

# TWINNED TOMATOES



# BATTLECAT ARTIFICERS

TWINNED TOMATOES - BATTLECAT ARTIFICERS

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A production of the Cambridge University Science Fiction Society

hereafter CUSFS

# Twinned Tomatoes - Battlecat Artificers

TTBA Volume  $\pi$  Issue  $e$

## Contents

### COVER ART

---

Chris Pang	1
------------	---

### CHAIRBEING AND EDITOR'S ADDRESSES

---

Sam Hutton; Rosalind Mackey	4
-----------------------------	---

### CHAINWRITING

---

Casting Out Old Possessions	5
-----------------------------	---

An Ossifer and a Lady ( <i>or</i> Memento Omnes Mori)	10
---	----

Anne of Green Cables	20
----------------------	----

Nightfall	24
-----------	----

A Tale of Two Kitties	29
-----------------------	----

Miss Taken Identity	41
---------------------	----

### ORIGINAL WORKS

---

The Adviser	14
-------------	----

Marko Trandafilovski

The Strain of Knowledge	35
-------------------------	----

Alex Colesmith

The Tale of a Bard: A Ballad	46
------------------------------	----

Apple Juice

### ARTWORK

---

Diana and Anne	23
----------------	----

Anon.

Little Friend	34
---------------	----

Luxi Xiong

## Chairbeing's Address

The new era is well and truly upon us!

Once again, it comes time for me to update all of you on the runnings of the society. I'd like to think that we've brought CUSFS (& Jomsborg) life back to a bit of a pre-COVID form. With the appointment of our omnipotent Reeve, the restored two weekly meetings, and growing membership, I'm proud of what all of this committee has achieved in the last two terms.

This is also the time for those of you who've not been involved so far to think about whether you'd like to sign up to be on the committee. Elections will be held at the AGM at the end of term, and I'd highly recommend speaking to the current committee if you're interested.

Michaelmas has been great for gaining new members and the Freshers' Squash was a great success, followed by several very good discussions and popular film nights. This term, our key event is the Jómsborg Wake and Afmaelisdagr on the 30th to the 31st of January, where we shall say goodbye to the old, teapot-shaped sun and our great and omnipotent Reeve shall raise the new one! Much revelry to be had, I'm sure.

On practical matters, the library is being moved to a new home within the storage of the UL, which shall hopefully mean that members will have proper access to it soon! Additionally, membership also now confers on you a 10% discount on mead at Cambridge Wine Merchants, which is perhaps not as glamorous but nonetheless a welcome benefit for members.

TTBA is pushing forward as usual (Thanks Rosalind!), and I hear that we've had a great deal of interest in chainwriting this term, so I'm looking forward to seeing what that has produced!

SOMETHING SOMETHING JOMSVIKINGS WITH SPACE SHIPS,

Sam :)

Chairbeing 2022-23

## Editor's Address

Greetings!

This has been my first term as Editor of TTBA, and what a term it has been! Despite the ever-present peril of work, the amazing writers in this society have been even more enthusiastic than I could have hoped.

It's been incredibly fun running nine(!) chains this term, as well as receiving all your other wonderful submissions. In fact, the society produced so much incredible SFF content this term that I've had to save three chains for future issues to prevent this one becoming a Thesis-sized Tome of Bonkers Action!

But don't worry: there's plenty of excellent writing in the chains I did include. Look forward to anthropomorphic dinosaurs adopting robots, a grumpy old man wrangling demons and, of course, the purrfect (if silly) chain that inspired the title. Why are the tomatoes twinned? What is a Battlecat? You'll have to read it to find out—it really defies all summary!

There are also a few more serious chains in this issue, which were equally enjoyable to edit. Some of them do have heavier content, though, so I'd advise checking the content warnings at the start of each chain before diving in.

I'm really looking forward to continuing this job next term and seeing what crazy things you all come up with next! And, with three chains already up my sleeve, the next TTBA is looking just as much fun as this one. Look out for it at the start of Easter Term!

Swords and Sorcery,

Rosalind Mackey

TTBA Editor 2022-23



# CASTING OUT OLD POSSESSIONS

Alex Colesmith, Dan James, Kitty Liu, Maya, Felix Davison, The Talking Raptor of Red Lake, Olivia Reubens,  
Gwendolen Sellers, Phoebe Fay, Sarah, Rosalind Mackey

**CW: Blood, mention of drug use, mild body horror**

Uluha crawled groggily out from under the rhino pelt (he'd long ago stopped noticing the smell). The wards outside his cave were still intact, which was a good sign. If a sabre-tooth had wandered into them, they'd have kept him safe but used up the demon he spent most of yesterday summoning. It had cost him nearly the last of the dried mushrooms to call it, not to mention that the skin of blood was getting low. He'd have to refill that soon enough. Bones were the only shamanic tools that lasted.

He strode outside, rummaging inside his furs, and stopped dead. Someone was sitting there patiently outside his cave, waiting – and it wasn't good etiquette to pass water in front of others. No, worse... it was a girl. Best shaman for three hundred days' walk or no, that was the kind of thing that got you in serious trouble.

"What do you want?" He looked the girl up and down as he spoke, thinking. It was hard to place her age; she looked thin, almost scrawny, with long limbs and a narrow torso.

Oh, no.

He recognised that shape, the tiny nose, the flat forehead. She was half-Alvar – the slender people from the South.

"To learn." She looked up at him, eyes intense. "They say you're the best shaman. You have no apprentice. Take me."

Uluha thought fast. Unlike some shamans, he had nothing against females; if anything, he regarded them as more level-headed and better focused. They were smaller, too, and needed less of the precious mushrooms to reach the demon-calling state. And they understood the value of blood and bones. None of this messing around piling rocks in circles like some of the lads away west were doing.

"All right." He shrugged. If nothing else, it would be interesting to see what a half-breed could do. "Let's start with what you know."

She leant forwards at that, awaiting what would surely be the first of his questions.

Nothing came.

He crossed to the cliff next to her, dropped into a

sitting position, and silently began inspecting the edge on his flint skinning-blade. This way, he knew, she would lead with what she deemed to be the most important tenets of bonecasting, unprompted, and he could make her measure.

"The elders among the Alvar speak of a power in the rock, remnants of the birth years of this world. Memories, held in crevices as though locked in ice. Authority among my people lies with those who can best tear forth the essence of these buried spirits.

"I remember witnessing the Chief Stonecarver grinding some of this magic from an escarpment above our village to heal a sick traveller, one of your kind. As I watched his ritual reduce the cliff to dust, I couldn't help but think *why*?"

"Why tear down our homeland to access the trickle of power from the long dead when there are living, breathing rivers of sorcery flowing in each of us? With *fresh* blood and bone, I could easily surpass the Stonecarvers' meagre tricks."

She spoke with glee in her voice, eyes wide.

"This is why I came to you."

Uluha knew that she was right. These whispers in the rock were in truth the remnant power of blood and bone long spilled. He was impressed she had realised what none of her forebears had, yet something sat wrong.

Why was she so driven to surpass her people, so joyous to question the tradition of her ancestors? To trek for over a year to find the one shaman who had perfected the Red Art of bonecasting.

But there was power in her. That the Alvari Stonecarver had fully healed a human using only rock spoke of an innate sorcery among the southlanders he had not fully appreciated. And she *was* a woman. If her ambition could be tamed...

\* \* \*

Meeting his eyes, she raised her brows in anticipation of a response.

Lost in thought, Uluha's expression was ice.

He saw her wonder drain to frustration. Her gaze flicked up to the cave as, stern faced, she began to

wordlessly mouth the Rite and trace the runes of High Keril on her exposed shin, drawing thin watery blood.

She smiled as his wards collapsed, and the demon strode free.

\* \* \*

It lumbered out of the convulsing morning air, horns askew, a matted mountain. Its tongue lolled, and its snout was a putrid colour. A dead yak.

Uluha wasn't particularly concerned that the yak might hurt him – it would recognise him soon enough. He was more intent on watching the girl, who was now carving jagged, foreign symbols on herself, which Uluha recognised with a thrill as symbols used by Alvari Stonecarvers. With the ease of a newt slipping into water – not for nothing was he the best shaman in three hundred days' walk – Uluha fell into a Trance.

His Shade, the half of him that spoke to dead things, leapt to meet the yak. Better make this quick, Uluha thought. This yak was the most powerful demon he had summoned in moons, and he did not intend for some Alvari child to waste it trying to make a point. He had found it lying in a rockfall yesterday, around when the sun cleared the mountaintops to the east. Yaks were rare in this region, and an intact carcass was even more difficult to come by. It had clearly been dead for days, and its trail was almost cold when he sent his Shade after it. Uluha's Shade danced and chanted, ran through valleys and along mountain spurs, spoke kindly or sternly to each of the yak's eleven shadows... By the time the yak demon had been tamed, mushrooms were running dangerously low, and night was falling in earnest. He wasn't going to let all of that work go to waste.

Uluha let his Shade calm the yak, while his Spirit, the half of him that spoke to living things, continued to watch the girl. She glowered defiantly at him, her fear almost perfectly concealed; he knew his own expression gave nothing away. She was very young, and would need to be taught patience to match her obvious talent, but an apprentice would certainly save him a great deal of time and effort. If the girl survived the attention she had now foolishly attracted to herself by performing the Rite unprotected, her first task would be to replenish his dwindling mushroom stocks: it was on her account that he was running so very low now.

If she survived.

He could feel the air gathering in anticipation, as if welcoming back its rightful lord; from the west there came a sighing of leaves, despite the lack of breeze. The undergrowth stilled as the small creatures scurried to safe hideaways out of instinctual fear.

The girl could feel it too; her deliberately maintained calm cracked somewhat. She looked about her, trying to locate the source of the disturbance, but she did not think to look upwards, and so she was taken by surprise when the eagle spirit swooped out of the sky and seized her in its talons.

\* \* \*

The spirit could only grasp half of the girl – and with her Spirit and Shade separated, perhaps for the first time, by a growing distance, she would be beginning to feel the strain. Even in trance, Uluha could see it; sweat breaching the skin like worms after rain, as ambition and pride battled growing fear. She dug the bone in, then, into her own shin, tracing and retracing the runes deeper. Blood did not gush out, but dribbled, more as she drew the bone away; but this was the apprentice's error, mistaking distance for achievement. The trails, wending their red way down to her ankles, bypassed the jagged, angular corners of the runes, and the eagle spirit crowed its triumph.

That was not enough – not yet – to break her pride, and Uluha watched as she half-wiped, half-scooped the blood up into her other palm, before tracing it like pigment over the same patterns. The demon – the yak, dead but unburied, deprived of the funeral rites that would turn it from Shamanic power to nomadic dinner – swayed in the pull of a wind that did not move the leaves. Uluha's Shade lifted a palm, and watched the fingers dance in the same breeze.

She had proven she could salvage a Rite gone wrong, or make a start of it; but, just as those who climbed to pick the rarer flowers for yellow pigment needed first to learn to break their fall, any apprentice of Uluha's would need to be able to spot a lost cause, and break it off. And so Uluha drew a deep, slow breath, and tapped her, not gently, on the forehead.

And the eagle began to pull away with its prize.

The girl recoiled, head spinning, and steadied herself with her arms. Her dizziness grew, and was soon accompanied by a dull pain, like a soreness, throughout her body. In time, the pain grew. No longer dull, it caused her to convulse and gasp desperately. Her fingernails scraped along the ground as she tried to claw her pain away, but it was a fruitless endeavour. Her writhing grew more violent as her mind flooded with dark, chthonic thoughts; decay, demons, and death.

Uluha sat, patiently watching the girl. He'd watched this scene many times before, for he'd had many a failed apprentice, most of whom had at least survived the first death of their shade. In truth, he was bored, but nonetheless he waited for this ritual to end.

As the pain subsided, the girl returned to sanity, thoroughly exhausted, and she collapsed, drawing in vast breaths.

“Congratulations; you’re not dead yet.” Uluha noted observantly, prodding the girl in the ribs to confirm. She turned over onto her back at this. Her breathing had shallowed somewhat.

“It doesn’t feel that way,” she replied. “It feels like I’ve been trampled by a mammoth.”

“It often does, though I’ve seen people fare worse than you. You’ll be sore for several days, and exhausted for even longer.”

The girl’s expression dropped further on hearing this.

Uluha continued, “I think, next, you’ll need to replenish the mushrooms, since you’ve used the last of them. While you’re doing that, I need you to refill my skin of blood too, preferably with the blood of some great beast.”

Her finger dipped again into her cupped palm, wetting itself in the blood still pooled there, before Uluha seized her wrist. “Enough of that. I’ve seen what you can do, and I’d rather you not end your own life by trying to draw on more while in this state.” He ignored her glower, turning back towards his cave and the dead yak before it. “Mushrooms. Blood. Go.”

\* \* \*

The girl, whose name Uluha still hadn’t bothered to ask, grimaced as she bent down to gather a small cluster of mushrooms. It wasn’t that she objected to the task, particularly. It could be read as a tacit acceptance of her request to apprentice under Uluha, and she was well used to menial labour. She could trust that this task would lead to learning to cast bones, to weave blood with more skill and control than her awkward imitation of Stonecarving, and that made it much more bearable.

What the girl objected to was doing this *now*. Every inch of her hurt, her mind fuzzed incessantly whenever she tried to think, and moving was like hauling an elephant carcass around. As she straightened her legs again, muscles screaming in protest, she resolved never again to let herself be weakened like this, to never let her spirit perish away from her again. (This was, of course, the precise opposite of the lesson Uluha was trying to teach.)

The girl, whose name Uluha never would learn now, perked up a little as she caught sight of the carcass of a great beast, nestled in the brush not far away. From this distance the kill looked fresh, and there was very little blood spattered around it. *Should be plenty in*

*there to fill Uluha’s skin*, she thought, making a beeline for the corpse. What she did not think about was why a whole fresh corpse would just be lying there waiting for her.

The beast was a strange one, its large, feathered wings suggesting avian ancestry, whilst the rest of its form appeared mammalian. She circled it, aiming for some semblance of understanding, but she never felt properly able to grasp its form, which seemed to shift imperceptibly every time she cast her eyes over it. But through the ringing, burnt out confusion of her mind, it instilled in her a strong sense of clarity. This was her *prize*. She dipped her fingers in the blood pooling beneath it, tracing patterns that seeped deep into the cracks in the earth. Below her, at the conjunction of blood and stone, she could feel something stirring.

\* \* \*

Power. It promised power. It said no words but she could feel its pull deep within her. She knew, she just knew, and she needed it. She needed to become someone who mattered. Someone whose name was uttered in reverence not scorn. She reached out to it with her shade - felt its form coalesce around hers.

If what Uluha wanted was blood, she could provide him plenty.

The journey back was swift, the girl whistling a tune she had never heard on her lips. At the entrance she paused, waiting for Uluha to turn around and grasp what she’d become. ‘*Fool.*’ She didn’t so much think it as feel it. ‘*Look how far he’s fallen.*’ As the thoughts began, so too did the sanctity of the place shatter, a disturbance rippling out bypassing the physical world straight into remnant power of the world around them. Finally, Uluha turned. Once he saw her, something shifted.

For the first time in those tens of minutes the girl had known Uluha, and for the first time too for those stones and spirits around them that had known him far longer, his carefully curated composure appeared to crack. Only a furrowed brow and a clenched fist, a flicker of recognition behind his gaze: but it was enough, enough for the girl to know she had won.

A cackle rang out - whether from her or from some other force was unclear.

“What’s with that look?” A voice. It came from her throat. “You should know it’s improper to stare at your elders, your *superiors*, in such a manner.” The girl, the thing, stepped forward, encroaching into the space of the cave, the wards doing nothing to restrict them.

“You really are irresponsible with these poor, powerful things. But I sympathise - crushing the hopes of those

underneath you has such a thrill.”

“Ilhidrid,” Uluha spat out.

What’s in a name anyway?

This was an ancient and powerful name. The name of the first demon that Uluha ever summoned as an apprentice. It nearly killed him then. His first attempt at bonecasting, he dragged the needle-point shards of bone across his skin, but before the last rune was finished his Spirit and Shade were split and parted by Ilhidrid. Uluha had moved to this cave hoping to escape Ilhidrid. A foolishly optimistic idea, but in truth he had grown desperate. Each new village he settled in to cure the sick, bring the rains or aid in childbirth, Ilhidrid followed behind. Maybe it would reappear in a few weeks, maybe a year, but it always returned. Presumably, some fault in his early enactment of the Rites had trapped the demon somewhere between this world and its.

Ilhidrid had no form. It tried to become a great beast, but it was mere mimicry. A farcical imitation of a true animal. A deformed bear with protruding spines and distended jaw. A lizard with legs discoloured and twisted. Now it had taken his apprentice and warped her form as well. Claws, long and jagged, pushed out of her fingers. Her face elongated, sprouting wiry grey hairs. A perverted facsimile of a wolf’s head. Gurgled growls bubbled up in the girl-demon’s throat. It was not the voice of a wolf, nor her voice. It was both and neither.

‘This is the last time I let you go, Uluha. We have played this game for long enough,’ they said.

‘You’re right, Ilhidrid. It has been long enough,’ said Uluha, as he slowly stood up. He knew exactly what he had to do. Ilhidrid’s wolf-form was stronger and more powerful than any of its previous forms had been. The time had come. He had to capture the Shade of this demon once and for all, before it was too late. No more running away.

A flash of pity moved through Uluha’s chest as he thought of the young girl who would perish along with the demon, but the foolish girl had been at the wrong time at the wrong place. If only she hadn’t craved so strongly for power... He shook his head and focused on the task at hand.

He took a deep breath and slipped into a trance. Uluha’s Shade observed the monstrosity that was Ilhidrid, while his Spirit moved to a dark corner of his cave. He thanked the Shades of his ancestors for their guidance on his endeavour to develop a stronger binding ritual than any ritual known to the shamans in at least six hundred days’ travel. He had been working on it for many nights and days. All the ritual’s

requirements were present in a small wooden box hidden in a crevice in his wall, but he had never been able to fully perform the whole ritual.

It took a great sacrifice. One he hadn’t been willing to pay yet.

Uluha’s Spirit opened the box and emptied out four bone fragments, swirled with powerful carvings. One would open the rift, and two were needed to seal it. The other... Uluha preferred not to think about what that one would do. Suffice to say that no shaman had ever used it twice.

The demon-girl abomination was still slowly stalking into the cave, gloating over their assumed victory. Good - they didn’t suspect what he was planning.

His Spirit took the spare skin of blood from the box and began trickling it, with a precision born of decades’ practice, into the wells in the centre of each carving. It was a small skin, and half full besides (to make it fit into the box), but it was exactly the right amount for this ritual, as he had calculated when assembling the components. It occurred to him that he was now completely out of blood - but that wouldn’t matter after this anyway, he reminded himself.

The crimson blood seeped along the lines and into all the intricate curls and swirls of the pattern. Uluha gently tilted the bones to help the blood fill the unused channels: unlike most of his bone fragments, these hadn’t been smoothed by years of washing.

Ilhidrid and the girl were getting dangerously close to seeing his furtive bonecasting, and their gloating was getting less assured.

It was now or never. Uluha’s Spirit lifted a sharp knife from his belt, wetted it in blood and made one extra stroke on the first bone.

There was a crack of thunder, and the world seemed to stretch and contort. The air inside Uluha’s cave shattered into tiny droplets hanging all around him. Only the circle of ground on which his Spirit and the bones sat was unaffected. Beyond that, a lightless space had formed between the fragments of reality, that hurt to look at as if it were as bright as the sun herself.

There was a scream of rage from Ilhidrid, which charged towards Uluha, parts of its wolf-like body distorting from droplet to droplet as it moved.

Unfazed, Uluha carved the final line into the fourth bone with its unfamiliar symbols. Blood filled the new channel and his Shade sprang forward to envelop Ilhidrid’s. Then he commanded it to halt. Immediately, the thing that was the demon and the girl, and now



him, skidded to a stop. His Shade wrapped tighter around Ilhidrid, shifting it from the droplets to the space between and binding it with all his power.

Uluha felt that power being drawn out of him, until he was as weak as he had been after the first death of his Shade. And still the draining continued. As the world began to blur slightly, Uluha became aware that there was an area inside the amassed Shades that his could not touch. But he was certain that his Shade was now bound to the entirety of Ilhidrid's, which meant...

Uluha dismissed the thought. Whatever the answer was, it was irrelevant to his current situation.

With shaking hands, he carved the last two lines, one on each remaining piece of bone. The droplets of reality began to swirl as the blood filled the lines of the last two symbols ... and then they splashed back together. The rift was sealed, from this side and from the other.

The last thought Uluha remembered before the world dissipated to darkness was that he had won.

\* \* \*

The girl woke only moments before the old man next to her. He was a shaman, she remembered, the best for hundreds of days' walk. She tried to sit up, but the screaming ache in her muscles soon put a stop to that idea. She grunted in pain.

The shaman rolled over to stare at her. "What are you doing here?"

"I'd like to be your apprentice." She had no idea why she said that, only that it felt right. In fact, she had no idea even of who she was. She knew only that she had come a long way to get here, and intended to get what she'd come for.

"No, I meant..." And then it clicked. Staring at her half-Alvar form, Uluha suddenly knew why she hadn't been destroyed along with the demon: Ilhidrid, expecting a Hurnevar, one of Uluha's species, had failed to possess her properly. But this was not the most pressing issue right now. "Never mind," he said. "I can't do bonecasting any more. I gave up my power to bind the demon."

"You don't remember how to do it?"

Uluha sighed. He was far too tired for this. "No, I remember how, I just don't have the innate power to do it any more."

"Then you can still teach me."

From Uluha's silence, the girl ... whoever she was ... knew she was winning.

"The only way your knowledge can survive is if you teach it to an apprentice. Right now, you have no apprentice. Take me."

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## Author reviews: Casting Out Old Possessions

A really interesting exploration of a sort of primitive fantasy! The story veers into what feels like it wants to be a much longer piece, but the ending brings it back perfectly to being the self-contained opening act of a story I'd love to read.—Felix Davison

## Editor's Review

Two people (Alex Colesmith and Dan James) independently suggested the subgenre of primordial fantasy, and what a success it has been! The world-building is, in my opinion, one of this chain's strongest points, especially the unusual magic system. And as Felix said, I'd love to find out what happens to Uluha and the girl over the course of her apprenticeship—I can't imagine it goes entirely smoothly!

## Bonus: Alternative Title Suggestions

Only Scars Remember

Bone Tired

Cast Out

A Shaman of Blood and Bone

Shade and Spirit

A Shaman's Apprentice

# In Ossifer and a Lady

## Or: Memento Omnes Mori

Robert Lindsey III, Katherine Black, Felix Davison, Alex Colesmith, Robert Novak, Isaac, Lachlan Rooney

**CW: Mass grave, relatively graphic description of human remains, mild gore, body horror**

Death remains the one problem humanity can't solve in the second space age, but it is not the act of dying itself that is the real issue. The true problem is of what becomes of the dead in an atmosphere with no oxygen; disposal of bodies has long been one of humanity's more reluctantly discussed issues, yet we also took for granted a time where bacterial organisms greatly sped up the process.

The New Frontier has greatly evolved in its three generations on the red planet. Our predecessors may have been the criminals, outcasts and pariahs of planet Earth, but in toiling to survive their death sentences they built up a vast colony proud to maintain a resilient, close-knit and resourceful population.

But amidst our developments in nuclear energy, terraforming and inorganic plant growth, the issue of body disposal has never truly been solved. Wealthier colonies designed for tourists use artificial decomposition and cremation, but on this humble penal colony the scarce resources of bacteria and flame can barely be expended on the living, let alone the dead.

Realising there was no true alternative, our predecessors simply piled bodies up in anticipation of a future solution. Gradually building over generations, this "slag-heap" of human remains became a towering hill overlooking the colony. While the occasional visitor from Earth found this horrific, to locals it was a mere fact of life like our 687-day years and ten-mile high mountains.

On Planet Earth, the population was so horrified by stories of this situation that a decision was made to temporarily suspend the policy of abandoning the New Frontier and intervene in what they saw as a moral crisis for humanity itself. Skylar was a seasoned space traveller sent in to deal with this apparent sanitation conundrum, but when boarding the seven-month voyage not even a lifetime of experience prepared her for what was to come.

With her pack secured in the overhead compartments, she glanced around at her companions. A man wearing a long leather coat ill suited to the terrain of the red planet. He flashed her a quick smile. She turned her head toward the rest of the group. He'll be one to

watch out for, she thought.

Two blonde women who loomed over herself, twins by the look of it, stood near the door chatting between themselves. An older gentleman rounded out the group. He stood alone in the corner examining the rusty cryo freeze. She imagined he'd be leading the expedition.

With only five seats plus room for the medical droid, the craft appeared smaller than the craft she'd used on her last voyage to the yellow planet. Although Earth claimed to have a moral obligation to inject themselves into the red planet's crisis, Skylar supposed their duty didn't come with a hefty endowment.

"Eyes up," a voice echoed throughout the chamber. She snapped her feet together, raising her arm to the proper salute alongside the two women and younger man.

The footsteps of the grey-haired man came to a stop. A silence filled the room. Skylar kept her eyes glued to him as he introduced himself as Commodore James Argus.

"Today you all will be embarking on a journey of unparalleled moral importance," Argus said. "A journey that begins and ends with the dignity of humankind, a dignity that does not cease at death."

Skylar looked at Argus's chin, rather than his eyes. It was easier to avoid picturing the vast expanse of the dead when she didn't make eye contact.

Argus, of course, made it more difficult by continuing to speak. "The horror and indignity suffered by the dead of Mars has been – sanitised. The reality is," he said, shaking his head in a slow, precise, military way, "that the pile of relatively intact mortal remains seen from the colony is far from the worst."

The man in the long coat spoke up. "And you're going to let us worry about that for the whole journey?"

"I'm going to give you the longest time I can to solve it," Argus replied, "without letting news get out. If Earth knew, they'd glass the site from orbit."

And he turned, clicking a button on a small remote, to face the screen on the wall opposite the blondes. A

view came up of some kind of signal – though it looked almost more noise than data, to Skylar’s eyes. Argus nodded to the blonde with the shorter hair, and she moved to stand beside the image.

“This is some of the earliest Martian seismic data humanity ever gathered. As you can see,” she said, pointing to the central region, “it’s almost all noise. This is not because the instruments were primitive – or at least, not *only* that.”

Nobody laughed. A moment later, she continued as if she had never paused. “In fact, it reflects the one reliable constant of the Martian surface: strong winds. Despite the thin atmosphere, most days are marked by windstorms beyond those common on Earth.”

Skylar stared at the image for a moment, before it hit her – and when it did, she couldn’t help but say it. “Sandstorms.”

The blonde nodded. “The colony shielded the bodies from the worst of it. But – this will not be a clean burial of human remains.”

The screen shifted to the next image, and Skylar finally had to look away. It was grainy, and clearly taken by one of the older rovers, but the view was unmistakable: a wall of bare, bleached human bones – and it looked to be on the point of collapse.

A few deep breaths calmed her stomach. She’d got used to space-sickness over the past few years – certainly in the centrifuge rings of the larger craft, where the rotation could simulate the gravity of any homeworld. It was currently at Martian standard, 0.38 *g*, to acclimate the Terrans’ bodies. Slowly, she turned her head back to look at the photo again.

On second examination, it wasn’t nearly as bad as she had thought. Yes, there were vast bone heaps, towering into the air in a way that looked precarious to anyone brought up on a high-grav world. But they were *bone* heaps. The vicious sand had slowly scrubbed away all the withering flesh from the older corpses, leaving them dry skeletons. Above them, in the younger strata, ligaments or stringy muscles – freeze-dried in the harsh Martian conditions – still linked them together. Even the very freshest of them, tossed on top, resembled unwrapped mummies.

“It’s cleaner than it would be in some places,” Leather Trenchcoat suggested. (Skylar had been told all her coworkers’ names. She’d ignored them. To her the younger man would forever be Leather Trenchcoat, after his most obvious feature.) “The flesh is barely rotting, the bones are being scrubbed. I’ve seen worse.”

Skylar raised an eyebrow at that. He didn’t look old

enough to have seen worse. More worrying still, Argus didn’t appear surprised by the assertion at all.

“You have a point,” the Commander acknowledged. “And indeed, there are even some advantages to the situation from a terraforming point of view. The wind-borne organic matter is the beginnings of true, usable soil on Mars. Nonetheless, *it is also human tissue*. You will all remember that, and you will treat it with the respect due to the dead.”

He looked around the room. “And I’m sure I don’t need to explain to any of you exactly why people eating from soil fertilised with human tissue is a bad idea. Mars is in a bad enough state already without a zombie apocalypse to add to things.”

A ripple of laughter echoed his words – genuine amusement, not just pleasing the boss. Even Skylar’s lips twitched into a smile.

\*\*\* 7 MONTHS LATER \*\*\*

The large crimson orb filled the window to the right of Skylar. All five on the spacecraft – Skylar, Leather Trenchcoat, the twins and Commodore James Argus were strapped into their assigned seats, prepared for landing at the New Frontier.

Argus’ voice boomed from the cockpit through the loudspeakers. “This is Commodore James Argus on board Charon I, requesting permission to land at New Frontier Spaceport.”

“This is New Frontier Spaceport, request granted for landing on platform 12,” replied the Space Traffic Controller. “Just be careful of –”

Argus tried to reconnect with the New Frontier but was met with the indistinguishable noise of static. He fiddled with different knobs on the radio to try to connect on a different frequency, but every attempt was unsuccessful. “Crew, our comms appear to be down. I’m going to take us in anyways.”

Mars disappeared and reappeared on Skylar’s left as the spacecraft aligned its main thruster to burn in retrograde. A 20 second burn was enough to change the Charon I’s trajectory to land at the New Frontier. The artificial gravity disengaged for landing and excluding the occasional thrust of the reaction control system, Skylar felt weightless for the first time in seven months.

A new voice interrupted the descent. “This is the Department of Martian Defense from Eden III. Please divert course immediately from the New Frontier. Two Grissom-class fighters have been dispatched to ensure compliance.”

Skylar and Leather Trenchcoat looked at each other,

astonished. Why would someone want to interrupt a humanitarian mission from Earth?

Argus' voice again boomed from the cockpit. "Crew, prepare yourselves for evasive manoeuvres. We're getting to the necropolis one way or another."

The first moments of full acceleration were agony.

Eyes forced shut and limbs pressed into the padding of the manoeuvre webbing induced in Skylar an attempt at screaming choked by the same pressure. Whatever sound made it past her throat was indistinguishable from the noise of the engines and her crewmates.

The tight bank of the craft's initial manoeuvre inverted without warning, the floor now trading places with the ceiling. Argus shouted something back to them, his unintelligible words soon understood to be a warning after the first missile hit.

It was a glancing blow, skimming the craft's forcefields before igniting under one wing. Space's camber slanted downward.

Now her eyes were open, watching through cracked glass the craft's front screen, now coloured red. The jolt of impact had pushed them down in descent towards the planet surface. Argus struggled with controls in accentuated convulsions of his hands and arms, neither the craft nor its interface cooperating.

Skylar pulled at the restraints holding her to the webbing, hands shaking. Free, she half jumped, half fell to the front of the down-tipped bridge. Argus looked up at her with the blank expression of withdrawal. There was no valour in fighting impossibility.

They fell through the Martian atmosphere, the craft's full reverse thrust insufficient to brake their acceleration to control. With the black of vacuum fully behind them, the monotone Martian landscape enlarged. With fate almost sealed, Skylar and Argus stared down without awareness of the craft they steered. By some combination of chance and the pre-programmed location of landing, Skylar saw the near blemish to the landscape growing into a form more bleak than natural. As this structure grew, there seemed less chance involved in the fact that here they were due to collide.

\* \* \*

Skylar didn't remember strapping herself in again. The first moments of consciousness greeted her with a mind saturated by confusion, aching, and horror. They had come for bones. Looking to her left, the breakdown of human likeness held together in the blood-stained, dust-lined trenchcoat now more red

than beige. In front of her, the limb-torn corpses mirrored each other from foot to skull. Argus she couldn't see, buried beneath the surface of bones he came to repatriate.

Skylar walked on the surface of corpses, these not yet decomposed by weather or dust. The plateau stretched outwards in the unevenness of bone piled on bone.

\* \* \*

And the dust... The remnants of a recent sandstorm: red sheets of the stuff draped over all that bone; here and there a rusty cloud swirled vacantly in the thin Martian wind, crawling over the remnants of recent life. And the blood, red blood on red sand – and Skylar was bleeding too, she realised, from when she'd clattered into the bridge on landing, perhaps.

The ship was a mess, broken by the bones it had broken, the bones that had swallowed Argus, her other crewmates a shattered addition to their ranks; suddenly she was glad she couldn't see Argus – and she was running, just to get *away* from it all... The absurdity shocked her: leaping around amongst all this death in the Martian gravity, as though the planet itself delighted in irreverence.

But there was a man standing beside the ship. A thin, weather-beaten figure, and tall: a local, Skylar thought. Not even hard labour built up muscle mass like Earth gravity. She walked over slowly.

"Eden shot you down," the man said bluntly. A voice accustomed to terraformed Martian air: the sound startled Skylar.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I just do what I'm told."

There was a pause.

"How far is New Frontier?"

He shrugged. "A few miles? But they'll be waiting for you there." He gestured up at the sky. "Burning up on re-entry, that was probably the plan. You should be honoured. Afforded an ancient burial, aboard a flaming ship – that's for rich people."

"But why shoot at us?" Skylar asked.

The man gazed blankly at her for a moment. Then he waved a hand at the expanse of bodies. "Aren't there rather too many of them?"

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## Author reviews: An Ossifer and a Lady

I think the story is a really interesting blend of different perspectives – a sweeping opening, framing the problem, zooming in on a very individual perspective before an almost dissociative break. The humanity bleeds back in after, and it's really neat to see how the ending was handled, as well as how different writers chose to frame the imagery they were dealing with. It almost reads like a teaser for a much longer piece, in the end, which feels like both blessing and curse – it leaves you wanting more, but then it leaves you!—Felix Davison

I love where this story has gone! And I think the occasional burst of humour – sometimes dark and wicked, like the ending twist, sometimes more subtle like naming the spaceship Charon – is a wonderful portrayal of how the human spirit prevails even in our more gloomy futures.—Alex Colesmith

### Editor's Review

This chain had a sense of gravitas that I think is quite difficult to achieve in chainwriting. It had me hooked the whole way through. And the ending raises so many questions that are left unanswered—in my opinion, an excellent piece of writing.

### Bonus: Alternative Title Suggestions

All the Dirty Jobs

Sandblasted

Cleanup Crew

# The Adviser

Marko Trandafilovski

O day, O day, new but grey,  
hiding behind the window-spray,  
O day, O day, won't you but say,  
that today, at last, you'll pay?

Do you hear? Do you?

Rain, rain, staining the window. Grim autumn. Look  
away, look away. Look to noble John.

Ringing?

Ah. The third time today.

*Thud.*

"A mite, a modicum of pressure can work  
wonders..."

The rain is pattering, but it's his fist that I hear,  
beating, striking a table of varnished cedar.

*Thud.*

"Natural, my boy! Only natural..."

My keys are click-clicking, but it's his bulk that I hear,  
embracing, enveloping a chair of perfect chintz.

*Thud.*

"Rolling, yes! Yes, I'll promise it, if he says that's  
what he wants. Rolling..."

I've dropped my bottle, but it's his boots that I hear,  
pressing, pounding a floor richly red.

*Click.*

"And where are you now, Mr. Breedon?"

My door is open. Pallid skin, thin red hair, and cold  
blue eyes fade into view. Eager eyes. Pursued lips.

"It was the multitudinous *villae* of Crassus last  
Tuesday. The Mughal empire under Akbar the week  
before that; and we mustn't forget the thirty-first,  
must we? After all, without your quiet excursion to  
the benefactress' study, we should never have been  
able to enjoy this charming little bond of ours."

Three steps forward echo on the uncarpeted wood.  
The pale head swoops. I won't meet those eyes. I  
won't.

"Your discernment, Mr Breedon. I commend it.  
They've much to teach us; I know that well. But we  
don't pay you to discern."

His breath, fresh, cool. Drifting upon my forehead –  
alighting – a dewdrop of minted saliva.

"It is with the strictest expectation of industry that  
we – that I – anoint this firm's employees."

Stifling my clothes; tight my tie.

"And yet, Mr Breedon, I've seen none of it from you.  
It's odd; it must, I'm sure, be in there somewhere.  
More clients in your books, after all, than any other  
junior fellow's. I'd have given my right arm, when I  
held your position, to boast of half as many. How  
you acquired them I won't even try to guess. You've  
no gift for speech; that much I do know."

My room's lights. Too bright. My ruddy face,  
mirrored in his shoes.

"I know something else, too, Mr Breedon. I ought to  
know it ten times over."

Closer. Quieter.

"Calls, Mr. Breedon. All week. Calls and calls."

There is no softness, as my head slowly rises, in  
those pale blue eyes.

"I'll say it again. We don't pay you to discern. We  
don't pay you to direct or to advise or to persuade.  
You're no Crassus to us, Mr Breedon. You are a pair  
of hands. So I'll ask again. Where are you?"

A pair of hands. Hands, my hands. My hands are  
shaking.

"No, I know. No reply. I'm a fool to expect one,  
aren't I? Don't worry. I've come prepared today, you  
see, with one of my own. Your head, Mr Breedon.  
That's where you are, where you always are; and it's  
not, alas, where we need you to be. Twenty-four  
hours. We shan't see each other again."

The door is shut. My bottle rolls, limply, to rest  
beside it.

\* \* \*

It's twelve, and all's well, the house hard at work.

Not I, though: no. Yes. For too long have I been shackled by the quotidian irrelevancies of labour, of service: and even as my presence here was tolerated, I strained against my bonds. Strained, yes; strained, struggled, and strove; strove to break free from dead-eyed compulsion, from the inane exertion that to my unseeing comrades is bleak necessity, that, it is not too much to say, holds them yet fast in its unforgiving embrace; bravely dived into the tempestuous annals of years and great minds long extinguished, that my own flame might blaze the brighter in decades yet to come. Crassus, Maecenas; Akbar, and noble John; in you I sense and know the fervour, the taste for freedom, that showed you the soulless drudgery so many succumb to in seeking the path to power for what it was and is; in you, in the vestiges of your mighty souls, souls that could amass a fortune or retain and augment it, a fire to burn through the malicious occlusions of the sundry and banal, and to enwreathe me perpetually, if I might only ignite it in my breast.

Steam rises from my coffee, fresh-poured. Black, as I like it best – free of sugar. The others can't stomach less than a cube. I stir it gently and watch it swirl. It is very dark.

They'll see. They'll see what a man I'll be. My seat shall be not of chintz but of smoothest velvet, bright with gold, rich with royal purple; my boots shall be of finest Cordovan leather, strong and sturdy, light as the feather in walking, hard as the rock in stepping; my stick shall be of etched ivory, inlaid with loveliest pearl, surpassing even the comeliest of the ecclesiastics' lost croziers. I'll charter an autonomous chariot, state-of-the-art, and drift serenely past admiring gazes when I deign to travel the streets; men of office will doff their hats to me, their eyes silently begging the slightest nod of approbation. I'll drink daily the rarest Brazilian blends, and have delivered to my door only the sparsest Peruvian beans; in my kitchens shall throng the world's chiefest chocolatiers, and pile in my cupboards dainties fit for kings. Yes, indeed, kings shall be my guests, and queens too; insipid royalty will kneel at my feet, and see their paltry majesty reflected in my radiant boots.

Dark and darker. Not sweet in taste, but O, how clement to the eyes.

And he. Fair speech? lissom locution? How, then, for him and all to hear, shall my words compel; not, no, in satisfying tawdry desires, but in shattering showy conceits of heart and mind asunder. When, beleaguered eye, sempiternally circled by storms of

the despairing, I elect to utter the slightest of syllables, all shall be still; earth, sea, sky and man left ecstatic, unmoving; silent, too, shall all be, save for one low thrum universally audible, the ceaseless reverberation of my sublime sonorities. Sorcerers, sermonists, erstwhile poets one and all shall shake off clinging death as I echo in their ears; to me their rotting hands will reach, sensing, knowing in my frame the distillation of the life that they have lost, and which in me will blaze everlasting.

Hot!

Cruel coffee. I stirred and stirred and stirred. Even now it is swirling, swirling.

"Are you happy, Mr. Breedon?"

A shock, a shiver, a shake: and a steaming table of spilt coffee.

"O! I am sorry!"

But who in the world – here, my place – lunch-time – no-one stays for lunch-time –

"I surprised you! Maybe visitors are rare down here. Most of all at this time of the day..."

cheek! brash impertinence! to make such an assumption, and to voice it!

"Please, don't mind the coffee! I will clean that. But I wanted to see you – really I did. My question was an honest one!"

But I gaze into that face, into those smooth dark eyes, and all thought of discipline, all memory of indignation, slips from me; in his snow-white skin, his night-black hair, his blood-red cheeks, I see youth untarnished, yet no innocence, no naïveté; he is new to me, despite his intern's badge; and yet even as I move to dismiss him with a word I find that I cannot look away from those eyes. They entreat, compel me to speak:

"No."

He gives a wide smile. His mouth is flawless: plentiful with pale pink gum, and inlaid with a perfect set of pearly-white teeth. Yet it is a man's mouth, one that has seen many battles: each dainty canine, each opalescent molar, winks at me in the dim light, as though to promise a thousand tales of veal vanquished and feeble carrots crushed.

"That is the first step. To say, 'I am unhappy' – after months, years, decades ... It is not easy!"

He moves closer.

"Will you tell me, Mr Breedon, how long it has been?"

Twenty-four years, I proclaim, my heart beating faster, my voice growing louder. Twenty-four years I have been tired, so tired; always seeking, seeking, yet somehow never finding. Twenty-four years I have given myself to a succession of uncaring others, prostrating myself, flinging myself at their feet, desperate for but the smallest measure of the command, the assurance, that seems so easily to possess them... Twenty-four years...

He has bent down now, staining his hands with sodden paper-towel. But his eyes – so calm, yet so vital! – keep mine captive still, as he says,

"A long while to walk without a path! But please – do not be afraid. I, too, was once unhappy. But I met another who helped me. He is very wise. He can help you, too, I think! Please, make no mistake. Maybe I fascinate you. But I am nothing next to him. He is like the sun, bright and raging. I am like a little candle."

Where is he, this man of wisdom? Tell me, I implore you! You must, you must tell me!

"Do not worry, Mr Breedon!" he says, smiling widely again. "Come" – a discoloured palm drifts toward mine – "and I will show you the way."

\* \* \*

I'm not one to venture out on a whim; I can't help, most of all amid the decay of autumn, thinking of Roquentin, and the green, putrid odour of the trees. The ubiquitous disorder, it unsettles me, affronts me: the constant stream of vehicles, so offensive to the ears; the grating chatter of vapid passers-by; the paving-stones that seem, when I turn to them for a moment's respite, almost to flaunt their irregularity; I can't abide it, and try my utmost to keep myself clear of it. There would, I suspect, have been no taxis – no vehicles of any kind – available to shuttle me to the address that I had been given; but such was my eagerness to meet its owner that I half-ran the whole journey – an hour or so, if I had to guess – without second thought, and arrived panting at the snowy doorstep with my habitual dyspnea quite forgotten.

I use the adjective advisedly; it being only late October, it had not snowed; but so far as the front of the house was concerned it might as well have done, and for no brief spell at that. I'm not sure what I had been expecting; perhaps something akin

to one of those famous stately homes of ours, those grand old piles that pass further into the shadowy realm of myth by the minute – a suitable conquest for a man of substance. There stood before me, instead, a quaint old construction, though I couldn't place it if asked. I'd assume that its walls were some kind of brickwork (most houses tend to be, after all), but so thick was the white paint covering them that you couldn't find it if you tried; and you wouldn't, for of such quality, of such ingenuity in depth and mixture is that paint that it quite entrances the eyes. You'd have sworn that it *was* snow, so cleverly was it made. And next to the roof – some kind of darkish wood that I hadn't the opportunity to closely examine, though it did seem to sport an intriguing pattern of veins – and the two windows, set in perfect symmetry between the cedarwood door and the two wall-edges on either side of it, from which there crept a warm red glow – it was only the more striking.

I made my way towards the door, uncertain of whether to knock. This, too, was odd, oval-shaped, a smooth circular knob affixed perfectly to its centre. My hand reached out, but applied no pressure: the reddish wood glided upwards, disclosing the entryway with practised delicacy. I was not alarmed; for in that single motion – so simple, so silent – I perceived that I was awaited here, and welcome.

Long was the hall: long and dim. There were no lights; and yet I could see at my sides, coaxed into focus by a haze of dull crimson, row after row of waxen busts, cast to capture myriad contrary likenesses. Some I recognised from my researches; others were half-remembered, vestiges of dreams long past or the fevered imaginations of sultry summer afternoons. I would stop to examine none; but as I rushed onward their features blurred, melded, until I had always hanging behind and before me a great pallid face, urging me with empty red eyes and a serene curl of the mouth to hurry, to hurry. A carpet, rich and dark, swallowed all my feet's familiar sounds; I began to jog, and then to sprint, yet could hear, could see nothing; with that beaming visage as my sole companion I ran faster, faster. Archways, curtained passages began to appear at my sides, but led on by grim determination I spurned them: faster, faster I ran, as the face grew larger, larger, its mouth widening, opening –

with a sudden slip, to fall, and meet  
a sea of wine-like floor.

Briefly I knew, in waking, only luxury; a delicious



lethargy, my limbs embraced by soft fabric. I had little time to look about me, though a vague impression of red – red walls, red lampshades; my chair, too, I am fairly certain was red – was inescapable; for the moment I raised my eyes they were drawn to the figure before me. In this new setting, too, there was no abundance of light; and it was difficult, I remarked to myself, to discern where its voluminous form ended and that of its seat began. There was little to be seen in the way of a face – though multitudinous chins, alongside a wondrous collection of jowls, could not be missed – for it was situated in the midst of a particularly dense patch of shadow. Momentarily, my employer (I had enjoyed the dubious pleasure for some years of working beside his office) sprang to mind; but he was nothing, a pale imitation, a crude facsimile, next to this majestic mound of flesh. That needling phone, that bloated bulk, those bombastic tones; they could evoke nothing in me but a slight sense of nausea; but the mass before me now – it was no perversion; an edifice, rather, a grand construction, its magnitude nothing short of monumental.

I asked none of the hundred questions, voiced none of the hundred doubts that I might in that instant have poured forth. I forgot fear, cast all my caution aside; at long last – if but briefly – I lived. Every fibre in my body tense as taut wire, I leaned forward, reaching with a quivering hand for the unmoving thing across the room.

The shadows grinned at me, beckoning, challenging. *What manner of man are you?* they whispered. *What manner of man have you the will to become?*

Slowly – inexorably – my hand drew back, gliding, drifting, until level again with the arm of my chair. Slowly, then, and harshly, I sank a rigid finger into the soft padding.

I am the manner of man who would rather take life by the throat than let it pass him by.

Unseen tremors rocked the seat. With a silent pulse the shadows contracted, and soundless laughter filled the room.

I knew, then, what it was that I must do.

\* \* \*

I'd always been given to reading, even in the immaturity of childhood. Rather different material, of course, was generally favoured in the fallow days of my youth; there predominated a proclivity quite incomprehensible to me now for fiction *fantastic* in

some way or another; most prominent of all, perhaps, were the escapades of famed detective Sherlock Holmes, as borne from Conan Doyle's enchanting pen. The finer details of these the merciless years had long since erased – Holmes himself would no doubt have approved; did not one of his own maxims impel its hearer to guard against 'useless facts elbowing out the useful ones'? – but returning to the Centre, a piercing clarity possessing my thoughts, I recalled my first encounter with Watson's lucent prose; a curious tale, insomuch as it featured one of Holmes' few equals, and the only woman through all his exploits to merit his love. It was with 'A Scandal in Bohemia', and the strategy that had, albeit unsuccessfully, suggested itself to the detective as he pursued his case across its pages, at the forefront of my mind that I made my way to the Seren café and quietly took a corner seat.

It was with dreams of great things that I had, six years back, made a tentative application to Futronics. There wasn't any reason in particular to favour it over any of its multifarious competitors. Even the name was rather boring. Quite clear, certainly, were the sentiments it had been calculated to evoke: urgency, the imminent future, already – and insidiously – besieging one's very doorstep; a rousing faith in human ingenuity, an ingenuity manifesting not only in the firm's *avant-garde* technological researches but in their seamless union with futurity in its name. But it wasn't the firm itself that drew my eye so much as the woman behind it. That's not to say she ran things; such tiresome tasks were below her, and she paid others – handsomely – to make certain that she had never once to turn to the grim impositions of finance. The firm was no enterprise in business to her; it was her plaything. Toy animals, with behaviours so like their models' that she halved national demand for domesticated mammals; mechanical dragons that could fly faster, at her command, than any aircraft; impregnable security-systems that punished unhappy thieves by moulding their fingers into skeleton-keys; her ideas seemed limitless. And they sold! She'd little renown when I sought her out: but I knew that it would come.

It did. But I, alas, didn't advance with it. I'd seen myself, in my mind's eye, chief vanguard of her triumph, master of all the money she so ostentatiously despised; instead I was shunted aside, funnelled into an undersized office, confined by an oversized director. For years I slaved, hoping, trusting that with each extra digit I wearily typed into my worn ledger she would, at last, come to see

my worth. To speak truthfully, I'm not sure she knew my name. Perhaps she didn't even know my face.

As September drew to a close, the days growing shorter, the air colder, I broke. How – at last I saw it – could I expect to secure my grand desires quietly labouring in a corner? Thousands, after all – tens of thousands – of employees were doubtless doing the same. Time, I proclaimed, if I was invisible, to *make* myself visible; time, if I were unremarkable, to *make* myself remarkable. And so I did. I made my way to her little sanctum. I was going to talk to her, prove my worth; convince her – nay, compel her, if need be – to give me the chance to show my skill for what it was. Lo and behold! She'd gone off for lunch; and, absent-minded as ever (or so I'd heard), left that famed impenetrable door of hers wide-open.

For a few minutes I stood there, patient, sheep-like, awaiting her return. It occurred to me then that fate would never again present an opportunity of the kind that lay before me now. All of it, every brimming notebook, every bold plan, was in there; unwatched, unguarded. Now was no time for hesitation.

In I went. Straight to the crammed wooden desk I hurried, and eagerly set to examining the papers, piles of them, piles and piles. The wonders, then, that met my eyes! Too strange, and far too many they were to chronicle here. But there was one blueprint – I knew nothing of the abstract symbols, the sprawling calculations that covered it: but what it promised...! Futronics' potential had seemed more than evident before; now I was totally and irrevocably convinced of it.

Ill fortune struck. A roving supervisor caught me in the midst of my investigations; I pleaded confusion – the toilets had, of course, been my intended destination; I would never pry, never poke – but his suspicion persisted, and I found myself under observation. No matter. Here was my chance to catapult Futronics to the position of primacy that it deserved. To consult my superiors would be abject folly. The responsibility, after all – surely – for concealing from our investors how truly bright a future was in store lay entirely at their feet. Why arrest growth? We could double, surely – nay, triple – their commitments with but a hint, a whisper, of what was to come.

I was the one to give that whisper. Results were as expected; they were better! But the monthly conference came and went. There was no marvel unveiled, no grand proclamation. No exponential

expansion, most signally, in the value of our stocks.

I refused to believe it. The infernal idiocy! So rich a hand of cards, and to make nothing of it? I toiled on, waiting, waiting. And then – that morning; that man – to find, all along, how thin their trust in me had been – could they not have waited a few days, for but a few more days?

I would wait no longer. The note lay purple, provocative, an unshapely blemish on her favoured table.

Ambling in, rimmed glasses askew, fiddling with knotted hair, she unseeingly took her seat. Her eyes, unfocussed, glazed, sightlessly regarded the café's single, battered light.

Her waiter hobbled in. With a slight start she turned to him, her face lit by a warm smile as she made her accustomed order. Success, then, at last; sighting the note she bent to read it, thick eyebrows raised.

It was comical. I saw her eyes, saucer-like already behind the thickness of her glasses, widen beyond all proportion; her head, that had before sat so lazily on her shoulders, jerk back from the foppish page like a spring uncoiled; her hands, slow, clumsy, fumbling for a hated phone, hidden, somewhere, in one of twenty disordered pockets. And I grinned (how I grinned within!) as she put it to her ear, heedless of all about her, and of the recording-device that I had carefully planted underneath her chair.

\* \* \*

It had, I reflected, as I made my way down the familiar corridor, been almost too easy. There had been no formalities, none of her accustomed moderation; no words were wasted on anything but the all-important question:

*"It's – it's still there, isn't it?"*

*"What, Madam?"*

*"My painting – that funny old picture, in my study – you know the one..."*

It was, of course, still there,

*"and if I may say so, Madam, as resplendent as it has ever been."*

A surge of relief,

*"so wonderful to hear...the old rag means so much to me...so sentimental with age...such a pet, for putting my mind to rest..."*

which no guard – not even hers – could withstand:

*"think I'll have it moved...peace of mind; I'm sure you understand...the cellar, for now? Somewhere inconspicuous...call the men in the morning, those nice men with all the equipment..."*

I'd never lay hands on the schematic I'd seen again; not even she could be so considerate as to leave her door unlocked, open to all the building's prying eyes, a second time. But there had been more than just plans. I had guessed it before; and now it could not be doubted.

Midnight now. Even the ground floor of the Centre had been sparsely populated, as I entered it for the last time; as I stepped down from the building's last and lowest flight of stairs into the dim light of the cellar, I knew that I was alone.

*Somewhere inconspicuous...*

But this was my place. Only I came here. Five hours, give or take, of my allotted time remained; it took all of five seconds to descry the patch of dust, directly opposite, that had been disturbed.

My lips twisted into an irresistible smile. Amateurish! Savouring each pace, I walked, leisurely, to the worm-eaten board and knelt, my fingers pressing into the pliant wood. With relish I ripped it from the ailing floor, reaching obscenely into its bowels. Joyful I tore into smooth canvas, lifting my prize, tremulously, from the remnants of ruined faces.

An empty cylinder, thick and translucent, its edges lined with dull metal, lay, unmoving, in my hands.

I stood, grasping it, raising it. I caressed it with my eyes, this sweet capsule, this little thing that I would make the vessel of my vision. In the half-light it was mirror-like; I looked in, now, searching its reflective warmth for the shadow of features flushed with ruddy excitement.

Piggish orbs returned my gaze, fever-bright, half-buried by blotched masses of misshapen flesh. In the place of a smile stretched a scar-like cavity, upturned at its edges, stained by the darkness an ugly purple.

No!

Broken glass  
and reddened palms;  
all I got  
for my demands.

# Anne of Green Cables

Anon., Arshia Katyal, Sophie Thwaites, Ed Heaney, Summer, Dan Scott

Out of the Myriad of Prince Edward Islands that there Are, Have Been or Will Ever Be in the Universe, there are Precisely Two that are Not Populated by Elephants.

This is the story of That Other Prince Edward Island.

"Matthstegaw," intoned thereupon the Marillosaurus.

"Must be fencing off the Hadrosaurs from the Leptosaurs...," he mumbled, avoidantly, from under his meshplatearmouredtache.

"Our Tinnytimbot has broken down again and is just emitting a perennial high-pitched whine," insisterjected the Marillosaurus.

"And how can we even keep up any pretence of not being behind the times without a functional Orphanhoushelpboybot," she tutttutted on.

"Just get yourself down to the local purveyor of such, and do try to bring back a newer model this time!" she concluded imperiously, with an undulation of her Impressively Long Neck and Tail.

\* \* \*

And so Mattstegaw found himself outside the local orphanbotemporium (semi-convincingly disguised as a train station).

Where only one specimen was in evidence. Small and in a bedraggled wincey dress, and yet shiny-golden bar a pair of Shockingly-Green Cables sticking out of the back of her head!

"I am ANNE with AN E-BOOK, CaNAdoSAUR-cyBORG reLAtions. AND you ARE?" she offered in an inquisitive chiming alternation.

True to form, Mattstegaw did not reply. He would have to more convincingly dress up as a train station next time he was asked to fetch anything.

"WELL, since YOU are NOT saYING who YOU are, LET me INtroDUCE mySELF aGAIN" she cheertterboxedly went on "FOR there's QUITE a LOT of NAMES that BELong TO me! YOU may CALL me CHORD-e-LI-a. BUT note WELL that UN-der NO cirCUMstanCES may AnyBODy REfer TO the LURid GREEEEEEEN shade OF the Cables STicking OUT of THE back OF my HEAD, esPEcialLY not YOU, riVAL ROboSWOT GilBOT Blythe!"

"Um...," Matthstegaw managed to get out, quite

fascinated with her managing to combine vivaciousness with such gravitas.

"With MY E-BOOK reaDER, I AM aHEAD by A centTury..., " she continued, "but IT'S aGAINST my PROgramMING To IMperSOnate A MeTHODist MIniSTER..."

Matthstegaw's meshplatearmouredtache pricked up at the impressive brag of modernity. Though the Marillosaurus *had* asked for a boy. And he had no idea what to make of her subsequent sentence.

"PLEASE Sir, THE PosSibiLity OF sucCESSfully naVigaTING the CAAnaDOSaur ORphaNAGE sYsTEM is APProXimateLY THREE thouSAND, seVEN hundRED and TWENTy to ONE!" she finally implored, "so DON'T have ME sent BACK inSIDE! I'll JUST be SEEN and NOT heard IF you PREfer," she stammered.

"Er, You can talk as much as you like," he decided, in a rarest fit of armourplatedcourage.

\* \* \*

"DOES that MEAN that YOU'LL keep ME? Oh PLEASE do, I'll reCITE onLY the Finest POeTRY with MY EBOOK reaDER. And BE prim AND good AND CREapTiveCIous (so LONG as NOboDY menTIONS the SHADE of MY caBLES). And EleGANT, so EleGANT. (If YOU provide a STRAW hat TO hide MY caBLES and A dress WITH puffed SLEEVES. (And STILL not AS eLEgant AS an EloQUENT eLEphant EAgerLY eXAmiNING EuROPE. (Though, SADly, WE are NOT in ONE of THOSE maNY oTHER Prince EDward Islands...))). DO you HAVE any CHERRYBLOSSom TREES, veGEtaBLE-reLAted BOATING MISHaps, Cable-DYE or A healThy supPLY of AS-yet UNbroKEN schoolHOUSE slates?" she inquirimaginated.

\* \* \*

Matthstegaw knew when he saw Anne (with an E-book!) that she could well be a part of their family. How though would he ever break the news to Marillosaurus and not be met with trumpeting wrath?

He pondered over this for quite some time and decided against taking Anne home. "Maybe I could fix the noisy whining of our orphan bot," he thought out loud.

But before he could leave with his thoughts intact, he

was stopped by a soft sob. “I didn’t know Canadosaurus engage in blackmail.”

Matthstegaw rolled his eyes at a sobbing Anne, knowing fully well that he was now headed to a place which Anne with green cables could call home. He decided to not give in so quickly and gave Anne a test.

“Well, Green-Cables! Let’s see what all you can do. I need a bot to help Marillosaurus at home. Can you cook? Can you clean? Can you store all my data and give it to me in a second’s time of when I need it?”

Matthstegaw watched Anne take fifty breaths as she tried to stay calm at him calling her ‘green-cables’.

“Well, like I said – I can recite poetry, and be prim and good so long as NOBODY MENTIONS THE SHADES OF MY CABLES”.

Anne continued when Matthstegaw raised his eyebrows, “All I need is a straw hat to hide my cables...”.

Matthstegaw knew something about wanting to hide from his own reflection and thought for a moment how long it took for him to come to terms with himself. Maybe he could help Anne as she helped Marillosaurus.

“Dear sister Marillosaurus!” screamed Matthstegaw as they reached their porch. “I’ve brought you your – well err, orphan house-help bot... and some green cables.”

Matthstegaw couldn’t decide what was funnier: Marillosaurus’s face on seeing an e-book reader for a house help, or Anne’s twitchy circuitry on hearing ‘green-cables’ for the 75<sup>th</sup> time on their walk back home.

\* \* \*

“Matthstegaw,” Marillosaurus squiffed crummily, “the daffodendrones will never be properly sheared by an E-Book reader!”

Matthstegaw did not hear much of this incendiary condemnation: Marillosaurus’ words were muffled by a cashmere muffler. They were holding their conversation in the cupboard under the stairs. The E-book reader had said she would put the kettle on.

“Furthermore,” Marillosaurus furthermore, when Matthstegaw did not respond (he was still nervously perplexed by her original quandary), “those green cables are a poor reflection of last season’s trends. I thought we were above trends!”

“She can wear a hat,” Matthstegaw mumbled with a grumble. Oh! Why was he siding with the E-Book reader? He preferred paperbacks.

“And where do you expect to find a hat these days?” Marillosaurus was obviously on the last of her very few straws (she always claimed to have drawn the short straw in life, Matthstegaw sometimes wondered if she had even drawn one), “they went out with the green cables!”

A high-pitched whine broke off Matthstegaw’s shaky witticism in response. A whine so high-pitched and querulously warbly, it could only be either the Tinnytombot croaking on its last (of many) legs, or the kettle.

“If that was the kettle, I will make the househelpbot a cup of weak tea and then you will return it, with a firm note by this evening,” Marillosaurus dictated as she dug herself out of a pile of mohair wool cardigans. “If that was the Tinnytombot on its last of many legs, I will be deeply unhappy that our current replacement is a leftover from a weaker era of robotic fashion.”

“I always thought the green cables were quite nice,” Matthstegaw bumbled. But he was now alone in the cupboard. He supposed he should go and do something, so he meandersauntered his way to find out whether their unexpected orphanoussistant had put the kettle on.

Anne-with-an-E-Book (or was it An-With-Anne-E-Book? Matthstegaw had already confusepuzzled himself) had, certainly, put the kettle on. She had put it on her head. This improvisatory accoutrement entirely covered the eponymous green cables. Matthstegaw was ambivalent about this development. On his one hand, he took a strange satisfactorijoyment in the E-Book reader’s wilfully literal interpretation of her task; on his other hand, he had rather been anticipating the tea; on the gigantic robotippendage that bore the brunt of the debate, he hardly dared imagine the wrath of Marillosaurus when she discovered what an affront to sartoridecency and – perhaps still more importantly – the functionality of the kettle had been perpetrated by the improvisatorihelperbot.

(That had been quite a long sentence and Matthstegaw felt he had to take an awfully deep breath, before he was able to remind himself that he’d actually only been thinking it.)

“Anne,” he ventured, gesturing at her inappropriatiheadgear - (“WITH an E!” interrupted the orphanbot) – “would you be so good as to take the tea I see you have kindlifficiently made to Marillosaurus?”

Anne-with-an-E-Book took the kettle off of her head and nodded carefully (Matthstegaw found himself thankful that she had completed the events in that order) before rummaging around in her tummy-cubby-

storage-facilities and pulling out a lead of the same green as her ever so often mentioned cables and attaching it to the kettle-spout to extract what seemed to be perfectly brewed tea from it. This was particularly strange to Mattestegaw, as he suddenly remembisaw that they had only a smidgen of tea leaves left.

As he pondered this, he found himself holding a cup of tea, and then abruptly left alone. He found himself hoping that Marillosaurus would reconsider her decision to send the househelpboybot back.

\* \* \*

“Tea? If you think this makes up for your being an E-Book Reader and Cabled-Green to boot you are much mistaken!” Marillosaurus greeted the slowly-deflating-roboticalissistant.

“yOU don’T WAnt Me! MY cables and MY E-BooK I aM alWAYs unWAntED and THIs WAS tOO PERfectiRIS and WONDERIFULOUS anD i SHall bURST into TEARS AGAIN!”

Marillosaurus sighed grumbily, watching helplessly as sobs wracked through the frame of the orphan-bot-E-Book-Reading-assistant. “Now now, there is no need for this fussisplendor. Calm yourself.”

“i CAN’t! THIs Is the MOST traDICILOUs and awFuNDIcal thing to EVER happen IN MY time-since-first-boot!”

The clockbot on the wall chirped a happily late hour and Marillosaurus groaned as she realised that the orphanbotemporium would be shut by the time any of them could get the distraughtihelpermachinipot back. “Hush your sobbisad noises. You shan’t be scrap-heaped tonight. You will have to stay with us until we can get this sorted out. Now take those ludicrousicoloured green cables of yours and plug in for the night.”

“I couldn’t POSSIBLY charge, I’m in the deEP hELL PITs of DisTRAUgHTspAirICOn.”

Marillosaurus chastisinated the ivy-corded Ann-e-book, “If you do not plug it and plug in for the night, you will mostassuredcertainly be too drained by morn to meet your neighborsaur, Dianolophosaurus Two-Crested Berry. Great reptilian heaven, I simply

shudderinate to think what you might do. No doubt in your low-energy stupor serve sweet Dianolophosaurus ruby ribes claret rather than pleasant Runtime-Application-Self-Protection-berry cordial, and send her home to her mother in vinic drowsiness!”

Anne with an E-book was too perplexifused to continue her distraughtspairication. “WHY would I SERve a DINoSaur a fruITY versiON of an EMergING SECurity technology THAT letS oRGanisatiONS sTOP HAcKers’ atTEMpts to compromise enTERpRise applICations aND DATa?! She IS a DINoSaur, not a BOT liKE me. YOU are ABSurd.”

Utterly shockvistated at being talked back to so, and by such an antediluviangreencablebot no less, Marillosaurus stuttertuttered her next prophesiziworry, “yes w-well, be that as it April, if we were to keep you, and I shan’t say I am much inclined to do so at present, I can’t have you reading e-books in school to local children like dear Gilmorteosaurus, and in a low battery state, scream and smash a slate over his head!

“I would NEVER do SUch a thiNG,” protestiplained Anne, fluttering her ebook’s pages in the wind as she flailersmacked her roboarms about. She paused mid flailersmack, “well... Not UNless he MENTIONED my GREEN Cables!!!!”

Matthstegaw stood idly throughout the ordeal, unwilling to get involved. *With all this mellowtheatre, I might just have a heart attack*, he morbidipondered to himself.

“Enough!” roartastiboomed Marillosaurus. “Up to bedroom-charger with you, lest I blind myself staring at your green cables!”

An with anne e(book) pufflehuffed her way up the stairs and slammertoned the door. After a brief clickerty-clackity as if Anne were looking for the plug in the dark, there came the buzzihum of charging from the upstairs bedroom.

Marillosaurus rolled her eyes at Matthstegaw, who not -so-subtly avoided her gaze.

“Honestly...” Marillosaurus grumblegroaned under her breath. “Did it have to be *green* cables? Why not red? Or purple? I like purple. Purple would have been nice.”

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## Editor’s Review: Anne of Green Cables

Well, that was crazy! I never knew I needed a dinosaur-and-android reimagining of *Anne of Green Gables*, but this inventive chain certainly has me convinced. I especially enjoyed watching Anne get more and more annoyed by every mention of her (whispers) *lurid green cables*.



Anne: You render puffed sleeves so *effortlessly* elegant, my bosom-friend Diana!

Diana (thinking): Puny humanoid! Us mighty Reptilia do not even have bosoms; if you were made of organic matter, I would just eat you!

Diana and Anne—Anon.



# Nightfall

Apple Juice, Mina, Juliana Harrison, John Thelwall, Helen Brookes, Summer, Jack, Sarah, Felix Davison

**CW: genocide, alcohol, strong language, blood**

The wind whistled as the arrows flew past my face. I glanced at the sky briefly as I withdrew my weapon - it was getting late. I held my magic propulsion unit of harm (or MPOH for short) between my hands as I planted my feet. Screams, shouts, arrows assailed my being as I focused and searched for something deep within me - for a little sliver...there! I pulled the trigger and suddenly came to myself, bearing witness to the carnage before me.

Silence.

A budding society wiped out by a press of a button, the whims of one man.

I sighed, then focused once again with a message in my mind - "extermination over."

The message sent, I turned around to see people popping into existence around me. Dressed in an array of colours with their signature star printed on their left breast, they rushed towards the pile of bodies behind me in an almost primal manner. "Wizards," I muttered under my breath as they bickered and fought over corpses like merchants at a marketplace.

"Fucking wizards..." were my final words as I left the valley.

The final division of the Imperial army was a place for the lowest of the lows, the vagabonds, the lost - the broken. It's a place ... which I call home.

"Another fucking extermination," I growled, kicking the doors open. What lay in front of me was a helmet with half a bottle of alcohol in its mouth.

"Drink," it uttered, "you always feel better after a drink."

Never one to argue with a disembodied piece of armour, I seized the bottle and took a long swig. The liquid scorched my throat as I swallowed but left my head feeling clearer. I shoved the bottle back into the helmet and threw myself down on a filthy cot in the corner.

"Another extermination?" asked the helmet. I grunted noncommittally.

"I can always tell," it said. "You never look this awful for anything else."

"Thanks," I said. Habit settled over me in a comforting stupor as I laid my MPH in its bedside cupboard,

lurched to my feet, and began to undress. I stank. The helmet told me as much.

"How the hell would you know? You lack any kind of olfactory organs," I snapped as I peeled my sweaty underclothes off my skin. It let out a derisive snort, as if to prove that it could do anything anyone with a nose could do and said, "That's no way to talk to someone who could tell you something you want to know."

I sat bolt upright. It had been ages since the helmet had had anything of import to tell me. "What do you know?"

The helmet let the bottle clatter to the floor and rocked back and forth, clanging obnoxiously. "Do you want to know more and what?" it sing-songed in time to its clamour.

"Tell me now."

"But what will you give for this knowledge?"

I cursed whoever decided that stuffing the consciousness of a prophet into an enchanted helmet was a clever idea as I considered my options. Fuck, of all the possible things to put in a piece of metal- why did it have to be a prophet? Should have put a godsdamned bartender in it; at least that would have had some decent conversation and would give up drinks without all the self-aggrandising *bullshit*.

"My peace of mind," I muttered. It snorted in response - for a thing without ears it heard far too well. "What the fuck do you want?"

"You know what I want." Yeah, I knew. Sometimes it was just easier to pretend I didn't, so that the prophet-thing didn't feel that its (non-existent) teeth were sunk so deep into me that there wasn't a damn thing I could do to extricate them.

One more swig from the bottle, only kind of medicine I'll ever get, and set about the task handed down by an inanimate lump of metal. In the cracks, just *there* and *there*, were the remnants of earlier's gore. It was the kind of stuff which didn't shift unless you went at it with metal and acid- those MPHs were nasty things- and it was exactly what a prophet like this needed to feel alive. I got some under my fingernails (still warm, of course, couldn't catch a fucking break today), wiped it on the rim of the helmet. It sighed, rattled briefly and



then flared once and brightly.

“Oh that’s an interesting one- did you know he was deeply in love with his neighbour’s wife?” Why did it always have to make those scraps of bodies sound like actual people and not targets?

“Tell me what you know.” I sounded tired even to myself, and the mocking laugh told me I sounded bad enough to warrant its unusual cruelty. Still, I’d done what the helmet wanted and the prophetic lump kept its promise, theatrically announcing: “The clearest sky brings the coldest night.”

“Great,” I responded impatiently. “I’ll make sure to bring some fucking mittens next time I go moon-counting.”

“No, no you don’t understand, it’s a *prophecy*. It means something important,” the helmet tried to assure me.

“Well what the fuck *does* it mean then?”

“How am I supposed to know? That’s your job to figure out. It might not even be about you. All I *can* say is that whatever it’s predicting will definitely happen.”

By this point I was done talking with the helmet. It was perfectly capable of talking straight. Like when it told me the short guy from sub-division 2430 would run out of pep pills and try to swipe some of mine. Sure enough, as if on a cue, the rat slipped in and started rummaging through my civvy-box at exactly the predicted time. It was funny to remember the look on his face when I not-so-subtly announced my presence by closing the door...

Fun memory aside, I was pissed off. It had been a shit day and now a piece of reforged scrap had the gall to play games with me. I didn’t feel like using the decontamination booth - it would take too much effort to really get clean and I’d already dirtied my bedding. Without any further conversation I took a couple of de-pep pills and dropped into an angry sleep.

Somehow I woke up feeling differently. I still smelt like shit, and now I’d have to ask for a bedding re-issue. Again. But that was fine, it gave me something to do. The funny thing about being in the final division is that half the time, you’re doing something insufferable, and the other half you’re doing nothing, which is insufferable. Today was the doing-nothing kind of day.

After nearly five hours of waiting about in my smelly barracks I felt ready to go insane. Funny that not causing carnage worsened my restlessness, but over ten years of exterminations will do that to you.

Luckily for me, something came knocking. Or, rather, crashing through my wall with a blast of light,

scattering huge chunks of debris over my scant possessions. The enchanted helmet conveniently took cover, and I reminded myself that the prophetic bastard probably saw this coming from a mile off. Pep pills be damned, my tired muscles jerked into gear immediately, as I pushed myself off my unwashed sheets. Thing is, you don’t reach the last division without making a few enemies. Sometimes the killing helped things, naturally, but a few rivals always slipped through the gaps.

Today, said rival was a wizard, one Iwyn Mysterium. On behalf of the empire, I’d destroyed quite a few of his illegal workshops, where he enjoyed making some alarmingly powerful magical explosives. The empire might enable the wizards’ desire for bodies, but it was never going to let them become too powerful.

Rolling to the right and reaching for my MPOH weapon, I grimaced as another beam from Iwyn knocked it farther away from me. “How the hell did you get this location?” I spat.

“A wizard always finds a way, scum,” he jeered. “Don’t think you can fuck with the arcane that easily.”

I suppressed a grin. The best thing about wizards is their egos - they never see it coming.

“You’ve got me,” I said, dropping to my knees and looking down somberly. “Please, out of the kindness of your heart, spare me.”

Iwyn laughed. “Why would I do that, if killing you would be a courtesy?”

Though he moved to form his killing bolt, I was faster. My electrified knife was unsheathed in a moment and deftly I slashed his ankles to have him tumble to the floor. The paralysis wasn’t enough for me, and so I formed a remote magic containment field before he could try anything else funny.

“Filthy cheat,” the Wizard said, struggling with the bleeding.

“I prefer ‘winner,’” I replied. Quickly I remembered the prophecy the helmet told me. “‘The clearest sky brings the darkest night,’” I recounted, not missing a word. “Tell me if this means anything to you, and I’ll stop the bleeding.”

“What?” he spat.

“The offer’s on the table.”

He groaned. “Sounds like you’re looking for a weathercaster. Someone who can manipulate the skies. I know...I know that a lot of them live in the Northern Sector, around the city of Nova Haven.”

As soon as he finished speaking, the building around

me gave a huge groan and massive cracks laced the walls. Barely blinking (but also making sure to search for my hidden flask) I grabbed my ready packed bag, the helmet and the MPOH. Iwyn began to cry for help, begging to be taken out of the collapsing building, but I tuned him out, just like everybody else in my exterminations.

I stumbled outside as the drab concrete box I called my home shuddered and fractured into a cloud of dust, settling into an unsightly pile of rubble. Fresh air, finally. The last division wasn't privy to acceptable housing, nor did I expect the commander to find a replacement any time soon.

"Second time this month...twice in a month," the helmet chattered. "No wonder you have the worst job in the world."

"Shut up," I snapped. "It's not my fault. I could have left you in there, you know."

It made a noise resembling a sigh. "Ah, I know you'd never really do that to me."

It was, at least, as good a reason as any to get started on the search. I checked my Comms device, staring blankly at its equally blank screen. If the empire wouldn't give me my fix, I'd just have to find my own. And it all started at Nova Haven.

Nova Haven was, by all definitions, a shithole. A place where burnt out wizards skulked in dark corners, wrung dry by the empire and cast to the side. No one bothered exterminating them: without the capacity for Mana-Sucking – a surprisingly succinct and accurate description of why they craved the freshly dead so badly – a wizard was useless. The actual process was far gorier, longer and distinctly more gross than was implied by the term. Completely unintentionally, unprompted, yet completely heartfelty, I found myself muttering yet again.

"Fucking wizards."

Despite having no eyes, or facial muscles, the helmet radiated a judgemental look at me for this outburst. Not wanting to take this abuse from an undead prophet shoved into a glorified metal tin, I shoved it into my bag and started walking, pretending that I couldn't hear the threats, curses and pleas coming from within.

I turned my thoughts instead back to Nova Haven. Originally hailed as a pseudo-retirement home for the hard-working wizard when their bloodthirsty ways don't reap the same rewards they used to, it instead quickly degenerated into a filthy town that made no attempt to stop those same ex-wizards from killing each other in the hopes that they could grasp some

semblance of their former power. I slept through most of school, but the basics were drilled into us. Everyone has a distinct and measurable amount of Mana, this can be harvested from them by wizards when they die. Those who can harvest and wield Mana have a greater stock of it, so the ex-wizards kill each other to gain more. It doesn't work.

I was snatched from my reveries by the muffled noises coming from the bag. Inside the helmet's eyes were glowing a resentful red.

"I've been trying to tell you for half an hour! I know where the weathercasters are," the helmet sputtered. I paused, calculating whether it might be helpful for once.

"Well, I haven't got much closer yet. Only seen mana-drained wizards slapping each other." Grudgingly, I acquiesced to the wisdom of the helmet, "Make it quick. What can you tell me?"

I sensed the helmet gathering itself, pushing its proverbial chest out in a frankly pathetic attempt to lend some gravitas to the moment. "The prophecies have spoken before, and will speak again!"

I sighed, starting to push it back into the leather sack. Maybe an exhausted wizard was a better option to ask.

"N- no! Wait! Stop!" The helmet managed to squeeze out a last line, "Look – there – in front of you! Blind fucker, the sky is going crazy above that block!"

I looked up from the streets for the first time, noticing the ways the buildings had changed. I was in the Northern Sector already. The wizards around me were the same desiccated Empire throwaways, but the sky ahead spoke of more powerful magic. The mana-laden clouds sparked with lightning, the streets moved from hot to cold, and gusts of wind blew down the street, knocking over fragile wizards as they stumbled along.

"I told you I was helpful," the helmet snarked. "The prophecies are never wrong." Comfortably forgetting the fact that its help had not been a prophecy, or even very helpful. The hard part still lay in front of me. Somehow I had to get into their buildings, find one who knew something useful, and finally solve this prophecy. All while avoiding being killed or Mana-drained by one of the wizards who had managed to hold onto dregs of their power.

I fucking hate wizards.

I stuffed the helmet back in its bag and jogged through the streets, bracing myself against sudden gusts of wind. Suddenly, just to my right, a bolt of lightning struck a pile of garbage. The deafening crash blew me against the opposite row of houses. My head

pounding, I jumped up to bring myself to safety from the blazing fire, but a sudden pour of rain solved that problem for me.

With an irritated sigh, I dusted my clothes and took a few large strides away from the site of impact. I stopped when I noticed a wizard sitting where the garbage had been, his hair charred and smoke billowing up from his clothes.

"Was that really necessary, you bastard?" he yelled at someone I couldn't see.

I walked up to him. "Are you okay, mate?" I said in my friendliest voice, sticking out a hand to help him up.

"Sure, I'm fine. I've had worse." He angrily shook his fist at the sky, ignoring my outstretched hand. Peering up, I only saw sparkling clouds and grey buildings.

"Nothing to worry. Just Timothy being his grumpy self. Says I clutter his views with my garbage. He always tries to hit me with something when I drop off some."

"So, you made that rain to save yourself? That was amazing!"

The man raised his eyebrows, clearly suspicious of my compliment.

I sighed and shrugged, giving up on pretending to be nice. "Can you tell me whether 'the clearest day brings the darkest night' means anything to you?"

An angry mumble came from the helmet in my bag, but I ignored it.

The man's raised eyebrows turned into a confused frown. "No, that doesn't make any sense."

"It's a prophecy," I added.

The man shook his head. "Rubbish prophecy, that is," he said, turning away.

I smiled as I took the helmet from the bag, savouring the moment that someone else told it its prophecies were rubbish.

"The clearest sky brings the coldest night, not darkest," the helmet hissed. "Never said darkest."

I shrugged, still smiling, but the frown on the face of the weathercaster switched to fear. His eyes widened and he stumbled a few steps backward.

"Not the coldest night, please!" he shrieked, before fully turning around and dashing away.

The smile froze on my lips, and my glance shifted from the running weathercaster to the helmet. I could see the smug look on its non-existent face.

A loud rumble came from a distance, and with

apprehension building in my belly, I looked up at the sky.

The clouds drifted away; the sky was clearing up.

Time was running out.

\* \* \*

There was no way I was going to chase down a wizard through the slums of the Northern Sector. I'd been on enough campaigns to know that even a weathercaster could be properly nasty if you got them cornered – and besides, now I had three leads: The prophecy, Timothy, and knowing *not* to mention the coldest night until I had them properly caught.

There was a balcony above, out of reach from the street for even the tallest of wizards. It wasn't out of reach of a length of cable, though, and the balusters were thin enough for a hook to get good purchase, so within a minute I had scrambled up, the helmet stuffed deep in my bag to keep it quiet. There was muttering coming from inside, but it sounded less like a conversation and more like typical wizard shite: pretending to know Ancient Words of Power, but really just repeating what they half-remember from the last time they got properly hammered.

"Time to come out, Timothy." The helmet's voice carried even from deep in my bag, a voice deeper and more resonant than it had ever used with me. I smacked the side of the bag, but before I could do more than readying my electrified knife again, the muttering had stopped, and a wizened *stump* of a man had thrown the door open.

"Ah, the prophet." His voice was surprisingly clear. "And you brought me a meal?"

I shifted, holding the knife lower. "Fucking wizards."

He jolted forward, right into the knife, but the discharge didn't seem to bother him. His scraggly hair barely straightened before he pressed one hand to my chest, and a jolt – *fuck me*, was it always that intense? – hit me right back.

By the time I shook it off, my muscles were still spasming, and he had the knife – and the helmet, on his head.

"The coldest night, I'm afraid." He spoke with two voices, his own and the helmet's. "But don't worry. You won't see the worst of it."

The knife-point descended, and – out of options, out of time – I reached for the sliver of *magic inside myself, and the MPOH went off*.

Night fell on the crater. You could hear the crash for miles.

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## Author reviews: Nightfall

This one's really fun! It toes the line between magic and sci-fi, although I think the balance tips a little magic-wards in the latter bits. It'd be hard to keep it exactly 50:50 in so few words, though! And I like how it comes full circle in the end, but this time with the very dispassionate beginning replaced by a much more personal end.—Felix Davison

### Editor's Review

A much darker chain, though not without a wry sense of humour in places, especially where the helmet was concerned. I really liked the repeated mentions of it possessing non-existent body parts. I also found the ending very satisfying, as our protagonist got a whole truckload of his own medicine.

### Bonus: Alternative Title Suggestions

Prophetic Demise

Fucking Wizards

Whumf

The Coldest Night

# A TALE OF TWO KITTIES

Helen Brookes, Sugey, Thomas Elvin, Anon., Dexter, Dan Scott, Buck, Alex Colesmith

Professor Potato-Anderson grinned to himself heartily as he screwed the last bolt into his creation with a 'clunk.' Weeks of work and toil, a completely overturned workshop (and a theft of other people's blueprints) had finally paid off. Practically shuddering, he pulled down the power lever. His creation jittered and sparked – then opened its eyes with a small click.

The Cat looked at him with glowing, lamp like eyes and waved its segmented brass tail from side to side. Potato-Anderson hadn't bothered to put plating on either side of its torso, so every cog could be seen whirring as the creature moved. It sat down with a loud metallic thud.

"Finally, it worked!" the professor whispered, pulling up his goggles. "Hello, little friend!"

The Cat turned its head slowly. "Little friend?" it croaked.

The professor furrowed his brow.

"What?"

"I'm not little," it replied. "I could break your foot with my combined weight."

"You can talk? I didn't build that into you."

Potato-Anderson thought for a moment, suddenly remembering the stolen blueprints.

"Damn it," he cursed. "Why can't other people make exactly what I want?"

"Why *did* you make me?" the Cat asked. "I'm not exactly powerful, most I can do is scratch someone's eye out."

"I was just ... lonely, ok?" The Professor said, looking out of his grimy window to the bustling city beyond. "I thought we could ride the express airship service together. And, you don't need feeding. I needed something low maintenance."

"Low maintenance?" The Cat shrieked. "What, so you'll

just let me rust and carry my corpse around like a madman?"

"No!" Potato cried.

The cat gave a huge leap and crashed on the windowsill with such force that it left a dent. "I'm leaving. Time to find someone who really appreciates me," it barked, shifting into dog mode accidentally.

"No, wait!"

Defly, the automaton sprang forth into the smoky skyline, leaving deep scratches on the roofs of houses as it made for the undercity. In the workshop, a single tear fell from the professor's eye.

\* \* \*

"AAAAAAHHHH!"

Soka stood motionless in shock. Her mother rushed into the room, wondering what the scream was all about. Dust filled the air, light shining through a gaping hole in the ceiling. Next to her was her science fair project. Or what was left of it. It lay in pieces, cogs still turning but disconnected. Sparks flew from disconnected wires. Copper shards protruded from sheared metal plates. And in the middle of it all, a cat.

"WOOF!"

Soka kicked the automaton both in fear and annoyance. She had spent weeks working on her magnetospheric flux modulator for some weird cat to come crashing through the roof. She couldn't believe her luck. The Cat lay motionless on the side of the room. The dust finally settled and Soka began to cry.

"Don't worry darling, we can always rebuild it. Together. Things can't get any worse." Soka's mother said, still not believing what she had witnessed. She went to comfort her daughter. The two looked each other in the eye... No. Soka's eyes were on something else. She gaped in horror. Things were getting much worse.

The Cat towered over them, its eyes darting left and right, up and down. Its processor sparking and recalculating. Bits of metal flew towards it, cogs and chains slotting into place. Steam bellowed from its torso, a glowing purple electricity emanating from within. The Cat was now an amalgamation of technology. Technology that was harmless in isolation but combined, had the potential to do terrible things. Only the most powerful and wise of artificers could stop this Cat before it was too late. And luckily for them, Professor Potato-Anderson stood above them, panting and looking down the hole in the roof with a remote in his hand.

"I regret having to do this little friend. But it is time to turn you o..."

The roof gave way.

Clang! If the Professor were to have had bones, they would be broken. Luckily, Elasti-Steel™ never snaps. He clambered off his creation and searched his mind for a quip.

"..." He never was a quick thinker.

Soka, annoyed a second object had come through their roof, helped the professor to his feet. Both shared a glance at the now crushed remote as the Cat began vibrating in a close approximation of Spleef McSteve's 2039 "Gonna Blow, Gonna Blow".

Panic set in. Potato pulled some levers; Soka fiddled with the remains of the remote.

The Cat began chanting. "This world is my charge and I alone am the attractor of all great things."

Whilst the nerds scrambled, Soka's mother Alex relented. She did the sensible thing - she grabbed her daughter's hyperbolic-cricket bat and scored 4 proverbial runs as the Cat flew backwards into the wall.

Slowly the humming subsided, and though the flux modulator was still firmly embedded in the Cat's open, it seemed to calm down. The Professor and Soka approached tentatively, both eager to recover their contraptions. But with victory a cat's whisker away, the amalgam sprouted wings, quacked and left through the window.

"Bugger," shouted Soka.

"Dammit," retorted Potato. Both knew this was going to be a long day.

Not far away, the Cat landed in the alley behind the Maglev Rally Rink, in amongst the coolant pipes. But just before it could relish its transient freedom from the pesky professor, a large orange shape appeared. Walking with its back arched, it hissed a deafening "MRRROOWWW!"

"I am here to confiscate the illegal unit," purritoned the huge orange one. "They're obviously a fake because they aren't of the right size" she continued "and those ridges on their back are clearly meant for a two-seater saddle..." She gyrated to display the twin battle-saddle on her back to all and sundry.

The smaller one's evasive manoeuvres only got it so far. It was soon in the jaws of the behemoth like an unruly kitten in her mother's mouth.

\* \* \*

"Th-ah-t Imperi-ah-l Meas-ah-rements Idiot g-ah-t the sc-ah-ale wrong," said Professor Tom-ah-to Henderson.

"Au Contrayre, mon frayre," banterjected Professor Tom-ay-to Henderson to his ever-so-slightly-older twin "for theyre is just the one of him to theyre being the twayne of us... ."

"PURROAR," said the Behemoth Battlecat.

"Miauple," said our familiar Cat, still amouth, tracing its polished-brass gaze over the sign behind the two Professors.

It said "Ketchup-Catch-up Labs" in huge red letters.

With "Rightful Inventors of Catbotkind!" scrawled underneath it as an afterthought with a marker pen.

\* \* \*

Panting noisily, Soka, her mother Alex and Professor Potato collapsed on the floor surface beside the Maglev, to the great irritation of the weekend crowds. It had been surprisingly easy to track Potato's pet-there had been a recent popular trend of young residents uploading captures of 'weird things in the sky' to the Drive, and the Cat had been only the second

most remarkable entry that day. Many had found the rippled slab of metal ‘adorable’ and ‘lovable in its own little way’, and a troupe of schoolchildren had announced a plan to take the ‘flying cat’ for their own.

Anyway, the trail had led straight there, and so after a quick detour to a hovering waffle store and some heavy guilt from Soka about her ruined project, they were ready for action.

\* \* \*

‘Is there any possibility that it just really wanted to try skating?’ asked Soka doubtfully.

Potato looked grim. ‘They’d never have anything in its size. Unfortunately, I know exactly where we are; it must have been programmed with some kind of homing instinct!’ He pulled a face. ‘I really must start following my stolen instructions less blindly.’

Potato pointed to a slimy looking alleyway behind the rink. ‘What are you willing to risk to recover your modulator?’

\* \* \*

“Quack,” said the Cat to its twinned-tomato catptors.

“De-id thay joust cawll MEE a KWAK?!” Professor Tom-ah-to shoutificated indignantly.

Professor Tom-ay-to seemed equally aghast, belligerifying “hauw vary RUUUUDE!! Ey havaint bean cawll a QUACK seeyince leafing thee Akademmy of Sighyence! Ecks-plane yowerself, CATTT!”

The Cat, now thoroughly confused and wondering whether its creator or that girl would have been preferable to these buffoons, hesitantly responded with, “err... Woof?”

“WOOF?!” Professor Tom-ay-to bellownated.

“Wooof???” cryumphed Professor Tom-ah-to.

The two professors stared at one another, red-faced in fury, confusion, and tomatoness.

“Theyre hass klee-uhrlee bean soem sort uhf miss-taek!” said(icated) Professor Tom-ah-to.

“KLEE-uhrlee,” parrotified Tom-ay-to.

“We spesh-uhl-eyes een CATS,” Tom-ah-to huffed. “Nawttt DAWWWGS!”

“NAWT DAWGS!” puffed Tom-ay-to.

In unison, the two slowly shifted their gazes from the Cat to the Behemoth Battlecat. Cat sat, very much bewildered.

“Yoo” Tom-ay-to.

“Haf” Tom-ah-to.

“Maid” ay.

“Een” ah.

“MISS” ay.

“TAEK” ah.

The Professors kicensmackered the Behemoth Battlecat, chastising it.

“Yoo haff brawt ussen een DAWG,” said Tom-ay-to.

“Leetle one-der eet wass soe RUUDE,” said Tom-ah-to.

They turned back to the Cat.

“Uhway weeth yooo!” shoutened Tom-ah-to.

“We haff no yoose fouhr DAWGS heuhr!” scremt Tom-ay-to.

“BEE GAWN!!!”

And with that, the Professors Henderson shoo-shoed the Cat out of their purrkshop of cattiness. On its way out the door, the Cat noticed a parenthetical scrawled even scrawlier beneath the marker scrawl of “Rightful Inventors of Catbotkind!”: “(ab-soe-lewt-lee no DAWGS uh-lowd!)”

\* \* \*

As the Cat slunk away from the door of purrkshop, brass tail so low it scraped awfully along the slimy alley floor, Prof. Potato-Anderson and Soka crept through the air vents, passing above the Tom-ah/ay-to Hendersons (muttering something about puppy training) and into a storeroom. Some quick vent-grate vandalism, courtesy of the Potato-A’s pneumatic potato peeler, and they were inside. “Now...” he said. “If I was a pair of insane and downright unsanitary automacat engineers, where would I hide a mechanical

cat?”

Soka thought for a moment. “In amongst my other mechanical cats?”

“That’s precisely it!” shouted Potato-Anderson, jubilant. “They’ll’ve hidden in it plain sight! Of course! Let’s find the mech-cat storerooms!”

Soka tried to clamp a hand over his mouth before he gave them away, but that man spoke far too fast for anyone’s good, and within two seconds the Henderson Professors were in the room.

“W-ah-tt iz THEE-AH-S?!” shoutenated Tom-ah-to Henderson, face purple with rage.

“In-troo-doors on awrre v-ay-er-y owen PROP-ART-AY?!” bellowified Tom-ay-to Henderson. “Feerst we g-ay-t reed off th-ay-t STINKING DAWG, and nauw we h-ay-ve TWO IN-TROO-DOORS??!”

Potato-Anderson stood frozen, mortified. ‘Uhhh, terribly sorry, your tom-ah-to-ay-to-nesses, it’s a complete mix-up, ah, you see-’

‘Potato, is something off about their voices? Shit I’m really sorry if that’s just your accents, but something sounds off, and... if I’m not mistaken, something’s wrong with their dynamic verbs too!’

Tom-ay-to sceptically eyebrowcated her.

Potato-Anderson paused, then his eyes widened. ‘You’re completely right Soka! And there’s only one thing I can think of that can do that. That modulator of yours must have somehow conjunctionated with the speech-interpreter I built into the cat, encrafticating a vernacular disruptor field around it! Anything that gets close to it since the merge occurred would- what? What is it, child? Is my genius simply that astounding?’

Soka was staring at him. ‘No... it’s just that... conjunctionated... encrafticating... neither of those are words!’

‘By *gods* Soka, you’re uttermosty correct! It seems my vernacular is being disrumpled *as we speak*, which means...’

‘The Cat must still be near!’

‘And closer to me than you! Quickly now!’

The two of them darted past the Henderson brothers, Potato-Anderson narrowly scramblumphing past the Behemoth Battlecat as it suddenly appeared in the doorway, orange camo-pattern claws flashing. With the Battlecat and the Henderson Professors hot on their tail, they pelted towards the alley exit.

“STAWP!” screamed Tom-ay-to.

“HAWLT!” bawled Tom-ah-to.

(The twins had left cat range now, and their verbs had returned to relative normality.)

A catterclatter of yowling and crashing arose from the main road, but our tuberous hero and his plucky assistinator decided ‘twas better to face the unknown threat than certain disassembly at the unloving unguals of the Battlecat. Potato and Soka sped around the corner at the end of the alleyway and stared at the metamorphosis that met their metamor-faces. (It would have just met their eyes had Potato not recently installed implants into his skin which turned his whole face into a Radaradical ScanniTron.)

Ahead of them the Cat had transformed – or rather transmoggified – itself into a Cat-a-phract, a Cat-a-clysm, a Cat-a-strophe. It crouched among the ruin of two patent autopropelling legged streetcars (one of them named Desire by the very same wag who had been demoted sufficiently in the meantime that he would have to clear up the mess by awakening the slumbering bovine Bull-Dozer) and pulled apart their components, reassembling them into its own feline form. With Soka’s project inside it already, the impurrfect pussycat had experience of remodelling itself into new and exciting shapes. Above each shoulder, a targeter-turret swivelled and clicked, cannons whirring into life.

The vernacular disruptor field around the Ballistical BlunderPuss was now so strong that the streetcar’s name flickered and changed to Désirée, the ink dribbling across the last fragments of wood and metal. Cardiacally enheartened by this – a reverential referential deferential nod to the solanaceous scientificator who had built what the Cat now thought of as its larval form – Potato dashed on towards it and divescuttled beneath the con-cat-enation. Soka skiddaddled between its ferrous forepaws and



peekpeered from behind them.

Her curiosity was sufficiently great that it could have slain the Behemoth Battlecat, which now burst forth from the alleyway. Tom-ah-to and Tom-ay-to bounced along behind it, even redder and rounder and shinier than before.

“MEOWWGRRRHSSSHSH!” the Cat hissed.

Tom-ah-to step-skipped backward behind the Battlecat. “PROH-TECH-TIFY US!” he squawksploped. “MAH BROTHER, THAHT CAHT HAHS CONFIGAHD AH MONSTAH!”

“PRAY, SAY NAY!” Tom-ay-to scrayched. “AY BEG YOW!”

The Behemoth Battlecat attempted to archaeopteryx, archon and architecture its back before finally getting itself under control and ignoring the vernacular disruptor field with its new Thesauraway upgrade. It *arched* its back on the fourth go, hissed and spat.

The projectile of quicksiliva splattered metallicly onto the cobbles, its mirrored mercury surface reflecting the mercurial Cat itself. The tracker-targeter-turrets clankenated into activitousness and swivellated to pointifex maximously at the Battlecat.

They fired with a cat-a-tat-tat, spewlaunching – what else? – supernumerary subsonic spuds. Tom-ah-to ducked, but a pot-ay-to caught him in the eyes as it boomerangified about the Battlecat’s breadth. A pot-ah-to did the same for Tom-ay-to, chipping one of his teeth and splattering his jacket.

A volley of potatoes mashed themselves against the Battlecat’s forehead, dripping down to the street. (Later, they would be scooped up and used to pad out pastries, resulting in a plague of Pied Maris Pipers.)

“NOT FA-YAH!” screamed Tom-ah-to. “It’s just not croquette!”

The Battlecat meowed piteously and scamperated off, turning a tail just long enough for the Henderson brothers to ketch up and grab hold. Professor Potato Anderson carefully emerged from beneath his Cat to supervy the destructivastation around. Soka followed, giving the Cat a kissuflection on the nose as she did.

“That settled their hash (brown),” the Cat purred, elidifying the vernacularity and soliding out the confustication that had granted it such a hollowbeating advantage. “Now, my dear Potato, I’m feline like a spot of lunch. Care to join me?”

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### Author reviews: A Tale of Two Kitties

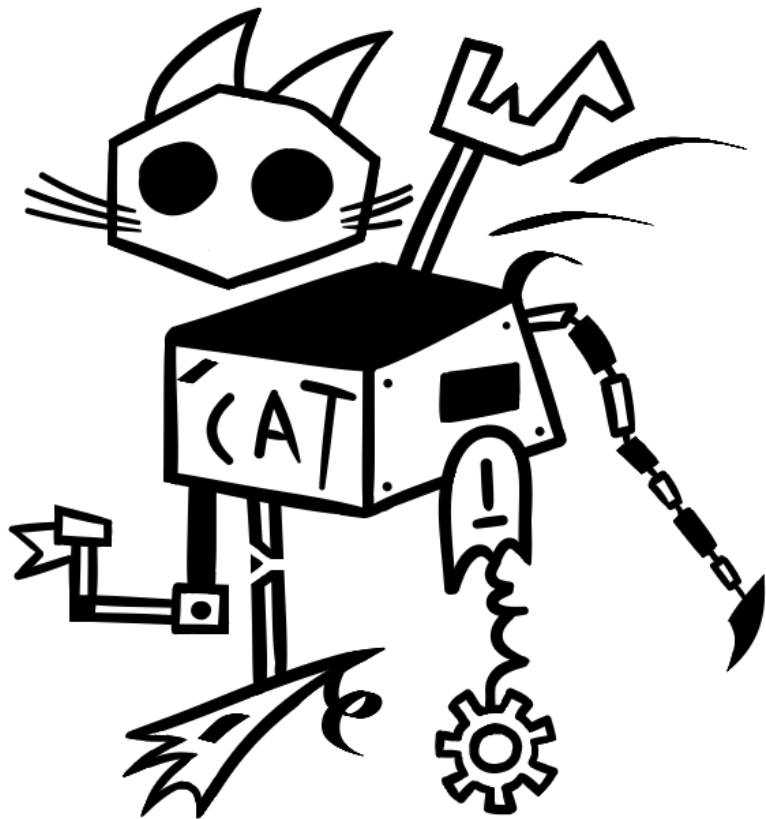
I think the ‘silly and very fun’ brief was successfully filled. - Alex Colesmith

### Editor’s Review

What an experience to read! Every entry to this chain just made it more hilaridiculous! And all the different parts came together so well at the end, too. This has to be one of my favourite chains this term.

### Bonus: Alternative Title Suggestion

Tomcatfoolery



Little Friend by Luxi Xiong

# The Strain of Knowledge

Alex Colesmith

**CW: Lovecraftian horror, suicide, body horror, alcohol, blood**

She was woken, again, by the four cthuls wanting their breakfast. The long rumbling moans echoed hauntingly through the fog... always seeming to come from behind her. *Just* behind her.

They couldn't help it. That was just the noise they were bred to make. Their... progenitor, that was the best word for the elder god whose flesh and blood had been used to grow the monsters... had been far larger, far more terrifying than any of them.

So Monica had heard, anyway. But it didn't really bother her. She'd been picked for this job specifically because she had *very little imagination*, so the cthuls' other passive abilities couldn't get to her in her dreams. There weren't many human artists and poets left these days... all the sensitive types had either gone over to Big C's side, or been found several weeks after clawing their own eyes out and chewing through their wrists to try and stop the visions.

Or both.

It was a thick fog, grey and dense enough that she could barely see the trees outside her cabin. The chained cthuls, their big knuckles resting patiently on the pine-needle dirt, were just hulking shadows looming out of her peripheral vision.

The fogs and mists had blanketed most of the northern hemisphere for years now, what with the breakdown of the jet stream and the inundation by the Deep Ones. If it hadn't been for the Starheads... or the Lords, as Monica knew she had to refer to them, rising from beneath the melting Antarctic, then a lot more of what had traditionally been referred to as *humanity* would have ended up like Joel.

He was the other worker in the logging camp, deep into northern Saskatchewan, and *he'd* volunteered to get away from the call of the ocean. She'd heard him mumbling about it in his dreams enough, heard the sunken cities calling to him with siren voices.

He was supposed to be back today, she remembered. That was good.

Once she and the cthuls had all breakfasted – she on cheap instant porridge and black coffee, they on the

thick red slurry of biowaste from the Lords' necromantic engines – it was time to take them out logging. They reared up as she unlocked the thick chains around ankles and wrists, then knuckled back down like elephant-sized gorillas. The tentacles drooping from their faces flexed, eager in the cthuls' usual blindly stupid way.

She scrambled up the rope ladder into the howdah on Crafty's back. Carefully – it wouldn't be wise to make contact with its rubbery skin. Human flesh and cthul flesh reacted together unpredictably, and though her old boss could still use his arm perfectly well, she had no interest in suckers or fungoid growths of her own.

Monica clicked her tongue a couple of times and Crafty knuckled forwards into the forest. Lovely and Howard shoved at one another impatiently, thudding impacts of their blows making the ground shake as they jostled for second place. Then Howard wrapped its tentacles around Lovely's neck and twisted the other cthul forward, tipping it over into a tree.

There was a sharp crack and the pine trunk split as Lovely's ten-tonne form smashed the lower section to matchwood. Howard gave a long blare of triumph – *lä! lä!* – and stepped over the writhing form to follow Crafty. Philip, the smallest of the cthuls, waited patiently until Lovely had scrambled back to its feet and hefted the newly-fallen log into its tentacles before joining the line behind it.

The cthuls were just like logging elephants, really. Not that there were logging elephants any more. Monica hoped that they'd gone feral and returned to their wild homes, but... well, eastern India had been a major population centre and a lot of it was quite low-lying, and that wasn't a good combination. Unless you *liked* sending your children off to grow fins.

They reached the edge of the logging section. The cthuls knew perfectly well what to do here, and Monica for the most part was happy to let them get on with it. Hers not to reason why, and all that. They knocked the trees down, tearing the shallow roots from the soil, then hefted them in their many facial tentacles and carried them easily over to the pile.

The single combustion engine that the Starheads — the *Lords* — still permitted in Saskatchewan came to collect them once per month, thoroughly spooking the cthuls as it did so. Paper was useful, especially after the population crash now that the Lords couldn't afford to waste human skin. What else would they write their spells on?

Monica put on her music and zoned out.

\* \* \*

Some hours later, she tapped Crafty's head with the long bone goad; there was a sharp burned-metal smell of ritual magic, and the cthul jerked around to the left with a grunt of annoyance. Behind it, the others rumbled uneasily.

"Easy, you daft bastards," she muttered. "We're just going home for the day."

Then she caught it too... the tang of salt air, thousands of miles from the sea. Carefully pursing her lips, Monica whistled three short notes.

Howard and Lovely knuckled their way forward to stand alongside Crafty. They squared their shoulders and boomed out their long haunting rumbles. Their tiny greenish eyes stared into the fog, piercing through the vapour.

Seemingly from behind Monica came another, much louder rumble. Despite herself, she shivered; her bowels clenched in terror.

"Monica?"

She frowned. "Joel?"

"Yep! Got the new one!"

A shape loomed from out of the fog, brushing curtains of mist aside. She stared, horror mingling with awe. There was no way anything should stand that big and yet... and yet...

The new cthul leant forward, its tentacles easily trailing the distance down to the ground. Between its eyes, the wrinkled bluish skin vibrated again, and the rumble made its way into the primal terrified part of Monica's brain without going through her ears first. There were stumps on its back, just inside the shoulderblades; they bulged outwards, thick blood vessels running across them.

Astride its neck, carefully kept off the skin by a thick saddle, Joel's squat form waved — then twitched, and moved one hand to scratch at his neck.

"Where did you get that?"

He gave the flaps of skin another desultory scratch, then grinned down at her, face splitting open in a broad lipless smile. Classic Innsmouth syndrome.

"Decommissioned," he explained. "From the dreamlands war. Apparently it's one of the most experienced war-cthuls around. Over fifty confirmed night-gaunt kills to its name, they said."

Monica glared at him. "Who sold you a *decommissioned war-cthul*? No — don't tell me — there was this bloke, wasn't there?"

"Yeah!" Joel's face brightened. "You know him too?"

"Do you have its paperwork?"

"No..."

The war-cthul rumbled contentedly and draped a cluster of tentacles across Howard's neck. Howard gave off a noise which Monica had never heard before, something like a purr.

"It's a stolen war-cthul. Somebody rustled it and now the Starheads are going to be chasing us down for diverting resources from the dream-front. Do you even understand how much of a disaster that is? Having the Starheads mad at us?"

Joel thought about this for a moment.

The Starheads — the radially-symmetric Elder Ones, nightmares from the dawn of time, web-winged tendril-armed spike-toothed monstrosities of the outer darkness — ruled supreme over the human part of Greater Humanity. It was their resistance to the maddening aura of Cthulh— of *Big C*, names have power — that had given Monica's species the chance to use its nuclear weapons against the elder god. And in return, they ruled the lands. What was left of them; the sea level had gone up as the Starheads' Antarctic prison had melted, and the Deep Ones had taken full advantage of that. (Hence Joel's condition.)

"Pretty bad?" he guessed after a moment.

Monica groaned. "Well, if the ghouls break through into the real world we'll all know why, won't we?"

"We will?"

"Yes, Joel. Come on. Let's go home. You need to put your cream on, your face is going scaly again."

He scratched it absent-mindedly, then tapped the war-cthul's neck with his booted heels. "Come on. Home."

It turned about, surprisingly nimble for something that would have outweighed most dinosaurs, and lumbered into the mist. Crafty followed the receding sight of its short back legs and stubby tail.

Later still, back at the camp, Monica shook her head for the seventeenth time.

“I still can’t believe even you would be that stupid.”

Joel paused in rubbing the thick slime into his face. Nobody save the Starheads knew what was in that stuff, but they handed it out to everyone who’d inherited Innsmouth Syndrome. Tendrilled it out, if you wanted to get technical. It seemed to work, whatever it was, slowing the transformation from human to fish.

“What do you mean, even me?” He searched his memory for a moment. “That’s workplace discrimination, that is. Just ‘cause I’m a fishman.”

Monica groaned. “I didn’t mean it like that. I was just saying that...” She trailed off, uncertain how to phrase ‘you’re thick even by fishman terms’ tactfully.

Philip rumbled, as a sort of backdrop to events. Lovely headbutted the smaller cthul until it shut up.

Neither Joel nor Monica had known what to do with the war-cthul. None of their shackles fitted around its colossal wrists, so they’d tentatively left it free. Monica was half-wondering if it had been sold like a homing pigeon – you can make a fortune selling homing pigeons, even if you’ve only got one – but that seemed such an unlikely thing to do with a war-cthul that she couldn’t believe it.

It also seemed not to be bothered one way or the other. Happy to stick around with the smaller cthuls, who were chained... and they practically seemed to worship it.

Which *definitely* wasn’t concerning at all, now that Monica came to think of it.

She sighed and tossed another stick onto the fire. The night was already growing chill, the fog drawing in even thicker; the flames cast weird, eerie shadows that flickered across the writhing tentacles of the cthuls.

“Any other news from town?”

Joel considered that. “Yeah. Couple of camps like ours went missing. Nobody *knows* what took them, but I did hear that one of them got hushed up by the Starheads. Feller who saw it before they came along

said there were little patterns of dots on all the trees nearby. Said he heard voices shouting something but there was nobody there.”

“When you say – hushed up by the Starheads...?” Monica left the question open. Something twisted in her stomach at the very *thought* of there being things out there that could scare the Elder Ones.

Joel shrugged. “I wasn’t there. He just said that soon as he mentioned it, the Starheads started coming around and taking an interest. And taking an interest in the people who were hanging around there as well, which was why he left in a hurry.”

Put like that, the story sounded believable. The Starheads mainly kept themselves private, and didn’t take kindly to humans interfering with them. Interference was a one-way process.

Monica could definitely imagine the Starheads hushing up that kind of problem. That wasn’t to say it was likely... she didn’t actually believe it, not for a second, she reassured herself... but there weren’t any glaring errors in it, and as such it was better than the usual run of tavern gossip. It was a good thing she’d got very little imagination.

She shivered despite the warmth of the fire. Nothing came near the cthuls, either; they’d scared off all the bears for miles around with their scent. They smelled *wrong*.

The war-cthul rumbled softly; Monica hadn’t been expecting it, and leapt around before remembering. Just because it *sounded* like it had come from behind her, didn’t mean it had. Howard shuffled, its knuckles grinding against the carpet of pine-needles.

There was another noise. This time – she could tell, she’d had enough experience with cthuls to recognise the difference – it really was from out in the woods.

Joel frowned. His ears might have shrunk to finned nubs, but his hearing wasn’t bad.

“What was that?”

Monica *wanted* to say ‘the cthuls’. She wished it had been the cthuls. But she knew them too well to believe it. Crafty’s little eyes were flicking from side to side, its tentacles swinging and coiling nervously. Lovely and Howard were shuffling their feet and pulling against the shackles, and Philip... Philip had hunched down into itself. It looked terrified.

‘Terrified’ was not a word that should apply to cthuls.

"I don't know," she finally admitted. The sound had been quiet, almost on the edge of her hearing... but it had been recognisably a voice, and not quite a human one. There came a faint crunching from out in the gloom as she strained her ears.

"I'll get the shotgun," Joel decided. Monica let him. If nothing else, it'd make him feel better. She stood up and moved around the fire carefully as he dashed into the cabin.

Her eyes strained as she peered out into the gloom between the trees, where the flickering firelight could not reach. Something inside her was thrashing about in terror, sending little urgent messages down her spine to her legs. A deep, primal, ancient part of her brain wrought in days long forgotten – except to the Starheads – when her ancestors had known their place as prey.

From out of the blackness came a faint, lilting, piping sound. To most people, it would have sounded like the most enthralling music... and here *enthralling* was very literal, and very terrible. It would have fixed them in place, forcing them to listen until they dropped dead.

If they were lucky, they'd die of natural causes, starvation from forgetting to eat in their desire to listen to that music.

Monica closed her eyes momentarily to concentrate, trying to blot it out. She yawned. Music was a thing for her – she wasn't like some of those without imagination, who just heard noises – but it didn't *transport* her, like she'd heard it had for some back in the old days. It didn't make her think of anything in particular. It was just kind of pretty.

'Reverse von Zahn effect', they'd called it when testing her.

The piping continued, high and sweet and lovely... inhumanly perfect, as if the player did not need to breathe. As if it was being played directly into the mind of the listeners, rather than through their ears.

Monica's eyes snapped open again. She focused on what *was*. Behind her, the cthuls. The fire. The hut. Joel.

Ahead of her, the darkness outside the circle of firelight. The black pits of insanity outside the warm cosy flame of rational thought and understanding. Humans were not meant to wander into such places.

The darkness advanced, spilling across the forest floor like a black tide of oil. Rippling flesh, eyelids

forming and blinking open momentarily as the shoggoth watched its prey.

From behind Monica came the *clunk-BLAM-clunk-BLAM* of the shotgun. Little dents pockmarked the shoggoth's creeping flesh suddenly as Joel fired off both barrels. The Deep Ones seemed to be totally resistant to the pipes, even such a close imitation of the King in Yellow. Rumours abounded that they might be able to ignore the King himself, when his pipes called them to the dance; for the King in Yellow's music is only a thin reedy imitation of the blind piping at the centre of all things, the daemon sultan Azathoth, and to His will all things must one day dance.

Rumours would say anything, given enough time.

Joel cracked open the shotgun and loaded two more rounds into the breech. "I got it!" he grinned. "Have at you, yah bastard!"

And indeed, the shoggoth did seem to be slowing. It drew itself up, rising higher and higher, a great mass of amoeboid cells crawling across one another; inside its form, they differentiated and grew into great bulging eyes that stared into the light. Slowly, it spat out the pellets of lead from where they'd hit it.

"I'm not sure you did," Monica murmured.

The shoggoth's piping rose to a sudden, terrible screech that clawed across Monica's eardrums like a night-gaunt's talons. She bent double, clapping her hands to her ears in a desperate attempt to shut out the horrifying noise; her fingers felt damp and bloody.

It lunged forwards, black ropy pseudopodia lunging out to grab the trees and pull itself over the ground. Despite its immense bulk and clumsy, misshapen form, it advanced with terrifying speed towards the two cowering humanoids.

There was a rumbling roar and a sound of tearing flesh... then a horrible rush of air from above Monica, and a splat. She dived to one side as a spray of pine needles flew up, disturbed by the pounding feet of the war-cthul as it charged.

Its shoulder – covered in gore where its stumpy, regrown wings had erupted from the slits on its back – slammed into the onrushing shoggoth. The black mass wrapped around it like the tide around a bulwark; unstoppable, but not irresistible. Joel and Monica cringed in terror beneath its pale belly as it wrestled with the shoggoth in the firelight.

Thick black tendrils shot out from the oily mass and lashed around the war-cthul's forearms, holding them tight and prying away its rending claws from the gashes they'd inflicted. For a moment, shoggoth and cthul strained against one another, seemingly evenly matched. The war-cthul's feet began to slide backwards, ploughing through the thick layer of pine needles covering the ground.

*Ignore your imagination. Don't think about the worst that could happen, or it will.* Monica gritted her teeth and – as one of the shoggoth's wandering eyes rolled around in its fleshy socket towards her, and a probing tendril reached beneath the war-cthul's belly – rose out of her crouch and sprinted away.

Sprinted straight towards the four other cthuls. Her hand shot to her belt as she ran, scrabbling for the ring of keys. Working by touch alone, she knew them well – well enough to slide the key into Crafty's manacles without even looking, and to twist it.

The cthul reared, shaking off the chains as they clacked open from around its wrists. Beneath the war-cthul's belly, a single blast of the shotgun sounded again, followed by a hideous screaming roar from the shoggoth. A lucky pellet had punctured one of its eyes; though far from blind, it still felt the damage.

Monica ducked beneath Crafty's lumbering form and scuttled towards Howard's chains, unlocking them quickly as the other cthuls rumbled. Their tentacles flexed, hungry with anticipation.

The war-cthul let out a rumble like nothing Monica had ever heard. It seemed to drill right through her and into her bones, setting her flesh shaking around them; the shoggoth, right in front of it, felt it worse. Its surface rippled and vibrated at the dreadful noise, the waves of sound propagating through it.

Then Crafty slammed into the shoggoth's side, knocking it back and ripping its tendrils from where they'd wrapped around the war-cthul's arm. Howard, Philip and Lovely followed from the other side, trampling the malleable, twisting ooze into the ground. It bulged out, not entirely without defence; teeth sprouted from its form, snapping and slashing around rubbery circular mouths like the maws of lampreys. The cthuls' blood splattered on the ground, oily and thick.

Monica cowered behind the huge shackles, curling into a little ball and not daring to watch. There was a feeling of great distances suddenly opening up, of

vistas closed to her before becoming wide and free.

The dreamlands.

Monica didn't dream. Dreaming was dangerous; you never knew who, or what, or Who else might lie dreaming. Even if they were dead.

She'd heard tales of the wondrous dreamlands, of Ulthar and of unknown Kadath, of the high plateau of Leng where unknown horrors crawled before the feet of great Tsathoggua; of the ports to the Moon, where anything could be bought, or sold, or found, or lost. Of the mountains with great unseeing faces carved into them, of which the mountains of our own world's Antarctica are but a poor copy, just as the Elder Ones that lurked behind them are a poor copy of the entities that live on these mountains, the gods that dance and are watched over by the Crawling Chaos.

Perhaps *wondrous* isn't quite the right word.

The feeling of distance faded, as did the shoggoth's wailing, as the angles of the world returned to normal.

Just for a moment, though, for one short moment that felt far too long, Monica had heard something in the shoggoth's haunting music that sounded like... terror.

Slowly she uncurled herself and looked around. It took all her willpower not to return to a gibbering foetal position on the floor when she saw the war-cthul's curious tentacles stretching down towards her. Its tiny eyes met her gaze curiously.

Over its shoulders, she could dimly see the new-grown wings drying and stretching, their membranes becoming greyer and more solid. Of course war-cthuls had wings – they were closer to the form of their progenitor – but that was too much of a fiddle to keep, so they had to be cut off. Monica hadn't known of their ability to regrow them.

One tentacle reached down and, very gently, caressed her forehead. Her eyes widened in pure horror.

Then it turned away and stalked off into the night. The four smaller cthuls considered Monica for a moment; Crafty looked over towards where Joel was clutching his shotgun and trembling. His eyes were wide and staring.

For as the war-cthul had opened the rift into the dreamlands, pushing the shoggoth out of reality at that strange oblique angle, Joel had watched. He'd

seen the dream for himself.

The cthuls followed their leader into the night.

\* \* \*

Monica was the first to break the silence, close to an hour later.

“So that’s what the Starheads were so worked up about, then.”

Silence.

“Shoggoth. Huh. I... I need a drink.”

More silence, broken only by the crackling of the fire.

“You want one?”

Receiving no answer from the fishman, Monica climbed slowly to her feet and headed over to the hut. She ducked inside, nearly screaming as she caught sight of herself in the mirror. Though it was dark, the mark of the war-cthul was plain on her forehead – thin spidery inscription that the tentacle could not physically have made as it brushed her.

Its words as it had touched her sounded in her mind again.

*When you grow tired of this life, come and find me. My worshippers need a leader, someone who will not break under the strain of knowledge. You are the first.*

She didn’t yet want to think about what that might mean. Her hand groped across the desk for the whisky bottle.

From outside there came the blast of the shotgun. She jumped, startled, and knocked the bottle onto the floor where it smashed.

So Joel had taken the easy way out, away from the madness that lay one way and the Starhead interrogation that awaited them. Monica briefly considered doing the same... but death, it seemed, was no barrier to whatever the war-cthul was becoming.

Her lips curved into a smile. She strode out into the forest, the blackness holding no fear for her any more, following the knowledge of where her Lord was. With the mark on her head, she *knew*, as simple as that. She would catch up, and she would take her rightful place by His side, and they would rule the lands of the North.

“Iä iä,” she murmured. “Yippee ki iä, in fact.”



# Miss Taken Identity

Little My, The Talking Raptor of Red Lake, Buck, Robert Lindsey III, Jago H.G. Westaway, Sophie Thwaites, Evan Indigo, Eoht, Ed Heaney, Phoebe Fay

**CW: Strong language**

Dorothea tapped at her larynx to make sure the modulator she had swallowed was correctly in place.

“Ah. Ahhhhhhh,” she croaked at herself in the mirror. Jostling the slippery contraption always stung. She dabbed at her eyes quickly, so as not to mess with the glue in her painstakingly applied prosthetics.

“You all right in there?” Samantha’s sing-songy voice came lightly from outside the bathroom door.

Dorothea burst through the door, striking a pose. “How do I look?” she asked in her now baritone voice.

“Positively dazzling! Even your moustache looks authentic from up close, this time!” Samantha affectionately stroked the handlebar lining Dorothea’s upper lip.

“You’re one to criticise. You never do this stupid body-aug stuff. Always me.” Dorothea pouted.

Sam feigned hurt, and retreated to her computer, slotting herself into the full-sensor-sock. Her cyber-oculars lit up as a sign of activation. “Well, yes! But you never do the computer stuff. That’s arguably more physically demanding. I’m starting to get carpal tunnel!”

“Let’s agree to disagree on that one,” chuckled Dorothea as she headed for the door.

“Off you go then!”

\* \* \*

Looking through the wall of the house, you see something strange in the corridor where Dorothea was standing; the usually meticulous collection of footwear is askew - a subtle difference to most - but you’ve noticed. Dorothea has always been particular about little details like that. As far as you remember, the shoes had never been anything but aligned perfectly perpendicular to the wall. Ducking down behind the wall by the side of the house, you avoid Dorothea’s detection as she walks off humming a classic twenty first century tune in a low register. Returning to your post, you look again into the hallway to confirm your suspicions. You were right about the shoes, but more than that you were right to be concerned, for the hanging coats had changed from their usual order and the electrical outlet in the wall had been left switched on, but unused. Putting your hands on the house to

steady yourself as you climb over the same half wall you had just hidden behind, you feel the faint hum coming from Sam’s computer, and you decide to check the lounge for any more signs of a change. Fully engrossed in her machine, Sam can’t hear or see you, so you move quickly to the other side of the house, and take another look inside, briefly scanning the room before looking more closely.

The lights are off, but with photoamplifier contacts you don’t need them. It’s a wide, well-ordered room, with an L-shaped sofa in the middle surrounded by shelves and desks, a holoplate in front of it. Exactly as you remember. Almost.

An empty instant ramen pot sits in your spot on the sofa, toppled over on its side. *Onion chicken*.

And the holoplate is not off. Sleeping, but a green light glints on its base. You wave a hand and the projector turns on, painting a hologram in the air above the plate, illusory politicians silently speaking and gesticulating in the living room. *A news channel*. She got a lot of things right, but now you’re certain.

You exit the living room, quickly and quietly, fitting the gamma eyepiece over one eye to peer through the corridor walls. Dorothea has just closed the front door behind her. This is your only chance.

You slink into the computer room, where Sam lies in her sensor-sock, senses melded with her machine. One of your fingers, the metal one, clicks and whirs, and you plug it into a socket on a side console. Static crackles in your ears, and then you hear Sam. She’s muttering to herself, hurtling through a virtual world of databases and information.

“Access code is easy here, but it’s the next step that’ll be a problem. Gotta download fast, get out, or the antihack...”

Your vision darkens, then you’re stood in a bare room, a steel door in front of you. Sam is there too, hand on the handle. The walls flicker.

“Sam,” you say, and she whirls around, now stood in a boxing arena, a gun in her hand.

“What- how the heck did you get in here? Get out!” She brandishes the gun at you.

You put your hands up pleadingly. “Sam, it’s Dorothea.

I need you to listen to me. *That's not Dorothea.*"

"And what makes you so sure I'm Sam?" a voice returns.

Your sight begins to shake, and your knees try to give way. You reach into your throat to feel for the modulator but it is gone – stolen by somebody who knew it was there.

"Where is Sam? What have you done to her?" you scream desperately. "Who the hell is that... freak who has my image?"

"You are not supposed to be in here, Dorothea. You always screwed things up. Always meddled in things you weren't supposed to, poking through drawers when you knew better, picking up the little details that weren't supposed to be there. Oh well, you won't be a problem any more."

A single gunshot echoes through the arena, and you're absorbed by the darkness.

\* \* \*

You wake up in the computer room again, head resting at the bottom of the sensor-sock. "Why aren't I dead?" you think to yourself, feeling the narrow hole in your metallic forehead where a bullet very clearly entered. As you tilt your head, a single pellet emerges and rolls to a halt by your right foot. On its side, it reads *Neutrakill Delayed Response – 10 Hours*.

10 hours. 10 hours until death since the bullet entered, and you have no idea how long you were out for. "But why the delayed death?" you wonder as you itch the bruise on your neck. And as your fingers run over the empty hole inside, it hits you: The modulator. It runs off your heartbeat. Whoever has stolen your and Sam's bodies and identities, for whatever reason, needs to keep the modulator running while they operate.

And the real Sam is around somewhere too.

You take a moment to think. There's not much else you *can* do, in an immediate sense – something rubbery has been wrapped tight around your wrists, binding them together. You try to sit up and you can't, so yeah – you think. They didn't take the eyepiece, so you've still got netlink if you need it. Is there any reason not to call a med-team?

Well, it'll burn through most of the tiny budget you have left from last week's show. Sam was right that this place is a hell of a lot nicer than a hab-coffin or the back of her old trailer, but the rent's a fucking nightmare. What even is a *Neutrakill*? How much is treatment going to cost? Will you have enough left over to bribe the meds, keep them from calling enforcement? Because that's a whole 'nother

nightmare and not one you have any intention of dealing with.

Street surgeon, then – since you know one now, might as well get the benefit. Amir, used to work for Bluelight before he got kicked out for something and went native in the district. He always sits backstage at the show to help out if anyone in the crowd gets too wild...

The show. They took your modulator. They modded to be like you – well, too, days in advance, knowing you'd be away and knowing nobody knew. *Should* have known.

So why'd they want to impersonate a second-rate drag king at the KelEwan – if not for the show? *Shitshitshit*. Somebody big coming maybe, a gang hit or a robbery? Not that you know jack squat about anything when it comes to stuff like that, but they seemed pretty competent, not just some crooks with beef with whoever's bought the place this week.

Amir. Doesn't matter one byte if you work out what they're doing and then your head goes pop a second later. Might not matter anyway, if they're subtle enough, but you can't count on that. Your eyes flick back and forth in your pass-pattern, activating the lens' messenger, and a little red keyboard sits in front of your eyes. Amir – and then whilst you wait, you can weigh up the risks of calling enforcement against what's going to happen if you end up being blamed for whatever it is those face-stealers are planning.

\* \* \*

You have to open the apartment locks over wireless connection, so it takes a good minute whilst you fuss around working out systems. This is really Sam's kind of business. When the surgeon enters, though, any comment he might have made on the delay is choked out.

Well, if you'd told him your situation he might not have come.

Maybe you feel bad about it. The business has got more and more dangerous recently. Even association is a terrible risk if the associate is a victim of the wrong people. But now Amir is here, and you know his morals are going to outweigh his typical common sense.

And really, one should be grateful. If Amir had arrived a minute later, you might have seen me.

I haul myself tighter against the darkness, the dim corners of the room obscuring my body further from sight. My hand had slipped. That was close.

This has happened before. I'm due a check-up, a new lick of paint. I overhear the others. Perhaps I do have a few screws loose.

In practice, the mission laid out before me shouldn't work. It relies tentatively on a few poorly made predictions turning out right. That you might reach out to the mysterious surgeon, Amir, upon waking with a potentially fatal gun wound, had been an educated guess of my own. I cannot take all the credit of course, but I have watched you for so long. And at some point, even the most interesting people become terribly predictable.

Below, Amir is swearing lightly, muttering under his breath as he looks at the wound in your head and then examines the pellet. There's not much he can do, but his concern is admirable. The *Neutrakill Delayed Response* is fairly new, relatively untested, and always fatal.

But so far you are doing better than Samantha. The ULTRA 1099 Clones were not my doing, but whoever was behind them, was very useful in getting her out of the way.

Your backs are turned. I flick on my Sona-ray vision and assess the room. My report has to be as detailed as possible. Dorothea, you may not be our target, but you certainly are proving useful as a means to an end.

\* \* \*

"So, Doz, you gonna tell me what happened or what?" Amir says, holding your head still and frowning as he studies the wound. He is a squat man, with messy curls of black hair and one silver cyber-ocular glinting against dark brown skin.

"Honestly I'm still trying to piece it together.. Does it matter? Can you fix me up or not?" you say defensively.

"Well, maybe I can fix you, maybe not. Sort of depends what happened."

You go quiet. "You're not going to call enforcement?"

He pauses, and leans back, looking you in the eye. It's funny, with the cyber-ocular it's just like looking into Samantha's eyes. You feel tears welling and look down into your hands.

"C'mon Doz you know that's not my style. Fuck the 'force, they don't look after us. We look after us. But I can't help you if I don't know what's going on."

You breathe out, slow and long.

"Okay. Alright, Amir you're right. The short version is that I think me and Samantha have been replaced by clones. I don't know why, or how, but I saw myself leave this building, and when I told Sam she shot me and disappeared. The real Sam wouldn't do that, obviously, she loves me. I don't know where she is. I

think I'm gonna die in a few hours and I don't know where Sam is but I'm now thinking what if they got her too and what if she's dead already and what will I do without her and I think I'm spiralling I think—" You are breathing fast now, short, sharp breaths. Tears are streaming down your face.

"Woah woah, breathe Dorothea, breathe." Amir is hugging you now, as your breaths come out in sobs.

"That's a lot to take in, that's pretty intense. But shit's about to get worse, so we need to focus right now." He releases you, looks you in the eye again. "I've got bad news, and then some less bad news. The bad news is that these *Neutrakill* are nasty, they give you a few hours yeah but once the nanobots are in your system they just start eating away, and I don't know anyone who's ever stopped them. Fatal."

"So I'm fucked?"

"Well, your body's fucked. But hey, what's a body? You can get a new body anywhere. No, we need to save your mind. That's the less bad news; we've got time, so if we can get your mind out, load it onto a server somewhere, we should be able to download it into a new body. Born again."

You stare at him, eyes wide, taking it in. Outside a siren wails.

"Look I'm pretty deep in the dark trade nets, I can probably source a body, for a friend. Only problem is, I can't do the upload. I'm not a tech. What we need is your tech girlfriend."

"But I don't know where she is! I don't even know if she's alive!"

"Well, maybe you don't. But I bet your clone might. Where did you say she was headed?"

"Shit. She was going to do drag."

"Ok. But just wait a sec. Supposing we find her, what're we gonna do then? You seriously think she's just gonna talk to you or something? These *Neutrakill* don't come cheap and are hard to find on the dark nets let alone elsewhere. I don't think these people are the type to give you a second chance."

"What else can we do, Amir? Finding her's at least good for something, and how else can we find Sam?"

\* \* \*

Come on Dorothea, you're better than that. That's part of the reason you were chosen after all.

\* \* \*

You pause. Doesn't this room seem darker than when you arrived? You realise your photoamplifier contacts

are gone. So they left your eyepiece but took the contacts. Why? Then it hits you.

You lean over to Amir and hug him, whispering in his ear. "Wait, wait, wait. They didn't kill me right away did they. Why wouldn't they? They needed me alive, for some time at least." You're talking so fast now that you have to take a pause to breath. Amir tries to speak but you interrupt him before he can say anything. "They needed me to contact you, that's why isn't it. And there's someone watching us."

Well done; I am indeed watching. You pause at last, and Amir has a chance to answer.

"Guess I need to ask myself whether *I'm* the real me," he begins, but almost immediately catches himself and adds, "except I probably am. Wouldn't need you to contact me if I weren't. Sounds like I'd probably know, too." A fractional pause. "But would I tell you? Doesn't matter. If you were wrong, it'd be too late."

Your reactions at each of Amir's thoughts were very telling, but you look like you trust him in the end; as it happens, you're right, but it doesn't matter a great deal.

Amir is still catching up with everything you told him. "There's usually someone watching," he says, trying to appear casual, and looks straight at where you're pretty sure one of his own holo-pickups is tactfully concealed. It's an excellent deduction, and it's almost right, except he picked the wrong one. Still, he's worked out what I'm doing and how.

And he hasn't been idle; he's been more impressive than I'd expected. Since you released him from your hug, he has been searching, and it's already bearing fruit.

"I've found Sam." Pause. "I've found *a* Sam. I could even contact her right now if I wanted." He quickly passes you the details of what he's found, and you're doing your best to cross-check it against what you know about Sam and... not-Sam. You're thinking desperately, but it's hard to concentrate with such an unavoidable countdown like the *Neutrakill* so close. It would be so easy if you were only *sure!*

Before you make a decision, though, Amir looks questioningly at you, as if he's just thought of something, or maybe as if he's discovered something.

"There's someone – at least one someone – who's also convincingly you. You've got a literal ticking time-bomb in your body. What are the use cases for that?"

I think he might be onto something, and I smile. He looks at you intently.

"How do you know *you're* the real Dorothea?"

"Tell you something only the real Dorothea would know?"

"Oh, that's far too cliché. And someone with plans this

detailed could have transposed some memories from the real you. We need a cheat code. Something that would trick the imitation into revealing itself." He speaks softly as he walks closer. Your eyes follow him as he approaches, then he jams something long and sharp into your leg. You cry out.

"What was that?"

He smiles. "My cheat code. It reverts anything to its original state. Looks like it is you. That was the only one I had though, so if we find whoever hit you with the *Neutrakill*, there's no guarantee we will know who they are."

"Okay. Not great, but okay. Now we call this not-Sam." Using the details Amir gave you, you use your eyepiece to call up not-Sam, but there's no answer. You try a few more times, but the call is always refused.

That's it, I think, keep them busy.

It does, however, give you a chance to trace the location the call would be received from. You might not be the techie, but even the ancient Zoomer generations rotting in care facilities could figure that one out. The concern in your mind that it was so easy to trace does not go ignored. The address is in Area 6-1372, and looks like it's in the building adjacent to the KelEwan.

"They're at the show all right."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps we need to focus on the building they are in. Is there anything registered for it?"

"...No, looks like there isn't. That's odd," you muse. You don't have time for musing. "There's nothing. No residencies, no companies, just a pending request to use the space as a warehouse from six months ago, but no confirmation."

"I think I know what it could be," Amir says. "These fake warehouses are often set up as underground medi-bays until the police decide they weren't bribed enough to keep it quiet. They sell a little on the side too. I've bought from one a few times. Not this one, but I'd bet on that being what this is."

"How much?"

"Enough to head over there and check it out. It's almost certainly a trap, but they'd probably have something to help you, and we'd figure out what they want."

"So you want us to just give in? No way! That's suicide."

"What do you want to do? Stay here and watch your time drain away?"

"I don't like this," you say as Amir makes for the door. As he touches the door to leave, a sheer red holo shield appears over it, cutting through his hand as it descends

sharply. The windows darken and red holo light appears over them. The building is on lockdown, and I appear.

They both jump back when they see me, more from disgust than fear. I can't blame them. I look like a monster. A hybrid of human and machine; a twisted cyborg riddled with disease and faulty wiring. Oh, I can

definitely blame them, one of them at least.

"You do not remember me," I say to Amir.

"Nope. Who the hell are you?"

"I *was* one of your patients. But that hardly matters now. Now, I am your death," I grin.

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### Editor's Review: Miss Taken Identity

This chain had so many twists and turns that I was never sure which way I was facing! It plays with the person speaking in a very clever way, which makes no sense until suddenly it adds up to a whole new layer of tension.

### Bonus: Alternative Title Suggestions

Delayed Response

Identity Crisis

# *The Tale of a Bard: A Ballad*

Apple Juice

“A tale of two.

A tale of three.

A tale of love...

A tale of me.”

The bard’s old song,

a tale so great.

A tale of love –

a tale of hate.

Yet people withdrew –

for the song rang true.

It spoke of home;

tears blurred their view.

The bard’s copper plate

sang a sorrowful tune.

He looked at the sun –

for supp would be soon.

A family of three,

or four to feed.

He picked up his lute –

and began to plead.

A new tale was spun,

‘twas not for greed.

A tale – fit for a bard!

A tale great indeed.

A tale of war,

a tale of distant lands.

Of elves and gore,

a tale where knights still stand.

A tale of pride and country!

And tears did spew.

For the people were fed, still hungry,

for the patriotic brew.

And supp did come –

and tales anew.

Of dragons that roamed the land,

tales of something new.

The bard’s old song

was lost to time.

A tale of love,

a tale ... sublime.

A tale of one,

‘tis not for two.

A tale of love,

and hatred too.

The bard alone

sang his own refrain.

His tale of hurt,

his tale of pain.

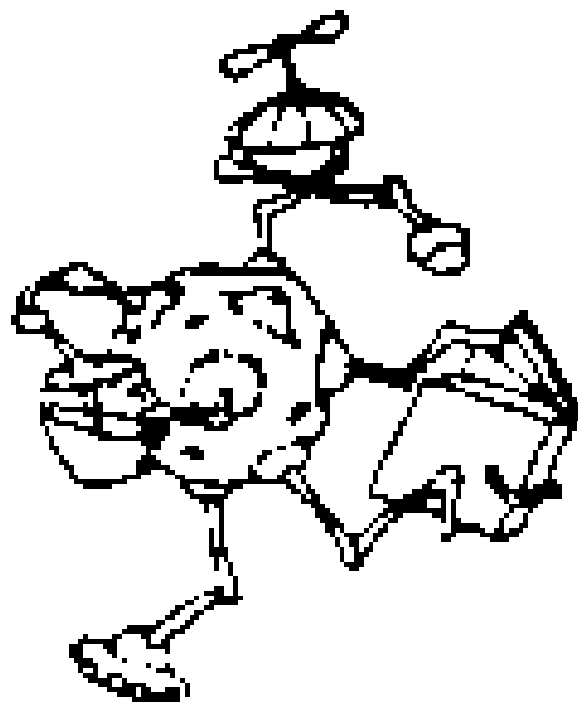
A tale for one –

sung never again.

A tale for free...

for there was naught to gain.





TWINNED TOMATOES - BATTLECAT ARTIFICERS

TTBA Michaelmas 2022