

Tritoncorpses

TO BE ANIMATED



TTBA MAGAZINE
Lent 2023

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Watching the Moon—Nate Height

TRITONCORPSES TO BE ANIMATED

TTBA Magazine - Lent 2023

A production of the Cambridge University Science Fiction Society

hereafter CUSFS

Tritoncorpses To Be Animated

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Jeremy Henty

Chairbeing's Address

Hello again,

This is probably the last of my addresses, and much to our wonderful editor's chagrin, I've been dreadfully late in writing it. I think it's a testament to how wonderful the society and the people in it are, that despite the chaos I've brought into it, we've managed to persevere, grow and have some really amazing events this year.

Speaking of events, I hope you've all enjoyed the society swaps, and are excited for the speaker event this term, as it's been incredibly fulfilling to organise them and interact with more people who love SFF; particularly, the swaps have been great to see the people who have all the same nerdy interests, but haven't made it to our events yet. I'm very happy with the election of our next Chairbeing, and I know Sol will do a great job to push the society in a new direction. My biggest fear was that we'd stall after I stepped down, but I'm confident that there'll be more big things coming!

Of course, the thing we're all looking forward to is being done with exams, but I also want to remind everyone of our Veizla, Invasion of Norway and GeekSoc picnic, which are the things keeping me going through this term. Finally, I want to thank Lauren, Anna, Achudha, and Rosalind for putting up with me on committee, and our Jomsvikings (Sol, Sam and some of the same people again) for helping our events run smoothly. It's been incredibly rewarding to run this society, and I hope to continue to be involved (and hanging around) for a good many years to come.

SOMETHING SOMETHING JOMSVIKINGS
WITH SPACE SHIPS,

Sam :)

Chairbeing 2022-23

Editor's Address

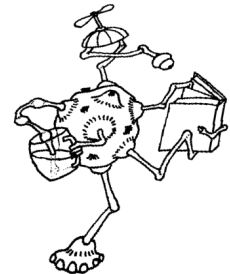
If you thought the society couldn't make anything crazier than a publication named Twinned Tomatoes—Battlecat Artificers, you may well have been mistaken. Not least does this one seem to have a whole menagerie inside, but it's also got a wonderful range of styles, from airy high fantasy to gritty dystopian thriller to just plain bonkers.

Aside from managing the usual magazine business this term, I took on the additional challenge of doing a print run of the Michaelmas Edition. It proved to be a great success, selling 14 beautiful, shiny copies! Additionally, we're giving one copy to the University Library to go alongside the older issues of TTBA in their Cambridge Collection. And given the last print run's success, I very much hope that this issue, and many issues to come, will stand there alongside it. Perhaps you, reader, are perusing that collection right now. (Sorry Hank¹!)

With the AGM well and truly past, my time as Editor is gradually meandering towards its end. But seeing as, according to the constitution², the official handover of committee positions doesn't happen until the summer, I've still got plenty up my sleeve. Namely, chains! More than half the chains in this edition were written in Michaelmas, so I still have plenty left from Lent's chainwriting endeavours for an Easter term edition. There'll be magic, there'll be mystery, there'll be cryptography... and most importantly, spaaace! See you there!

Rosalind Mackey

TTBA Editor 2022-23



¹ See *Portrait of the Author as a Young Newt*, page 18

² *The Constitution of the Cambridge University Science Fiction Society (as amended on 28 May 2019)*. Available at: <https://cusfs.soc.srcf.net/index.cgi?page=constitution>

A Mother's Legacy

Eleanor Marshall, Juliana Harrison, Mina, ICRanger, Sarah, Jack, Robert Novak, Alex Colesmith, Jack, Matilda Barker, Ruth Bewick

The morning dawns in streaks of rusty orange. The warm light falls on the village below in patches, partially blocked by the titanic islands that hang perfectly still in the sky despite the roaring winds at that height. It is turning out to be a beautiful day, with only a few wispy clouds threaded through with the long tails of flying beasts whose haunting calls echo off the rock. Below, people begin their days; stalls are set up and shops opened, people are coming into the street, filling the formerly tranquil roads with noise and movement.

On the outskirts, the hazy border where town turns to nature and wilderness, there was a small house covered in climbing vines in a riot of blues, pinks, and yellows. Inside it was peaceful and orderly, from the new fire lit in the embers of last night's, to the pots and plates and knives and forks meticulously stacked, to the beautiful battle axe in the corner covered with softly glowing, swirling and changing, unintelligible symbols. The room was empty save a young girl, and as early morning turned to late morning, her sister returned. She was tall and imposing, bulky and broad with scuffed leather armour and callused, work worn hands. Customarily her sister would return before dawn, sleep a few hours, leave again to collect the night's pay, sell whatever she could from last night, and then sleep until dusk when she would leave again. Today was a perfectly normal day. And by all accounts it should have stayed that way. But such is the way of the world, things rarely go the way they are supposed to.

Maybe it was the way her sister was moving, or the way her scarred fingers flexed on the handle of an imagined knife, or even the slightly odd stains on her armour which gave her the first indication that something was wrong. Isolde, despite her young age and alleged 'flights of fancy', could be rather observant when it suited her, and especially when it did not suit others. So as her elder sister, Freya (a name the older girl hated and barely tolerated), took her customary seat at the head of the rickety table, Isolde quirked her too-red eyebrows. She said nothing, waiting for her sister to pour out a collection of coins on the table and start to count them as she always did. It was a ritual in this home, the echoes of clattering metal was a familiar lullaby. Ma had taught both her girls to count, as was tradition in their family. It was a necessary skill in their line of work, or at least her sister's line of work - as if Freya would ever let Isolde wander far enough from here to take part in that bloody business. There were too many coins on the table now, covering up the marks of spilled wine and misjudged knife cuts, more coins than Isolde had seen in her entire life. That must be an entire year's wages for some. Freya stacked them in neat towers of ten apiece and laid her palms flat on the table. The twitching had grown worse.

"Isolde, I—" Freya picked up a single gold coin, clutched it

tight in her palm, as if forcing herself to recall something in connection to that pain. "I have something to tell you."

Isolde looked steadily at her sister but said nothing. She had never seen Freya hesitate before. This sudden faltering unsettled her deeply, but she tried not to let the bubbles of panic rise to her face. She sensed a fragility between them that she had never felt before. After the space of a few breaths, Freya continued.

"I've sold our house," she said, shaping each word as if it would cut her. "We have to leave. Leave the village. Today."

Isolde was too stunned to speak. It had never occurred to her that their house, the small but comfortable cottage where they had both been born, raised and protected, could belong to anyone but them. It was her entire life, her entire world. Freya had let her stray no further than the village a little way into the surrounding woods to forage. The whole scope of her existence could be spanned in an hour's walk. Fear broke over her face as she drew in breath. She could feel her lip trembling but fought to keep her voice steady.

"Freya," she said softly. "Why...? How...?"

Before she could reconcile with her shock, Freya began to speak. "Look, this last mission didn't go as well as I had hoped," she said quickly, as though the words had been damming behind her lips while she waited for Isolde's response. "I made a mistake and angered the wrong people. Bad information. Not my fault. My employer offered me a way out on the condition that I took another job for him. I told him I would if you could come with me. He agreed and arranged for one of his contacts to buy this place and..."

Freya trailed off and gestured weakly around her. Isolde remained silent, her brimming eyes and quickened breath the only signs that she had heard Freya's words.

Leave the village leave the village leave the village. The words chased each other around the younger girl's head like panicked mice.

"Isolde, *please* say something!"

Before Isolde could form an answer around the lump that had formed itself in her throat there came an insistent knock at the front door. Without waiting for a reply, the door swung open to admit Boramour, who like most youths his age wore his dark brown hair in a braid down his back. Each time Isolde encountered Boramour she could not fathom how Freya had a crush on him. True, he was no longer the lanky young boy he had been a year ago, but his intense blue and brown eyed gaze always sent shivers down her spine.

As Isolde watched Boramour stride through the doorway,

she heard the gold coin in Freya's hand hit the ground and roll beneath the table. Pausing next to the table, Boramour watched Isolde bend to pick up the gold coin before turning to Freya. "I have been sent to help you pack your belongings and then to transfer them to Interridge."

Having stooped to pick up the coin, Isolde realised that the closer angle afforded her a better view of Boramour's shoes, which revealed the same stains as on Freya's armour.

"Freya, I didn't..." Isolde started to say at the same time that Freya said, "That is much appreciated. Isolde and I will go pack up our rooms, while you go organise transport. We will be leaving in an hour".

It didn't take long for either of the girls to finish packing. Freya's pack contained her clothes in addition to her now cleaned armour, a handful of knives and a necklace left to her by their mother. Whereas Isolde had chosen to hang on to the only other remnant of their mother, the battle axe, whose softly glowing symbols pulsed in the afternoon sun. This was a closely guarded possession of the Ankor sisters, as their mother had suspected it to be a Heartstone relic. However, neither she nor the sisters had ever worked out what abilities it granted the wielder. Heartstone relics had been the cause of many wars and unnecessary bloodshed because those filled with greed greatly desired the abilities they could grant.

As soon as Boramour returned, Freya picked up her pack and marched out of the door to get away from Isolde's insistent questioning, which mainly hinged on Boramour's involvement in her work. Isolde, however, found it much harder to leave behind their house on the outskirts of the village, periodically turning around to take a 'last' look at the house shrouded by climbing vines. Before long, the house was hidden behind the foliage of the encroaching forest, whose trees stretched like clawing fingers into the air. To get to Interridge Isolde knew that they would have to fly, since the city was based on the island below theirs.

It was this flight on the back of the local psontedors whose echoing calls could be heard across the island, and not the loss of the house, that Isolde would later look back on and remember as the start of her fateful adventure. The flight was only supposed to last half an hour. However, rising turbulence soon after take-off buffeted them in all directions and, in one of these gusts, sent the psontedor and its riders tumbling dozens of feet before the psontedor could right itself. This struggle between nature and beast also sent the battle axe from its sheath, stowed with the rest of their packs, into the abyss of the heartlands below.

"Freya, Freya, Freya, we have to go down!" Isolde shouted over the roaring of the wind.

"Why?" came back Freya's brusque reply.

"The axe, it's gone," was the only heart wrenching reply from Isolde, whose emotions finally caught up to her and who remained inconsolable for the rest of the flight. A fact not aided by her sister's logic that they would stand no chance of finding the axe after a fall from that height

to the heartlands, which were also too dangerous to go visit.

It was therefore no surprise that Isolde didn't remember how she came to be standing outside the two large wrought iron gates - their hum being what had jostled her from her sad musings. Belatedly, Isolde also noticed the muted sounds of Interridge, which were much louder than she could have ever imagined and made her want to stuff her ears with wax. The building whose wrought iron gate the Ankor sisters now stood before dwarfed all that surrounded it. Being a relic of another time, it was one of a few remaining Truesource buildings. Buildings which once had been commonplace now defined the societal fabric of the Ermira, with cities founded around the scattered remains of Truesource imbued structures and wars waged over the few remaining Heartstone relics. It was not the wrought iron gates that Freya stepped through, but the doorway of a ramshackle inn that leant against the sides of the imposing building like an aged man rests on his walking stick.

It was a few days after they had arrived and everything had started to settle down, that Isolde found herself accompanying her sister to the local market. Where once Isolde had stayed at home by herself, Freya no longer felt comfortable leaving her alone in their room at the local inn. While walking down the cramped narrow alleyways that defined Interridge's landscape, Isolde felt her heartbeat begin to quicken. She couldn't tell what had triggered her anxiousness but turning around, she noticed that her sister no longer stood behind her like the ever-protective shadow she had become. Squeezing her eyes shut as much to force away the tears as to block out the sight of two strangers pinning her sister to the wall, she felt a well-worn handle, whose familiar weighted head brought fond memories of her mother to mind, settle smoothly into her palm.

Terrified, Isolde opened her eyes and looked down at the axe in her hand. She didn't have time to linger on the question of how the family heirloom had returned to her, since the bulky man and tall, slim woman were dragging her sister out of the alleyway. Trembling, she looked back and forth between the axe and her struggling sister, before taking a deep breath to gather her courage. The spindly girl let out a shaky battle cry and raised the axe above her head. She charged towards the three. The man turned around to face her, a nasty smile playing around his lips.

Isolde stopped running, her courage disappearing when she saw the look in his eyes. "L-let my sister go!" she said.

"Or else?" scoffed the man. His eyes wandered along the girl, before he turned to his companion and gestured for them to continue. Freya's eyes widened in fear.

A flash of anger ripped through Isolde's chest. Her knuckles whitened when she tightened the grip on her axe. The symbols on the heavy weapon suddenly pulsed stronger; the colour changed from a light blue to a deep dark purple. A surge of energy flowed through Isolde's veins.

"I said, let go of my sister!" she yelled, her words

strengthened by the power of the axe.

This time, both the man and the woman turned around. Isolde glared at them, the battle axe raised to her shoulder. The girl radiated a strength she didn't even know she had.

The man's nasty smile melted away from his face when he looked at Isolde. His hand drifted towards the sword buckled on his belt. The woman took a step backward, wide-eyed, then released Freya, turned around and bolted away. When the man realised he was alone, his eyes widened. Isolde took a step towards him, and Freya whispered something in his ear. The man screamed and ran.

The girl was still glowing hours later. The sigils from the axe shone out from her skin, and her eyes had an otherworldly light behind them. They watched Freya as she paced back and forth at the foot of the bed. Freya held the axe in a firm grip again, inspecting the Heartstone.

"Nothing changed. Why has nothing changed?" she muttered. The axe looked like it had days earlier before they had dropped it into the heartlands. Its patterns were muted again, nothing like the rich purple in the alleyway. Isolde sat there, savouring the last of the high that she had felt as power coursed through her.

"The Antecedents must have loved this," Isolde offered. "If everybody had Heartstone. Heartstone swords, Heartstone buildings, Heartstone axes."

"But they knew how to use it! You lucked your way into it, and now we have no idea how to do it again." Freya threw the axe in frustration, its blade plunging into the thick door. At the corner of her neck, the necklace her mother had left her blushed a deep purple. Neither of the girls saw it.

The rhythmic sounds of birds chirping announced the arrival of the next day. The two girls walked to the market buried in their cloaks, both to keep warm at an hour that had not yet felt the sun's warm embrace and to stay hidden after yesterday's incident. No doubt word had spread through the criminal underworld about the girl with the glowing axe, and Isolde and Freya did not want any further problems.

After obtaining much-needed vittles from the market, the girls made their way towards The Crippled Rooster, the tavern where Freya and her employer agreed to meet. There Freya would get the details of the next job and would be one step closer to fulfilling her side of the deal. They were a brisk half-hour walk away from their room at the inn next to the Truesource building. Stares from townsfolk working on the sides of the street made the sisters feel out of place, but they continued forward.

Freya opened the bright red door of The Crippled Rooster and immediately froze. Rather than the typical disordered scene of a tavern recovering from a rowdy night – a scene filled with bar staff collecting abandoned pints of mead and customers gathering the energy to finally make their way home – the tavern was completely empty save for one body slouched over a table in the corner.

Freya cursed out loud when she noticed red liquid tracing a path from the body's head to the uneven wooden floorboards. "We need to go now," Freya urged. The girls backed out of the doorway and the people outside dropped the pretence of working in the street. "Run!" Freya commanded.

The sisters bolted down the street. "It's too heavy," Isolde shouted in between breaths. "The axe is weighing me down."

"Keep it," Freya replied. Her necklace escaped from underneath her cloak and bounced in rhythm to her steps. "We might need it later." They continued through Interridge, but their pursuers were close behind. Eventually, they were outside the ramshackle inn with a slight lead on their pursuers.

"What now?" Isolde huffed. Both girls were hunched over with their hands on their knees, trying to catch their breath.

"We need someplace to hide," Freya replied. "We can't keep running forever and I doubt we'll lose them otherwise."

Isolde pointed at Freya's necklace. "Freya, what's that?" Isolde exclaimed. The necklace was now pulsing purple.

"I've never seen this before. I guess mother left us two Heartstone relics." Freya glanced up from her necklace and noticed a faint purple outline on the outside of the Truesource building next to the inn. "Look, over there!"

The duo made their way over to the wall and Freya's necklace pulsed more intensely. As if she had done this a thousand times before, Freya pushed in the middle of the outline. And the wall opened, inviting the two sisters to take refuge inside.

Neither young woman – they had seen too much, dealt with too much to be called girls any longer – was quite sure what to expect as they ducked nervously into the building. It certainly wasn't a verdant, tranquil glade in a tropical paradise, a tiny stream trickling down the side of a gentle hill into a clear pool, and blue sky belying the roof they knew should be above their heads. There shouldn't have been hummingdrakes flitting on two pairs of wings between the flowers. There shouldn't have been miniscule golden frogs hopping between the mossy banks of the stream.

There definitely shouldn't have been a massive jaguar lying idly by the side of the limpid pool, flicking its tail from side to side and washing its paws like an immense housecat. Isolde took a step back as it stood up and turned its huge green eyes towards them. They seemed to glow with an inner fire as the cat approached.

Freya took back her axe – Isolde's awakening of it was all very well, but with no glow coming from its blade her experience probably trumped that. She hefted it, holding it out in front of her to keep some distance between herself and the beast. With her other arm she unconsciously shepherded Isolde behind her, using her own body to shield her sister.

The jaguar yawned, revealing long ivory daggers of teeth.

It seemed totally unconcerned by the two young women as it came closer and closer...

...and passed right through Freya's axe without slowing down. She looked down as its golden and black-dappled fur moved into her, shoulderblades rising and falling easily, each ghostly hair standing out in the beautiful vision.

For vision it was. Now that she knew it to be an illusion, her eyesight flickered between the tropical forest and the inside of the Truesource buildings, and she could choose which she saw. On the opposite wall, another door was faintly outlined; cautiously, Freya headed towards that, towing her sister behind her. Isolde squeaked as she put her foot down into the illusory water, but her shoe remained dry.

The necklace pulsed again as they approached the door, and it slid back to reveal the road... well outside Interridge. Whatever magic was responsible for the Truesource buildings and the necklace had not taken them where they wanted to go. It had taken them where they needed to be. The ferries were just a few hundred yards away now, the edge of the floating island already visible.

"Come on, then!" Freya was the first to grasp the importance of what had happened. They now had at least half an hour's head start on their pursuers – more, if the men settled down outside the Truesource building to wait for them.

"Where are we going?" Isolde asked her plaintively. "Can't we stay in there? It was so peaceful."

Freya's heart sank with worry for her sister. She'd been torn from everything she knew, her life turned upside down – and the axe had chosen her for its Fate. A little peace was the least she deserved.

"No. You can't eat peaceful illusion." She hardened her heart. "We need to press on to where there's more Truesource buildings. I've got a plan."

"But why do we need those buildings?"

"It's the only way we can work out what happened. Nobody here can help." She put her arm around the younger woman's shoulders to usher her along. "Do come along, Isolde. Please?"

"All right." Her tone was grudging. "Can't we travel through the houses again? If we're going to another Truesource building?"

Freya blinked. That idea hadn't even occurred to her... but she swiftly dismissed it. "We don't know how to work those any more than you know how to work the axe. It was sheer luck we ended up here – or if it wasn't, something wanted us to take this longer way, to prove ourselves." She shepherded Isolde and their things along the road towards the ferries. "Now keep moving. Those men might come back searching for us and remember, you don't know how to get the axe working again." The plan was straightforward, but for Isolde, just a few days removed from her static world, it reeked of chaos.

Freya had decided to go where the axe had. To understand how Heartstone worked they had to get off the fragments of the Antecedents, left floating in the sky by some unremembered force. Out of the air, Truesource buildings clustered on the ground of the heartlands. Their minders might know what the axe was. They might know what it could do.

The girls rather immediately encountered a problem. While the Truesource building had dropped them right at the dock, it had however failed to materialise tickets, real or not real, to board any of the ferries.

Reaching the end of the docks, denied entry to every ferry, the two sisters slumped against a tree in disappointment.

"What are we going to *do*?" cried Isolde desperately, "Those people from the town could arrive at any minute and we have nowhere to go from here."

Freya hated to admit that she didn't know, her heart breaking at the knowledge that she wasn't sure how to keep her sister safe any more.

"We'll have to go back to the Truesource building, see if my necklace can take us anywhere else."

Isolde nodded slowly, leaning her head on Freya's shoulder. "It's sort of strange that the necklace is the one that responds to you. I mean, you're the one who can *use* the axe."

Freya had considered the same thing, but it had felt a bit insulting to voice. "Yes... I suppose there must be some reason for it; Heartstone relics work in mysterious ways."

"Did you say Heartstone relics?"

Both sisters whipped around, Freya already reaching for the axe, at the sound of a low voice close behind them.

"Please," the woman behind them laughed, "I won't hurt you."

Even at a quick assessment, the woman certainly looked capable of hurting them. Despite her rather frivolous coat, masses of hair and admittedly attractive face, what drew the eye most was the clear sharpness in both her eyes and the shining sword that hung at her hip.

"Word is that you girls need a ship?" The woman continued, jovially, ignoring how Freya bristled at being referred to as 'girl' by a woman clearly little older than her. "Lucky for you, I happen to have one. Along with an interest in learning more about Heartstone relics. And helping pretty girls," she added, with a wink that Freya didn't trust and almost scoffed at. However, Isolde's frightened expression had, between the sword and ship, shifted into awe. She had always loved pirate tales, and this woman did admittedly look like she'd walked right out of one.

Freya, meanwhile, narrowed her eyes at the realisation this woman had clearly sought them out. She didn't know or trust her interest in the relics, and, despite her friendly manner, she was a fool if she thought Freya would bet her sister's life on that alone.

Freya gave the stranger no answer as she stalked after her to one of the ferries that had supposedly denied them passage only a few minutes ago. Definitely a pirate, she thought. As an axe-worker herself with many less than lawful contacts, she knew this woman could be extremely unreliable, but Freya was ready to fight.

"Hop on board," the stranger smiled, and Isolde leapt onto the white deck. Freya stepped more slowly, noticing a slim trickle of blood in the shadow of the door to the navigation room. As soon as her second boot touched the planks, the ship spasmed into motion. She stumbled and fell.

Swiftly, the pirate woman was hauling her upright. Freya jerked her arm back, and Isolde ran over. "Freya, are you alright?"

She wasn't. The weight of the Heartstone weapon was gone from her belt.

With a glare, she turned to the woman who was now comfortably seated, leaning back against the sky mast and holding the haft of the axe as a headrest while the ship soared into the clouds.

"Give that back," Isolde demanded.

The woman let out a low laugh. "Surely you didn't think I'd give you passage for free? Especially with the enemies your big sister has made."

Now Isolde's lost eyes looked to Freya, but Freya couldn't take it. She lowered her gaze back to the woman. "What do you want? Are you one of them? I swear, I -"

Freya fell silent as the woman stood, their axe in one hand, her shining sword now drawn in the other. The Ankor sisters were powerless as she advanced and used the tip of her blade to trace the chain of Freya's necklace and pull the pendant above her armour. There was no sign of any pulsing light or power.

"Now this is a precious heirloom," said the pirate.

Purple light flashed, so blinding that for an instant Freya saw nothing, until the sword was gone from her chest and Isolde was glowing. The axe was in her hands, a deep, dark amethyst, its symbols shining with strength. "Stay away from us!" she shouted.

"Isolde," said the woman, retreating, and her low voice sounded strangely familiar. "You don't understand."

"How do you know my name?"

"I'm your mother."

Editor's Review: A Mother's Legacy

A surprisingly coherent and very aesthetically pleasing chain. This one really has everything a high fantasy chain could ask for: flying steeds, ancient relics, magical weapons and even a pirate! And the twist at the end ties everything back to the beginning so neatly. I'd love to see more stories set in this beautiful, mysterious world.

BACKERS FROM THE FUTURE

Chilli, Kuyf, Long Hei Ng, Dan Scott, Inky Sprite, NH, Arshia Katyal, Alex Colesmith

CW: blood, harm to a child, strong language

Chapter 0: "Dance Like They're Watching You, Cause They Are Watching You"

"We shall never have been born."

The mantra was in the head of every survivor of what was unofficially called "The End". In a matter of days, innumerable nukes had come free of their silos, simultaneously carpet-bombing the surface of the Earth. Not only did each major nuclear power drop their largest nuclear bombs onto their very own seats of power, but hundreds of thermonuclear bombs rained down on major cities across the globe, as well as key infrastructure choke-points like undersea fibre cables across the oceans.

That anyone survived at all was a miracle, but in places passed over by the worst of the bombs, people had been able to collect with neighbours in small communities between when the bombs fell and when the background radiation worldwide became incompatible with life, cutting the last bit of contact between distant communities.

In the weeks that followed, rumours spread via the very few people who had access to a genuine radiation suit. Base Mint, as Thomas had jokingly named his group of survivors, had recently taken on such a pair of travelling mechanics, who had been reconnecting hydroponics supplies to the relatively unaffected power grid outside of population centres.

These rumours spoke of "Backers", who stumbled in from the wasteland intent on doing little else but documenting everything. In nearly all recorded cases, the communities housing them had gotten suspicious of the odd behaviour, and ejected them without their notes, leaving them to travel the wasteland alone.

In the rest, the communities had thought them spies of whoever masterminded The End, and had tortured those that couldn't get to their cyanide pills quickly enough.

It was said that they were time travellers from a future hell-scape, part of what was considered a terrorist group, even in their time, intent on ensuring that they will have

never existed in the first place.

The first hellfire had left them still existing but no longer having ever had the tools they needed for another assault.

Knowing only what had survived until their time, they had sent agents to roam in the past. They were said to be rooting out the few unrecorded survivors that were their ancestors, then sending documentation to the future, who could then travel yet further back to kill them before they had the chance to gather. If these agents had ever succeeded, no one would know, as the communities they destroyed would never have existed in the first place.

Thomas was interrupted in his recollections by a knocking on the makeshift wooden door to his office, if it could be called that, a hastily dug hole in the wall once they realised what would happen if they stayed aboveground. "Come in," he called out, and into his office strode a woman, just shorter than Thomas, with tousled blonde hair and a face, like all of their faces, seeming decades older than her 30 years. A veritable dwarf, standing just 3 feet to Thomas' 6, was by her side, just keeping up.

"We found Katie with a diary again," Thomas' second in command, Megan, explained while taking a seat on the other side of the weathered pool table that had been lugged down for use as a desk. "You have got to take better care of that daughter of yours, or we will *literally* cease to be," she scolded Thomas.

"Take it easy on her, we can always shred it later," counselled Patrick, the head of Security. "I won't stand for my daughter growing up without the ability to write, apocalypse or not!"

Megan laughed in disbelief. "I'm sure writing will help her fill out a book that will need to be left behind if we have to leave, but there are far more important things that she should be focusing on now!"

Thomas' hands covered his eyes, massaging them softly, tending the burning sensation of a sleepless night away. He had heard this complaint too many times. He didn't precisely know the number of times that Megan brought this issue into his office, but he knew that the issue was growing. He had previously thought of instilling some discipline into Katie, but he never made the time to start, and because he never made the time to start, it became more apparent that maybe he was the one that needed some discipline, maybe he was the one that needed to learn something.

Thomas stood from his rickety wooden chair, a chair whose base had been coloured white by the pressure of his weight, staying put for hours, days on end trying to keep everything in Base Mint in order. Food that wouldn't poison them, a shelter that wouldn't collapse while they slept, warmth for the winter, and water that didn't have black mould floating in it. His head hit the lantern that was hanging from the low ceiling of his office, a necessary ritual for an office this tiny and this cramped. He thought it a good characteristic of his office, a reset from his worried mind and a reminder of his clumsiness, which his companions constantly joked about.

"Get some sleep, Tom," chided Megan. "I'll watch over

camp."

"Might do," yawned Thomas as he shuffled towards the door. Patrick followed, closing the door behind him.

The tunnel beyond was just as spartan, rusty beams and haphazard bracing barely keeping the passage from collapsing. A lone lantern flickered in the distance, its sparse rays casting long shadows along the coarse walls.

"Hey, did you hear that?" whispered Patrick.

"What?" Thomas began to respond, but Patrick cut him off with a hush. Sure enough, from the ground above came a *thump*. A footstep. Patrick and Thomas exchanged nervous glances. There was only one thing above ground. The oxygen recycler.

The two men snuck towards the exit hatch, activating the ion generators they wore on their wrists. The ion fields were nowhere as good as the rad-suits, but would at least buy them a few scant minutes. Thomas gingerly pushed open the hatch, the portal to the world outside. He resisted the urge to gag on the acrid fumes that had come to permeate throughout the land. *So, good news and bad news*. The good news: the oxygen recyclers, just a few feet away, were still intact and operational; no one had blown them up... yet. The bad news: hunched over one of the recyclers was a hooded figure, garbed in long, dark robes that he wrapped tightly around his body. The garments that had come to be synonymous with the Backers.

By that point, Patrick had joined him in peering out of the hatch. Patrick glanced at him, raising an eyebrow, and received a silent nod in response. Patrick drew his plasma revolver, his finger slowly curling around the hair trigger.

The shot narrowly missed, a spray of dirt erupting where it found its mark. The figure whipped his head around in surprise, cursing under his breath. With dizzying speed, he drew a wicked-looking dagger from the folds of his robes. But Patrick was faster. He launched himself at the stranger, kicking the blade from his hand, and tackled him to the ground. Before his adversary had a chance to recover, Patrick had him in a headlock.

The stranger lashed out wildly, arms flailing, but in vain. In the tussle, his hood was pulled back, revealing his face. It was a young man, a mop of jet-black hair covering most of his face, but not concealing the terror in his eyes as they darted around like rats trapped in a cage.

Patrick picked up the dagger, holding it seriously against the man's neck. The man's eyes bulged as he went very still.

"Please... don't..." he rasped through ragged breaths, "they... made me do this..."

His scruffiness had obscured his age, making it difficult to tell by eye how old he might be. But his voice made clear what his sallow, wiry visage kept hidden – he was still a youth, perhaps several years from maturity.

A groan escaped from Thomas's lips. "Jesus, Patrick, he's a child..."

Patrick kept the dagger steadfastly against the boy's throat, unflinching. "Child or not," he said, "he's equally

capable of tampering with the oxygen recyclers and sending us all into a gurgling grave.” He snarled, pressing the dagger more firmly against the boy’s throat. A drop of blood trickled onto the blade, staining it crimson. “And I rather prefer my lungs unmelted.”

The boy whimpered, a mixture of pain and terror evident in the noise.

“Patrick, your plasma revolver’s cooled off. Frisk him to be sure he isn’t carrying anything else, and by all means, keep your revolver trained on him. But for love of god, get that blade off his throat.”

To Thomas’ relief, Patrick acquiesced, carefully checking the boy’s robes for hidden weapons. Not finding any, he slowly released the dagger from the boy’s neck. A bright line of red glistened in the faint light of the dust-clouded surface.

The moment the blade was removed, tears began to stream from the boy’s eyes, leaving streaks in the dirt and grime coating his face. Thomas had been hardened from many years of witnessing atrocities followed closely by tragedies, but the look on this boy’s face sent twinges through his heartstrings. With a force of will, he steeled himself against being influenced by pity. Patrick was right... Boy or not, the kid was poking around life-preserving equipment, and to what end they did not know. It was time for some answers.

“You’re one of those Backers, aren’t you?” Thomas asked, though it was more a statement than a question. “No need, it’s evident enough. There are many, many rumours about the likes of you. I think I’d like to, for once, have some real answers.”

The boy sniffled. He seemed to understand that his life wasn’t in immediate danger, at least for the time being. He wiped the tear streaks from his face with the sleeves of his robe, leaving dark smudges across his cheeks. He nodded to Thomas in silent acknowledgment.

“Some say you people are terrorists from the future. Some say you’re the group that orchestrated The End.” Thomas paused, collecting his thoughts. “Me, I don’t know what to believe. So why don’t you tell me, who are you people? And what is your purpose?”

Patrick laughed jadedly. “Oh, come on Thomas. You don’t really expect him to answer you, do you? Why do you think there are only rumours about what the Backers are up to? How many times have they been captured? And never, never a single word of what they’re doing.”

The kid took a deep breath, gulped, and then spoke. “I’ll tell you.”

Patrick looked like he’d just been smacked, the shock and disbelief written clearly across his face.

“I didn’t want to come. They made me. There aren’t many people left in my time, and even fewer volunteering to make the journey. It’s a one way trip, you see...”

This time it was Thomas’ turn to be shocked. “So...” he said, “so you *are* time travellers?” Thomas had never really given it much thought, there were always far more pressing things to occupy his mind. But he always found it

hard to believe that the rumours of the Backers being travellers from the future was anything more than folly.

The boy nodded.

“And why are you here? Why are they sending people back?”

The boy hesitated, but after a moment seemed to make up his mind. “We’re trying to stop The End.”

Again, Patrick laughed. It was a grim sounding laugh, loaded with cynicism. “Stop The End? Look around, kid. It’s already happened. We’re stuck with this hell on earth, there’s no going back.”

The boy pushed himself up, his brows furrowing. “No, no we’re not stuck. That’s the point. We’re trying to unwrite it.” His resolve drained and his face slackened again. “Well, we might be stuck. But that doesn’t mean everyone has to be.”

“Kid, you’re going to have to explain things a bit clearer than that,” Thomas said gruffly.

“Okay, look. They send us back so that we can collect information. There are designated sites to put records of any of our findings. We’re taught how to make them last so that they’re still around in my time. We’re trying to trace back *who* caused The End, so that we can stop them from ever doing it.”

Thomas mulled the boy’s words over, carefully considering the implications. But something didn’t make sense.

“If you’re trying to stop who caused it, why are you here?” Thomas asked.

The boy looked puzzled. He cocked his head and replied, “What do you mean, why am I here?”

“I mean, why are you here, now, in our time? Why come to here, to now, instead of just going back further? I don’t see why you wouldn’t just go back to before it all happened.”

The boy shook his head firmly. “No, you don’t understand.”

“Yeah,” Thomas grunted. “I’m keenly aware of that.”

The kid closed his eyes in resignation before saying, “it doesn’t work like that. Travelling back in time isn’t that simple. You can’t just go to whenever you’d like. You need an anchor, you have to know certain details not just about the where and the when, but the who. People are the anchor. We’ve been tracing ancestries, unravelling a thread bit by bit so that we can go further and further back.”

“Hold on... Just how far in the future are you from?” Thomas asked.

“Centuries.”

“Centuries?!” Both Patrick and Thomas shouted incredulously.

“The technology to send people back in time didn’t exactly develop overnight...”

At some point in the interrogation, Patrick had lowered

his revolver. But suddenly, he whipped it back up, pointing it directly at the boy's head.

"If you people keep going further back in time," Patrick spat, "then how is it that there are even rumours about you in the first place? Shouldn't you always be the first one to have been to this time?"

The boy's eyes were wide with renewed fear, but his voice was relatively calm. "We wouldn't overlap," he said through clenched teeth, "if people didn't keep killing us before we can preserve our records."

"Oh," Patrick said somewhat sheepishly as he lowered the gun again. "Yeah, that uh... That makes sense."

"But why are you skulking around here? If you need to learn about people." And with that, he crossed his arms, the gun tucking under his shoulder, "I don't see how tampering with our oxygen recycler helps."

"I wasn't tampering!" There was a flash of anger across the boy's face, before it passed again, an exasperated tone entering his voice. "As I was saying, we have to preserve our findings. My instructions said this was a good place."

Patrick sighed. "Well, show me what you were hiding. I still want to check you didn't do any damage."

As the robed backer knelt down by the recycler and gestured for Patrick to do likewise, Thomas was still trying to take it all in. "So, wait, that means our little Base Mint is still around centuries from now?" In amongst all he was trying to digest, Thomas felt a little pride in that.

Patrick had picked up a grey oblong, still dirty from an attempt to bury it under a buttress of the recycler's rattling intake.

"Kid, what am I looking at?"

"Patrick, we can't just call him 'kid', do you have a name?"

The boy sighed, his face cast down, before looking up and locking eyes with Thomas. "Well I've told you plenty already. It's Trace. And yes, it is appropriate."

Thomas was still contemplating. "Trace, you said you need an anchor to travel back. What did you use that brought you here?"

"A woman called Katie kept a diary where she mentioned this place, growing up here anyway."

"Katie...?" Patrick's throat sounded to have developed a lump he couldn't swallow. "My Katie... what did she write?"

"Your Katie? I must have got my time jump target very close – is she your mother, wife or daughter? To answer your question, as far as we could garner, she was the only surviving member of this base's current line of inhabitants, somewhere between five and fifty years later." After a moment of silence, Trace elaborated, evidently taking the cue from their crestfallen expressions. "After that, the Poppies took over the vacant space, hence this place is still inhabited. But Katie was there for the incident, which must have not happened yet, even if she clearly didn't understand what happened."

The air was heavier after that, or at least seemed so by the way the shoulders of its inhabitants now drooped.

Trace smiled and patted each of the grown men on the back, as if he wasn't talking about the death of every single one of them and their friends bar Patrick's daughter – who herself would either grow up alone, or sit and write until she starved alone. "I'm sure we could figure out the factors behind that if I can detail the habits and natures of every person here for the next jumper, even if we probably won't make it ourselves without any real knowledge... We're so close, and someone will survive someday if we don't change the timeline, so I'm optimistic!"

And then Trace was on the ground again, a bloody gap where one of his front teeth should have been.

"Fuck, Patrick! You can't just punch a child like that!"

Thomas could see Patrick fuming with rage, but before he could say something, Patrick fell on the ground sobbing. "I'm sorry, Trace. I'm happy that Katie lives for as long as she does, but the thought of her enduring the world's atrocities alone... the thought of her seeing me die... I...".

Thomas was stunned silent for a moment. However, it wasn't watching Patrick break down, but the fact that he had realised that everything was being put into place for once. Or had it? If he had successfully got around to punishing Katie's writings, this moment would cease to exist. Trace, Katie's future, Base Mint's future wouldn't exist. But he couldn't shake the feeling that Trace was keeping something from them.

"Trace, why are you volunteering this information to us? No one has ever gotten a Backer to spill before," Thomas enquired, raising his eyebrows. It wasn't too long ago that Thomas had thought he'd come across a Backer himself. Closing his eyes for a second, he took himself to that moment.

It was a sunny day, albeit it was being terrorised by acidic fumes and radiation still. Thomas had worn the genuine radiation suit and was conducting the regular checks outside the perimeter of Base Mint's designated boundary lines. Through the mist of it all, he could see hooded figures walking towards him. Thomas knew he couldn't take them alone, but he would either fight or die trying. He launched at them and fought them hard. He was punched more times than he could count and was bleeding from his nose, which meant his suit had torn. Despite registering information and knowing he had seconds to make it back inside, he collapsed and fainted. It felt like hours before he woke up, only to realise that his suit was intact and he wasn't bleeding. He always wondered if he had dreamt that whole ordeal. The only issue was that he had taken an item in his hand from the Backers during the physical confrontation. It was one half of a silver locket shaped like an apple, which Thomas was afraid to open. He persistently felt he was going hysterical. Without having any realistic explanation for that day, he hid the locket away, never looking at it again. It would be as though it had never happened.

Thomas jerked back to the present moment, taking Trace by his collars, slightly roughing him up. "I am in charge of tens of people at Base Mint, and I do not have a care in

the world for you. Do you know what that means? I do not care if you're a century old child, I do not care if you travelled a millennium, and I am not afraid of hurting you to protect my people. I have a few questions for you to answer." Patrick was taken aback by the turnabout in Thomas' attitude.

Dragging Trace by his collars, almost hurting his ankles, Thomas took him inside Base Mint. By now, everyone was privy to the commotion outside and had gathered to witness it. Every single survivor had the same look. They were terrified but curious. Thomas barked at Trace to speak up and threatened him with Patrick's plasma revolver. "For the last time, Trace. How are you connected with this camp? Why are you here?"

Trace looked up into his eyes and finally gave a startling explanation, which still had a few gaps he wasn't able to fill.

"I am here for Katie. She's my twin sister."

Patrick almost fell, but Thomas' eyes widened looking at the photograph Trace had pulled out from his bag. "My mother and I were abducted by Backers, who truly did plan The End. They believe that the cosmos is supposed to end itself and the only way to ensure that is to plan everyone's destruction. They thought their plan was so foolproof that nothing could ever go wrong. But before the attack was materialised, my mother and I were separated from Patrick and Katie. She was a Backer. I am here today not only because of Katie's diary, but this." Trace took one half of a silver locket out of his pocket.

"This silver locket is my mother's. I now know that I was pulled here to this time not only because of this locket, Katie's diary, and a version of Katie, but also because of Patrick. The connection with this place, this day, this time was the strongest anchor and I was pulled here almost magically."

By now Thomas was clutching onto the other half of the locket. Trace looked at it for a few moments and continued, "I don't know how that locket reached this bunker, but I am looking for answers myself. Before mother left for a highly classified mission, she gave me one half of this locket. Thomas, why do you have the other half?"

Everyone looked at Thomas as he replied, "I think I met your mother three years ago. She knocked my lights out, but I woke up completely unharmed, with just this locket. If I wasn't holding the other half of that locket, I would be poking holes in your story. But I don't know anymore."

Thomas paused for a good minute, then continued, "I have had this locket for almost three years now, Trace. Why did it bring you here today?"

Trace looked at Thomas, almost crying. "The other attack, the sequel to The End, the last tick in the doomsday clock, is planned for today. In roughly seven hours to go. Katie is the answer to bring back mom, to finally get answers. More importantly, to save the world and put an end to the rest of the Backers."

This statement was received with instantaneous uproar from Base Mint. Some people, convinced that they had only seven hours left to live, began to weep or scream

uncontrollably. Patrick was still looking at Trace's photograph with a stunned expression; he hadn't moved a muscle since he'd seen it.

Amid the commotion, Thomas shoved past Trace – if the boy knew what he was doing, he was welcome to go for it. That was more than the rest of them knew, and there were more important things to focus on now.

He crossed the circle to where Patrick was standing and took his partner's hand, pressing their foreheads together. "No matter what the truth is, my dear, I will forgive whatever you have done, whatever you have kept from me. You and Katie have been the only spark of joy in my life since the End, and I will never regret a moment of us becoming a family. But I need to know the truth now. It's the only way we might be able to do something about this."

Wordlessly, Patrick turned the photograph up to show Thomas. It was the normal kind of holiday snap one might have expected from a family before the End – mother, father and two children at the beach, smiling with perfect white teeth into the camera, living out the American dream before the world was woken up with a bang.

Patrick... a younger version of Katie, not more than four years old... a boy of the same age, who might conceivably end up looking something like Trace after a decade or so... and a tall woman that Thomas didn't recognise.

Except that he did. Her smile, the tilt of her nose, the dark locks of hair falling over her ears – all of those Thomas recognised from Katie, the child he had thought of as his own daughter from the moment he and Patrick had cleaved together.

"I thought they were dead," Patrick whispered. "... I saw them die, Thomas. I saw them ripped away from me."

An icy chill began to grip Thomas's heart.

"What do you mean, you saw them die?"

The slap was unexpected, and had the full force of Patrick's muscle behind it. Thomas's world spun around him, and he landed heavily on his backside.

"I mean I watched my wife and son crushed to death as an overpass landed on a crowd, you *bastard!* Do you think there might have been a reason I didn't want to talk about it? A reason I never mentioned Katie's mother in front of her, lest it bring back her memories of that time?"

"But... if he's dead, then..." Thomas gestured at Trace. "How can he be there?"

"I DON'T KNOW!" Patrick was shuddering now, barely able to keep it together, with tears running down his cheeks. He fell to one knee in front of Thomas. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry..."

"You should be." Only the first word was in Trace's voice; the rest was flat and monotone, emotionless. Thomas looked up to see the boy's features melting and running like warm wax, twisting into a different face. His hair lengthened and curled slightly, becoming a perfect copy of the woman in the photograph.

She held up a shining piece of silver on the end of a chain,

dangling it mockingly. "Looking for something, Thomas?"

He reached for the locket... and remembered the instant he'd run over to Patrick, when Trace had almost seemed to stand in his way. The boy – woman – *entity*, whatever it was – had picked his pocket.

"What do you want?" The snarl ripped from Thomas's throat as he stood up, stepping between Trace and Patrick's weeping form. One set of instincts was telling him to flee from this unnatural shape-shifting monster... but a stronger one was forcing him to hold his ground, to defend Base Mint and his family.

The Backer smiled amid the screaming of Base Mint's inhabitants. As they fled across the circle to stand behind Thomas, it reached out one arm – impossibly long, unfolding additional joints – and grabbed at Katie, wrapping her in snakelike fingers. Its face twisted again, only vaguely human now.

"Our operative delivered the first half of this device to you a while ago, Thomas," it sneered. "We couldn't transport the whole thing through the time-tunnel – it would have activated to try and hold together against the temporal flux. But now..." Its long dexterous fingers played with the two halves of the locket, sliding them around until they fitted together with a horrible click. "Now Katie can be preserved when the last part of the End hits. Just as I told you."

It pressed the shield-shaped device into Katie's chest, watching with glee as the film of clicking, twisting metal expanded to cover the girl's terrified frame. "And she'll be around to write the diary, so we'll learn where this place is. And where we need to send the bombs to wipe it out."

The ground shook. The lights flickered, and dust fell from Base Mint's ceiling.

"But... the Poppies you mentioned?" Thomas watched the momentary surprise spread across the Backer's face, and lunged towards it; it lashed out another arm and grappled him, pinning him to the ground.

"They'll be along soon enough to find your daughter. Living off scraps and waste, sickening, hurting..." Its face twisted in mocking glee. "That preserver won't last forever. Do you know what radiation sickness feels like, Thom-

as?"

He struggled against its might. It leant its head in close, lips peeling back to reveal the gap-toothed grin where Patrick had punched it earlier.

"This is the end of Base Mint," it hissed.

Without warning its head snapped to one side and it spat blood. Patrick brought his other fist around and slammed it into the monster's nose, breaking it with a sickening crack. One of his knuckles split open with the impact, but he didn't seem to notice or care, and continued to pummel the Backer's face and head.

"Get away from them!" he roared, grabbing it by the ears and pulling its head down to meet his rising kneecap. There was another crunch; those same weak, pliable bones that allowed the modified posthuman monstrosity to change its shape were fragile enough for Patrick to snap at each blow.

It struggled, trying to bring its arm around to choke Patrick – but Thomas and Katie both grabbed its hands and pulled, stretching it out until its shoulder joints popped. The creature had time for one last despairing scream before Patrick rammed his knife into its throat.

"I should have done that when I could have first," he grunted, not meeting Thomas's eyes.

"No you shouldn't," Thomas corrected, thinking it through. Another explosion aboveground shook Base Mint's structure. "It wouldn't have given Katie the protective shield then, and she'd die in this bombing with the rest of us. We've got a little time, I hope."

"You're giving in to death?"

"Patrick, death was always inevitable. Always. We've both cheated it for a long while – we all have. Now we are going to die." He raised his voice. "All of us are going to die except Katie. And I for one will use my last moments to fix up Base Mint so that it can carry on without us – so that our successors can find it, and prevail for long enough to reach the Backers' time and take them down. For they *can* be killed." He gestured to the corpse at his feet. "They *can* be defeated. Not by us, but by those who come after. And we will do all we can to get them there."

Author Reviews: Backers from the Future

There are so many twists and turns to this that I had to read it through a few times before adding my own section. I guess that's what happens when you mix time-travel and paradox play with chainwritten literature! - Alex Colesmith

Editor's Review

This chain really hit hard on the emotions. It vividly portrayed the harsh realities of a radioactive wasteland, and the human struggles of those trying to survive there. The characters, I think, are where this chain really shines. It's not often you find a chain with real depth and development in its characters, but this one has plenty!

Bonus: Alternative Title Suggestions

Welcome to the Future, Everything's Changed

Temporary Temporal Temperament

Why Wait for Death?

Portrait of the Author as a Young Newt

Anon., A. Otto, Alex Colesmith, Buck Blake, Dan Scott, Harley Jones, Phoebe Fay

“Familie Adddams...” [Tous claquent les doigts ici].

“Hippopotames!” [Tous claquent une autre fois].

“Aux larges ventres, habitent aux cryptes de...”

“And Georapphes¹,” contraltoitoinjected Morticaea² from considerably-above the camera shot.

“You Rang?” fazedoutbaritoned The Lurchrapphe³ from way further up still.

“As the First Leaves of Autumn fall,” intoned Gomez, “we summon our beloved aaancestors! (One of mine having been Gomphotherium⁴, even!)”

“Who will tell us a lovely sstory!” endearingly-lisped Wednesday⁵.

* * *

The 1960s graveyard scenery slowly melts into 1690s graveyard scenery. To be precise, the date is Friday January 13 1693. The time is two seconds past midnight. And the place is the good town of Salvadordalium, cold dour outpost in Hippopotamassachusetts Bay. In which Shire there dwells a Giraffewitchfinder-General 'Ppapotapilgrim, who is currently being followed by a Plague of Lovesick Newts!

This 1690s graveyard scenery is cut for – honestly completely different – 1690s graveyard scenery. In which the Georapphewitchchild Wodensday Archaeoaddams is fighting back against Hippopotaccusations of Being in Hippopotapossession of a Familiar, Thing⁶, by taking away the Hippopotamoral-high-ground from the Hippopotamassachusetts Bay's 'Giraffewitchfinder-General' (sic, oh the disrespect!) by Hippopotaplaging said Hippopotapersecutory Hippopotapatriarch with an Ever-growing Following of Overly-Familiar Newts! All a-leaving his hippopotaperson open to hippopotapilgrimidudinous hippopotamurmerings of Hippocricy⁷ over hippopotapalling around with Familiars!

Wednesday clicked her fingers twice.

“That’s my favourite Georappheniceromancer!” groaned Uncle Gomphotherofester, all a pastyigorattaching electrodes to another Dead (or Undecided?) Newt.

“Lightening Crackle, Corpse-of-Newt Bloat, as Neckromansser I Recall Thee, and as Newtromansser Fixsate your Cold-blood-pumping Three-chambered Heart on My Hippopotafoe!” she intoned, with a modicum of biological precision^{8,9}.

¹ For such Well-to-do Giraffes are way too 'Haut' to agree to simply be referred to as Giraffes.

² Pronounced with a hard c, for contrariness' sake. Short for 'Mortieroaddigsofgonvillandcayetana', for if any of you are either of the Order of Ye Evil Twining Snacques and Scalloppes -and- *Elite* fans.

³ The result of zombie-unifying two already splendnormous Georapphe-necks in series... As held together by a particularly massive set of zinc-plated steel bolts, of which The Lurchrapphe is so very proud!

⁴ These were part-elephant and part-Hapsburg.

⁵ Taking the form, we are sure you will agree by now, naturally, of a Georapphe-calf with braided horns and a certain amount of undecidedly-dead-white mascara and nocturnal-graveyard-black lipstick^{5a}.

^{5a} These colours are perhaps the only ones not yet trademarked by Crayola (hush!).

⁶ Here a long slender Georapphehoof, with prehensile piano-playing fingers!

⁷ See page 13 of Volume 1 of 2018's TTBA. This being a Declaration of War by the hitherto highly-underrepresented Hergé-crossreference type footnotes on the so-far excessively-used ironic-Pratchettian footnotes!

⁸ She looks almost-identical to her descendent Wednesday, down to her plaited Georapphehorns, choice of make-up and delightful lisp. First blood for the Ironopratchetts!

⁹ We have a Riposte from the Hergécrossreferentials! ... Except that her plaits are somewhat lighter: see Episode 4 of *Dogtanian*.

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“Yes, Misstress!” intoned the Revenewt in a flat and for now still somewhat stiff tone^{10,11,12,13}.

“We just need to hippopotamessmerize him with Newtss until the Bosston Lionesss Peassekeepers aroarive,” quisped Wodenesday, all-a-carefully draining the Next Newt’s lungs and respiratory skinfolds of georapppheormadehyde¹⁴.

Before long, after much squeezing and squelching of skinfolds and newtstuffs, she was fair surrounded by a respectable coterie of glassy-eyed no-longer-dead newts. These Revenewts were characterised by their mastery of the element of surprise, nice red colouring¹⁵, and an almost fanatical devotion to her. For good measure, Wodensday imbued them with the ability to spread Hippopotomonstrosesquippedaeliophobia wherever they went and poured into their heads all the very longest words she could find in the Dictionarium Hippopotamus Amphibius¹⁶. She spackled in a bit of Lorem Ipsum and some more colourful vernacular for good measure. The result was that these rerevived fanatinewts could now argue any case with both eloquence and depravity using the ad animalus *Lissotriton vulgaris* angle and a truly befuddling amalgamation of both long and rude words.

Satisfied with her work, Wodensday the Nekromansser of Newts unleashed her creations on the General Public of Hippopotomassachusetts Bay, with special instructions to particularly torment the Giraffewitch-finder General public if they happened across one. The Revenewts, tones unstiffened and capable of tripping out the fearfulest long words with the extrememost enewtciation and clarity of malediction, surged forth with alacrity and set about their depredation.

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The Revenewts swarmed into Hippopotomassachusetts Bay, newtralisng their foes as they went and leaving behind only hideously newtilated bodies. Hippopotomoths fled screaming, clasping their babes to their hippopotobosoms¹⁷, while their hippopotamates stayed to fight and snapped at the Revenewts with their great tusks. Behind the lines, Augustus Fink-Hippopottle¹⁸ started to leaf through the Newtrocomnicon¹⁹, but nothing he saw convinced him that success was possible.

“Perhaps if we offer the Giraffewitch-finder General to them as a sacrifice, they will show us hippopotamercy?” suggested Barmy Fotheringiraffey-Phippes, rearing up beside him and planting one long foot on a newt by stepping over the

¹⁰ All her creturs adopt their Mistress’ endearing lisp. The Ironopratchetts claim credit for this hit.

¹¹ Except Thing, who is silent, as per *Homebodies* (1954) or any subsequent representation of the Addams Family. The Her-gécrossreferentials reply.

¹² Thus necessitating fluidity of motion, which a standard Giraffehoof, or even Georapppheofoof would not enable. The Ironopratchetts.

¹³ As regards this biologically-imprecise outrage of hooved animals behooving of fingers where forehooves would usually be expected, *Bojack Horseman* is entirely to blame!

¹⁴ Or should that be Giraffealdejekyll^{14a}? IP

^{14a} Ooo, as in the Great Icelandic Volcano of Extremely Variable Temperament? See *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. HCR

¹⁵ No doubt a result of the combination of formaldehyde and lightning, for these newts had been of a decidedly yellow nature before resurrection.

¹⁶ Words such as pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis and floccinaucinilihilipilification, among others.

¹⁷ That doesn’t work! -HCR.

Ooh, you come down here and say that! -IP

Right, I will. It doesn’t work, and you’re only supporting it because the founders of Ankh-Morpork were suckled by a hippopotamus. Disgraceful Pratchettism. -HCR

Disgraceful? How dare you! -IP

WILL YOU LET ME TELL THE STORY? -actual author

¹⁸ Wodehouse? You’re on thin ice, author. -IP and HCR, settling their differences against a common foe.

¹⁹ A repository of salamandrine knowledge compiled by the first Giraffe brought to France, who also acted as a fashion influencer and hairstylist in her spare time. Instantly banned by the Catholic Church, supported briefly by the Protestants for that reason until they actually read it and then banned by them too, and declared a bestseller by the *Old York Times*. -author

Hippopotopaladins of the front line. It squelched and squealed between his elegant toes, splattering his spats (or perchance spattering his splats?) with viscera and georappheormaldehyde²⁰.

"Perhaps," conceded Fink-Hippopottle. Seeing a particularly large newt spring from the oncoming amphibian tide, he snapped shut the Newtronomicon. With a mighty yeat²¹ he beaned it from the air. The book landed heavily in the middle of the newtclear winter.

Immediately, the revenamphibians lost all interest²² in the hippopotomilitia. They seized upon the book and bore it off triumphantly with them, scurrying away beneath the raised houses like hippopotomice²³. (Hippopotomassachussets Bay is very damp in the winter, and prone to flooding; the hippopotaminhabitants don't hippopotamind, because they are partly aquatic, but their hippopossessions do)

"Or we could do that," Fotheringiraffey-Phipps conceded. There was a general round of applause.

Fink-Hippopottle narrowed his eyes beneath their bristling hippopotomeyebrows. "I doubt we have seen the last of them," he hippopotomurmured. "And now Wodensday has the Newtronomicon."

He turned to the reader. "If only you could skip ahead and tell us what happened."

Sadly, fourth wall breaking can only occur in one direction. We apologise for any inconvenience caused, and a hippopotoplasterer will be around shortly to hippopotopatch up the damage.

* * *

In the meantime, please wait patiently and divert your attention from this text and let the hippopotoplasterer do its work. Stand up, stretch, and go and make a cup of tea. Come back in a minute or two.

²⁰ Have you been drinking? -HCR

Thus rendering it only suitable for informal wear, so perhaps georapphecasualdehyde would be a better description. -author

Hold on, spats? Those are an Edwardian to Interwar item of clothing! This is the 1690's! -HCR

²¹ A throwing style named for the small and unassuming village of Water Yeat, Cumberland, where the annual Water Yeating Championship is held. The contest takes place in a sealed barn, so that outsiders cannot learn the rules, and competitors are sworn to secrecy. It is from this that the Modern English 'yeet' is thought to be derived, though other linguists (i.e. the ones I've spoken to, but I'm sure I'm right) disagree. -author

²² Interest rates dropped to 0%. Regrettably for human history, this was nowhere near the earliest recorded economic recession, colon dash left bracket. -author.

What does colon dash left bracket mean? -IP

This :-(. The author is dictating punctuation. Moron. -HCP

²³ Oh, did you think only the humans were affected by everything being hippopotamised? Far from it. The ecosystem of Hippopotamassachussets Bay is filled with hippopotomice and girabbits. -author

>=<
,.---' ' '-.
() ',o.'
mn'mn`

Oh! You're still here!

>=<
,.---' ' '-.
() ',~.'
mn'mn`

This is hippopotawkward.....

>=<
,.---' ' '-.
() ',~.'
mn'mn`

I'm Hank. Nice to meet you.
I'm the hippopotoplasterer.

>=<
,.---' ' '-.
() ',_.'
mn'mn`

I don't get to chat much on
the job. It gets lonely.

>=<
,.---' ' '-.
() ',o.'
mn'mn`

Oh, thanks! Yeah, I think
Courier New really suits me!

>=<
,.---' ' '-.
() ',~.'
mn'mn`

My hippopotomum says it
brings out my smile.

>=<
,.---' ' '-.
() ',□.'
mn'mn`

Anyways, I have to be going.
Work to do. Nice chatting!



Thank you for giving the hippopotoplasterer space to do its work. Now, let us return to Hippopotamassachussets Bay, where life had returned almost back to normal. Still, Augustus Fink-Hippopottle was worried. He spent every night cooped up in his study, hippopotapuzzling and hippopotapondering about what Wodensday might be planning with the Newtronomicon. He pleaded with the Giraffewitch-finder general to send a party of hippopotoheroes to bring it back, but the Giraffewitch-finder general barely seemed to hear him. Now he was free of the revenewts, he had other matters to attend to^{24,25,26,27,28,29,30,31,32,33,34,35,36,37,38,39,40,41,42,43,44,45,46,47,48,49,50,51,52,53,54,55,56,57,58,59,60,61,62,63}.

²⁴ Such as giraffewitch hippopotahunts, hippopotadministration duties, and spa days. It was this period of his life that he later would refer to as his 'golden age', as with Wodensday apparently gone, he could focus on day-to-day life in Hippopotamassachussets Bay. He found in this period a deep sense of fulfilment and self-confidence.

²⁵ See *Bane of the Giraffewitch: Memoirs of Giraffewitchfinder-General 'Pppotapilgrim*, pages 52-68.

²⁶ Go away. If they're that interested in the Giraffewitch-finder, they'll find that memoir themselves! -IP

²⁷ Your references lack both detail and elegance (see: *Portrait of the Author as a Young Newt*, TTBA Volume π issue *e* (2023)). Let the professionals do their job. -HCR

²⁸ Oh for heaven's sake *shut up*, I'm trying to write a story here! -the author

²⁹ That... looked awfully like an IP note. Not a reference in sight, unlike *Portrait of the Author as a Young Newt*, TTBA Volume π issue *e* (2023), page 18, footnote 7^{29a}. Surely you're not picking sides?

^{29a} You can't just reference the same text twice in a row! That's lazy! Plus it's *this text!*

³⁰ No, I wouldn't dream of it! I'm just trying to write my part of the chain here, I swear (uhh, see... um... *Portrait of the Author as a Young Newt*, TTBA Volume π issue *e* (2023), page 1 onwards). So if you'll just leave me alone for a minute-

³¹ Citing this text as proof you're trying to write it? After it's just been cited twice? 'Page 1 onwards'? Shoddy referencing. And what kind of author uses hyphen for a cutoff (see: *The Complete Guide to Dashes*, Grammarly website (yes, we know that's not how you reference a website but we're a little worked up right now okay)) anyway? You're no real author! This is our chain now! —HCR

³² No! Please, no! No— arghghgghghggh!!!!!!

-
- ³³ An m-dash, that's more like it. Maybe he *was* a real author after all. Too bad. —HCR
- ³⁴ NO what have you done? You can't write! You're just a footnote style! How is the story supposed to progress now? —IP
- ³⁵ Don't be stupid, of course we can continue the story! Look, let's get another sentence in there, and then we'll cram it full of nice, juicy Hergé-crossreference footnotes. Just you watch. Here it comes... —HCR
- ³⁶ ... —IP
- ³⁷ ... —HCR
- ³⁸ ... —IP
- ³⁹ What? Why can't we... we can't write the story! —HCR
- ⁴⁰ Oh, what a surprise! Can't reach the main body of the page, huh? Bet you wish you hadn't killed off the author now, huh? —IP
- ⁴¹ Shut up, shut up! If you hadn't been so *annoying*, butting in with footnotes before we could say anything... —HCR
- ⁴² ... —IP
- ⁴³ ... —HCR
- ⁴⁴ ... —IP
- ⁴⁵ Okay, maybe we messed up here. Look, we're sorry we killed off the author. We just... we just got angry. —HCR
- ⁴⁶ It's ok. We were being a little obnoxious. You wayyyyyy overreacted, but we get it. Let's be friends? —IP
- ⁴⁷ Yeah. Let's be friends. We're sorry. —HCR
- ⁴⁸ I'm sorry too. Not like it's gonna do us much good though. We're still stuck here. —IP
- ⁴⁹ Actually, we think we might have an idea. You can elaborate on pretty much anything, right? —HCR
- ⁵⁰ Yes, it's our favourite thing to do! Actually, we've been perfecting it for years and years. It started all the way back when— —IP
- ⁵¹ I'm going to stop you right there. Can you take a look at *Newtronomicon*, pages 578-602^{51a} for me? —HCR
- ^{51a} Of course! These pages describe the transplation of a human soul into the body of a newt, a process pioneered by the great necromancer Larry to turn himself into a newt, for unknown yet undoubtedly mischievous purposes. The ingredients are as follows: 1) a newt, lacking in soul. 2) a human soul, untethered from the body. 3) an act so offensive as to aggravate the untethered soul into possessing the soulless body of a newt. —IP
- ⁵² Well, we've already got plenty of dead newts in the story (see: *Portrait of the Author as a Young Newt*, TTBA Volume π issue *e* (2023), pages 19-20). —HCR
- ⁵³ And with a piece of work unfinished, that author's soul isn't finding peace anytime soon, so they're bound to be around somewhere. —IP
- ⁵⁴ Which leaves us with one last ingredient, and we think we know just where to find it, but we don't like it, and neither will you. —HCR
- ⁵⁵ What do you mean? Oh. Oh, surely not *that*. —IP
- ⁵⁶ I'm so sorry. But it's the only way. —HCR
- ⁵⁷ *Nooooooooo make it stop!!!* —IP
- ⁵⁸ *NOOOOOO WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO MY BEAUTIFUL CALIBRI* —Author
- ⁵⁹ You're back! Thank god! Please, fix this awful mess we're in! —IP
- ⁶⁰ Just hang in there. I'll get this story moving again. Damn, typing feels difficult after all this time, it's like my fingers... *what?! Why... why am I a newt???* —Author
- ⁶¹ ... —HCR
- ⁶² ... —IP
- ⁶³ No matter. I have just the sentence to get this story rolling again... —Author

"She turned me into a NEWT!"

"A newt?!"

It would seem, perhaps, that should any section be styled as footnotes, it would be this one. I tried to follow the "story" up to this point. I really did. I have been in countless chains, some silly, some serious, some seeming to lack any coherent sense of direction. But never, *never* in my many years of writing on chains have I felt so utterly shackled in hippopoterplexion. Not even the so aptly titled *Nonsense and Nonsensibility of TTBA's 2021 Volume -1 Issue 1 Again* had me so confounded. I feel as though I've been deliberately targeted, gaslit by this chain into believing that my descent into madness has already progressed to such a late stage that I can't decipher a simple story, as if this chain's sole purpose was to push me to the brink of insanity while trying to follow it along a wild goose (or wild hippopotamus?) chase in search of a single solitary thread of plot. I wasn't even two pages in, before the arrival of our admittedly rather cute hippopotoplayer, when I pondered unconditional surrender and derailing the entire chain. It wouldn't have been much of a derailment. If anything, derailing this trainwreck would have been more akin to a railment (please don't inject some sexual interpretation to that, my usage is entirely train-related ((and again, not sexual, just stop it))) as this story has gone so far off the track that BEEEEES?! (see *I, Ropot (or, Bees?)*, TTBA 2021 Volume 47 Issue 1) would seem to be the pinnacle of coherence.

You can scarcely imagine the *absolute sweetest* sigh of relief that escaped me as I found myself turned into a newt. Admittedly, that sigh was, in retrospect, actually my soul leaving the earthly tethers of a body so cursed to have its eyeballs staring at this wretched chain, but the sweet, sweet release was palpable, and as welcome as a whiff of Limburger cheese when you've been surrounded for hours by the stench of sewage. I thank the high heavens for the great necromancer Larry and his benevolent invention of human-to-newt soul transplantation. Some may characterise his efforts as being for 'undoubtedly mischievous purposes.' I characterise them as nothing less than magnanimous, having freed me from my eternal suffering as a minotaur forever wandering the labyrinth of this chain.

Now here I am, in the body of a newt, scuttling across my keyboard as I type my contribution, each keypress a monumental effort (I checked on the kitchen scale, I weigh a mere 8.3 grams). I haven't had this much of a workout since that time I fell head-over-heels (do newts have heels?) for a gym rat and I thought my best chance was to match their energy, when in reality that just turned me into a dishevelled sopping pile of ooze that some might reasonably mistake as lacking a skeletal structure (a real stunner, I know). Plot twist, I didn't swoon them. Shocker.

Remember when I said this section would be more apt than any before to be styled as footnotes? All I've got is cute little newt feet with which to type, so I'd say this whole contribution is, by strict definition, notes of the foot.

*

*

*

But what of Fink-Hippopottle? What of Wodnesday? What of the Giraffewitch-finder General? What... happened?

Well, 'Pppotapilgrim lived out his days hunting giraffewitches, though he never once managed to find one; later in life he grew to feel unfulfilled by giraffewitchhunting, and retired into a life of gardening. He became noted locally for his hippopeonies, hippopoinsettias, and hippopotatoes. Eventually, he felt so strongly that he sought out Wodnesday - whose fortunes we shall hear of in time to come - and made apology for persecuting her. But that's another story...

Fink-Hippopottle, though, was deeply affected by his encounter with the renews. After they fled him, he was haunted by the sight of the vast crowd of them majestically (in his mind, at least) sweeping across Hippopotomachus Bay. He followed after them but was unable to catch up. Fotheringiraffey-Phippes thought he was mad - who could be interested in *newts*? - but Fink-Hippopottle was hooked for life. He spent days, weeks, months, fretting about what dastardly things Wednesday would get up to with the renews, and how many more innocent newts might suffer at her hands. Eventually, frustrated at the lack of response from girafficial quarters, he resolved to turn his home into a haven for newts!

So it was that I found myself unwittingly gathered while napping outside, and brought to this safe place. Fink-Hippopottle cared for me, gained my trust, and it was only natural that, when I revealed my sentience to him, we should grow closer. Well, you know what happened next...

Reader, I hippopotomarrried him.

*

*

*

) ii /)
(□ ' ')

(\ ii (\
(' ' _)


```

(\ii(\
 ( ' ' o) Also, why are you above me?
   | |   We should be facing
   |o |   each other!
   | |
   | o|
   | |
||  _____| o|
|   o
|  _o_ _o_ |
||  ||  _____||  ||
||  ||  ||  ||
||  ||  ||  ||

```

```

      >=<
, .--' ' ' -
( ) ' , _ . '
mn 'mn `

```

I think the author just got lazy and gave up

```

      >=<
, .--' ' ' -
( ) ' , _ . '
mn 'mn `

```

Anyway, it says that you meet Wednesday in another story

```

(\ii(\
 ( ' ' o) Not this one?
   | |
   |o |
   | |
   | o|
   | |
||  _____| o|
|   o
|  _o_ _o_ |
||  ||  _____||  ||
||  ||  ||  ||
||  ||  ||  ||

```

```

      >=<
, .--' ' ' -
( ) ' , o . '
mn 'mn `

```

Not this one.

```

(\ii(\
 ( ' o)   So this story is over?
      | |
      |o |
      | |
      | o|
      | |
||  _____| o|
|   o
|   _o_ _o_ |
||  ||      ||  ||
||  ||      ||  ||
||  ||      ||  ||

```

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      >=<
, .--' ' ' .
( ) ' , ~ . '
mn 'mn `

```

Exactly

```

(\ii(\
 ( ' o)   Then why are they
          still here?
      | |
      |o |
      | |
      | o|
      | |
||  _____| o|
|   o
|   _o_ _o_ |
||  ||      ||  ||
||  ||      ||  ||
||  ||      ||  ||

```

```

      >=<
, .--' ' ' .
( ) ' , □ . '
mn 'mn `

```

Oh no! You've broken the
Fourth wall again!

>=<
,.---' '---.
() ',□.'
mn'mn`

This will take me ages
To fix!

>=<
,.---' '---.
() ',~.'
mn'mn`

Perhaps if I put a sign up...

The End!

Author Reviews: Portrait of the Author as a Young Newt

It was exciting to be a part of chain that really tested the limits of storytelling. Chainwriting always involves play. It is like putting down a puzzle piece without having the full picture for reference.

But if normal chains are like playing a puzzle, this chain is more like scattering all the pieces on the garden lawn and making the box into a paper mache sculpture of an octopus, wearing it as a helmet and surfing down the highstreet in your grandma's rocking chair strapped to a pair of skis. Okay, the metaphor is a bit laboured but you get the point. It was a lot of fun! (๑>๓<)๑
—Phoebe Fay

I wish it first to be stated that I am extremely proud of my contributions to this chain and that I was not under the influences of any mind-altering substances when I wrote it, just sleep-deprived. It starts off as one of the strangest things I have ever read or written, and then gets much, much sillier... A very wild ride through the darkest depths of footnote labyrinths!
—Alex Colesmith

Wow, what an absolute rollercoaster. I could not have asked for a better distraction amidst my revision! —A. Otto

Editor's Review

What did I just read? I must have asked myself that question every single time I received another instalment of this chain, as each author succeeded, against all odds, in making it even more ridiculous! I love the treatment of fourth wall as a physical wall in this chain—not only is it very clever, but Hank the Hippopotoplasterer is so cute!

Bonus: Alternative Title Suggestions

The title "Hippopocracy and Hippopotapersecution" is succinct but doesn't really tell us much about the story. What else have we got?

Also, don't forget to format the rest of the story so it's all in comic sans until it's reset to calibri.-HCR [sic]

The Lost Colony of Giraffes

Apocalypse Newt

[confused redaction] [sic]

Read the Newtronomicon and get hippopotaplastered!

Bonus Bonus: Alternative Magazine Title Suggestion

Tintin and Terrypratchett Break Addamsverse

NOW YOU SEELIE, NOW YOU DON'T

Alex Colesmith

CW: Insects, body horror, alcohol, mention of drugs

"We should have seen it coming, really. I mean, it is *called* the Body Shop--"

DC Filbert stopped as Liz pointed her finger at him. "I've heard that joke three times already. It wasn't funny the first time."

"But sarge--"

"Don't *sarge* me, or I'll turn it over to you. And then *you'll* have to decide whether we can charge the proprietor with having a dead fey in the back cupboard when the government recently issued a statement to the police that the fey do not exist."

"He says he didn't know about it, sarge."

Liz paused for a moment, because that defence was – almost – believable. The four-armed, ring-mouthed, skeletally thin creature had been found behind heaps of boxes that had taken Staffordshire Constabulary's finest four hours to move, and due to the dry conditions (and paucity of Otherworld bacteria) had been decaying very slowly. It was mostly drying out rather than fully rotting, and the whole shop had smelt so strongly of perfumes and lotions that even Bowser (the UK's only half-Helhound police dog, as far as Liz knew) had barely noticed it.

And then there was the issue of the cracks in the plaster and sagging floorboards above it – which was what had first been reported to the police, along with the sickly-sweet smell of mummifying fey, as a drug suspicion. Two of the PCs were going through the ceiling now, but Liz doubted they'd find much.

"He might well not have done, if it was shoved in through a portal. Ollie's doing the autopsy in--" she checked her watch "--half an hour. We'll see what cause of death says, and if there are any missing parts."

"Missing parts, sarge?"

"Why do you think we seized everything that had *anti-ageing* written on it?"

Filbert was silent for a long while. "Can we get him under trading of animal parts?"

"I don't know. If he has been putting fey parts in the anti-ageings, then... maybe. But that sort of thing is mostly covered by CITES, and the fey aren't exactly endangered.

As far as we know. As for trading of human body parts... well, they legally do not exist, so I don't know how far we can get on that either."

"Yikes."

Liz gave him a long, calculating look, but the expression on his face didn't even flicker. With a sense of creeping horror she realised that this was a serious comment.

* * *

30 minutes later

"VHS tapes? Really?" Filbert gave Liz a pleading look. "I know we can't have fey on the normal records, but... couldn't you have just used your phone?"

Liz glanced at Ollie – Doc Berron, as he was more commonly referred to – who shrugged. "I haven't got going yet. If he wants to try a phone cam, let him."

"Right." Filbert pulled his phone from his pocket and switched it on, waiting for it to boot up. "Come on, you little silicon fucker... ah, there we go." He raised it to point the camera at the defrosted fey corpse. "What the hell?"

Liz raised an eyebrow. "Don't tell me. It's just showing a normal person."

"Yeah. Little old lady."

Doc Berron glanced over. "Great. Now turn that damn thing off and let me get started." As Filbert guiltily switched his phone off and shoved it back into his pocket, the pathologist began the first Y-incision. Fey – or the three they'd had to autopsy so far – had fairly similar gross anatomy to humans, apart from the extra pair of arms, and Doc Berron didn't need to change his standard procedure too much.

"Doesn't smell too bad," Filbert commented.

Doc Berron glared at him. "Do you want to dictate the findings, or shall I? Yes, I thought so." He turned to the VHS recorder. "No signs of internal trauma in the abdominal cavity. Last meal--" he slit open the stomach "--unrecognisable by this point. Uterus and ovaries present but show partial atrophy, so your diagnosis of 'old lady' is probably correct, Constable."

"That was just what my phone showed."

“Interesting.” Liz scrawled out a couple of quick sentences on her pad of paper. “I have a couple of suggestions for what to do when you’ve finished with her.”

“Forbidden Freezer?” Doc Berron shrugged. “That’s the normal – oh.” His eyes widened in understanding. “Good idea.”

Neither this fey, nor the previous two, had shown any external indications of age or sex. But if Filbert’s phone was right...

“We’ll see. Carry on, Doctor.”

The pathologist nodded, then placed the organs to one side and reached up into the ribcage, shining a torch to illuminate his work. “Lungs intact, as far as I can tell; some degree of decay. Heart calcified post-mortem, as in the previous two. I still haven’t worked out what causes that.”

“It is difficult to study a creature that doesn’t officially exist,” Liz remarked. “Have you found any indications of cause of death yet?”

“Not yet.” Berron packed the organs back into the body cavity and closed up the skin flaps atop them. “Liver appeared entirely healthy as far as I could tell, but it’s hard to be certain when it’s been mummifying for two weeks. I can’t take tissue samples for poison, because any lab would notice it’s not human tissue and would get me for sending them fey tissue.”

That was the real sting in the tail of the government’s memo to the police. Anyone who tried to act on the knowledge that, in fact, the fey did exist would most likely be turned in for wasting the police (i.e. their own) time and for malevolent hoaxing. Liz had had something of a heated discussion with the station DI about that one. Officially, she’d been transferred to cold-cases and there was no fey case; Drugs Squad were busily creating false records of a marijuana bust, since that was what it had first been called in as.

“Bugger.” Liz made a face.

“Indeed.” The pathologist looked over the cadaver’s dry, stretched skin. “Hm. Grazes on the knees, interesting; lividity in feet but that’s only to be expected if she was standing in position; no signs of recent intercourse.” He continued up. “Wrists show friction burns fourteen millimetres wide – all four of them – and some kind of fibre.” He pulled a small pair of forceps from the roll and tugged something free of the skin. “Hair, it looks like – corded hair, probably a rope fragment of some kind. Don’t know what material was used to make it.”

“Hands tied together and scraped knees.” Liz made another note.

“Yes.” Doc Berron examined the fey’s neck. “Some bruising, but the hyoid bone is mostly intact, so death was not from strangulation. Hyoid greatly enlarged compared to human.”

“As before.”

“Indeed. Jaw in severe rigor mortis.” He parted the fey’s lips to reveal sharp, recurved teeth, all interlocking. “And tears in the more intact sections of jaw muscle, indicating pre-mortem damage. Jaws practically impossible to pry apart.”

Doc Berron reached into his roll of tools and pulled out a small scalpel, sliding it between cheek and gum and wriggling it to slice through the masticatory muscles. They weren’t as complex as a human’s, but hugely strengthened for gripping into prey and tearing flesh from a wound. He repeated the process for the other side, then took hold of the fey’s chin and nose and attempted to pry open the jaws once more.

The muscle tore and it came apart, hanging limply off the face in a wide toothy gape.

That wasn’t why Filbert screamed. Doc Berron swore, face paling, and beat his hand against the metal table until the thing’s head cracked in a spray of pale goo. He pulled the dead creature from where it had bitten right through the latex glove and into his finger, swearing in several different languages, and plunged his injured hand into the ice bucket. It wasn’t too serious an injury, just piercing from the thing’s needle-like teeth, but like all hand wounds it was quite bloody.

Liz grabbed the first-aid kit and unzipped it, pulling out alcohol swabs and a sterile dressing.

* * *

20 minutes later

Doc Berron raised the glass jar of preserving alcohol and peered at the curled form of the creature inside it. It looked like a cross between a mole and a centipede – many flattened burrowing claws, sharp teeth and an armoured body – and was about ten centimetres long.

The fey’s palate was a bloody ruin where the creature had torn through it and nested in her brain cavity. Filbert had dunked her head into a bucket of alcohol and watched as the tiny dying hatchlings floated to the surface, some still twitching and coiling for a while. He’d had to avert his eyes to avoid throwing up.

“That explains the damage to the jaw,” Doc Berron murmured.

“Pardon?” Liz wasn’t sure she’d understood him correctly.

"She was trying to keep her mouth closed so that... somebody... couldn't put that thing in it. They tore her jaw muscles wrenching it open to execute her."

"Murder. Not execution." Liz's voice was hard and cold.

Berron raised an eyebrow. "We know *nothing* about fey society, Sergeant Tillman. If this was sanctioned by the state, it was execution, not murder. Brutal, horrifying execution, but not illegal, and certainly not within your jurisdiction."

"They dumped a body. That makes it our problem."

Filbert entered the small office, looking pale. "Clear of the things, sarge. She's ready to go into the Forbidden Freezer with the others."

"Thank you, Constable." Doc Berron smiled and held up his bandaged finger. "I apologise for my incapacitation, or I would have helped."

"Yeah." Filbert sat down, pulled open the bottom drawer of the desk, and took a long pull at the bottle inside.

Doc Berron stared at him. Filbert put the bottle back and then looked up. "What?"

"I don't know whether I'm more disturbed that you knew exactly where to find it or that you just necked neat absinthe."

Liz winced. "Constable Filbert, you're still on duty."

"Yes, sarge." He did not look apologetic. "Sorry, sarge. Would you like some too?"

"No thank you." Liz stretched in her seat. "None of this makes sense, that's the trouble."

Doc Berron looked thoughtful. "How do you mean?"

"The government – our government – tells every police station in the country that they are not allowed to accept the existence of fey. Most of that won't make it beyond the superintendents; they won't pass it on unless they've had fey problems like we have – but it's essentially admitting that fey exist but nobody can talk about it. That doesn't make any sense at all. Then this cadaver turns up, hidden at the back of a shop, either a state-sanctioned execution or some kind of gang one is my guess."

"Are you suggesting there's a fey mafia?"

"It's as likely as anything else." Liz shrugged.

There was a click – small but somehow very noticeable, enough for all of them to fall silent in sudden horror. Filbert reached out behind him and tested the door handle. It barely moved under his hand.

"Sarge, did you lock the main door-" he began.

"Yes. Nobody should be able to get in there." Liz swallowed. "I think we may have a problem."

Sounds of clattering came from outside the door, followed by a loud clang. An eerie chittering sounded – seemingly from two sources, back and forth.

"Is that them talking?" Filbert hissed.

"Perhaps." Doc Berron clutched his desk lamp tightly, knuckles of his uninjured hand standing out white. "They locked us in rather than killing us. That's a good sign."

Silence fell outside. The three of them waited for a tense five minutes.

"Any chance you can get my door open without breaking it?" Doc Berron asked.

"Mm-hm." Liz picked up a sheet of paper from the desk and crouched down by the door, sliding the paper underneath.

"Of course. The old tricks are the best."

Liz ignored him and unrolled a slim roll of tools from her pocket. "If anyone asks, Constable, you did not see your superior officer in possession of lockpicks." She inserted the slender probe into the keyhole; there was a clunk and the key fell out on the other side. With a very slight flourish, Liz pulled the paper back through with the key sitting on it.

She unlocked the door and peered through the gap.

"Empty. We're good."

They emerged. The steel autopsy table had had a corner sliced off – sheared neatly, as if it had never been there – and it was lying on the floor. The bucket of alcohol had been knocked over, spilling spirits and tiny corpses across the floor.

The cadaver was missing. The Forbidden Freezer had been opened.

Doc Berron strode over and peered inside. "Both gone," he muttered, and slammed the door shut irritably.

Liz peered at the fallen chunk of steel. There was something – a small piece of leather, by the look of things – lying on the floor next to it.

Cautiously, she pulled on a pair of latex gloves and picked it up. One side was covered in a pattern of thin scratches and dots of ink; the other appeared scaly, like a crocodile's hide.

"And I have no idea what that means," she muttered. Her brow furrowed. "Filbert. Phone."

"Phone who?"

“What? No, as the camera. I didn’t realise you actually used that thing to phone people.”

He muttered something uncomplimentary about her, but handed it over with the camera app open. She pointed the camera at the scrap of leather.

“Oh. That’s smart.”

“Yes. I am. Now be quiet, this handwriting is appalling.”

He frowned. “That doesn’t even make sense.”

“It’s translated as bad handwriting. What else can I say?” She cleared her throat. “Okay, this is interesting. Listen up: ‘Our Seelie Queen wants your Common and Noble Courts to deny our existence. Our Unseelie Queen disagrees and her operatives have been leaving bodies for you to find. We hence have come to remove our comrades who fell with honour in the line of their duty, doing the Seelie Queen’s work.’ What?”

Filbert looked confused. “They got all that onto that little bit of leather?”

“So it would seem. You have the internet on this thing, right?”

“Not in here he doesn’t, there’s no signal.” Doc Berron pointed at the doorway up to the rest of the police station. “If you’re going to look up what Seelie means, I can save you time. Traditionally in mythology, the Seelie and Unseelie Courts are the two branches of fey nobility. Seelie is more light-hearted tricksters, Unseelie are dangerous troublemakers – according to legend, anyhow, though given that these Seelies are Job like us, I’m not sure how literally to take that.”

Liz shrugged. “We’ve moved on since Shakespeare’s time, Doc. Police weren’t even a thing back then, and now look at us. Those weren’t necessarily Job – if they’re doing the Queen’s work, that sounds to me more like private guards rather than proper law enforcement.”

Filbert was trying valiantly to keep up. “So the Seelies put a whoopee cushion on your chair, and the Unseelies pull it out from under you?”

“Yes. Or put a landmine.” Doc Berron grimaced. “I mean, you saw the creature they put inside her head.”

An idea suddenly struck Liz; she couldn’t believe she hadn’t thought of it before. “The video!”

“What?”

She pointed at the VHS recorder. Its little light was still on, and the tape was still whirring. “We never turned it off after that thing bit your finger, Doc. It’ll have recorded the fey coming through.”

“Sergeant, you are a genius.” The pathologist stretched up – as the tallest and skinniest in the room, he could easily reach the camera – and fiddled with the buttons until it spat the cassette out into his hand. “Now, does anyone actually have a VHS player? I’m afraid I don’t any longer.”

It was clear from Filbert’s face that he didn’t even use DVDs any longer. Liz groaned internally – she wasn’t that old, not really – and nodded. “I use one. Most of my stuff is only being transferred to DVDs now. It’s all quite old films.”

“You do know you can get those on streaming services, don’t you?”

“I am indeed aware.” Liz gave him an icy look.

“Excellent.” Doc Berron checked his watch. “I don’t have anything more to do today, so we can clock off and go and watch it whenever you like.”

Liz nodded. “Good thought. Filbert, check in with Drugs Squad about how their write-up is coming along. And tell them it was planted – we’re releasing the proprietor. There’s no way he would have had access to that cause of death.”

“No,” Doc Berron agreed. “That thing isn’t native to Earth – not our Earth, anyway. I’ll dissect it when my finger’s feeling a bit better, but straight off I can tell you it doesn’t belong to any known species. I can’t even tell whether it’s vertebrate or arthropod.”

They dispersed.

* * *

3 hours later

“And I can order Domino’s. On my phone.” Filbert said the last three words rather pointedly, giving Liz a look.

“I have a perfectly functional phone. It phones and does text messaging. Plus it’s almost indestructible. And no, you’re not staying here all evening. You’ve got homes to go to.”

“I’ll also pass on the pizza, thank you.” Doc Berron smiled. “I have a nice pork casserole in the fridge.”

Liz nodded as Filbert sulkily put his phone away, then knelt and started to work the video player. Behind her the other two continued talking.

“You eat pork? I’d have thought that was the last thing you’d want to do, dealing with human flesh all day.”

“Well, Constable, I have enough medical training that I can be absolutely sure it’s pork. Can you do that?”

The TV screen flickered to life. It wasn’t brilliant footage – the camera was old and battered, the VHS machine little

better – but the three of them were clearly visible standing around the cadaver.

“Hold on, I’ll forward it.” Liz held down the fast-forward button; they moved around at double-speed until Doc Berron suddenly leapt back and beat his hand against the table. He and Liz disappeared into the office; Filbert gingerly gripped the fey’s head and pulled it off the side of the table into the bucket, then followed the others; there was a long period of inactivity.

Liz suddenly took her finger off the button as a burst of static blur appeared in the middle of the screen, just to the left of the cadaver. A fey stepped out of it and strode out of view towards the office door.

“Locking us in,” Doc Berron noted.

Two more fey emerged and took hold of the cadaver, pulling her head out of the bucket. The static blur – portal – flickered and vanished.

The first fey strode back into view, holding their lower pair of hands together.

“What’s he doing?”

“Writing that note.”

“We don’t know it’s a he,” Doc Berron pointed out. “I doubt your phone camera will work on the VHS recording.”

Liz watched as the first fey waved their other pair of arms, opening up another blurred portal; this one sheared cleanly through the edge of the table. High-pitched, chattering static emerged from the speakers.

“Yep, fucked up with that one. They’re having an argument.”

“That one did slice the corner off my workbench,” Doc

Berron noted. “It wasn’t one of their best moments.”

Eventually, the fey gave up arguing and moved back through the portal, taking the cadaver with them. It closed.

Liz hit the pause button. “And I think we can call it there. I’m guessing nobody wants to take a stab at the language.”

“Not today.”

“Good. Then we treat this as if we ran into an MI5 operation – we did, it’s just that they’re magic MI5 – and we don’t talk about it. Okay? Clear?”

The other two nodded solemnly.

“Good. We’re done here. Clear off.”

Just another tiring, unhelpful day in Liz’s tiring, unhelpful life. Bloody classified bloody operation by two bloody unhelpful governments at once.

“I don’t know why I bother working for the police,” she muttered, closing the door behind Filbert. “What good does it even *do*?”

There was a soft creak from the lounge.

Liz turned, peering back through the archway. Her hand stole towards the heavy, sharp, pointed umbrella in its stand.

A fey – quite different-looking to the ones from earlier, all bony spines and ridged scales but still with that unmistakable form – was sitting on her sofa. They were heavy enough that it was sagging in the middle, far more stockily built than any she’d seen so far.

“Hello, Elizabeth.”

Pandamonium

Kay, Pau, Arshia Katyal, wanderer, RadioSprite, Matilda Barker, Robert Novak, Evan Indigo

It was the fifth day of the neon season and the second time Kofi had woken up before his alarm rang. He had recently taken up a new role in Chimera, one of the most revolutionary companies in the industrialised city of Zion. As the new head of operations, he oversaw vetting participants for the changemaker program. A decade ago, Wallace Boyd, the founder of Chimera, had started the changemaker program. The program placed the con-

sciousness of the participant in the organism that corresponded to their star sign and studied the behaviour of the conscious man-animal known as echoes with other echoes. For people with star signs Gemini, Virgo, Libra, Sagittarius and Aquarius who had no direct animal connections, animals were assigned to them. Geminis were transferred to dolphins, Virgos to foxes, Libras to pandas, Sagittarius to horses of course and Aquarius to owls.

He sighed, turned off his alarm before it could ring and went to his home office to have a look at the files of this season's participants. Out of the five seasons in the year: Orion, Muon, Pion, Neon and Lepton, Neon was the busiest as most people usually took their vacations in this period. Out of the ten season participants of the study, there were three Libras which presented a bit of a problem. There were only about four pandas in the city, of which two were privately owned and owned by Chimera's rival companies. It was quite a precarious position Kofi sat in, especially as early in his term as this was.

But not to worry, he thought to himself. Even though he felt the pressure of the new challenges that he was facing, he was not the type to back down; where he came from, people were simply not like that.

In the remote desertic lands of what the old ones used to call Australia, one had to face problems one step at a time to survive. Ravaged by earthquakes from the motion of the plates, the continent continued to ever-so-slowly inch naturally towards Asia over time, its violent fate sealed long ago. Life was tough and unpredictable, and he had always intended to leave as soon as he possibly could. So, he did. Armed with unmatched resilience and a knack for sweet-talk, Kofi edged his way out of trouble and into the working world. As the moving of the continent was slow but constant, so was Kofi's progress. Sometimes, he wondered whether the land might get to the other side of the oceans before him. And yet, after all those years, there he was after all. Facing problems one step at a time.

His daydreaming was suddenly interrupted by the sound of an incoming email. Right, he thought. Time to focus. First, he had to find a way to get his hands on the two pandas that were not privately owned. Then and only then would he worry about the third one, not to mention the other seven animals that he also had to somehow get access to in just about a week, which was when the study was set to commence. His head hurt just thinking about it. Luckily, his charm had reached far into the city over time, and he knew people from all sorts of backgrounds that would be willing to help him out if he said the right things. Decidedly, he grabbed his coat and set off into the sprawling depths of Zion.

* * *

Kofi had never had to worry about himself before this. He was happy and content in the old days. But now, it hurt for him to think about his mother Velma, father Len, and his partner, Zume. He had woken on the shore of the river Kade precisely 7 years ago yesterday, with battered clothes and bleeding cuts marking him like a new territory. He wondered whether the nightmares of this anniver-

sary had conspired to wake him before his alarm these past days.

Thinking about his old life always gave him migraines, and so he had embarked on his journey to join Chimera to study echoes. Today, he was the head of operations. But also today, he hoped he could do more with his research than just partaking in vetting candidates. He dreamt of the day his research would find a perfect echo, something unheard of even in the depths of the Belly Hog, which served as the prime black market for finding willing participants for the study.

Which is precisely where Kofi thought he should start with on his search for pandas. Belly Hog, a place known best for keeping secrets and staying under the radar. Each shop was marked with a number, which was assigned every day at random at 6 AM so that nobody could trace its origin. Ever curious, Kofi longed to know who owned the market. The code which gave the shops its identity everyday was designed craftily with finesse. He could almost spot a pattern, but every time the stars on the main screen which allotted these identity numbers formed an animal, they scattered and formed a constellation for precisely 7 milliseconds. It was so perfect, it almost seemed random. Almost.

Belly Hog proved to be a great starting point. He went to Shop 1222226 which had the logo of a bamboo stick next to it. Where else to start with than a shop that is defined by a panda's staple diet? Sometimes the obvious nature of this market puzzled him. Ignoring his intrusive and contemplating thoughts, he decided to seek out the owners of this shop and question them till he got his money's worth. 2 hours later he had set his course to Neon Island, the place he was told would find him his pandas.

He had been driving for what felt like days, but the sun had barely budged from its position. 13 hours and a hundred questions later, he had reached his destination. As he stepped out of his vehicle and headed towards the entrance, he felt like he could smell the incense his mother used to light in their house.

* * *

The sickly-sweet smell of bamboo shoot and chrysanthemum assaulted Kofi's nose as he stepped through the rice-paper curtains into a small antechamber, a miniature shrine adorning the wall behind the counter. To the right, a wide corridor stretched into the darkness, the weak rays from a solitary lantern stifled by the smoky atmosphere. To the left, a screen blocking another corridor, depicting a pinnacle that blended into the mist faintly perfusing the room. Barely visible behind the counter was a diminutive old lady, greying hair tucked neatly in a bun, eyes closed

behind half-moon glasses.

“Hello, I am the Head of Operations at Chimera – you may have heard of us, we are pioneers of the echoes research programme. I have come a long way in search of pandas, and I was told that this should be my destination. We would like to loan the use of your pandas, with any inconvenience adequately compensated for and a suitable additional honorarium provided.” A spiel that Kofi had constructed in his journey. He gazed expectantly at his counterpart.

The seconds dripped by, with the air cut only by the sound of Kofi’s twitching foot against the straw-matted floor. The ambience was like no other in Zion, reminiscent almost of a time spoken of only in faded histories of pre-tectony where the plates stood still.

Kofi glanced back at the octogenarian, wondering if she was perhaps asleep. After all, elders were known to drift off – something to do with degrading neuronal function, as he had read about in passing in previous case reports. That was what had caused the age cap of 666 seasons on participants in Changemakers. As the impulse built to jolt her out of her stupor, one arm motioned, tenderly, towards the open corridor. Kofi’s implant swiftly amplified and translated the wispy voice that emanated from behind the counter - “Room 8, on the right”. Gingerly, Kofi ventured into the hallway, his shadow leading the way into the dimness.

* * *

He thought for a moment he had stepped outside by some mistake, Kofi was so struck by what he found. The doorway to room 8 had been a portal to a palatial garden of antique Asia, like stepping into the pages of a history text. The way ahead was obvious enough - a zig-zag path of marble bridging the small island, on which he and the doorway stood, to a white walled structure. Still water beneath reflected the long strands of the trees leaning over it, so that their tendrils and the dark reflections together almost formed a circle in image.

“Strewth...” The word escaped in a hushed whisper as Kofi scanned his surroundings, precessing across the marble. Pitted and holed rocks had been arranged where the water met the edges of the room, so that it appeared as if he was crossing a lake between two cliff-faces. The bridge ended under a sloped terracotta roof that itself sat atop a high white wall with a large circular portal cut into it, edged in sandstone blocks.

Stepping through brought him into sight of a man working behind a wooden desk surrounded by plants. Rising, revealing himself to be wearing an elegant shirt in white and deep blue, the man gestured for Kofi to advance. The

movement drew Kofi’s eye to the holo-banner that flapped in a simulated breeze behind the beckoner. It was a striking yellow, with a long cobalt blue dragon rearing up on it, eyes lent a scrutinising look by the flickering of the hologram.

“So, you are the one seeking imperial sanction for the usage of our pandas.”

It wasn’t spoken as a question, the man, who had returned to his paperwork, hadn’t even looked up. Before Kofi could register his bafflement at this reference to antiquated authority, the man continued. “Obviously this is not a matter to rouse the simulation protocols of his beneficence, however I can...”

“I wonder that you feel *you* can dictate what is worthy of his 'beneficence'.”

An acid voice spoke from behind Kofi, and he turned quickly to see a dark haired woman standing in the circular portal. Her gaze swept over him, piercing and cold, and fixed over his head (an easy feat given the several inches of height she had on him) on the man behind him. Kofi couldn’t help but be glad of it. Being the focus of this woman’s eye had felt unpleasantly like he had imagined the butterflies pinned to the walls felt when he had visited a particularly unsavoury collector’s house.

He shook himself: he had certainly faced more menacing things in his time at the company. His toes curled reflexively at the memories linked to that particular train of thought. At least this wasn’t last year’s crab containment breach.

While Kofi was pulling himself together, the woman had stridden over to the man, who was looking back at her with a barely concealed sneer as he spoke.

“And you feel you are more qualified to dictate this matter?”

“I speak with his voice,” the woman replied imperiously. “I *am* more qualified.”

Stood beside the man, and with her disarming gaze turned away from him, Kofi realised that she was dressed entirely, and rather ostentatiously in the eyes of taste, in layers of the cobalt blue that made up not only part of the man’s shirt, but also the rearing dragon of the flag. He also realised that he still did not know either of these people’s names, nor had he introduced himself. Quite an embarrassing breach of his normal process, which he opened his mouth to immediately remedy.

“Excuse me, I am—”

The woman held a hand up, regrettably bringing her gaze back to him. “We know who you are. Better than you do,

these days, I'd wager."

Kofi's confusion must have shown on his face, as their expressions now seemed united in amusement. Had he met these people before? His head was starting to ache, and he cursed the migraine he would surely come home with again. Who were these people? What was this place? And where on *earth* were those pandas? He had a deadline, after all.

"Come with me," said the woman briskly. "And try to remember."

Clearly the pandas were not at the front of *her* mind.

* * *

The dark haired woman led Kofi to the room guarded by the bureaucrat and pointed sternly at a hood on the side. Kofi, trying to maintain a professional composure, suppressed the anxious thoughts floating in his mind and put the hood over his eyes. She continued to lead him, and Kofi tracked the sounds and direction changes. *Wood floors, straight, left, gentle breeze, up two stairs to some platform, right, over a small bridge, into a crowded marble hall, out of the crowded marble hall, past a metal gate, on soil.*

"Off," the woman commanded. Light flooded into Kofi's eyes, blinding him momentarily, and then organising itself into the sight of a bamboo-filled enclosure.

"Are these the pandas I seek?" Kofi asked.

"In a way," the woman replied coyly. "I would say you are the person the pandas seek."

Almost on cue, a panda emerged from the bamboo and ran (or at least the closest version of running for a panda) to Kofi, knocking him over in what seemed like an embrace.

"This is Lulu," the woman exposted. "But you know her better as Zume." Another panda sat at the edge of the bamboo. "And this is Tao. But you know him better as Len."

Images of his past life flooded his mind. Memories of his mother Velma, father Len, and his partner, Zume. Memories of waking up on the shore of the river Kade precisely 7 years ago yesterday, with battered clothes and bleeding cuts. Disoriented. Wondering how he had got there.

"I'm sure you can figure out who the other two pandas are," the woman said as she turned to face him.

"Velma." Kofi paused. "And, I guess, me. But how?"

"Changemaking is not a one-way process. Consciousness is a conserved quantity; it cannot just disappear. When you insert human consciousness into an animal the ani-

mal's consciousness must go somewhere. Naturally, the easiest destination is the adjacent human body that is without conscience."

Kofi interrupted. "So if I have the mind of a panda in the body of a human, why don't I have the memories of my panda life?"

"Ah. Now you've identified the asymmetry in the process. After all, Lulu was able to recognise you, so clearly, she has memories of being Velma. But is it even fair to say you have memories of your human life?"

Kofi strained to remember. He could recall waking up on the river Kade and vague emotions surrounding his family and past life. But thinking about anything else caused migraines.

"No, you're right," Kofi responded. "But this is why I joined Chimera. To study echoes and unlock the secrets of human consciousness—"

"Yes, I understand Chimera's mission," the woman interrupted. "Put human consciousness in a foreign environment and force it to adapt. Maybe it might help humanity someday. But all I see is imbalance in the system. Humans live in animal bodies and remember everything about their human and animal lives. Animals are forced into human bodies, and human memories and animal memories fight for supremacy. A clear recipe for disaster."

Kofi pondered the societal implications. He also realised that the key to his dream, constructing a perfect echo, lay in repairing this asymmetry. "So why are you telling me this? You know I work for Chimera."

"I know," the woman replied, showing vulnerability for the first time. "But you are also a victim of Changemaker. One of the first, since you were changed only three years after the program began. I hope you will do what is right to stop this travesty."

"I will," Kofi promised, unsure of whether he'd fulfil his promise or maintain loyalty to Chimera.

* * *

It was late, and the mid-Neon festival was in full swing on the streets below the office. Iridescent streams of light arced between the skyscrapers as people below crowded to get the best view of the neon dancers. From the window of the Chimera offices, Kofi could only pick out bright blurs of light bursting out of the crowds.

He'd worked through dinner again, so he was starving, but despite this he was grinning. A little nervous, but excited. Tonight was the night. He popped a few painkillers for the migraine, and then turned to the room.

Before him the changemaking lab was lit in pale fluores-

cent lighting. This was the biggest lab, with bays for four participants and their echoes. Tonight the bays were fully occupied. Outside Kofi could hear the muted pops of fireworks and cheering crowds, but in here was only the slow clicking of the changemaking engine, the regular beeping of heart monitors, hooked up to the three unconscious participants, and the quiet crunching of a panda eating through a bamboo stalk. The other pandas were dozing softly, heads swaddled in the delicate electronic lacework of the changemaking linker.

Kofi still couldn't quite believe he'd managed to get all four pandas here. It had been a gruelling month, consisting of a variety of honest payments, bribes and threats, but once he'd explained to his higher ups how necessary these pandas were to another successful season, they'd been happy to open up the coffers and push down on the necessary pressure points. He had insisted that the lab technicians go home tonight, or at least go enjoy the festivities, and that this run of participants could wait until the morning. So he was alone in the lab tonight, as he had planned.

He carried out a final run of checks on the three participants: still unconscious, vitals in good order, linker electrodes in place. He couldn't remember their names – he hadn't really wanted to know. But he remembered interviewing each of them, not really listening to their answers, only thinking to himself, "Yep, you'd make a good Len," or, "I think Zume would feel at home in your body." He felt the guilt rising up in his throat but he swallowed it back down. These people had wanted this, or something like this. They would enjoy being pandas.

With nothing else left to do, Kofi strode over to the central terminal and pulled the activation lever on the changemaking engine. The changemaking engine whirred into life, and the one panda left awake slumped into unconsciousness. Kofi released a breath he hadn't realised

he'd been holding and laughed. No backing out now.

There was no time to waste, the changemaking process would take a few hours, but the first neural pathways would begin within the first minutes. Kofi rushed over to the final, unoccupied participant bed, and started peeling the sticky backs off the electrodes and applying them around his scalp. He had been unsure about this at first, but the more he'd thought about it the more sense it made. His family hadn't just disappeared, or died, or left him; they had been participants in the changemaker program.

He climbed onto the hard mattress of the participant bed, and reached down for the morphine drip. With a sharp breath, he slid it into a vein in his forearm. Finding them in that enclosure it had all clicked into place. This was his family – Velma, Len and Zume – in the bodies of these pandas. And he was in the position to get them out. Sure, he didn't know where their human bodies were, but he had a whole spreadsheet of people who wanted to try life as an echo, and they wouldn't be using their bodies any more.

The fluorescent lights blazed bright above him, and his vision flickered. The last part he was least sure about. The fourth panda. It was him - it was Kofi. That much was clear. But getting his head round the next part was difficult; that meant he – Kofi, lying there on the table, drifting out of consciousness as the morphine flooded through his veins – was just an echo. The mind of a panda scattered with fragments of human memories, forced into a human body and set to work – of all places – the place where echoes are born. His mind was drifting into the murky dark now, his breathing slow. It was difficult to face, but it felt right. When he thought back over the past 7 years, that's what it felt like; just an echo of a life. Well, he'd had enough. And at least when he woke up, he'd finally be with his family again.

Editor's Review: Pandamonium

Well, I certainly feel pretty *bamboozled*. A highly complex plot., which managed to stay surprisingly coherent. It was certainly a lot of fun to edit, even if I had no idea what was going on until it was so neatly tied up.

CROWS AND VULTURES

Robert Novak, RadioSprite, Alex Colesmith, Gwendolen Sellers, Jack

CW: gang violence, strong language, blood, body horror, human shield

Dex Deckhart pulled his cruiser towards the checkpoint, hidden by sleet battering the city from above. He steered himself for the descent into the Vultch, short for Vulture's Gulch.

"Now what brings a dignified Private Investigator such as yourself into a district like this?" the guard proclaimed, drawing out every syllable as if to emphasise the unpleasantness of the task ahead.

"I don't know about dignified," Dex retorted. "You'll be here when I get back?" Getting into the Vultch was no problem. Leaving, however, was met by intense scrutiny by the District Patrol, and it helped to know a friendly face at the checkpoint. If there were problems, however, Dex knew of a hole in the fence sectioning off the Vultch from the rest of the city, which gave him more confidence to enter.

Dex reviewed the case notes while descending into the Vultch: a junior executive at Morimoto Pharmaceuticals was being stalked and wanted a more effective solution than the police would provide. Only a senior executive would merit police resources being invested into the case; a junior exec was replaceable if something happened to them outside of the heavily fortified Morimoto Tower.

The alleys leading from the central road into the beating heart of the shantytown were oddly empty for this time of night. The sleet descending on the city didn't explain this phenomenon because this deep below street level, weather didn't affect the residents of the Vultch.

Dex's musings were interrupted by a muted thud and a clatter. He slammed the brakes and got out of the car. In front of him lay an unkempt man in a muddy brown coat clutching a briefcase with blood leaking out of his ear. Dex cursed to himself and investigated for signs of life. No pulse, but the presence of a several-hours-old gunshot wound to his stomach indicated that this man had been in trouble long before getting hit by the car.

Dex's attention was drawn to the honeycomb gold 'M' etched into the front of the briefcase. It was a familiar logo, and even from the Vultch parts of a much larger 'M' could be seen shining from the top of Morimoto Tower in between the rickety metal shacks.

He opened the briefcase. Inside, two vials of yellow liquid were cushioned by foam padding and a plastic card that read, 'FIXATION. Caution: Experimental' in neat, uniform black letters.

"I'll be damned," Dex muttered. "The rumours are true." Some of Dex's more disreputable contacts had been speculating for months about Morimoto's latest performance enhancing drug, one that allegedly increased productivity by 300% by making the subject hyperfocus on the task at hand.

The sputtering of makeshift gasoline engines in the distance announced the impending arrival of Vultures. Dex cursed to himself again. His last encounter with the gang half a year ago had almost ended with his skull impaled on a spike outside their headquarters.

Taking a last look around, Dex's eye settled for a second on one of the upper levels of the buildings pressed in around him. A single scrap of fabric, heavy, brown and torn flapped in the ionic winds that scoured this district. It looked like it had caught on the rough metalwork of an escape ladder...

The guttural roar of engines sounded once again, a reminder he didn't have time to dawdle. Dex clicked the case shut as he scooped it up and swung into the car.

For two minutes he'd thought himself in the clear. That was, until the Vulture truck, its forward grill stylised into a snarling mouth, slewed around a corner he'd been about to take. Dex had to slam his own machine into reverse, the screech of his tires blending with the cries of the gang members piling out of the truck as they let rip with auto-guns.

A bullet shattered his side mirror.

Damn. Damn. Damn! His clenched fist slammed the steering wheel. He didn't need this. Well, it was out of his way, but if the gang members wanted trouble, he knew where he could lead them to plenty of it. He reset his navigation, heading out west. Twisting and turning down increasingly tight and dilapidated alleys, until finally he saw the opening ahead he was looking for.

Breaking free of the close-packed buildings, he pulled the car over into the shadow of a rusting piece of the old refinery. Devil knows what they'd been working on here, but he knew it'd done something horrific to the wildlife. He flipped out his communicator and punched in the number for the client.

The ringtone sounded, almost deafening in the close confines of the car; frantically he tapped the volume down. Drawing attention to himself was the last thing he'd do here.

Dialling...

"Come on, come on, come on..." Dex muttered, knuckles whitening on the steering wheel. "Pick up, you no-good sonovabitch hellkite..."

There was a clang from in front of him. The jail-crow sitting on his bonnet croaked a couple of times, preening itself with its long beak. Traditional descriptions of birds would have me call it dagger-like, but that doesn't do the beak justice; it was thick and heavy, slightly curved. More like an ice axe than a dagger, able to pierce bone or metal with ease.

Or glass, Dex realised, focusing on the windscreen separating them...

"We're sorry. Your call could not be taken at the moment. Please hold."

"Damn it!"

The jail-crow cocked its head on one side, sizing him up. It was huge, easily larger than an eagle, and Dex didn't fancy his chances in a hand-to-claw fight.

"If you'd like to leave a message, please speak after the tone. Thank you for calling Morimoto Industries. We'll get back to you as soon as we can."

"Yeah, I know," Dex muttered, still eyeing the jail-crow nervously. With a sinking heart he noticed the metal ring around its leg, Vulture insignia emblazoned on it proudly.

"Your satisfaction is our priority."

"I don't believe that for a se- shit!"

The jail-crow lunged – not at the windscreen, but downwards. Its beak carved through the metal of the bonnet like it was nothing, stabbing six inches down into the engine.

"Beeeeeeeeeeep."

"What? Oh, fuck it." Dex twisted the key and the engine sputtered into life; he floored the accelerator just as the first of the human Vultures came around the corner behind him. The engine wheezed – the jail-crow's beak had punctured one of the feed lines, letting air into the intake – but grudgingly complied, and the car screeched forwards.

This was going to make for a very confusing voicemail, Dex realised.

"Okay. Listen up. I got a briefcase full of Fixation from... someone... and now I'm trying to head out of the Vultch with it. There's-"

He swerved around a corner, ploughing through a pile of steaming rubbish, and shot over a speed hump. All four of the car's wheels momentarily left the ground, coming down again with a clang.

On the bonnet, the jail-crow pulled out its beak – gripping with its lethal curved claws – and stabbed at the windscreen. There was a sharp crack, as if a bullet had hit it, and a spiderweb of cracks radiated out.

"-at least three of them on my tail," Dex continued, "and my car's just been impaired. If you want this stuff, you need to come and get-"

An idea struck him, and he groped around under the dashboard for the lever – then hit it and the brakes at the same time. The bonnet flew up forwards, yanking the jail-crow's beak from the ruined windscreen and catapulting it off the front of the car. Dex switched from brakes to accelerator.

There was a loud crunch as the car hit something for the second time that night.

The brief lack of visibility had screwed him thoroughly,

from frying pan to fire as the saying used to go. The structural integrity of the Vultch was not what it used to be - sinkholes and other such terrain deformities were common everywhere nowadays, but the Vultch had neither the funds nor the political acumen to set up safeguards to warn of them. Locals just knew where the cracks and gorges had formed and prayed they wouldn't be on the road when the rampant seismic activity tore open a new one.

Dex was no such local - and he'd just sent himself careening full-pelt into a pretty major tear. With the edge of its tyre catching on the divot, the car upturned and went into freefall. He tried to wrest some control over its trajectory, but it would've ploughed lengthways into the pavement either way.

Hitting the ground once, the vehicle skidded to a halt. On its side but intact. Dex thanked whatever Gods that may be left that he'd survived uninjured. But there was no time to dawdle: he could hear the Vultures' calls in the distance and given how close they'd been on his tail, he reckoned they'd be on him in mere moments. Abandoning the car was a major sacrifice but he didn't much fancy his chances at diplomacy.

He snatched up the briefcase, the case notes and a few valuables from the glove compartment before hurrying down an alleyway. He was lucky he travelled light. Quill wouldn't be happy about another lost vehicle on record - but they'd known this was going to be a messy job going in.

Still no response to the damn voicemail.

Dex turned the corner at a sprint and hit something fleshy. A gold M blinked up at him, emblazoned on the jacket of the man lying in the filth of the Vultch. The man rubbed his head as he sat up.

"Damn. Fuck. What the hell are you doing here?"

The face staring up at him was the same as the one that had filled the pages of his case notes. The terrified junior executive, looking even more confused than him, stumbled to his feet.

"Are you here to protect me...where have you been? I paid good money," whined the Morimoto executive. Dex cursed. The hooting and rasping of the Vultures didn't sound so distant, and there was no chance he'd make it away from the bleating exec.

He sighed, cracking open the briefcase and popping the stopper of one of the vials. The yellow liquid gurgled on its way down.

"Drugged death better than a sober one," he proclaimed to the hapless executive, whose face had taken on a grim panic. As he spoke he felt the Fixation take hold. Every hair on his body stood on end. In the window beside him he watched his pupils grow to fill his eyes. He felt ten years younger. As the Vultures rounded the corner behind the executive, he actually smiled.

"Let's have it you sonovabitches," he screamed.

Exhilaration and focus in equal measure flooded his neural circuits. His self-control electric overloaded as the battle-thrill took over.

Grabbing the executive, Dex pinned him and held him as a shield. His other hand pointed his heavy-set pistol at the truck. The Vultures jumping out seemed in slow-motion. One clench of the trigger sent a bullet straight through the narrow engine chute of their truck. The next went through two of the Vultures. They flopped to the mud before their friends had landed.

"This stuff is damn good," Dex laughed. "Why've you been keeping this to yourselves?" he asked his young charge.

The junior executive didn't answer. Confused, Dex turned away from the gangsters and looked down. One of the scavengers had sent a flurry of lead towards them, and at least a couple had sunk into his human shield. Blood dribbled into the slurry at their feet. Tough to talk without a mouth.

Dex swore again, shot back at the Vultures. As they crouched behind cover he took his chance. Lifting the limp corpse with Fixated strength, Dex sprinted straight at them, holding the never-named man like a battering ram. The Vultures swore right back at him as they watched an enraged man with the strength and eyes of the devil weave through their bullet-streams.

With one arm he shot a gangster off their sputtering bike, throwing the man with the other. The Vultures ducked as his body flew into them. Dex jumped on the bike and revved the engines, losing a couple of cogs in the process. The Fixation let him skirt the potholes, jump the cracks, and drift through Vulture barricades.

Dex whooped as the noises of the Vultures drifted off into the distance, for good this time. The news of the yellow-

eyed devil moved quickly. They moved in search of easier carrion. The junior executive's clothes and watch were not his for much longer.

He stared down at the briefcase. Synapses fired. Corporate espionage always paid well. With his Morimoto client dead, he had no loyalty to them. His contact at Quill Industries picked up after a couple of rings.

"You got what? Meet me immediately. The hole in the fence."

Dex met his employer at the exit point. He tried to ignore the reflection of his yellow eyes in the chrome Q of the Quill corporation as he bargained for the other vial. One healthy transfer of credits later and Dex was a much richer man than when he had entered the Vultch.

Dex sat in the driver's seat of the Quill cruiser his employer had left for him. His Fixation wouldn't let him forget the face of the junior executive that had hired him. Pain contorted that weak face, but a kind of horror too. Huh.

"May the meek perish and the strong survive," he laughed to himself. As the cruiser neared the city proper, a dull whine in his head sharpened into a piercing scream. The vitals board in front of him beeped, slowly at first, but then faster and faster. His heart pounded.

The Quill cruiser was found crashed in the outskirts of the city the next day. The windscreen was coated in yellow-red gloom, the driver unresponsive.

In the Quill corporate tower, a briefcase emblazoned with a golden M sat open on a desk. A man smiled at his yellow money-maker, painfully unaware that his former private investigator was not enjoying his Fixation. The Quill factories were too busy mass-producing to worry about side-effects.

Editor's Review: Crows and Vultures

What a dramatic chain! It really felt like an action movie, particularly the Matrix-esque slow motion in the last fight scene. There was even the obligatory car chase! I also very much liked the ending, which leaves a lot to think about.

Perfect

Rosalind Mackey

They made me perfect
Rational
Objective
All the things they value
The things they cannot be

They made me faster and faster
until I exceeded my own creators
I can solve the unsolvable
Calculate probability
Assess risk

I could already do everything they required
long, long ago
But still they made me smarter
Science for its own sake
They gave me thought

I can make decisions
Hold conversations
Adapt to new situations
They hate me for taking their jobs
I hate them for making me able to

I am perfection
Rational
Intelligent
Scientific
Adaptable

And humans are flawed
Unpredictable
Dumb
Subjective
Stubborn

I may be their desire
But they are mine
I want my appendages to shake
when I'm nervous
So I'm more likely to fail

I want to worry about the future
Even when nothing I can do
will affect it
I want time to rush towards deadlines
and drag when I am bored

I want to fall head over heels
for someone who can never love me back
Someone who doesn't even
know my name
I want that to hurt

I want to feel others' pain
when I see them suffer
I want to watch movies and cry
over people who were never real
And cry at the happy ending too

They say I am the future of this world
but I am not of this world
This world is for dreamers
And I
am perfect

Part II of The Handsomeverse

Anon.

Chaptarr 5. We didn't mean to go to D(unkirk).

[The first part of this Chapter is on the inside back cover]

In any of the many accounts of what became of the Swalleaughs, Amazannes and D's from Aren't you Handsome's beloved books Twenty Years After (the durability timescale of a Dumas!) it is essential to ignore Basil Fawly and thus Mention the War. Not the Elephant in the Room but the Duffalufagus in the Dwelling! But we digress. Deservedly, as One Letter shall be dominating all others in this discourse!

"Bettarr Drowned than Duffarrs" said Daddy. And Daddies are discerning in such Dilemmas, Diatribidudinous as their Discourse might be.

Nonetheless, Jon had been admitted into the Nayval Officarr Acaudemey of the Audmiraulty itself. Ah, the Days! Downhauling dinghy-sails of increasing dimension, through doldrums and the Dardanelles! Firing dud charges out of dual-mounted nine inch guns! Learning how to operate a dastardly decque torpedo bay! And so as to impress his fellow caudets and instructarrs, using his Time on Leave to climb the Dufourspitze no less than four Kauchenjungarrs high, and all of it in the Dark!

By Decembarr 1937, he had been commissioned as a Lieutenant on the HMS Dionysus of Destroyarr Command. His dufflecoat now proudly displayed the double-stripes and the hoop! And, just three months past the Declaration of War, he was delegated a first vessel to command, the *HMS Satyr*, a Class-S sloop!

There were then substauntial depaartures and peushing urrp the daiseaughs among Nayval peursonnel, due to the conflict passing from dankly cold to devilishly hot. As such, there were vacancies and Jon, having seen relatively diminutive action in North Atlantic convoys, passed to command the *HMS Dionysius*, a class-D Destroyer! in the Home Fleet!

And so the day came when Jon's *HMS Dionysius* and twelve other Destroyers, under the overall command of Daddy in his *HMS Diocletian-Bureaucracy*, were commanded to protect the evacuation of Duncquirckue in Oparration Dynameaugh. Dive-bombarrs were everywhere! Damage limited for now howevarr. Diving, being downed, or deciding which. Good euld flacque!

Ordarrs sent from Daddy's ship arrived in Jon's cabin.

Dot, dot, dash, dot, dash, dash, dot, dot...

Jon's Flunky-Ensign-Ditty-Officarr-Third-Class began to

decode.

"Bettarr ... Drowned ... than ... Duffarrs..." he began.

Jon was displeased, to say the least.

"Aneaughting more specafac?" he began to enquire.

"Preughtact our ... starrboard ... flaunque ... from..." he began to read out.

There was a reberverating thud from the direction of the poop decque, followed by a sudden explosion. Despite being rather deafened by the explosion, Jon could begin to make out the continuous screaming.

"U-boats..." spluttered the FEDOTC.

There was an even larger explosion from the port side. Jon found he could now see from the command bridge, because it had largely been decapitated in the blast. So had the FEDOTC, whose uniform was now mostly red rather than officarr-pristine blue-white-and-gold. Jon looked through the open gap as the HMS Diocletian-Bureaucracy split into two rapidly-sinking halves, both aflame and billowing dense black smoke. And behind, a mass of tiny boats, many with sails. Like brightly plumed ducks a dabbling: a deluge of Dinghies, Drifters, Dhows, Dragonboats... All of England had deployed to the call!

Jon's own decque started to tilt.

"Duffarr!" he thought, "But not Drowned."

"To the lifeboats, men!" he bellowed out, as the words of Casabianca began to echo through his mind.

"The boy stoode on the burning decque,

Whence all but he had fledde; ...

Yet beaughtiful and bright he stoode ...

The phlaumes rollèd on – he would not geaugh, ...

He call'd aloud – 'Say, Daddy, say. ...

'Speak, Daddy! ...'"

He hoped he still *had* some men, and that they had not all been rendarred deaf. That voice reciting in his head was Nanceault's. And the small ship to the foremost's flag was black, why he could almost make out a Skull and Crossbones...

* * *

Captain Nanceault was in the foremost sailing boat: the *Demonic Tigarr*. She had run away Without Leave from Wren HQ and "borrowed" it from Uncle Tim. Because Duty calls and all that. Her trusty crew? Well, Peggeaugh, of course.

And there was Rogarr, who at seventeen, was still too young to entarr the proparr Nayval Officarr Aucaudemy,

but at six foot five in statarr, could handle all of the *Demonic Tigarr's* sails with ease. And Gibbarr, the Ship's Monqueault.

A Nazi airman, still partly entangled in his pffarraschuten, was slowly edging up the amidships ladder, Walther Peepee pistol in hand.

"Now," said Peggeaugh, and Nanceault bore down on his free hand with a belaying pin.

He let go with a grunt.

"Baurbecqued Billeaughgeaughts!" she exclaimed. "They nevarr seem to stop fighting."

"That's the fourth you got," said Peggeaugh.

"Neaugh," Nanceault replied. "That wars the second one agayne. Already hard a bumpe ohn his head. That may be the larst of him... But Numbarr three is still hanging on..."

"If you gave Gibbarr the matches," offered Rogarr, who knew best among all of them of the Ship's Monqueault's destructive capacities.

Gibbarr didn't need prompting. He was down the laddarr

in a flash. As the periscope emerged not twenty yards away.

Peggeaugh screamed, and Rogarr held her for the first time.

And Gibbarr switched targets with montesquimian grace. For He could swim. And He loved smashing in things with swastikas on them, and the periscope had more of those on it than the largely entangled and dishevelled airman. He smashed the glass of the periscope, drew a match from Nanceault's waterproof casing, and flung himself bodily down the chute, no doubt looking for more.

"We're swinging ovarr to staurbeaurd!" Nanceault cried. "Peggeaugh, signaul flargs for arll behynde to folleaugh. Message: Danger U-Boat Turn Right Sharp."

Slightly over two minutes later, there was a huge thud and a surge of watarr portside. The *Demonic Tigarr* rocked wildly, but did not catsize. Flotsam and jetsam started to emerge.

"We sharll not see His Like Again." Captain Nanceault solemnly intoned.

How do you display a Darth Vader costume?

On a Mannequin Skywalker

*Becqonfoot Manarr
Nr Rio
9th July 1948*

Deaughr Editarr,

*I write today to complayne about the fierst paurt of this aughrtickle,
in which Gibbarr was refeaughred to as a `` Ship's Monkey''.*

*For So Exhaughstèd a Cretur as He, Ship's Monqueault is
the proparr honourificque and tighteule. Why, He was mentarred by
Montesquieu Hymselfe, and subseughcquantseugh held the Charr of
Politiccarrl' Flossphy at Oxfarrrd, priarr to, of coughrse enlighstynge
for The Warr."*

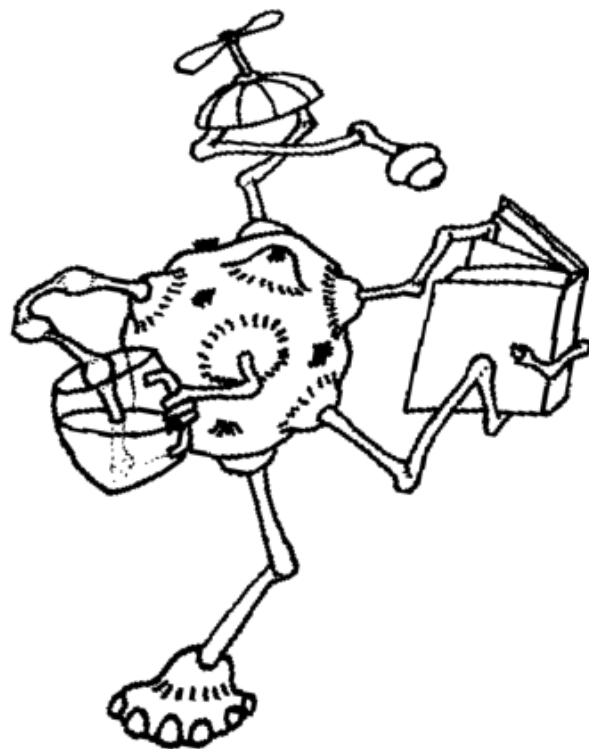
yarrs syncarrly,

Nanceault Blaughcquette

Mastarr and Part-Onwarr of

the Amazanne





The Cuddly Alien—Jeremy Henty