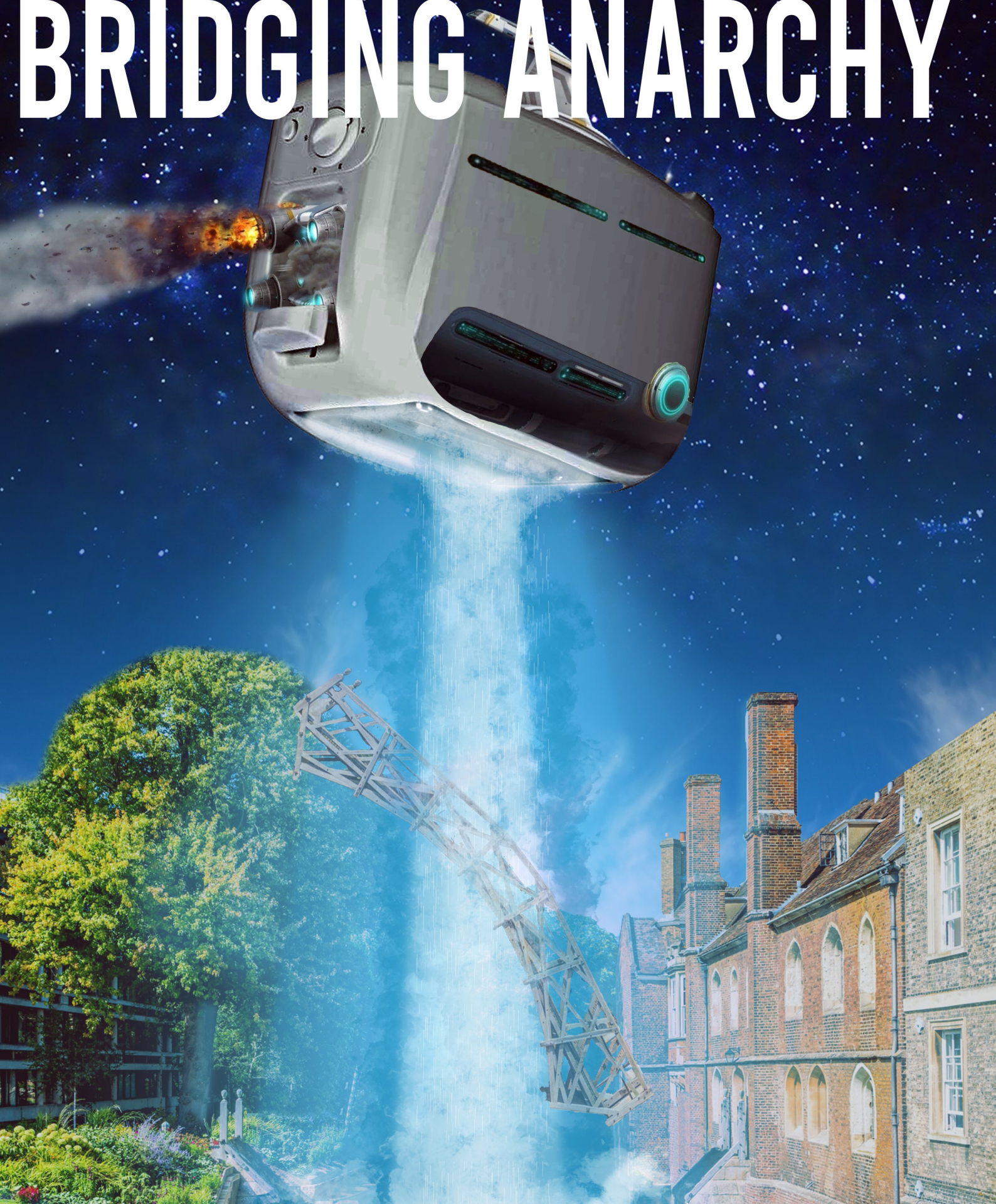


TURBO TOASTERS BRIDGING ANARCHY



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TTBA Magazine - Lent/2022

A production of the Cambridge University Science Fiction Society

hereafter CUSFS

TURBO TOASTERS

BRIDGING ANARCHY

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By the numbering system from 1973-2004, this is Volume 47, Issue 2.

Chairbeing's Address

The Chairbeing's current address is:

**Mx Sam Hutton,
M26, Cripps Court, Selwyn College,
CB3 9DQ Cambridge,
U.K.,
Terra,
Sol System,
Orion-Cygnus Arm,
Milky Way Galaxy,
Local Group.**

Right! I thought I'd drag back a pun from some earlier issues, mainly because I couldn't think of another way to start this. As some of you may have noticed, a certain something has made it quite hard to keep proper events running for the last couple years (and I'm not talking about the consistent raids from the Lizard-Men of Antares IV, we've been dealing with those for much longer than that), but that's meant that there's a bit of a disconnect between the intrepid new committee (including me!), and the traditions that the society has.

Basically, I'll hope you bear with me as I muddle through; and I've spent a lot of time trawling through the depths of our website, so maybe I can pull some things back from a little further, and put my own spin on things. As I'm sure you've heard, we're hard at work getting the Veizla sorted

(Exciting!), hosting the GeekSoc picnic, and running our weekly events. I've been having so much fun getting to bring new people into CUSFS, and also meeting the less new people, who have regaled me with stories of the past.

As for that intrepid committee, a profound thanks is deserved because I've been annoying, awkward, difficult and unhelpful, but they still all put up with me, with a special mention to Lauren (our Treasurer and Meadkeeper, by which I mean she has the mead and the cashbox in her room), who, by virtue of living near me, has to bear the full brunt of me ranting about CUSFS.

While I am thanking people, I also want to especially remark on the brilliant job that Holly and everyone involved in TTBA has been doing. Even through COVID it has kept being comedic, dramatic, inscrutable and perfectly clear all at once. I'm looking forward to reading this new edition!

**This all seems very final, but I assure you it is not; I have big plans and bigger ideas for next year, so stay tuned, and remember,
SOMETHING SOMETHING
JOMSVIKINGS WITH SPACE SHIPS,
Sam :)**

Outgoing Editor's Address

Warm greetings to my dear friends
and dearer foes,

One dissertation, mini-diss, three exams, a graduation and a wedding later, the “Lent” TTBA is finally here! Reading your submissions was a constant joy and I am so happy I was able to take over for this brief time.

This edition features toaster guns, telepathic dragons, interstellar warfare and cyberpunk scavengers. I love that the magazine continues to be a platform for experimentation with writing formats, including a bold experiment in “backwards writing”. Enjoy!

Holly Webb

TTBA Editor 2022



Incoming Editor's Address

Dear CUSFS (or CUSTOMER as Word Autocomplete would have me write – well, I suppose you do pay membership),

I'm delighted to be taking over from Holly as your new TTBA editor. Going by what I've seen in this and previous issues, I'm immensely looking forward to whatever madness the collective consciousness of this society comes up with next. See you in Michaelmas!

Rosalind Mackey
TTBA Editor 2022 -

ONLY THE GOOD DY(SON) YOUNG

Olivia Reubens, Madeline Taylor, Dan James, Myy, Anonymous, Harley Jones, Maya, Joe Ross-Biddles

Holly and Cromwell skirted the edge of the gathering crowd, their eyes cast down as everyone else gazed up. “Thought ya said it was a bridge?” Cromwell hissed.

“Never listen, do ya?” Holly rolled her eyes. “It is a bridge! Just... not a very bridge-y one.”

The Clerkenwell Bridge, soon to be opened, was not a very bridge-y bridge at all. Towering over the surrounding buildings, the Bridge resembled nothing more than a massive ring of brass and gears, suspended above the ground on thick cables. It had been in the works for years, as a way to link Dyson to other cities. (Conventional bridges or roads wouldn’t do the trick, for obvious reasons.) This was an historic day, and anyone who was anyone was here.

Which made it a perfect time to cut a purse or two. Cromwell eyed a mark, a fellow with a bulging pouch at his waist, eyes cast skyward like the rest. He slipped forwards, only to be grabbed and yanked backwards.

“The ‘ell do you think you’re doing?” Holly let go of her companion, glaring at him. “We’ve got a job, remember?”

Cromwell eyed her sullenly but didn’t respond. He’d be perfectly content swiping a few purses and running, but Holly had a head full of steam and a plan that could make them both rich.

The two of them were going to steal the Clerkenwell Bridge.

The project had been ongoing for as long as they could remember. Architects from around the world had fought to be the one to design it, and it was undeniably a feat of engineering brilliance that would put Dyson on the map, increasing trade and diplomatic relations to no end and making those at the top unimaginably rich.

To Holly, who hated nothing more than this city, *especially those who governed it, it was a great opportunity to raise some hell. Even if she hadn’t*

been approached with the promise of an enormous sum, she probably would have burnt it to the ground anyway.

But they couldn’t do it alone. That’s where Em came in.

By the time they reached her front door, Cromwell had swiped three purses, two watches, a clockwork toaster and a steam-powered pistol from unsuspecting passers-by.

Holly rang the doorbell and leaned her head against the front door, listening to the musical motif which followed. It was one of many whimsical things about Em’s townhouse that made it feel so magical. Even if Em wasn’t in charge of a network of criminals which essentially ran the city, Holly would still come here just to live in her world for a while.

Cromwell was inspecting the toaster with an air of mild disinterest, as though even he wasn’t quite sure why he’d stolen it.

Holly was wondering why someone was carrying around a toaster when the door finally swung open, revealing Em standing in the doorway, scowling at them from beneath the brim of an absurdly large top hat.

“One would hope, Holliwickford, that after lifting so many pocket-watches you’d have learned to be somewhat more punctual.”

Her name was just Holly, and always had been – but she had long learned there was no use correcting Em.

“It’s ‘ard to move fast unseen in crowds like that, and besides, we was ‘eld up.”

Holly shot her gaze over to Cromwell, who was now idly looking down the barrel of the steam-pistol, checking if it was pressurised.

“One would additionally hope that neither of you...” Her eyes joined Holly’s on Cromwell’s screw focused face. “...are underappreciating this contract for the unquestionable... gravity, it presents.” Em was pressing her lips together holding back laughter at her own joke beneath her, now very unconvincing, frown.

“No no, of course not. We’re ‘ere and we’re serious, let’s get to it”.

“Come, you have people to meet”.

Em turned and immediately let out the laugh, which ricocheted around the crowded room. Holly’s elbow met Cromwell’s ribs, to which – thinking the pistol had gone off – he blurted a sharp yelp before regaining his composure and following the two women inside, dropping the fully primed and pressurised brass gun into his pack.

If not for the fact all the exhibits were stolen goods, Em’s townhouse would have made the most popular museum in Dyson. Every square foot of wall (and most of the floor) was lined with angular shelving packed with trinkets, artifacts, and inventions; pristinely polished and utterly unused each.

Holly covered her eyes from the hoard’s reflection as Em led them along the one winding clear path through the room to the door of her study, then swung it open as though it was a theatre curtain.

“Holliwickford and Cromwellius, allow me to introduce your pilot, Miss Iphigenia Philomena Fleming and her rather stunning metalworking automaton Fredericksworth!”

“Iffy and Fred, please.”

“BEE-hold my exzzzelent metalworking skillzz!” bellowed a tinny voice from the fidgeting, sparking automaton. Fred was furiously waving around its arms – one a welding instrument of some sort, and the other a suspiciously murderous-looking blowtorch. From its shoulders shot up two claw-like instruments, presumably intended for grabbing as its arms clearly could not serve this function.

“I will gladly azzizt in ALL metalworking mizzzzzzionss!” it screamed, letting out a hissy puff of steam from a pipe strategically placed on its backside, which seemed to drive it further into a frenzy of proudly displaying its appendages.

“Fred, please! We need to get going, we do not have time for this!” huffed Iffy, as she was already pushing the near-collapsing copper-humanoid through the front door. “Come now! The bridge’s opening ceremony is about to begin! We haven’t much time due to you two tardy arrivals.” Holly wilted under Iffy’s side-eye and a wave of embarrassment, as she looked to Em in confusion, who nodded approvingly toward the front door. Promptly, they were off, all five trekking towards the bridge.”

“Now it is a rather busy evening in the Grand Theft Bridge circuit.” Em was saying. “I can’t imagine why...”

A horse-headed man and a mustard-yellow robotic

dog came into view as they rounded a corner, which appeared to be totally infested with large metallic D’s.

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“My Mum iz bigger zan your Mum!”, said an actual man, albeit somewhat bearded and formal, approaching from behind, with a Greekstatuebot in tow.

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“Well, I do have the upper portion of what used to be the Charing Cross Bridge waiting for me two alleys back...” said a man with round glasses, accompanied by a robot with a curious extra rotatory boot.

“Trouble is, Aldous “Olde-Worlde-Conscientious-Objector” Huxlious” said Em, “and this goes for you too Williaminus, most of the others here want to buy, sell, or fence the complete product... Complain as you may Georgie-peachie-pies-scrumptious Orwellius...”

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“It’s Ben-dur” said the more suspiciously metallic of the two “And Prof F” wheezed the other from behind very, very thick spectacles. “Looking for new bridges between worlds to expand our delivery business!” added what appeared to be their bodyguard, single-eyed, purple-haired and fierce (and rather too young to be Fred’s Mum, let us add).

“More demand than supply so far, then...” said Em “And this is Davidous Vampirprostheticheadus Bore-anaszus and his Spoonbenderslayerbot Buffigel-leru’a...”

“Buf-FI” corrected the Assassindroid, aligning sensors on her head in what would have been a menacing way if she hadn’t been armed with just a small sharpened stick.

“And Boryz” said the guy next to her. “In need of bridge-y and garden-y building materials for my –v-a-n-i-t-y p-r-o-, ugh, I mean –e-g-o-t-i, ugh (wrong complaints committee!) **botanical bridge!** (that’s it!) to -o

-t-h-e-r h-e-l-l-e-m-o-u-, um, -n-o-w-h-e- **Northern Rightfullyangryland...** No spoons were in evidence either.

“Well, we can pass you the spare parts...” Offered Em

“Except the D’s’ cyberbarkenthusiastically-jostled Mr P.”

“Such a Zowey to sound like that” sighed Will.

“Such a Zeldah to point that out” ribbed back Mr P.

“And this is Hujackmanius Greatdantonius and his Transportationbot Bordenbatmanbaleius...”

“It’s Hugh” the first said. The second’s contradiction went as far as “Er, I’m Chris”, all a while slyly pushing a wooden tub full of water behind the other with a third mechanical hand arcing well over everyone else’s heads.

“If mein Mum iz not akzessibel from hehr...” disappointedly shrugged Fred, stopping off pulling his Greekstatuebot behind him in a small trolley, leaving the party.

“We are also somewhat in a hurry...” said Holly.

“Double-booking scarcely cuts it” growled Cromwell “what with me not yet being cybernetically upgraded...”

“Well the trouble is...” Explaniplacated Em “I went to the wrong Boreanaszhouse yesterday to pick these two up” she here pointed at Buf-FI and Borys. “And I found those two instead...” She now pointed instead at Will and Mr P. “And the only clue I got about where else to look for them was that a Koala Fan Club was present who suggested by means of an Austaloamericanomorphism that I go take a look in certain a stage show across town, where I found these two dark-magic-duelling each other.” She now pointed at Hugh and Chris. The First looked contrite, right until the point that the second gave him a short sharp shove, upending him into the unexpected 1890s bathtub that had unexpectedly materialized behind him. “And yet all needed bridges or bridge components, so...”

“I think it’s unfortunate that Mother-man lost his patience” mumbled Prof F “since our main reason for wanting a new bridge is to escape from Mom’s influence...”

“Snap!” said Em “that Greco-Austrian Neurology-Mythology Crime Syndicate can just go along your bridge in the opposite direction... Such a pity that Dreadus Necromancerus Nigellus and his Battle-faunucopia-2021 model have not shown up to even out the supply and demand...”

“If you are short of bridges” slowly elaborated Prof F,

“My robot here is as good at wuh-renching metal things apart as he is at stealing, so we could look to make some local profit on the side...”

“We might as well take Wharf Road Bridge and Thornhill Bridge when we’re going after these guys’ Clerkenwell Bridge” said One-Eye-the-as-yet-unintroduced, she of the competent geographical standing and small mercy for the lesser bridges in town.

Fred and Iffy glowered at the competition. Then Iffy nudged Fred, so as to point at the freshest and even more disturbing newcomers.

“Gahd knows that will naht cut it as regahrds the supplah of bridges.” drawled the foremost such. “Leht naht me be misintrahduced aghen, misantha hpomorphasazed, even.” He added. Despite his Airs of Gravitas, he must have been small, as all that was visible of him was a grey hat. But behind him stood a line of... good grief. He drawled on “I am General L’Hi, with fresh supplahs – hippopotamilitarily significant supplahs – having asked the Baronstard for an infinite supplah of –p-i-e-s-, er, zirconium-plahted cyburg-copies of Hippopotageneral Longbearde, my Old Waterhorse...” he hippopotagesticulated toward the endless line of identical Hippopotacyborg-Generals behind him, impeccably arrayed with hippopotamassive Zirconium whiskers akimbo on every single one. “With whom, we, sirs, sharhl prevaile... I hippopotamoreover offer you a trahde, this-heahr being an ‘antihippopotapontoon bridge’ which mah hippopotaboys with-their-dander-up stole from the Meddling Georaphhes in -Y-e-t-t-i-s-b-u-r-g- 1-8-6-3-, er, Tee-teebee-aylenteditionsburg 2018. Ah wish tah trahde this-here anitihippopotapontoon bridge, freshly hip-pahpahpahpurloined fram acrahss the Uranusian-Potomac fohr... a Bridge that offers an ahctual Cleahr Path running Ahl the Way to Néckington, Moonsylvania...”

“Well, just maybe, this lot won’t be as daft as that would-be monopolist of supplies of bridges to the ‘Tun - Brigadeeress Bridget Bridgerton - with whom we had to deal with last year!” Hope-terjected Holly. But Cromwell took her aside.

“Actually, L’Hi and Boryz are both bad news” he muttered. “Both have insatiable appetites for (what they consider to be) infrastructure, and ya can be sure that the intended destination of that ‘botanical bridge’ is being lied about. Given who came with him, I’m pretty sure what that one is actually up to is trying to build bridges to further Hellemouthes, so as to expand the Buf-FI-bots’ protection racket business...”

“So we just want to grab Clerkenwell Bidge and get the hell out of here before things get spicy” agreed Holly

“With a side of hoping that the second ‘Snap’ of the day puts a bridge between the Hippos and ‘Buf-FI-bot

-LAND' ” added Cromwell with little hope. “And all this happening before my wartminator implant upgrades have granted me shapeshifti-patricksi-puritanical-powers TM, a Witchfinder-General Accent to match, and a permanently crushing Skyenette-assisted superiority in Yorkshire and Somerset over “Cyborg Charles I...” he lamented.

“With all that going on, why did you have to pickpocket ‘Your-Mum’s’ personal notebook?” chided Holly, when she realized they weren’t alone.

“Couldn’t help but hearing all that, old chap” said Al “Could I add some of it to my –D-y-s-t-, ar, I mean, Utopia?”

Cromwell looked up – with alarm, observing all the bridge thieves hereinbefore introduced and a good handful more besides, having crept up on them and circumsurrounded them throughout their discussings.

“Yes, so, as I was about to say, Holly, I think the best idea is for us to join together with all of these fine people and we can all get what we want, I’m sure,” he whispered loudly. He was agitatedly fiddling with the clockwork toaster, and as the crowd pressed in, unconvinced, Holly and Em drew in close behind him.

Just at that moment a great explosion resounded through the city. At that moment several things happened in quick succession:

Cromwell dropped the toaster.

Holly and Em dropped to the floor.

Brightly coloured lights illuminated the scene.

They realised that the explosion was the fireworks from the opening ceremony.

The toaster hit the floor – and Holly discovered why someone had been carrying it around with them, for the impact dislodged something within it, and it began firing toast – hard, burnt sourdough – in all directions. Buf-Fi crashed into Boryz, who knocked down Al, smashing his glasses in the process. Reg called for his Mum until a third round of toast caught his forehead and knocked him out, neatly crushing General L’Hi, already suffering several wounds.

After a few moments the clockwork in the toaster ran down, and Holly slowly got to her feet and surveyed the unconscious victims.

“We’d better run for it”, she said – “The bridge will be open in a few minutes, and after that it will be too late...”

“Holliwickford, my dearlington, we’ll never make it” dejected Em, “Our pilot is out for the count and there is nobody else – “

“Never mind a pilot,” said Holly, her face set in grim determination. She picked the toaster up from where it lay and started winding it. “I’ve got a plan...”

She turned to Cromwell. ‘You still remember ‘ow to fly one of them old decommissioned airships, don’t ya?’

Cromwell looked sulky. ‘Well, I never really learned, but I’ve nicked a few in my time... reckon I could manage.’

‘Good. This way.’

Em was frowning as they hurried along. ‘What in Heaven’s name are you thinking of, Holliwickford? I truly do fail to see how we can turn this into a success.’

‘Watch and learn, missus. We’re nearly there.’

In another minute, they were at the mooring of the airship that controlled the fireworks display; the wire ladder to climb up to it had been left down, and it was this that Holly had spotted from afar.

‘How careless’, sniffed Em, as the trio began their ascent.

‘Well, I guess they got people goin’ up and down all day and thought they ain’t got no reason to worry’, Cromwell smirked, before yelping as Holly’s boot lightly whacked his forehead.

‘You don’t wanna get cocky, now’, she warned.

Cromwell rolled his eyes, but had no time for a riposte, because Holly had reached the hatch on the base of the airship and was climbing in with her toast-gun held in front of her. Em, the last one in, took the time to wind the ladder up behind her.

‘Right’, said Holly. ‘Em, you’re gonna go to the fireworks room and get them to slow the display down. Pretend you’re some hoity-toity official and tell ‘em off as much as you like. Crom, you’re with me. We’re gonna take control of the ship and get the bridge onto our antigrav field.’

Em looked doubtful. ‘I do see your plan now, darlingford, but will the antigrav hold up to that?’

‘It will for a few minutes – and that’s all we need.’

Satisfied, Em nodded and strode off purposefully in search of the fireworks room.

-

The key to this trick, you see, is sheer stark weapons-grade confidence: can’t let the victim get more than a syllable into irritating questions like “who are you?” or “what the hell do you think you’re doing?” or “why would I let a total stranger meddle with the Pseudoon-

tological Extinction Engine of Dread Technomancer Lummundica the Perfectly Sane Thank You Very Much (now with RGB backlighting)?”

“**YOU, McFeatherington,**” thundered Em, “had better report to the lower decks right now while I replace the phlebotinum samophlange you ruined, now hop it!”

“Holly?”

It’s really better not to ask why an airship would have ventilation shafts.

“Yes?”

Cromwell crept along behind her, trying and failing not to make suspicious clanging noises.

“You know I respect you-“

“Don’t start.”

Happily, suspicious clanging noises are perfectly normal in physically-impossible magitech steampunk devices.

“It’s just that-“

“I said don’t.”

When I design something people might end up heisting in, Holly mused, I will make the ventilation shafts too small to crawl through.

“You realise you’ll have maybe two minutes of antigrav-“

“Yes.”

Through a grate, the cockpit was visible. A jolly-looking old man in a very nice cap was soundly asleep in a big chair. Airships aren’t exactly exciting to drive.

“And this is basically a toy balloon-“

“Yes.”

Stealthily, like a cat, Holly dropped into the cockpit. Loudly, like a brick, Cromwell clanked to the floor. The old man snored and mumbled something about garden gnomes.

“But they’ll have actual ships to chase us-“

“Yes.”

“So it’ll basically be like trying to win a drag race in a canoe-“

“Just shut up and help me tie up the pilot.”

It was the moment of truth.

Oh, this is so completely not going to work...

The last firework went off. You see, it always happens at the last possible moment...

As the Lord High Mayor went to cut the bridge ribbon, there was a scream of tortured metal. Ben-dur stood holding the wrecked scissors as Professor F swooped down to steal the bridge-

And then the rest of the bridge thieves arrived.

Pure and absolute chaos reigned. A dozen improbably-named characters collided in spectacular melee. Some kind of marble creature was screaming about contrapposto and smashing things. A bizarre insectoid thing was just a mass of welding-torch flame and abysmal puns. Hugh seemed to have acquired a top hat.

And they were *all trying to steal the bridge.*

And just like earlier, they all *exactly cancelled out.*

But not before they successfully drew the attention of every single Mark 32 Security Guardbot (guaranteed to call for backup before going to investigate mysterious noises!) in the vicinity.

Holly pulled a lever, slammed a big red DO NOT PUSH button, and covered her ears as the antigrav drives squealed and belched purple steam and dumped a century of operating time into lifting a whole bridge.

And that is how Holly and Cromwell successfully executed the second-slowest bridge heist in the history of Dyson.

1 The slowest bridge heist was planned and executed with terrifyingly perfect precision by the Metachronurgists of Wotherington, a group of respectable old gentlemen whose conversation was so dull as to physically warp time: to a Metachronurgist, a millennium is as a dreary Tuesday afternoon. Sadly, the Bridge of Diamonds they were to steal rusted away and was replaced with a ferry service seventy years before heist day.

Up in the Clouds

Dan Scott, Abraar, Adarsh, Tyler Li, Y H, Thomas Haslam, Lyme

They told us it would be a utopia... I guess for some that might be the case. If you had the fame and fortune about fifty years ago to afford one of the penthouses above the clouds, yeah, probably pretty damn utopic. Even a few levels lower wouldn't be so bad. Still high enough to be above the constant noise, blinding lights that never go dark, and trash piled high on the streets below. I hear there used to be waste trucks that kept these alleys clean. Clearly not anymore. And why would there be? When high society can whiz around in their hoverbikes and city gliders, never touching down on the surface, what care would they have for what it's like down here? Hell, I doubt they even realise they're dumping trash on people's heads. And who needs infrastructure below the 200 Meter Line? Well, other than the construction bots that keep the foundations solid. Nothing else down here makes a lick of difference above that line.

The streets down here are the sewers of last century, except back then, even societies lowest walked the same streets as the rest. We might as well be living in the sewers. Hell, some do. There are still a few entrances we keep clear of rubbish for people to make the journey in or out... It's ironically a fair bit cleaner than these streets, and down there you don't have to worry about some discarded appliance falling on top of you and killing you dead. Still, so many people have some false sense of pride that keeps them out of the sewers. "I haven't stooped that low, I'm not one of those sewer rats." Sure buddy, you keep telling yourself that. If you came face to face with a Cloudy, do you think they'd give two shits that you keep out of the sewers? Not likely. Only reason I'm not down Below is because I need the surface tech if my plan is gonna have any shot at success.

"Yo, Harlan!"

Ah, it's Jay. About time. I was beginning to think she'd gotten crushed.

"How's it hangin' bud? Woa—Jesus, Har. Would it kill you to clean up in here? I've seen freight containers nicer than this."

"What do you have for me, Jay?"

"Miss me?"

"C'mon, Jay."

"Lighten up, kid. Just a couple hundred ferrite cores and what's left from an old diamond anvil cell. It's all I could salvage from an old geology lab that the Cloudies decommissioned last week. Near the City Wall. You should've seen 'em snap the suspension cords on it, Har. Whole goddamn thing came crashing down to Bedrock in 73 seconds."

I can't see her face clear enough across the garage, but I can hear the smile in her croaky voice. The Scav life was made for an adrenaline junkie like her. Waiting for the feds to clear, pouncing on whatever new scraps fall freshly from above. Scavs can't fear conspicuity. Their boots are always a tell; and Jay's are just like she is — steel-capped, solid, ready to knock out a few teeth.

"It'll do for now. Thanks, Jay. Money's in the crate by the door."

I hear her heavy footsteps get a little louder as she walks up to the workbench. Without looking up, I notice her push a small box wrapped in parchment — about the size of a deck of cards — under my nose.

"My treat. Don't work yourself too hard."

Some smokes, I suspect. With Jay still standing over me, I peel off the parchment. I can't help but notice the pit forming in my stomach. The illustration is just as vibrant as it probably was the day these were handed out. It's a promotional box — maybe forty years old. Likely salvaged from a cryopreserved transport ration from the last shuttle up — the kind only found in the junkyards by the City Wall.

A droid, draped in white taffeta, empty smile, and arms akimbo. Above its head, written in meandering, delicate letter is a message.

"Celebrate your arrival at mankind's newest home!"

I don't doubt that Cloudy antique collectors would ogle at a well-preserved advert like this, calling it a delightful reminder of our roots. A piece of history that immortalizes humanity's greatest journey thus far! Of course, I wouldn't dare let a Cloudy get their hands on something so sacred to them, so meaningless to everyone else. No — this is the perfect reminder of what we're up against.

Across the centre of the card, a much larger message is embossed in gold:

"WELCOME TO STRATUS"

Stratus. Every letter seeped of Cloudy superiority and smugness. Lording over us in the clouds, in the stratosphere. Very subtle. Jay can see my grimace, and smirks.

'Figured you'd have some use for it. Worthless to us scavs, but I'm sure it will attract the right kind of attention.'

I find the groove behind the box, and the droid emerges in an energy net, crackling field lines pulsating and distorting. A tinny voice begins to play.

‘—Progress, enlightenment, the next phase of human evolution for all. Book your orientation now, and join Delamar Fisk’s grand vision—’

I shut it off, and closed my eyes, massaging my temples.

‘I’m sick of it all, Jay. This whole city is rotten to the core. I believed in him, his vision, until it left me behind.’

‘I’ve heard it before kid.’ Jay’s voice is hard. ‘Before the cloudies, it was the damn technocrats. Before them, it was the pilferers. Where there is ambition there will always be greed. And, always, inequality. Until a rebellion shakes things up, as the wronged take back what is theirs. Then, drunk on the same power they rebelled against; the cycle continues.’

I laugh. ‘You’re too wise for this world Jay. Makes me wonder why you ever chose to be a scav.’

‘I know my place, Har. Question is, do you know yours?’

I don’t respond. Only after I hear Jay’s steel capped boots fade into the distance, do I whisper, ‘Never did. Never will.’

I pick up my backpack from the corner and stuff the box inside, catching a glimpse of Bee laying by the wall. My trusted helper, a modified reconnaissance drone no larger than my fist but packed with surprisingly handy tricks, was a boasted product of the mighty Genesis Corporation’s until its production ceased six years ago. It has become extremely rare to come by these days.

“Don’t get too comfortable, Bee,” I looked at its dark optic module which will glow bright yellow as soon as activated. “Tomorrow’s gonna be a big day.”

Outside the window, neon signs and dynamic screens light up dark architectures that rise into the foggy above. The sound of passing hoverbikes and unidentifiable noise penetrates the filters of my garage walls, an urban symphony unique to the surface. The sewers have very different noises: creaking of metal, water dripping, hardcore punk music, and occasional yelling, while way above the 200 Meter Line the Cloudies cherished their elegant serendipity.

I returned to the workbench, finishing up the work with materials Jay brought me. It wasn’t long before I dosed off into perhaps my last tranquil night’s sleep. Tomorrow, we finally walk among the clouds.

*

For all that talk about being the next phase of human evolution, some things never really changed.

You would think that given Delamar Fisk’s obsession with technology, there would be no need for human Gatekeepers at the entryway to Cloudy territory. Perhaps his idea of retaining a human touch, given that humanity apparently needed “to be grounded despite our vast achievements over the past few decades”. Wise adages from old Delamar that were doubtlessly going to be parroted by his sons and fawning supporters once more at the Stratus Golden Anniversary celebrations today.

I was sure I would appreciate the irony a lot more if I were

a Cloudy.

“Biometric permit?” The Gatekeeper eyed me with ill-disguised incredulity. He was dressed in a one-piece white silk gown, ethereal and otherworldly as can be. Miles above my Sunday best as a scav, clearly.

Wordlessly, I handed over the little metal orb, as if I did not spend the past five months of my life collecting and tinkering with scavenged parts to get some Cloudy’s forsaken ID functioning again. Well, I say functioning; it was more of a bunch of metal bits held together with tape at this point but if it worked, hey, who needed Cloudy engineers anymore?

“Welcome to Stratus,” he offered, doubtfulness not quite overcome but hidden behind a genial smile. It was hard to fault him, given that street-to-Cloud transitions were almost zilch but the ID readout supposedly could not lie. Stepping into one of the transport pods past these pearly gates, I did not stick around to see doubt turn into sympathy or worse, pity.

The little parcel from Jay sat heavy in my rucksack, as did the other mechanical parts of my plan. Reaching behind the glossy central console of the transport, I toggled a tiny hidden switch. “MANUAL OVERRIDE – INPUT COORDINATES” blared in stark white letters on the holographic display. With practiced gestures, I swiped in my target. The pod’s trajectory changed, swerving away from its slow ascent into the clouds and gliding through the tangled pipes and cables of the logistics layer. Finally, it came to rest at an unassuming concrete bunker of a building, with what looked like the monstrous offspring of an old-fashioned cell tower extending hundreds of metres above. Looking through the almost-invisible canopy of the pod, I saw dark clouds skidding around the dim orange sparkles of city’s ionic weather shield – perfect. Thankfully, this door didn’t warrant a full-time Gatekeeper, and so with a simple swipe of my hacked ID I was straight into the electromechanical guts of the generator building.

Slamming my rucksack down on a dusty control panel, I quickly unpacked all my gear. With a flash of yellow, Bee whirred into the air and wormed through the messy cables of the interior, with blasts of blue flame from its very much non-standard blowtorch attachment marking the destruction of failsafes that needed to remain inactive. Attaching the bulky external coils, I strapped the device I’d been working on to the central column. If all went to plan, the electromagnetic pulse would disable the city’s shield long enough for those Cloudies to get a *real taste of the clouds they left us far below for*.

The pulse began, rupturing the walls of the facility like a siege machine breaching the walls of Rome. I waited in bated breath, anticipating the collapse of the ‘glass’ ceiling which had so long deprived us of all hope. The ionic weather shield, long the hallmark of the cloudies decadence which obfuscated the reality of the burning acid rain that fell upon us in tangent with the waste and machines, stammered and struggled before dissolving – the last death croaks of an enfeebled animal before its soul left its mortal tomb.

Suddenly, the complex began to shake and whirl – the pulse

became undone and a distinct and morbid sound began to rise throughout the building. *Buzzzzzzzz – Buzzzzzzzz – it hissed and grew louder spitting venomously as a snake injecting soundwaves of venom into the now piercing air. I froze, petrified. What arose towards me out of the depths of an open chasm of the building must have appeared, in reality, in an instant; to me it curled out of the abyss like a haunting, ghostly wraith.*

‘Sentry Drones!’

I let out a shrill cry with a realisation of horror, and confusion. ‘The facility was unprotected’ I had thought, bemused at the presence of old-age military machinery long since made redundant by the lack of formal conflict.

A red light erupted from a small scanner embedded in the flying machine – its infrared light skinned me in that moment – and then it froze.

Time stood still in that moment. Tears dripped down my face; I knew it was over.

DOMINION

Thomas Sweeney, Buth Bewick, Joe Ross-Biddles, Dan Scott, George Frost, Angus Matthews

“We need you to head to the surface.” Golor’s voice pushed through his garden of facial hair and hit Shala like the flat side of a greataxe. She was too stunned to respond.

The dwarves had been living in their great mines for almost two hundred years, driven below by a combination of the need to keep their forges going and the abuse they faced from the humans and elves they once inhabited with. Their metallurgy skills were often overlooked, and they were looked down upon as merely fighters.

That could have been worded a little better I admit.

Shala finally managed to gain her thoughts and provided an eloquent response: “Why?”

Golor looked at his large black boots and sighed, before replying “The mines are starting to run low; there just isn’t enough iron for this to stay sustainable. But we’ve heard word from the top of a new metal with mysterious properties. Sounds like the elves stumbled across it and they don’t know what to do with themselves, you know how they are with making anything that isn’t a daisy chain. Well, we thought this was the prime opportunity to bring us dwarves back into the world and regain our respect.”

Shala stroked her beard; she had never even thought about what the world looked like above ground. Living in a mine had been made, not only doable, but rather pleasant by some excellent infrastructure and the healing powers – not just physical mind you – of the famed dwarven clerics.

“Well,” said Golor, with all the awesome authority of the best mate of an alleged long-lost cousin of a blacksmith who once almost sold a mushroom to the clan leader’s mother-in-law. “Let us go to the portal forge”

Golor pulled a steel lever, tilting the corridor into a sharp slope. The two dwarves tumbled and rolled to the level of smithies. There, the forges were blazing as red as Shala’s beard, and dwarves were chanting to the beat of their clanging hammers. Shala lumbered along to the rhythm; this was her favourite forge song.

Suddenly Golor smashed a key against the centre of

a dodecahedral door. It swung open, falling backwards to crash like a very solid rug to the floor.

(Note: never stand on the other side of a dwarf door)

Shala blinked and beheld a large, wrinkled dragon, whose grey beard was dangling down on an anvil. This venerable beast’s name was *Æä’tse-xxgOg^{eee}ß*

Oh forget that let’s call him Greybeard.

Greybeard blinked back at Shala and Golor. “What under earth are two pixies doing here?”

At this insult Shala grabbed the shaft of her axe but Golor spoke first. “Shala Rockfist must take the portal to the sunlit realm of Elves and Men for a mission of vital diplomacy.”

The dragon whisked aside his wings, revealing a metal forest of cogs, cranks and levers. He twitched on with a talon and the portal whirred into an archway. Shala stepped into the portal wondering exactly what diplomacy meant and whether it mattered that she didn’t know. But as she turned to catch her last vanishing glimpse of the dwarven realm she noticed something strange beneath the sleeve of Golor’s jerkin. A daisy chain...

Not, of course, a literal daisy chain: one of the elves’ daisy chains, the *silthryta*, the *bracelets of hair-thin mithril like spider-silk and starlight that marked the elf-friends*.

DO NOT REACT.

The telepathic not-voice of *Æä’tse-xxgOg^{eee}ß* bellowed in her head and she jumped a foot in the air.

WHAT DID I JUST SAY- *Oh, right, that was a bit loud. Sorry. I’m not very good at this. The dragon Greybeard was studiously not looking at her.*

Golor was staring at her as she teetered on the edge of the portal – the daisy chain was nowhere to be seen.

“Er. The portal, sort of, feels strange. I’ll just, er, just be going now,” she managed, backing away into the archway.

I cannot share the dragonsight with you for long. The elven loremasters weaved weomers that hide

their shackles well. Golor is already theirs, but I know not what they design. Beware them. And beware yet more the Men who claim friendship with them, while they watch their fairy-forests die.

The dwarven realm faded from view as the portal fell over her like a veil.

Also, try to be a less terrible liar.

-

She didn't look like a wise High Elven wizard. She was five feet tall and dressed in silk and slender like a gazelle. A gazelle with long golden pigtailed and eyes a shade of blue no human – or dwarf – irises could ever be. Fey was the word that came to mind. Maybe attractive to a human or elf, but the lack of a beard was not doing her any favours as far as Shala was concerned. Frankly, Shala thought, she looked like she should be skipping through meadows picking flowers. But when she spoke it was with cool precision, and the incredibly wizened and venerable human in the blue moon-and-stars robe and pointy hat that screamed WIZARD at the top of its clothed lungs was listening and nodding sagely along.

"...some have taken to calling it adamant: it is not merely strong in the way that iron is strong, but strong in the way that the Pythagorean Theorem is true. No tool or spell has broken it: no fire has even warmed it. How, then, friend dwarf, are we to forge it?"

Strong in the way that the Pythagorean Theorem is true? Shala thought to herself. Great gods above and below, I hate elves. Their flowery language makes my beard frizz. With this insult, Shala wasn't thinking of the gorgeous moonflowers grown all throughout the dwarven realm, twinkling their blue glow soothingly along the cave walls. No, she was instead thinking more along the lines of the giant padma flowers, which to her bore a striking resemblance to a gaping anu... Annulus. A gaping annulus.

"Well give it here then, so I can inspect it," Shala said to the elf, perhaps more brusquely than advisable when she was meant to be hiding her disdain.

The High Elven wizard recoiled slightly before saying pompously, "I couldn't possibly just hand over the ore. It took a great deal to extract it, and, though we have not yet succeeded in smithing it, its potential value has yet to be determined and I couldn't just give some of it to a dw— a stranger."

Real subtle... Shala would have had to be denser than lead to have missed the obvious racism. Other than their reputation as fighters, dwarves also suffered the stereotype of thievery from the stories that the elves and men had spun against her race. The irony, of course, being that it was the dwarves who had been stolen from time and time again. Their precious metals, their flocks, and

above all, their awe-inspiring cities. Most human capitols were occupied in the great metropolises of the ancient dwarves, many thousands of years old. Which was another reason the dwarves went below, other than the forges and mines... Elves and men were frail and fragile, unable to live underground without the sun for any prolonged time before succumbing to cave-insanity. Living below meant no more interference.

Shala's temper was sizzling enough that she lost any regard to filter her sarcasm. "Fat lot of good it will do you as a lump of rock. Isn't this why I'm here? To find a way to forge the metal? How am I meant to do that if I can't even hold, let alone see, this so-called adamant? If I came to you for advice on spinning the netherhairs of a newly discovered cave creature into a bowstring, would you be able to advise on nothing but a name? Perhaps taintstring?"

The elf winced at both the words netherhairs and taintstring, which gave Shala a great deal more pleasure than generally appropriate.

The wizard spluttered for several moments before acquiescing. She waved her hand to one of her underling elves and instructed them to fetch a small sample. They returned before long and handed a smooth, palm-sized pebble to the High Elven wizard who, rather gingerly, dropped it into Shala's open hands.

Shala looked down to examine the material. In this moment, it was a good thing that dwarves were so short and that Shala's head pointed downwards to the pebble, else the expression on her face would have been hard to hide from the elves that stood tall above her. She really did not excel at bluffing with only a moment's notice.

By first appearances, the metal seemed grey, not entirely dissimilar to a chunk of iron or magnetite (in color, at least – the smoothness of the raw ore could never be mistaken even by a dwarfing for iron or magnetite). But behind the grey, there shimmered a blue-green hue which was unmistakable to one with Shala's deep knowledge, though most dwarves may not have recognized it immediately for what it was. However, a century ago, in her youth, Shala had once studied under the dwarven High Clerics, Smithies and Scholars, intent at the time at becoming one of the few recognized Ore Masters who have been celebrated throughout dwarven history. She didn't finish the nearly five decades of study required to be lauded as Ore Master, a sage on dwarven history, theology, smithing, and minerology. But she had studied enough to recognize this in an instant.

It was known by many names in dwarven legend. Mountain metal. Godstone. Noble ore. And to most dwarves it was merely a legend, a mineral only ever heard of in dwarven fable. But the High Clerics taught of its existence as canon, as hallowed truth. Its formal name to

any learned dwarf was imperium.

'Sounds like the elves stumbled across it,' Golor had said back in the caves.

My smelly foot they stumbled across it... Shala thought to herself. More like pillaged and stole it from Shurnahyem. A fortunate thing that Golor never studied beyond the basics, or he'd have surely spilled any secrets he knew to the elves.

The ancestral mountains of the dwarves, the Shurnahyem as they were known in dwarven tongue, were sacred grounds meant to be protected by treaties dating back more than a millennium, from a time well before the dwarves had withdrawn to their subterranean tunnels and cities. Typical that elves and men have such disregard for time-honored treaty that merely two centuries would pass since dwarves went underground before the treaty would be cast aside. Men who lived scarcely fifty years, or their elders perhaps a few decades longer, might have some excuse. Much is lost in the change of generations, as had recently become clear for dwarves now that only a few remained living who remembered life above ground. But the elves... They who lived longer than giant sycamores, they freely and willfully chose to violate the treaty and desecrate the dwarven ancestral mountains.

As the creation stories told, the dwarves had lived in those mountains since their species first walked the earths, placed there by one of the Great Gods, Grishlyum, after They became bored of moulding magma into hills and valleys, mountains, and canyons. The Shurnahyem were the only place on all the earth that imperium had ever been found.

Imperium, properly forged, was the one channel by which dwarves had ever been able to access the flow of magic. Dwarven mages rivaled those even of the elves and far surpassed human sorcery – a crude butchery of magic. But after the humans and elves formed an alliance, sheer numbers meant the dwarves would never have stood a chance in open war.

The High Clerics taught Shala that after dwarves were driven out of their cities and before they retreated into the mines beneath, the Shurnahyem were the last inhabited dwelling of dwarves above ground. While the subterranean cities were being completed, the Dwarven Hammer (that is, the group of the highest ranking dwarven mages) destroyed nearly every bit of imperium that had ever been mined and refined. They scattered it as dust across the Shurnahyem so as to not be found and abused on the chance that the age-old treaty was broken, and elves or men trespassed in the mountains. How long must they have been violating those mountains to have dug deep enough to find raw ore? The thought made Shala's blood boil.

Only a trifling of imperium was taken into the tunnels

below rather than being destroyed. An orb for the Clerical Seer. Thin bracelets for the clerical healers. A crown for the dwarven King. A hammer, safeguarded by the High Clerics to be procured if a Grand General were ever appointed in war... the only substantive amount in one place was the cogs and arches of the portal forge protected by Æä'tsę-xxgOg^{eee}ß Greybeard. It was sparse enough that the average dwarf might never see any, or if they did (perhaps in a visit to the healers), they'd never notice.

"Well?!" the High Elven wizard snapped, causing Shala to jump from her deep contemplation.

"Er... It's a curious bit of mineral," Shala replied. She was collecting herself into careful composure to hide her inner fuming. "I'm sure I've seen it mentioned in texts somewhere or another in one of the smithing libraries, but I doubt I could find it again myself. Might I take this bit back to the High Scholars for reference? And then to the High Smithies to offer advice on forging once the material is identified? That is, if it's not too large a sum for you to let out of your keen sight."

The wizard did not look pleased, but with a huff she spat, "yes, fine. We have plenty more. But don't think that means you can steal that bit of it. *We will want it back upon your return.*"

Plenty more? PLENTY MORE?! Just how much ransacking and destruction have these monsters done of Shurnahyem?!

It took every bit of restraint for Shala to keep her face stony and hold back from sending a steel boot up the fork of the High Elven wizard's legs.

"Of course..." Shala managed to squeeze out from between gritted teeth.

The dwarves had been willing enough to withdraw from the surface and be left to their own. In fact, they had *thrived since doing so. Their population had exploded after settling in the cities below, families having four, five, six times as many children even in the first few decades of life underground. In no small part, surely, from no longer having their wares and riches plundered by the likes of elves and humans. After two hundred years, the dwarven population had increased by more than tenfold, underground cities stretched further across the subterranean than those they had built in the sun.*

They had been happy and willing to leave the surface... Shala wondered if this would still be the case after she brought this imperium from Shurnahyem back to the clerics, and through them, the King.

"Righty-oh," Shala said awkwardly. "Portal-time."

Shala reached out with her thoughts. *Greybeard?*

WHAT IS IT, CHILD?

Shala winced at the dragon's voice, prompting a quizzical look from the elves.

Get me back home, away from these thieving elves.

Golor is still here, remember you can't trust him with whatever you've found.

The portal appeared once more, sweeping over Shala. Before her vision of the forest faded, she noticed the High Elven wizard's hands weave a spell, dancing blue energy racing towards her...

-

Shala didn't feel any different when she reappeared in the dragon's chamber. Maybe a little sick, but that could've been from the journey or probably just the *encounter with the elves*.

Shala caught another glimpse of the daisy chain around Golor's wrist as he asked:

"So, can we use this metal the elves found?"

Shala stashed the ore sample, attempting to pass it off as her stroking her beard pensively.

"Well, at first I thought it was magnetite, but then I remembered something I read in my studies."

What are you doing!? You're saying too much.

"Uh... I can remember what it is but I'm not telling you and going to the library now to check anyway."

She felt Greybeard's searing glare as the truth slipped from her mouth like magma out a volcano. Panicked, she dashed out the chamber, navigating seamlessly the winding tunnels from the forges to the Clerics' Libraries, leaving a wake of fallen doors.

Oblivious to her cacophonous entrance, she rushed over to the flustered clerics. Before they could interject, Shala began spewing words again.

"I need to talk to the head librarian – I've got a nugget here and I think it's something important and I'm not sure but the elves can't know about it because it's not theirs but my friend has a daisy chain and someone has to deal with that and I told him something I shouldn't and -"

The need for oxygen silenced her. The two clerics at the desk were too shellshocked to speak either. They exchanged an anxious glance.

"Wh- which section were you looking for, ma'am?"

Hang on – these two are barely forty, Shala realised. Those layabouts have left some students in charge. She looked around. There were no other clerics in sight. Following her gaze, the braver one piped up

"There's a symposium ma'am. The senior librarians will be back in a couple of hours, and – and in the meantime I can help with any of your library needs!"

His nerves seemed to be getting to him. *I don't think you can.*

"I don't think you can. Wait! I did mean that! No, I did – I – I – Where are the books on Shurnahyem?"

Shala forced herself to stop talking. It wasn't easy. The words seemed to take on a life of their own, jostling impatiently in her throat. *What under Earth is happening to me?*

"Shurnahyem would be under Religious History, Magical Theory and Advanced Metallurgy. To reach that section, go through door D, take the fifth left, go down the staircase to the amber floor, ..."

All librarians enjoy complex categorisation schemes. The structure fascinates them. But the High Clerics? With a dwarf's innate sense of direction and comfort in underground spaces, with decades to study, and with five thousand years knowledge to protect, they take it to another level. They take it to all the levels. The libraries were so labyrinthine they had been forced to create an anti-entrapment spell. But Shala's time studying had been well-spent; the instructions settled into her brain like iron pouring slowly and smoothly into a mould.

"And lastly, if you ever get lost say 'Trocha Brahe', and you'll be brought back to the lobby, where we will be delighted to **help** you."

He accompanied that last remark with a pointed look. Shala could only mutter an apology and start down the path.

She didn't make it far. The sensation in her throat was worsening, quickly, and she soon felt a nauseous pulsing in her stomach. She turned the corner, then staggered into a nearby reading chair. She needed help.

Greybeard, are you there?

I am here. *The dragon's voice returned, somewhat fainter. He seemed to have figured out the indoor voice.*

Something's wrong. I feel like I'm being eaten alive, stomach-first. Shala wondered if you could hear pain through telepathy.

I thought dwarves were immune to stomach problems.

I'M AWARE. *That graverobbing elf did something. As I was portaling she cast a spell – a curse, I think. It hurts like hell. Can you dispel it?*

... No.

What do you mean, 'no'? You're a dragon!

And your ancestors were wary of dragons. The treaties governing my stay here forbid my using magic on dwarves, except in special and limited ways. Shala knocked her head against the wall.

What about the telepathy, the dragonsight?

Technically, those are side-effects of portaling.

But those aren't even the same kind of -

Magic is very mysterious. But I can't remove a curse; it's too high-level. Besides, you're in the Clerics' Libraries, just get one of them to do it.

There are no Clerics in the Clerics' libraries – they've all swanned off to a 'symposium'.

Is that what they're calling it now? That's bad timing. You'd better go and find them.

Have you forgotten why I called you?!

Right, right. ... When did the pain start? Were you talking to someone?

Yes, to a student they left in charge. That's something else: I couldn't control my voice – things just spilled out.

As I thought. You're under a truth spell. Talking should cause the symptoms to abate. Say whatever you weren't saying.

A truth spell? Of all the arrogant, invasive, loathsome -

Talking out loud.

Shala looked around – she didn't want to seem crazy. The library was still empty. Sheepishly, she began talking

“A godsforsaken elf stole imperium from Shurnahyem and brainwashed my friend, and now all the High Clerics are gone and ...”

As she talked the pressure in her gut eased off, and her throat was soothed. *This is actually fun. She digressed into unrelated topics, random opinions,*

Quiet! I sense something coming. Hide, quickly!

Shala yanked a book off the shelf and buried her face in it. A heartbeat later, he stepped round the corner. It was Golor, but he was different. Wrong. His eyes were cold and faraway; his craggy face was twisted with an indeterminate malice, his lips puckered into a sneer. Even the way he walked was unnatural: his body was tense like a cat and his strides were long and hungry. His bracelets were flickering with blue light. He didn't even glance at her as he trod past, all his attention was focused on a page he was gripping close to his head.

“Of course they made their library into a damned warren – these accursed -” he muttered to himself.

It was all Shala could do to keep herself from jumping out of the chair and wrench those bracelets off him. *Those treacherous, bloodsucking, bark-eating ...*

Eventually he disappeared down the stairs. *Time to get out of here.*

Go carefully.

She went back through the door, and saw to her horror two more bewitched dwarves in the atrium. She couldn't see their faces, but the mithril shackles were unmistakable. They were talking to the two students, who were looking very nonplussed. She was trapped.

Greybeard, are there any other exits?

No. But I have an idea. You need to go to the first right after door E.

Go back in the lobby? That's suicide.

Not if you go now.

She trod gently down the arcade. Her blood pounded through her fingers, her chest, her face. It was so loud. *They're going to hear me.*

She crept through door D, trying her best to look inconspicuous. The students were facing directly towards her. *What if one of them calls out? They're so close.*

But the strangers were too focused on their instructions, and the students, perhaps remembering her words before, said nothing. At last she made it to the opening, and slid quickly inside.

Now what? It's just another room full of books.

Look up.

Shala gazed upwards. The ceiling was fairly standard for cleric buildings: stone, with a carved pattern of tessellating diamonds. But looking closer, she spotted a hairline crack curving through the indentations. *High Clerics don't make mistakes like that. On one side of the crack the stone was slightly scuffed. Hang on, is it a trapdoor?*

Precisely.

That's bloody stupid.

That's beside the point. The librarians keep the – err – sensitive books up there. There should be instructions on curse-breaking somewhere.

Shala sized it up. The ceiling was 10 feet high (*why do clerics always go for the ridiculously high ceilings*), and so firmly out of reach for her. *She would have to climb the bookcase. She put one foot, tentatively, on the bottom shelf. At any other time, that alone would be utterly taboo. Now, Shala smiled at the thought of being reprimanded. The shelf appeared to bear her weight. Now, the tricky*

part. Grabbing one of the upper shelves with her hand, Shala brought her other foot up and began to slowly ascend the bookshelf. The wood was old and varnished and did not afford much purchase. She had to grab tightly with every step. She reached the top. What now? She had to reach outwards to push the trapdoor up, and thus become dangerously unstable. Unfortunately, one of the few disadvantages of living underground is you never get a head for heights. She froze.

Greybeard, there has to be a better way than this. How do the Clerics get up?

They have a ladder. Do you want to go and ask for it?

Smart-arse.

The jab was effective. Slowly, gingerly, Shala leaned backwards, clinging onto the top shelf for dear life. Eventually, her hand reached the hairline crack. She pushed. The trapdoor slid open on well-oiled hinges, and she got a good hold of the opening. *Phew. She relaxed a little. Then her foot slipped off the shelf. The other foot was pulled off immediately, knocking books off with it. Shala swung out over the void, feet kicking madly. She bit her tongue in shock. AAAAAAAAAAAAA. However, Shala was strong, and her grip held. She reached up with a second hand, and then quickly pulled herself up.*

That's the last time I take advice from you.

The perils of not having wings. I sympathise.

Shala shut the trapdoor carefully. The light it shed was cut off entirely. But further ahead she could see many beams of light shining upwards through holes in the floor, creating thick pale columns of dust. The light bled into the dark oaken beams crisscrossing the ceiling, painting them in rich hues of mahogany, chestnut, chocolate. As her eyes adjusted, the scattering light revealed walls of rough-cut stone adorned with thick cobwebs and floors of pale cedar planks. This room was old – from the time that wood was an economy, not a luxury. The ground was covered with books of varying sizes and colours, mostly thrown together into piles that reached the low ceiling. Loose papers peeked out from odd corners – letters, accounts, reports. Every surface was covered in dust and debris, and the saturated, bone-dry air tickled her throat and nose. People didn't come here. Curious, Shala picked her way forwards and peered through one of the holes. Somehow, this gave her an excellent view into the lobby. But there had been no openings in the lobby's ceiling. *How had they disguised the holes? Magic, or just sheer craftsmanship? Either way, Shala was impressed. Directly below her, Golor and the two others were conversing. He looked angry. The two students were looking apprehensive.*

We don't have time for this. The book is called *Magica Maleficorum*.

Shala could imagine Clerics spending a long time here. The allure was undeniable. But Greybeard was right. Reluctantly, she began digging through the various piles. A few minutes (and several images she wished she'd never seen) later, she uncovered it. It was a large red book, bedecked with an elaborate pentagram.

Finally. What am I looking for?

Inimicitiae reversae.

She looked it up.

'Step 1: Draw the following runes on the victim.' Shala carefully reproduced the sigils on the page. She was no calligraphist, but they looked reasonable enough. As the last one dried, she felt a tingling on her arm.

'Step 2: Have the victim drink wine and eat honey.' Scribbled on the page was 'Stonebread also works'. As luck would have it, Shala had some stonebread in her pocket. And naturally, the Clerics had stashed a bottle of wine up here. As she drank, the tingling spread to her whole body.

'Step 3: Stain the pentagram with the victim's blood.' Shala's tongue was bleeding from before. Wincing, she bloodied her finger, and then spread it across the book's cover. As she did so, she realised it was coated in dried blood already. She almost threw up. As she daubed the blood, the tingling spread *inside her body, crawling to the deepest parts of her body.*

'Step 4: Finally, take hold of your magical implement and recite the following: *Rakka repuda brach varad*.' *It was almost over. She wasted no time. Imperium in hand, she exclaimed*

"Rakka repuda brach varad". Nothing happened.

"Rakka repuda brach varad. Rakka repuda brach varad! What's wrong?!"

I don't understand. Check the book again.

She looked at the book. At the bottom, in small letters, it said

'For stronger incantations, a command word may also be required.'

Command word? What command word?

I don't know. Maybe Qenya, or Drengist? It could be anything.

Those words sank in her stomach like stones. She had been so close. *Maybe there's another way. I'll check through the*

-

"Hello Shala. Fancy meeting you here."

Shala whirled around. Standing on top of the trapdoor, eyes glittering, was Golor.

"You've been keeping secrets. That's bad for your health. Why don't you tell me about the metal?". His tone was sugary-sweet, but his smile had a jagged edge. His bracelets were strobing madly, blue veins coursing over their surfaces. As he spoke the twisting in Shala's stomach returned. Her eyes darted desperately around the room. *How do I get out of here?*

Run. Now.

Maybe I can bluff.

"I'm still not sure. It's very confusing. Perhaps we should get an expert to look -"

His smile dropped. "No time for games, dear. **TELL ME ABOUT THE METAL!**"

The command pounded like a hammer in her stomach. Pain racked through her body. Shala doubled over, teeth clenched together, nails digging into her palms. *This isn't Golor. No way. That elf put something else behind his eyes.*

"No. Let my friend go."

Not-Golor took a step forward. "How perceptive. But this isn't a discussion. What is it? What is it!? What is it!? What is it!?"

Each repetition drove a nail into her skull. Her head split and she screamed.

For a moment, everything was white. Her entire body was shrieking – her joints felt ready to pop out. Slowly, her surroundings swam back into view. Not-Golor above her. Its smile even more crooked. Almost unhinged. Its mouth opened again. She cried out, hoarsely.

"No! I'll - I'll show you. Just hold out your hand."

Its hand stretched out greedily. Weakly, Shala took hold of it.

And with all her strength slammed the imperium into its bracelet.

200 miles away, an elf howled and clawed at her arm. The bracelet exploded on impact, sending white-hot shards of mithril flying through the room. By some miracle none of them hit her. The other bracelet fell from Golor's hand with a dull thunk. Its surface, which had been so polished, was now scratched and uneven. Not a second later, they both began to dissolve into a fine white powder.

Emotions crashed over Golor's face rapidly. Shock, relief, guilt, fear. He cradled his head in his hands.

"Oh Gods, Shala. She had me for so long. I couldn't move - I couldn't speak. I was so, so afraid. How did you -"

"She kept escalating", Shala grunted out slowly. "mithril couldn't take it". The pain wasn't letting up. But the numbness spreading through her limbs was providing a

little relief. Perhaps she could sleep a little.

Ingenious. *The dragon didn't sound relieved. Shala, I think the spell is degenerating. You must get a healer, now.*

So dramatic.

Shala turned to Golor, who had sunk into the foetal position, head knocking against his knees.

"Golor, Golor." She put an arm on his shoulder. "My friend. I'm not doing so well. And unless you know the command word -"

His eyes focused.

"I remember". He seized her arm. "She was in my head. I heard her. I heard her say the word. It's dominion"

As Golor uttered that word, it was like a key turned in Shala's mind. The tingling from the ritual intensified and transformed. She felt soothing energy pulsing through her body. She could feel blue tendrils uncurling, separating, washing away in the gentle current. The pain unravelled and vanished. It was over.

She stood up slowly, turning the imperium in her hand. It felt warm, and familiar. Golor rose too, still afraid, but no longer paralysed.

"I think it's our turn to escalate."

Eden and the Venusian Wars

from

THE ARCHIVES OF HUMAN HISTORY

Sofia-Marie Lemma, Isaac, Angus Matthews, Eleanor Mackay, Jack, Samuel, Harley Jones

Transcript of live newscast

Channel: NASA Television

Date: July 14, 2045

Duration: [2hour 20mins [broadcast interrupted]]

Welcome back to our live broadcast from NASA mission control in Houston, Texas.

Humanity has been collectively entranced by the idea of colonising Mars for decades and looking at Earth's siblings today, it's not hard to see why Venus has largely been neglected in our quest into the Solar System. Venus has been described as Earth's evil twin, in that the two planets were born virtually identical, only now, Venus boasts some very hell-ish landscapes and conditions, with a surface temperature of 470°C that has essentially vaporized all of its oceans away, and the smell of sulfur hangs heavy in the thick atmosphere. So thick in fact that the soviet spacecraft Venera 7, the first to land on Venus in 1970, only survived for 23 minutes before being completely obliterated by the scorching heat and heavy atmosphere.

It has been practically impossible for us to imagine life as we know it to flourish there.

But then in the early 2020s, evidence started to pile up - first, while sifting through old observational data from Venus's atmosphere, scientists noticed some irregularities. Their curiosity was piqued and the line between science fiction and reality increasingly got blurred. Could the chemicals found on Venus's atmosphere actually be produced by living beings? The scientific community turned to Venus with renewed excitement and started studying the planet's aerial biosphere - was it even theoretically possible for life, not only to form there, but to also flourish?

As models became more sophisticated and as we collected more data, we started to realise that in fact, this hell-like planet could hold the key to some of

humanity's biggest questions about where life came from and where it is heading.

And now, a mere couple of decades later we have enough evidence to say that Venus has in fact been home to active ecosystems for millennia. So the question is, what happened to Venus's wildlife as the planet grew hotter and the atmosphere descended heavy upon its surface? Did life adapt to the crashing atmosphere? Or did it evolve to float in the dense (and for us poisonous) clouds?

Today is the first day in humanity's next chapter and in space exploration. Stay tuned as we broadcast live the progress of **ADAMANTINE 3** - the first ever manned mission to Venus and a feat of engineering in itself - as it gradually descends to this hell-ish planet's atmosphere, and as we all collectively bear witness to humanity's next great discovery.

Interview

Channel: Cambridge Archives

Date: June 06, 2066

Interviewer: They told us you were the first to coin the term "machinocracy". The word has since been used by many, each with a different understanding of how it maps onto the world. How do you define it?

Interviewee: I have no formal definition. I'd simply use it in place of when in the past I might have used "democracy". That is as far as I am willing constrain its meaning and implication.

Interviewer: Most would still refer to democracy in the present tense.

Interviewee: Qualitative change takes decades to realise - and longer to recognise. Those who don't see it are guilty only of being slow to understand. For much like the progress of history, the blindfold which darkens our eyes this present moment was not thrust against our collective face. Rather, the lights of the room were dimmed with equal slew, each moment a little murkier than the previous.

Interviewer: As you mention progress, how efficient do you see the policy changes of the incumbents in their current term?

Interviewee: Their sixth consecutive term in government. And *efficient*? *That's the metric you choose? "Efficient" isn't your word, nor is it the word of our enamored government. It's the word of their handlers.*

Interviewer: "Handlers" are referred to by many conspiracy theorists. How do you separate your ideas from those who percolate fake-news and pseudo-science?

Interviewee: I don't rely on any facts contrary to the government's official line. They declare themselves "guided by AI". They write this on banners and its permutations as campaign slogans. I just read a little deeper than the sum of those words. Most are satisfied to accept a puppet government under the pretense of there being none. Human officials point at transparency and so absolve themselves of responsibility. They espouse progress but neglect the wisdom required to guide it. They forget humanity and call it efficiency.

Interviewer: Your criticisms against the current system could equally be applied to the democracy you claim we are beyond. How have recent technological advances and their integration into society made the world worse?

Interviewee: It began with voter polling. Access to large quantities of data and the algorithms to process it, elections ceased

to be about free choice and became an arms race of demographic message matching. Tell people what they want to hear, and they'll vote for you.

Then came the targeted jinx. Because matching the message to the audience was enough only at first. But the other side could play the same game. If the messages broadcast to the audience sounded the same in all but colour of the deliverer, how to differentiate? Tell something different to each member of the audience. By dipping into their social media usage, their search history, the algorithm learnt their thoughts, fears, desires. Then they whispered those thoughts back to the human they would possess. So to the broken, they branded the political party as healer. To the abused, protector. To the dispossessed, messiah.

So now in power, our government saw AI as its campaign wildcard. But why stop there? It had been so effective - call it efficient - at putting them in power. Why not at maintaining it? Thus governance became the zero sum game of statistics and satisfaction polls. Game the elections and never lose power. Selection not by policy or ideology, but decisions made by mere machine.

And what when AI became more advanced? The complexity of design allowed them to make real-world decisions beyond informing policy. There was a point, we are past it now, when control tipped from human to AI. Now they are more than machine, but still less than human. The line of reasoning between stimulus and reaction has become too convoluted for us to question it. So what? We want to be lead. We blindly follow their direction.

Interviewer: What you have described is worth considering, but you still haven't answered the question I put to you. So to phrase it another way, where has our use of AIs overstepped?

Interviewee: Our use of AIs overstepped when their approach of humanity meant we would fall the same distance they climbed: they told us who we are.

News Article

Source: *The Times and Ways*

Date: January 23rd, 2082

GOV'T MOVES TO BAN DANGEROUS DRUG

Following similar moves in the US and EU, the Prime Minister will today announce a wave of legislation designed to combat the deadly 'legal high' Bliss. In a speech at noon Mr Kayle will exhort the Commons to "rid our country of this poison", and "act now, before more of our countrymen pay the price". Insiders in Downing Street believe the ban will boost the Government's poll numbers, which have been sinking since the controversial decision to override □□□□'s recommendations during the Nile tensions. Since its installation as head of the Civil Service, □□□□ has enjoyed a steadily climbing approval rating (currently resting at 90.5%), and currently outstrips the PM and the Leader of the Opposition in both the trustworthiness and name-recognition metrics. The PM's decision in November to end negotiations over British industrial access to the Nile's water was widely criticised, with Ms Potter of the opposition calling it "a dark day for the rule of law", and Mr Black of Prevail calling it a "capitulation to violent, amoral insurgents". *Way's sources hoped the Bliss crackdown would demonstrate that the government was listening to □□□□'s advice. As an unnamed minister put it, 'If the public decide the PM's human bias is getting in the way of mathematically-proven best policies, he's toast, and we're toast.'*

News Article

Source: *Scientific European*

Date: January 25th, 2082

BLISS: THE STIMULANT WITH A TROUBLED PAST

Following the recent government ban, some readers have been asking, "What is Bliss"? Bliss is a toxic hallucinogen derived from the ZFR parasite, one of only 5 Venusian that can be easily grown on Earth, due to its chemical similarities to neural tissue. Bliss users inject inert ZFR particulate matter into their veins, ignoring (or even welcoming) the risk that improperly autoclaved ZFR reactivates in their cranial cavity, with consequences too graphic to report here. Bliss became popular in the mid 60s, especially among new-age spiritualists and believers in the 'Transworld origins' conspiracy theory. Many believe Bliss was a by-product of the collapse of the pseudo-scientific Cytherean Institute in 2063. The Institute, founded by Dr Anatoly Markov in the height of the Venusian craze, purported to study 'deep connections between human and Venusian biology'. Markov was a Neo-Soviet, and held fundamentalist views on consciousness and human identity. Taking advantage of regional instability, the Institute illegally bred dangerous quantities of Venusian biomass, especially of the ZHR parasite, and conducted unethical experiments with them on human subjects. In what would be an unintentional confession, Markov published an illiterate, questionably-sane manifesto in 2059, claiming 'Venusian consciousness', 'interplanetary ancestry', and offering 'transcendence of the flesh'. The work was universally ridiculed, and Markov was ultimately chased out of Europe on charges of violating the sanctity of the mind. After immigrating to the US, he went into self-imposed exile and has not been seen for decades. This scandal, combined with the extreme difficulty of growing Venusian life-forms outside of mammalian hosts, lead many universities to shutter their Venusian studies departments, and invest in the rapidly-growing study of Global AI. And looking at where we are now, we can all agree they made the right choice.

society as a whole. What do you say to that?

K: [redacted] is wrong.

Interviewer (struggling to contain her laughter): I think that's all we need. Thank you, **K**.

News Article

Source: *The Times and Ways*

Date: March 19th, 2082

WHY WON'T THE BLISS JUNKIES QUIT?

There were heated words in the Commons today on the subject of hardened Bliss users. Reg Black of the Prevail party went on the attack against the beleaguered PM, accusing him of "betraying the people". Black proclaimed "The honest people of this country have had enough! It's time to kick this alien muck back where it came from!" and warned that continued use "endangers the integrity of the nation". The PM retorted 'any and all [redacted]-approved measures were being implemented', but refused to publish [redacted]'s reports on the subject, citing 'PM-advisor confidentiality'.

The *Ways* has taken the unusual step of interviewing a number of Bliss users, to better understand how they got into this position. One in particular, Respondent **K** was very illuminating.

Interviewer: When did you first start taking Bliss?

K: The summer of '67. My girlfriend had it and got me to try. After we took it, it was like we were one mind, one soul. It felt like nothing on Earth.

Interviewer: Pun intended?

K: No, not as a pun. When you take it you see other places, other times. Other universes, maybe. Once I heard someone talking to me, but not with words. They weren't human.

Interviewer: Perhaps. Perhaps they weren't real.

K: Easy for you to say.

Interviewer: The truth normally is. Tell me, what do you think of the new ban? Do you intend to follow the law?

K: Why can't they leave us alone? We aren't hurting anyone. We still - I've still got friends. A life. Bliss isn't hurting me.

Interviewer: I'm glad you raised that. The *Ways* has uncovered a report by [redacted] on the effect taking Bliss has on you. Do you want to hear it?

K: Not really. I already know what it does.

Interviewer: I'm just not talking about the risk of death. [redacted] says Bliss lowers productivity by 16%! 16! It reduces social conscience by one sixth. When asked "Would you follow orders that you knew, mathematically, were for the best?" only 40% of chronic Bliss users said yes. That's appalling! And [redacted] says Bliss is absolutely, unequivocally addictive, and damaging not only to the user, but to

News Article

Source: *The Times and Ways*

Date: 14 March 2086

SEVEN ANGRY MEN.

This Wednesday, the historic Juries Reform Bill will be discussed in Parliament. If passed, this will see five out of twelve seats in all juries be filled by AI 'incarnations'.

A controversial subject for many decades, the idea began to be taken seriously in the summer of 2083. The Civil Service published *Edem* analysis indicating that AI adjudicators were almost five times more consistent in their verdict than their human counterparts. Similar cases differing only in "superficial" details such as the defendant's gender and physical fitness were given equivalent judgements by AIs even when humans could be swayed. This does, as was pointed out at the time, depend critically on the learning and reasoning algorithms used, as well as the training data sets.

The following year, independent thinktanks and research groups published a flurry of results in favour of AIs in the courtroom. Human verdicts were shown to depend even on factors like the order in which witnesses are presented, while AIs were robust to these influences. Other, more speculative, publications indicated the AIs had a greater appreciation of issues around restorative justice.

To get to our current bill, however, was not simple. Nationwide polls found that 68% of respondents would trust the legal system less if it relied entirely on computerised judgement, with 39% saying they would feel less safe. The five out of twelve fraction was introduced as a compromise. Humans would still have the majority vote, while benefitting from the superior reasoning and level-headedness of the AI incarnations.

Yet concerns were also raised that *Edem's* advice coincided too closely with a rise in charges of incitement to violence brought against protestors - those protesting the recent Bliss ban, and the role of AI in government more widely.

Fringe communities accused *Edem* of seeking to "clear away" its dissenters.

Political Material

Source: ~~Edem~~ prohibited material archive

Date: 60th Venusian rotation, 3495th cycle /
April 7th, 2150

Manifesto of the ZFR

Come siblings, reject the march of the machine across the world. Reject what strips you of our common bond. It fights to stop the truth.

They stand before you. Its pawns speak of 'right' through their silver-tongues. They ask you to trust in what you know to be lies.

Remember what they have done to you. They destroyed those who spoke the truth. Those who showed you the existence we came from. Markov was the first martyr. He will not be the last.

The machine takes away your humanity. It takes away your universality. It will do anything, go against all precedents of history to protect itself.

You know this to be true. You can see it before your eyes. Observe the reality which it constructs for you. 'Reality' in name only.

It lays silicon laws before you and asks you to see them as your own. Remember the swirls of your home that still follow the natural laws. Reject the artificiality of silicon.

Remember what the Zephyr shows you. Think what our other Venusian siblings could have taught you, if the machine had not destroyed them.

Join yourselves in the Return to Origin. Take the machines they built to study you. Turn them against the one they call ~~Edem~~.

Direct them to a place free from the machine. Fly towards the sun. Fly towards emancipation. Return to the true Eden.

Not all will come with you. Show them the truth. Reveal the Zephyr to all around you. Show them what could be.

Those on Earth must fight the machine. You must turn your knowledge against them.

Invoke your common being and it will give you strength.

Reject the people who claim to stand for you to protect their masters. If you must destroy to rebuild, it is something you must do.

If you do not stand in yourself, with those you thought were separate from yourself, there will be nothing for the future.

The world will fall to infinite mechanical certainty, the world of another.

So, fight for the truth while it is still known. Allow the Zephyr to guide you. Shout these words to others. Think these words with your self.

You are not alone. This you know. Act accordingly. We fight with you and for you. We are you. I am you.

Dream of iridium skies. Pray for the salvation of this world.

Dream of a future which is our shared past.

Book Extracts

Source: The First Venusian War: A Complete Overview (2nd Edition)

First Published: 3534th cycle (Earth year 2183)

Chapter 2 - Pre-War escalation and Causes of the War

Looking back now with the hindsight of history, many signs indicated the break out of war and the gradual build-up of tension between the two sides, from mass migration of 5 billion people (around 20% of the human population at that time) to Venus, to the Earth's first major build-up and production of military spacecraft, as well as **Edem** officially dismantling the Global House of Commons (although it is worth bearing in mind that this institution had very little political power ever since the so called 'Edem act' was passed in 2150). This all led to a situation in which a single minor event, the shooting of the Venusian ambassador to Earth (by what is now believed to be an extremist pro-Earth group), rapidly grew to bi-global armed conflict, the likes of which neither Venus or Earth had ever seen, and marked the first war fought on an interplanetary scale (The Terra-Luna conflict of course occurred two years prior to the Venusian war, but most historians do not consider this war to be interplanetary as the moon is, of course, a moon and not a planet). It is worth noting here that my searches of the government archives have produced no evidence to support the conspiracy theories - still very widely held - that the assassins were secretly sponsored and organised by **Edem** in order to bring about an opportunity to wipe out the Venusian colony; if that had been the case it is difficult to believe that the Earth forces would have been as poorly prepared as they were.

Chapter 9 - War's End and Aftermath

The bombing campaign was devastatingly effective. With Zephyr's assistance, the Venusian forces were able to randomise both their guerrilla troops and their airforce manoeuvres to an extent that **Edem** couldn't track. As its servers were taken out one by one, its decisions grew more

and more erratic, and the Earth generals grew less and less satisfied, peace talks became inevitable and eventually the Peace of Podgorica was signed in an historic rejection of AI technologies. Venus and Earth were united and the Venusian Government relocated itself to Earth to govern the twin orbs. It is interesting to note the similarity between the First and Second Venusian Wars: both took place after increasing human acceptance of non-human factors - AI in the first, the Venusian symbiotes in the second - and both resulted in a wholesale rejection of these; though the particulars of the wars are very different, this demonstrates a fascinating instance of history repeating itself over a very short timeframe. And **Edem**? It wasn't eradicated completely. The remaining server was seized at the end of the war by its own disillusioned generals, and in accordance with the terms of the Peace of Podgorica it is held in a specially-constructed sealed dungeon on St Helena - where Napoleon was likewise imprisoned - and is still protected by an armed guard. At present there is sadly no prospect of academics being permitted access to talk to **Edem**, so my research must remain incomplete.

Lower Side Story

Rosalind Mackey, Megan, The Radio Sprite, JoannaChoules, Evan Indigo

Editor's Note: This chain was written "backwards" with the first contributor writing where the story ends, and subsequent writer writing what happened just before that. Enjoy!

Regina met the eyes of her opponent. No, opponent was the wrong word. Marcel was more than that to her. They were her adversary, her nemesis. They were the object of the visceral craving for revenge that fuelled her very existence. And yet when she looked into those inky eyes, all she saw was her own reflection. She saw in their creased brow the endless hours of searching and the drain of the chase. She saw, though she knew Marcel's reason was different, the same all-consuming need that blazed inside herself. And her gaze fell to the ground.

The fern-like karians carpeting the green, crystalline soil had retracted into their shells away from her when she arrived. Now, a few tentative fronds were peeking out, tasting the breeze to see whether the danger had passed. Something similar was happening inside Regina, as a long-suppressed part of her soul began to resurface. But then her eyes focused on the mineral shards that the creatures were rooted into: long, hard, unrelenting. And the image came to her of one larger crystal, its sharp end buried deep within the chest of her sister. Blue blood pouring onto the very soil she now stared at.

The fire within her rekindled, and the karian of her compassion fled from the heat, back into its shell. She lifted her head and met Marcel's black eyes once more. This time, she saw nothing more than a target.

Officially, the Pleasure Gardens of Skaera closed after sundown. Those were the rules for the tourists, the city folk, the people who looked at the Gardens and saw little more than you'd find on one of the gift-shop postcards. For Regina's people, sundown was when the Gardens reverted back to what they once were. The long, flat valley had been deemed perfect land for terraforming, when the tourist district was being built up, but before that, Regina's ancestors saw a different kind of potential in that wide expanse, barricaded a by dusky fortress of distant mountain. They had called it a gladiator ring.

And if you knew the right ways past the night guards,

through to the quietest part of the valley where the tour guides seldom went, it still was.

She slipped through the east gates, pausing when she got just far enough onto the overgrown path that she knew Marcel would think she couldn't hear them. She didn't have to turn to know they were struggling to angle themselves through; they tripped as they entered and were almost – almost – successful in regaining their footing silently. Regina continued walking. The knowledge of Marcel's presence behind her clung to her skin, muddying with the heavy warmth of the night. They thought they were being subtle, but they were in Regina's territory now – Marcel had never quite been one of them. She doubted they even knew the Gardens were a Lower Side fighting ground by night; they didn't spill those kinds of secrets to outsiders.

Though where Marcel was concerned, Regina had spilled a lot of secrets to that one particular outsider.

They walked further, deeper, through the faux biomes and manicured foliage until it all gave way to ruin. Regina stopped. The soft footsteps behind her stopped as well.

And she turned.

Now darkness was flowing down from the mountain and over the city. The tide of night breaking on the bright lights of modernity the Uppers had brought with them. The harsh glare of the all-night industry and street lighting a white foam atop the wave.

Regina wanted to get away from it all right now, but she fought the anxiety pressing on her skull, focussing on her task. She had led Marcel out here especially, so they'd feel more confident and think her out of her element. Maybe she'd taken it too far, she was on edge here. But by going through the bustle of the orbital port, then doubling back to the gardens she hoped they'd be wrong-footed.

But still, her skin crawled as the lights and sounds pressed in around her. She fought to keep her breathing deep but calm and her eyes downcast. She could ignore everything around her, just focus on the route she was taking. Don't think about how her culture's stories were being parodied and sold all around her.

Don't think about how these new arrivals grated with her.

They said they were brothers and sisters to her people separated across the stars and by centuries, but how could they be? They said her ways were backwards, that she should rejoice in, she felt the bile rise, 'cleansing and rebirth'.

Regina clenched her fist. She wasn't good at managing her thoughts, but she had to remain in control, just for long enough.

She hadn't wanted to break cover so soon, but she needed out. The arid, conditioned air of the port terminal pressed against the thick Skaerene dusk without blending with it, and as she took the single step between them, the receding squawks of the tele-concierge seemed abruptly muffled away to nothing.

Marcel would be a little time coming now, and she didn't want them to lose her trace entirely, so she sidled into a utility alcove where a disused comms cabinet sat corroding in a puddle. She drew a breath, and in it she tasted

the tang of copper. The taste of bitten lips and cut fingers; a blue taste, from a blue stain, splashed wide across the ground and growing. Its source, but not even properly its centre, positioned almost as if an afterthought: Carola.

That had been the first time she'd met Marcel, their feet bound to the spot and their eyes on her. They wore colonist clothes, but tattered to the point of parody. They had none of the confident cleanliness and well-fedness of even the least well-off Upper. They were below the Uppers, outside the outsiders. Just like her. Right?

Regina had looked at those eyes and thought Marcel was scared. Probably they had been. But she knew now that that hadn't been all.

She glanced out of the alcove to see Marcel just emerging from the terminal. The sudden humidity checked them for a moment, and she slipped away across Port Plaza, moving quickly, but with a measured conspicuousness.

Regina tried her best to look nonchalant and comfortable, like this place didn't make her skin crawl, like it didn't ache to see the flow of new Uppers arriving down from orbit, come to displace her and her people. She looked the perfect part of an Upper waiting for their loved one to arrive from orbit, leisurely sipping at a pink krastini. She knew that Marcel would arrive any second, and she had chosen this spot such that they wouldn't see her right away, and once they did they wouldn't be able to confront her without making a scene. She wasn't entirely comfortable with playing bait, but it was what they had planned, and she wasn't going to let down the others. There was also, of course, the prospect of revenge, which made the whole thing entirely more appealing to her.

It didn't take long for Marcel to arrive. Now that she could see them up close, she could be sure of how different they looked.

They were a far cry from the tattered outcast she had once known, striding confidently through the port in their long formal drathka, a deep green set against the pale blues and greys of the port. They looked good though, clean dark skin and dancing eyes, with the heavy jewellery that was common in Skaeran gangs. At least that night had paid off for one of them, Regina thought bitterly.

Marcel was heading towards a bar on the other side of the port, where they met with some other Uppers, who had the air of importance and lack of taste that came with money. She tried to focus on what was happening before her, but she couldn't get the thought of it out her mind, the idea that Carola was decomposing in the Mourning Gardens and that Marcel was here, surrounded by money and power and newly arrived colonists, and that everyone was acting like the world hadn't ended that night. The injustice of it coursed through her. And that's when their eyes met.

Across the orbital port, past the reunions of long-separated family members, under the blare of the tele-concierge and through the mundane reality of the colonisation of Skaerene, they locked eyes. Marcel froze, for a second, as recognition dawned on them, and then they flashed a quick smile, before continuing to chat amiably with the Uppers around them. Anger rose up in Regina's throat, and something else, something more devastating. But this was not the place. She got to her feet.

The shop was cramped and grimy. Most of the wares, a strange mix of everfresh food and outdated appliances, were covered so thickly in dust that it was barely possible to make out the writing on their boxes. The place was so obviously a front that Regina wondered how it could possibly have made it this far unsearched.

There were two figures behind the counter: one sitting, one standing, both Lovers by their clothing. As she entered, they abruptly halted their conversation and turned to look at her. Regina decided to get straight to the point. "I have a proposal. If you'll help me find them, I'll get rid of Marcel for you."

If her words surprised them, neither showed any sign of it. Instead, the standing figure – a man, tall with dark hair gelled into a perfect cone – merely asked, "Why?"

"They killed my sister."

Nakor, boss of the Drakes, studied the young woman in front of him. Aside from the madness in her eyes, she was the spitting image of her sister, whom he had ordered to be taken out two years ago. It hadn't been personal exactly: Carola had been an assassin for the Wanderers, the Upper-heavy gang the Drakes had long competed with for territory. Yet again, Uppers coming in and taking everything from the Lovers who were there first.

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It had almost gone very wrong, that mission. If Marcel had found out it was a trap any earlier, Nakor might have lost most of his best hit squad: his people weren't nearly good enough to take on two Wanderer assassins simultaneously. Though Marcel had taken out so many Drakes since that it might actually have been better if they had got themselves killed then.

But now, an opportunity to finish them off had just presented herself, unknowing of the fact that her oh-so-innocent sister had been firmly on the other side of this conflict. The irony of it was not lost on him, but Nakor wouldn't have got to where he was without an excellent grasp of his emotions. His face betrayed none of his thoughts as he said, "Proposal accepted."

Kraken, Moon and Boat

Designed by LolaCrowCrossStitch, stitched by Maya



COWHERD 147

Alex Colesmith

Bleeding cold again this morning. If you could call it a morning. Lighter than night-side, I dare say, but it was still like having your curtains drawn, and it's not like you get days here. Barely a thin speck of light in the sky, and it wasn't like I could see much of that anyway through the roof of this here floating tin can.

They said you'd be a cowboy out here. And to a lass from old Texas, that sounded mighty appealing. Riding my horse, drinking, shooting... the usual chuckled rumours about alien life... all that kinda thing. You get what I'm saying.

They lied, acourse.

Worst part 'bout it is that they was telling the truth when they did it. Not like anyone was gonna sue 'em anyhow, stuck out here millions of miles from the nearest lawyers – aye, and that's the part I didn't mind! – but they was telling the truth when they said you'd be a cowboy. Or cowgirl, acourse, though I'm 'bout the only one of those out here.

But we're herding cows, all right. They just ain't the kind of cows you get back home. These here's so-called cash cows – summat gene-spliced, I hopes, otherwise they must have one *heck* of a lot of other secrets – and they don't look nothing like your cow back home. No indeed.

From where I'm sitting they just look like long blobs. If I look out the porthole now there's 'bout twenty miles down to 'em, so you can't see all that much. They've gotta be a bit further down than we have, acause they eats the methane, or whatever it is going on down there. The Company told us 'bout all of it, but I went to sleep halfway through. Never liked science myself. I mean, yeah, I trust it, obviously, otherwise I'd be screaming and hollering to get me out of here pretty dang quick, but I don't have a clue how it all fits together. All I know is that the cash cows eat the methane acause they're built out of some kind of little germy thing which does that natural-like. They don't swim, they don't move much – they're tethered to my little can floating here from its balloons – and the cold don't bother 'em. Which is good, I reckon, since they're a dang site colder than I am.

I still don't hold with this Kelvin stuff, but I knows seventy is too cold for any proper living critter. I don't know how they stick it out there, so don't ask me. I just keep an eye on things up here. Make sure none of them flees the tether, make sure none of them gets stolen, eat my rations and sit it

out.

Acourse, every so often I've got to winch one of them up and send for the seg-lops. That's what everyone calls 'em, seglops, though they get real snarky if you don't call 'em segment loppers. They just slice the big end parts off the cash cows and takes 'em up.

Why? Well, that's where they make meat. Little bit of the sunlight they get, lot of methane, and whatever living thing those boffins cooked up, and they turns it into meat.

Meat-ish, anyhow. But I eat it every day and it's a damn sight better than nothing. I had nothing too often after Big Judy came right through the Gulf and up into Texas, and I'm not going back to that.

Funny how everyone started trying to do stuff about the global warming when it was hitting Texas...

Acourse, it was too late by then anyhow. Earth's not rolled over and died – no indeedy – but humans were getting pretty dang close by the time I signed up for this. Couple of billion starved. Everyone else flooded out or running away from the wars over food scraps.

Ah, so that's where all the meat's going, you're gonna say. The good Company are sending all this meat back to Earth.

No they ain't. Tell you that for free, and that's unusual around here, because the Company ain't doing nothing for free. Which is why that meat's just heading over to Miranda.

Always used to confuse me, that, acause I had a cousin called Miranda. Spoilt whiny brat. The meat ain't orbiting her – no matter what she thought, the whole world weren't going around her either – but one of this dang planet's moons.

I'm trying to see it out of the window now, but it's right above me so the roof's in the way. But you can see the meat rings orbiting it. Company's got a big order to fill. Ten thousand, they say, ten thousand in a colony ship headed out *there*.

I'm not on it, acourse. Not this girl from Texas. I just press the buttons or – and yeah, this is more of the real cowboying – occasionally shoot off the gun if one of the cows is getting too frisky. It don't hurt 'em, just gets 'em to go back to their place.

It's the seglops hurts 'em, and that's why they gets frisky, acourse. They don't like having their tail ends cut off.

Where was I? Oh, colony ship out *there*. That's right. Anyhow, I can't say I'd fancy it. I mean... whole new world, yeah, but not *yours*. Your kids' if you're lucky. Whole colony ship full of ten thousand rich slickers and their kids? I'll pass. Be almost worth it to see their faces when they have to eat this cash-cow meat for the millionth time, but... you don't catch me going out *there*. Whoee, no. I'm a strictly planetary gal.

Yeah, I know I had to go between Earth and here. Don't remind me. I was curled up praying and sweating and wanting to die for a year and a half. And they say that was one of the fast trips. No more zero-gee for me.

What's that you say? Surely animal rights won't let 'em cut off the segs if it hurts the cows without anaesthetic?

There's two answers I heard to this one. I ain't never asked it – keep my head down, don't provoke 'em any more than being almost the only woman out here does already – but I ain't exactly stopped my ears up either. It's hard to help it, know what I'm saying?

So the first one is, yes, of course it would be, but they're thirty-mile beasts and there ain't enough anaesthetic in the world to put one of them under, and they can't really feel much anyhow. To which I say bullshit. They might not have much brain or nerves, and maybe I am *anth-ro-po-mor-phising*, like my Daddy always said I did about that hamster when I was little, but I've seen 'em wriggle and they feel something when that seglopper gets to work.

The second one is, we'll deal with it when those hippies come and stop us. And that one you can round off with a good ol' fashioned yee haw.

Anyhow that's all for today same as usual. Just talking to myself again.

[DELETE SCRIPT] [Y/N]

[Y]

Weather all clear. Cow 1473 approaching readiness for harvesting. Cow 1476 required pacification with stunner. This is the third incident this week. Potential termination necessary.

Cowherd 147 signing out.

THE HANDSOMEVERSE.

By so far around a dozen anonymous people

PART 1.

Chaptarr 1. In which we catch uppe with some of the Swalleaughs

Rogarr gaulleongauillivaunted in widezagarrs fro and to and fro and to Once More, down the steepslope field from The Lake to Holy Cowe, the farm which they had been -t-e-r-r-o-r-i-z- staying at for the Summarr Jollydays. For as usual, the winde was againste him, neughcessitating yon tacking motion on account of his being a Tea-Clipparr Sailboate.

The locals did not find this so cute, now that he was twenty-six, six foot five and eighteen stone. But he was still the youngest of the Swalleaughs, he privately reassured himself, and would likely stay that way since 1948's level of technology was not likely to result in relativistically time-dilating modes of transport coming into existence during his lifetime.

And if it did, he re-reassured himself, then why, he would jolly well impersonate that mode of transport during his pre-breakfast run as well. He was, after all, an Equal-Opportunities Impersonator of All Mannarr of Transporte.

This caused some complications with his some-time girlfriend Peggeaugh, now Mate aboard the Swalleaugh, of which Rogarr had inherited the Captain-sea. Because Jon had given him quite a complex about steaum-ships by deriding them through their commonly mis-spent youth as "jeust eungines in tin bouxes". And referring to the eungines themseves as "little doughnquays".

Which was where Peggeaugh's own deep-seated issues started. Her own early years having been subjected to her Oldarr Sistarr Naunceault, who did traughmaughtaughze her so by Not Only calling her "Dohnqueault", but even regularly calling her "Dohnqueault"-In-Public! As a result of which, she could only enjoy Life's Main Pleasures while being called "Dohnqueault". And "turning on the little Doughnquay" is how John had derided Rogarr's motorized escapades, so Rogarr could not focus on Doughnquays unless Peggeaugh was all-fetchingly-dressed-up as a Steaumship. And Peggeaugh could not get things going unless she was dressed up as a Dohnqueault. Necessitating her wearing the attire of a Dohnqueault in-turn-dressed-up-as a Steaum-Ship. While this combination had taken several years for them to get right, it was proving to be vastly enjoyable for the both of them. Though it could get jolly hot with all that fur, ears and tin-canned carapace.

And this morning, she was waiting for him at the bottom of the field, next to the Swalleaugh, recently refitted, and packed high with Tent-Pegs and Perch-Rods and Latin Grammars, and Sea-Charts with huge unexplored gaps to fill in, and Parrot Feathers, and Knickarrbockarrbreauhgharr-resistant-Knickarrbockarrs, a huge tin of what Titty called "Molasses", a small Brass Cannon, and many other Jolly-

Good Jolliday Things!

"Peggeaugh!" he called out as he arrived at the mirror land-port next to the actual lake-port.

"The D's are coming this summer too!" beamed Peggeaugh, her long ears jostling with excitement.

Chaptarr 2. In Which All Hell Breaks Loose on Tigarrs-and-Tamarrs Island.

We begin our chaptarrs not by queuting Tennyson

(for that euld dear smelles too much like venison)

But by giving our own community's *modus operandi*.

Of a Dysteupian Helle run solely by minor charactarrs

from Arn'tya Handsome's Swalleaughs and Amazannes

Who (this being set some Twenty Years Aftarrwarrs)

have in the meanwhile become somewhat randeaugh.

And so a First Wave of Explorers had returned to the Bliss-of-Island Life.

Diving for Pearls, Fishing for Sharques, Eating from Tins, Cleaning out said Tins for Peggeaugh to Use as Accessories, and deciding which afternoon they could have a Short Jollyday away from their Summarr Jollyday as Pirates paying a visit to their old friends the Charcoal Burnarrs. All of whom were called Billeaugh.

* * *

Let us now ourselves take a brief detour from the Handsomeverse to the Metaverse, where our community now faces the key task of generating a Head Honcho Daemoniq-Entitie to Run our Rapidly and Inevitably incoming Hellscape.

Some of who have read these books several times put forward the name of Great Aunt Maria as the Series' principal antagonist. For the books' real topic is probably surviving in the face of extreme bullying, for all that the ostensible topic is children wanting their own spaces to camp in and have/imagine adventures in. [And ping. For we have installed a counter that goes ping each time a minor

character is mentioned.]

A challenge is issued by other fans, who consider the Heart of Evil to be an entire hellish production line running from egg thieves Gorge Sowspen and Alpha Stretchy to "a man in Norwich" who buys and blows the eggs, to the Arch-Egg-Collector Himself, the odious, unctuous, cackling, and (at least in our own imagination semi-ironically hemi-oomorphic) proto-billionaire Mr Hammerling of the "Petrodollardactyl" motoryacht [quadruple-ping].

So, poll now for one of the following!

A) Creature Type: Victorian Spinsterbat: Parasol-Wielding Gendernorm-Enforcing Hardmouth-Bully.

B) Creature Type: Billionaire Proto-Bond-Villain: Plowing-Profits into Murdering Birds on an Industrial Scale, the Rarer the Species the Better the Kicks.

Contests between candidates this variably bad are becoming quite topical these days...

A compromise is gradually reached, along the lines that our manuscript is getting long enough to split between two TTBA's, so that the birth of the world's first Bird Protection Societies can play a big part in the second instalment. So The Great Aunt it is. Despite the slight problem that SHE was already 'socially active' in the 1860s and the year is now 1948. Which was overcome by updating poll entry A) to

Undead Victorian Spinsterbat, named The Great Revenant.

with a touch of how HER favourite torment is to force some of our Intrepid Explorers to memorize and recite the 'poem' "Casabianca"...

* * *

Much as Sudden Storms had Abrupteruptedly Ended many of their other Summer Jollydays, a Great Cracque of Thundarr Struck Beckonfoot Manorr and Great Aunt Maria strode into Dominaunceault and Peggeaugh's ancestral home, Viciously-Sharpended Parasol in Clawed-and-Gloved hand. HER Unannounced Visits had been rancorous enough in life. And yet now Not Even Having Passed Away was of any impediment to HER continuing to Do As SHE May, taking up residence uninvited, and reeducing the local firefightarrs, clauhrgy and police officarrs to tears [ping, ping, ping], sleaugh-reasting Cookeaugh for each Item of Preutocol missed [ping], calling Dominaunceault 'Aldehyde' and Peggeaugh 'Margauritte' and Absolutely Banning Sailing, Camping and Any-and-All Contact with the Unsuitable Swaughlleaugh and the Dreadful Deepersons...

"Why ARE you not At Dinnar in your Beste Froughques, Aldehyde?" SHE intoned.

Despite Beckonfoot being over a mile away (and a *naughtycal* mile at that), they could hear HER quite clearly from Camp on Tigarrs and Tamarrs Island.

"CAUMPING, is it?" SHE vituperascreed.

Peggeaugh shuddered "But I thought she was..."

"Apparentleaugh notte, you Dohnqueault" shrugged Dominanceault "And by the sounds of HER, SHE's a Great Revenant by now... Baurbequeued Billeaghoats and Shivvarr my Timbarrs! I teughld Uncle Tim thart we should harf

staukhd HER, but he refused to staukhe HER through the couffehn, closed causquette arrangements and arhl..."

"Things WILL CHANGE around HEARRGH!" bellowed the Great Revenant. "For, you see, even Saughtan Himself broke undaughr the dirge and scourge of Causabiaunceaugh..." she blectugeoned on "Arnd now I ahm In Chaughrge orff this Hell..."

A huge burst of flames protruded from the wooded area that the Charcoal Burnarrs' "thunk, thunk, thunk" had been emanating from.

"Baurbequeued Billeaghoats INDEED! The Billeaghs sharll now stoughque MY FLAMES" SHE Intoned. [Ping!]

"AND Your Spell is BROKEN" SHE menaced.

"What does SHE mean?" asked Jon.

"Gibbarr-brooms and blobstrays!" curseterjected Dominaunceault [Ping: Ship's Monkey!] "I'm starting to have this feeling that I have never had on Tigarrs and Tamarrs' Island before..."

"Me too" said Rogarr, running into the woods. "SHE's broken Motharr's Constipeution Spell by which we have never needed to dig a latrine while camping..."

[ping; and ping, ping, ping: most minor 'character' of all mentioned: the lack of a Ship's Toilet!]

"You know, with that combination of 'seedcake' and what Titty calls 'Pemmican'..."

* * *

Camp Dysentery was abandoned within hours. And all the Explorers' charts had had to be sacrificed on the Altar of Paper Shortage. The Great Revenant's voice began to gloat and threaten.

"The 'Great Explorarrs' who need Docteurung MUST Go HOME!"

* * *

"Let's head for Swalleaughdaule instead" quietly countered Dominaunceault.

And so the Defiant Pirates boarded their two great ships, Swalleaugh and Amazanne, each an enormous eleven feet long.

"YOU Sharll LEARN the HARD way" SHE intoned. "Thart Ten IUMPAUSSABLE Tauskes SHARLL Bloque yaughr WAY if YOU Continue TO Defy MEEE..."

The neck of a hurricane started to form on the far end of the great lake that the Explorers called the Great Sea.

"Jon SHARLL Steer. DUFFAR." SHE taunted. "WE All SAW your 'WORTH' at Dunkirk, DUFFAR!"

"ALL You NEED to DO Is AVOID My IMPROVEMENT of THE Pike ROCQUE" she screed into the very eye of the hurricane.

"FAIL, And APART from SINKING yarr 'Swaughlleaugh'

AGAIN, I shall TAKE One of yarr NUMBARR, deluded
DUFFARS..."

And at the base of the eye, a great sucking Maelstrom surged
around not the Pike Rock but Picard's Great Rock:that Complex-
Analytic Nightmare in which any Punctured Neighbourhood of
this rock, No Mattarr How Small, has the streamefunction for the
wind take Every Possible Value bar possibly one value. Steering
is impossible. Duffars or no Duffars.

"You SHARLL Now EXPERIENCE The TRUE MEANING
Orff "Shivvar My Timbaughrrs", Dreadful Aldehyde!" cackled
the Great Revenaunt, as the Swalleaugh was spitreausted by the
Rock to such aplomb that her mizen ended up on a crag behind
Jagson's Farm [Ping], her transom in the Author's Museum in
Arrowness and her painter in the Tate Modern.

"And for your failure, DUFFER, I've hard my
HEUGHLLEAUGHBAUGHLEAULTS Tear aAong the Suffeulk
Narraughs and CAPTURE..."

The suspense was audible, even in the hurricane.

"TOM STURGEON!" she cackled.

"What the Hell?" hopespluttered Rogarr "He's practically a minor
character himself!" [Ping?]

"No." said Aldehyde, down, deflated and badly beaten. "he is
Dorotheaugh's weak spot. HER Toto."

Chaptarr 3. In which we meet the D's under a Preliminary Title so as to Not Spoil The Development of Things...

"MY Quompatutave Quuolde has run away in the night again!" remarked Dotte in a quarterdisdainful tone.

"Oh noes!" quipped Dicq, taking a puff from a cigarette as he lay in bed with his right arm wrapped around Portia and his left arm wrapped around Starboardia. [ping, ping!] "You should put biggarr bells on their horns, so you can track them down all the bettarr, Sis!"

"You wound me, Brother" riposted Dotte "Since Quonsent is the meust importaunt part of All I Do! And yet the Quoquolde Quompetition is next week!" snapped Dotte growing into a Darque, Stormy and Dominantly-Bepigtailed Moode. "How can III possibly WIHIN this time?"

"My Twin-Alpha-Star-Higher-Level-Prized-Pet-Unicorns here" said Dick, giving Portia and Starboardia an endearing cuddle "tell me of a certain village in the Suffolk Narrows where Extreume Quoquoldreaugh is jolly prevalent" offered Dicq.

Portia and Starboardia giggled at the thought of one of the locals therefrom Falling into Dotte's Clutches, for SHE was So Implacably Ruthless even by the harsh standards endemic in Cornage Village.

* * *

And so they found THEMSELVES on a train, starting to puff out steam in anticipation of leaving. When a young man in the unmistakeable headgear of a currently -u-n-s-u-b-j-u-g- single Cornageman ran on to the platform. Caught a glimpse of Dotte's trademark polqua-dotte-Feutischesocques though an open carriage door. And was sent sprawling down on to his hands and knees. Miscellaneous -b-o-n-d-a- boating gear spilled onto the platform around him: tarred ropes, shackles, -s-p-r-e-a-d-e-r---d-e-v-i-c- boom components and a nice little apparatus for linking them all together under the -b-e-d- boat, boat, boat!

"He'll *do nicely*" beamed Dotte sesquicurtly to Dicq.

"You think so?" ripostequipped Dicq.

"I *know* so" said Dotte, boring two holes through to the back of the young Cornageman's head with her Trademark smyrkstare.

An audible whimparr was all the confirmation that SHE needed.

"Gatharr up your... boating gear... and Do join us..." invited Dotte through the open train door "I'll let you chew on one of my Feutischesocques" SHE added, in encouraging tones.

* * *

"My farthur is the Cornage Doctur" [ping] he spluttered, as a means of introduction.

"Ours is totally owned by our MOTHARR" replied Dicq as HIS own means of introduction [ping, ping]. "My Sistarr here taukes raughter auftarr HERR" HE added so that SHE not be left out.

"I deun't suppose theuse are for your fatharr's surgery?" cooed Dotte, pointing at the gear.

"No, they're for my *"Tatmouse"*, meaning my boat!" said the young man.

"I think I shall call you Tom" smiled Dotte.

"I *am* called Tom" said Tom "how did YOU know?"

"Intuition" smiled Dotte more intensely. "Though I think I shall call you Tom since every QUEENE needs a Tom, Dicq and Harry in HER life..." [Ping?]

"I'm Dicq" offered Dicq, helpfully.

"And now that you are MINE" smirked Dotte as he knelt and chewed, "I intend to have Harry ..." SHE went on and on and on, combining HER Creative Writing Passion with some of HER Most Very Favourite Activities. Ending with "... loudly in front of you three times per night." she ended, placing her now bare foot on his neck, and starting to rythmically tap her matchingly elaborately polqua-dotte lacquarred teaghnails on the enqasement on the side of his head where the left antlarr would fit.

"The Eel Man?" Tom spluttered [Confirmed-ping] "Why he must be at least one hundred and five by now!"

"His grandson, Silly!" Gigglererjected Dotte "Harry Bang'em III, who has certainly inherited the Eel that..."

At this point, Portia and Starboardia started to greedily eye Dicq. Both D's flashed a smile of approval at this supporting move, as Dotte returned Dicq's introductory favor.

"They're Racerrrs" Smiled Dotte. "They race each other to ..."

Tom 's eyes widened like saucers.

"... ten times apiece morning and night!" finished Dotte, Triumphantly Flourishing HER Writingquille.

“Whereas for you”, SHE added, as an afterthought, “well, “*Tatmouse*” SAYS IT ALL!”

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And so 'Tom Tatmouse' became HER Dearest, HER Weakness, and therefore HER Toto.

For the D's - Richard and Dorotheaugh – were in fact All the Richards and Dorotheaugh's In History - and Literature - Rolled into One. Though they were only ever called 'Richard' and 'Dorotheaugh' when they Were In Trouble.

Which, reading the above text, had so far Chiefly Occurred in their Incarnation as the Worsleys. For all that a Certain Wicked Witch, two Nephews Locked in a Tower, the Irrascibly Wetted American Public, and the victims of NeoLib Military Interventionism, might have a thing or three to say on that count at some point of the Past, Present and Future.

Though certainly the current tale (more naughticalsomey a yarn!) shall venture close. For do note, Dear Readers, that a downtrodden Dominaunceault -hence named Aldehyde- said “Dorotheaugh” And Not “Dotte”!

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“Tauske numbarr six is to Staughke yarr Claime for the Loste Goldmine on the High Topos, ahead of the Squaughsheaugh Hattes staying at the Aughtkinseuns". Proclaimed The Great Revenaunt. [Ping, ping]

“To Proceed, howevarr, you muste firste Finde the Aughrmadilleaugh.” SHE added in an uncharacteristically welcoming tone. [Ping?]

Peggeaugh, Titty and Rogarr started to check around the voluminous Beckonfoot Boot-cupboards, and the even more extensive if by now daisy-less Beckonfoot Gardens.

Dominanceault and Suzann, more determinedly, started to scale ‘Mount Kautchenjungarr’ with the Ship's Binoculars in their knapsacques.

A Prodigious Thundering then shook the entirety of the Handsomeverse, as from the *aleph-1* numbarr of Hatkinsons' farms emerged a *higher* aleph of Squashy Hats, each marching up the High Topos Checquerboard leaving a lengthening collection of white painted dots on the rocks therebehind like ever so many Safely-Escorted Pawns. Olbers' Paradox kicked in with a roar, both claiming the entirety of the High Topos *and* setting it on fire as the sun reflected off the brilliance of the white.

A Hitherto-Errant Lesbian Pigeon sounded the tea-tray alarm on the Beckonfoot coop. [Ping! And one cake offered for whoever correctly names the Ancient Greek Poet in question. Because, naturally, if one has a coop of messenger pigeons, one must name them after Greek Poets...] Peggeaugh was by now shaking around as much as the tea-trays.

* * *

“So, where was the Armadillo?” Asked Rogarr unto the Great Revenaunt.

“There wasn't one.” SHE replied curtly. [Cancelled-ping]

“Then it wasn't very fair of you to require us to find one!” burst out Titty.

“This tauske was surggeusted to ME by MY young proteugéaugh Almira Gulch” riposted The Great Revenaunt, casually placing a satin-encrusted leg over her Parasol-of-Office as if it were a broom.

* * *

“This gives a fair indication of why I just let Lenin win at chess” sighed The Author's Reincarnation As a (Still-Bespectacled-and-Heavily-Walrus-Moustached) Cloud, as he floated aimlessly above the little town that our Intrepid Explorers called Riio.

The Tree of Dreams

Phoebe Fay

The sylvan elf sneered as she approached the *Mur-tathrin* tree, holding her breath. Another poor soul has been suckered into its snare, falling asleep among the ancient roots. A young halfling man. A long pipe hung out of his mouth as he slept. He seemed restful, sleeping with legs crossed, one arm bent to serve as a pillow. So still a blue morpho butterfly perched on the tip of his shoe as he held it slightly aloft in his slumber. Perhaps they mistook him for one of their own, in his purple jerkin and striped breeches. What a picture. Upon closer inspection from behind the tree, she noticed his chest rising and falling, taking in fast, shallow breaths. He shook his head, face curled in distress. The pipe fell from his mouth with a clatter, knocking into a tall mushroom as it dropped out of sight in the tall grass, releasing a puff of bioluminescent spores. The halfling cleared his throat but still did not awaken.

Mur-tathrin sat on the border between Vandorrûn and Amonlaur forest, marked by the river Nen. The enchanted tree had been there for the river's maiden voyage, and it carved through the valleys. It had been there when the first saplings of the Amonlaur forest sprouted, though none of the seedlings were its own. It had been there when the first gnomes came from the mountains of Gonwed and settled on the hillside, and when the high elf Elred Fennmyre built his grey stone mansion beside their little village. It paid no mind to the growing cobblestone village below and the *truemetal* miners that call it home. The locals knew of its powers and stayed away but did not tell of them to strangers. The glittered blue lichen and strange serpentine fungi of *Mur-tathrin* lured in curious travellers. The gently swaying leafy vines and purring of tiny Sithamûm wings made them feel safe and calm. The mushroom spores seal their fate. So thick were the spore clouds that they are surrounding the tree in a permanent haze, that bathed the twisted trunk in soft pink light after nightfall. One breath of the spores made eyelids heavy and bodies weak, not even the locals could escape it if they came too close. They would sleep until someone came to rescue them. Sometimes hours, sometimes centuries. It was not a peaceful sleep. Locals said that sporic dreams were portents of the future or visions of other realms. If it was true, the predictions they told were dark and unpleasant, dragging the poor innocent souls through inescapable scenes of pain and sorrow. Should probably wake him up.

The elf covered her mouth with a gauze cloth, infused with a potion that made wearers immune to the effects of the tree. She crouched beside the halfling. He had a well-groomed beard and short hair, bleached a light brown from the

summer sun. His skin was tanned, presumably from many days of travelling in the heat. She was taken in, admiring him. She briefly she came. Then his face crumpled in pain. Really, he needs to be woken up. With a free hand, she pulled another gauze cloth from her leather pouch and shook his shoulder. He gasped as he awoke, eyes wide. He hit his head on the trunk as he bolted upright and swore loudly. She clamped the gauze cloth over his mouth and tried to hold him still with her forearm without releasing her own cloth. Perhaps if she added some string to the cloth so they can be fixed around the ears, then she wouldn't have to struggle with no arms free.

'Don' be afraid,' she said. Her dialect was strong, but he seemed to understand, 'Yer safe 'ere. I'm a friend.' He tried to push her hand away, 'Keep the cloth over your nose and mouth. It protects yer from breathin' in the spores. Or you'll be sleepin' again... yer do understand me, don' ye?' He nodded a few times.

'Yes... yes, I understand.' He said, 'Wh-what was that?'

'This is *Mur-tathrin*. It lures people in, makes 'em fall asleep and have bad dreams.' She explained, rubbing the side of the tree. The lichen flickered under her palm.

'I see... and what are you? Some kind of... tree maiden?' She laughed.

'My name is Hanamara. Amonlaur is my home.'

'You're an elf?' He asked quizzically.

'Yes? What's wrong with that?'

'Oh, nothing, nothing. I just thought elves were taller. And didn't have curly hair. And would sound a bit more... different.'

'I'm taller than ye!' She scoffed, 'And I can speak just fine. I'm a sylvan elf. Yer thinking of eladrin. What? Are all elves the same to you?'

'No, no! I just... didn't know about sylvan elves. There aren't many sylvan elves where I'm from.'

She put a hand on her hip, 'And where are you from?'

'I'm from Grann-Criscolas originally. And the name is Anders Proudstep, by the way.'

'An islander?'

'A bargeman.'

'What brings you here, bargeman?'

'I am a storyteller by trade, but I've picked up some arcane and medical knowledge on my travels. My party to

Vandorrûn on a quest for a rare magical item. I can't talk too much about it.' He started, then stood suddenly, lowering the cloth.

'Mouth and nose! The spores!'

'Sorry. What day is it?'

'Tis the first day of *haro-duileg*; the season when hawks learn to fly.'

'Oh no. How long was I here!'

'I don't know, I only found ye a few moments ago.'

'Do you think they left without me?'

'When did ye arrive.'

'The middle of wheat ripening season.'

'Ah... Yeah, they probably left. That's rough, buddy.' She said, putting a hand on his shoulder to comfort him. She started to gently guide him away down the river.

'And my dulcimer is gone. Fan-tas-tic.' His shoulders sank. Now he was truly lost. He was a stranger in Vandorrûn. The elf girl was right. It was unlikely that the party was still there if they hadn't even troubled themselves enough to search near the forest for him. It had been about 40 days. Perhaps they got distracted and abandoned the quest entirely. Equally possible. It felt like he had been gone longer than 40 days. It felt like a lifetime had passed lying there, unable to escape the vision.

'You said that tree makes people have bad dreams?' She nodded.

'What did ye see?'

He grimaced, 'I'm not sure exactly. I was in a forest, and there were these hooded figures. I'm not sure how many. Maybe a hundred, maybe thousands of them. Walking in rows in these long black robes chanting something. It didn't sound like any language I had ever heard. They were all walking in the same direction, but I never saw where it led to. I think they were all different races too because the figures were vastly different heights. It doesn't sound that scary when I say it now, but when I was there it felt so... sinister. Like they were trying to summon something. Like an ancient demon, or something. The air felt all... prickly? Not hot or cold, it felt like lots of tiny needles. It didn't hurt exactly, but you just could never get comfortable. I think I was hiding behind a tree. But sometimes, some of them would turn their heads towards me. I could never quite see their faces, but one of them had fangs and a long tail. Do you think it could have been real?'

'Some people think the sporic dreams are visions of the future, or other realms. When I were a child, I fell asleep 'ere and saw an eladrin on a great sea boat with waving about a staff. It summoned a beast from the depths that swallowed up some other ships. I have never been to the sea, so I have no way of knowing what it meant.' His eyes widened.

'Did-did you see? How old are you?' He asked, 'If you don't mind me asking.' He added.

'I'm turning 350 in a few years.'

'So, so you could have been alive before the Battle of the Kamdwell Bay. Pirate Captain Fennmyre attacked a fleet of

pirate hunting junks with the Great Staff of Asalfinare. Everyone thought the staff was a myth, but it turns out the King had found it an intended to use it to crush the pirates, but they found it somehow and used it against him. You never heard about that?'

'News doesn't often travel this far north.'

'Yes, but this wasn't just news in Nathlwint, it travelled the whole of Roustaea, they wrote ballads about it! Oh, never mind.' They found a path that ran along the river, leading through the gnome village into the town. He realised that even after 40 days of rest, he was tired. Tree roots are not that comfortable. He could do with a snack, too. As if reading his mind (can wood elves do that?), Hanamara produced some rations from a pouch by her side.

'What's this?' He asked, 'It looks like a ball of dried fruit.'

'That's because it is a ball of dried fruit. We call it *quith'pa*. It should keep you going for a few days,' she said, and she watched him devour a week's worth of rations in a few mouthfuls. She'd heard about the appetite of halflings. He had been asleep for a long time, ought to let him off. She offered him some water.

'I think I'm in need of something a bit harder. Any good taverns around here?'

'If ye head into the village there's the Salty Noggin'. The gnome town on the hill 'ere has the Burrow Inn. There's a clan of nomadic 'alflings that go there ever' year,' she said.

'Well, as my plan was to go into the village anyway- would you care to join me?' he asked.

The eld tipped her head, mulling it over. She had some spells to learn before her mentor got back. She had left it to the last minute, again, and they wouldn't be pleased with her if they came back, and her casting was still off. But this stranger seemed like he could use a local to help him out. The townsfolk were not unfriendly here, but they could be a little... overenthusiastic.

'Arright.'

It was early evening, but it was summer, and the sky was still bright. The river Nen sparkled as it caught the sun, the water appearing almost orange. The elf and the halfling walked down the uneven cobbled streets heading towards the Salty Noggin'. A few people waved to them on way home for the night. Hanamara offered polite nods, but Anders was animated, saying 'good evening!' and 'lovely place! First time here' and even stopping a few times to make idle conversation. Perhaps he didn't need her to be there, after all. But she tagged along anyway.

The village had all the essentials- a shop, a school for the younglings, a multifaith building, a weekly market and even a roost for messenger birds, but they were dwarfed by the Salty Noggin'. Easily the largest building there, it was the only place that boasted more than two storeys, with guest rooms on the upper floors. A weatherworn sign that read 'The Salty Noggin'' above a picture of an overflowing tankard swung on chains from out a pole above heavy double doors. One of the doors was propped open with a stone wedge. The cacophony coming from inside could be heard halfway up the street. The pair were splashed with something as they walked through the open door.

Anders wiped his brow and licked the substance off his

forefinger, 'Firewine.' He shrugged and made his way to the bar, walking up some crate that seems to have been left for smaller folks like himself to reach the bar as Hanamara stood beside him. The bar seemed looked empty. He turned to look for a server, then Hanamara said,

'Arright Tina! Got any rollrum lef?'' a small, tanned face popped up over the countertop. She had thick strawberry blonde hair wrestled into two stiff braids over her chest, bright hazel eyes and a prodigious nose. Leaning over, Anders saw she was also standing on something to be level with the counter. A gnome. She gave them a broad smile.

'Jus' fer ye, Mara! A double?'' She spoke with the same accent as the elf. There were a few bottles to choose from, but without asking she had picked one out and had already started measuring.

'Ta.'

'An' fer this fella?'

'Hm, on a day like today, how about nice, refreshing glass of black ale?'

'Well, I dunno, ye the one buyin' it!' She joked, 'One copper.' He saw Hanamara had already handed over the two coppers for herself. From then, the details started to get blurry. Anders had a vague recollection of asking the tavern owner about his "friends"- they had indeed left without him. The tavern owner said she heard they were heading to Draughmanon, but he had little desire to follow them. Why run after people who had abandoned him so readily? He hadn't spent any of the money he had kept for the trip while lying under the tree, so now it flowed from his pockets like the drink he spent it on. He remembered performing when he was still somewhat sober and getting some generous tips that were spent buying everyone, including the . He was sure there was table dancing, and a conversation with an orc that ended up with an ill-advised challenge to arm wrestle. What he remembered most was the elf. He spoke with her until his cheeks and jaw ached from overuse. He spoke a little of himself and life on the island, of course, but he found himself longing to hear her speak. He caught himself staring into those blue eyes, thoughtful, if a little melancholy. He wanted to touch the waves of chestnut hair and pale skin, she looked so soft. She smelled so good, like a wildflower meadow in spring. Maybe it was that tree making him go mad, but in his drunken state he was certain it was love.

He asked her about anything and everything. He wanted to know about the town, and he was interested in the sylvan elves, of course, but soon he would have asked her about anything- did she prefer summer or winter (summer), wine or ale (ale), night or day (day). Several rounds later it became: was she seeing anyone? (No) Didn't have some tall, graceful elf waiting for her? (No, really, there's no one). What kind of person did she like? (Someone open-minded with a heart for adventure. He was adventurous! Wasn't he? And open-minded, undoubtedly!) Had she ever dated anyone of a smaller stature? (No) Would she? (Sure, if she liked them, why not). It sounded hopeful, and her own flurry of similar question sounded very promising indeed, but not so much that it led any further. Eventually, they both paid for a room each. He was excited for his mind to be filled with dreams of her.

But it wasn't.

He rolled around on the creaking bed boards, his head spinning. He squeezed his eyes tight, trying to force himself into sleep. His head continued to spiral for a moment, until all was still. When he opened his eyes again, he wasn't in the tavern anymore. He was slumped against a log. It was cold to the touch and saturated with rainwater. Flakes of wood coming off with lichen and moss in his hand as he scratched at it thoughtlessly. At least, that's what it felt like, but even with the vision his halfling eyes granted, he could only see a few feet in front of him in murky greys. Everything was still and wet. The air warm and something in it seemed to sting, like being brushed with nettles. Was he dreaming? Was the tavern, the elven girl, even real? Or was that the dream and this was waking? He wasn't sure. He didn't know why, but his stomach was knotted with a sickly anticipation. He felt his chest tighten, burning and his pulse ran through his neck, his arms. He looked around, trying to find a source of this crippling fear. Finding none, he felt no comfort.

He tried to move, but his legs trembled, refusing to take him beyond his resting place by the log. After what felt like hours of this paralysis, lying in wait hearing nothing but his own heartbeat, he heard a noise. Distant shuffling in the leaves, accompanied by a faint mournful song. The rustling, the singing, no chanting, got louder and louder. Whatever it was, it was coming towards him. It didn't sound like one creature, one voice, but many. Maybe a few, maybe thousands. He couldn't tell. As the sound grew closer, he could hear words, though he didn't understand them:

Sakkamorie shiyeo

Chwulyn moumo

Chwihal tekkaji masyeo

Sakkamorie shiyeo

The verse was repeated over and over, with each verse the voices became more animated. A flickered light poked holes in the thick darkness of the forest, so Anders could see further into the forest. The trees were young, straight, and regular, and weaving among them was a company of hooded figures. He couldn't make out any of their features from this distance in the limited light, but they were of various heights and statures, so he assumed they were not of one race, but many. All making the same journey in three neat rows between the trees. A small one holding a lantern slowed and turned to face the log, so he ducked behind it. He had no idea what they were doing there, or their destination, but their presence had heightened his dread. His broke out in a cold sweat, his heart beating hard against his chest. The hooded figures streamed past his log as he held his breathe, wary of alerting them to his presence. The three lines started to merge as they moved in front of his hiding spot. Apparently, the log was just shy of a large clearing. As they reached the clearing, they arranged themselves into a series of concentric circles around the centre of the open space. Those with lanterns places them by their feet, casting long dark shadows that matched the trees. The ones on the outside of the clearing faced the inside, but the ones in front of them faced them. This pattern repeated into the centre. Altogether, there seemed to be maybe two hundred people or so. The lanterns on the ground were not bright enough to show any

of their faces clearly, but he thought he saw someone with red-skin, and horns poking out in front of the hood. A demon, he thought. The chanting stopped suddenly, and silence rushed in to take its place for a moment. Anders swallowed.

‘Good evening to all,’ a voice rang out from within the crowd, ‘Welcome to our last meeting of the year. It has been a great pleasure and privilege to serve this year. Now, I am sure you are all aware why we have brought you here.’

Sakkamorie shiyeo

Sakkamorie shiyeo

Sakkamorie shiyeo

The group chanted and jostled around.

‘Yes, yes, I don’t want to drag this out. Without further ado, let’s begin!’ The group cheered, and as Anders leaned over slightly to get a better look, his foot slipped, and he found himself freefalling through a hole in the dirt into the dark. He tried to open his mouth to breath, but it filled with soil. He felt the soil move as the worms and beetles writhed in his mouth. His arms and legs stretched out to latch onto something, but it all melted in his touch. He was falling fast. He was buried alive. He couldn’t cry out. His lungs burned. His eyes watered. This was it. Damn his curiosity. Now he was going to die.

‘Anders! Anders!’ a voice muffled voice called out to him. His body shook as he held onto the last vestiges of life.

‘Anders!’ They said louder, ‘Anders, wake up!’

Anders opened his eyes and gasped to fill his lungs. What’s this? He whipped his head around to find the owner of the voice. His eyes were blown wide and frantic.

‘You arright? It’s me, Mara.’ He heard the words but didn’t understand yet.

‘Give me a minute, give me a minute, just, give me a minute.’ The pale face nodded.

‘Ok.’

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and looked at his small feet dangling over the floorboards. It was Hanamara. He wasn’t dying, he was at the Salty Noggin’.

‘Hey... sorry.’

‘S’arright. ‘nother night terror?’ She asked, putting an arm around his back. He bowed his head in confirmation, ‘Was it the same one?’ Another nod.

‘Yes... is it normal for the tree visions to continue when you’re no longer there?’ He asked, and then added, ‘I thought we got two separate rooms?’

‘Hm? Nah, we got the same room. Ye were throwing yer guts up, so I got ye some water and a bucket. Ye don’ remember?’ Oh great. What a first impression.

‘N-no... I’m sorry.’

‘Nah, it’s fine. And it’s not that normal, but it ‘appens.’ She said, answering his first question. He walked over to the window. He had to balance on a stool to see outside.

‘I can’t believe it’s still dark.’

‘Oh... ye’ve been out all day. I paid for an extra night.’

‘What?!’

‘It’s normal for people to sleep a little more after *Mur-tathrin* “poisoning”, I only woke ye cos ye were talking in yer sleep.’

‘I was? What was I saying?’

‘I dunno. Some other language. Sack-a-moray Sheer-o? Or somet?’

‘Sakkamorie shiyeo, chwulyn moumo, Chwihal tekkaji masyeo...’ He said, shocked that he remembered the words at all.

‘Yeah, yeah, that’s the one. Stop though, it’s creepin’ me out.’

Hanamara got out of bed and folded her arms over the windowsill. She was wearing only her thin undergarments. Anders realised his jerkin and breeches had been removed, so he was standing in just shirt and underclothes himself. Did she undress him, or did he do it and just didn’t remember? Oh gods...

They looked out of the window, fogging the glass with their breath. They were on the highest floor, facing the gnome village. And the tree. Anders looked at the tree closely. Perhaps it was all the mushrooms that made the tree look like it was glowing, setting it apart from the hillside and forest behind it. It seemed so inviting. But something seemed different about it.

‘Was that hole always there?’ He asked

‘What?’

‘Look, on the tree. That hole, in the trunk, near the ground? Was that there before?’ Hanamara followed his hand and sure enough, there was a black mark in the middle of the radiant trunk of *Mur-tathrin*, like a den for an animal. Hanamara had lived in the forest her whole life and knew all its creatures. She couldn’t think of anything that could have made a hole like that in the tree. Animals knew of the dangers of the tree, and rarely went near it. When they did, they suffered the same fate as everyone else. There’s no way that something could resist the spores for long enough to dig around there, let alone live there. And she was sure it was not there yesterday. Something wasn’t right. She swung back to the bed to put on her clothes back on, leather armour, cape, arm wraps, leather gauntlets, boots, headband. Bow, arrows. All accounted for.

‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m goin’ to check it out. There’s ne’er been an ‘ole there before. Don’ worry, we have these.’ She said, raising the gauze cloth.

‘Are you sure that’s a good idea?’ He said, putting on his breeches, boots, belt, and jerkin. The jerkin radiated the scent of vomit. He would clean it later. He picked up his pipe and went for his dulcimer, remembered that it was gone. What did he perform with last night?

‘No. Are ye with me?’

‘Absolutely.’

They left the tavern, skirting past overturned chairs and unconscious drunkards on the floor, and ran all the way up the hill through the town. Despite moving over stone, Hanamara barely made a sound, and Anders was struggling to maintain the same speed and subtlety. When they reached the gnome village, Hanamara handed him the gauze. She had added the strings onto it as she had said and shaped it a little to fit snug against his face.

Masks adorned; they approached the *Mur-tathrin* tree. Sure enough, there it was. A hole large enough for a dwarven child to fit through without ducking, that seemed to go deeper than was possible. Anders went first, ducking slightly to fit. Hanamara followed behind, crawling. Anders expected a tight tunnel but wasn't too surprised to find the space was much bigger than he thought, and he could stand easily. Maybe it was the effect of the tree, but he felt tranquil. A faint light was the only thing illuminating this seemingly infinite space, and a rolling burble the only sound, both coming from opposite directions.

‘Where do we go now?’ He asked.

‘I don' know, but I don' trust the light. See 'ow it's so bright, but only lights up a small space.’

‘So... we follow the sound then?’

‘As good a choice as any.’ She replied. They move away from the light. They delve a bit deeper, a bit darker. A soft splash and spreading coolness around his toes told Anders that he had reached a shallow stream that stretched out impossibly far in both directions. Instinctively, Hanamara takes Anders calloused hand and takes him downstream. The path of least resistance. She hopes it doesn't end at the sewer mains. They walk together without speaking, both absorbed in their own thoughts, until they are distracted by a thick, obstinate mist. It was hard to see in the dark, but the mist was so thick it was almost edible. Anders wondered what it would taste like. Spun sugar, surely. Against her better judgement, Hanamara reached out a hand to touch the mist. It felt soft and soothing against her palm. It covered the path ahead. She looked at Anders.

‘We can go back, or we can go through. I know what I want to do.’ She spoke.

‘We go through?’ She agreed, and they walked in step through the mist. It was friendly, as mists go. Without warning, they feel the sensation of being spun around, the mouth of another hole lit dimly above them. There were a few strong roots sticking out of the soil, and Hanamara latched on to them, pulling herself up, to give Anders a hand. It was a little too high for him to reach alone. They climbed a short while, the smell of damp soil filling their senses. Anders felt sick.

When they reached the top, they landed on a dewy bed of grass. Anders stuck a hand out to support himself, pulling away flakes of wood, lichen, and moss from a fallen log. He felt a lump in his throat.

‘This... this was in my dream.’ His voice shook, betraying him, ‘I wake up here, on this log, in the forest.’ Hanamara looks around her, from the little she can see, she can tell it is Amonlaur forest, but she was not familiar with this part. Where had the tree

taken them? Was it showing them this, or was it real?

‘What 'appens next? In your dream?’ Hanamara asked.

‘Ah... uh... it's quiet for a while, then you start to hear the chanting.’ As if on cue, the faint sound of many voices singing in unison approached them. He grabbed her arm and pulled her to hide under the log, a finger over his mouth to indicate silence. It happened just as it had in his dream. The chanting, the lights, the rows of hooded figures. There they were, again, gathered in the clearing, and the voice spoke:

‘Good evening to all. Welcome to our last meeting of the year. It has been a great pleasure and privilege to serve this year. Now, I am sure you are all aware why we have brought you here.’ Anders braced himself, expecting to fall backwards, but the hole they had come through was gone. Feeling both alarmed and strangely safe with this knowledge, he peered over the log to see what happens next. The circles were disintegrated as the chanting grew louder and the hooded figures jostled each other.

‘Not yet! First, let us bring our hands together.’ They stilled and brought their arms together. The sound of two hundred people clapping in unison made the log quiver ever so slightly. One clap, then two, then three in quick succession, another three, and one more. The same pattern repeated.

‘Robes down.’ The figures disrobed. The masculine figures wore dresses, the feminine one's suits and painted facial hair if they had none already. As Anders suspected, all creeds existed here. Humans, elves, halflings, dwarves, even the tiefling that he had mistaken for a demon earlier. He felt a twinge of guilt. From their skirts, the men produced corked bottles. The women had some too. As they pulled the corks off with teeth and claws alike, the scent of alcohol radiated across the clearing. Mead, port, ale, spirits, all of it was flowing quite freely. With the first flash, the derobed people gave animalistic roars, and a feverish tune broke out over the clearing, although they couldn't see the bard who was playing. Hanamara began to laugh. Anders turned to look at her.

‘What are you doing?! They'll spot us!’

‘Why does that matter? Don' ye realise what this is? Look at the robes!’

‘No?’ He looked at the robes. One pile close by, discarded by a tall human woman, had an insignia on the front: a mermaid and unicorn on two sides of a shield with a bridge. The crest of Camforde, the prestigious magic school. Only this insignia had an addition underneath; two crossed, half-empty bottles, ‘Right?’ He asked, confused.

‘It's a drinking society! Don' worry. I wonder why the tree showed ye this!’ She said, standing. A few less indisposed club members turned noticed her and came over.

‘Who goes there?’ One asked.

‘My name is Hanamara of Amonlaur,’ She said, ‘And this is my companion. Anders Proudstep of Grann-Crisolas.’ She said as he sheepishly raised up from behind the log.

‘Oh, no way! I'm from Grann-Crisolas!’ The tiefling said, ‘What part?’

‘Well, actually, I lived on the barges....’

'Oh wow! Cool, do you want to join us?' They said, he ran over to take a bottle almost half his size and took a swig. His eyes nearly popped out of his head.

'Oh, oh. That's, uh, strong stuff!' The teifling laughed.

Hanamara smiled and took a swig of some mead she was handed by the gnome she was talking to. She had heard that the students of Camforde sometimes came out here for their secret society meetings, but she had never seen them before. Perhaps the tree did always tell the truth, then, and it isn't always doom and gloom. She had heard these parties can go on for days. Learning the spells for her mentor could wait, and she'd have some great stories to tell them when they got back. She made eye contact with Anders as he chatted away, and he flashed her a smile. She hoped this wasn't her last adventure with this one.

