

Two Tigresses:

Beautiful Aristocats?



TWO TIGRESSES – BEAUTIFUL ARISTOCATS?

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*Two Tigresses:
Beautiful
Aristocats?*

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Outgoing Editor's Address

Greetings one and all,

This space has traditionally been occupied by an address from the Chairbeing, but I thought that I would take the opportunity to say a few words on my way out.

I've really enjoyed the last two years as Editor, and I can only hope that Navyaa will enjoy the role as much as I have done. Reading the latest update on the zany stories created about anything you can think of has been a real joy, and I hope that you can enjoy the latest batch of those as found within these pages.

The TTBA moves onto excellent hands, and I hope that it may continue for many years to come. Thank you to all of the writers from the last two years, and I very much hope that you all continue to write and create - and I will probably make plenty of sneaky chain appearances moving forwards anyway!

Swords and Sorcery,

Shaun Vickers

TTBA Editor 2019-21

A Message From The Incoming Editor

Hello, lovely SF&F fans!

I've had great fun doing Chainwriting for the past couple of years, so I couldn't resist the opportunity to control the whole operation myself *evil laughter*!

I hope to do as fantastic a job as our previous editors at enabling you all in writing some brilliantly insane chains.

I look forward to receiving all your wonderfully zany contributions – this edition, produced partly by Shaun and partly by me, is as sparkingly mad as ever, full of brilliant twists and turns, and chock-a-block with fantastic creatures, including chinless aristocats, Scottish folklore wildlife, space fungi, sentient storms and of course an entire magical zoo. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did.

Navyaa Mathur

TTBA Editor 2021-22





What We Zoo In The Shadows

Maya, Phoebe Fay, Paulinia, Cerian, Jenny Smith, Mark Johnson, Noura E-N, Dan Scott,
Hannah Clark

'I am not made for this. Very literally,' Marie grumbled, picking up a bucket of flamefish. 'Couldn't Siobhan or Ciaran or Grainne have stayed back? Couldn't they have found someone actually capable of speaking to penguins to fill in here? A nymph? A naga? A merperson in a waterchair? How did evolution come up with a creature as stupid as a fire-breathing penguin, anyway?'

She was perfectly aware that the selkies' trip left the aquarium too short-staffed to spare any water-breathers on the penguins, nor did she really begrudge them the few weeks they got to spend with the seals when she worked with her moonwolves year-round, but she already hated the damn penguins after just three days of dodging the overexcitable birds' fiery blasts.

'Yeah, yeah,' Ngozi replied, adjusting her veiled hat to cover her neck better, 'be glad it's only the penguins that might set you on fire, and not the actual sun, love. I hate these outdoor day shifts. I want to get back to the caves already.'

'Doesn't the union have anything to say about vamps' working hours? Like, we get the morning after full moon off - surely you guys have accommodations too?'

'You'd think so, but apparently it's too hard to predict what constitutes "unbearable sunshine levels" for different individuals, so they don't even bother trying. At least I can get away with just a light veil even on a sunny day, most hags and vamps I know aren't that lucky.'

'Even more reason to not let all the selkies go gallivanting off when they *know* these problems come up...'

'Be fair, love, you know the selkies are doing good work out there. Quoting adorable wildlife verbatim gets us conservation funding like nothing else does.'

'Too bad they can't conserve my patience with these birds.' Marie grimaced as she tossed the fish. As if to spite her, one flicked backwards to her hand.

'Ouch! What the hell!' She howled, dropping the bucket to cradle her burned hand.

'Tsk, maybe I should write you up for another fire safety training day, Marie,' A voice said. She turned but could not see anyone.

'Maybe you should stop sneaking up on staff, Prisha. Don't want to cause any more injuries.' Ngozi said. A tall, shapely woman flickered into being behind the glass walls of the enclosure. Today, her skin was peppered with black markings, faint against her dark skin and a long tail hung just above her feet.

'Prisha, can't you shape shift into a penguin or something and tell them to back off?' Marie said.

'You know it doesn't work like that. I can only shift into forms roughly the same size and weight as me. The lesser red-crested fire penguins are too small,' Prisha used all the proper names for the animals. 'And besides, I can't talk to the animals. I can only imitate them; they wouldn't be fooled.'

Marie took the second bucket of flamefish. Prisha's transmission stone rang out in a sonorous tone. *<The cockatrice has escaped the aviary. We have an escaped cockatrice, again...>*

<And three, uh, four chicks>

Prisha sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. These things always happened when she was duty manager.

'Look, Marie or Ngozi, whatever I don't mind, could one of you come with me to sort out this mess?'

Cockatrices were indeed much easier to deal with than the fire-breathing penguins. However, Marie knew they would grow more restless the more hungry they became. But sooner than she could tell Prisha to wait a minute, the transmission stone rang out again.

<<We had an incident in the Nocturnal Pavillon. The Cats of

Darkness attempted to escape. If we could be sent more staff to help to apprehend them...>> All three of them sighed simultaneously. Escaped cockatrice was one thing, but the cats were notoriously hard to even see.

'I can help there,' Ngozi said in a resigned voice already expecting the manager to ask for her specifically. The association of vamps with the cats of darkness was such a prevalent myth, even conservation veterans didn't often know that they, in fact, didn't see the cats any better than anyone else.

'Wonderful,' Prisha commented, and, as those things were becoming predictable, the stone buzzed again.

<<...sea dragons...>> ... a sound of splash ... << something very wrong. Could the selkies be summoned? Or someone? (splash) ... they're acting very out of character...>>

The sea dragons, such tranquil, solitary creatures, who spend most of their time sunbathing curled as a sinusoid, lived in a giant tank just a few blocks east. Even without the buzzer, they noticed the noises coming from the east.

Three sources of havoc at the same time and most of the aquarium staff vacationing? Prisha felt an overwhelming desire to transform into someone insignificant and wait until the situation spirals back into control. But she was a shift manager for a reason, and the sense of responsibility kept her from panic.

'Go, go help with the common northern sea dragon, Marie.' Commanded Prisha. The penguins could wait. She had a gut feeling the entire conservation area should soon go into a lockdown.

Before Marie could start to leave, however, another transmission came through, this one decidedly more frantic.

<<crack in the tank... get someone here now! We can't...>>

There was a loud crackle, a few splashes, and a cry of surprise, and the transmission abruptly cut off. Marie, Ngozi and Prisha stared at one another in silence for a long few moments, panic evident in the air between them, before Prisha finally spoke.

"Okay. Never mind the penguins or the cats. We need to get over there, now."

The three of them made quick work of closing up the penguin enclosure – they were in a rush, but they didn't need to make the crisis any worse by having any other escaped animals on the loose – and then began to head across to the sea dragon enclosure. Marie could tell that the other two were having similar thoughts to those which she was harbouring; they'd never had three escapes in one day before, especially not the sea dragons. There were numerous possible explanations, of course – this time of the

lunar cycle tended to have an odd effect on some of the animals, there had been recent cost-cutting measures implemented which meant there weren't as many people as usual checking on the more adventurous animals, and a lot of the creatures tended to sulk while the selkies were away – but something about this felt off. Cara, who usually watched over the sea dragons, was the calmest person Marie had ever worked with, but her transmission had sounded agitated, almost frightened.

Marie's apprehension only grew as the trio approached the sea dragon enclosure. A cacophony of hissing and great agitated howls reverberated through them as they entered through the double key card access doors to the sea dragon enclosure. Marie surveyed the scene before her, looking for Cara's unmissable auburn bob and easy smile.

"Cara!" Called Prisha, clearly coming to the same unsettling conclusion as Marie; Cara was not tending to the sea dragons. They bucked, hissed and slammed their 12ft long snakelike bodies into the sides of the tank, making the crack on the left side spread and clear salty water spill over the top of the tank in salty waves. (Unknown to many, the lesser striped Mediterranean Sea Dragon was a mammal, despite its serpentine looks, so needed fresh air- this was not a security risk in such a calm animal... usually.)

A whimper answered Prisha's commanding shout and Marie's feet were moving before her brain had time to catch up. The moaning noise was coming from the very edge of the sea dragon arena, beneath a supply bench.

"Cara, are you hurt? You're bleedi..." Marie started before she was cut off by Cara. Her face shone with fever and a large gash covered her forehead.

"Marie, there's no time," Cara rasped, "There's an oni, he's here... he's so fast." Cara's hand fluttered weakly to her face as Marie's mind worked overtime trying to comprehend the disastrous significance of an Oni in the aquarium.

Marie released a series of colourful swears before turning to find the others; Cara needed help.

Cara grabbed hold of her sleeve, "You have to help them, the animals, he's making them hurt. Controlling them." Cara uttered with a gasp, her eyes not on Marie but fixed above her shoulder, her face a mask of fear. Prisha had materialised beside them and began to tear long strips from the hem of her pinstripe blouse to tend Cara's wounds.

Marie followed Cara's stricken gaze to a man so slight she had not noticed him upon first entering the enclosure. He sat cross legged, his cobalt-blue skin rippling and glowing as

he muttered incantations beneath his breath. A pair of delicate ivory horns protruded from his bowed head, amongst dark tousled hair. He looked innocent enough, but Marie knew a predator when she saw one.

As Marie took a step forwards his eyes snapped to hers, smouldering yellow beacons which promised chaos. The Oni's face stretched and contorted into a murderous grin. Marie closed her eyes and pictured the full moon, trying through force of will to trick her body into changing. Then, with a growl, she started to run.

Then pain. And falling. And water, and teeth and fur. And she couldn't breathe. She howled, and the world went dark.

"You took a nasty tumble there love."

"I... What?"

"You took a nasty tumble. One of the dragons got you by the ankle. Good show, though. I'm sure you would have given him the what for if you hadn't been got en route."

"I. What? I..."

"Don't worry, love. You're okay, the sea dragons are okay, and Cara's going to be okay, you know how Nymphs are."

Marie groggily opened her eyes, to find Ngozi's concerned eyes and sharp fangs dangling mere inches from her own. It struck her that for all the calm words Ngozi must have been agitated; Ngozi only stood on the ceiling when she was agitated. Then she remembered the Oni.

"Prisha's gone to get Cara someplace safe. She said that once you were awake we should do something about our new friend."

"I. Yes." Marie paused, left the human part of her brain to deal with its shock, and let the other part take over. "He's hunting. Started at cockatrice. North-east gate. Pavilion and aquarium. Going south-west. Heading for. Oh, no..."

"What love?"

"He's heading for the visitor centre."

"Oh no indeed. If he wakes up a visitor we are so screwed."

"I'll gather the pack. You go get the Grimoire."

"Which Grimoire? The vamps-can-see-cats-of-darkness Grimoire?"

"Yes. We need to know what we're facing. Meet me at the visitor centre."

Marie groaned as she stood up, willing the transformation away. She felt faint from the energy that had drained from her, from the mess of human and wolf thoughts intertwined in her mind. Luckily she had remembered to pack a power bar with her that day, perfect for restoring energy. As Marie felt her strength returning, she tugged on the wolf cord inside her, calling for the pack to come to her aid. Before too long there were five of them at her side, anticipation and adrenaline running through them as they locked eyes with each-other. The rest of the pack had gone straight to the visitor centre, surveying the perimeter.

Meanwhile Ngozi shivered as she entered the Grimoire's underground cavern. Ngozi had nothing against dark and damp places, in fact she felt most at home in a cosy sea-side cave, or a pitch-black hovel. The Grimoire's realm was something else entirely, however. To the inexperienced eye it would see like any other cavern, but Ngozi felt the air change as she crossed the threshold. When other creatures thought of vamps, their thoughts would often jump to legends of the Grimoire. The stories of their brutal and archaic traditions, and their 6th sense for detecting cats-of-the-darkness had leaked into the general perception of vamps, the way in which all vamps were slightly feared and avoided by the other creatures. Of course, that was complete nonsense, normal vamps had nothing to do with the Grimoire, they were as similar in disposition as the wolves to the chimaera, the centaurs to the fairies.

So, if Ngozi had had a heart, it would have started beating faster, and if she had had to breath, the audible inhales and exhales would have reverberated through the cavern. As she reached the centre of the cavern, she placed her hand on the ice-covered pool of water in front of her, pouring her thoughts and pleas out onto the surface. She was not worried that the Grimoire would deny her, they took every chance they could get to seek out the cats-of-the-darkness. She was worried about the implications of involving the Grimoire, an unpredictable weapon that had a mind and agency of its own. A plea for help was an invitation, an invitation for the Grimoire to take matters into their own hands.

Ngozi felt a rush in the air as hundreds of bats swarmed in-front of her, forming the rough shape of a large vamp who looked her in the eye before dissolving away as the bats rushed towards the exit of the cavern. Ngozi collapsed, shaken to her core, hoping that Marie had as much werewolf back-up with her as she could get.

Marie stood outside the front door of the visitor centre, her wolfpack circling the building for any glimpse of the Oni trying to sneak off somewhere else. Knowing what she knew

of the visitors, Marie wasn't keen to enter the building. Inside were creatures well beyond the capacity of the aquarium's limited facilities to deal with. Even with all selkies present and accounted for, they would still have a hard time managing even one of the visitors. No, Marie was not keen on the idea of trying to temper an Oni-influenced visitor. The visitors were only there temporarily while in transit to a more suitable facility, and they were meant to be kept secluded, sedated, and serenely undisturbed. She and her wolves stood no chance against an aggravated minotaur, hydra, or – Elder Gods forbid – the Pyrenees Mountain Dragon that had arrived shortly before the selkies left on their trip.

“We should probably just call the nearest ERFO...” Marie muttered to herself. The ERFOs, Emergency Response Fairy Outposts, were few and far between, and they'd take quite some time to arrive. But Marie would feel so much better letting a crisis-trained team of powerful fairies deal with the Oni, and potentially one or more visitors, rather than her and a handful of wolves trying to handle it. She grabbed the transmitter from her waistbelt to bring up the ERFO with Prisha, but thinking better of it, stopped midbreath and recliipped the transmitter to her belt. She walked up to the panel outside the entrance of the visitor centre, shattered the thin magical barrier glass, inserted the key she got when hired decades back but had never used, turned the key with a satisfying click, and punched the now-glowing-red beacon crystal.

No sooner had she done this, the panel speakers still quietly announcing “your alarm has been registered by a regional ERFO, crisis team inbound”, then a plume of bats swarmed around the visitor centre, engulfing it briefly in darkness.

Uh oh, that'll be the Grimoire... Marie thought to herself. *Let's hope the Necronomicon isn't more trouble than it's worth here. Asking that thing for help can be like opening a can of bogworms.*

After billowing around the building for a few moments, the bats coalesced into the shape of a large vamp. It glared at Marie for an uncomfortable while, and, instinctively, she sent a tug along her wolf cord, recalling the pack to her side.

Just as the last wolf bounded up to her, there was deafening explosion of sound from the rear of the complex that could only mean one thing. Ice-cold dread flooded through Marie's veins as the force of the explosion still reverberated in her chest. A mountain dragon woken from its sedated state, and to make matters worse, tormented by an Oni? *Not* something to be trifled with.

The bat-cloud-vamp spun on its feet to face the other direction... Perhaps not the most apt description, as the *thing* didn't actually physically spin on its feet, but rather the

bats inside synchronously reoriented such that the semi-corporeal being faced the opposite direction, eyes on the visitor centre rather than on Marie. The sight was, quite frankly, disturbing, not unlike seeing a curupira turn its skin inside out and its feet backwards. Visitor centre still exploding in the background, the bat-vamp emitted a deep bellowing voice.

Banrabishu

The word echoed through Marie, both as physical sound and as a javelin of astrally-projected thought. The cloud of bats undulated, and the bat-vamp had rotated 90 degrees.

Banrabishu

Another rotation. The yellow eyes burned holes through Marie, even though they were unfocused, looking far beyond her towards the horizon.

Banrabishu

And again a turn.

Banrabishu

Another turn. The bat-cloud again faced the visitor centre, smoke now erupting in massive black plumes from the far end, the crashing and roaring of an angry dragon still booming through the air.

We summon you NARILUGGALDIMMERANKIA, Sixth Name of Marduk, Watcher of the Igigi and the Annunaki, to banish the demon striking chaos within.

The air around the bats shimmered, the explosions in the background suddenly and momentarily silenced, all sound muted, and then...

POP

The bat-cloud-vamp-thing vanished and in its place - wearing a rather unfashionable matching pair of galaxy-cloud hoodie and sweatpants and more than a few gaudy gold necklaces - stood the ancient Mesopotamian god, patron deity of Babylon, Marduk, with his small servant dragon Mushussu at his side.

“Sup.”

Marie snarled on instinct, ears folded back as she moved back. Her packmates moved with her, forming a loose half circle around the god. There wasn't really a way to describe the power that swirled around him, but it made the wolf in Marie want to tuck tail and run and she could feel her pack thinking the same.

The god frowned, “honestly you animal folk are always so skittish. I promise not to bite ok.”

“Where’s Ngozi?”

“No idea who you’re talking about. I’m just doing a favour for old bat-face. Now apparently there’s an oni prancing about the place and you want me to,” he made a vague gesture with his hand, “deal with it.”

The bat-cloud hadn’t reappeared since. Marie hoped it stayed away.

“Yeah, if you could just get rid of the oni and make the dragon fall back asleep that would be just dandy.” Just to be on the safe-side, she pulled on her wolf bond and sent one of her sisters to look for Ngozi. “If you’re feeling generous you could even undo all the damage and put all the creatures back into their enclosures.”

“HA!” Marie and her wolves skittered back as the man barked a harsh laugh. “You, I like! Unfortunately, I’m a god. I don’t do all that mortal plane shenanigans. Sending your creatures sleepy-byes’ a cinch. But I can’t do anything to that oni so long as he can cast a spell. You shut him up, I can make him go permanent sleepy-byes.”

Now, were-wolves are not bloodthirsty by nature. That’s just propaganda from the dark ages. What they are is loyal and territorial. There’s a reason Marie is the only wolf in the aquarium, and her brothers and sisters still call it home even if they have their own families elsewhere. As far as Marie is concerned, every single member of staff is pack to a degree, even the creatures to some extent, even the bloody stupid fire-penguins.

And this oni hurt them.

“And how do I do that?” Her hackles are up in anticipation already, the short hair on her head and down her neck rising up.

“Musshushu sweetie.” The dragon was a bright green, long like a snake with a crown of feathers on his head and tiny little feet and wings. It clambered up the god’s legs to coil up in his open palm and fluttered its wings in excitement. “Yes you’re such a good boy. Aren’t you the bestest boy.” The dragon’s wings fluttered faster, buzzing like a pixie’s wings so that it started to lift off the god’s palm. “Do you wanna kill an oni? Do you wanna kill an oni? Yes you do.”

One of Marie’s brothers made a noise of frustration, baring his teeth at the god. Honestly, Marie was in agreement.

“So here’s the deal Luna.”

“It’s Marie.”

“Whatever. You and your pack can fight the oni, once you got him pinned Musshushu here is going to curse him. Aren’t you sweetie?” The Musshushu rolled over on its back wriggling in delight as the god tickled its belly. “And then

once he’s cursed, I’ll put him to sleep. Deal?”

It wasn’t a great deal. Marie didn’t need her pack’s dissent to know that. The god wanted to use them for canon fodder. But the visitor centre was still exploding, and they needed to get the visitors back to sleep before they got themselves or someone else killed. Half the staff were in the infirmary. Her sister still hadn’t found Ngozi. The EFRO could be another hour.

“Ok fine. You got a deal.”

“Brilliant. And for my payment I’ll take.”

“Oh no, you didn’t say anything about payment.” Marie backed up and her pack crowded round her, all snarling as one.

“Ok fine. For payment for my services, I would like a favour.”

“What favour?”

“Now that would be telling, wouldn’t it-” Her brothers and sisters barked and snarled a warning. “Ok ok, I promise that the favour won’t involve any permanent changes to your life or lifestyle, and that neither you nor anyone else will be injured or killed. How does that sound?”

Another explosion ripped through the visitor centre and there was a scream that could only be the minotaur.

“You have a deal.”

“Perfect. Then off you pop puppies. I’ll be ready when you need me.” The god jumped back, floating mid-air like he was reclined in a hammock or something and materialised a video game console.

It wasn’t the most reassuring, and her brother told her as much.

“Yeah I know he’s an idiot, but he’s the best chance we have.”

Quite how a wolf could do such a great impression of a raised eyebrow despite having none was one of life’s greatest mysteries.

Once again, Marie closed her eyes and focussed on the moon, she could feel it overhead, even in daylight. Even if it wasn’t full, she could feel its potential, knew it would be again. And she let it pull and tug until she slipped back into her wolfskin.

She was bigger than her brothers and sisters. Most werewolves couldn’t change shape. Usually only one in the litter could listen to the moon and let her change their shape. Marie didn’t mind being charge most of the time. But leading her pack into a fight against someone who had thrown her about kindling once before didn’t feel right.

Her brother came to lick her cheek, gently butting his head against her shoulder in comfort. They all trusted her.

Ok. Here's the plan.

First, Marie split her pack in three. Sent three down to lay in ambush on the left, and sent the other three down the right. She'd drive the oni out into the open.

Second, they tire the oni out. Do everything they can to wear it down. Chase it if they can, mob at it. Get it tired.

Third, they get their teeth into it and pull to the ground.

Fourth, the god and his dragon do their bit.

It was a simple solid plan.

Marie watched her pack as they made their move. Feeling their flashes of emotion sparking down their bond as they slunk past the wounded minotaur and stubbornly burning fires.

"You better be ready." Marie growled at the god.

The god smiled sweetly, "don't give me orders puppy." The accompanying rush of power was enough to lay her ears flat and tuck her tail against her belly. "Good dog."

Bigger deer to catch, one of her sisters warned accompanied with a bubble of *warning*.

Marie snarled her frustration and slunk away, moving into the visitor centre. It was carnage in here. Some of the holding pens were intact, their visitors still slumbering away. Thank the moon, the hydra was still asleep. But as she moved further in, she found herself hopping over fallen ceiling beams and skirting round fires. Had she been in her human-skin she wouldn't have made it through at all. Holding pens were smashed open, blood smeared on the shards of glass. She saw the minotaur slumped under a beam, a weeping burn over the back of his head and shoulders. A gryphon flapping one wing in distress and wheezing. Its other wing was dropped and limp at its side and it hadn't the strength to lift itself up.

They were going to need a vet team down here quick.

Her nose was useless with the smell of burning metal and flesh. But she could hear chanting in the distance, distinct from the cries of distress of all the visitors.

Dropping her head into a predatory stance, she followed the sound through the wreckage.

There.

The oni was sat cross-legged again, his skin rippling with runes she didn't recognise. Behind him, the dragon was shrieking in pain, writhing on the ground and destroying everything in the immediate vicinity.

How dare he? That thought hummed between her pack, pulsing in time to their shared heart. How dare this creature come into their territory, attack their packmates, destroy their home.

Marie leapt into a sprint, teeth bared and running straight at the oni. It's eyes opened, solid white and staring as it moved backwards out of reach and swiping at her nose with claws like meat-hooks.

Marie barked her threat, a low warning "ruff ruff" for him to get away! She was big, a solid seventy kilos of muscle and teeth and certainly more than a match for the oni in weight. When she slammed into it, they both went flying. His horns scored a line down her shoulder that made her yelp, scrambling to get back with a paw that protested bearing her weight. The oni followed her, pressing the advantage and slashing with her claws. His long teeth bared in a snarl.

Marie's worked with dragons most of her life, she knows the tell-tale rattle of scale that comes before a dragon fires. She threw herself out of the way just as the dragon blew white hot fire on the oni. With its attention on Marie, whatever spell it had used on the dragon must've broken and Pyrenees Mountain Dragons hold a grudge. The heat of it burns Marie's face, driving her back behind the safety of the rubble.

The fire is constant for a solid two minutes before the dragon finally runs out. Its head dropping down to the ground as it gave in to exhaustion.

And the oni is still there. Not so much a scorch mark on its body as it walked to where the dragon lay. For a split second, Marie and her pack are SCARED. And that's something they haven't been for a very long time.

There's a spiked club in its hand now, and the raised it high above its head with every intention of bringing it down on the dragon's skull.

Marie's clamped her teeth around the oni's leg before she's even processed what she's doing. The butt of the club hit her shoulders hard enough to bruise bone but she's already throwing the oni. Sending it flying into the last remaining wall that finally gave up the ghost and collapsed on top of it.

The oni hardly got a chance to claw its way out before the rest of her pack were there, pincering it between them with snaps and snarls. It can't do everything at once it seems. Certainly not attack them and pull itself free.

One oni versus nine werewolves isn't a fair fight. And it can't use its magics to protect itself like it had with the dragon. It doesn't take long before oni blood joins the werewolf and dragon blood on the floor.

An explosion behind them suddenly throws the pack off

their feet, landing in a tangled heap of fur and paws. By the time they right themselves, the oni is back on its feet, black blood running rivulets down its arms and chest. Marie didn't get a chance to launch a second attack, still shaking her head against the ringing in her ears and fuzz that blurred her vision. Her bond to her brothers and sisters pulsed in time to the roar of blood in their ears and tiny explosions of *confusion* and *hurt*. When she did manage to force her eyes to look straight and focus, she saw the oni snarl with a kind of malicious glee and begin to chant. The runes lit up beneath the blood, dazzling white in a way that was almost hypnotic.

Pain like no other exploded in Marie's mind.
ithurtsithurtsithurtsGETAWAY

She writhed and flailed on the ground, desperately rubbing her head into the ash to MAKE IT STOP. Around her, her pack SCREAMED. Their pain resounding off hers and she off theirs in an infinitely amplifying agony.

She couldn't see. She couldn't hear. She couldn't smell. Her fur screamed at every touch. Now matter how she ran or thrashed, the pain chased her. The chanting reverberated deep in her bones, a mantra of hurthurthurt and it won't GO AWAY!

makeitstopmakeitstopMAKEITSTOP

Ngozi was quite possibly having the worst day of her entire life. First the Grimoire had knocked her about and left her with a bruised skull. Then, Marie's sister had come bounding up, hackles up and tail between her legs barking and whining so quickly she couldn't make heads or tail of what was said. The visitor centre was on fire.

Now Marie's sister was on the ground writhing in agony and if Ngozi had had a heart it would've dropped through the floor by now.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. She'd seen the way the oni had been able to toss Marie aside like a ragdoll. Cara had said he was making the animals hurt. Ngozi loved Marie and trusted her to protect them, but the woman wasn't invincible. No matter how easy it was to forget when you saw her wolfskin.

She was only round the corner from the visitor centre, and when she made it to courtyard she wasn't sure if she wanted to be sick or cry. Maybe a bit of both.

The centre was in ruins, one half of it almost completely collapsed, and she could see the still form of the dragon slumped in the rubble. Worse still, Marie and her pack were all the ground, writhing and screaming in agony.

Ngozi has worked with magical creatures her whole life. She knows better than to approach an injured animal. Ninety percent of major injuries are caused by injured and cornered animals. And when an aquarium is kept stocked by creatures rescued from the illegal wildlife trade. That's a lot of injured animals.

Still. It's Marie.

Ngozi ignored the oni entirely, making a beeline for Marie still writhing on the ground.

"Marie. Marie love, can you hear me? Darling?"

The wolf didn't respond, whining and yelping and screaming with the rest of her pack.

"Marie love?" She reached out to sink her fingers into the thick ruff of fur framing the wolf's face. "Marie?"

Years of experience was the only thing that stopped Ngozi losing an arm as Marie shrieked and snapped her teeth millimetres from the tips of Ngozi's fingers. Feral wasn't the word. Feral would be unsure and terrified, putting distance between them and pacing. This was torture, cruelty plain and simple. Ngozi wasn't even sure Marie knew she was there.

Ok, plan B then.

"Hey, Marie. Love, let me see your eyes, ok." Careful, crouched ready for if she needed to spring out of the way of another attack, Ngozi reached out again for Marie's face. She aimed for slow and gentle, barely brushing even. Exerting the minimal pressure she needed to guide Marie to look at her.

Vamps aren't supposed to use their hypnotism. Its unethical and a hundred other things. But Marie's hurting and the aquarium is under attack. It isn't a question.

"Marie. Look at me. You are ok. You are not hurt. It's not real. You are ok. You brothers and sisters are ok. It's not real."

With another hand, she parted the veil and poured every ounce of magic she had down into Marie's eyes.

"It's not real."

She could feel the competing magic from the oni. It was definitely stronger than hers. But Ngozi fought it with all she had.

There was a sudden give, the spell retreated, and suddenly Ngozi had the upperhand.

"Marie." Ngozi could sense the pain coming from her packmates, follow the thread to repeat to the the same, "you're ok. Its not real."

Time lost all meaning as Ngozi worked to undo whatever

magic was hurting the wolves. But when she finally came out of it, dragging Marie with her, there was no oni waiting to gut her like a flamefish. Ha, there it was. Ngozi could see it fighting off something she couldn't see.

Cats-of-darkness. Usually just mischief-makers, but also very territorial. And apparently averse to people making explosions on their turf. Now they'd taken to mobbing at the oni, and thin scratch lines appeared up its legs and arms. Good. She hoped he got cat-scratch fever.

"Ngozi?" Marie whimpered.

"It's me love. You're ok."

A few more slow blinks and suddenly Marie was awake, leaping to her feet and herding Ngozi and her pack behind her. Ngozi let her.

"The oni."

"It's discovering the difficulty of escaped cats-of-darkness. I think our friend needs to be able to sense his victims to use his spell."

"We need to pin it. Then the god and his dragon will finish it off."

Ngozi's lived with Marie long enough to know she's out for blood this time, and she can't say she entirely disagrees with the sentiment. "Works for me. I'll do what I can to hypnotise him, slow him down."

Once she made eye contact with the oni, she could feel his sudden panic. It's definitely a 'he' from what she can feel of his thoughts.

"You have fought long and hard. You are so tired." Ngozi said, pouring every ounce of magic she has into slowing him down. "Your limbs are so heavy, your heartbeat is slow. You are so very, very tired."

He fought her every step, but it was just enough of an edge for Marie and her pack to move in. It didn't take long before there were teeth in his flesh and he was down on the ground.

"Messhushu!"

Out of nowhere, a tiny flash of green zipped by and landed on the oni's face.

"No!" The oni shouted. It's the first any of them had heard him speak. Its rougher than they expected, like the oni's been smoking his whole life. "This wasn't the deal Marduk! This wasn't the deal!"

"What deal?" Marie's dropped his leg and turned round, Ngozi turned with her and - holy mother of darkness that's a god.

Admittedly a god in dirty sweatpants and a hoodie with wine stains on it. But a god nonetheless.

"Now now, Turuk. You don't want to spoil the game now do you."

"You said if I attacked the aquarium you'd clear my record. You said if I attacked the aquarium I'd see my son! You said-

"Shut him up, Musshushu."

The dragon jumped down the oni's throat and then quickly remerged with a little glowing red pearl. When the oni tried to speak, this time no sound came out.

"What deal, god?" Marie snarled again, stalking forward with her tail up and ears forward. Behind her, her pack let go of the oni to amass together in a single unit.

The god shrugged and made a slicing motion with his hand. Behind them the oni started to choke and the wolves around yelped and skittered back. The choking turned to thrashing until, suddenly, he went still.

One of the wolves stalked forward, gently nudging the oni with their nose before leaping back out of range. It was dead silent as the wolf approached again and this time it looked up at Marie with flat ears.

"Marie..." Ngozi had felt the flashes of memory from the oni before it died. It wasn't an answer. But the oni hadn't been lying about making a deal to get out of prison.

"Now Luna," Marie snarled some more at the name, and surely anyone else would've backed up in terror, "I killed that horrible oni for you as per our deal."

And so the final piece clicked into place and Ngozi really was going to be sick this time. "Marie what have you done?"

"I believe you owe me a favour."

Author review:

Hail, mighty Editor, I really like this chain; it seems to have everything you could ask for from a short story: a coherent plot with an actual arc TM, a charming #aesthetic setting, interesting characters, a satisfying twist, and a cliffhanger that leaves you wanting more! Good job, team!

- M Johnson

Nonsense and Nonsensibility

Anonymous, Evie Burrows, Sarah Nolan, Yuhang Xie, Gustav Conradie, Dan Scott, Ed Heaney

Lady 3PSM [narrating]: "It is once again That Season of the Year, in which the prohibitively few Membars of the Tupparr Clarses preside over the 'Courtshippe Rituales' of the Cuppar Clarses..."

[Cut to a wide shot of The SUN QUEEN floating at a variety of wuthering-heights above The Debonair Openair Ballroom, in HER Hyparbouffant Montgolfiant Omnirradiant Wigpiece of State. Of size comparable to a fully-rigged corvette, this Antique-Tupperwear-rooted Folly-of-Follicularity flares sunburst after sunburst as its cogwheel-curlers strain and its lofty coronablazonfunnels waft seven great plumes of steam up to the adoring heavens.]

Lady 3PSM: "While Corsets are Out this Season, we can be expecting thrice the usual bytching. For yes, in this the first year of the Reign of the Sun Queen, it has been Decreed that the Deb role shall now fall to the unmarried Men..."

[Cut to two fluffy Gents forming up for the Quadrille, their hair all-a-combed into matching alternating tangerine and licquorice curls.]

"... and Tigarr Furrehs. Ach, the silken tights and stripey gartars..."

Turning one's back to the Sun Queen being tantamount to social suicide, only those with the Very Studiest Parasols can be expected to Thrive in this Clime: a Veritable Parasolarchy where there has been nothing but Muttonchopistocracy before." Aside from the obvious Sharpened-Parasol Duels between Mawtriarchs of honnar-besmirched Debs, this Season's Bloodsports of Choice are the equally vicious and yet now bettable bouts between Steam-Powered Automaton Archbishops of Banterbury. Lizardess Constantina's Profanomicon is at present 2 to 1 on to defeat the Professor's Episcosmutterer; place your bets, Gentlemen, Ladies and...

[Cut to who else is forming up for the Quadrille...]

"... Lobstarr Crunches. Those other three unlikely laddies being Tasteless Mawrchioness Wholechickenington's foisterings on to the already saturated marriage marrket..."

[Cut to thee Debs clumsily advancing toward the dance floor, each with an entire unplucked poultry carcass ceremonially riveted around their head.]

Envelope-me Wholechickenington [Crashing into several nearby dancers, addressing the one ending up immediately underneath him.] "Ow! Is thart you, Edmund-Beane?"

Lady 3PSM "Naw, that's not your bruther, it is..."

[Loud squeals from several as Dickie Pincerworthy, bottommost in the pile of bodies on the ballroom floor, lashes out with both of his Mighty Pincers unto various of the rears precariously piled atop his Exoskele-gin-and-tonic Crunchsuit.]

"Hey, Pincaarweaurtheigh, that do be a Bridgeaughr'tun poughstearieure thart you are leighing claughs on" flamerjected Brigadieress Bridget, all selfrigheously komododragonifanflaring Her Terrible-Military-Parasol-Jack-of-the-Line."

Lady 3PMT "And yet despite Tressida Tigress also being deeply and rudely deposited inside the spontaneous ruck, maul and scrrum on the ballroom flawr, Mawriarch Tigress limits Herself to emitting a single shorrrt "Rawghr". A bettar display of Cuppar-Clarse 'Sassenachstiffarupparliptiquette', and indeed of Quadrilloquence in my humbill opinion. First blood to the Tigresses of Frostedflakeington. The Brigadieress is livid at her bruther Colinfythe for getting caught by that loose flailing Wholechickenington legg...

To conclude this my first wee pamphalette on these Mattars of Importt, Gossip and Scandal among the Sassenachselfingratiationocracies I must issue dire warning to any Cuppar-Clars Clan that tries to chicken out of these 'Courtshippe Rituales' by giving themselves Eyres of actually being Tupparr Clars and thus an Exempt Arbitrator. For you know in your hearts' hearts that *you are not Tupparr Clars unless your Butlar's Butlar themselves has a Butlar...*

Yours anonymously, pseudonymously and elsewise untraceably (for in such ways a scribbling Scotswoman is the most canny),

Lady Pennydreadfulscribblar Pennyfarthingbornescapier-Pennywhistlesmythe-Sarcastictonguelikeathistle-MacVitriolicputdown"

THE SUN QUEEN: [Putting down HER copy of the pamphalet] "How Dahre this scotswoman Taurnishe the Reputationnes of mine Cuppar Clausse Undarlinges!" SHE Bombastobuoyed, flicking several sandbags out of HER novelty SombreZepplin-Triverticalpropellor Aerial-Wiggery-of-Handling-Currante-Affairs. "I Require a Volunteahr to Unmasque this Machinating-Lady-Macbeth, this Undarfoote-Urquhart-Upstarte" she bellowed (and billowed) at HER Cuppar Ladies-in-Waiting. These kept on trying to silently backstep into the background whenever presented with but THE ROYAL NAPE. The Tigresses proved graceful at this elusion as well. The Wholechickeningtons did not. And yet their wordly Matriarch bodily knocked down one of the clumsier Lobstaar Ladies-in-Waiting toward THE SUN QUEEN'S BACK, landing rather closer than the fringes of her

own doddering brood...

"Ah, [Bertinargh Pincaarwortheaugh](#)" beamed THE SUN QUEEN "You have three days to Unmasque this Highlander Haughtyminx. Succeed and you shall have better Praughtspects in the Courtshippe Rituales. Fail, and I SHARLL uncerimeunieslie have you made into Thermidor..."

Bertina Pincerworthy noticeably paled despite her overuse of rouge. She lifted her eyes to the Sun Queen, just in time to see a dark shape appear in the sky, accompanied by a crack of Thunder and a regal NEIGGGHHHEYOWYODOIN. At this, all eyes peered up from beneath the Plethora of Parasols; even the Sun Queen allowed herself a glance. [Panoramic shot as the shadow comes into view, a gigantic black steed galloping through the air, Metallic-Feathered-Glide-Enablers at full stretch and Telescopic-Horn-of-Lightning piercing its path. A crimson-besuited rider holds the reigns casually, as if he is but partaking in a gentle trot through Hyde-and-Seek Park. He spins the Single-Horn around low to the ground — sending up gusts of wind that misplace a few most meticulously placed hairs (and feathers) on the heads below — and then he swivels over side-saddle and promptly drops a dozen feet into the half-blinded crowd.]

At his graceful landing the nearby Ladies-in-Waiting were swiftly rendered Ladies-in-Fainting (an infrequent occurrence since Corsets fell out of vogue). On the edge of this veritable fatality of femmes, excited murmurs of 'The Duke' could be heard from Felines, Crustaceans, Avians and Reptiles alike. The new arrival tipped his Top-Hat-O-Copter, which went whizzing around the Quadrille, and bowed his head to the Sun Queen.

THE DUKE: "Fear not, your Highestness, for I will *not* stand idly whilst a quill-wielding coward slanders these here Loveliest Ladies of the Cupper Classes." [Fresh fainting]. "I will drain Loch Ness, topple Ben Nevis, even storm Edinburgh Castle itself, if that is what it takes to end this terror of words." A pause. "In return, I ask but one favour."

If the Sun Queen was taken aback by this, she did not show it. Instead, she raised HER ROYAL RIGHT EYEBROW.

THE SUN QUEEN: "Declahr your favahr..."

The Duke hesitated, attempting to hide his nervousness behind his Top-Hat-O-Copter, which had returned in haste after having been chased by one of the less well-disciplined Felines. Finally, he lifted his eyes to THE SUN QUEEN, wincing at the bright light.

The Duke: "I wish for you to allow for the return of The Moon Princess."

[Cut to the audience as loud gasps escape from the mouths and beaks of everyone in attendance. Darkness envelops the Ballroom, followed by aggressive brightness as THE SUN QUEEN reddens with rage.]

THE SUN QUEEN: "How DARE you uttah the Nahme of that Awfulle Creature?! She has been banished and shall nevah return to these Lands!"

[The Duke takes a few steps backwards to pick up an abandoned parasol, which he brandishes in front of himself

as he steps back towards THE SUN QUEEN to confront HER again. Breaking the stunned silence, the poultry on top of Envelope-me Wholechickenington's head drops to the ground with a satisfyingly loud *plop*. Envelope-me hides behind his brother in shame.]

The Duke: "YOUR ROYAL HIGHESTNESS, I do *not* wish to offend you with these words. I merely wish for the Moon to return, for the tides of the oceans have disappeared, and the Start Countesses weep every night as they dance in the skies without their dearest friend the Princess! I ask for you to consider this Matter, and I will save your court from the evil rumormongering of the Scotswoman Lady Pennydreadfulscribblar Pennyfarthingbornescapier-Pennywhistlesmythe-Sarcastictonguelikeathistle-MacVitriolicputdown."

To everyone's surprise, THE SUN QUEEN'S HUE returned to its ordinary yellow. The Tigers and Tigresses breathed out a sigh of relief, as the heat had been simply too much for them. The extended silence as SHE considered the request drew out, growing tenser by the half-hour.

[One Hour Later]

[Tressida Tigress walks towards the Wholechickeningtons and begins chewing on the abandoned Poultry.]

[Two Hours Later]

[One of the Automaton Archbishops crashes into the left wall of the Ballroom, making the entire structure tremble. The Duke sits down with his back to THE SUN QUEEN, apparently not caring about Sassenachstiffarupparliptiquette anymore.]

[Half an Hour Later, Finally:]

THE SUN QUEEN: "The Fahvah shall be Grahnted!"

[Vociferous audibulations of magnitudinous relief. Envelope-me Wholechickenton recovers the gibleitious remains of his headpiece from between Tressida Tigress's twin incisorettes.]

Solar flares of kelvinious irradioscopy curl about the protruding dactyl as THE SUN QUEEN elongates her favourite digit.

THE SUN QUEEN: "Bertinargh Pincaarwortheaugh..." [Close-up of the shrinkage of Bertina's eye-stalks and the nervous chittering of her mandibles as she finds herself upon the end of THE ROYAL INDEX...] "I demahnd that you act as my Chosen Reprahsantative for the accompaniemente and accomplishment of The Duke's entarhprise."

[Frantic fluttering of Bertina Pincerworhty's antennae. The Duke, with Tiptuppergentlemanliosity, advances, armed with a Polite Protest. THE SUN QUEEN, however, anticipates it from afar. All in attendance, Tuppar and Cuppar alike, shield their visages from the burst of red heat to erupt from the Wingpiece of State.]

THE SUN QUEEN: "STAY YOUR POLITE PROTEST, DUKE! Do not Presume to Test my Grahciousnesse. Bertinargh, my Lobstaar Lady-in-Weighting, shall ensioure that The Royal Interesse remains at the Forefront of your Endeavah; NOT

the Interesse of that Courtlie Satellite, the Moon Princess. I hope I make myself Clarh?"

[The Duke twirls his Top-Hat-O-Copter and bows. The Lords and Ladies, Lizardesses and Reptilarchs, Mawchionesses and Felinords, Tuppar Clarses, Cuppar Clarses and prodigious broods of the Court lower whatever honourary musculature their uppermost (exo-)skeletonatures possess to the floor. Only Bertina Pincerworthy, in her state of Inordinate Distress, omits the proper obsequiocities as the black steed hooks his Single Horn through her pannier and takes off in a whirl of wind. The Duke activates his Top-Hat-O-Copter and, with a final triple-backbow-and-cartwheel, elegantleaves after.]

[Montage of The Flight of the Questers, over the heights of Imperial Landmarkes of the the Most Distinguished Whiggishness, such as Stonehenge, Kensington Palace, the Lake District and the Milton Keynes Magic Roundabout. Soon, the tartan-splattered hills of the Scottish Highlands bagpipe into view, carrying intoxicating fumes of whiskey up from the bogs.]

Upon a sudden, the Single-Horn's Metallic-Feathered-Glide-Enablers doth begin to engine-sputter.

-

With nay a neigh nor neigh-borious nelly, Single-Horn's Metallic-Feather-Glide-Enablers shatter with starry-glamour, rain down like men-hallelughay onto greeny-weedy highlands.

[Lady 3PSM interjects] the highest, glammet and most GLAMOUROUS of lands, so called SCOTland for how Salubrious Coveted Outrageously-Trendy a land SHE is. And you can guess then so-forth, dear pamphellet reader, of what level of high praise, Scotswoman means.

[Cut back to the gigantic black metal horse and its passengers].

"Grasp well, bare-knuckle-whitened to ye Top-Hat-O-Copters!" the dashing DUKE vociferates with voracious verocity as the smell of imminent danger excites his whiskers. As Single-Horn plummets like a weighty turd in the shape of a sleek black stallion, the DUKE flew-eth forth in wonderous delight.

Meanstwhile, smile, Bertina Pincerworthy's mandible did not as she doth not possess such a ludicrously expensive and plot-useful device. She falls from the sky, pincers a-flailing, eyestalks a-wailing, even fleas a-bailing.

Her life replays across her eyestalks like old film on a wonky film player. She sees her father through a childlike lens of sepia and nostalgia. His pincers would tuck her into the softest of shedding-beddings whilst mother made hot saltcomfortbrine, a delicious and soothing drink. Their mandibles chatter in smiles and love as good-nights were shared all round like a disease, but a disease of love, empathy and affectionous tenderous bond that only death could undo, and even so with great difficulty since even Death's dexterity is no match against the knot of the Pincerworthy family. *Pincer*, in their tongue meant love of the highest degree. And all of them were worthy for it. But Death's dexterity eventually proved successful as the tide of

all tides rushed into their village and untied their knot, as it untied her grasp to her mother's pincer, and dragged mother into the unholy of holes, The MAW of the pincerninsula of their homeland. Saltuncomfortbrine flowed from her eyestalks. It felt as if her heart was shattered into a million and three metal feathers, just like the ones falling around her now. And as she became of age, she left her father to his grief, unwillingly, to become a lady in waiting. Her task is simple, win the favour of the SUN QUEEN, and find the butt of the MAW. For every mouth should have an anus. It is the one truth of the Pincerverse.

Should her noble quest be cut short here and now? Bertina watches the highlands hills approach. If only they were higher so she would fall less distance. No, she thought. The love and anguish pumped through her heart. She would not fail now, so close to winning the SUN QUEEN's favour. She will find her mother again. Gravity was not the full-stop but an obstacle that she must overcome. No one said it was easy. Bertina fills with determination.

She splats against the ground. Dead.

The DUKE not-splats against the ground. Alive.

The DUKE had never held any affections for the residents of the Pincerverse. Why choose to have your eyes on stalks that flailed around grossly in the wind, when they could be firmly attached to your body, and not interfere with the wearing of one's Top-Hat-O-Copter, the most majestificent of cephalic attire? Why forgo claws, most adapted for the pursuit of the Lowarrest Clars in the septennial Rituales of Slaughtarr, in favour of bulky and unwieldy pincers, that could ne'er manage to handle the two-hundred-and-fourty-seven varieties of fork required for a true banquet of the Tuppar Clars? And, most absurdly of all, the DUKE could scarcely fathom the Lahbsterrs disinterest in the RED LIGHT OF DESTINY, a most elusive being, but which was rumoured to bring immense fortune and wealth if caught.

Yet, as the DUKE looked down at Bertina's splat marks, he nearly felt a sense of sorrow, but upon remembering his Sassenachstiffarupparliptiquette, restrained himself. He hadn't intended for her to die yet, but sometimes the unexpected happens. But clearly someone had been alerted to their presence, for Single-Horn had in a score scored of periapsises of the SUN QUEEN's Wigpiece of State never failed him. The DUKE cautiously glanced around himself, and grasped paw-whiteningly-tightly to his Taliscat of Purrtecton.

A flash of movement in the corner of his vision. The DUKE twirled around most gracefully, his tail wagging with anticipation behind him. Nothing, but the patented (to negative profit) dull green of the Highlands. He unsheathed his claws, and his Top-Hat-O-Copter began to spin, ready to copter-into-action and pounce at a whisker's notice.

Footsteps sprinted up behind him, and the DUKE turned just in time to swift-side-step the attack. The blow overswung, and his assailant struck a compatriot, who disappeared where he stood. In his place, a lone chicken clucked and clacked, clearly displeased at his new form. A Poultrificatoring Staff of Poultric Poultrification, the DUKE observed. Whoever his assailants were, they were well-

equipped. The DUKE leapt to avoid another blow, hovering out of range of the Staff, but a third assailant somersaulted up, pincering onto his Left Boot of Elegant-Gentlemanliness. Preposterous, the DUKE thought to himself. The Laws of Proparrangement, passed in the third apoasis of the SUN QUEEN, a most sacred time, decreed that when assaulting with no formal glove-slapping-of-warning a member of the Tuppar Classes no more than two assailants may involve themselves, unless, of course, the aforementioned member be marked with the Disapprovalment of the SUN QUEEN herself, in which case there may be up to seven. The DUKE shakedeth his leg to try to free himself of his attacker, and his Top-Hat-O-Copter whirred more frantically, when the DUKE felt himself falling back to the ground. A crossbow bolt, from a fourth assailant no less, had shattered his Top-Hat-O-Copter. Certainly a treasonable offence, in any civilised society.

[The DUKE, in a much more gracefultitious manner than Bertina before him, in a manner only beholding only the utmost Sassenachstiffarupparliptiquette, divebombicated down to the earth and kersmackleplantcollided with the ground with a crispy crunch and the DUKE's death. The splatterifitude of the Top-Hat-O-DROPTed DUKE's mangled body would ostentationabilitly adorn the countryside for at least until the next precipiwetness.]

[Darken sky, as if clouds which were actually stage curtains which were actually low budget blankets spraypainted black suddenly filled the scene and blocked out the light, which is precisely what happens as clouds which are actually stage curtains which are actually low budget blankets spraypainted black do indeed suddenly fill the scene and block out the light.]

[Cut to the top left corner of wherever, but not quite the corner corner, nearer to the middle corner area in that disatisfying way of the icon that would bounce around the corner of a TV. Spotlight, as, fully adorned in HER Silkynatious Erotiphasmic BlackerThanVantablackened Bodysuit of Nightness, THE MOON PRINCESS floatentates airily into the scene of the DUKE's splattification. HER face the only visible feature as result of the Bodysuit of Nightness, SHE emits a piercifying caterwaulous stranglemonious screech of, capital letter, Anguish.]

THE MOON PRINCESS: "AHHHHHHHRRR NAHHHRR." [perfectly pronounced, deadpan to audience] "The Duke." [end deadpan] "Whart hahrve yaehw donne, Sohn Qwæean?! Yohr fawllt! Minen beelohved" [deadpan] "The Duke." [/deadpan] "is deæthenned!"

[THE MOON PRINCESS procures An Glowing Roundness of Orblight from the nether void of HER Silkynatious Erotiphasmic BlackerThanVantablackened Bodysuit of Nightness]

THE MOON PRINCESS: "Wehth thars heyar leight grehrnarden, Oi wehll blahwwh yaehw t' smahrthehreyens, SOHN QWÆEAN! Prahpehren yaehwserlf fohr DAEATH!"

[THE MOON PRINCESS would violate her bannishenessedness, and Sassenachstiffarupparliptiquette be damned.]

THE SUN QUEEN: "Sharll no Chaempiooohhn coame foaurth to DEFEND your SOUVAERAIGHN's honour?"

[Sudden pan across – with much clicking, clacking and even clickety-clacking, a most pride-bedecked becarapaced personage advances adjacencewise towards the Throne.]

"It is I, Proconsul Poindexter-Palxton Pincerworthy, and Ai stand uncowed and preparedful of inflicting justivengeance on those who cast down my unbesmirchable sister-creature BETTINA..." [Pincerworthy gently nudged by an aide] "... Ai say again, BERTINA... Pincerworthy! Such an affrrrrrrront..." [such an unduly extended trill on the R receives a light smatter of applause] "... cannot go unavenged, unretributionfilled, UNRECOMPOPULIREPRISIMATED!"

A slight mutter at this. Could the Proconsul have overproclaimed the teensiest smidgeon there? A muffled cry of "Stop agglutinating, you devious crab!" can be heard from an unspecified source.

"And WHO," continues the Proconsul, unabashed, "will stand up, despite her void of DECENCIPROPRIETY, for her Ladyship the most importunate MOON PRINCESS?"

[THE MOON PRINCESS is ready to nominate an Most Puissant Champion to represent her.]

THE MOON PRINCESS: "Wilt thou agreeh, thehn, SOHN QWÆEN, thaht she whosoever's CHAHMPIOHNN shahll triumph in this Cohntest shahll be the Victor? Should I prehvaeaeeil, I shahll not ohnlhy rehturn to COURT buht my COHNSOHRHT shahll be elehvated to PRIHNCEDEEM! Should YOU prehveail, I shahll leave HIGH SOHCIAETY altogether, rehnounnce my TITLE and accept a MINOR VISCOUNTESSSHIP at most!" [Gasps at such a bold stake.] "And foer MAIY reprehsaientative... mine belohved, minen cohnsohrt-to-bee, mine GEHNTELMARN, whom you thought DÆAD..." [deadpan] "The Duke."

Shock! The Duke's bescrumbled body unzips, right up to the broken and splatterified Top of the Top-Hat-O-Copter, and falls apart, revealing inside it the hale, hearty and hearthaleful body of the DUKE! Within the separating petals of the wounded Top-Hat-O-Copter can be seen the Duke's surprisalvation – a Trilby-Gyro concealed within the Top-Hat-O-Copter, in case of Emerging Emergencies! Immediately and without a moment's delay or the delay of a moment the DUKE strideth forward menacingfully, deathstaregazing at the horrified Proconsul.

"The DUKE!"

"Gosh!"

"Unbelievable preposteratiousness!"

[Other cries of horror, amazement and, according to certain sources, horrormazement as the DUKE speaks.]

"Prrrrrrroconsul PINCAEHWOURTHEEEAHH!" [Applause and other plaudits and approbation at such stupefying Upparlipronouncification.] "Have aet thee!" And without a second thought, the Duke assumes his first position, his

MIGHTY THEWS bulging, his whiskers twitchingly mobilified and his tail twisting sinuously.

[The Proconsul recoils, barely able to raise his pincers in a feeble attempt to combat such statuesqueness.]

"Dost thouh YEEIIAELD?" cries the Duke, both paws raised splendiferously as he flexeth his ripplingly rippled biceps.

"Aah! I yieald! I yeeaaeiiiiaeld!" cries out poor Pincerworthy.

[The Duke has no mercy, turning sidesaddleways and half-genuflectiokneeling as he raiseth one bemuscled arm before a bowed head. The Proconsul cries out.]

"Nae moare! Have mercaiey!"

The MOON PRINCESS sweepeth forward, HER Silkyntious Erotiphasmic BlackerThanVantablackened Bodysuit of

Nightness swirling silkinatiously, erotiphasmically and, uh, blackly around HER form; she raiseth the DUKE to her side, declaiming:

"Aaeend SO, I cohme fohrwaaaerrd... to assuhme my RAIAEGHTFUHLLLE PLAÆCE. Whaæt saæeieth thou NAAOOEEW, o SOHN QWÆEN?"

Surprise! Awe! Preposterousness! Commotionality all around! What will befall?

Lady 3PSM [narrating, infuriatingly smuggliciously]: "Find out next time you, dear Listenarrs and Viewaarrrs, tune in..."

Author reviews: Nonsense and Nonsensibility

I have never seen such a gauntlet thrown, nor one picked up by so many with such panache. To the person who opened this chain: I hate, respect and admire you in equal measure. Strangely, this is the most coherent, tonally-consistent chain I have ever participated in. I am actually so proud of every single writer in it! - *S Nolan*

"My word, what a ride! Chaos theory in action, perhaps. Never before have I see so many red underlines in a text editor." - Anonymous

Orbital Distance

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I used to dream of space and alien sky. Now I lay awake at night picturing enclosure and the orbital of my upbringing. Something about the gravity to this starlit world pulls me in the wrong direction.

Tripping over a ridge in the rock broke me from daze. Low shoulder-slung tool bag swung to pull me further off balance. Bayta, walking beside me, grabbed my free arm before I fell too far forward. Behind the reflection of her visor, I saw her smile at my near fall. I straightened, following the line of people now a few paces ahead. Four more domes came into view over the ridge. Their glass surfaces marked the horizon to the left of the path we followed. The cities within outnumbered the population of my home orbital a hundred to one. The stars above, visible at midday through sparse atmosphere, surpassed even these cities with their numbers.

We stopped by the usual out-cropping. I climbed the rock pile to the right of the path, following its groove in what I imagined to be product of a stream dried up millennia ago. Lying against the incline, I checked the oxygen level on my wrist. This suit was ancient in design, and a lack of seal integrity wasn't something I wanted to discover half-way between domes. For between domes, landscape was a trivial tessellation of the red-grey rock of which our path followed the contours. From this landscape – being generous in definition – I looked to Bayta as she sat below and to the left against the slope. With grace, she tolerated my daydreaming and propensity towards solitude for reasons I preferred not to speculate. Some things seemed better unsaid. We sat in silence for the duration of our union-required march break, hoping we'd reach the next dome before starlight dominated.

It was as I stood to continue the march when the white-flecked black sky was enveloped by white. The space above grew inward as the stars alone disappeared.

Bayta swiftly placed her gloved hand over my visor and directed me towards the rock wall. She held me down with all her weight, yet I could feel her body shaking. We were not prepared to see our ends, but after a few moments, it appeared we had misinterpreted the situation. She loosened her grip and shifted to the side. We huddled like children, staring at the sky.

"I thought it was a..." she cried, but I couldn't hear.

Bright blue spilled upwards from the horizon like fuel of an ion propulsion engine, before morphing into wisps of purple and pink that dissolved into the stars. We gaped as the sky rearranged these colours with the boundless creativity of a heavenly artist. Under my gear my sweat turned cold and my fingers numb.

Some commotion nearby caught our attention. Several men were on their knees, pointing at their exoskeletons, while another had removed his survival kit and was gesturing wildly at his chest. I checked my wrist for potential changes in the chemical makeup of our surroundings but was met only with my confused reflection. Meanwhile, Bayta retrieved her computing kit from her tool bag to make contact with the nearby domes; perhaps someone in the city knew what we had just witnessed. She paused and tapped her hand against the rugged device.

"Is it bugging out again?" I asked.

"It's not turning on at all this time."

"Let me try mine," I suggested. That should do the trick.

"Anything?"

No response necessary. I surveyed our surroundings and sighed.

“These are supposed to last months. Could the flashing have caused this?” I wondered.

“I think there’s a chance it did,” Bayta replied after a moment’s consideration. “But there’s no way of knowing when we can’t make contact with the city.”

Bayta paused to take a sip of water from her tube. “Let’s get back,” she continued, “I’d rather not be isolated out here for too long.”

I nodded my consent, and we walked briskly towards the others.

It was clear that the rest of the group was as anxious to get back as we were. A few were already hurrying along in the distance. It was policy for groups to stay together, especially under abnormal circumstances, but things were becoming lax. Arthur, our elderly geologist, was the only one still resting against a rock. He looked shaken and was taking deep breaths whilst a young woman was bent over, talking quietly to him.

“He lost his daughter in the last attack,” Bayta told me under her breath. “She was leading an excavation at North Ridge that day.”

There was nothing to say to this. When I first got here Bayta had warned me that attacks were part of life here. And whilst the loss was no less sad here than anywhere else, it was expected and therefore not discussed much.

Within five minutes we were on our way again. My heavy panting drew sympathetic looks from Bayta. But her skewed smile told me she also found the situation a little amusing. Even after two years it was still painfully obvious that I was from a different orbital.

The terrain was rough. My vision was blurred – my visor was fogging up from the ragged breath of my struggle. I sank into my thoughts of my home orbital while struggling against the steep ridges and rolling stones under my feet, trying to comfort myself of the physical strain with familiar memories. Having come to this orbital by necessity, I still often missed my home. The different twinkle of the stars, the lush vegetation.

I kept checking my wrist, waiting for the device to show some sign of life. Usually, if our equipment bugged out, the downtime was short. Any quirks of technology would resolve themselves within a few minutes. This time, it felt longer.

A dripping sensation on my neck woke me up from my determined walking daze. Condensation, from the fogged visor. My neck felt uncomfortably hot and wet, my insulation layer having been soaked. My condensed breath mixed with my sweat. An unfamiliar feeling.

The realization crept in slowly. The visor is not supposed to fog up like this. The suit has a climate control system, which should keep the visor clear, the body free from excess sweat. I feel my breath quicken with a rising panic, my body feeling hot, the scent of my sweat suddenly overwhelmingly nauseating. I feel light-headed.

Could this attack have affected the oxygen system? Did it short the electronics of the suit?

I look ahead for the others, vaguely seeing an advancing line through the fog. I can’t keep my thoughts straight. Breathing feels challenging – I can’t tell whether it’s my panic or what I’m beginning to suspect is a depleting amount of oxygen circulating in the suit. Or, devastatingly, both.

I look behind me, remembering Bayta. I can’t see her immediately, expecting her head to be level with mine, advancing steadily through the landscape. I scan the area, look down. There she is, on the ground, leaning against the edge of the ridge. One hand clutching the stone for support, one hand clutching her chest. I look for expression for signs of similar panic, but I can’t see it through the fog on her visor.

I stumble forwards, almost slipping again, my breath rasping against the visor, my surroundings slowly leaching in colour. I no longer know if the fog is within the suit or outside, and I can feel a scream slowly building. Bayta is no longer in front of me, but I see two figures standing beside each other silhouetted in the gloom ahead. The sky is pale, the ridges around me blurred, as if someone suddenly chose in that instant to wipe the canvas clean.

'Bayta—' I feel a firm hand on my shoulder that cuts my yell short, spinning me around, and there she is, her face a dull sheen, her eyes lit with a fervor I haven't seen before.

'We have to keep moving. That propulsor...it drove it back, directly towards us. We're in the middle of it.'

'Middle of what?'

Bayta shakes her head. 'Explanations can wait. Oxygen's depleting. We need to get to the dome.'

'We need to get to the dome. Oxygen's depleting. Explanations can wait.' The two figures emerge from the gloom, and I reel back in shock. Bayta, with someone else I have seen before. Diminutive in stature, fogged visor, close-cropped hair. I hear a soft gasp beside me, as my voice carries clearly, eerily similar yet somehow lifeless.

'Middle of what?'

Every muscle in my neck twitches with the animality of fear, but I devote what self-control I have left to keeping my gaze on the vague shape of Bayta's eyes, behind the now almost-opaque layer of fog blanketing her visor. Two hot blue stars in the soupy haze of a galaxy. Two petrified children lost in a sandstorm. The same as mine.

I cannot afford to take my eyes off her. Nor can she afford to take hers off me. It seems like there is a significant enough lag for us to manage to keep the distinction - you could never be too sure. Or so they said during our training.

They said we would never have to worry about this. They said this would never happen, not in lightyears. And that if it did, instinct would rule over any training they could possibly give us.

Then why is my instinct to freeze?

I feel like a child in front of a supercomputer, uselessly observing the thousands of calculations passing in and out of my brain. My throat burns furiously, violet plumes tease the edges of my vision. It's all a

whitewash watercolour, overdone, the painter wiping away what he creates as he creates it. Everything merging, bleeding, contaminating. If we aren't careful, we'll find out the definition of chaos.

I'm more aware of the shape next to me than of myself. The space between us is alive; a hot silver stream of identical electric charges pushing up against each other. I'm dumbly waiting for him to say something.

Bayta breaks the stare and begins tearing onward toward the dome, closely succeeded by the form with the close-cropped hair. I have no choice, my legs obey her and I follow. The shape with my voice starts a few seconds later. He has a strange pace - limping slightly, perhaps. I wonder what happened to me in that version - perhaps Bayta hadn't saved my fall an hour ago, and I'd come off with an injury. *He* had come off with an injury. That was not me. It could well have been, but it wasn't.

He feels dangerously close to me. I speed up a little - his clumsy footfall quickens too. At any moment he could trip and grab my arm, he could forget his training. One touch and the sky would go black. One stroke of ebony paint over our histories and our hopes, the inextricably intertwined yet impossibly independent lives of this sorry guy and mine - one apocalyptic instant, one gulp of silence, then nothing. I never thought annihilation was something I'd have to fear, and now it is more real than the hummingbird beating of my own heart.

I only hope Bayta and her companion had remembered their training, too...

Each breath is becoming increasingly more difficult now. The sensation makes my mind wander, bringing up memories of the compression fields of a travel stasis pod. A cloak of weight enveloping your body... Chest and limbs heavy... Each breath like making mountains rise and fall.

I look towards the dome. My suit is now so dense with moisture that the fog on my visor condenses drop by drop into small streams of water, leaving a striped window through which to peer. But if the visor fog is

gone, why is the dome still so blurry? I know that I knew the answer to that question, but somehow I'm unable to quite explain it to myself. Perhaps Bayta could explain it, when we take a moment to pause and catch our breath. Oh, it would be nice to stop for a rest, even just briefly.

Wow, the dome, would you look at that. It had grown on the horizon since... Well, since before. But it still seemed so far away. What a tiresome journey they were on. I couldn't quite recall why I wanted so very badly to reach the dome. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to just lie down for a nap. The dome could wait, surely.

Despite the thoughts floating in my head, something in my brain keeps my feet dragging along. But these new lead boots they gave us are far worse than what I remember getting in the past. I'll have to ask for my old boot model when I get to the dome, these ones are far too difficult to walk in.

Were those specks on the horizon coming from the dome? Or are they also going there, just like me and Bayta? It would be nice if they were coming from the dome. Maybe they have a spare exosuit I could borrow and a mobile containment field that I could change in. I don't know what those people were thinking giving me a suit this heavy.

Something is different now. I pause, trying to figure out what has changed. Why does my blinking feel so slow? I turn my head. Just rocks. Wasn't I...? Huh, maybe Bayta went on ahead...

Oh, so that's what it was. My feet were no longer moving. Because I'm on my knees instead. But why would I be kneeling? Perhaps there was something I dropped? I should probably look around to try and find it.

I blink again. When my eyelids open, I find myself staring at the world sideways. Wow, I've never seen a dome grown off the side of a cliff wall. What a strange dome this must be. All the buildings carved horizontally out of the cliff. But that's not right... The dome couldn't be sideways on a cliff.

Ah, that would be why. The world isn't sideways, I was just lying on the ground. This does feel like a nice spot for a nap. I was desperately tired. I'm sure Bayta will wake me when she catches up. Or perhaps those glimmering specks out in the haze towards the dome...

How convenient, for night to come so early. This darkness will make it so much easier to sleep. Even the stars were dimming, fading away. So much black. Time for a good rest, I think. It's too difficult to keep my eyelids open anyway...

I used to lay awake before the looming domes. I used to lay on edges and dream of alien skies. I lay in this ample solitude for a while. But I will not bury my body in this nothingness, I will bury it in the infinite. I see the outline of the domes against the sky, against its light or against the night. There is light coming from somewhere. Perhaps, I dream, from my mouth. The domes and the land blur and I softly lay in the colours around me. There is a name somewhere within me. A name for the place I am coming from, a name for the place I am heading to, a name for my companion. My skin is bare and something somewhere clicks. And then beeps. I can't feel my chest though I know it's there. And beeps. It is not sand I am laying on, it's now grass, my fingers clutch the leaves. Something pulls me up, I now stand and the domes have disappeared, the sand has disappeared, I am far away from my orbital and I can feel it calling me, again, pulling me towards the burnt crops and the dust, towards a grey patch of ash. There is a name somewhere in my mouth, I try to catch it with the teeth and my jaw locks around something small and circular, around a tube. My arm is lifted and it is now a branch, clutching the leaves. I see a face beside me, though it might be my own reflected in the visor. The face and the name
Become one.

And I recognise the face.

You are the face.

To the domes, says the mouth,

As we walk.

The silence stretches around us. I feel it tugging at me, like air escaping through a cracked suit-seal. "Bayta caught me before I fell," I find myself saying to empty space.

"We shouldn't talk," comes the reply, and I nod, ashamed.

"Avoid entangling the world-lines. I know."

Neither of us has turned our head or looked at the other since we started walking.

I look over my shoulder – left, away from the other – and see two pairs of footprints stretching out across the dust until my eyes can no longer distinguish them.

"I'd rushed ahead," he says. "She tried to help, but she was too slow."

"Sprained?"

"Yeah."

Silence, again, but now the steady tread of boot on ground is the ticking of life-support, the constant background reassurance of my home telling me everything's on track.

There's no need for us to say anything else.

I barely notice when the swell of the dome goes from distant landmark to wall in front of my face. We circle round, following the marks to the closest airlock. The dome is a thin skin separating me from life and safety and all I have to do is get back inside.

The lip of the airlock emerges around the dome's gentle curve, and then we're standing in front of it.

My hand reaches out to punch the entry key.

So does his.

The Turbine at the End of the Lane

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The air in the tram is sticky with sweat and the day's worries. It has been another scorching day, hotter than Carmen likes, and way too hot for early May. Or it would have been, at some point. The air felt thicker today though, muggier, so she feels like the heatwave will break soon, maybe even tonight. The tramway is lined with young trees, which cast the carriage in a soft flickering strobe as the late afternoon sun shines through them. There is a break in the trees, and Carmen sees the sea in the distance. She thinks for a moment she can see the dark smudge of storm clouds on the horizon, but then the break passes and the tram is passing again between the trunks of young trees.

She sways with the tram as it hums along its tracks, heading back into Margate town centre from the community farms on the town's outskirts. She sits on her own, surrounded by other workers on their way back into town who are chatting about the harvest, or the heatwave, or Sandy and Sara's newest baby. Carmen's back aches from the day's labour, but she is content, as she often is after a day spent kneeling in the fresh dirt side by side with her neighbours, planting seeds and pulling weeds for them all. She doesn't get out to the community farm enough, what with work being so busy, but every time she does she promises herself she will go again soon. She wonders how the seedlings will fare with such heat and so little rain. Just another worry. She wipes the sweat from her brow.

The tram goes dim for a second as it passes beneath the blades of Margate's biggest turbine. The word Windcatcher is painted in cursive down one side of its stem, the green and blue paint starting to peel. Carmen stares up at it in awe, caught off guard by its sudden presence, and distracted from her thoughts momentarily she catches some conversation from down the carriage.

"The townmeet is tonight, although they're saying it might be pushed back if the storm hits." A young man says. Carmen thinks she may have been thinning out carrots with him earlier that day, but she's not sure from this angle.

"Oh yeah?" says his friend. "Hope it's not a big one, Clancy says he's worried about Seabreeze. Says he's not sure how many more big storms it can take."

The carrot man snorts. "Ah but Clancy will say anything for a bit of drama. He gets bored stuck up in that turbine all day. All it does is spin."

Even though Windcatcher was the largest turbine they had on land, it was nothing compared to Seabreeze. Three-hundred metres tall and just over two-hundred metres in diameter, it dominated the view out across the sea. More importantly, it was also central to Margate's economy. It produced far more energy than the little town needed and so the excess was stored in batteries that could be sold on to inland communities who weren't as gifted with wind.

Unfortunately, Carmen knew that there was some truth behind the friend's worries. Carmen was a member of 'Clancy's Crew', as they were commonly known, and their role in town life was to look after the vital wind turbines. Carmen was only second to Clancy himself and the lead technician for Seabreeze. She knew the machine like the back of her hand, could tell you the purpose of every screw and wire but she was at a loss in the face of Seabreeze's current difficulties.

The storm story was only a white lie really. Indeed, it was true that Seabreeze could only take a couple more big storms but it was nothing to do with the weather. Seabreeze had been built to last and there was little even a hurricane could do to undermine it. No, the problem was what came with the storms.

Carmen sighs as she contemplates the coming working week. Far from the tranquillity of the community farm, where she could let her mind wander at will while her hands did the hard work, the week ahead would no doubt be spent in endless meetings, brainstorming sessions and equipment inspections – mentally draining even before considering the pressure she was under from Clancy.

The train jolts to a halt, and a cool feminine voice announces 'Shell Grotto' – Carmen's stop. The impressive station platform was designed as an homage to the mysterious cavern after which this area of the town took its name, and was decorated with thousands of shells – synthetic ones, of course, which left it but a pale imitation of the original grotto. As Carmen trudges through the streets

towards her home she can't help glancing
Northwards, out to sea, looking for clouds...

'Lights,' said Carmen, and soon afterwards 'Aircon.'

'Good evening! How was your day today?' called the familiar voice. Carmen smiled as she walked over to the ceiling-height fish tank that stood dividing her kitchen from the living area. Most people chose dogs or cats, but when Carmen had got her own place, she knew that she wanted her housebot to take the form of a carp: her grandmother's house had had a pond full of koi, and she had always found watching them incredibly calming.

'A good day, thank you – and how is everything here?'

'All in order, as always,' replied the fish, somewhat smugly. 'I've made you a pie for dinner.'

'Thank you, Wednesday – just what I need!' Wednesday turned a somersault in the water: it was clear he was pleased to see her after a long day in the house alone.

Carmen sauntered to the food hatch as it glided open, revealing a piping hot steak and kidney pie. Or at least, that is what Wednesday said it was, but it had been a long time since anyone had tasted real meat. Tasted damn good, though. She took her plate to the window, watching the thick, tan clouds tumble across the sky, though it was partially obscured by the garden climbing up the wall of the modest apartment building.

The apartment block where Carmen lived was a bit cheaper than the rest because it overlooked the cemetery. But she didn't mind; it was one of the reasons she liked it up here. Like the other buildings, the cemetery tower was covered in a blanket of greenery, interspersed with solar panels that followed the sun with the plants around them. It undulated like a gentle ocean current, and the only thing telling you it was not an ordinary apartment building was the lack of windows, and the abundance of white lilies.

Carmen shovelled another bite of pie into her mouth and chewed absent-mindedly, watching the storm clouds. Big storms were happening more and more, and it was not by chance. Clancy made it clear that none of the ordinary townfolk could know the real cause of the storms. Carmen agreed it was better not to spread fear and panic, but another part of her felt that all those people working hard in the community farms, all the solar panel engineers, the wind turbine technicians, the day labourers that kept their town ticking. They deserved to know. They needed to know. Their way of life was crumbling.

The storm clouds are closer now, and the deep, reddish core is visible bubbling underneath the paler surface. This one is going to be powerful, and its vigorous roiling worries

Carmen more than a little. It isn't low to the ground, but the worst ones never are. Its outermost clouds are already closing on Seabreeze, and it looks like it's managed to position itself so that it'll head in, over the coastline, and Windcatcher will also be in its path. Clever. Clancy's going to need her help...

(... and Clancy is having second thoughts about staying in Seabreeze's turbine tower; he taps his hand to his ear to call for help but the signal's already weakening as the storm surrounds him and he might not be able to get through. But those second thoughts might have come a little too late...)

... and she'll probably have a lot to do in the morning. But that can wait for tomorrow, she's sure; she's already beginning to yawn after the food, and it'll be best to see what Seabreeze needs with fresh eyes. She hears the storm rumbling as it gets closer, and she shudders. This one is hungry.

Growing ever wearier, Carmen takes her licked-clean plate of "steak and kidney" pie over to the counter under Wednesday's fish tank to be cleaned. She didn't need to, of course - Wednesday could have collected it. He may be a carp, but he's still a housebot. But Carmen liked to do some things herself.

"Goodnight, Wednesday," Carmen says.

"Goodnight, Carmen," replies Wednesday. "May your dreams be pleasant."

The lights switch out, and Carmen idles to her bed and slips under the thin, silken blanket, too weary to even change into her night clothes.

Even as she drifts into sleep, Carmen can't seem to shake the nagging feeling that something is different this time. But of course, she'd felt this same worry any of a dozen times before. It was nothing. Eventually, her eyelids, heavy as mountains, force themselves closed and Carmen begins to slumber. Minutes, hours pass...

And yet...?

Carmen's eyes crash open, her mind suddenly alert with worry.

Every storm had been subtly, even imperceptibly, different from the last, hadn't they been? And there were even beginning to be whispers in the town, whispers of whispers,

lurkings of rumours... That the storms are not mere storms... Whispers and rumours. If only the townsfolk knew, Carmen thinks to herself.

"Well it really seemed to hate that crop... My whole field's destroyed but not an inch more!"

"Ripped my silo straight up out of the ground! I'm just glad it didn't touch the house."

"Well by damn, we're lucky we finished reshielding that solar field. All those panels would have been chewed to pieces otherwise."

If only they knew.

But why was she so worried this time? Carmen had never been the type to be woken up by anxiety.

... it looks like it's managed to position itself so that it'll head in, over the coastline, and Windcatcher will also be in its path. Clever. ...

Carmen bolts upright, her thin blanket falling to the floor next to her bed.

"Wednesday," she says.

"... Yes, Carmen...?" Wednesday says, yawning.

"Wednesday, up now." Carmen snaps sharply.

Instantly, the lights in her apartment switch on as Wednesday drops any feigning of tiredness.

"Wednesday, display Windcatcher's monitoring cameras and diagnostics on the television."

The TV screen embedded in Carmen's wall lights up and Wednesday flutters in the water, clearly seeking approval. Carmen's mind is too focused on the television in front of her to compliment Wednesday as she normally would. After glancing at the camera feeds and seeing nothing significantly concerning, Carmen pores over the diagnostic data.

... Nothing out of the usual – that is, the usual in the midst of a storm. Carmen sighs, relieved. It looks like Windcatcher is holding in there for now. Carmen turns, and, before even taking a half step, foot still raised off the ground, she pauses.

"Wednesday," Carmen says, a hint of trepidation in her voice.

"Yes?" the fish asks.

"Pull up the Seabreeze cameras and diagnostics."

The TV goes black as Windcatcher disappears from the screen.

"Wednesday?" Carmen asks, the TV screen still stubbornly blank.

"I'm sorry, Carmen. I am unable to access the feed for the Seabreeze."

Without a second thought, Carmen throws a pair of shoes on and stuffs her arms into the sleeves of the nearest jacket. She bolts out the door, down the hall, out of the building, and into the street. Carmen runs, searching for a gap in the surrounding apartment buildings that would give her a view of the ocean to the north. In her haste, she runs clear past one of the alleys with a direct view seaward. She stumbles to a halt, desperately reversing her momentum back toward the alley. Carmen rights herself and, gasping for breath, looks to the sea.

What Carmen sees stops the breath in the throat. Her eyes travel far out to sea, way beyond the coast, to the towering spire splitting the horizon, Seabreeze. But as her gaze moves up from the base of the turbine towards the sky, Carmen finds dense clouds wrapped around the top of the turbine tower, obscuring it from view. The clouds are redder than ever before, a crimson core frothing angrily inside a dark shell.

"Oh god, there are so many more of them this time..." Carmen whispers, her voice hoarse with dread. Clancy...

Clancy stares out of the front of the turbine tower control room, its blades slicing through the air around him. His throne in the sky feels more like a submarine, a fragile shell against the pressure outside. They promised him the glass was fortified and ready for storms, but the floor to ceiling panels feel more like vanity now. He watches patterns form out of seeming chaos. Fluid flashes of red stream past the window and he can trace their paths, sinuous lines of crimson crossing over each other, avoiding collision in a frantic dance.

Unsummoned memories of childhood storms flash through his mind and he can almost feel the warm rain streaming down his face, a brief respite from choking heat. No rain strikes the glass now. The clouds are not a uniform mass, but shades of black and grey, swarming around the heart of Seabreeze. His life work has been to keep it alive, and with it the town. He had only expected to deal with rust and old parts. The manuals around him cover part replacements and blade lubrication. He clamps down on a spike of anger. How had they not expected this? Those architect-engineers of the new Margate. Photos on the wall show them with broad smiles, cutting the ribbon in front of Windcatcher. Ushering in hope. He doesn't feel hopeful now. The glass is distorting in front of his eyes.

He realises he is screaming at the storm. Swearing and pleading with the winds. The window is still standing. A grating noise rings out from above him. The red sparks dance with what seems to be glee. He can barely see through the darkness, but a huge shadow glides past the control room. Seconds later he hears the sound of a splash over his own voice. The storm contracts for a moment,

squeezing the air around him. Clancy doubles over, his lungs screaming for breath. The storm releases him in an outwards surge. The red follows it. In front of him, one pauses by the window, with what looks like a smile. The storm leaves him. The glass remains unbroken as promised, with a clear view out to the horizon again. Clancy tenses. It is not relief that grips him now, but fear. He hopes Carmen is asleep.

Carmen arrives at the shoreline just as Clancy's boat wafts into shore. She had seen it all happen a mile ago – the dark, angry storm swallowing Seabreeze, the almost comically large splash - and as the storm suddenly implausibly changed direction to leave - the ruins of Margate's pride and joy slowing to a standstill for the first time in two hundred years.

She realises that her lungs are aching. Forcing them to take in a ragged breath, her whole body shakes. Her muscles are painfully tensed up and each pounding heartbeat echoes in her ears. It barely registers when Clancy gently pulls her towards him and before she knows it, she is sobbing forcefully into his chest. Why. Why. Why.

As if hearing her thoughts, Clancy begins to speak slowly. "It's from another world." He had worn himself out through screaming, and on the boat ride back to shore, he had found a sudden realisation and calm acceptance of the truth. "I don't know how it found its way here, but I guess it makes sense seeing how everything in nature is interconnected."

Though she never fully vocalised it, a part of her had always known that these weren't simply storms. Clancy gently let go of her, and she follows him to sit facing the sea. The sun was beginning to set, and Seabreeze is now a darkened silhouette against the deep orange sky. In that moment, she finds herself once again captured by the beauty of it all, and she almost forgets the anger and loss still staining her cheeks.

"We knew long ago that the Earth is a closed system. What we do here affects someone else far away." Carmen remembered those lessons from school. Her history teacher had taught them about how the world leaders had decided to put aside their trivial differences and petty competitions in order to protect the environment. "But perhaps our Earth is part of a system too. We made all the right choices here. But maybe on another Earth, they didn't. Maybe they didn't work together. Maybe they ignored the inconvenient science so that they could somehow momentarily triumph over each other. Perhaps even now, they aren't willing to admit that they're wrong. These storms..." He paused, as they both watched the last of the sunset fade. Her breathing stopped again as she braced to hear the uncomfortable truth. "These storms are somehow the embodiment of all their hatred, their anger, their jealousy."

As Clancy's words wash over her, Carmen digs her fingers into the pebbles of the beach, as if trying to release the tension from her body and his words into the very ground on which she sits. Something pulls at her thoughts, like the sea lapping against her boots, a thought that was somehow both comforting and disturbing. Clancy seems to sense her stirring, seems to read the direction her mind had taken. He nods, and gives the thought a voice, clear and powerful.

"The storms were always precise. Too precise. We knew that. It targets our crops, our solar panels, our turbines. Devastates them. But people, houses, even housebots? How often do we see or hear of serious harm and damage? The storms know their goal, and it is not us. It never has been..."

Clancy trails off into silence. Carmen voices the conclusion with a whispered breath so hushed that, barely escaping her mouth, it is lost in a moment to the breezes and the sounds of the dying storm. "It's the world that we created."

No more words are needed. Bathed in the orange light of the setting sun, a weary smile flickers upon Carmen's lips. Storms from another world. It seems unbelievable. And yet, she does believe; she can feel the truth of Clancy's claim. She wonders whether, on these other Earths, there are also other Carmens, other Clancys, even other Margates and Shell Grottos. She wonders about their lives and about their worlds. She wonders how they face the storms. She wonders how the storms make their fateful crossing into her own world.

The silhouette of Seabreeze is now nearly indistinguishable from the darkening sky, the last glimpses of the sun granting a halo to the horizon and illuminating the base of the vast turbine.

Blink.

The dim light around the base of Seabreeze flickers. Carmen rubs at her eyes, eyelids feeling heavy with tiredness and the day's disquiet.

Blink.

The light flickers again. But Carmen was sure she hadn't blinked again...

Blink.

No. She definitely hadn't blinked then. Perhaps a trick of the light...

Blink.

Clancy rose to his feet. He had noticed, too. Carmen also rises, squinting as much as she could in the darkness. Something is out there, around the turbine. And it is... Moving towards the shore...

"No," whispers Clancy. "A remnant from the storm."

Already the clouds began diving towards the shore, the red miasma within lightening to oranges and bloodied mustards.

Straight towards *Windcatcher*.

The beach was enveloped in a gale almost immediately.

Clancy hobbled back up to his feet and ran.

"Any cover at all," he gasped. "Right now."

Carmen overtook him quickly and they dived down the first alleyway after the steps from the beach had sped underneath them. Carmen descended another flight of stairs and hammered on a stranger's basement-level door.

"Please! Please! We need cover!"

Please, someone, be home.

Clancy stumbled into view at the top of the stairs. He was more exhausted than he had let on.

A sudden blast of wind whipped at Clancy from behind, and launched him down the stairs. He flailed through the air, and Carmen reached in vain to try and protect his landing.

A sickening crack echoed in the alleyway.

The door to the basement opened to a kind, dumpy woman.

With her help, Carmen dragged Clancy into the stranger's home. His arm was clearly broken, but thankfully Clancy continued to steal shallow breaths.

In the morning, the storm was gone.

Thanking their patron and giving her every currency in her pocket for her trouble, Carmen assisted Clancy out onto the street, now quietly warm in morning sunshine.

Windcatcher stood proud, but the debris scattered across the hillside stopped mere metres from its base.

Clancy winced every few paces from his haphazardly bandaged arm. Clearly, their first trip was to the hospital.

Carmen began crying silently as they walked. Clancy grinned through his pain.

"I know. I'm glad that I'm alive too."

"She continued, "What can we even try to do?"

But what now? We tell people, sure, but what then? We don't understand any of this." Carmen mumbled.

A pause.

A sad smile crossed Clancy's face.

"We survive."

Where's Atlas when you need him?

Anonymous, BingBing Shi, Joanna C, Dan Scott, soma, Ed Heaney, Laura Araujo de Fritas

It was beautiful, that night. The night the Finality occurred.

For the first time in over twenty standard years, the shooting stars had come to Odrex. The residents of the only habitation rig on the planet, Alcanthis, had known of the coming shower for quite some time, and on the day it finally arrived a national holiday was declared. That evening, the floating islands were packed even before moonset, the transporters still flying to and from as more and more people came from the rig on the ocean far below, all hoping to view the spectacle.

"I can't believe this!" Gildain grumbled as he and Jenora made their way up to the transporter, the computer inside already programmed to fly them to their own private island. "I mean, a holiday has been declared for the whole rig! Even the drillers have got time off, and yet father's gone off-planet for 'essential work'. Essential! What's so essential that he has to miss the shooting stars?" He continued to complain as they were taken up to the island, and Jenora sighed and glared at him, finally getting him to shut up. Inwardly, though, she agreed with her brother. *It was strange that their father had work today, when he seemed to spend most of his time doing – as far as she could tell – essentially nothing, and the rest of his time trying to get out of doing that. In fact, she thought, musing to herself, it seems almost... suspicious. But why on Odrex would he lie to us? Her train of thoughts derailed as they arrived at their island, the computer announcing that they had docked in a loud, nasal voice. Jenora followed her brother out, a smile beginning to appear on her face as she anticipated the display to come.*

The light of the shooting stars filled the night sky. They walked through the corridor between transporter and island, standing in the lawn outside their crystalline house to have a better view. Every star flying through the sky and eventually disappearing on the horizon of the sea, they heard the exciting yelling coming over from the nearby islands.

It was so romantic, Jenora thought. She still remembered many years ago, when she was child, she was told by mom that people lucky enough to see shooting stars are blessed. Now, she closed her eyes and lowered her head, speaking her secret wish in a whisper, as though this could be heard by mother in heaven. Suddenly, she was interrupted by her brother's shouting.

"What's that?" said Gildain, pointing at a large golden fiery ball that was falling down from the shining sky, with a voice of astonishment.

Jenora then heard a crash behind her. When she turned her head, ashes, dust and smoke arose from the ground the object hit. The scene in front of her was blurred, but then, in a few seconds, there was a face staring down at her from where the fires of the ball had dimmed, nearly extinguished. A face with a long sheet of silvery-blond hair and large, deep blue eyes. The face of...

"Father!" Jenora cried, sprinting over to him. Gildain followed in close pursuit. Coils of smoke receded to reveal the wreckage of the escape pod behind him, glowing hot inside its shallow crater.

"Quick, children, you must follow me."

"Why? Father! What's happening?" Jenora implored, concerned by the seriousness of her father's tone, but he had already turned and set off towards the house.

"One of those shooting stars wasn't a shooting star," he announced. Then with a grave glance behind him: "The islands are going to fall."

At those words, Jenora felt her heart skip and vision narrow. *Impossible, she thought, as they passed through the front door. Surely it wasn't possible? Through the atrium. What could have that power? Down the hall. Into the library. By Odrex's ocean! Her father frantically punched a keycode behind his desk. Think of all the people! A circular panel on the floor slid away to reveal a ladder.*

Suddenly, a quake rocked the island and snapped Jenora back to the present. Books were thrown from shelves, but instead of dropping to the floor they hung in the air, defying gravity. Jenora felt a sickening lurch in her stomach as her hair floated up around her head.

"Grab onto something!" their father shouted. Jenora gripped onto a marble statue whilst Gildain caught hold of a large globe. Their father kicked off his desk and got hold of the top rung of the ladder. Jenora realised with horror that Gildain's globe wasn't fastened to the floor and was floating into the air with him.

"Throw the globe!" Jenora shouted. Gildain understood her meaning and tossed the now weightless orb behind him, which went ricocheting off

the walls. It imparted just enough momentum to get him within reach of their father, who helped him scramble down the hatch. As they moved through the ladderway, it was only Gildain's long familiarity with the house that told him which way was down and which up, and even then he couldn't be sure any longer that he was right. He knew where they were coming to, though, and so did Jenora.

"Are they still there?" she called ahead, as their father threw open another hatch and began to pull himself through.

"Yes! No... Only two." His face gave nothing away of whether this was better or worse than he had expected. Emerging from the hatch last, Gildain saw the situation for himself: two of the usual four kitecycles were still clamped to their racks, despite the clutching wind that now blew across the tumbling island. Jenora's and Father's were gone: those left were Mother's and – barely touched since the day it was bought – his own. Father was an awkward fit on Mother's cycle, but a workable one; Jenora, grown rangy over the past year, had no hope of operating Gildain's, and had already perched herself as securely as she could manage behind her father on the larger machine. She looked over to her brother.

"Follow us! Remember, let the kite do all the work, and if you get into trouble..." She and Father whipped into the sky as he kicked the clamping lever out. "*Let go!*"

Gildain craned his neck to keep sight of the cycle's dim safety lights – easy enough for now against the flat Alcanthian night, but there was only one option to stop them from fading out of his view.

There was a reason Gildain's kitecycle had gone largely untouched – he was terrified of the wretched things, a fear of heights being no small contributor to that terror. Sure, their house was built on an island that floated hundreds of meters off the ground... But it at least was relatively fixed in place (current plummeting aside) and felt like solid ground. Gildain could never stomach going to an island's edge, something the rest of Odrex's inhabitants wouldn't have thought twice about. The kitecycles, on the other hand, would whip about the sky almost of their own accord. Kites had limited ability to control their exact course and were left mostly at the mercy of the skystreams. Gildain was not fond of them, not fond at all. Not of kites, not of heights, and not of the skystreams.

It might come as little surprise, however, that the current situation seemed to overrule Gildain's fears. After all, a leading protagonist can't exactly plummet to their death in a formerly-floating-presently-falling island home so shortly after being introduced. A poor

plot that would be...

Gildain swiftly mounted himself on his kitecycle (though still taking the time to strap himself in) and, more gingerly than the occasion demanded, disengaged the clamping lever.

If Gildain had more experience with the kites, he'd have remembered to disengage the clamp *after inhaling and before exhaling rather than the other way around. Instead, as he was ripped out of the house's kitebay and torn across the sky, he tried desperately to gasp in a breath... But to no avail. The pressure on his chest and the air whipping around him offered little sympathy for his now oxygen-starving lungs. Had he had the breath for it, Gildain would likely have screamed in terror. His sister, however, did that for him.*

"GILDAIN!" Jenora screamed with dread as she saw her brother spiraling out of control. "Father! We have to help him!" Her face would be streaked with tears if not for the blustering winds. Instead, the air behind her glimmered with the glistening sparkles of sadness. "He's too tense, the kite won't stay up if he keeps fighting it so hard!"

"I can't turn around!" Her father's gruff voice carried back to her, barely audible over the deafening air around them. "The turbulence from the islands is making the air currents impossible to fight! All I can do is keep us airborne, Gildain will have to manage himself."

In another context, the sight unfolding before Jenora's eyes might have been awe inspiring. Hundreds of islands, some smaller, some larger, all falling to the surface of Odrex with unsettling grace. They weren't quite in freefall as they were descending at an unnaturally slow (albeit still lethal) pace. The sky above shone resolutely with the streaking light of shooting stars. It really was quite surreal, almost beautiful.

Of course, that other context, the one where the sight might have been beautiful, would not have included her brother's current downward spiral. She screamed as loudly as she could manage, willing that Gildain might by some miracle hear her at such a great distance.

"Gildain, you have to let go! Let the kite fly itself!" Jenora bellowed.

Unfortunately for Gildain, no amount of willpower on Jenora's part could make her voice heard over the immense noise around them. Many of the islands had already begun striking the planet's surface, explosions of noise tearing through the night sky and fracturing the scene's former artful tranquillity.

Gildain, whether out of fear or inexperience or oxygen-deprivation-induced sloppiness, continued fighting his kitecycle for control to the very end. The kite, unable to remain aloft with him wrestling for control, spiraled ever closer to Odrex.

“GILDAIN!” Jenora shrieked.

Gildain hit the ground with a crunch and a splatter, dead on impact. The island which fell upon him eliminated any doubt in Jenora’s mind that her brother might have survived the “landing.”

It would have been poor plot for him to have died in his island home. But plummeting to his death because of kiting inexperience brought about by a fear of open heights, death cherry-topped by an island-crater burial site? Exceptional plot element.

Albeit an exceptional plot element, such a presumption of death based on Jenora’s line of sight, compromised by speed, moist eyes, and hundreds of meters of distance is much too simplistic a way to seal Gildain’s fate. Switching frame of mind from one sibling to the other, Gildain opened his eyes and blinked several times, hoping to clear his eyes. Nothing. Deep black. Darkness. *Did I die? he thought to himself, but no I can feel something. All around him, Gildain grazed the ground with his hands, rustling pebbles and soft, pliable dirt. He shifted his right leg in an effort to stand and explore further and yelped in pain. Previously unnoticed, his right leg from knee down now sent shooting arrows of pain up his body. Gildain blindly shuffled his hand down his leg, tension brewing in his head anticipating what he might find. Groping a little past his knee, Gildain grazed some body part so painful he shrieked again and fell over, jerking his hand back.*

Suddenly, Gildain’s eyes seared with pain as a light above him flicked on. He kept his eyes shut as he waited for his pupils to adjust and continued hearing little clicks one by one, fading into the distance on his left. Gingerly, he squinted his eyes open and looking to his left, saw a long, red-clay passageway extending as far as his eyes could absorb. He couldn’t quite comprehend the existence of this tunnel, clearly constructed and tooled likely by humans. *Is this a dream or some version of an afterlife?, he mused, bemused. The only humans he was aware of on Odrex were those who worked on the ocean rig and inhabited the floating islands. He also couldn’t quite place how he could’ve ended up here if he was indeed alive. Rewinding his memories, the only sensations he could recall were those of utmost terror, dizziness, and a hammering heart as his world spiraled with the kitecycle. He could only assume he lost consciousness*

somewhere in the descent. With a shock of inspiration, Gildain looked up. A gaping hole twice the width of his body opened on to where he now lay. Little was visible in the hole with the tunnels’ yellow lights but shadows of rungs lining the upward tunnel could be elucidated. Slightly swaying at the hole opening was a circular door of some sort, likely flung open by his impact. He could only assume on impact, he miraculously fell into this hole, clearly fashioned by man for what may have been emergency escape purposes, and somehow ended up mostly intact and alive.

Having gained some understanding of his physical surroundings, Gildain grunted as he used his arms and one intact leg to scramble up the wall to a standing position. Only then did he notice at eye-level now a strange symbol on the red-clay wall opposite him. It seemed to be engraved but also retained a slight glow, as if powered by something. He hopped closer, switching his lean from one wall to the other, and cautiously traced the symbol, a circle with various length spokes radiating out, some connected to others in an unidentifiable pattern. After tracing through a certain set of spokes, the symbol suddenly flashed brightly and underneath, to Gildain’s bewilderment, a set of connected lines began engraving themselves. The engraving ended with a filled-in circle and an unfilled circle placed at different points along the lines. As soon as the engraving seemingly finished, Gildain jerked as he heard a rumble travel down the tunnel from his left. It felt as if something heavy was being dragged across the ground, sending vibrations deep into the tunnel foundation around it. Abruptly, it stopped. Gildain glanced back at the symbol. No more adjustments were being made to the engraving but the new line drawn with the filled-in circle was pulsing. He looked closer and realized that line connected to another line to the left of the circle. That line went upwards and after a couple of turns led to the unfilled circle. *A map!? Could the rumble have been a passageway opening? Hardly able to believe his luck, Gildain hurriedly began trying to commit the map to memory with a glimmer of newfound hope.*

While a downward spiralling fall accompanied by the tragic death of one of the two main protagonists may be an exceptional plot element, a story worth being told must include something out of the ordinary, something extraordinary. *A deus ex machina provided by the existence of a manmade, inexplicably advanced tunnel system and the implication of a whole unknown civilization? That may just hit the spot.*

It was just too convenient. Too many coincidences. But Gildain, wracked with pain, was in no state to notice the twists of fortune piling up – he was already

cursing his bad fortune, rather than giving thanks for his miraculous survival...

“Stay balanced!” Jenora heard her father shout. “Don't worry about Gildain!”

Jenora was for a moment horrified. Though it was concise and simple, it just hadn't sounded urgent. How could he be so carefree – nonchalant, even – about the fate of his son? But there was a note of such supreme confidence, as if all this were perfectly and neatly planned, that a different sort of chill swept over her. How could he be so utterly sure that Gildain was safe? What did he know that she – that nobody else on Odrex – could never have known?

Certainty coalesced in her mind as her father moved smoothly left and down... and within moments, a huge chunk of island plummeted past her, barely missing their kite and sending them into a tumble. Her father's hands did something fleet and barely visible, and somehow, as if nothing had happened they had recovered. Surely it was far, far more by luck than judgement. Or was it luck? The panic, the fleeting instant where it seemed all was lost, the near-impossible recovery... and yet her father had barely moved a muscle.

“Be careful, Jenora!” he called out to her. “We've already had one too many near misses today!”

“Near miss?!” she shrieked, losing control for a moment. “Gildain's...”

She somehow couldn't hear herself over her father's words, coming to impossibly sharp and clear through the tumult of the air. “Gildain has his own challenge to overcome, his own battle to fight. But that is for us to worry about another day... Jenora! Watch out!”

But Jenora had already started reacting, twisting in her

precarious perch, though she didn't know why and hadn't seen anything. Her movement changed the balance of the kitecycle and they swept down in a wide arc, allowing a panorama of slow destruction to swing majestically around them. She didn't know what it was that they had avoided, or how she knew with such clarity that it was her movement which had saved them from the threat she hadn't even seen. Her path was being written for her, an exciting – perhaps even heroic - set-piece for a hypothetical observer, but with something strangely missing from her own first-person view. She was left in a strange, contradictory state between uncomprehending terror and stoic, fatalistic calm.

“Father?” she asked, and this time it was her side of the dialogue which cut so sharply through winds which should surely have drowned it out. “I have a question for you.”

“Is now really the time, Jenora?” But it still sounded too detached to convince her.

“Does anything I'm doing right now matter?”

“What could you possibly mean by that?”

“Father, if I jumped off the kite now, I'd survive, wouldn't I? I don't know how. You'd catch me. Or I'd somehow follow a path to the ground which resulted in a clean landing, though there'd be ever so many close shaves. But I can't test that, because that wouldn't be what's needed, would it?”

Her father paused, and somehow she knew there was a smile on his face.

“I have something very interesting to tell you, Jenora. Maybe you'll make sense of it. Maybe you won't remember it. Who can say?”

Jenora knew exactly who could say.

One Wedding and a Fungal

Evan Indigo, Nikola Georgiev, Anonymous, Isaac, Yuhang Xie

“You found anything yet, hun?”

Axyl rolled his eyes as he waded through the overgrowth, and grabbed the radio from his belt. He was a bit pissed off.

“No Jacobi, nothing yet. Just a load of weird pink leaves and rocks.”

They were already going to be late for the wedding on Sylon 4, and this extra stop didn't help. Nor did it feel entirely necessary. If Jacobi had wanted to bring flowers, he should have brought some from home, not made them stop at some random planet on route. And it had taken ages to find something properly hospitable that wasn't light years away.

“Well they don't have to be, like, the nicest flowers ever. Some leafy bouquets can be quite impressive.” Came Jacobi's voice over the radio.

“No no, we've come all this way, we're going to find a nice big bunch of flowers for you.” Axyl said, through slightly gritted teeth. He was answered only by static, so he walked on in silence.

Although it wasn't really silence. The alien forest around him was thick with the humming and buzzing of stars-knows-what, and off to his left somewhere there was definitely running water. Above him stretched a canopy of tree-like things, broad scaly leaves hanging off tall straight trunks that shot out of the ground like spears. Around his feet were cushiony, pillowy caps of things that could have been mushrooms. The ships log had confirmed that this planet was still in its primordial stages, but he still didn't love being out of the ship on a strange world.

As Axyl moved further through the flora, his discomfort grew. He had the distinct feeling that something was moving through the undergrowth around him, but whenever he looked, he couldn't see anything beyond the pale pink mushroom caps. And he still couldn't for the life of him see any flowers to satisfy Jacobi. He took out his

radio.

“Okay Jacobi, this is ridiculous. I can't find any stupid flowers, I'm going to come back to the ship. We can just give them some credits or something.” He paused. “Sorry.”

And then he turned.

And there blocking the path behind him – the path Axyl had just made through the alien forest – was the eerie, pale pink form of a giant mushroom, at least the height of Axyl's chest. It definitely hadn't been there a moment ago.

The mushroom oozed translucent orange sludge at its base, seeping into the cracks of the ground, and dissolving the tiny mushrooms in its wake.

“Jacobi, I'm being approached by some form of... shroom? Check my shoulder cam.”

Axyl retreated carefully, eyes fixed on the mysterious entity as it slid toward him.

“These don't seem to be in the planetary docs. In fact, it doesn't match anything we've seen so far.”

“That's really great, but um, there's more.”

Axyl pivoted so Jacobi could see six mushrooms that had now joined the party. He expanded his arm blade and retrieved his sonic weapon. Up close the mysterious fungal entities pulsed and moisture dripped from their hefty pink caps. Some of their ooze squirted onto his suit – too close for comfort.

Axyl blasted the mushroom that had followed his trail, leaving a clean hole through it. They all instantly stopped their advance.

“Get out of there. This is way too weird,” Jacobi commanded.

Axyl skirted around the damaged mushroom, skipping to avoid the bubbling orange substance that was pooling on the alien earth around him, and sprinted off directly towards the ship. His steps were heavy; a large container meant for sampling flora rattled on his back.

With some distance between him and the foreign fungi, he stopped to catch his breath whilst leaning against a tree. His visor had fogged up, so he forced some new air into his helmet.

“Almost there, have the door open,” requested Axyl.

“Got you.”

Ready to continue, he pushed himself off the tree for additional speed but was thrown back towards it. His hand had become embedded within the bark. No amount of frantic pulling helped.

“Jacobi, I’m stuck.”

Silence. He used his leg to push against the tree, but only strained his shoulder.

“Ahem, Jacobi, I need your help. Hello?”

He attempted to saw the tree with his arm blade, but the metal strained against the tree’s purple skin. He considered a blast of his sonic weapon but figured the energy vibrating through the tree into his arm would shatter his bones. He could see more mushroom beings nearby, deliberately making their way towards him.

“Jacobi!” he cried out, louder now, his coolness replaced with fear. Further attempts to free his arm were unsuccessful; in fact, his arm seemed to sink deeper the more he struggled. “Get me out of here Jacobi!”

“I’m coming, I’m coming, hold on!”

“Hold on? That’s exactly what I’m trying not to do, you sunnuvabitch!”

The ship’s outer door slid shut, meaning Jacobi had suited up and was using the airlock. The shrooms were close now. Though they had no facial features, Axyl swore that their caps were angled menacingly downwards. He scrambled his feet further away, as the orange sludge continued its advance.

Suddenly, the ship’s outer door snapped open and a flash erupted from inside. An incendiary bullet streaked through the air, inches above Axyl’s head, striking the trunk of the tree and spewing forth a burst of flame.

“Are you trying to kill me?” Axyl exclaimed, as he squirmed away from the fire working its way down the trunk, towards his swallowed arm. The shrooms had temporarily halted their advance.

“Relax, your suit will protect you,” Jacobi assured him, firing a few sonic bolts into the crowd. Sure enough, as the flames began to lick at

his hand, Axyl felt the tree’s grip loosen. A strong tug freed his arm, and he felt the blood rush back into his fingers.

“Let’s go, let’s go,” he shouted, half-running, half-tripping his way back to the ship. There were dozens of mushrooms now, seemingly everywhere. Every sonic bolt that struck home only allowed another shroom to take its place.

Axyl threw himself into the ship and Jacobi stepped in behind him, sending off a few final blasts to hold back the horde before the doors slammed shut. For a few moments, as a gentle hiss signalled the air being replaced, they felt the craft shake. But the doors held strong. When the green light flashed, both threw off their helmets and looked at each other.

“Let’s hope they’re not serving mushrooms at the wedding,” Jacobi quipped. Axyl gave him a punch to the shoulder, then grinned.

Little did they know, as the craft lifted out of the swamp, of the millions of microscopic spores that had followed them inside...

Once in orbit, the world’s surface held an eerie presence not noticed on descent. Stare long enough at the mosaic of blue and green below, and the face which stared back up seemed almost sentient. Either by delusion or the world’s terraformer’s design, the twists of land and ocean resolved a snarling mouth whose teeth they had escaped between. Their craft had emerged unconsumed – or so a cursory inspection would imply.

Jacobi slumped in his chair. Axyl did likewise, his back turned to the planetscape through inch-thick glass. Jacobi instructed the ship to take them onward, their deviation shorter than Axyl had first feared.

“What do you think?” Axyl opened his hand.

“Those aren’t flowers,” Jacobi chastised.

Axyl dropped the shoots onto the navigation terminal. “I grabbed them whilst being chased by extra-terrestrial fungi, it wasn’t the moment to be pedantic.”

Jacobi shrugged, swept them into his grasp and arranged them as he spoke. “They come with a story, I suppose that counts for originality – if not the most beautiful of plants.”

Axyl had lost interest in the subject, and watched the stars streak past in hyperspace. The question of weddings and promptness seemed lost to reality. Now the adrenaline was flushed

from circulation, speculation about what alternate fate could have befallen him no longer felt idle. He brought up the visual recordings and had them projected in front of the stars, the multiplicity of angles from ship and shoulder cam underlining the closeness of his escape. He must have played the recordings back ten times, only then satisfied that his self of an hour ago had made it out alive. He left the projection paused at the moment he'd passed the door's threshold.

It was by luck he spotted it. So switching to a live feed of the airlock compartment, his blood ran cold.

Always the most dismissive and usually the least observant, such details he would normally miss. It didn't feel like it in the moment, but retrospect would tell him the stars outside had conspired in revealing this to him. He stood staring at the airlock feed for close to a minute before he could break eye contact even for a second. When he did, he turned to Jacobi who must have read the horror held in the paleness of his complexion. Jacobi's expression became mirror to Axyl's as he too became fixated on the feed.

In wordless agreement they both stood, each daring the other to look through the viewport first. Each step towards the inner airlock door felt like a step towards the gallows, the sickly green coming into view of the viewport's circular aperture. They remained two metres from the door and its viewport, uncertain if the greater terror was implication of rate at which the spores had proliferated, or visage of the hominid-like figure the spores had contrived to give life.

Its voice was neither human nor ghost. Yet there it stood, forgery of human life silhouetted against a backdrop of space and stars.

A raspy shriek shook the intercoms. The sound was enough to break Axyl's dread into adrenaline. He dashed for the console, pulling Jacobi along behind him. Axyl stopped at the airlock controls and smashed buttons in quick succession. The sharp hiss of the airlock depressurising into the deep space beyond, brought him a quick breath. They looked at the screen. The creature was gone, expelled into oblivion.

Axyl was gripping Jacobi's hand.

"What was that?" Jacobi said. His voice was trembling.

"I... I've never seen anything like it. Was it an alien?" Axyl said. They were told that the Universe was empty. Humans were the only intelligent life. But whatever that was in their airlock. It definitely had the intent of doing something. Axyl could see it, feel it. The smooth surface of the fungal head. It felt like it was looking at them.

Jacobi pulled Axyl into an embrace. Axyl exhaled a shaky breath.

"Well, it's gone now, whatever it is," Jacobi said.

Axyl wrapped his arms around Jacobi. He was about to say something quirky, something to lighten the mood. But his eyes fell onto the navigation terminal.

The handful of pink shoots were gone too.

"Where did they go?" Axyl pulled away.

"The shoots."

"I didn't move th-," Jacobi said.

The sound of wood creaking broke his sentence. From underneath the console, branches grew incredibly fast towards them. It wrapped around Jacobi's leg, pulling him away.

"Axyl!" he yelled.

Axyl grabbed his blade; it hummed to life. A single cut was enough to sever the young branch. Yet it started growing again. The branches snapped towards them. Axyl pulled Jacobi to his feet. They sprinted for the corridor. Branches snaked across the floor. His foot hit a branch and suddenly he was falling. Axyl hit the floor hard. Pain shot up his nose. Warm blood began to drip. Jacobi was yelling his name. But it felt distant.

He thrashed with his blade, cutting whatever branch came close. But there were too many. It had grabbed his legs. And was wrapping around his torso. Tiny mushrooms grew on the wood, oozing drops of orange slime. A branch swung close to his head. Axyl swung at it and missed. A cloud of orange spores exploded from the mushrooms. He coughed as the particles hit his throat.

Through his blurred vision, he saw Jacobi over him and the branches that were wrapped around him. In Jacobi's only free hand was the unmistakable red barrel of the incendiary gun.

"Cover yourself!" Jacobi yelled before bursting into a fit of coughs.

Axyl threw his arms over his face. The heat was intense. The light was blinding.

Patulia smoothed the silken folds of her wedding dress as she kissed the cheeks of her next guests.

“My goodness, this is perfect!” she said to Jacobi, her brother, who was holding out a huge bunch of flowers with slender stems and pink petals resembling cartoon hearts. “My spouses will love to have this in our entrance-room, thank you.”

Jacobi and Axyl smiled at her but said nothing, not even a quip. Patulia would have

made a comment about it but there were so many more guests to greet.

“You boys look like your solar shields need replacing,” she said instead and laughed. They did look a bit pink, perhaps burnt from the interstellar travel. “Go on inside, I’ll talk to later.”

Jacobi and Axyl did just that.

As the soon-to-be-wedded laughed and danced and the guests drank with merriment, no one noticed the small mushrooms beginning to grow about the hall. Each one was so smooth and pink except for a ragged cut in the stems that could, almost, be mistaken for a smirk.

The Ballad of the Bonnie Selkie Scientist

Hannah, Paulinia, Maya, Hannah Hens, My, Anonymous, Dan Scott

Foreword

So...how to tell this story. I'm sure all of you who have taken the inclination to pick up this book most likely hold a certain expectation towards its contents. You are probably expecting a calm and collected log of events that lead to the discovery you've no doubt already read in 'The Lancelot'. You are probably expecting risk assessments, careful planning and the execution of said plan in a dignified and civilised manner.

For those of you that have the misfortune of knowing me personally will know that I am rarely dignified and only occasionally capable of civilised conversation.

But to my defence this is science- and science is messy by its very nature. If you are hoping for a clinical summary of our findings please might I refer you to our peer-reviewed article 'Proof of Intelligence? The stormy political climate of the Blue Men of the Minch' by *Brodie et al 2017*.

But if you would like the uncensored version of how a zoologist studying the breeding colonies of the Boobrie entangled herself in the politics of storm kelpie society then by all means please read on.

**Expedition Log, Date: 26-05-2015, Time: 15.00,
Location: Rùm- Inner Hebrides**

We have arrived on the Isle of Rùm after a truly gruelling journey across the sea. We left the port of Ullapool on the mainland to travel by ferry to Barra where we met our chartered ship 'The Fairest'. From there we spent another three hours

sailing to Rùm. I could not tell you more for I spent most of that time bent over the railing and trying to keep my breakfast from making a guest appearance. I understand that my mother being a selkie ought to give me some protection against sea sickness. But with my sample of $n=1$, I can tell you that is very much not the case at all.

I'm sure I could have, in theory, slipped into my coat and swam the distance with far less discomfort. But I refuse to give any man the chance at snatching it and forcing me to be his wife- there is no law out here in the Hebrides from what I have been repeatedly told. My coat is safely locked away back in Edinburgh; and damn my mother or anyone else who thinks it is unbecoming for a selkie to walk on land without her coat at hand.

But I digress.

We came ashore about an hour ago and my stomach has still not entirely returned to me. Selma has used her best magics to try and soothe the nausea, but neither those nor the travel sickness pills I swallowed seemed to have done me much good. It would seem that for all that I am drawn to the sea and its creatures- the sea does not love me...

Enough of my woes, not much has happened since we landed. Or nothing I've noticed at least. So, while we have a quiet moment, I had probably best make a note of all those on our team.

There is of course the aforementioned Selma, she is a síth who is employed by the RSPB to monitor Broobie populations in the wild. It was her efforts in tagging the captured birds that lead us to the

Hebrides. She is much younger than me sort of mid-twenties with all that hope and joy for a life of science. She has yet to learn of the paperwork involved in publishing anything scientific. But she's sweet, can do things with SkyPhones that even I can't wrap my head around and has a genuine love for the ragged broken cliffs of the Hebridean islands.

In case you haven't guessed, Selma is my favourite.

The others in our crew are as follows:

- Brennus, the captain of our ship. He's a finman, which is to say he has this eerie fishscale sheen to his skin. He's damn tall too, easily over a head taller than me so that he can't help but loom whenever he speaks to you. I am only moderately afraid of him. (For those of you who don't know, selkies and finfolk aren't known to get on particularly well as us selkies make prize wives for finman. This is however complete and utter gossip and, in my experience, entirely untrue. But at the time, I must confess I did not treat our captain with all the respect and fairness he deserves.)
- Innis, Brennus' wife and the ship's navigator. She is a lovely woman whom Brennus dotes on. She's in charge of setting the ship's course as well as onboard repairs. That woman could break me in half if she had the mind to do- when I tell you she's built like an ox it is not an exaggeration. She's a mainlander but I haven't learnt much else.
- Hefin, my PhD student who is studying conservation methods in migrating birds. He's a good lad, although not entirely functionally competent when it comes to keeping oneself fed and watered. He spent the entire journey over here complaining about how the sea spray hurt his delicate rabbit ears. I fear he will not enjoy this trip nearly as much as he hoped.

We are so far a small crew. I prefer it that way- less names to remember and inevitably forget. I am much better at memorising different species

then I am at memorising different people.

We do not intend to spend too long here in Rùm, we are headed for an unnamed island in the Outer Islands once the weather clears up. That is where Selma's trackers appear to be leading us at least. My theories about the breeding habits of boobrie's have already been disproven- I imagined that considering the birds rely on primarily ruminants (by this I mean calves, ewes and roe deer) for nutrition that they would roost much closer to mainland Scotland. They must have some other kind of food source instead. My other theory about the forming of lifelong pairs has yet to be assessed. I do hope we come across them soon so I can start collecting data.

But to get the island, we'll have to cross the Minch. A treacherous stretch of water known for its storms and rough waves. I do hope Selma has some stronger healing spells to help me through it or I fear I may take a frying pan to my own head to spare myself the suffering.

I am afraid I am being called to help set up our camp. I shall write more once we have arrived at our island.

Expedition Log, Date: 30-05-2015, Time: 19.00, Location: Unnamed- Outer Hebrides

I finally have something worthwhile to write about. We have our first sighting of boobries today. Such magnificent creatures- as tall as an average child with thick serrated bills perfect for butchering carcasses. Like the kind you find on a great eagle if it consummated with a breadknife. There are only three pairs here on the island and a fourth lone bird whom I shall hope is waiting for his partner. I assume that it is a 'he', for the males of the species are significantly smaller with bright blood red eyes and sweeping white markings down his neck. The females typically have markings that are confined to the backs of their wings and tail.

Only one of the birds appears to be on an egg at the moment. With their size and place towards the top of the foodchain, they do not bother to build precarious nests on cliff faces with the other seabirds. They instead appear to collect seaweed

to make little round beds for their egg in sheltered hillocks on the coast- contrary to previous accounts for their love of heather. I believe this may be related to the forms they take. During the winter they move inland to saltwater lochs and are often seen to shape change into horses and have been observed to retreat to the thick heather when startled. Considering the presence of predators such as kelpies and morag, this may be more defensive than general preference. As a kelpie could not follow a boobrie into the thick heather without risking a broken leg.

Ah but I digress. The excitement at having finally found the boobrie has me tumbling down rabbit holes.

As for the others in our camp, Selma is as excited as I. We have spent this whole afternoon mapping the nest locations and watching the interactions between the pairs as they build their nests. It has driven our captain and his wife to such frustration that they have taken themselves back down to the boat to watch the football. Apparently Scotland are playing France in some championship or another. I'm afraid I have no care for sports.

That was them cursing just now. I do believe Scotland may be losing.

As for Hefin, he has spent most of his time on his laptop. I have heard him speaking to his parents on video call and no doubt showing them the camp. It is a testament to our magic technology that we get such strong wifi signals even out here. Otherwise, he has been silently tapping away. I fear I may have alienated him a little. After I have finished here, I will go and ask if he has any questions and see if he has any opinion on my theories of the boobries' mainland predators.

Our plan for the next week is to set up camera traps near the nests- preferably without having any fingers or ears taken off by territorial birds. We hope to observe their mating behaviour, document their diet and ring any birds that have yet to be ringed and obtain DNA samples while we have them caught. I hope also to do some diving around the coast to catch the boobrie swimming out at sea and see if they demonstrate any shape changing behaviour on the water. We have seen a

couple of the birds this afternoon fly down to the water and bob amongst the gannets and razorbills like colossal carnivorous cormorants. Perhaps the smaller seabirds provide a source of food out here? I shall investigate.

Scratch that- Selma has just informed me a male boobrie has brought back an otter to his mate on the nest. We are going to begin documenting their diet. Oh how exciting this all is. I shall write more once I have followed the boobrie out into the water.

Expedition Log, Date: 31-05-2015, Time: 00.30, Location: Unnamed- Outer Hebrides

It was merely five hours, and already more happened than during the past week of sailing - and not in a good way. I'm still shaken, and so is the entire crew.

To keep it short - as it's already very late: while boobrie observation magic started to malfunction, the internet stopped working, a storm came, the ship sank, our camp was almost washed away, and we barely had time to save ourselves and pieces of equipment (this notebook included).

We managed to move the camp towards the centre of the island and sent a distress signal. Gods know how long it will take to get help without the should-be-omnipresent magic.

I'll write more details in the morning when we decide what to do next. Hopefully, no more nasty storms will surprise us at nighttime.

Expedition Log, Date: 31-05-2015, Time: 09.30, Location: Unnamed- Outer Hebrides

Our fears that a storm may come back, fortunately, didn't come true. Brennus, Innis and Selma went to shore to estimate the damage and see whether anything other can be saved. I opted to ask Herfin to log our boobrie findings from yesterday - it really feels like days ago - meanwhile, I get to write what really happened last night.

We placed the first two cameras, just as planned, avoiding any boobrie bites in the process. (When I come to think about it, we definitely heard a suspicious sound on the placing of the first one, splashing, and perhaps, galloping? My brain might be deceiving me here, I will consult Hefin and Selma. We didn't interpret it as anything out of ordinary back then, maybe a boobrie getting into the water and continued with the rest of the cameras.)

It was when trying to look at the GPS signal when placing the third when the catastrophe started to unfold.

The GPS seemed to be malfunctioning. It flickered between showing our true location - after all we knew broadly where we were and could recognise our island on a map, and the GPS tracker was meant to record the precise location of each camera. But the GPS showed flashes of an entirely different location in the middle of the Atlantic. Not the Azores or Bermuda or any other islands that any of us knew of. Still the same island - same size and shape - just in entirely the wrong place.

We tried to fix it, and eventually Innis went back to the ship to get one of the ship's trackers, these generally being left on board in case of emergency, rather than being unpacked with the rest of the camp. However, it showed exactly the same thing as the malfunctioning tracker - down to the timing of the changes. Then Hefin got very agitated about the weather. 'I can feel it in my ears', he said, ignoring Brennus's sceptical looks, 'something bad is coming'. In vain Brennus tried to convince him that he - and I, which I didn't bother disputing - was far more connected to the sea and ought to be able to tell much better.

However, Hefin was right. In a matter of minutes the sky darkened from its dull light grey - quite usual for a summer evening in the Hebrides - to near-black. There was a terrible heavy feeling in the air. Brennus and Innis leapt into action to secure the ship better while Selma, Hefin and I got our equipment into waterproof bags and covers. At the same time, Selma lent her magical strength

to trying to calm the oncoming storm, but quickly gave it up to focus on the equipment, saying it was much too strong for a single sith of middling power.

Then the storm broke. Brennus sent Innis back onto land immediately, and just in time, too. He tried to control the ship, insofar as that was even possible, but in a matter of minutes she had disappeared beneath the massive waves. Of course Brennus can breathe underwater but it took him a while to make his way back to the island, during which Innis looked tense. We attempted to comfort her though we were very preoccupied with holding down as much equipment as possible, with very limited success though we did save most of the food stores, which was something. We also struggled with not being blown off our feet while doing so - especially short, skinny Hefin and tall, slender Selma. Sturdy Innis was better off as was I - I am basically a seal in human form, after all, and this isn't the first time I've been grateful for being short and stout, it's a very practical shape. But we managed and by the time Brennus had dragged himself out of the ocean again we'd moved what remained of our equipment to higher ground and sent a distress signal, and even managed to get enough cover to brew some tea, which Innis immediately pressed on Brennus.

Brennus was deeply glum at the loss of his ship. Of course she was insured but she had been built by his grandfather and lovingly maintained and upgraded by his mother and then himself - which meant she was a good 300 years old, given finman lifespans. Now he would have to build a new one for himself and his descendants. He and Innis fell to bickering about whether the new ship should be named after Innis, which Innis said was really too much especially as she was part of the crew, it would get too confusing.

A while into this adorable domestic, Hefin said, 'Why are all the boobries over there on the beach?'

He was right. They were all in a mass in horse or

bull form and they were facing off against a crowd of figures who were too indistinct to make out at all.

While the idea of approaching a herd of agitated boobries was, quite frankly, terrifying, we could not deny the possibility that these figures could be from another shipwreck caused by the rough weather, and in need of aid. We decided to approach cautiously, crouching behind various rock formations on our approach. The lashing rain made it hard to see the figures clearly, and it wasn't possible to make them out until we ourselves were on the beach, poking our heads around a pile of rocks that appeared to have broken off from the cliff above. At that point their blue skin made it quite clear that they were not shipwreck survivors in need of help. I heard Brennus mutter behind me: *na fir ghorma*.

The Blue Men of the Minch.

It would be an understatement to say that I was confused; while little was known about these storm kelpies, it was established that they never ventured onto land. Until now, I suppose. However, I had very little time to process this strange fact before we were spotted. Apparently, they have good eyesight in the dark. Or we are not so good at hiding. One of them called out to us: 'Child of the sea, we see you hide; Emerge or die by our hand'. Not overly friendly. I glanced frantically over to Brennus; I knew of the kelpies' propensity for poetry, but I had never thought to practise for such an occasion. But our captain still seemed shaken from the loss of his ship, and could only open and close his mouth soundlessly. Wracking my brain for a rhyme, I stepped out from behind the rocks with my hands raised, hoping the gesture translated in the kelpies' society. I called back: 'We mean no offense, men of the tide; What brings your kind to land?'.

The man who had originally called out looked taken aback, and the man who I perceived as their leader turned towards me. The boobries regarded us all warily, hooves occasionally striking the ground, but otherwise they made no move to attack. The leader walked slowly towards me, and I was able to make out a scar running down the

right side of his face which had rendered his eye white and sightless. I also couldn't help but notice the brutal-looking spear he carried in his left hand, the edges of the blade sharp and ragged. He stopped no more than a metre away, towering over me as Brennus did. Then he gave the start of another verse: 'Selkie, you are brave to ask a question so bold; Our affairs do not concern you'. More prepared this time, I was again able to answer: 'My inquisitive mind cannot be controlled; I seek answers, creature of blue.' I was not overly happy with the confrontational nature of the reply, but it was the best I could do given the circumstances.

The blue man stared me down for a few nerve-wracking seconds, before stabbing his spear into the ground and giving me a shallow bow, hand over his heart. It seemed they backed down if you could match their verse on land as well as at sea. 'Donnchadh. Rightful *Seonaidh of na fir ghorma*.' I gave him my best bow in return, replying with the much less impressive: '*Rhona. Zoologist*.'

Expedition Log, Date: 31-05-2015, Time: 22.30, Location: Unnamed- Outer Hebrides

Initially, the day was spent in slow approach toward a détente. Upon meeting our gracious hosts, I had believed our diplomacy to exist on somewhat equal grounds. I had done my best to emphasize the importance of our research of the boobries to the Blue Men of Minch, coming to believe they saw value in my zoological aspirations, that they shared my appreciation for the diversity of lifeforms that inhabit this closed off corner of the sea. The BMM's (abbreviation for efficiency's sake) main motivations seemed to be keeping peace in their territory, but they seemed to tolerate us.

However, as the evening progressed, I began to suspect their motivations being solely finding a source of entertainment. I detected a sneering attitude from our kindly hosts. What initially seemed like an inability to speak in anything other than rhyme, had started to feel like a deliberate choice.

As I lay under my blanket, I will record below the development of the evening. This includes our best and most characteristic attempts at matching the BMM's rhymes, with admitted missteps along



the way. As our memories are not honed for keeping a collection of rhyme vocabulary, some mistakes were bound to be made. The later the evening inched, the more I became convinced the BMMs were having a laugh at us, the setting verbal traps for our inferior rhyming skills being apparent from quiet sniggers and stifled smiles flickering across our shared campfire. Italics for BMM:

*What do thee dine, thee boobrie seekers
Come 'cross seas far and wide*

*We eat hotdogs and popcorn in bleachers
We eat fish from the tide*

*A hearty feast we shall prepare
Fill stomachs and gaping hearts*

Foodbabies we shall gladly bear
With gratitude in our farts
(NOTE: We should not have given Brennus a rhyming shift!)

*Now which nightlodging do our guest require
To house their moving parts*

To great housing we do not aspire
Just blankets to cover our farts
(NOTE: It was still Brennus' shift.)

*These great blankets we shall gladly supply
For morn' to arrive for the boobries*

These great gifts we shall gladly apply
But please do not look at my boobies
(NOTE: By now we had hoisted the shift to Innis, only to realize she was not much more sophisticated a poet than her husband. Brennus of course thought this hilarious.)

**Expedition Log. Date: 01-06-2015, Time: 14:40,
Location: Unnamed - Outer Hebrides.**

I write this sitting on a piece of driftwood, a little way away from the others. We are still on the island, but the situation has evolved again. At this point, I shouldn't be surprised.

Hefin woke me some time after dawn. It was light, but it gets light so early this far north. Though bleary, I could tell he was afraid and this was

enough for me to sit up and pay attention. He could feel another storm coming.

I snapped that he should wake Selma. I poked Brennus with a long stick, then stepped round to shake Innis's shoulder. Without staring - I've seen enough displays of affection between mating pairs - I noticed that Brennus slept curled around his wife, hugging her arm.

During this time, the Blue Men's camp had lain silent. That changed as the sky darkened, clouds rushing together as if someone was pulling them in on a fishing line. We heard shouts, and the kelpies rushed out of the tents into a defensive formation: three rows of them, spears pointing directly to the sea.

Lightning struck the water. After the flash, we could see a figure walking towards us.

She was another storm kelpie, the tallest yet, with the broad shoulders and biceps to match. Here was an alpha if I'd ever seen one. She stopped less than an inch from the Blue Men's spears, before looking over at our quivering group. Suddenly embarrassed - I had thought I was too old to feel embarrassed - I stood up straight and called over, "I'm Rhona. We're scientists. Just here to look at the birds."

"Aileas," she replied after a moment, "True *Seonaidh of na fir ghorma.*"

Ah.

Then she turned back to the Blue Men. "I don't suppose you've seen my brother?"

They couldn't meet her eye. What I'd taken to be fear was looking more and more like sheepishness: some were scuffing the sand with their boots, others clearing their throats and mumbling indistinctly. There was some short conversation, before she barked a laugh.

"Did you think he'd lose his other eye to those wretched birds? That would be worth seeing, I'll give you."

One of the Blue Men replied, adopting a tone noticeably chastened compared to our earlier

exchanges, “We wouldn’t dream of lying to you with words. But neither can we tell you all which is true.”

“Oh, spare me the rhymes, Cairn. Your name befits your intellect. We aren’t in an ocean monastery of *Uibhist a Tuath*, and if we were, your poetry would have you laughed out of those sacred walls.” The one called Cairn shrunk back, deflated. The others made no move to console him.

Aileas directed her next words to me. I must admit that being addressed by one as towering and broad-featured as her made me feel every bit as sheepish as the BMM looked. But her words were kind and soft, albeit tinged with annoyance. “I don’t suppose they’ve been stringing the lot of you along with poetic verse, mmmm?”

I made to answer the *Seonaidh*, but it was unfortunately Brennus whose words came out first. “You mean I didn’t need to make rhymes about my farts?!” He seemed genuinely upset.

“Or my boobies?!” Innis chimed in. “Well that’s just rude!” She glared at the BMM who shrunk away from the gaze. Their composure had radically changed since Aileas’s arrival.

An expression between amusement and bemusement replaced Aileas’s stern demeanor. She brushed this off with a chuckle and shake of her head before returning to her former stoniness. Turning towards the tents of the BMM camp, Aileas raised her voice.

“Donnchadh, my dear little brother, you’re welcome to stay cowering in that tent until the seas dry up. In the meantime, I will attend to matters of diplomacy and State. It is for precisely this reason, among others, that the *britheamhan* selected me as *Seonaidh* after Father passed, despite my lack of phallus.”

My ears may have been playing tricks on me, but I am fairly certain that I heard a muffled “*hmp*”

from the direction of the tents.

“As for you...” Aileas turned again to me and my crew. She had shown no ill will towards us, unlike the other BMM, and yet a twinge of dread nonetheless crept up inside my chest. I could feel the nervous restlessness mirrored in the others of my crew. Would we be punished for some sort of breach of territory?

“I’d like you to come speak about science to the *Cùirtean Uibhist*, that is, *the Courts of Uist*, the governing assembly of *na fir ghorma*.”

I recall opening my mouth. And closing it. And opening it again. I do not recall having closed it after this. She would like *me to do what?!*

“It will assuredly be dull and unexciting,” she said. “Your research will bore them, which is precisely the point. Perhaps after all these centuries of distrust and ‘othering’ of the *chan e ghorma* – the, ehm... Not Blue – my people can be shown that you are mundane, boring folk just like us. Not just untrustworthy heathen dead set on destroying the oceans.”

There was a brief pause. I believe my mouth was still gaped open.

“I would even wager that those two might just charm a few members of the assembly with their sweet simpleness,” Aileas added, glancing at Brennus and Innus.

Gods spare us...

And this, dear readers, is how the story begins and how my crew became the first outsiders to enter the Courts of Uist in untold centuries. The logs herein detail my time embroiled within the political systems of *na fir ghorma*, the Blue Men of the Minch, at the behest of Aileas, ninety-third *Seonaidh* of *Cùirtean Uibhist*, first female *Seonaidh* of *na fir ghorma*.



TWO TIGRESSES - BEAUTIFUL ARISTOCATS?

TTBA Lent, Easter and Summer 2021