra of 'he's old, he doesn't know better' played on repeat in her head as she politely listened to him talking of errant students and late assignments. The croissant at least tasted nice as she nibbled on it.

"Say, I've got a bit of time before my supervision. What do you say to a coffee before you start your working day?" It didn't feel like a question, and Susan didn't feel like he really wanted an answer from her.

"Stupid rumour," she heard Shuck snarl from under her hat, "we gots things to do. You wants me to scare him?"

"No." She hissed back when the professor was looking away.

"Fine, just let me outs under that arch."

As they passed under the shadow of the arch, a cold chill went down her spine as Shuck shifted.

"One moment professor." She said it quietly in the hope he wouldn't hear her. He did. Pausing to admire an old tree as he waited for her to finish.

Bending down to retire her shoelace, she lifted her bowler hat up out of her eyes and felt the brush of ghostly fur against her skin as Shuck slipped out, "meets me in the library," it whispered to her before disappeared into the shadows between the crumbling mortar.

Susan knew better then to try and follow his progress with her eyes. Standing straight, she caught up to the professor and asked him to continue his entirely riveting account of the founding of St Mabb's that she had never once heard before.

He led her up a spiral staircase, and down a long corridor to a small shared office tucked away in the right courtyard. It was dark and small, far more claustrophobic than the Crypt had been last night.

"So tell me Susan, how do you take your coffee?"

She edged around a stack of books almost as tall as she was. Unusual titles: *De Flumen Mortis*, *Chronomanipulaba*, *Beasts of the Fens*. "Just a dash of milk, thank you."

"Of course you understand St Mabb's collection is quite singular, even when compared to the other colleges."

Professor Chronotis was looking at her, mug in one hand and coffee spoon in the other. She realised he was expecting a response. "Um... Yes, their library is very grand."

He chuckled. "Oh, I didn't mean books." He handed her a steaming mug. "I was talking about their monsters."

Susan gaped. "I beg your pardon?"

The Professor waved the spoon absently. "Oh, don't let's be silly, you porters do pretend you are the gatekeepers of College lore but you must understand you're only here by the grace of the Fellows." He waved a hand and a stack of books on a chair clattered to the ground making room for him to sit. No, not clattered; hurried, like trained mice, into neat piles.

Susan's every nerve was afire. Her instinct for trouble had been well honed over years doing the A&E night shift, spotting which drunk was about to start a fight; it was what had gotten her this job. But she was far from help and now a pile of hostile books blocked the door.

"What exactly do you want, Professor?"

"Oh, call me Reg. And honestly! Backing away from an old man. One would think I was a slavering tokoloshe or gytrash or somesuch." He sipped his coffee.

"You're a sorcerer, I know that much."

"Many Fellows are."

"And I know you're the one responsible for turning those poor monsters to stone."

He set his mug on the table with a loud *thunk*. "'Poor'! They are dangerous relics of a less civilised age. Why, you wouldn't remember, but there was a time that not a term would go by without an undergraduate being snatched by some demon or other. The University kept it quiet; said the missing student had gone to London, or eloped, or very occasionally – if there was anything left of the body – drowned. Those of us who knew the truth lived in fear!" At that he banged the table for emphasis, and the books all around him shuddered.



Susan kept her voice level. "That was a long time ago. Humans and monsters live in harmony, now."

"Pshaw. Equilibrium, perhaps. But an unstable one. Stand on King's Parade and look around. Tourists and technology. Comfort. Control. The world has moved on."

"So you decided they needed to die?"

"Nothing so dramatic. I mean only to send them to sleep; calcify them. Make them the statues we believe them to be. And for that I need your help, Susan."

She started. "Me?"

"I know you met with the Convocation of the Crypt. They trust you. You can give them to me."

A chill ran down Susan's spine. No... not a chill. Her mind was racing. "It doesn't fit. Why St Mabb's?"

He waved a hand absently, and as he did so a shadow flickered across the wall behind him. "It was where I spent my undergraduate years. The monsters there know me, would suspect me."

This was it, Susan knew. The point of no return. She took a deep breath. "Is there really no way for monsters to live in peace, alongside people?"

The Professor narrowed his eyebrows. "Young woman. Of course not."

Susan exhaled. "I suppose that's the answer, then."

"Hm?" Chronotis started, face full of panic which turned to

horror as he looked down at his jacket. It appeared he was wearing a necklace of gleaming white teeth, strung on an invisible thread. He lunged for his desk, but before he could stand the invisible jaws tightened, drawing blood and sending him sprawling into his chair, wheezing with pain.

"No!"

Susan surprised herself with her own voice. "Don't kill him!"

Teeth-in-the-Dark sounded as though it was speaking with its mouth full, which, Susan supposed, it was. "But ee's the monster killer, lady. You did it. We'se can go home now."

"Not by killing him. Don't you understand? Humans and monsters, co-existing. That's the point of this city. We all three of us have to live by it."

Chronotis was panting, but Susan saw his eyes widen. She kept talking. "That's what Porters are for. We mediate, we keep the peace. We continue the traditions in new ways." Her waistcoat was still too tight. "And if anyone thinks they're going to break that, they'll have to go through me, first."

Slowly – was that regret? – Teeth-in-the-Dark withdrew from Chronotis's jacket and settled with its chin on a pile of books, which trembled underneath it. The Professor massaged his neck and stared at Susan with an expression of dumbstruck awe. Susan downed her coffee in one go.

"I don't know what you're both looking so confused about. Come on. We're off to the Crypt, all three of us. We've a treaty to sign."

BONUS CONTENT: The Porter's Log

Maybe go and take another look at the artwork on page 5 by one of the talented writers on this chain...

The Editor

DO LET THE SUN GO DOWN ON ME

Hannah Clark, Anonymous, Samuel Cook, Ed Heaney,
Maya, Dan Scott, Hannah Hens, Anonymous

They said it would be glorious. They said it would be a Golden Age, where no one would die waiting for a doctor or live from paycheque to paycheque and hoping the foodbank down the road wouldn't be low on stock again. Where no one would begin their life in debt only to die still six feet deep in it.

Well, they got one out of five right. The future was blindingly golden.

Sunlight bright and warm as a summer's day bathed everything in its light. When the sun finally did decide to set, streetlamps lit up the sky instead tall and twisting into each other so that a little bright sun hung underneath each one. Remarkable engineering her teachers had said back in school, truly ingenious to soak up the sun's light by day and send it back out at night. Look how pretty it made all the streets look, the tabloids at the time had written comparing it to grey and dreary days of concrete and the gloom of a cloudy day.

Not anymore though. There hadn't been a cloud in the sky since Mary's nan, still kicking at the ripe old age of 123, had been a student playing on all the old video game consoles her uncle had owned. Since the Enlightening -a dumb name for a dumb idea- it had been bright light every hour of the day, in every city, country and time zone. Why? Eh, the little people knew better than to ask.

But for a pasty Irish kid, twenty-four-hour bright golden sun felt like Mary's own personal hell. Her whole life she'd had to slather herself in sun cream anytime she wanted to leave the house, the windows shuttered to stop her from grilling at her own dining table. Her face had never not been covered in acne, and the skin of her shoulders always red and peeling.

I mean sure, the twenty-four-hour light meant food wasn't a problem anymore. Half the world was vegan nowadays anyway, and boy did crops love that sun. Apparently in the old days there

used to be tomatoes the size of cherries. Ha, most tomatoes came the size of a small melon and pre-sliced for your convenience.

Mary wouldn't have minded trading giant tomatoes for just one day of clear skin and blessed night. Not the blackout curtains and electric light switch in the house. But actual night with stars and constellations and all those things they had in space that you couldn't see anymore from Earth. Or rain. Please God just let it rain for once in her life. The city-wide sprinkler systems just weren't the same. Imagine being able to dance in puddles and twirl around lampposts like that one ancient black-and-white film Nan had shown her. To throw her head back and drink clear water straight from the sky. Have her hair plastered to her scalp and wet with rain not sticky and slick with sweat.

Just for once. Mary wanted it to rain. And she had a plan to do it.

For in "The Summoning of Ghosts Past" it stated that sacrificing a bowl of spookghetti dripping with giant tomato juice in the most batinfested of the house's attic alcoves would summon autodeprecatory ghosts whose bewhingsings would incur autofulfillingly-prophetic rain!

Unfortunately, the local spirits which materialized in Nan and Mary's attic were neither autodeprecatory nor at all straightforward to get rid of. For instance, because they were autoregulatory, so complaining about them to them would fall on unhearing phantom ears.

They were moreover autocongratulatory, which was rather distasteful. Neither of these were however the reasons that Mary and Nan wanted to be rid of them from their house however; that would be their more than occasional tendency to be autofellatory as well,



as befitted their vacuous and thus spinelessly flexible physiques. And being autoregulatory and autocongratulatory while not being autodeprecatory did mean that, aside from not receding to the ghostly spiritworld whence they came, they were particularly blankfiring in the department of apologizing for their fairly frequent, highly inappropriate and often publicly visible comings and goings, lapses of judgement and general lack of basic decency.

Nan having had more than enough, and the console cyberspace having been scoured for remedies, the local chapter of the Ghostbusters was contacted. "Sure", they pintwittgrambooked back "we will send four of our finest to take a look".

The first three to arrive were well-received by Mary and Nan. Buster Dugless, the retired hand-to-hand fighter, Buster Killrain the somewhat unfortunately-named yet gallant gun-fighter, and Buster Aldehyde the former actor turned antighost chemical supplier for the group. Their preliminary labours began to pick up momentum as several ghosts were zapped out of contention by Buster K's byelectionic zapfabulator as they sat doing unmentionable things on the back bench of the garden. Buster D vacuumed up two more in the pressing cupboard where they had somewhat unadvisedly 'exposed their true colours' in autodistractory fashion by droning on about which of them would build 'a longer bridge to nowhere' at public expense. Buster A then administered an overhead chlorinated veritacustard bucketdrop onto one 'particularly palestale fellow' who was all-a-reclining atop the ground floor cabinet in eighteenth-century warlaggiogentrified uppityhat-and-coattails.

Unfortunately, when the group's last and tardy member arrived at the scene, the tone was lowered once more. For enter Buster Gonad, preceded by his trademark wheelbarrow, on this occasion labelled "fruits of my own labour: fresh from my allotment".

Disgusted, Mary and Nan left the two warring factions to it. "2-party politics: people's choice or the plutocrats having countries use divide and conquer on their own populaces?" wise old Nan started to explain, as they started to send out various adverts on the console's instafacerester as regards formation of an independent 'Bring the Rain Back to Manchester Party'.

Mary woke up. Wow, that had been some dream. Too many tomatoes or something. What was she thinking, sending out public adverts for a political party? That would be a surefire way to bring the fiery gaze of Sol Invictus down on her like a terawatt laser. The Solarians weren't noted for their sense of humour (but did have some good patter songs – their PR people knew their stuff, she had to give them that) and anyone voicing such public opposition to the Enlightening would be sure to draw their ire. Maybe not Sol himself, but one of the regional flunkies would have her imprisoned in the Black Pit, devoid of sunlight, for quite a while (actually, now she came to think of it, complete lack of sun didn't seem too bad. She wouldn't be sunburned, at least). If not something worse.

No, her plan was altogether less blatant than that. She'd read that rain was caused by all the water that was hanging around in the sky condensing when it got cold. Or possibly when it got bored or gravity noticed or something like that anyway. She was a bit hazy on the details, but she was pretty certain that cooling things down was the key. Of course, cooling a large chunk of atmosphere down when you've got constant sunlight is a bit difficult, but she wasn't going to let that stop her.

All she has to do was turn out the lights in the area for long enough and then physics would take care of the rest.

Simple. Right? Or had that been another dream? Water just hanging around in the sky? That sounded ridiculous, even when there had been such a thing as night. No, it had to be true. But that only posed another question. Before the lights, how did it get into the sky? Something complicated and natural, no doubt; Mary was reasonably sure that the "clouds" in the pictures predated the sort of technology needed to make them – did we actually have that even now? she

wondered – but one wasn't taught these things nowadays. Maybe Nan knew.

To Mary's surprise, Nan claimed that she did know.

"There *is* still rain," said Nan, darkly. "There *are* still clouds. Not here. Not under the Enlightening. But far out at sea, where the lights don't reach, where the air's still cool... there's rain there. There are clouds. They don't tell you that, because they don't like you to remember there are spots on this world where Sol Invictus does not always gaze."

"How do you know?" asked Mary, torn between curiosity and disbelief.

"Once upon a time, I was a woman of the world," said Nan, a croak entering her voice; Mary found it hard to imagine what it was like Back Then and had no idea what she was supposed to take from this assertion. "In the early days after Enlightening," continued Nan, "people travelled long-distance by aeroplane. Aeroplanes with windows. I think they stopped that because it reminded people there were places Enlightening couldn't reach. But I saw! We all saw! So few remember. So few! But let me tell you this..."

Nan leant in, her crusty old eyes staring intently into Mary's.

"We still meet. Those who know. Those who remember. Maybe you should talk to us. Come, tonight," she said. Mary waited with bated breath for whatever the ancient woman might reveal.

"Come," intoned Nan, as if unsuccessfully trying to force a resonating, booming timbre into her creaky, ancient voice, "to my sewing circle."

Mary had previously declined invitations to the weekly sewing circle in the crafts centre. She had frequently benefitted from Nan's offerings of comfortable, tailored clothes which always had generous pockets especially shaped to hold an emergency bottle of sunscreen or two, but that was no reason to watch them being made while a bunch of old ladies cooed at you.

But it was undeniably true that those old ladies were among the few living people who remembered life before the Enlightening.

Mary followed Nan into the sewing room, hefting Nan's bag over her shoulder. Sitting down at the only remaining table, Nan pulled a sheaf of papers out of the bag, which explained why the bag had been way bulkier than a few pieces of fabric should be.

'Here's Cara at last', said a woman near the front of the room. She didn't look much younger than Nan, but her back was straight and her eyes were bright and sharp. 'And this must be young Mary. Come up here, child'.

As Mary walked over, Nan said, 'She's been asking how life was before the Enlightening, girls'. At this, there was a susurration in the room, the old ladies murmuring to their neighbours.

The old lady at the front of the room nodded. 'You're one of those who the Enlightening hasn't been kind to, child. In some ways, it's our generation's fault. We didn't mark how unnatural it was until it was too late. But we can connect you to people who feel the same way. People who are working to restore the natural order of things. The Enlightening is all well and good for agriculture, but humans weren't meant to live this way.'

Mary's eyebrows shot up at this, and she opened her mouth to point out how dangerous it could be to question the Solarians like that, but the lady said 'Oh, don't worry child, this room is safe. They can't spy on us in here, we've made sure of it. And anyway, who would suspect a bunch of old hags like us to be the leaders of an anti-Sol network?' She smiled knowingly, making Mary flush – that was exactly what she has thought before today.

'You said you can connect me to people? How? And how many more are there? I don't mean to be rude but you're all really old and I can't imagine that there are many others around here that---'

The old lady in the front cut her off. 'If you don't mean to be rude then don't be. Honestly. Why do people do that? Not to be rude *but*... Don't take it personally *but*... No offense *but*... I don't mean to be condescending to children as if they are young and clueless and dim-witted and daft and smelly and quite frankly annoying *buuuut*...' She glared pointily at Mary, eyelids narrowed into two wrinkly slits of skin that seemed to crease endlessly like some sort of higher dimensional



manifold. 'But you're right.' The old woman's face relaxed so abruptly that Mary almost lost herself in the disappearing eyelid folds. 'Yes, we are old,' she croaked. 'Really old. So old, in fact, that we've got technology that even the Solarians haven't thought to spy on. Now if you don't want your knees to lock up while we're talking, I suggest you take a seat.' She gestured to a stool in front of a rather ancient-looking Brother sewing machine. Mary sat.

'My name is M. Yes, like the letter,' she said, before Mary could ask. 'Does it stand for something? Yes.' Again, before Mary could form the words in her still open mouth. 'Am I going to tell you what it stands for? No.' Mary was sure by now that this old hag was some sort of psychic... 'No, I'm not psychic.' *Psychic*. Definitely psychic. 'No. Stop thinking that,' M croaked. 'I'm not. I can just see the questions in your dumb little face.'

Nan came to Mary's defense, 'Molly, you don't need to be such a biznitch.'

M, or rather Molly, huffed and puffed at this. 'What are you- Why would- Did I not just- HMPH.' She crossed her arms indignantly. 'What is the point in being the leader of the sewing circle if no one even respects my authority enough to use my codename?'

Another woman who had been silently working away on some frilly dress looked up from her machine at this point and chimed in. 'You're not the leader Molly,' she said dryly. 'We don't have a leader. We're a sewing circle for God's sake. Get a grip, woman.' Molly seemed absolutely petulant at this. 'And as it happens,' the woman continued, 'if we had a leader, I wouldn't be voting for *you* anyway.'

Molly butted back in, having seemed to collect herself. '*Be that as it may*, we are *also* a clandestine anti-Sol cell and *I for one* think it would be safe and... well... *cool* for us to have codenames.'

The other woman rolled her eyes (at least Mary thought she did, it was hard to tell under all the wrinkles) and returned to her frilly dress.

Molly snapped for Mary's attention, 'Eyes over here girl. Best pay attention, I'm not getting any younger. Waste more time and I might be dead on the spot.' She chuckled, but it came out somewhere between a croak and a cackle.

'Anywho, when we first started, we used to communicate by something called *radio*. Back when I was a girl, I was very into ham radio. It is very interesting stuff I assure you.'

Mary was not convinced, but she thought it best not to contradict the old lady.

'But I won't get into the wonders of radio because we don't use it anymore. Even though the Solarians didn't catch on for a while – they're all too reliant on their subby spacey talky speaky majiggy thingers – they did eventually figure it out. We had to find something a little less... conspicuous. Tell me, Mary. Do you notice anything when you look around this room?' Molly gestured to the sewing circle around them.

Mary eyed the room carefully. Old bat. Old bat. Her Nan. Older bat. Slightly less old but still very old bat. Sewing machines – Singer, Janome, Brother. The occasional knitting needle and yarn. Fabric, lots of fabric. Honestly too much fabric. Small bits of thread everywhere.

Mary turned back to Molly. 'Uhm... I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to be looking for.'

'Exactly!' Molly said excitedly. 'No one really is. But you see all those little rectangular boxes?' Molly gestured to a few of them.

'Oh. Yeah, I saw them, but I just assumed they were sewing kits or something,' Mary said.

'Ohhhh no, my dear,' said Molly, even more excitedly than before. Mary was worried the old woman might have a heart attack if she got much more worked up. 'Those are an ancient gaming device called a Playstation 4. We use the chatroom in an old game called DC Universe Online to communicate with other anti-Sol cells across the world.'

Mary looked down doubtfully at the console as she sat cross-legged in her room; it seemed impossible that such ancient, clunky technology could be at the heart of the Sol resistance. Chewing at her lip, she shook out the remaining contents of the bag she had been given at the sewing circle: a controller; a couple of cables; and a photocopied set of hand-written notes. Smoothing out the notes, she set about plugging the device into her monitor; most technology synced nowadays, but a few ports were always

present in case something went awry. All the same, the original cables had been heavily modified to allow them to be compatible with the modern technology. The power cables had, however, remained mostly unchanged.

After double-checking the instructions to ensure everything was connected correctly, Mary tentatively pressed the power button. A few seconds passed before a light within the button flickered into life and the screen of her monitor turned blue, a soft melody playing over the speakers. Fumbling for the controller she punched in the passcode Molly had made her memorise and selected DC Universe Online from the menu. The loading seemed to take an age – how had people Back Then put up with waiting for so long? Every second that passed part of Mary screamed to unplug the device before she got herself tangled up in something dangerous, but before that voice could become overwhelming, she found herself in the game.

Nightsister is online

Dawnbreaker: Sorry I'm not down for your little suicide mission, Chaos.

Orion: Save it, new recruit's here.

Orion: We go by codenames only, so I'm afraid you're saddled with whatever username you got. Manchester area, right?

Mary's hand hovered over the controller; last chance to back out.

Nightsister: Yes.

Sir Chaos: Could use one of those.

Dawnbreaker: No one is down for your little plan, buddy.

Sir Chaos: And yet all the other cells have been able to find someone.

Orion: It's a big ask, Chaos.

Sir Chaos: Time is against us.

While the words 'suicide mission' didn't exactly appeal, Mary didn't like being kept in the dark. Anyway, in for a penny, in for a pound, right?

Nightsister: What plan is this exactly?

Dawnbreaker: Chaos wants to try and make it rain in some grand display to the people that the power of Sol Invictus isn't absolute.

Dawnbreaker: Mental, right?

Mary's pulse quickened.

Nightsister: How?

Dawnbreaker: You have got to be kidding me.

Sir Chaos: We take out their detection system for coronal mass ejections. Trying to take out the lighting in one area wouldn't work; they'd have it up and running again in days. But knocking out the power grid entirely? It would take them weeks to recover.

Nightsister: Won't they notice their CME system is out of commission?

Sir Chaos: We introduce a virus that mimics normal background activity.

Sir Chaos: The problem with such a good detection system is you don't bother looking for patterns. We do.

Sir Chaos: We predict there'll be a CME in the coming week or two. We've been able to introduce the virus at every other control centre except Manchester.

Orion: You don't have to say yes. It's a big risk.

Mary glanced up at her shuttered window, the cover keeping her safe from the harsh streetlights. To be able to go outside, even if only at night, without having to cover herself in sun cream. To see the stars. To feel rain on her face. She looked back at her screen where the cursor blinked steadily.

Nightsister: I'm in.

Buster Killrain now ruled the attic, having parked the long and terrible ghost of an electoral pinocchio over the last of the Lords



Foaminthemouth (one 'yeah-right honourable' Breximus Endfreedom-Orphmouvement-Darquesatanicmills-Reintroducier, a well-known soundbite in these parts from his insistence on using his own full name in *at least* every other sentence he had uttered). Yet now a searing pain began to crawl up Buster Killrain's right arm, and he began to scream. Mary left her Playstation-4 console to investigate, in quite some irritation. She found him writhing on the floor; his arm had started to melt in a rash of pale blue teardrops. Integrated circuits started to show through the increasing wreck of his arm as he began to claw at his face in heightening desperation. From there, the end was around as swift as it was un-nice.

"Told you that other unwelcome lot were androids!" Mary called down to Nan. But Nan did not reply. So Mary descended once more, only to find an open front door. She ventured out in search of Nan, picking up a two-pack of sunscreen on her way. Yet Nan hadn't gone far.

She stood staring up into the sky. A strange darkening was forming above: a billow, a blot on Sol Invictus' homogeneous golden hegemony of the air. And it started to *reach down*

atop the old lady's outstretched arms and upturned face. Mary could see pale blue teardrops sliding down Nan's face and dress.

"Nan!" cried Mary in alarm. "You're going to melt! Like that last mechanical bastard in our attic..."

"Poppycock and fiddlesticks, Mary dearest" retorted Nan. "Nightsister has succeeded even here! This is rain! What rain and clouds look like! My, I never thought I would see or *feel* this bliss again! Come, join me under this wisp of cloud! What do you *make of it?*"

"Tomato-fresh, suncream-moist and yet not a bit sticky!" said Mary in wonder. "And if *this* is what water drops look like, the sprinklers round here are a *right* rip-off!"

"Now let's go back in to compare notes on how widely our cell's hack has succeeded" said Nan, reinvigorated into quite the straightened posture. "And then we WILL throw a Bring Rain Back to Manchester party!"

BONUS CONTENT: Do Let The Sun Go Down On Me

"Totally barmy. I have two disclaimers here -

- 1. I promise I didn't influence them to make it about my hometown**
- 2. The title is an Elton John reference from one of the authors. It's a bit sad that we're getting to the stage where that's an *old* reference."**

The Editor

This chain is unusual - the first 5 writers listed here then wrote again in this same chain, and this was put together after agreeing on having a chain with a bit of a different genre/setting to normal. As such, there'll be a 'Shuffle' category in the next signup sheet, with another different genre setting to the others on offer - secret until after you sign up...

TO ALL WHO TRANSGRESS

Phoebe Fay, Joe Ross-Biddles, Mark Johnson, Samuel Cook, Dan Scott,
Shaun Vickers, Ed Heaney

Kamenwati stuck his head around the thick stone column and glanced around. The coast was clear. He waved at Neith to continue. She had almost finished the inscription. The tomb was carved directly into the cliffside. The vast entrance decorated in hieroglyphs was hidden deep inside the hand-carved cave, and without the large columns supporting it, you might not even notice it was there. But Kamenwati knew it was there. He was not sure what would happen if the Romans *did* find it, but given who had settled here for their afterlife, whatever it was could not be good. He had heard stories of Roman historians excited at the chance to study the ancient Pyramids of the Old Kingdom. Not complaining about them respecting Egypt's proud and ancient culture, of course, but he balked at the thought of sacred relics being worn as earrings back in Rome.

And done. The warning read:

All who transgress this tomb

Will feel the fury of a thousand venomous snakes upon him

And the pressure of a thousand hands about his neck

So that he may no longer exist on this earth

"That'll do the trick." Neith said, dusting off her tools. Just as they were preparing to leave, Kamenwati noticed some of the hieroglyphs glowing on the opposite side of the tomb. Oh, turns out they were some three thousand years late. The tomb entrance had already been cursed.

And apparently the curse did not know they were the good guys.

Kamenwati reacted instantly. With his left hand, he made a strange clawed gesture and chanted a few spiky, dripping words of the Eldest Speech; with his right, he formed a fist and thrust *up*. The surface was many yards above, and the arcane effort of teleporting two humans that far might

shatter his mind like an egg, but that would be better by far than what a curse on the Tomb of the Nameless Queen might do to them.

There was a muffled pop, and he lay, coughing and retching, on the ground beneath the glaring sun. He still knew his own name, which was good – he was Kamenwati *he was the Unspeakable Queen of Egypt-as-it-was and Egypt-as-it-would-conquer* -

"Kamenwati?" Neith said as he began to rise with terrible slowness, and the black thought left his head at once.

"What?"

She was looking at him with a guarded expression. "Are you sure you're all right? That was far too close."

"...Yes. Come on, let's go."

It was surely her imagination, but Neith almost thought she could hear a woman's laughter.

Marcus frowned at the inscription from the mouth of the cave. It was certainly modern, for all that it was written in a very old tongue indeed. Something about snakes? He could feel the boundaries of the curse, just a few inches in front of him – it was going to be tedious work to break it, but the promise of being the first to formally document this tomb led him on. His sponsors in Rome were going to get what they'd paid for.

And then he paused.

There were two sets of footprints in the gritty sand that carpeted the cave.



Two sets leading in, and none leading out.

Curious. He would have to tread carefully. The deathly stagnation down here could have preserved the footprints for an age, but something about the way nothing quite seemed *still* suggested otherwise.

He delved into his *loculus*, emerging with a nearly-new wax tablet and his faithful number III stylus. He set about transcribing the sharp words into the soft wax, calculating the numerals which would break the ward as he went.

Neith grew increasingly concerned as Kamenwati led the way back down the cliff face. She'd tried repeatedly to talk him out of it, but he seemed to be in one of his moods, and she'd learnt long ago that arguments at such times were pointless.

Kamenwati reached the tomb and darted off into the darkness, not even waiting for her to finish the difficult descent. Her anxiety peaked a moment later when a loud, rolling boom echoed out from somewhere deep within.

Neith finished the descent, dropping the last few cubits into a painful, hastily executed landing. She rushed inside as quickly as her throbbing ankle would allow.

The scene within was worse than anything she could have feared.

Her curse, so carefully carved, lay broken. Splodges of cheap wax and hastily scrawled numerals corrupted its wrath, turned its baleful gaze inwards where it could be of no use. Beyond the curse stood Kamenwati, and a Roman, both shrouded in ancient energy.

Eldest Speech screamed around the small space, and Neith could only catch fragments.

"...Protect the Tomb..."

"...Ancient Queen..."

"...Enemy of Egypt..."

"...Battle to the Death..."

Neith knew she needed to act fast, needed to give the curse an outlet, a channel through which to pour its power. Needed to give her brother, and this cursed *Roman*, the right roles to play. Needed to stop them from tearing each other apart.

Oh Ra, Kamenwati was going to hate her. "Oh great Caesar," she regretted the words even as they left her lips, regretted the magic even as it flowed from her fingers, "do you not

recognise your Cleopatra?"

At the heart of the maelstrom engulfing him and the Roman jackal, Kamenwati paused. He looked down. Weren't those breasts he was growing? They weren't there a moment ago, he was sure of it. He looked back up. Only to see the Roman looking equally confused with a hairstyle that was so two centuries ago. Now he realised what was going on. This could only be Neith's work. She knew how much he hated all those transformation spells when they were applied to him.

But, it was clever, he had to admit. If the curse thought that he – she now, he thought, from the curse's point of view – was the queen it was supposed to protect and the vile Roman was just that, a vile Roman, it should work accordingly and earth itself as intended. He smiled in a rather predatory manner at his adversary.

Marcus was confused. Why did he suddenly have the look of a man from the late Republic? And why was this Egyptian peasant who'd jumped him suddenly looking quite so... womanly? Was that a smile? And what was going on with this curse? If only he could make it release somehow.

Marcus's concentration and, indeed, consciousness was interrupted by a sound best described as KABLAAAM. There was a blinding purple flash and he fell to the ground.

Kamenwati, now looking like his old self, and Neith stood over the prostrate body of the Roman.

'Is he dead?'

'Usually, I'd say yes – that was a killing curse I'd carved on there – but what with all the energy lost whilst you two were screaming at each other, I'm not so sure.'

'Hmm, well, we'd better take him with us. If he wakes up, I think there are a few questions I'd like to ask him'

As they dragged the body out of the tomb, Neith again thought she heard a faint sound of feminine laughter. Could it be possible that---

'My...' Neith heard the Roman mutter something even as her brother dragged the man's body from the tomb. He didn't appear conscious, at least not properly. He grumbled again, this time with a fraction more strength behind his breath.

'My book...'

Neith looked back to where Kamenwati and the Roman had been standing in the center of the tomb's antechamber. Sure enough, lying on the floor was a worn and tattered book, clearly of Roman origin. Neith turned back to pick it up. If they couldn't extract any information from the barely conscious man, they might at least learn something from his book. Books, unlike people, cannot so easily protect themselves from probing inquiries and refuse to relinquish their secrets. The ancient curse that had enveloped her brother would take some hours to draw energy from the surrounding stone and desert before being recharged, so she was safe at least for now to venture forward.

As she righted herself, book in hand, Neith happened to glance through the passage leading to the tomb's annex. She paused. Something caught her eye which made her falter.

The Tomb of the Nameless Queen was arranged somewhat differently than the others far across Egypt in the Valley of the Kings. It consisted of a primary passageway, leading to the antechamber where Neith was standing at present. Beyond the antechamber was a passage leading to the annex. Any typical unwelcome guest who might manage to survive the antechamber's powerful and gruesome curse would, upon entering the annex, naturally be drawn to its rightward wall. On the rightward wall stood an archway guarded on either side by statues of the canid-headed Anubis and the falcon-headed Horus. Behind this sealed archway was a burial chamber, and attached to the burial chamber, a vast treasure room.

An unwelcome guest, no doubt a greedy thief seeking to ransack the tomb of its riches, wouldn't be drawn to the wall directly opposite the passage from the antechamber. On this wall was the forgotten and brutal history of the Nameless Queen, in details never seen or spoken of beyond the confines of this tomb. The original priests who wrote this history had even included details in the Eldest Speech of forbidden magics the Queen had used during her rule in Egypt before the High Order had decided she must be stopped. The priests who documented those glyphs eventually sealed themselves from the inside within the burial chamber. The dark magic that flowed through them for writing such words in the Eldest Speech died with them. But what an unwelcome guest couldn't possibly know is that behind this wall of history, sealed behind a seamless and flawless heavily enchanted slab of stone a meter thick, was the true burial chamber of the Nameless Queen. Though perhaps burial chamber is not the right word. Resting place?

Yes, resting place is far better suited for that chamber hidden beyond...

What Neith saw as she stood up, looking through the passage into the annex, was a jagged crack running from floor to ceiling on the stone slab sealing off the true resting chamber of the Nameless Queen. Surely... No, it couldn't possibly be. The crack was assuredly superficial, there was no way it ran all the way through a meter of stone. No possible way... Neith turned around towards the primary passageway where her brother would have been still dragging the Roman.

But Kamenwati was standing there, halfway down the passage, the semi-conscious Roman man dropped gracelessly behind him. Kamenwati was staring at Neith, and she back at him. But Neith knew, she knew deep inside her, the person standing before her was not her brother, not anymore.

'I was hoping you wouldn't see that.' The words fell dryly from Kamenwati's mouth in a tone Neith had never heard him use. A faint green light glimmered in his eyes. 'I had hoped my awakening would go unnoticed.'

Neith knew. She hated, *hated* that she knew. It chilled her to her core, sending icy chills into her very soul. The air suddenly seemed acrid, her saliva thick like tar. Though the light from the sun shone clearly inward from the entrance of the passageway, the antechamber around her seemed dark as dusk. Neith knew. It was *her*.

Amenemopet was the Queen of a Pharaoh around 3500 years prior, when even their Egypt was young and flourishing in its unification across the Upper and Lower Nile. Only the stories and the sand still remained from the time, for sure, but the folklore still provided a little more than her tomb's inscription. She had been savvy and measured, and for a time her Pharaoh listened to her alone – and who wouldn't have. She spoke with alacrity and poise that allowed her words more defensive or destructive power than any one of her chariots, it is said. The tale always ended in bitterness, though – as she aged and bore children, her Pharaoh slowly lost interest in her, seeking brothers and drink for solace, and the prettier, younger serving girls for warmth at night. She was maybe the best champion the people of the Old Kingdom had flourished under, but none may question the Pharaoh. She was Queen of what Egypt had always had the potential for. She had ruled in all but name once – and her line would speak again with her gift one day, another Queen would reign, and



would not have been stifled by the politics of their wombs – until the Romans came, of course.

And now her spirit, seemingly never given solace by Osiris or Anubis, was rattling around inside Neith's brother.

"Kamenwati."

Her brother shivered.

"What now?" He snapped.

Amenemopet wasn't anywhere near done yet, then – but this was no relief. The queen would already be eroding every last memory and inclination one at a time in him, so every hour now was vital. She wasn't skilled enough to stop her, but she could maybe freeze the spirit's progress to find someone, anyone that could.

"We need to go back home, now. You have to believe me, you will probably feel fine, I know, but there's some sort of side effect to that curse."

"What curse? What? Why now? There is an unconscious Roman *at our feet* and we need to put the bastard somewhere before he wakes up and remembers our faces for the benefit of any damn guard and his bounty posters in the city--"

"No seriously, I can't explain it to you--"

"And why would that be?" Kamenwati was quickly losing his temper, and already squinting in his rage as he had done since he was 5. Ridiculously, this was a good sign. The spirit hadn't got to 5 yet.

"Because if I talk about the curse, it gets stronger. If I name it, it gets stronger. If you stay next to this wall, it...by those last two reasons, it gets stronger. By Ra, listen! I don't just flip out randomly on stuff like this."

A pause as Kamenwati stood in grumpy confusion. He turned to read the Queen's inscription, trying to make head or tail of the situation...

"No damned reading! Reason 1!"

Neith slapped her hand over Kamenwati's eyes, planted her other hand firmly on his back, and marched him out on the hour-long trek back to their home in the shanty. Kamenwati had stopped bickering, but clearly had one more comment playing on his lips.

"And the Roman?"

Neith hesitated.

"My problem."

She picked up a brick of rubble, and carefully dropped it on the Roman's head from about a quarter yard up.

"That gives us another 6 hours before he comes to. Now go. I need to mix some herbs. And burn them."

It was not long before Neith and Kamenwati got back to the river, and not much longer again before they pushed open the bare wooden door to their shack.

It was a while since she had smoke-frozen a spirit. She was proud of how well it was holding up. She lay the Roman on the bed and asked Kamenwati to wait there, she wouldn't be long.

She dived into the throng of merchants and customers bartering for their daily bread. She was slight, poorly dressed, and easily lost in the crowd. She slipped down the alleys to find the Anti-Roman Circle, ARC. This "family" were, like Neith and her "brother" Kamenwati, poor and versed in Sorcery, especially Moswen. Moswen was neither young, old, tall or short, man or woman, and the most powerful Sorcerer Neith had ever seen.

Neith knew the alleyways like her own veins, so she soon noticed the cracks. Jagged cracks spanning the full walls. Cracks that were not there yesterday. Cracks identical to that in the tomb. She felt them tugging her, coaxing her to look. She stopped, and the crack widened into a long hole, and the sensation of pulling became stronger. She reached her arm into the crack and it pulled her in with a Dark Force. The crack opened out a little until it fit became her silhouette, then closed around her form tighter and tighter until she was broken and stretched, a grotesque string of flesh. Nobody saw or heard her agony in the tunnel.

You too are infected by the curse. It is a potent one, but do not be afraid. Moswen's voice reverberated in her skull, pulling her out of her vision, and she realised she was in the hideout. *In here you can be cleansed. In here you can be exorcised. The pain I made you feel as you entered was but the first stage of that.*

Neith grimaced – she didn't need the reminder, as this wasn't her first exorcism, but it was a gruelling experience and the worst was yet to come – but there was also a wash of relief. Relief that it was that simple for her, that there was, after all, an easy cure. She steeled herself for the pain.

It's lucky that you came so quickly. I sense you are sure that the restless ka moving in Kamenwati is smoke-frozen. Good. You can fetch him only when you are yourself cleansed and warded. This was careless, but it is not unsalvageable.

And the exorcism began. It felt like fire and ice, twisting and crushing, slicing and tearing. The spirit inside her flared up and dug in, trying desperately to keep its hold, its secretive hideaway sacrificed for brute force. Sometimes the energy being thrust through her seemed to have the upper hand,

sometimes the spirit, back and forth... and then it was gone. Destroyed? Contained? Merely driven away? She didn't know.

You and your brother, both caught within the tomb.

Moswen's words rang once again in her head. Then there was a brief hesitation. It was hard to read emotion from the sorcerer's powerful thought, but she couldn't help but feel there was a hint of worry – perhaps even of fear – in the message. *You, and he... and one other.*

The Roman. She'd put a hold on the spirit in Kamenwati. But the Roman was lying on her bed, unwarded and unprotected. If the spirit fled its tiny, smoky prison within Kamenwati for such easy prey, dizzy and easily influenced as he came around...

"I have to go", she cried, trusting the great sorcerer simply to *know*, and she ran.

Marcus came to slowly.

His forehead was a little sore. Marcus had grown up in the streets and gutters of the Subura at Rome, and despite all that his talent with magic had brought him, he'd never quite left. He'd been in enough fights to know very well that while a blow to the head might kill or stun or merely anger the victim, it couldn't put them conveniently to sleep for a few hours, whatever the playwrights might say.

So whatever had actually left him unconscious was-

You know, came a voice inside him, *you're perceptive, for a graverobber.*

His eyes widened. His hands came up and shaped the strongest counterspell he knew, but it was like trying to punch fog.

Your people have not had a wizard powerful enough to threaten me since Traianus died. Rome is waning, child. The greatest sorcerer for miles around labours mightily as we speak, to free the woman who brought you here from my lightest touch. I am not limited to one mind like a lesser spirit. You have this one chance to do I say, or I will take your body from you again and do it myself.

He thought frantically. "Yes, your highness," he said out loud to buy time. She probably *couldn't* read his mind, at least not easily, so he might get the chance to do *one* thing to stop her before she realised what he was doing – but surely she would have thought of that too –

Take your book, said the voice, and he did so.

And stared.

In his book, the text of the curse on the tomb was written out, over and over, in his own hand.

The voice inside him laughed. *Now tear out each copy of the curse, it said, and scatter the parchments through the town. Let the people read of my curse. Let them think about it. Talk about it. Dream about it.*

And if anyone tries to stop you, then tell them my Name.

Neith kept running. The streets around her were a shattered mosaic of sharp bricks, writhing cracks, and things that used to be buildings. The people seemed slack, their vacant eyes and open mouths unmoving as the city crumbled around them. And still Neith kept running.

Ashes drifted on the air, and through the ashes fluttered and rustled a multitude of pale *things*. Neith tried to ignore them, tried to just keep running, but the things seemed to glow, seemed to draw her in. As one drifted past, her eyes were ensnared, and Neith had to slow to avoid tripping on the buckling road beneath her. With a settling dread she realised what she was looking at. What she was reading. The Eldest Speech screamed at her, beckoned to her, demanded her obedience. With a painful, awful jolt she tore herself away, began running once more through the storm of silent screams, desperately batting away the scraps of paper as they tried to inflict her with their terrible knowledge.

The journey to their shack was not long, but it was the hardest she had ever made. Eventually her desperate, half-blind, plunging rush was over, and she threw herself through the rickety door. Even as she arrived, she could see that she was too late.

Kamenwati lay still on the ground, green light pouring from his eyes, his mouth, every exposed span of his skin. It arced and twisted around the room, turning their peaceful home into a panorama of desolation.

The *Roman* crouched over Kamenwati, face bathed in green light and an unmistakable laughter tearing itself from his throat. Neith lunged towards him, tongue twisting around the first syllables of a deadly curse. But even as they collided, she saw that his eyes were screwed tightly shut, and that he was frantically etching away at a tablet, carving out a frantic spell that was not written in the Eldest Speech.

The curse died in her throat. Could he still have enough of his own mind to try to scribe out a counter-spell? It certainly looked as if that was what he had been doing before she'd launched herself at him. It seemed ludicrous that a mere Roman would have the mental powers to resist the Nameless Queen for so long, but she supposed it wasn't totally impossible. After all, he had broken her own curse back at the tomb, which suggested he wasn't a total



sandworm. She also knew she didn't have the power to tackle the Nameless Queen head on – she was good, but not *that* good. Neith extricated herself from the Roman, retrieved his tablet and stylus and put them back in his hand. He'd barely uttered a sound the whole time and his eyes remained tightly shut, but he seemed to get the message and carried on etching. Neith had to admit she was impressed by the sheer level of concentration the Roman was maintaining.

However, even given her charitable assumption that the Roman was trying to exorcise the spirit and not kill them all, what should she do? If she were wrong, she and Kamenwati and the Roman, shortly followed by most of the population of Egypt were almost certainly about to die anyway, regardless of what she did. If she was right, though....

She put her hands on the Roman's head and started muttering the spell that would transfer power from her to him. She just hoped he'd sort out the putative counter-spell before she was drained to a husk. Though, perhaps, that would be a more pleasant way to go than whatever the Nameless Queen would do to her. The power started to flow.

Slowly, ever so slowly, something began to happen. Beginning from the Roman's still tightly closed eyes, the green glow began to clear. He continued his frantic etching as the green faded from around his face and neck. The man opened his eyes, desperate relief showing for the briefest of moments before his face was shrouded in worry and single-minded determination. Still furiously scribbling away at the tablet he clutched in his hands, the Roman spoke.

"You must come with me," he said, teeth clenched.

Neith, who had still been pouring her energy into the man, faltered. "What?" was all she managed to say as she removed her hand from the Roman's head.

He spoke again, his voice sounding as if every word was a gruelling struggle. "Must go."

"Go? I will *not* leave my brother. We can still save him," Neith protested.

The Roman shook his head the smallest fraction of an inch. "No. Too late. Look outside."

Neith was unsure why she held even the slightest amount of trust in this foreign invader. But something deep down pushed her to comply. Perhaps it was that somehow, this

man was fighting back a power she couldn't even hope to understand let alone stand her own against. Neith slowly stepped towards the door and opened it. She was mortified at what she saw.

The streets were bathed in a piercing green glow. It could hardly be called light, as the eery ooze held such a deep darkness within it that it seemed to suck the very light from the air. Bodies were scattered along the streets. Men, women, children. All collapsed and covered in the green aura. Neith turned back to the Roman, understanding now the futility of trying to save Kamenwati, let alone the city.

The Roman glanced at her and spoke, "Tablet. Two spells. Counter-spell. Teleportation. Must warn."

So that was his plan. Neith reluctantly came to agree with his reasoning. The city was lost. Potentially all of Egypt would follow. Their only hope was to warn the rest of the world of what was coming in the hopes that they could prepare. But teleportation? And no trivial distance either. Far enough to get them out of the city? Neith found it hard to believe that anyone still living could possess such depth of power. Even the few yards that her brother had teleported them at the tomb was a dangerously taxing exercise. Perhaps a priest of the High Order from ancient Egypt would have been powerful enough to teleport them to the outskirts of the city, but this Roman?

The moment the green disappeared entirely from the Roman's body, the man leapt up, grabbed Neith's arm, and hurled the tablet at the ground. It shattered, and the two figures vanished from the room, transported through space halfway across the world to the middle of Rome.

Egypt had fallen to a sinister shadow. Amenemopet's spirit would stop at nothing to seize the power she had once tried to claim when her physical body walked the earth. The curse would slowly envelope Egypt, seep into the Nile, spread to the vast sea to the north and into the sea to the east, until it would eventually creep beyond the lands of Egypt. What followed would mark a time in history like no other. Wars and petty squabbles between nations would be cast aside as the whole of Africa, Europe, and Asia devoted their every magician, sorcerer, wizard, shaman, conjurer – anyone with an ounce of magical prowess – to fighting the curse.

The Era of Darkness had begun.

BONUS CONTENT OVERLEAF

BONUS CONTENT: To All Who Transgress

“It reads not like a short story, but a pilot for a series! I'd love to know what would happen if we could strike a deal with Netflix.

...would love to see more of this sort in the future- where else could we go? A space western perhaps? Misadventures of Lesser-known Greek Gods? Comedy ghost opera?”

Phoebe Fay

“it's rare that CUSFS manages an entirely serious chain!”

Samuel Cook



Eden's New Exhibit

Shaun Vickers, Anonymous, Evie Burrows, Dani, Cayson, Yuhang Xie, Curtis J. Reubens, Wiles Swift, light_harted, Nikhil Dutt Sundaraj, Joanna Choules, Joe Ross-Biddles

Frederick had worked at the zoo for as long as anyone. The ins and outs of feeding and cleaning up after one of the galaxy's best collections of lifeforms were by no means simple. Take the gagnors: they were always desperately needy, and this was coupled with their incredible aptitude for melting the windows of any ordinary exhibit to meet and/or eat the visitors to their enclosure - thanks largely to their amazingly acidic saliva. It had needed the specialist intervention of a small regiment of engineers and chemists to invent a new glass compound, coupled with continuous flow of water down its surface on the gagnor side to finally solve the issue. And the gagnors were arguably the *easiest* creatures to look after across the entire site. The Eden of Andromeda Planetary Zoo, admittedly only slightly larger than the asteroids in its own system, was no small undertaking.

Despite this, the reason Frederick hadn't tired of the job despite the ridiculous hours (and the countless times that his own clothes had evaporated from his body in the middle of a shift) was not for any particular love of one of the specimens sourced by space cruiser from nearly every system in the galaxy.

It was simply due to the fact that the visitors to the park, despite having better clothing and table manners than the exhibits, were far more varied from day to day than everything in the zoo put together, many times over.

It was a tourist trap in an inhospitable place, cramped underground chambers only for any of the staff brought in upon employment from 2 planets over, and to be frank, the pay was abysmal. The robotic assistants had real attitude problems. But where else would Fred ever have had the chance to truly experience the diversity in

the Galactic Union he called home, which he had found so unbelievable since before he was too small even to fly?

—

It was a few hours before the morning cycle as he pulled on his jumpsuit to the low red glow of the alarmbot's disdainful gaze. As it wheeled off in search of its next victim, he pulled his hair into a tight braid and stepped onto the conveyor connecting the staff quarters to the mess hall.

Lukewarm breakfast burrito in hand, Frederick dropped tastier looking food into the gagnors' acid pool, and entered another corral to confront a wailing flock of kaeds. The last night-tour was passing, advertised as a chance to see the elusive 'nocturnal' residents. Sure, day and night were probably a thing on a few of the creatures' homeworlds, but no amount of sun-sim light fixtures were going to fix the effect of months of interstellar transit on the poor things. Frederick paused in loading the hanging feeders, and surveyed the small group.

Clearly made up of mostly middle-deck families, from the latest tech the kids pulled out to point at the kaeds. The tour guide scowled, pointing at the 'Please turn EduScan flash off in the dusk district' sign in front of them. The polarised glass would help reduce the stress of bright lights on the flock, but it certainly didn't stop them swarming into the air, knocking Frederick backwards into the entry gate. The feeder he'd been filling swung wildly, spraying a fine gravel of enriched minerals over the inside of the enclosure. The tour guide shot him an apologetic glance as she started to chivvy the group onwards towards the aquatic and caustic exhibits.

Frederick got to his feet, absent-mindedly brushing the minerals off his jumpsuit as he kept a close eye on the retreating kaeds. They were shy and rather well-mannered creatures, actually. With their elongated necks, oversized eyes and long, sharp beaks, they usually looked almost sad or even melancholic. But when frightened, this semblance of grace vanished in an instant, as they transformed into an angry swarm ready to exterminate anything which might constitute a threat. Luckily for Fred, the kaeds were used to his presence, and so, with the flashing lights gone, the animals' flying gradually became slower and slower until they landed on the swampy ground with vague looks of confusion in their bulbous eyes.

As soon as they had quietened, Frederick made his way out of the enclosure and set off in the direction of the aelophora. The tiny lilac creatures had wrinkly skin and extremely large ears, and many seemed to find them sweet (indeed, a young-looking visitor with extremely green skin had just noticed the aelophora and begun yelling: 'so cuuute! Look Tata, look at its earrs!') (Frederick didn't like them, though. This probably had to do with the fact that one of them had once burnt off half of his right arm. He had regrown it easily, of course, but he still kept a grudge, and liked to think that that wasn't entirely unreasonable.

'Here you go, you hideous mistakes of evolution,' he muttered as he threw them the small onion-shaped rodents which they seemed to enjoy. 'I hope these are infected and you'll all die before tomorrow so I'll never have to set my eyes on your disgusting bodies again.' After observing the visitors, insulting the aelophora was Fred's favourite part of the job. He was getting more and more creative with the insults by the day.

'I would not slight them if I were you...'

Frederick turned around in surprise, looking for the source of the slow and extremely dreamy voice. And then he turned around again, blinking stupidly. 'Uh... where are you? I mean where's that voice coming from?'

'Down here. Hell, for a guy who works all day with things you don't want to get underfoot, you'd think you'd be more observant than a...' the voice grumbled off into a stream of what Frederick had to assume were insults, though they were more creative and therefore less familiar than his own.

Winding between his legs, tail held straight, was a creature whose body was about forearm length, covered in soft-looking fur that was striped gold and brown. It had pointed ears, a pointed face and, as it yawned, extremely pointed teeth. It was somehow both extremely pleasing, and like nothing Frederick had ever seen in his life.

He told it so.

'What the- I'm a *cat*, duffelhead! You're a zoo assistant, how can you not recognize the animal whose attention your ancestors most- oh, I see. Retracted wings, hair requires restraining, you didn't even notice when that last aelophora toasted your ear, which I assumed was just another sign of your utter lack of observation but is probably because it's already healed. You're not human. Oh, this is embarrassing. Ok, let me try again.'

In front of his eyes, the creature shifted gloopily to have the broad, scaled footpads, feathered wing ridges and six huggable bowed legs of an archraptor.

Much as he would have liked to stop and pet it, Frederick sighed and instead reached for his panic button. They were all warned about the dangers a shifting species could pose to visitors and the collection alike. But before he could reach it, the creature spoke again.

"Something in this zoo should not be here – *not* me – and you need to stop it."

—

"What is it?"

"Um, I can't tell you."

Frederick sighed. He didn't have time to chase ambiguously described threats with an ambiguously shaped monster. "Look, I've got a feeding schedule to follow. I can't stay here and



play guessing games with you. If I'm not at the flandark tank in the next five minutes, they're gonna start eating each other."

"Wait, wait!" The archraptor quickly stepped into Frederick's path just as he turned to walk away.

"Let me come with you! It might be over there!" Frederick was half-prepared to give the creature a gentle nudge into the crowd of hungry aelophoras below, but something about the way it gazed up at him with its eight compound eyes and fluffed its wing ridges at just the right angle made him pause. He knew the thing was weaponizing its cuteness against him, but he just couldn't refuse such an adorable request.

He heaved a dramatic sigh. "Alright. But no more of this stupid guessing game." The archraptor happily jumped up onto his shoulder as he began to make his way to the next enclosure.

"I think we might have a slight misunderstanding here, friend." The archraptor warbled heartily next to his ear. "It's not that I don't want to tell you, but the thing is that I can't."

They were now almost at the flandark tank. Frederick had always been intrigued by the scaly, eye-less creatures. They were apparently fatally allergic to any form of light and thus had to perpetually be kept in pitch-black conditions, but of course, that wouldn't make for good viewing at all. So the zoo had figured out the ingenious idea of covering the creatures in a one-way reflective coat of ink while filling the tank with a transparent dark liquid. Of course, visitors would still have been unable to see the creatures if not for the expensive 'Dark Lights®' system, which basically reversed the amplitude of light waves, allowing for viewers in the special room to see dark as light and vice versa. Frederick always enjoyed seeing the reaction of the guests as they jumped at their glowing shadows.

"I know it seems pretty hard to believe, but what we're looking for is indescribable in your language, or any language for that matter. In fact, it doesn't exist. Yet it does, at the same time. It's kind of like that old thought experiment about the poor archraptor which was both alive and dead."

Frederick was getting more and more certain that this was some elaborate nonsensical prank. But as they stepped into the specially lit enclosure, Frederick finally understood.

-

As usual, the shadows became light and the light became shadows. The technology was not good enough for colour yet, so everything was cast in grayscale. The flandark swam about ambiently, with their limbless bodies turning in corkscrew motions.

What surprised Frederick was a smooth orb, motionless in the centre of the tank. But... it was red, the colour red. Then it switched to green. Then magenta. Then back to red again.

"What does it want? How did it get in here?" Frederick asked. He felt mesmerised by the changing colours. It resembled a children's toy: bright coloured, mindless entertainment. This room was always locked because of Dark Light®. And because flandarks were actually quite tasty, and so were expensive too. Guests could only visit with a guide.

"I had hoped you'd have some idea." The archraptor cocked its head at him.

Frederick broke his gaze and looked up to the corner of the room where a small camera resided, its little light flashing black.

"Maybe the camera picked up something? We should go to the video room," Fred said. As he left the room and locked it behind him, a voice startled him.

"Hey, Frederick! Who you talking to?" It was Susan, from accounting, passing by with her lunch.

"Hey, Su, just my archraptor. Look ain't it cute!" Fred said.

"What archraptor?" Su-san laughed.

With a sudden sense of dread, Fred turned his head to look at the archraptor, which was still on his shoulder. The archraptor blinked back.

Silence reigned.

“I’m... I’m going to go now.” Su-san said eventually, gesturing lamely at her food. “Have a good one.”

“What was that about?” Fred hissed to his companion. “Why couldn’t she see you?”

“Look, it’s really very complicated, but-”

“No, screw this.” Frederick pulled a CommPad® from his belt and started dialling. This thing violated so many Eden by-laws that he should have called it in a long time ago. It was time to remedy that.

The kravaxis was one of Eden’s proudest exhibits. Small, purple and bulbous, the kravaxis moved around, communicated and crushed its prey to death with its three slender tentacles, unevenly spaced about its body. The concussive force of these tendrils could shatter pretty much any substance in the known universe; the on-staff engineers had produced a blastproof glass that was now being used to shield against nuclear strikes in several ongoing wars. It could withstand assault from a kravaxis for up to twelve minutes, at which point it was swapped out for another pane while the first one was repaired.

A slender purple tentacle swiped Fred’s CommPad® from his hand. It hit the wall and shattered.

“Oh, *vohk*,” Fred breathed.

“You have to run, now.” The archraptor’s form was shifting, growing, changing. “It must know you’re onto it. I’ll hold this thing off, just go.” A tendril launched itself at Fred; the archraptor *caught* it, its bowed leg sprouting a large muscled hand. The strike launched it off its five remaining feet, throwing it a good thirty feet.

Frederick ran.

—

Scrambling through the door to the enclosure, pausing only to lock it, Fred wove his way through the languid river of visitors making its imperceptible journey with all the turbulence of buoyant excitement. Ducking past younglings being treated for arbitrary occasions, venerable

professors on a quest for knowledge and the glimpses of romance offered by optimistic youths, Fred tried to determine where he should go. As he ran, he searched. Searched for a place to report to, to regale the myriad of bizarre events which had passed.

The presence of an unauthorised undetected shapeshifter with dire warnings. The presence of one he no longer saw. An unexplained inexplicable threat of unknown but grave nature. Those were the ravings of a madman, containing no hint of proof or logic; the Warden deemed him to have none of this anyway since the fiasco with the kaeds. The Warden wanted easy, logical zookeepers to make it easy and logical to report on profitability to the conglomerate, Veil, that owned the zoo.

With his body following the change in momentum of his thoughts, Fred lurched to a halt and glanced about. A nearby maintenance closet would do well. Opening the lock on the third try thanks to the cheaper replacement locks instituted in the last round of cutbacks, Fred collapsed into the unhealthy industrial blend of flicker, light and shadow – the storm of the light reflecting the storm of his mind.

A vein of cool rationality to mine was precisely what he needed. Strangeness was undoubtedly definitive of the past hour: a targeted strike to his CommPad® from the aimless kravaxis, an archraptor-shapeshifter capable of Standard speech, and most elusive of all access to the flandarks but leaving things behind rather than stealing one; without tripping the second-rate alarm system either. This pointed to a subtle yet effective influence; one which was known by the archraptor, but defied explanation or cause. Was this then a creature? Or a metaphysical occurrence of the type that led to the peaks of joy and sorrow on Janus Minor? A chilling sense of unease, the dark void panic dripping slowly through his body, freezing gradually into an icy cage around his mind, constricting the more philosophical thoughts that might be of use, spread through Fred’s psyche.



Through the panic gripping his brain, Fred heard a distant chime which dragged him back to the dingy maintenance closet. There, hovering in the middle of the room, was the pulsing orb from the flandark tank. Fred jerked backwards and, forgetting that the dimensions of all maintenance closets had also been halved in the last round of cutbacks, he slammed his head painfully into the wall. Fred scowled reproachfully at the orb, rubbing the back of his head. 'Stupid glowing orbs, ruining my day.'

'Boop'

Fred blinked. 'Did you just 'boop' at me?' The orb responded by floating a little bit closer to Fred and then flashing bright turquoise. Momentarily blinded, Fred couldn't see what happened next, but he felt his feet lurch and heard a noise like a herd of angry gragnors. When the roaring stopped, he blinked his eyes open and looked around. He wasn't in the maintenance closet anymore.

He was in a room which looked much like his dormitory back at the zoo except for the fact that everything was just much nicer. The room was bigger, there was actual natural light flowing in and the bed looked like it might even have a mattress. Feeling slightly overwhelmed, Fred sunk down onto the sofa (yes, it even had a sofa) and tried to make sense of what had just happened. At the best of times, this would have been a complicated thing to wrangle with, but the day wasn't done with Fred yet. Just as his thoughts were starting to regain something of their normal cogency, there was a whoosh of air and Su-san appeared in the room. They barely had time to look at one another in alarm when a glowing orb appeared and said, 'A warmest welcome to the newest occupants of the Cassiopeia Ark; a zoo so large that we had to put it in the 12th dimension' .

Fred instantly seized up with overwhelming anxiety, and his dorsal fin began to pierce through the lining of his uniform - a symptom of severe stress for his species. His pulse quickened, pushing viscous green blood through his neck and shoulders - the condition popularly known as

being green around the gills. He was also struck with a case of Interdimensional Boundary Sickness (IBS for short). Fred fell to his knees, face down, staring into the void. Cassiopeia lay directly above a miniature black hole. Its designers crafted it in a notably avant-garde-cosmic-existentialist style, which meant situating it directly above an inescapable singularity with transparent floors. Only the structure's antimatter levitation tech kept it from being sucked in. The orb floated nonchalantly up to Fred saying with the purest bureaucratic roboticism, "We hope you enjoy your stay" before apparating elsewhere. Fred staggered to his feet and trudged over to Su-San to help her up.

"Oh gosh - Frederick, are you all right?" Su had apparently got to her feet just fine before Fred had even made it to her. "You look awfully gree-"

"Please don't say it," said Fred, screwing up his eyes and trying to flex the incipient cramps out of his hair, "but yes, I can't say I'm doing as well as *you* seem to be."

"Yes." Su rubbed her belly contemplatively. "I think I must've left my lunch behind."

"That doesn't seem like the most important thing to worry about right now."

"I'd already eaten it."

"Oh."

"Ah, it's fine. I'd just popped over to chat with the tax lawyers - it won't be anything they haven't had to deal with before."

Fred didn't dare ask. Su glanced down at the floor.

"Do you think they'll be bringing us food any time soon?" She gestured at the black hole with a terrifying casualness. "This is kind of making me hungry again."

"We need to *go*."

"Right, yes. You don't think, though..."

"What?"

"...you don't think staying here is maybe... better?"

"No!"

"Eh, I guess you're right. The sofa's a nice touch, but it doesn't work in this room at all."

"Agh, don't I?" asked the sofa, sounding rather put out. As if to drive home its disappointment, it began suddenly to deflate until it resembled a conjoined pair of wings, the centre of which then pulled taut into the body of an archraptor. "Your friend's right, you know."

"About the sofa?"

"About staying."

"Staying *here*? Where *are* we?"

"Did you listen to *any* of the orientation day?" Susan asked, smiling faintly (he hoped very much that she didn't actually know about his species' very useful ability to execute basic functions like workplace training activities while sleeping). "This is part of the containment system. If anything dangerous gets loose, all staff and visitors are translated into an emergency backup virtual dimension. They can't power it for long, though."

"How long?"

"With the Pseudotemporal™ Virtual Time Dilation system—"

"How did you pronounce ™ like that?"

"-Perhaps seven minutes?"

"And then we'll be let out?"

"If it's safe, yes."

"And if it's *not* safe?"

"Well, we'd be exposed directly to the black hole and utterly annihilated. It's a final emergency safety mechanism..."

"*Safety*? Isn't it the whole point of Standard that this kind of language barrier can't exist?" Fred shuddered, turning a pale shade of orange at the memory of the sky-rending Fifty Stars War, fought

over a word that, by sheer cosmic coincidence, meant "I admire your adroit personal grooming skills" in every language except that of the Crimson Earthshaking Skullcrackers of V'lixcz, a small furry poodle-like race of pacifists to whom it meant "it is existentially imperative that you immediately undertake an intergalactic war to exterminate us, if you don't mind awfully."

"...The rationale being that if whatever is loose can survive the Incident Response Squad of genetically-modified Acid-Breathing Kravaxes for seven minutes, cosmic annihilation would be merciful."

"Ah."

And so they waited. Fred counted sheep. Susan watched a film on the back of her eyelids. The archraptor experimented with various other forms of furniture.

"PROGENITOR," complained beta-4-7-thaumiel to what might be loosely called its parent in a throb of iridescent violet, "THEY'RE NOT DOING ANYTHING. MAKE THEM DO SOMETHING."

"YOU HAVE BEEN REQUESTING TO VISIT THIS META-ZOO FOR YOUR SOLAR-CYCLICAL GENESIS COMMEMORATION PERIOD FOR A CONSIDERABLE TIME." replied beta-2-9-thaumiel in a complex whirl of blue.

"I'M BORED," it replied in waspish vermillion, and managed to flounce away despite drifting eerily through the air.

beta-2-9-thaumiel sighed. They always were so difficult in the early six-hundreds. Before leaving, it paused to look once more into the capsule that contained the virtual dimension of the lesser species' zoo. They had only been captured recently, but they already seemed to be getting back to their regular lives.

"PRIMITIVE CREATURES," it muttered, and then floated away to find an ice-cream.



And that's the end of the issue!
Stay tuned for the next term's emails
and writing, starting very soon
indeed. As always, send in any media
you've made and fancy sharing, be it
writing, drawing, riddles or puzzles,
or any other contributions.

As always, keep writing!

-Shaun



Shaun



TRIUMPHANT THROUGH BATTLE-TORN AVENUES

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