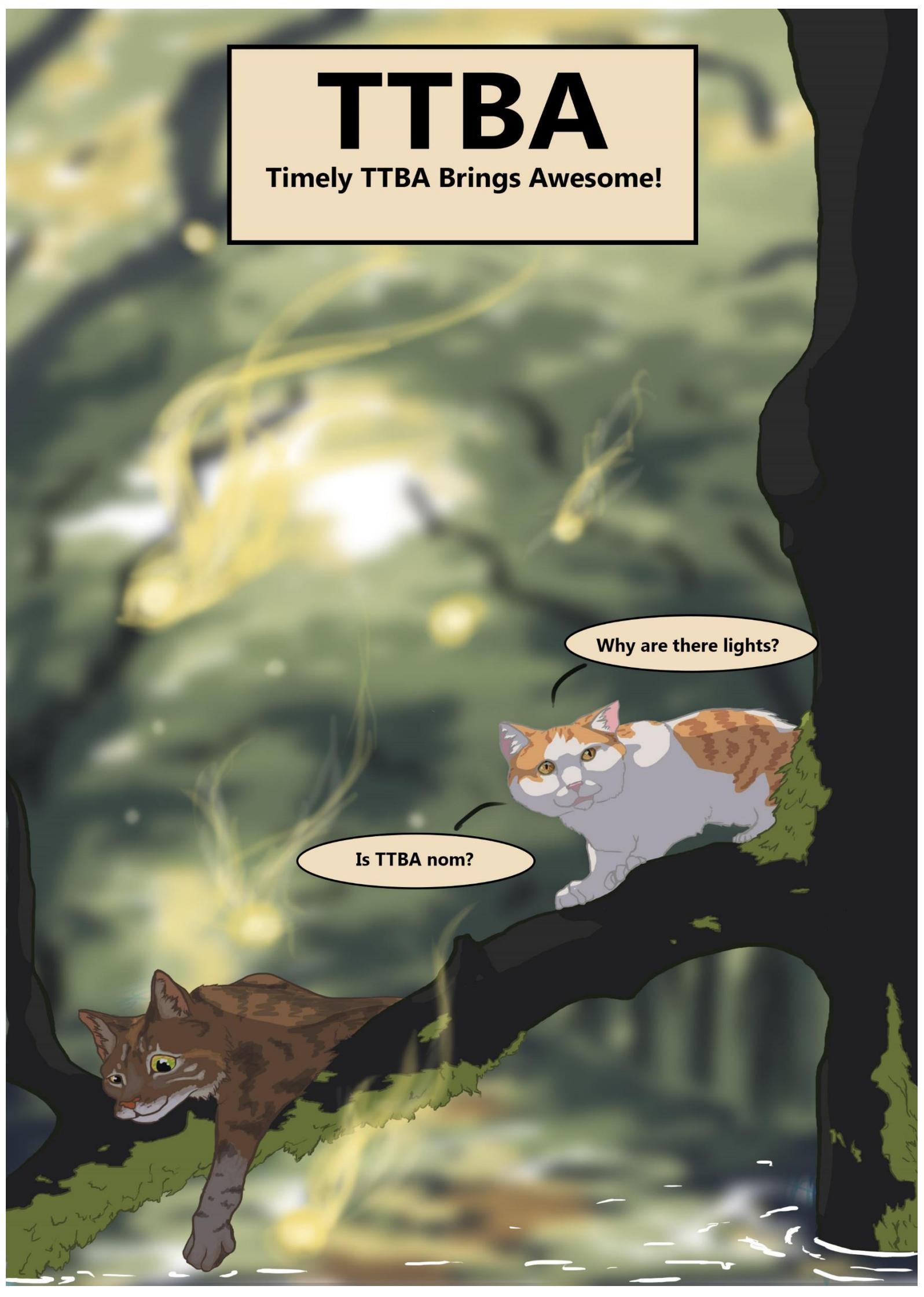


TTBA

Timely TTBA Brings Awesome!



Why are there lights?

Is TTBA nom?

Timely TTBA Brings Awesome!

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The Chairbeing's Address

Friends, Canterbridgians, countrymen. Listen from your puny college rooms, castles, houses, bungalows, zeppelins, low-orbiting stealth-cloaked mega-nuclear-torpedo-armed ships. We find ourselves here today on the brink of a brave new era. 2014 is upon us, which not only means we're a mere 22 months away from the events of Back to the Future II (and, by extension, the first commercial hoverboard sales, which have frankly taken far too long already) but also that CUSFS's 50th Anniversary has officially passed! The first Mars colony can only be around the corner.

To recap: the last term has been highly entertaining (or at least, mildly amusing) with the success¹ of our Freshers' Squash in ~~brainwashing~~ recruiting new members, and the triumph of our first chainwriting project (ALL HAIL THE BARD). There might've been other things which happened last term which I've completely forgotten about²³⁴ (I should really cut down on the drugs). And of course we are still the university society with the largest amount of orange by length per member⁵.

So, without further ado, just to prove to you all that science students can write eloquently ^[citation needed] we have a bumper edition of our famed⁶ magazine, just to distract you that little bit more from whatever it was you were doing just now. (Probably work. Go do work, you procrastinator.⁷⁸)

And in the meantime, enjoy!

Sarah⁹ Binney

CUSFS Chairbeing 2013-2014

¹ If you discount the "sardines in a tin" bit. I mean, it's in the name, you should've guessed it'd be a squash.

² Alastair Reynolds came to Cambridge, of course, but that wasn't such a big deal.

³ Did I mention we had Alastair Reynolds come to talk?

⁴ And obviously there was that visit from Alastair Reynolds.

⁵ Though we haven't actually verified this statistically. I don't like it when numbers prove me wrong.

⁶ For a certain definition of "famed". By which I mean, I've heard of it.

⁷ This title clearly doesn't apply to me just because my room is full of half-unpacked suitcases full of tea.

⁸ Though if you fail your degree you can go be a science teacher and try to hitch a lift with a passing time traveller. It worked for Ian Chesterton.

⁹ Turns out I had a first name hidden down the back of the sofa all this time! Who knew.

Editorial

So, as editor it turns out I have to write this, and to be honest, I don't really know what to say. I guess I can start by saying that I am amazed by the amount of content this issue has, considering this issue is out a term or so early. I was expecting it to be practically all chainwriting and to have to fill the space with some of my alien space monsters (luckily you'll only have to deal with one this issue, although thanks to someone including a picture in their submission I feel justified in adding in a picture of it too) but it turns out there is actually other writing going on.

So I am afraid I don't have any particularly interesting tales to tell here, there was a mysterious line I had to recruit help in removing, and a title that did not lend itself well to a cover illustration (which is probably a good thing, otherwise it just would have been called "The Thing I want to draw BA"). As it turns out it didn't matter anyway, since I just ignored the title and drew cats instead. My intentions were good, honest! They just snuck in there while I was puzzling over whether or not to put catsfs on the cover. Also I would like to use this space to say that I while compiling this magazine I have developed a dislike of contents pages, hopefully this is curable because it might make getting the next issue out difficult.

I am afraid I may be unable to match Binney's footnotes, but I regardless I will stop my ramblings here so you can get on with the things you actually want to read.

Happy TTBA!

*Lilian Halstead
TTBA editor*

The City Stops

*The wandering City of Tump has ceased to wander,
and the reason is hidden far in its depths,
reachable only by its Queens.*

*Bryn Dickinson, Katie Wakelin, Will Bradshaw,
Fraser McNair, Emily Room, Jess Harrison, Alison
Madgwick, Tom Neat, Coleman Chan, Thomas
Parry, James Baillie, Tristan Roberts, Sarah Binney*

The City of Tump stopped walking, and stood where it was for three days. On the third day, it managed a single, faltering step before falling to its knees, the lower districts alarmingly diagonal.

This caused something of a commotion among the people of Tump, who had after all been promised by the mason Phu that their city would wander for a hundred thousand days. Phu was not one for empty boasts, but the chronimetrists were unanimous: it had been forty-three thousand days since ey carved Tump its legs.

Wild conspiracy theories evolved and fought, protesters packed the streets, and in the gondola which housed Parliament, the masons found their authority challenged for the first time. The Navigator-Queen, Sian, knew that it fell to her to set this matter right, but still unstable on her new stone leg, she could not climb down to the heart of the city alone. She stood before the council and asked that her cariad, the Architect-Queen Lin, might go with her.

The masons grumbled, of course. The rules were very strict, and only a Navigator-Queen could talk directly to the city. And if Tump thought they had breached Phu's contract, who knew what would happen? But there was no other option. The Council grudgingly approved.

Tightly wrapped in ropes and harnesses, the two Queens exchanged a kiss on a rickety platform overlooking the path to the heart. There was no more time to lose.

They leapt into the darkness.

The freefall was long, dark and full of rushing terror. The two Queens clung to each other, barely able to breathe against the pressure of the air as it parted around them. It felt like a solid thing, easily thick enough to support them and end their sickening plummet. Every heartbeat they expected to slow, and every heartbeat that they didn't felt

like another fall, a million million missed stairs all blending and stretching together into an eternity of horror.

Then the harnesses snapped taut, and they jerked suddenly upwards, the rigging designed to stretch and bounce, but still jarring their backs and bruising their ribs as they yoyo-ed gently to a stop. The darkness was absolute. Slowly, with agonising jerks, their downwards motion resumed. Up above, the last few feet of the ropes were being paid out, running over rattling cylinders and grooved pulleys, the cords trembling with the remote rocking of the ramshackle structure.

Queen Lin, not knowing how far they had yet to go, remained bravely still. The grip she maintained on Queen Sian's white hand and the little gasps of her breath in the blackness were the only signs she gave of her fear. Queen Sian, knowing what was ahead, did her best to be even stronger. But in such total darkness it is hard to conceal one's thoughts. The night around them sucked at their pounding hearts and amplified the small panicked shudders of their bodies. All they could do was hold onto each other, and wait.

Around them, light began to grow. At first it was so dim as to be little more than a red tint to the darkness, but it became swiftly stronger. An orange glow suffused the air below them, their dangling feet silhouetted against it, so black against the light that it seemed as though the darkness they had fallen through had subsumed them entirely. The glow looked hot, blazing, a furnace - but it was cold. In their sweat-drenched ceremonial gowns, the two women shivered.

From somewhere below, the heart of the city boomed. A mere rumbling to those waiting anxiously in the streets above, down here it was a deafening roar. Lin, who had never before experienced the full force of the heart's beating, cried out in pain and clapped her hands to her ears. Sian also covered her ears, though less hastily; she had done this before, and had the deadened hearing that was the mark of any experienced Navigator-Queen.

Separated, the two women swung gently away from each other, then back. Below them, the orange light reached an almost blinding intensity. Averting her eyes, Lin saw that the walls of the shaft were inscribed with writing, thrown into sharp relief by the blaze below; with all her years of learning, she recognised not a fifth of the characters she saw.

Slowly, the noise faded, and the queens clung together once again. A few minutes later, the cold orange light of the heart began to dim, until they were once again shrouded in deep blackness. The heart would not beat again for at least an hour.

A loud clanking echoed down the tunnel from above: there was no more rope. The lengths of the ropes used had been specified precisely by Phu, so very long ago, and no-one had dared to change them. Every Navigator-Queen to visit the heart in the whole of Tump's long history had had to go through what Sian and Lin did next. Unbuckling and untying at points laboriously explained to Sian by the elder masons (and to Lin by Sian), the queens of Tump shook free from their harnesses, and fell.

Even after fifteen years as Navigator-Queen, the fall always lasted longer than Sian expected. She counted seven heartbeats, and began to tuck into the roll that made the landing easier. Lin was not so experienced, and hit the bottom with a loud thud. The two women helped each other to their feet and began to move.

Going was slow, even with Lin supporting Sian. The floor was uneven at best, and many times the queens fell. Slowly, though, the going became easier, as the cracks between the stones started to glow with a muted blue light.

Eventually, they came to their ultimate destination: the voice of the city. The light was dim, barely enough to make out outlines and shadows. Silently, Sian pointed at a face carved in the wall, its features obscured by long years' growth of lichen. The two queens fell to their knees, and waited.

As they waited, Lin looked at wall in front of them, and saw that it was not actually a wall at all – more a square building. And beyond the building, she saw wires, great colossal statues, vast machines whose purposes she dared not even think about but whose very forms were ominous, all stretching off into dim nothingness. She gasped.

Sian blanched. Who knew how the city would take such an interruption? Five heartbeats, then ten, then fifty; and nothing. Sian relaxed. Suddenly, they heard a sibilant, breathy voice, like wind through parchment. The city spoke.

'Yes?'

Sian frowned. This breathy, rustling voice was completely unlike the deep echoing voice she had heard last time she had descended to speak with the city.

"I am the Architect-Queen Lin, and with me is the Navigator-Queen Sian." Lin's own voice was high and trembling. "We seek to know why you have stopped."

"Both Navigator and Architect? This was not agreed upon," Tump rasped. The two queens held their breath, waiting for what would come next.

"But these are unusual circumstances," the city sighed. "Step forward my queens. Go deeper and you will see."

The two women cautiously stepped beyond the small building, into the mess of wires and machinery. The statues loomed menacingly out of the shadows, and strange lights blinked and flickered in the darkest depths of the room. Once, Lin nearly screamed as something the size of a cat but with many metallic legs scuttled frantically in front of her. Sian just stared ahead into the darkness.

A white light suddenly appeared on their left, this one faint but steady.

"Go towards it." Tump's voice was still a breathy whisper, but was louder here.

As Lin and Sian approached, they could see that the light was coming from a circular window set in a door.

"The Engine Room," Sian whispered reverently. Lin's eyes widened. No Queen of Tump, Navigator or Architect, had seen the Engine Room for at least a hundred years. The door was unlocked, and swung open easily with barely a squeak of rust. The two queens each took a deep breath and stepped into the Engine Room. The walls pulsed white and red and peacock-blue, emanating unbearable heat and Sian gasped, feeling her mouth dry out, her lungs crisping. Lin covered her face with her hands, and still she saw the light throb behind her eyelids. Something cold nudged at her knuckles. Peering up Sian saw something roughly outlined against the brilliance; something jagged, flashing, bright. It looked vaguely humanoid, but was far too tall, its legs too long.

That was not possible.

"Hello *Navigator*," hissed the metal thing. When it spoke, Sian thought she saw a mouthful of knives.

There were stories, of course. Stories of the terrible things that lurked in the depths of the city, tales of monsters that feasted on the hearts of those unwary enough to stumble into their path—

"Are you lost?" said the creature. The walls were too bright. She could not see what was happening to her cariad. Her heart rattled against her ribcage and she could not breathe for panic.

"Sort of," replied Sian finally, meriting a quizzical look from the creature. With confusion in its eyes, Lin felt the menace of the creature ebb away. Where before there had been a terrifying edifice of metal, she now saw a still threatening, but slightly melancholy figure. Silence descended; a long awkward silence.

"How did you know I am the Navigator Queen?" asked Sian.

"I am the Navigator," rasped the creature, with a sound like knives being dragged over blackboards. Sian and Lin exchanged frightened and confused glances. "And what are you?" it hissed, steam billowing from the gap at its jaw into Lin's face as it turned towards her.

"I am the Architect Queen," gasped Lin, as the steam surged around her, the stench of burning metal almost making her retch.

"What are you?" asked Sian of the creature.

"I am the Architect," puffed the creature.

"Before you said you were the Navigator, and now you say you are the Architect, so who are you really?" asked Lin.

"I am really..." replied the creature.

Oddly Lin was reminded of the games that she had watched the children playing in the streets of the city above; where older children would wind up their younger friends by repeating their questions back to them as answers, a never ending circle as the younger got more and more exasperated at their peers.

"It's just mirroring what we say," whispered Lin to Sian.

"What?" asked Sian, disbelief in her eyes.

"If we ask it a question the answer it gives us is a statement of the question. I think it's lost, and confused as to who it is. There is a strange sickness permeating the heart of the city."

The creature had all this while been watching them intently, its eyes burning bright with a fiery glow.

"Are you sick?" it asked.

"So what are its questions?" said Sian.

"Statements," said Lin.

"So are you lost?" asked Sian of the creature.

"I am lost," came back the hissed echo.

"That isn't going to help" said Lin. "Hang on, it called you the navigator when we met, so who gave it that statement?"

"It must be talking about itself. I think it was introducing itself."

The Queens' hearts fell as out of the darkness rasped a single question:

"Was it the Navigator?"

There seemed to be no pattern to its questions. Then in one swift motion, the two companions looked into each other's eyes as they simultaneously realised a possibility, each asking the same question in their gaze: could it really be what they think it is?

As part of their childhood, all citizens of Tump, the Queens being no exception, were exposed to the lores of Tump in a myriad ways - for example as part of the education system, as they learn about the history of their city. It was also common for mothers to scare their children with bedtime stories about the strange creations that inhabit the Inner Core of Tump, creatures that roam the streets at night looking for naughty kids. These lores are at best treated as a series of fables regarding its creation and its creator, the renowned mason Phu; there has been no evidence to prove the claims within these stories.

Yet among the numerous collection of myths, there was one legend that every child knew and remembered: the legendary entity that ruled the denizens of the Inner Core. The entity that single-handedly manned the furnace, the heart of the

city that kept the mechanisms moving, for forty-three thousand days. The entity that keeps Tump alive and moving. The entity that Phu sacrificed himself to create, the entity that Phu became.

According to the lore, Phu - the entity - was a calm and kind being whose only purpose was to power the engine. It was theorised that Phu did all the work whilst the other residents kept em company. And now the Queens wondered. Had they been living a lie, a lie in which Phu wasn't some hideous monster with more knives than a shark had teeth, or had some catastrophic calamity taken place, something beyond the realm of imagination that had transformed Phu into eir current miserable state?

Sian spoke hesitantly, but firmly, to the creature, "Where is Phu?"

A lone wisp of smoke puffed out of the creature's mouth and the jagged plates slid noisily around its face.

The long silence was too much for Lin, "Take us to Phu!" she howled with a tremor in her voice.

Only the piercing echo was met with response, the creature slowly turned towards Lin, its eyes glowing more fiercely than ever. Suddenly it lurched at her, arms outstretched and smoke billowing.

Sian was knocked down, but when she looked up both Lin and the creature had gone and the creaking door was hanging loosely on one hinge. She struggled to her feet, her stone one causing more trouble than the other, and hurried out the door. The towering creature was holding Lin in its grasp and pacing off into the darkness. Sian tried feverishly to catch up, shouting and cursing at the brute, but its stride was too large, her stone leg too unwieldy. Soon, only the fading glow was there to follow, and then, nothing.

Whilst panic and fear trickled through her veins, she tried to stay calm and composed. Alas, she still jumped when a ghostly figure appeared in the mist. The closer it got, the more she noticed the resemblance to the creature; yet much shorter and broader, more like a dwarf. The eyes began to glow as it broke through the haze and turned its head to Sian.

"Hello, Navigator."

"Who are you?" Standing still and steady, she kept her voice level as she addressed the new creature. "I am no who. I am at best a what. You are a who. And you are Navigator."

"What has happened to Li... to the Architect Queen?"

"She was not required; you were chosen. She will come to no harm."

"Chosen for what?"

"Shelter. Warmth. Necessity." This was a new voice, not metallic but somehow not human either, croaking the words and yet somehow imbuing them with a rainbow of emotions. But the croak was clear. It was... well, it was a croak. Heavy, and rasping, and with a sadness of years behind it. It was a voice that was dying. "Don't turn around. Not yet. Memman, help me." The broad, dwarf-like figure shuffled past her, metal limbs creaking and clanking.

"We like to think we are masters of all, we who can calculate and make the numbers of the universe dance to our will. We sit in judgement, or mercy, or stand and observe. Sometimes we are cities, nations, stars, planets, rivers, streams. But as we rule the numbers, they rule us in turn."

"You are Phu." Sian stared forwards; it was not a question.

"Turn around, child."

Sian turned, and there ey were. Pieces of metal shook where they had replaced bits of skin or bone or whatever ey had once been made of. The thought of the first creature being Phu was terrifying, of the second strange; seeing em was... "A sadness beyond words. I know your thoughts, little Queen. And I know you are afraid, and that is right. Do you know what I am asking of you?"

"I don't know..."

"I am dying, little human Queen. And Tump has a long way to run." Phu reached out, eir hand wired together, a grotesque mess of charred bone and wood and steel. "You must take Tump onwards. You must Navigate."

At that point the smaller figure grasped her wrist and tugged insistently on it. Sian turned again and saw that Phu hadn't been reaching eir hand out to her, but rather to a chair half-hidden in the steam behind her.

“What do you mean, I must navigate?” she said as she tried to shake off the cold metallic hand from her wrist.

“Tump needs a navigator, and our current one is no longer up to the task,” Phu said. “Memman, if you would help Navigator to the chair.”

The machine’s tugs grew more insistent and Sian was left with no choice but to follow its lead.

As they neared the chair, Sian saw that this was no ordinary chair; this was an ancient seat carved of a stone unlike any other in the city with hinges, cables and pipes running all over. She also realised that, as she was staring, somehow the chair seemed to staring back at her.

The tall machine stopped in front of a door and opened it, not a sound coming from its hinges. It unceremoniously dumped her outside the door and shut it again in her face.

Lin picked herself up. Sian was stuck in there and, as Architect-Queen, she’d be damned before she’d let a *door* stand between her and her cariad.

She mentally prepared herself to fight her way past the monstrous machine and opened the door but was surprised, instead of a grotesque imitation of a human in spikes and knives, to just find the engine room, glowing a little more coolly than the first time she entered it, and no sign of where the machine had gone. A sickening sense of urgency lodged itself in her gut. “Sian? Sian!”

Sian ran one hand along a vertex of the chair. Embossed writing was worked into the mechanism, each cable and cog covered in characters she did not recognise. And what she had taken for stone was something more porous, more organic. Like bone.

And she understood.

She turned to face Phu, underneath whose chitinous skin quicksilver eyes glinted softly in the azure light. When she spoke her voice was little more than a whisper.

“So it is true. Tump carries the Throne.”

“Yes, child. It is true. I am sorry.” There was sadness in Phu’s voice now. Or perhaps it was regret.

The Navigator-Queen stepped onto the dais, waving aside the creature’s motion to assist her

with more calm than she had thought possible. “I had thought...” She trembled imperceptibly. “There is no alternative?”

Phu shook eir head gently. “That the stars have spun so as to make this moment fall during your reign... Even I could not have changed it.”

Under the clatter of gears and the hubbub of hydraulics, at the very corner of her hearing, Sian became aware of a hum, a vibration, something so deep it was felt in her chest as much as heard. “Tell Lin what – what I did here.”

Phu shook eir head sadly, never taking eir eyes from Sian. “She cannot know. My aides can guide her safely to the surface. But the City cannot be told what occurred here. To do so would betray Tump’s purpose. You alone know this, Navigator-Queen.”

Sian sat in the Throne. Such an easy thing to do. The hum was stronger now, imbuing her body with a sort of strength. Her voice wavered. “So be it.”

Lin, forgive me.

With a barely audible sound like the intake of breath, needles hissed out of the chair to meet her arms; cables and wires uncoiled to embrace the Queen, but she hardly noticed over the now omnipresent humming. It soared and swooped, its harmony suffusing her consciousness; a rush of deep colour and music more beautiful than emotion itself –

As the lifeblood of the city engulfed her senses, the last Navigator-Queen of Tump closed her eyes, Phu’s final words reverberating through her skull: “Keep Tump safe. Keep Tump moving. And they will not catch up with us.”

The City Stops - Extras

Fun facts:

This chain was predominantly fantasy preference, but wound up with a vaguely-steampunk otherworldliness.

For some reason, this particular story seemed particularly prone to odd mistakes (now corrected) in the submitted sections. Personal favourites include the queens switching titles for a paragraph, and the City briefly having wandered for an impressive 43000 years rather than the same number of days.

The Bard is now terrified of:

Falling, for depths of up to 500 words.

Comments:

"This needs a sequel so very much.

We can explore the upper regions of the city and see what it's like to live on streets that move – this story mainly happened inside the engines and there was virtually no proof of the civilian population's existence!

We can meet Phu's sibling Bar, which is a compsci joke and thus will be understood by a significant chunk of CUSFS.

We can investigate the workings of Tump politics and society, which I think can use a lot of worldbuilding (for example, I had thought there might be more titles of Queen; maybe an Astrologer-Queen or a Blood-Queen who does medical things. Maybe there are lots of Queens, and it is usual for them to claim as cariards other Queens because the rest of the citizenry is of insufficiently noble rank.)

And most importantly I'd really like to find out what Phu meant in the last sentence as although I wrote it I don't know what it means, though I have some ideas..." – Binney

Wildfire

In the forest, there are some secrets which should not be explored too deeply.

James Cole, Joel Lipson, Curtis Reubens, Edward Anderson, Margaret Young, Tiffany Armitage, Natalia Mole, Francisco Vázquez de Sola, Bryn Dickinson

A forest; untamed and tangled.

A summer's day; warm and sunlit.

There were three men ploughing through the thickets.

The leader was the shortest; exactly 1.80m tall and weighing precisely 100kg (including gear.) He had dark brown hair, a solitary face and eyes which seemed to be forever holding back a great intensity. Behind him came a handsome, wiry man with fair hair and green eyes who was constantly peering through the bushes, curious to spot any movement. Following at a more relaxed pace came the third with thinning auburn hair and a tired expression on his less-distinguished face.

"I don't like it," said the first. "We shouldn't be this far out." He was not normally reluctant to travel to the forest; after all there was little that could threaten him anywhere, but today he felt uneasy and it was in his blood to be cautious.

"Why are you being so argumentative, Jed? We must continue or the whole trip will be pointless," said the second.

"Active camouflage only conceals us from view; it doesn't mean we can't be tracked by animals or wild-men, and we're leaving a big pathway behind. I don't like it," repeated Jed.

"I don't have to be a physician to understand how cloaking works," retorted the second, "Besides, is there a reason you can't just use your toys if we run into trouble? I'd love to see how that sonic cannon works."

"Ten more minutes, then we head back to the city," Jed stated firmly.

The third was silent. The third was always silent. The trio carried on in silence, flitting between shade and sunlight. Light danced in the canopy. The path was green and gold. Uneasiness was

slung across their shoulders. Jed was no stranger to the woodland, yet a creeping anxiety had him in its snare. What was it that so bothered him? They took step after innocuous step, and save for snapping twigs, all the world was still.

The second of them began to hum, a tune at once welcome and disconcerting. It rose, nervous and shrill, before fading as quickly as it came. It was too, too quiet here. The second muttered something under his breath.

“Do you have something to say, Ward?” Jed did not look back; his eyes were ever-scouring, ever-searching the makeshift path ahead.

The wiry man glanced up, clutching the straps of his backpack tightly. “I never knew trees could grow so big, that’s all.”

Jed allowed himself a smile, knowing his companions could not see. “This is a garden compared to the true wild-lands; the really deep places. There are oaks there the size of cities; cedars that have grown so wide it takes an army to uproot them.” Still, he admitted inwardly, their present surroundings must be impressive to the uninitiated.

“Is it true that they can think?” asked Ward, suddenly lost in wide-eyed enthusiasm. “Is it true that these were all grown by wild men, long ago?”

Jed snorted. “The trees grew the men.”

“And is it true-”

Jed allowed himself to turn his head and look back at his brightly ingenuous companion. “Men are story-tellers, Ward. There are grains of truth in the rumours, yes, but mostly they are just fireside tales.”

He brought his eyes back to the path ahead as Ward began a steady whistled tune, warding off the silence. The wild-lands were places of beauty; the trees would have been enough, flush with captivating flora, but there were more wonders there, hidden, then one man could ever discover, built or hidden by wild men in millennia past. By the time Ward spoke again, Jed’s pace had changed, just slightly; he found himself stepping in time to the beat of the whistling. “Must we go back so soon?”

“Yes, we must.” In fact, his unease was growing; something was very wrong, very wrong indeed...

In a flash his sonic cannon was out and raised, before his conscious mind even realised why it needed to be. It didn’t take it long to catch up though. “Ward?”

“Yes?”

“If you’re talking to me, then who’s whistling?” Well, then the jig was up. Hiding was no longer an option (of course, most of them had not wanted to hide in the first place, but they knew what fate awaited those who argued about orders and so hide they did.) It was time to come out and play.

* * *

A procession of winged lemons wafted lazily around the nacre mongoose where the failing sun had been. The trees roiled; the whole landscape reddened into monochrome haze.

Jed awoke to sharp pokes; arms bound; upside down; vision limited; moans to his left. Ward’s moans.

Their captors, wearing only thick chameleonic slime, bickered awhile. Jed’s thoughts remained sludgy, but their cruel implements and how they’d looked at each prisoner pointed to the ensuing horror. They’d torture Mute Os first. They’d taken his silence whilst prodded as a man of substance’s affront. And among the Wild Men, such knew the battle plans. Jed felt brief selfish gratitude he wasn’t first, then grasped how Os’ ‘resistance’ would further madden them...

He rubbed a wrist against the coils. These slowly pulsed, and grew tighter, *alive*. His eyes widened as they reached its origin. He was being held by a *tree*. The swollen parasitic sun began to rise, a red omen.

The *Liphanora*’s pulses intensified with the dawn. She then decided to suppress the desecrator’s struggles with a brush of her prehensile psychedelic tendrils.

Curses intensified as Os continued to say nothing. Osvaaldus *hated* scouting with noobs. *Endless* prattle on top of errors... His Condition precluded him from better, *despite* repeated survivals. Even this blasted tree had slashed him *last*. *After* he’d triggered his Beacon. Coming from him, Captain Bargadze *would* pay attention...

If they lived long enough for what passed for a rescue mission in this hellish place to reach them.

Behind the shouting wild-men he could see the haphazard pile of their gear. The ruins of their active camouflage units poked out from beneath Jed's sonic cannon. Even if Os could reach it, it would decimate the wild-men but do nothing at all to the tree.

He cast his eyes to his companions, lying either side of him. Ward lay comatose, wrapped in tendrils; Jed was similarly restrained but not so peaceful. He writhed in the tree's embrace, eyes rolled back in his head. He was locked in some terror-world of his own making by the poison leeching through his veins. Left too long in such a state, men emerged with one of the Conditions or not at all.

Os shook his head to clear the potent sense-memory of another mission gone awry, the Edge-quest where he had slumbered too long in nightmares and pain. Even buffoons like Jed did not deserve such a fate. He prayed that the tree did not choose to bestow another such toxic caress on him.

The wild-men stopped cursing at Os. Instead they advanced, the slick gel they wore catching the red, rising sun to gleam unsettlingly; now came the wickedly curved blades, serrated and needle-sharp.

Osvaldus refused to close his eyes as the knife approached his skin...

From a long-silent throat came the unearthly cry, cracked, broken, triumphant. And none could be as surprised as Os, who gave a wry chuckle as he welcomed the escape into darkness.

If they had had eyes, the elders of the forest would have rolled them. But how were these young Wild Men, mere toddlers in the life-span of a tree, to know that the only way to end a Condition was to repeat the act that initiated it? Indeed, dipping their blades in the same poison that was coursing through Jed had seemed like a marvellous idea, and an ideal punishment for one who had so irritatingly resisted their torture for so long. But as the Wild Men celebrated their success, Jed silently shared in their delight, and allowed himself to indulge in the perhaps foolish hope that all was not yet lost. He had of course heard the rumours of what Os had been like before the Edge-quest, but he hadn't taken those seriously. Nobody had. Now he was rather uncharacteristically praying that he had been wrong.

In the haze of the flickering firelight, the Wild Men danced an unknown ritual, cackling in their merriment and congratulating themselves on another victory. It was not to last.

The Wild Men did not see how it happened. They did not see Osvaldus' wound begin to peel back, revealing beneath, fluid, rippling, skin, ever-flowing swift as the great rivers Jed had read watered the true wild-lands. They did not feel the power surging within Os, the storm stirring within him, the force no longer bound by ancient toxins. And they did not see his eyes, the way they burned white with the intensity of star-fire.

Jed had to be hallucinating. This had to be the poison. Of course he'd heard stories, no legends, that there were beings who were as part of the world as wood is part of a tree. Wasn't this why he'd joined the Companionship in the first place, to see the things he'd dreamed of as a boy? But now his dreams stood before him, alien to him as the darkest side of the furthest moon. In this forest, this true forest and not the gardens he'd scoffed at before, he was once again a boy sat by the fire listening to his father tell tales of the world that was before the Plasma War.

Yet as Os stood beside the fire, blackest skin flickering like a shadow against the flames, eyes blazing bright enough for the heavens to see, there was no doubt that he was no story, that there were still daemons in this world.

As the tales of old came back rushing towards him, so did a powerful sense of foreboding. A new fear crept into his mind, just as lobsters had crawled into his skin for the past few... hours? Briefly, Jed was seared by two holes in the perfect darkness that surrounded Os's body, and felt like a lamb stalked by a crocodile wielding *truesteel*. Then the gaze shifted towards the dancing madness of the Wild Men ritual, and he was thrown back into pain, laughter, shame, anger, repentance, lust, guilt, fear... but none left his sewn lips. He would not live much longer; the two-faced direbunny was munching through his kidneys faster and faster.

The *Liphanora's* tendrils started turning musty brown as a shadow reached their gear, swimming through the fruit sea. The sun raced through the sky and hid behind the horizon as the daemon grabbed the sonic cannon one-handed, and the cloak assembled seemingly by its own volition. The ground raced towards Jed as the tree died. Before the night engulfed him, he noticed that the Wild Men had stopped chanting even before a deep,

chuckling rumble echoed: "Gentlemen, you have my most sincere thanks for your assistance."

Ward awoke. The first thing he noticed was hunger. The second was the green blood that covered the surrounding vegetation. The third was a transparent figure crouching on the blown out remains of a dozen creatures. It was staring at him. "Well, well," he heard. "We were beginning to believe they'd finished you off..."

Ward struggled to a sitting position, tore off a few clinging strands of *Liphadora*. He accepted an arm from the figure.

"Hana, from the Ninth. Come on, up you get. And get your camouflage back on! Can you walk, ah..?"

"Ward. The Third. I think so..." Awareness returned, slowly. He glanced around the wrecked area. "Jed? Os? Are they..?"

"I'm sorry, Ward. We didn't reach Jed in time. But we haven't seen this Os. If they're they're still alive, they have a beacon."

Hana shook her head, the motion barely perceptible through the active-camouflage blur. "I still don't get it, Ward. What happened out there? Who killed those people?"

A rustle up ahead; Hana dropped to her knees, pointing some sort of invisible weapon. Ward stared into the darkness. Surely not...

Smiling benignly, Osvaaldus stepped out of the shadow of the trees. "Good afternoon! I'm very sorry to have kept you all waiting." Wandering over, he fell into line next to Ward, snapping into active-camouflage invisibility.

"Os... Os, you're talking!" Ward could not keep his confusion out of his voice.

"Mmhmm."

"What happened? Are you alright? I just woke up – how did you -?"

Os laughed. "Oh Ward. So many questions!"

They walked back to the city in silence.

Wildfire - Extras

Fun facts:

This chain was predominantly sci-fi preference, but seemed to blur genre boundaries more than the others. For example, at one point there are some extremely subtle but (I am told) entirely intentional Disney references...

This story features a character with disturbingly accurate physical measurements which I spent the entire term hoping someone would make plot-relevant. Alas, it was not to be.

The Bard is now terrified of:

Trees, the imaginations of certain CUSFS members.

Comments:

"Well, we didn't fall into the sci-fi trap of explaining everything?"

From that beginning to sentient, parasitic trees and daemons... I honestly really want to know what on earth is going on. We had so many capitalised things that I want to know about, like Edge-Quest, the Companionship, Condition, the Plasma War and the Wild Men. Mostly I still want to know why they were out in the woods to begin with..." – Margaret

[Additional comment: What's the point of becoming a daemon if you don't then kill everyone? – Ed]

Move On – A Tunnellers' Tale

The Tunnellers have travelled far, but now the way is blocked, and the caverns are both dark and full of terrors.

James Baillie, Steph Leddington, Benjamin Dobson, Edward Heaney, Harley Jones, Bettina Juszak, Michael French, Catherine Gray, Lizzie Colwill, Sam Ottewill-Soulsby, Robert Gowers, Alina Wanitzek

There Alph, the Sacred River, ran, through caverns measureless to man... down to a sunless sea. Frothing and plunging, cave after cave, into the bowels of the earth, the black waters roaring through the darkness, it went to places that none who visited had ever returned from – or at least, not unchanged.

A river is not just a path though; it is an obstacle, and it was this that occupied the company at present. Somewhere in the gloom ahead the carved stonework of the fort could be seen, but to even get there required crossing the Alph, and those who dwelt in the caverns ahead had cut the bridge. Protection for a while, perhaps, from the terrors of war, but in a world where the Tunnellers would eventually go under the river – or over the cavern altogether – a temporary respite was all it could possibly grant.

The company, every being of them, stared across the surging waters. They had come so far; from the great under-city of Tamadun, up the great dark roads that led into the watery, stony plains of Arath, and then into the tiny winding tunnels that led out from the great west wall of the plain. This was unsafe, dangerous territory; a land of little villages and homesteads cut into the rock faces, tiny shafts leading down to hotter caves where fungi could be farmed, and of course bandit lairs and places where stranger beasts crept in the blackness. And now, before them, one mighty river.

They were a strange company, these mercenaries hired to plumb the depths of the ancient caverns. At the fore, staring at the frothing waters with a slight frown, was Lindis May. The daughter of their employer, she cut a solid figure, clad in travelling leathers and with two axes strapped across her back. She had been granted this command of fifty or so mostly off the back of her father's wealth, but she was handy enough with the skull-splitting weapons.

They were the advance force; Expeditionary Company 4, as was written on their papers. Many of these small cavern dwellings simply rolled over when the Tunnellers came knocking, but it seemed these ones would not be so obliging. Now she needed to decide whether to force the issue now, or to send back to Tamadun for reinforcements and equipment, though it would take many weeks.

The remaining fragments of the wooden bridge bobbed in the current, knocking against the stone banks. The Alph was too violent to swim without being instantly swept away, down into the inky blackness.

As she stood there, trying to make out any details on the far bank, one of her scouts approached her and saluted smartly. Running a hand through her cropped red hair, she turned to face him.

"Did you manage to find anything?"

"The Tunnellers have been here before, sergeant." He raised his voice above the Alph's dreadful howl. "There's a half-built framework about a mile downriver. No recent signs of life on the surface; it looks like they just abandoned it about a month ago. Further on there's nothing interesting until the river is swallowed up by the rock face."

May was taken aback by this lack of news. "Nothing at all?"

"An ash tree, a gravestone and four miles of this same low undergrowth." He kicked some of the brambles with his boot.

She sighed quietly and looked back at the dancing ruins of the bridge. A gravestone was a surprise, but unlikely to be helpful. And if some other Tunnellers had tried to break through downriver before, that probably wasn't a place that invited a second visit. It sounded like there was nothing that would help them. She looked back at the scout to tell him to wait for the scout from the southwest, but he spoke first.

"May I speak, ma'am?"

"You don't have to ask, Tayeb. We're not exactly in a hurry at this precise moment."

He looked slightly abashed for a moment. "Our best bet downriver is the half-built tunnel. I know it's not the best thing to do, structurally and all, but if we can get through there it'll take less than half the time it'd take to get through here. And, it's

out of sight of any settlements, so we won't meet trouble."

May turned to the Handler. "Tayeb's analysis. Is it good?"

The Handler was tall and bulky, with bulging muscles, close-cropped dark hair, a short, fat neck and deep-set eyes. He was, in short, the physical stereotype of a vicious bruiser.

This was not why members of the company so studiously avoided him. This was not why people would shrink away from his least touch. He was not at all a violent man; he bore fewer scars and fewer armaments than anyone else in the company. He wore costlier clothes and spoke softly and gently in his deep, gruff voice. No; the company avoided him because of his job. Who would touch such a pariah as a Handler? Surely nobody could last long in such a role without picking up some of the taint of their charges.

The Handler looked at the creature on the end of the heavy chain in his hand. It could be called human only at a stretch. Emaciated, bald, liver-spotted, its hands clawed and its dry skin wrinkled, it hunched naked on the riverbank, a heavy collar around its neck. The Handler bent down and whispered in its ear; nobody dared strain to hear.

The creature stopped, and thought, and stared around it with its gimlet gaze, and thought again... and spoke in a shrieking voice.

"He lies."

"He means he thinks there's a mistake, not that..." began the Handler gently, but the creature harshly interrupted, emphasising the last word.

"No. Scout... Tayeb... he *lies*."

Tayeb turned in anger.

"Sergeant. Will you really trust the judgement of this... this *thing* over my word?"

"I know you have always been a loyal scout, Tayeb, but Number 6747 here has never led us wrong," replied May, deep in thought. Since the Alethid tribe had been discovered and enslaved, on one of the first Tunneller expeditions, their unworldly skills – many of which were not yet fully understood – had come in useful to the cause in a number of ways, not least of which was lie-detecting and rooting out spies. But their stench,

appearance and condition led them to be reviled by the mercenaries – all save the Handlers. Lindis May was well aware that to trust 6747 over Tayeb would lead to ill-feeling among her company, and in this hostile terrain they were already demoralised. It was imperative that they cross the Alph as soon as they could – their supplies were in sore need of replenishing.

Tayeb and the Handler were by now deep in argument. "Handler," interrupted May, "is there any possibility that the Alethid is mistaken here?"

"I've never heard of it happening before, Sergeant, and although I've known Tayeb for many seasons now I'll still take 6747's word over his."

"Tayeb, what have you to say in your defence? What lies upstream that you aren't telling us about?"

Tayeb bit his lip, but before he could speak, the sound of running feet cut through the rush of the river; the other scout had returned from upstream.

"There is another tunnel upstream!" he cried, as soon as he was within earshot. Taking a few gulping breaths as he came to a halt in front of their group, he added, "And it is fully formed."

May's eyebrows drew together in surprise. "Any sign of Tunnellers?"

The scout shook his head. "None. It seems abandoned, though tools are still scattered about. They must have left in a hurry."

Her eyes cut back to Tayeb just in time to notice his minute flinch. "Tayeb," she said, voice calm, but low enough that anyone familiar with her moods would hear its dangerous edge, "Did you know of this?"

Tayeb, to his credit, only took a moment to reply. "Sergeant, I was aware of the tunnel. May I ask him a few questions about his observations?"

May thought for a moment. "You have five questions. No more. There had better be a good reason, Tayeb. You rememberolan, do you not?"

Of course he rememberedolan, they all did, and what happened to him after his treachery was discovered. "There will be, sergeant."

He turned to address the other scout in a clear voice. "Did you see any signs of Tunneller activity

beyond the exit?"

"Nay, I did not. The tunnel is ours for sure, but no sign of us leaving it." Tayeb made an effort to make his voice clear above the Alph. "Were the walls smooth, save for supports?" Again the other scout replied negatively, "They were not. Small holes lined the walls, possibly shafts but too small for most of us, and twisting off at odd angles."

Tayeb considered his questions carefully, wanting May to come to the same conclusions he had, without overly leading the questions. "You said we left in a hurry. Were there signs of a struggle?" The other scout shook his head emphatically.

"Not in the slightest, else I would have reported it."

"Yet we left in an unusual manner?"

"I've never heard of Tunnellers leaving their tools behind before."

There was a hesitance in Tayeb's voice as he formed his final question. "Thank you. My last query is not for you. Number 6747, you have heard all this. Can you name any creature that lives in such small tunnels?"

At this 6747 looked up at Tayeb and, for the first time known to the company, smiled.

"Brothersssss."

May had her axes in her hands before she knew what she was doing. Around her, the rest of the company followed suit, some directing their weapons towards the Alethid, others outward towards the perimeter. May, trusting to her company to guard them from external threats, turned her attention instead to the internal one.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded of the Alethid. "What monsters have you drawn down on us?" She advanced forward, pressing one blade into the creature's chest. The wound oozed thick black liquid, and the Alethid screamed and cowered behind its Handler.

"You *know!*" it shrieked. "My brothersssss... you *know* them! Don't ask! Don't hurt!"

Dread struck May like a blow from her father's hammer. The Alethid was confirming what her gut had told her at the description of the tunnel.

"Siridil," she said flatly. "The Swarm."

The others exchanged uneasy looks. "The Swarm is a myth," objected Lonnes, the second scout. "A fiction to keep children out of unstable tunnels."

"It's real." Tayeb's eyes were hollow, his face haunted. "It's waiting for us. We have to go downstream."

"You do not give the orders here." May stowed her axes away. "And you've overlooked something. The Swarm is aware of the half-built tunnel too."

She turned to stare around at her company. Good people, every one of them. They had weathered worse than this.

"We go upstream," she announced. "Prepare torches and pitch, and stay on guard. And we'll send the Alethid in first."

As they set off again, she heard muttered complaints behind her. *Easy enough for them to grumble*, she thought. *They don't have to answer to my father if we come back empty-handed.* Yarran May liked to think of himself as a family man, a benevolent patriarch. And he did care about his children, truly. Which was why Lindis' older sister was now spending the foreseeable future learning the nice, safe art of drawing up maps from travellers' reports, her own expedition having ended up in similar difficulties to Lindis'. Marla had made the wrong call and now she was out of the adventuring game for good. *Not me*, Lindis vowed. *I'm not losing the only job I've ever enjoyed because of a couple of twitchy mercenaries.*

But still. The Swarm was bad news, and the lack of concrete information about it only made the stories worse. The Tunnellers who had been working up ahead must have got lucky; the more usual find after a Swarm attack was tumbled piles of bones, picked clean. Not just of the... edible bits, but hair, nails, everything. And not a trace of whatever creature was responsible. May repressed a shudder. It would do no good for the rest of the company to see her unnerved by the prospect of what they faced.

The tunnel mouth, she was forced to conclude, probably did not look any more menacing than any other she had encountered, but then, jagged stone framing smothering darkness was never the most comforting of sights.

"Right," she said, beckoning the Handler forward. "Let's get this over with."

"This is not a good idea," Tayeb began again, but May silenced him with a look, and started organising her people, placing herself behind 6747 and the Handler. She was responsible for this company and she'd make sure they all came back. Cool-headed Kullej she left with ten at the mouth, to get word to her father if all went wrong.

Then they entered the deep, weapons in one hand, torches in the other, apart from Damzin, clutching her dulcimer. May's world shrunk to the space between her and the Handler's back as they carefully fumbled their way forward. If the tunnel entrance had been unnerving, the little openings on the walls were worse, promises of death on either side. She wanted to scream, to run, forwards or back, it didn't matter, to fight and bury one of her hatchets into someone's skull. Instead she kept going. The price of leadership was being the strong one. The abandoned tools frightened her. Some of them were expensive. No one would willingly leave them.

The tunnel began to curve upward. Lonnes started saying something, when the Handler stopped suddenly. Somewhere ahead of her, in the darkness, something whispered. The rhythms were not human. May tried to concentrate, to hear above the sounds of the water running over them. Another whisper, behind now, followed by a choir of susurrus. 6747 emitted a desperate wheezing giggle. The whispers rose in volume, before abruptly ending. There was a moment of silence before the screaming began.

May turned to see a frenzy of flailing shadows being put out one by one as each torch went out. Then she realised that she too was screaming as her body became a cage of agony. Barely standing, she noticed the Handler seemingly oblivious to all the commotion.

"You cannot fight the Swarm with brute force," he said calmly.

The pain lessened and the tunnel was filled with the sound of scuttling. May looked for 6747 but the creature was gone. The Handler started walking off.

"Hurry before they start to feed!" he called. Soft humming echoed behind May and the pain reintensified. She clenched her jaw and moved forward, ignoring the anguished cries behind her.

What kind of leader flees leaving their company to die? But the Handler was right: it was pointless to try and fight a foe that could immobilise you from afar.

Eventually she reached the end of the tunnel. The Handler was perched on a raised rocky slab. Damzin, Lonnes and Tayeb followed after her - there were no other survivors. Although Lonnes could hardly be called a survivor - he was carried by Damzin and looked more a corpse with various sections of flesh cleanly removed. Tayeb had a blade in each hand stained with blood. *Red blood.* Tayeb looked at his hands, "Better to die by my hand than be *devoured.*"

Damzin backed away, but the Handler nodded. "They cannot feed on death, but those they feed on must die."

All was silent as the inevitable conclusion sank in. Lonnes had made it through the tunnel, yet there was no hope for him to reach the end of their expedition. Being marked by the Swarm equalled a death sentence. Four of them would be left to carry on - there was no going back through this tunnel.

Behind them, the Alph was still roaring away in the darkness. Ahead, the entrance to a larger passage could be made out in the darkness, probably leading down to the fort that had been faintly visible from where they had first reached the river. This would be their next destination; it might seem suicidal with so few Tunnellers, but still they had to try to make their way onwards. Only fate knew what lay ahead.

Move On – A Tunnellers’ Tale - Extras

Fun facts:

This chain was mostly people who specified a fantasy preference – it was also just about the only one where every person followed on a single established plot.

The Bard is now terrified of:

The poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Comments:

“When I was writing my part, I really didn’t know where it was going, and was happy to leave that task to those who came after me. They picked up on my character work particularly well, and the plot offers I made were taken and twisted into a rather good shape. It was nice to see some details I’d made up feed into things written a thousand words later. It’s a shame some of the world building in the early paragraphs was never recalled, but there wasn’t really room for it in the story. I’m kind of amazed how naturally it came to an end, as well—good work from the last few authors.” - Benjamin

"I wrote the dialogue scene between Tayeb and the other scout, from asking May for permission to ask questions, up until 6747 replied to his first question. I'd been given a good set-up for a story, and clearly my job was going to be dialogue, so I had the interesting choice of whether to open the story up by introducing new elements, or whether to try and start aiming for a close, so that the last few people weren't hastily tying up too many loose ends. I have to say I'm very impressed with everyone's work afterwards, drawing the story to a reasonable ending. Considering 12 people wrote relatively tiny parts each, it feels remarkably coherent. Great fun to be part of." - Michael

Really Wrong

Only two things are clear: coffee is incredibly important, and nothing is quite as it seems...

Danielle Saunders, Kamile Rastenyte, Thomas Ruddle, Robin Polding, Jon French, Souradip Mookerjee, Alex O'Bryan-Tear, Nakul Khanna, Lilian Halstead, James Brett, Hana Azizan, Pedro Fontoura

The coffee didn’t seem right.

Jay had seen an awful lot of coffee, having a typical student’s attitude to deadlines. Jay had also seen no small quantity of Really Wrong Coffee, having a typical student’s attitude to washing-up mugs, to microwaving lukewarm beverages two or five times, to shrugging at a milk carton that happily declared itself to have expired three days ago and carrying right on.

(That was mostly why Jay had decided to go *out* for coffee in the first place. That, and though she’d never been to Grounds To Operate before, she’d heard it was basically the best café around. She wasn’t entirely sure *where* she’d heard that, but there was something unshakably believable about it.)

It wasn’t unusual to get coffee Really Wrong, and it also wasn’t hard to tell what exactly was wrong with any particular mug – strange smell, strange texture, on one memorable occasion strange pinkish froth crawling over the rim. This mug of coffee didn’t *look* wrong. It was just sitting there innocently on the café’s table.

That was it. Coffee shouldn’t be able to look innocent. Somehow, though, this coffee was managing it.

“If I drink this,” said Jay, “something is going to go wrong. I can tell.”

No response from the mug was forthcoming. A passing pedestrian gave Jay and her coffee a perturbed look.

“But I really want coffee. To drink, not to have light conversation with. Oh, to hell with it.”

Jay lifted the mug and took a mouthful. This innocent cup of coffee seemed to be the best coffee anyone could imagine. It filled her throat with comforting warmth and for a few minutes Jay

couldn't lay her eyes off the cup that had just contained the delicious liquid.

This cup of coffee somehow felt life-changing. "If a simple cup of coffee can be such a big discovery, what else have I been missing out on?" she thought and suddenly became extremely self-assured and eager to take action.

But her thoughts didn't focus on any particular subject. Instead, they leapt between various things: planning how she would reorganise her drawers, then how she'd go to the library searching for new undiscovered books, coming back to thoughts about the pile of unfinished assignments and various little things she began doing and then forgot, leaving them unfinished and lonely in various places of her room and mind...

Jay's mind became so preoccupied with all those thoughts, that she hardly paid any attention to her surroundings. In fact, she was so preoccupied with them that she managed to forget the one thing she would always have with her – Tommy – her favourite umbrella. The one that had drawn eyes and ears sticking out on the sides. He would accompany and listen to her in every long walk in the rain she had. The black guardian that kept her from catching a cold because of all that water falling from the sky. He was the only friend who enjoyed the rain alongside her.

She knew Tommy's continual presence in her life was strange, but she didn't care. All she knew was that she was happy when he was around. She knew everything about him – the way he sprung quickly into position, the slightly bent arm where he'd been damaged, the specific way you had to wrap it up. The coffee adventure had seemed nerve-wracking, but Tommy's stare gave her the confidence to approach a barista – and now she definitely felt better for it.

She took another long gulp as she wandered out of the café. She'd have to make the switch to this café from her regular place. She'd been there for so long, the details of it were lost on her. It was just go in, mutter at staff, grab coffee, leave. It would be a great reward for completing a difficult essay, that's for sure. "A job well done," she whispered, but she wasn't sure why.

Jay suddenly became more aware of the rumble of cars, the beeping of checkouts and the hubbub of Saturday shoppers. She needed to get home before the rush of cars out of the city centre made

cycling difficult. The ground was slippery, too – Tommy's services were required. "Tommy! Damn!" she exclaimed, as she recalled leaving him in the café. She turned back, only for the light to brighten and the beeping to get louder.

She opened her eyes.

"So, Ms. Gaskill," said a voice. "What did you see this time?"

Jay sat bolt upright; or rather, she tried to but found herself incapable. She discovered herself strapped down, only able to move her head, which itched with the feel of a tightly fitted cap. How had she gotten here? The vision was still so vivid in her mind that she couldn't remember. Or perhaps she never would.

As her eyes adjusted to the light, she saw his shape looming over here. Large eyes, with a hint of sparkle that suggested at any moment he could spring quickly to action, ears that stuck slightly out from his head and his arm bent in a sling, meaning he had to wrap himself up in his long black coat in just such a way as to fit.

Tommy.

He tentatively reached down a hand to gently caress Jay's cheek. As he did so, all her panic washed away. Tommy was here. Her world was right again. She reached up her hand to stroke him back...

And remembered! Her arm couldn't move; she was trapped. This beast had her stuck here like an animal. Jay opened her mouth and snapped her head round to bite Tommy's hand, but he pulled back and whipped his arm round to land a stinging slap upon her cheek, where before he had touched it with such affection.

"You *will* love me, Jay." Tommy spoke softly. "Now tell me what you saw!"

"Don't you know? You were th—" She stopped as his lips curled up into a strange smile.

"Of course I was, but I want to know how *you*... remember it."

Something about the way he said that word made her pause. She was already feeling light-headed this morning, but it seemed to be getting worse, and... *This morning? Is it morning? I don't remember getting here...*

Annoyed at her hesitation, Tommy moved closer and stared impatiently into her eyes. "Something about a coffee shop, Grounds To Operate I think it was called?"

Hearing those words again stirred something in Jay's mind. Her eyes widened as two memories surfaced and clashed with one another.

"You... I remember you being there but... I'm not sure you were..." Now her eyes flashed with anger as another memory asserted itself.

"And then I woke up here... you must have slipped something in my coffee... or something... and – and –" she trailed off.

Tommy was sighing and rubbing his forehead.

"You really do have to make this difficult, don't you? This is something like the fifth time with this memory, and I'm not a patient person. You know you'll be happy in the end. You do love me, don't you?" he said, his voice suddenly becoming tender. It was true. She did. She was just finding it difficult to forgive him for what he had done this morning.

"You were just finding it difficult to forgive me for what I did this morning."

"Yes..." She blinked a few times, and ran that thought past herself again. "What are you *doing to me?*"

His nostrils flared with irritation, and he appeared to reach a decision, shaking his head and turning his attention to a computer off to her left.

"Oh well, let's try again then. With feeling this time."

He pushed a final button with a flourish, and the world vanished into a sudden blinding white light, as her head pounded and roared and the world dissolved into confusion as –

She struggled her eyes open.

Jay could feel her warm, comfortable pillow against her cheek. Feeling especially groggy this morning, she fumbled around for her alarm clock for the time. She always slept with her arms wrapped tightly around her alarm clock so that nothing could ever separate them. "I love you, Tommy".

Her most favourite alarm clock in the world. It had cartoon eyes in between its two hands, and she called him Tommy. The name just felt right. She checked the time, and it was 6:59am. Riiiiing! 7:00. She tried to turn it off. The button was nowhere to be found. Jay knew she had to get Tommy to stop complaining so much. She'd get ready soon enough. She dropped Tommy into her handbag, still ringing. "I'll sort it out later", she thought to herself. She found it difficult to stay awake, as if she'd been waking up again and again without actually falling asleep. Must be the coffee, she thought. Coffee.

"That's just what I need," she mused to herself. "There's a new coffee shop down the road. I'll pop in there for a little bit before heading off to my lecture".

She took her handbag in one hand and closed the door behind her, with Tommy still ringing loudly. Jay could already hear the people in the rooms next to her complaining about Tommy. They just didn't understand her special connection with Tommy. Suddenly, she heard glass crack and the ringing stop.

"Tommy!" she squealed, digging into her handbag to pull out her friend. But it was too late. Tommy's face was looking up at her reproachfully from behind a web of painful cracks. One of his bells, sticking out like oversize ears, had fallen off. One of his delicate black hands was bent. A trail of blood streaked across Tommy's eyes and dripped onto the floor.

Jay cursed herself for bringing her beloved alarm clock everywhere she went, despite Tommy's usefulness being confined to 8:00AM every day. It was only a matter of time before something like this would happen. She would have to try and locate the original manufacturer, and explain the situation. She turned Tommy over and squinted at his casing for hints of where he might have been made. Unfortunately, blood was beginning to congeal around the raised plastic lettering, and she couldn't make it out without giving Tommy a perhaps fatal bath first.

Blood?

Jay knew for a fact that alarm clocks didn't bleed. That only left one possible source of the blood: Jay. A strange pinkish froth was pumping almost cartoonishly from Jay's left wrist, welling up around a sliver of glass that was still buried there. In thoughtless fear, Jay dropped Tommy to the

ground. He bounced once, with a sickening crunch, then careened over onto his face.

But Jay was no longer thinking about Tommy. Her thoughts had been torn away by a word, streaked across the floor in her own blood.

REMEMBER.

The familiar restraints on her arm returned, and the taste of coffee in her mouth transformed into that of blood. Coffee? She hadn't been drinking coffee. That had been –

"I asked you a question, Jay, and when I ask a question, I expect an answer."

Another stinging slap on her cheek.

"Do. You. Remember?"

"I – I remember an alarm clock, and there was coffee, and–"

"This evidently isn't getting us anywhere," groaned an exasperated Tommy. "I was trying to spare you. You know I don't like to see you suffer, darling."

Then why the hell are you doing this to me? But the thought did not remain in her mind for long before being replaced by a wordless sensation of calm. She knew that, in Tommy's presence, everything would be alright.

"That's right, Jay. Everything will be alright."

She heard the clink of a glass being placed on the table. She realised that her eyes were scrunched shut, and she opened them. It was filled with a pink, frothy liquid.

"Drink."

A sense of wrongness overcame Jay, but once again it was drowned out by unconditional adulation. A part of her mind screamed at her to wake up, to realise what was going on. But she dismissed it as insane. It would be insane not to trust Tommy. Tommy loved her, and she loved him, more than anything in the world.

Jay discovered that her arms were free to move. She drank, and the world went black. In the darkness she was alone. The blackness had closed in around her and reaching out she'd found only space, there was nothing, no-one, here but her. Jay hated the emptiness, she'd not been alone for as long as she could remember until it had come and taken the world away. But what could

she remember? Everything seemed so fuzzy, she couldn't fit shapes to the loose scraps of memory floating around her head, it seemed such a struggle to pull anything out but Tommy. He was always there, in every fragment of her part-remembered life. It didn't make sense, why was she alone?

The scent of coffee, a ringing, a word in blood... Remember. But what? Jay poured through the loose sensations and associations but no coherent memories sprang forth. She'd always loved Tommy, but why wasn't he here? It was all so confusing. The first thing she remembered was waking up and seeing his face.

Latching onto that she ran it over and over in her mind, she missed him so much, the memory of his face as she awoke was the most precious thing she had right now. But as it became clearer it seemed more like a dream than a memory, he'd smiled smugly and she'd felt anger? But why would she be angry with Tommy? He was the most important thing to her. Something had been wrong, something had been taken from her. She'd leapt up and charged him, a mug of coffee had smashed on the floor, alarms had sounded, there had been blood...

Light poured into the darkness and she was aware of her surroundings, she looked around for Tommy and was reassured to see him standing to her right talking to another man; he didn't seem to have noticed she was awake yet. She was in a different room than before the blackness, she was reasonably sure, although all she could remember about the last room was that Tommy had been there. He'd wanted her to remember something too, although Jay had the unpleasant feeling that what he'd wanted her to remember was something quite different to the memory she'd found. He stood with his back to her, his slung arm sticking out awkwardly and obscuring her view of the person he was talking to.

She blinked, and the memory of leaping at him made its presence known again, the hatred and anger she'd felt at the man who had taken her life from her and the satisfaction she'd felt when she'd heard his arm snap. It had seemed so easy, and so right. He'd done something horrible, changed something, changed everything, taken everything from her. It was impossible for her to reconcile the loving Tommy with the monster that had done this to her, but the look on his face as he turned around and realised she was awake cut through her confusion. Jay suddenly knew what she had to

do.

This room extended far beyond the two people Jay could see – she had the vague impression of other figures dressed like Tommy, although without the sling. Of other tables like the one she was strapped to, and other tubes of pink fluid running down to other prone shapes.

Focusing again on Tommy, she made a small noise through a stiff jaw and a numb tongue. A whimper, to attract attention. Good, they'd noticed. Tommy came forward, still wearing that expression on his face. She kept still, tried to look small, until he was just close enough to... she dashed herself against her restraints, trying now to get her teeth just a little close to Tommy. At the last second before revenge though, she reached the limits of the table's straps. They were loose but not quite loose enough. Regret filled her. Tommy jerked back, and quickly scurried over to an IV line she could barely see, suspended over her head.

"Up the dose... Can't remember... I should have..."

Tommy was muttering, but Jay didn't care. A fire of hatred burned in her, and she could never forget, not now she had remembered. She didn't care even that a flow of pink was creeping down the IV line, into her blood. She wouldn't forget Tommy had... had... *but no not Tommy he...* No! She was losing it again he... *he wouldn't not Tommy, her alarm...* She tried to recall, make out the details of the betrayal, do something... *something to keep you dry, wonderful umbrella...*

With the last of her fading memory, Jay tried to scratch a word into the metal of the bed with her nails, but she couldn't remember why and she was so tired, was it really *time to get...*

"Gaskill."

Jay looked up from the file she had been reading and closed it when she saw who was speaking.

"My apologies for interrupting you."

"It's not a problem, Mr. Coffee."

"The operation will begin very soon," he looked at her, eyes unusually sharp, and that made her sit up straighter, "I will entertain any last requests."

"A date?" She joked.

"Pulling out."

Jay refrained from rolling her eyes, and looked at Coffee with as much professionalism as she could muster, "I appreciate your concern, sir, but I will be fine."

"That is easy to say *now*," he sounded irate and she merely returned his gaze with newfound steadiness. It made him narrow his eyes at her, "This is your final chance, Gaskill."

"I know," Jay replied, "Sorry."

"That's not what I want to hear."

Jay couldn't help the smile, "Thank you."

"Take care of yourself," he said seriously, and then he hesitated momentarily, "Especially since Whiskey is involved."

He was shifting his eyes in front of her – dithering was completely unlike Coffee – and, propriety be damned, Jay took a slow breath before she reached out and held him by the hand. He blinked at her when he finally registered the contact, but he didn't reject her touch. He didn't seem to tighten his grip either, but Jay thought of small victories and forged ahead.

"Whiskey and I, we're in the past. I know I won't remember anything after the surgery but I don't think I'll ever forget what he did or how dangerous he is, in my gut." And she smiled up at him, mostly earnest and somewhat cheeky. "Since I won't remember anything after the surgery, what are the odds of a date, John?"

"Highly unlikely, as it will be a security risk to us both," he said, tone sharp, but it was followed by a deep sigh as he sat by her side, still connected at the hands, "But if you succeed, I will think about it."

"Thank you."

"I said, I'll think about it. It wasn't a 'yes.'"

The moment was shattered by high-pitched ringing cutting across the coffee shop.

"Is that the fire alarm?" asked Jay.

"What do you mean?"

She began to panic. "Why isn't anyone-

Jay opened her eyes. The alarm kept ringing, the sprinklers were on. Her bed had been knocked over, straps straining painfully against her weight. Lights flickered as black-cloaked shadows rushed from bed to bed. Shots were fired.

The fall had damaged the bed's side rail, where someone had scratched the word *RUN*. When had she last used her muscles? Anger yanked her right hand free. Jay clumsily undid the remaining straps and collapsed on the floor. She tried to crawl.

"Springing the cage, my little jaybird?"

Tommy towered before her, black cloak deflecting fire-suppressant rain.

Jay managed a weak smile. "Guess I burned through the pink juice, you bastard."

"I was enjoying breaking you." Tommy aimed his gun. "Unfortunately, play time has been cut short."

One shot.

Jay opened her eyes. Tommy lay sprawled on the ground, empty eyes gazing into hers. Pink froth dripped from his mouth, collecting on the floor.

"Gaskill?"

Jay looked up. "John!"

He holstered his weapon and sat beside her. The standard black kevlar was comforting.

"You're bleeding," said Jay, noticing the dark red stain on his arm.

"I'll get it checked out," said Coffee. "The sting operation was a success. A job well done, Gaskill."

"Some memories are coming back," said Jay. "He may have broken the conditioning."

Coffee looked at the body. "If Agent W did get anything, it won't do him any good now." He uncapped a hip flask. "What do you remember?"

"I didn't know you were a drinker," said Jay, taking the flask.

"A really weak one," he replied. "Irish coffee."

Really Wrong - Extras

Fun facts:

This was the only chain formed entirely of people who specified no genre preference – it was started as a wildcard chain, and my goodness did it live up to it.

The Bard is now terrified of:

Coffee, novelty umbrellas, the name Tommy.

Comments:

"Even though I started this and was reading every update as it came, at no point in this story did I have any idea how even the next section would go. That said I'm extremely impressed by how coherent this turned out – well done to everyone who wrote for it!" - Danielle

"I thought it didn't go exactly as I planned and I think my idea would have been safer (I just wanted Inception, really, less experimentation) but it definitely went in an interesting direction." – Thomas

"My thought was that she was some sort of bioweapon, and that she was being influenced to try to make her trust the person that would be giving her orders so that she'd obey without question. In my head I was thinking that she had been human once and that they were trying to make her think she was still human, but having thought of it I prefer the idea of her never having been human. I probably would have taken her on a rampage through the facility but it was probably a good thing I didn't have the words to do that." - Lilian

"This really is a weird story." – Nakul
[This has to be my favourite comment on the chainwriting – Ed]

Epiphany

It was a cold, crisp morning on Epiphany when they switched the sun off...

Sarah Binney, Hannah Wray, Hannah Jones, Anon, Holden Lee, Michael Donaghy, Sahr Jahil, Kanta Purkayastha, Fabio Fiorelli, Isobel Sands, Filip Drnovsek Zorko

It was a cold, crisp morning on Epiphany when they switched the sun off.

It was regrettable, they said. They had of course nothing but respect and compassion for the people of Epiphany, but it was simply inevitable. The rent, they explained; the sheer running costs of even a modest sun these days, you know, simply outrageous! Hydrogen doesn't come cheap any more, they reflected sadly; the galaxy was a very different place before the war, you know! Of course you know. Tragic, yes; but such is the Universe. How very romantic!

And so the sad little ball of radiation rose for the last time above the thin llarado trees that lined the long avenues of the Capitol, guided as always by the speckled barely-visible form of the helioframe, like it was saying a weak goodbye to the low mist rising over the pine forests to the south and the dusty tundra to the east and the crystalline glaciers high above the Austals to the north. Then it coughed, politely, quietly, and without further meaning to bother anyone simply shuddered, gave a final little flare, and blew away in the morning air.

And then it wasn't morning any more, and Epiphany shrunk away into darkness.

Anders chewed thoughtfully on her nutrient feed, gradually surfacing from the pleasant sleep of interstellar hibernation. Ship spoke in her mind. *We have reached our destination. Please have your planetary visas ready and filled in for the quarantine officials. Thank you for travelling with Ariadne Interstellar Airways.*

As her body gradually rehydrated, she couldn't wait to look out at the view. Anders had seen many worlds and many wonders over her long life, but she always anticipated the *next* one most keenly. Epiphany had a reputation as the most breathtaking planet in the universe – undoubtedly hype, but still, she was excited to see it for herself in a few short moments. The vast artificial

structures, the gleaming net of the helioframe cradling a delicate blue-green ball of sentient beings. And the skiing was supposed to be amazing. Anders peeled her eyelids apart painfully, for the first time in 312 years. She gazed over at the display screens. Had they not been activated? Everything was dark.

Ship spoke again, sounding unusually confused. *There appears to have been an error.*

Anders focused her eyes and discerned only a faint silver gleam beneath them, where the brightly lit helioframe should have been. *There appears to have been an error.* With effort, Anders croaked a query to Ship's systems. "Location?" If Ship had gone wrong, what a waste. They'd have to restore her from backup – had she even made a backup recently?

Location confirmed: Epiphany.

She winced as she again strained her neck to look at the displays across Ship's passenger cabin. Hibernation had left her body stiff and mostly unresponsive. Although the pod where she lay had intermittently stimulated her muscles with electric shocks, in addition to flexing her limbs with dexterous robotic arms, the years of sedentation had taken their toll. Forcing her mind and body to realign, shooting weary electric signals between brain, nerves, and muscles, was like trying to urge a nearly-retired CropBot from its stall and out to work on frosty morning fields.

Before she'd finished uncurling her fingers from the fist she'd managed, Ship lurched. *Destination's tractor has locked. Estimated time until landing: fifteen minutes.*

The pod's airlock hissed open as its team of arms and instruments prodded her body to wakefulness with injections, faint electric shocks, and bursts of alternating hot and freezing air. The stiffness in her body was replaced by a frenzied desire to move, to *sprint*, to get out of the confined space as quickly as possible.

The faint shimmering of Epiphany's metallic receiving docks grew larger, but the sight that greeted her as she walked towards the display screens was darker than even the quietest night on the bustling, intergalactic receiving hub.

Lining the streets were masses of shadows. All the citizens of Epiphany were out in droves, slinking about from place to place. They had been reduced

to mere musings, random scraps of thoughts. A train of thought pulled up sluggishly alongside a building and shuddered as if rethinking its decision and then promptly dematerialized.

A being, which might have been sentient once, slid towards Anders as she staggered onto the docks in disbelief. "What's going on?" Anders implored.

The being oscillated from side to side in a movement that mimicked pondering. A hole opened where a mouth might have been. The being looked alarmed at this sudden event and melted in shock.

"Sun's been switched off," said someone behind Anders. It was a Gherkin, they often resembled gherkins. "The traders and foreigners are fine, just a bit duller, but the citizens, ehh, lack illumination."

"Oh, right." Well that's the skiing buggered, she thought ruefully. A question struggled into existence. "Wait, how can they switch the sun off?"

"Search me, it's not like I had anything to do with it. I'm just a Gherkin," it added quickly. Anders shrugged and did just that.

"Ow! Hey! Lay off! This is assault! Police!" The Gherkin screeched as Anders rifled through its belongings. This was highly improbable, Anders thought, since gherkins often do not have belongings, nor is it possible to rifle through them. "The police aren't properly sentient," Anders gently reminded the Gherkin who only doubled its screams.

...And then she felt the all-too familiar sensation of being encased in jellified air. It oozed into her lungs and clung like mucus. The crowd's shouts turned low-pitch until it got beyond the range of her hearing, into whale echolocation territory, and stopped. Anders turned around as fast as she could, about five seconds.

Agent Garrett had his arms folded, and was tapping his foot as easily as one would on 0.5g.

"Barely set foot on a new planet and already molesting the citz?"

"It asked for it!" she said; she felt like she was speaking underwater. Gosh, she *hated* time-cages. The Gherkin's mouth was still open, and it looked

without seeing. She had an intense desire to pour some vinegar down its throat.

Garrett unhooked a canister from around his neck and fastened it around Anders's nose. "Take a breath of O." She did and her head cleared. She noticed Gherkin's darkened heliopod hanging in mid-air, fallen from the pocket where she had been rifling through its non-belongings. It stared at her accusingly.

"The atmo's high in N2O," he explained. "You did get my brief?"

He looked at her expression and sighed.

"If not for your other... skills, we'd've left you back in Charon," he said, "I'll make this snappy. This sci-group, they gene-modded this new species, who only needed the sun to be happy. Drunk-happy. Turns out happiness isn't profitable. The sci's've busted their bulbs, are moving out. Bad biz all around."

"So what's my job?"

"Same as always."

"But... the whole ring?"

"We've repo'd bigger things before. It's all in the manual." And indeed it was, procedures laid down by the Firm countless eons ago, by authors like Chad Eatwell and the legendary Winston Brice. She'd heard that Brice was still out there somewhere, wealthier than galaxies but working for the sheer joy of it, whispers from colleagues, friend-of-a-friend stuff. It'd be nice to have his like around. Now the universe was shrinking, dividing, inflationary bubbles too small to contain a legend.

But Garrett was right; they'd done bigger jobs than this. The wreckage of the assembler fleet that had struck Ossephus had been two light years across, and a slight programming error in their blue goo had taken off three of his legs before they'd managed to shut it down.

That was probably why he was so cranky, she reflected.

On the plus side, it looked like draining the air was one of the early steps. If she tapped it out at the bottom, she could toss all that gummy N2O somewhere, and spend a few decades in a decent atmosphere while the sidewalls came down.

She unslung the QGP torch and ambled forward in search of a valley.

The darkness of the sunless planet almost made it easier for her to know where she was meant to go. The city lights faded as she approached the periphery of the town she landed in; the citizens, quietly slumping by, dwindled in number and a heavy silence descended on her as she trudged on into the empty countryside. Had she come here a few millennia ago, even in night time she would have been able to witness the jagged peaks of the mountains bathed in starlight without having to activate the Giiggle™ chip laced on to her retina.

The annoying thing about Giiggle™ was that, because they were the most profitable tech company for the past 5000 years, they seemed to assume that they could do no wrong. Hence, the glowing red arrow in her field of sight illuminating her path failed to highlight the hulking figure of Legendary Winston Brice, whom Anders walked straight into.

Anders took one look at Winston Brice's face and her mouth fell open so wide that a swarm of frostquitoes could have entered through it. Frostquitoes are a common fly that will bite and turn your insides into ice if they ever got the chance. With that thought, Anders quickly composed her face.

However no one would blame her for her sudden surprise in seeing Winston Brice's face. Many would consider him a miracle to be even alive considering that it has been eons since anyone has personally met him. The only way Anders could describe him in one word was enigmatic... and beautiful... *wait, that's two words.*

He looked the age of a 21 year old, wearing a black suit with a white shirt, no tie. He had dark brown, messy hair with slight stubble. His eyes were aqua blue with a hint of silver. He looked exactly as the picture of him from the first repo manual published by the Firm. Anders could look at him forever, but an unexpected beeping noise broke the spell.

The noise was coming from Brice's left hand. Before Anders could say anything Brice put an object, which appeared to be in his left hand, into his suit pocket and gave Anders a quick, dazzling smile, before rushing past her towards the jagged peaks of the mountains. Anders' instinct was telling her that Brice was up to something - but what?

"Sorry for not having dropped by before, but I really had to pick up this call from the Notary. Things have been a bit nervous in this period." Anders could scarcely believe that even a character larger than... well, several lives as Brice could talk so casually about the Notary Attractor. The vast, cold, intelligence which resided in deep extragalactic space and computed its alien thoughts in Bose condensates occasionally sold its legal services to the Firm. Anders wasn't high up enough to know how they actually ever paid it, or what could actually make it nervous.

"I have to tell you that the Repo of Epiphany cannot go on as intended. We have had a change of plans."

There was a long silence as Anders realised that the legend was talking to her, and then as she registered what it was that he had said. The endless darkness outside the scope of her Giiggle™ Night-Sight suddenly seemed to be one enormous, sentient being, waiting to see how she would react. As usual, she felt her purely professional side take over while the rest of her remained stunned.

"New instructions, sir?"

Brice tipped his head, as if considering her. Anders felt something flip in her stomach.

"Yes and no. This is no longer a repo project. Officially, you are now between assignments. However. Since you are here, the Firm feels that you could be useful... unofficially. Remember the old days."

"I don't follow, sir." Oh, but she did. It had been centuries, more than centuries, and the universe was so distorted now that she couldn't know how many light-years separated her from what was once Medea. She felt old memories stirring, old thoughts restarting. By the time she registered that Brice had been carrying an activator, it was too late.

"The Notary has found a buyer for Epiphany. Said buyer desires a small, unspoiled planet on which to retire, after an existence longer and busier even than mine. Emphasis on 'unspoiled.' Close this deal and the sun rises tomorrow. To close it, however... You remember now, lieutenant?"

Anders ripped off a salute that had not been seen for nearly one thousand years.

"Sir! The sun shall rise unmarked, Sir!"

"I think we've seen more than enough, thank you." The image froze on the view of Anders, rendered gloriously martial in her stillness, like any veteran who had served her country and was proud of having done so. Beside her, in sharp contrast to the precise lines of her salute, Brice was nothing more than a vague fuzzy outline.

"Wake her up." The judge glanced up at the rows of silent dignitaries sitting opposite. "The court apologises to the honourable members of the audience for the shocking nature of these images. It was the judgement of the prosecution that they were necessary."

In her corner, the prosecutor cleared her throat. "It is always difficult to judge how a subject will respond to the machine. We had not expected her true feelings to be quite so... naked."

Then there was silence for a time, as all eyes fell on the woman lying prone in the middle of the chamber. The technician's quick, sure movements as he unhooked her from the machine were the only disturbances in the preternatural calm. Presently she stirred, limbs twitching one by one, and her eyes opened.

"Do you know why you are here?" The judge spoke in a flat, emotionless voice.

It was obvious to all present when she remembered. Her face underwent the slightest change in expression, and suddenly the fuzzy, confused eyes of a human woken from deepest sleep were replaced by something cold and hard.

"Yes," Anders said.

The judge motioned the technician forward. "It is your opinion that the images we have just seen represent an accurate account of the subject's interaction with the Epiphany machine?"

"It is."

"Very well." The judge glanced down at her desk and began to read. "Lieutenant Samantha Anders, you are charged with crimes against sapient life, including but not limited to: the destruction of the Ossephus migrant fleet; conspiracy to overthrow the local government of Medea; murder of the children under your care; and perpetration of the

Medean genocide." She paused, then looked up at Anders. "Use of the Epiphany machine has been approved and its results taken into evidence. Prosecution?"

The prosecutor glanced at Anders, but her gaze flinched away and she ended up staring at a fixed point beyond Anders' shoulder. "Until now, Lieutenant Anders' involvement in the Medean incident has not been supported by concrete evidence. It is, however, the opinion of the prosecution that the Epiphany scenario demonstrates beyond reasonable doubt her culpability. Her use of xenophobic slurs is in line with the Medean colonial administration's attitude towards the local population. Moreover, it is telling that her mind has populated the scenario with such crudely offensive caricatures. Although her responses to the agent construct are guarded, as soon as she is in the company of a construct she construes as familiar her defences drop. She all but admits to the crimes she is charged with. Given the slightest opportunity she jumps on the chance to revisit the... old days."

Abruptly the prosecutor's voice hardened and she turned her head deliberately to meet Anders' gaze. "I need not remind the honourable members of the audience just what it is the humans mean by 'unspoiled.'" She held her gaze a moment longer, then turned to the judge.

"The prosecution rests."

Epiphany - Extras

Fun facts:

This chain was predominantly sci-fi preference, and (perhaps consequently?) almost every person seemed to try to introduce at least one new plot element.

The Bard is now terrified of:

Foreshadowing.

Comments:

"I was entertained by where it ended up, and amused by the fact that nobody seemed to make a big deal of how the sun got turned off." - Binney

Kelkai

Common name: Kelkai or solar sailor

Latin name: *Astrum Navita*

Family: *Cornubranchia* (Wyverns)



Physiology: Kelkai are huge, peaceful wyvern-like creatures that can be found drifting serenely between the stars. They seldom eat, getting most of their energy from the light of the stars they circle. They can photosynthesise because they have chloroplasts that are reminiscent of brown algae, with a double membrane that suggests they were originally free-living eukaryotes. Contrary to popular belief, most of the photosynthesis takes place in the wings, not the frills on their backs. Their chloroplasts have loads of the accessory pigments fucoxanthin and beta-carotenene, which gives them their orange/brown colour. Because they live in the vacuum of space, they are exposed to very high light intensities, which would damage unprotected chlorophyll irreversibly. The green is just for display, it plays no role in photosynthesis. Because they get most of their energy that way, they don't eat much, getting the protein they need from comparatively small asteroid-dwelling crustaceans. They are ill-equipped for combat of any sort, having no natural weapons and fragile bodies; they rely on their size rather than anything else for defence. They can't enter any atmosphere, because they would be crushed by the pressure but it allows them to survive in the vacuum of space without decompressing. They rely mostly on scent to find food, and are one of the few animals that can smell nitrogen. Their three eyes are sensitive to ultraviolet, but they have poor reception to the red end of the spectrum. They are very long-lived, living for centuries. They reproduce only once or twice in their lifetimes, migrating to binary systems to spawn. They are born live and a newborn will typically measure two to three metres nose to tail. Their skin is only thin enough to allow things to diffuse in within the first

few weeks of life; during this time they must remain within the nebula or risk asphyxiation. It is during this time that they build up their spare oxygen supply, storing it in oxygen sacks in their thorax.

They don't need to breathe in later life because of their bizarre circulatory system, their large, slow heart pumps their blood through the oxygen sack, then it goes to the muscles and wherever else it is needed, where the oxygen is used up and carbon dioxide is produced. The blood, which is at this point full of carbon dioxide, is then taken to the wing membrane, where the carbon dioxide is used for photosynthesis and oxygen is produced. Only then does the blood return to the heart.

It is a matter of contention as to how they regulate their body temperature, but the majority suspect that they generate their own heat internally, like mammals or birds, and prevent the stars from overheating them by having scales that reflect infrared, but this has never been proven. How they deal with internal thermoregulation however, remains a mystery.

Due to their environment and longevity, Kelkai can grow to immense sizes; there are many reports of them reaching around sixty meters in length, and a few less credible reports of even larger ones.

Because of this they have few predators, with packs of Arka being one of the few things that can take them down. The kelkai's main defence is its powerful stomach acid, when threatened they vomit at their antagonist. This is quite a powerful deterrent, because a spray of highly concentrated acid is lethal anywhere, but more so in a vacuum. They seldom do this though, because there's a big risk that they'd be hurt along with whatever was attacking them.

They have several stomachs each with a different set of bacteria. This means that it takes them a long time to digest things, but very little is wasted.

Description: They are sexually dimorphic, with only the males having the large back crests. Females have smaller, tendril-like appendages instead. Both sexes have long head-crests and holes in the edges of their wing membranes, as well as loose flaps of skin on the sides of their necks, the function of which is unknown. Because of their diet they only have molars for crushing their prey's shells, having no need for canines or incisors. They are very finely scaled, each scale being tiny and hard to make out, except for the large ones along their spine. They are mostly white or grey with shades of brown, orange and green, but individuals with blue or red markings are occasionally spotted. Their markings become

darker and less saturated with age, with newborns being the most colourful.

Behaviour: Because of the way they feed, kelkai are solitary wanderers, not living in any particular territory. They spend most of their time in orbit around small stars, but need to forage in the asteroid belts every few years.

Notes: It is believed that they evolved on a planet that slowly lost its atmosphere, but as of yet no specific world has been suggested. Their oxygen sacks are believed to be modified lungs.

Lilian Halstead

The Death of James Thornton

“It was not suicide!” James insisted. “It was science!”

The argument had been going on for some minutes now, with James and St Peter, guardian of the pearly gates of Heaven, battling back and forth reasons why he should or shouldn't be allowed in. James would point to something good that he had done in life, a good deed or a sin he had abstained from, and St Peter would respond with an example of a sin he had indulged in, or a blind eye turned to someone in need of help. St Peter's most recent allegation, however, had touched a nerve within James. “I knew there was a risk in what I was doing, but I did it anyway, for the greater good. We were advancing the course of science!”

St Peter sneered at this. “Yes, I know all about your little niche of *science*. I've had St Gertrude on at me for *weeks* about your wretched experiments.”

“Please tell me you're not opposed to science.” James really needed a cigarette, but even if he'd had one he felt that smoking in front of St Peter himself was, well, probably not the best way of getting into heaven. “I know a lot of theists are, but I would hope that up here at least you'd have some sense.”

“I have no problem with science in general,” said St Peter. “It is merely your field which I must stand opposed to.”

“My field? What exactly is wrong with teleportation?”

“Nothing. If teleportation was in fact what you were working on then I would have shown you through the gates by now. In fact, if your 'teleporter' had malfunctioned and killed you I would have most likely been lenient and let you pass. As it is—”

“Hang on. *If* it had malfunctioned?” St Peter nodded silently. “But... I thought it had malfunctioned. If it didn't, how did I die?”

“You're a clever man. A *scientist*.” St Peter chuckled. “Figure it out!”

“Okay...” James thought back to his last memories of being alive. He had shaken the hand of Gordon Maxwell, his partner, stepped into the machine, switched it on...

And the next thing he remembered was appearing up in the clouds. He'd entered the machine and not exited it. He had died inside it, surely. “Was it Gordon? Did he kill me?”

“He should shoulder some of the blame, but really you killed yourself.”

It was at this point that another James appeared, popping into existence a few metres away, and that in the first James' head everything clicked into place. Everything must have worked perfectly. The machine had scanned him, saving a blueprint and transmitting it to the second booth. Meanwhile, the James in the first booth was converted to energy to help power the rebuild.

“Oh.”

The new arrival, James #2, hadn't seen them yet, despite having spun multiple full circles. “We're invisible to him,” said St Peter by way of an explanation. “People need a little time to adjust.”

It's a surreal experience, watching yourself go through a routine you performed only a few minutes before. It was made even more difficult for the watching James by the fact that while watching himself absorb the fact that he was dead and wrong about the non-existence of God, he was also processing the fact that he now had *three* immortal souls and the fact that if and when alive him put the teleporter up for sale, so would everybody else.

New James had reached the tipping point, the point where a new arrival stops looking around in wonder and starts looking for whoever's in charge.

This was when St Peter would approach them, though traditionally he wouldn't have a clone of the deceased trailing along behind him.

"James Alexander Thornton, I am Saint Peter, Guardian of the Pearly Gates of Heaven. Normally I would tell you that I would need to interview you about your life in order to assign you to your karmically appropriate afterlife, but in your case we have a rather major problem." He gestured to the original James, who took this as his cue to explain.

"We built a cloning machine." The look of shock on James II's face upon meeting himself was priceless, but James I was in no mood to appreciate it. "The 'teleporter' creates a clone, and then kills the original. This is not in itself a problem until..." He turned to St Peter, confused. "Actually, why is it a problem?"

"We cannot allow the same soul into heaven more than once. Every new soul created is one more cursed to wander the cloudscape for all eternity. What's more, all of you willingly stepped into the machine you built, which makes your cause of death officially suicide. Even ignoring the cigarettes and the atheism, that is rather a deal-breaker."

A third James popped into existence. "Bugger," said the first two.

Curtis Reubens

A Letter

My dear Josephine,

I hope this finds you well. It has been much too long since last I wrote, but hopefully you can forgive me when you hear of the progress I have made – my paper is almost ready for submission! I won't be at all sorry to leave this freezing cold cultural wasteland – it is a place much more pleasant to study than to visit, especially for so long.

Before I talk about that, though, I should tell you that your son is faring extremely well. He seems to have taken to the cold air and long treks much more readily than me, but then, he is young. More importantly, he has shown a real knack for ingratiating himself with the Kaylids – without him it would have been far more difficult to pursue my research. I am too different physically and in

temperament for them to trust me, and the guards I hired are hardly approachable. Arnold is a fine young man now, and strong from his training and the journey; they can understand and respect him, and don't mind his enquiries so much. If we're not careful he's liable to settle down here!

Anyway, as I say, my work progresses wonderfully. Travelling to Alberna myself has paid off just as I hoped it would. I can't attach the whole text of my paper – nearly finished! – lest any of my peers get hold of it, but I can at least share a few insights – I am sure you will find them as thrilling as I do after reading all the claptrap from the previous University expeditions here.

My central thesis is that the "Adventure Economy", as it is fashionably called, depends on natural resources being difficult to obtain. Alberna is a wild land quite unlike home, and things that we take for granted must be won and defended from the land and its inhabitants, both bestial and self-aware. In this environment it is hardly surprising that "adventurers" – although that is not what the Kaylids call them – are so crucial to survival. We have interviewed many such people, and the crucial uniting element of all of them is that they lubricate the flow of money and resources. I will give just one example – read the paper when it is published for the full argument.

My example is the slaying of wyverns, the indigenous species of drake. You may know that wyverns are among the fastest breeding of all dragons, and this is certainly evident from their relative abundance here. Uniquely, perhaps because of competition caused by this fecundity, the wyverns of Alberna are extremely proactive in accumulating wealth. Where most dragons are content to gather hoards very slowly – I suppose there is no hurry if they really are immortal, as some now think – wyverns venture forth from their lairs as often as weekly, and raids on Kaylid settlements are not at all uncommon, nor is the waylaying of travelling wagons. (My own expedition has so far been safe, thanks no doubt to our unfamiliar appearance – the wyverns seem wary of us, and of me especially.) The hypothesis that this is a result of competition between drakes is corroborated by the rarity of seeing an adult wyvern here – I suspect that competition for treasure and territorial disputes result in most wyverns dying before reaching maturity.

The counterpart to this aggression towards humans is that the slaying of a wyvern conveys enormous status among the Kaylid adventurers, to the extent

that young adults will actively seek out particularly troublesome wyverns and challenge them in an attempt to gain standing. All of this I have observed up and down the country, and Arnold has heard many tales of courageous drake-hunters. This is a superb demonstration of my thesis. When a wyvern raids and robs a village, it denies the use of the various items it accumulates to the townsfolk. (Unlike some of the larger dragons elsewhere, wyverns are not fussy in what they consider valuable, and steal tools and food as often as jewels and precious metals.) Because of this, I hold that the chief societal function of the slaying of wyverns is to allow the goods and wealth that they steal to re-enter the trading economy. When a wyvern is destroyed, the killer is given first pick of as much wealth as he can carry, and the rest of the hoard is redistributed among the villagers from which it was stolen – and this is as much a cause of celebration as the beast’s death in a land where living conditions are dreadful and life and limb must be risked to obtain even basic raw materials. This, I am sure, is the origin and true purpose of the system of honour among adventurers, which is what incentivises those Kaylids who choose the wandering lifestyle to slay wyverns in the first place.

On its own, I suppose that sounds like rather insubstantial evidence – but just wait until you see all of the other examples and case studies. I am sure that my thesis is correct, and that adventurers are the natural consequence of economic hardship and hindrances to the flow of raw materials and money. Look for my paper to arrive in the University journal soon, and for me to arrive just a few months after! I know you must be looking forward to seeing Arnold again almost as much as I am to spinning web hammocks without them cracking in the cold.

I remain most sincerely yours, and look forward to the pleasure of your company once again.

Ith-Tek

P.S. I thought you might be interested to know the Kaylid term for “adventurer” – they call them “dreamers”. Not relevant to my work, of course, but it is rather romantic, don’t you think?

Ed Carter

The Opinion Editor

Columns. It was all about the columns. The News, after all, was not just about events; any old person could try and find out what was going on (and most probably fail). The News told you Why, The News told you How – and so The News needed its columnists, prodding and poking the world around them in exactly the right places.

The opinion editor leaned back in her chair, and contemplated the screens in front of her. Opinions flashed up, little possibilities that she had the power to admit or deny. It might have been a little terrifying, but working for The News saw to it pretty quickly that those sorts of emotions weren’t going to exist in its modern, user friendly office environment.

“Code 14. Incoming. War in New South China morally wrong.”

“Code Z9. Politician piece. Angling for votes on basis of government’s war.”

“Code A4. Middle class concerns over squalor noticed from train window.”

The editor listened to the voice, and filed them into order of urgency. It was a job, and it needed doing. She compared the incoming stuff against the current columns. The New South China affair was the big issue. Fixable, of course, easily fixable, but the column she’d been given was going to be a hard sell.

The News was beamed straight to the people, and that was how things should work. They provided direct, trustworthy news for the modern age, with a free press standing astride the world like a colossus. Untouchable, honourable, and noble, The News was the pillar that society arranged itself around. Politicians lined up to defend the freedom of the press, and in turn The News lined up articles that gently guided them as to what the people thought. Or, in the modern age, even what the people would think in eight months’ time.

“New South China: NO MORE”. It wasn’t the best column heading, but it could have been worse. Anyhow, it was causing problems, and problems had to be edited out. That was, after all, the job of an editor. She blinked at the screen, pondering for a moment.

An actual event caused a flurry of incoming messages from West London, some building fire. Those were alright, the column wouldn't come out until tomorrow. She imagined, for a second, being in the middle of the panic. If it had been a generation ago it would have been a mess of bleeping earpieces and messages flying around, but systems were a lot smoother now.

"Code P11. Incoming. Building fires terrifying."

"Code P11. Incoming. Roof collapse shocks neighbourhood."

Of course, the incoming messages were synthesised before she got them. That made life a lot easier. Snappier, more swish, that was the way of things (and always had been). There was quite a flurry starting though. That would be a pain to deal with tomorrow. But tomorrow was another day.

Opinions, opinions, opinions. They were beamed to her desk, one by one. All done with subcutaneous chips. It would have seemed amazing, but surprise was an ineffective emotion in news editors and had been deprogrammed some time back.

She finally got to her inbox, and selected file 14. War in New South China morally wrong. Right-click, and hit edit, and the menus were all there. This seemed to be a young man, from Ealing. Lots of friends, high potential for discussions. Right-click again.

She wondered for a second what it might have been like for her predecessors that had to edit the news. It seemed a strange idea now. Why have people edit the news when The News can edit the people? The opinion editor refocused, and got back to her task; editing opinions.

She tapped the delete key five times, neatly, then typed a word.

"War in New South China morally right"

She hit the enter key.

"Edit complete? Y/N"

James Baillie

A Night to Remember

It was a night to remember. The events of the day had left everyone numb and disbelieving, as happens when history wanders into your life. By night (or the time people in the diplomatic fleet were theoretically allocated to sleep, nighttime being a somewhat nebulous concept two solar systems from Terra) people had recovered enough to want to celebrate. Rozo could see the High Commands of Terra and Nnwere Onwe refighting their last battles by attempting to see who could take the most benti pills and stay standing. The ambassadors were talking to each other by the canapés. Food had been short enough for years that even diplomats were careful to get as much they could. They were surrounded by a court of lackeys carefully positioning themselves to be best seen by the Oju planted in the walls. The footage caught in those infallible lenses would show the hangers-on standing by some of the most powerful humans in the galaxy.

But the real power in the room, the one whom all eyes were carefully not fixed on, was the old man sat in the corner. The Grand Old Man had a little smile on his tired face. She knew it wasn't just her past that made this short man loom. It was true that Rozo Ebennokota had had more reason than most to be grateful to Toussaint Lofinda, but after today all humanity was in his debt. This quiet, unassuming man had overseen the end of the bloodiest war in history.

There had been many reasons the war between Terra and her former colony had ceased, with many people acting out of varying levels of decency and necessity, but their efforts had been possible because of the integrity of one man. Toussaint had been the voice of moderation, the champion of a common humanity and he had lived the life he had preached. After his Party, the All Nnwerena Convocation, was elected to power, he had found the men who had tortured him in the Pit and embraced them. After taking control of the Nnwere Onwe planet-killers, he personally deactivated and destroyed them. After the surrender of the previous Terra-backed government, he had refused to put on mass trials, preferring instead to speak of a united planet. And after talks had begun, he had taken the first step of unilaterally raising the shields above his residence, as a statement of good faith.

Roza Ebennokota had been there for some of that. Technically she was here as a reporter for the

Liberator, the biggest newspaper on Nnwere Onwe, with a strong readership on Terra. But Toussaint had taken an interest in her when she was young, helping her get an education when the Terran regime had made that difficult for a colonist. The university she had attended had been firebombed three years ago, but she still had happy memories of it. He had encouraged her to become a journalist, something she had flourished at. She had gone on to write Toussaint's biography, which had sold millions of copies on Nnwere Onwe and Terra, despite the rationing. During negotiations, she had been one of the Nnwerena sent to Terra as part of the cultural exchange.

It was then, looking at the old Terran propaganda posters (now viewed with embarrassment by their audience) that she realised Toussaint's greatest achievement had been to change the way people on the mother planet viewed the colonists. One of the posters had shown a caricature Nnwerena, tongue lolling rapaciously out, grabbing a screaming woman and pulling at her clothes. Orbiting a different sun, with minimal contact between Terra and Nnwere Onwe, stereotypes had abounded. Colonists had been depicted as savage, mentally deficient and almost childlike in their lack of self-control. Simply by being so obviously a good man, Toussaint had changed that and made the burgeoning peace movement on Terra, buoyed by the millions of casualties and economic deprivation, irresistible.

Toussaint waved at her as the High Commands began a rousing rendition of a rather bawdy song. Rozo smiled. It was a night to remember.

Rozo decided the third benti might put a few holes in her memory, as she finally arrived at her cabin on the *Anwu* after a long night. The drug was giving her a pleasant buzz as she opened the door, so she didn't mind. Benti pills had been designed to provide a much needed escape during the bad days of the war, a space to breathe. Mariko at the *Liberator* could wait a few hours to get a write-up of the party.

'Ms Ebennokota?' A voice from down the corridor. The lights were still on, which was a novelty. Ships outside home space had always had to run on blackout before for fear of hostile eyes. She stopped and turned to face a young man, scarcely more than a teenager. By his accent he was a

colonist and by his dress, a deck-hand. 'Yes?' she replied.

He was nervous. She could see him rallying his courage. 'Please Ms Ebennokota, I need to speak to you.'

'What can I do for you?' He looked at her desperately. She took pity on him. 'Why don't you come inside? Call me Rozo'.

'My name is Roh Do-jeon', he said as he followed her in. He was gabbling now, anxious to say his piece and dreading the results 'This isn't easy to say, but I need help. You're a person of power, of integrity. They won't ignore you, not like they did me, and they won't be able to ignore this'.

He pulled an Oju out of his pocket and opened up the display screen. Rozo was surprised he could afford one. Humans still hadn't worked out how to make them, only how to use the Oju they had found when they discovered Nnwere Onwe, which meant they cost a packet.

Roh looked at her as she sat down. 'Please', and his voice trembled, 'just look at this. This is still happening...' He rallied, straightened a little and took a deep breath. 'It happened to me'. He then left, leaving Rozo holding the Oju, watching the images on the Oju screen. She soon wished she wasn't.

No one knew how Oju worked, Rozo reflected as she wandered down deserted corridors and through empty rooms. Apart from staff essential to the running of the ship, everyone was either recovering from the festivities or holding their own private celebrations in their cabin. The only humans she encountered were an Nnwerena cultural attaché kissing one of the Terran delegation and they were too occupied to notice her. The first impossible fruit of the peace. There were plenty of theories concerning Oju, but none of them were really convincing. The only thing people knew was that they could not be tricked or tampered with. Right now Rozo really, really wished that wasn't the case. She had the Oju in her pocket now, and it felt heavier than shackles from the Pit.

Her mother had been disappeared to the Pit for being too loud. The charge sheet had said smuggling weapons but the Ebennokota family could translate Terran officialese. Her father had

looked after them, working for tips in the courts, before being stabbed by an insurgent for being a collaborator. They had been lucky, for she and her siblings had survived. If war returned they might not be so fortunate. What she had in her pocket was as deadly as a planet-killer.

The peace worked because of him. Documents might have been signed and hands shaken, but it only meant something because everyone, even those who disliked him, trusted him and admired his integrity. Do anything to him, remove him as an honest broker, and the two planets could be firing missiles at each other within days. And this time it would be worse, for all the hope and all the work would have been for nothing and the fury and the disappointment greater.

Unbidden she heard Roh saying again 'It happened to me'. She didn't want to hear it. She didn't want to see the images from Oju again either, but they kept playing in the corner of her mind. Toussaint and the children. It was like seeing a dog fly, biting into an apple and tasting blood. It was against the order of things, breaking the most essential pattern of things, the web of associations that structured her life. As if in recognition of this, the Toussaint on the Oju had been different, his voice less gentle, but sweeter and more desperate, the usual languid grace of his movement replaced by a frenzy. But it was undoubtedly him doing those things.

Those things. Rozo was beginning to rewrite her history, but those things remained awkward, cloggy, indigestible, resisting being placed in the narrative. How had they not known about this? People had worked with Toussaint (that name a cloying mix of the old warmth and the new dread in her mind) for years. How had they not known? The answer was obvious. Of course they had known. Not many of them, probably, and not for certain. Hurried looks, strained smiles, rooms locked off for repairs, insignificant in the old world had meaning in the new. No doubt they had avoided questions, preferring the gentle haze of disquieting possibility. Being good people they had probably, in their discrete way, tried to stop this, working within the party machinery, keeping it quiet, paying people off, intervening at points. Never breaking ranks, never letting the outside world in. The Party must be kept clean and Toussaint Lofinda was the Party.

And if it got out worlds could burn. Rozo could see the posters going up, the hawks back in power, the editorials in the papers, the words and pictures

swirling like ashes from the fire. Everything they'd worked for. The long years of prison and beatings, of comrades shot and disappeared, of unity in the face of oppression, all of it lost.

All of it was already lost in her mind.

'I see I'm not the only person who likes to wander alone.' Not her memory of the Oju anymore. The man himself stood before her. There was a harder look in his eyes and a tinny edge to his voice. But it was the same man and despite herself, Rozo felt calmer in his presence, as she always had, ever since she'd met him all those years ago, a girl of thirteen encountering a living legend. At that moment the Oju, the unforgettable, irrevocable Oju came to her mind, and she remembered his words on the recording 'Are you going to be nice to your Uncle Toussaint?'

Unaware that his past was floating through her head, Toussaint smiled his old wry smile. 'I enjoy these moments of solitude. When I don't have to be the Grand Old Man, in all caps, the infallible hero, and can instead just be a tired, little lowercase man'. He turned to her. 'What's the excuse for your seclusion?'

Rozo hesitated and the instincts of more than a decade kicked in. This was Toussaint she was talking to. 'I've learned something,' she began 'information which if I release will save people from suffering...' He nodded encouragingly. 'But it could hurt a lot more people by destroying the image of a group which has done much good'. He smiled again, 'one of those problems'. He thought for a second. 'This one is just going to have to be a conscience call. But my instinct has always been in order to help people, you must begin by helping the person in front of you. Institutions and groups, they're just people with a fancy label attached it'. He patted her on the shoulder and she could feel his slightly laboured breath on her cheek. 'As I said, your call. And you'll make it. And it'll be the right call,' he beamed at her, beneficent grandfather, 'because you're Rozo Ebnokota, and you always do the right thing'.

It was a night to remember. By the end of it she knew every inch of the ship. She knew the names and stories of most of the crew. She knew all the gossip from the festivities, who ended up with whom in which cabin. And she knew what she was

going to do. Apart from that, Rozo wasn't sure she knew anything for sure.

She picked up the jabber, punched in Mariko's number and spoke into it. Afterward, when everything went crazy, she remembered with pride how calm her voice was. 'Mariko', she said, 'I've got something you need to see'. It was a night no one would ever forget.

Sam Ottewill-Soulsby

Festival of Rebirth

The city streets echoed with fireworks, the bright colours reflecting off the worn buildings and gathered crowds. The noise and the chaos of the festivities was enjoyable to some, but to Caladra it was all a bit too much, especially since she had so much work to do. Being a student of the city's warden did have its perks, but running back and forth fixing the stress points in the shield while everyone else was partying was not one of them. The machines outside did not stop when the people did, and it was down to those who shared the warden's gift for the unnatural to ensure their unceasing assault never made it through the bubble they were hiding in.

It really wasn't that hard work repairing the shield, a sensitive could do it, you didn't have to be gifted at all, it only took a few words and some simple hand gestures wherever the spell seemed to be thinning, the part she objected to was getting between the places in time. It was unlikely they'd break through tonight even if there wasn't anyone working on it, but once the spell started to thin the monstrous constructs would be visible, and the sounds of the Spring Festival would be drowned out by the sound of metal grinding against metal, which wouldn't be nice for anyone. But although she thought it was unlikely there was still some danger of them breaking through, and the thought of what might happen if they ever did was enough to justify her working during the festivities.

"A fray's appearing over The Red Dragon." There was the ever present sense of boredom and weariness that accompanied the warden's message, despite knowing all her students were easily contactable by phone the warden preferred using mental communication, probably because she knew everyone had to humour her. She'd set up the shield and was the reason they were all here, they would never have reclaimed the city without her.

The Red Dragon was a few streets away, and Caladra once again cursed her position as she pushed through the street market, the people were bad enough but the thing was set out like a maze, with enthusiastic shop owners waiting at what should have been exits ready to show off their wares. The red and gold decorations obscured familiar landmarks and added to the confusion, but after a bit of struggling she made it to an alleyway which would lead her to the weak spot without having to cross any more of the main streets. The break from the incense and fireworks was a bit of a relief, and after speaking the words and watching the shadows above fade out she found herself with a few moments before she was called away again.

Walking out into the festivities again she noticed the crowd were all moving in the same direction, towards a rather messy stage drowning in red fabric in an obvious attempt to hid how last minute it was. It must have been time for the warden's speech, she had needed a lot of persuasion to talk the first few times, but it had been going long enough now that it had become a tradition, and her protests were now mainly for show. Despite not being that interested in the talk itself Caladra remained in the entrance to the alleyway, happy to watch people pass by as she waited to be sent off again.

However, while people were still moving to get a better look the warden's voice sounded in her head again. "I'm going to need you to cast the spell you've been helping me with very shortly, there isn't the time to explain why." Caladra was startled by the request, but didn't consider not obeying. If the warden needed help with something then it was probably very important and although she wasn't sure exactly what the spell did, she knew enough to know that part of it involved knocking the target out, and that it was strong enough to keep them under for a considerable length of time. "Get on the roof to your right, in order to do this properly I need you in the right position. Start the spell when I start talking, and whatever happens make sure you carry through to the end. This is important."

There was an external staircase leading to the roof which made things easier, and once she was up there Caladra could see a few other students like her on the rooftops around the crowd, there seemed to be one on all of the buildings less than five stories around the square where the stage was (although that wasn't that impressive given that there weren't that many buildings that small

around). She did briefly worry that with so many of them here that there was a risk of the shield failing, but the warden knew the risks better than her so there must have been a good reason for it. The speech started sooner than she was expecting but she had no clue what her mentor was saying, her own rhythmic chanting and the complicated symbols she was drawing took all her concentration. She suspected it was the same for the others.

Caladra stopped and stepped back, and she could see the others do the same almost simultaneously, and the last few words of the speech were suddenly audible, they would not have meant anything to most of the audience, it was the command for the spell to activate. As she spoke threads of light erupted out of her, spreading out and connecting everyone in the crowd before only seconds later making it up to her students standing stunned above them.

Everything glowed red, the light expanding from the crowd to fill her vision and then a burning not-quite-pain enveloped her for a few seconds, and everything cleared again. The city came slowly back into focus, the red banners and ancient skyscrapers just as they'd been left, but the people...

Caladra didn't believe what she was seeing. But the feeling of the wind through her fur and the feel of the teeth in her mouth told her it wasn't a trick, somehow she'd helped do this to herself, to everyone. There were all sorts of creatures below her, things that with a small stretch of the imagination resembled rats, roosters, even dragons.

With what had happened to the people below it took her a while to notice the stars, there had always been the shield in the way before. But the machines hadn't come, hadn't killed them. Confused she looked over the scene again, and then she understood.

The stage itself was empty, there was a chance the warden was in the crowd but Caladra was fairly certain that they weren't going to find her even if she was. She'd done her duty, and had given them back the world.

Lilian Halstead

The Night of Films

Monday watched with increasing jealousy as, week after week, Tuesday got to hoard the film nights. Her frown grew deeper and deeper as streams of cheery nerds went in and out of auditoriums and common rooms, laughing, shouting 'contact!', and enthusing about the cinematic brilliance they had just witnessed. This was supposed to be hers, damnit! If that fool Guy Fawkes had acted just a day earlier...

Well, something could be done. Monday lowered her nightvision goggles and attached the zipline to the top floor of Clare Colony. Right now, if her timing was right, the Chairbeing would be composing her email for the week. It took her a few seconds to reach the chairbeing's window. Now, the distraction: Monday squeezed a small remote control and the telltale sound of an eldritch incursion emerged from the hallway.

Monday watched as Binney shook her head, grabbed her raygun, and went out to deal with the problem. "Damn it, horror-beasts from the Nether Dimension are getting so tiresome..." Now was her chance! Monday sliced a small hole in the bottom of the window and, transforming into her octopus form, wriggled through to the computer. A quick substitution... nobody would even notice until the email had been sent and it was far too late.

Outside the room, the horror screamed and groaned out of its thousand eyes. Binney was making short work of it. Monday squeezed back outside, slapped instaGlass over the hole, and zipped back up the building. She did not want to risk the Chairbeing's wrath...

Will peered at the email. Something was wrong. Tuesday had been granted exclusive custody over the film nights, yet here... a daring theft had been enacted, clearly. Will expanded his omnipotent mind into the world, and detected Monday, sitting and laughing with Wednesday and Saturday about what she had accomplished. Of course.

A bolt of lightning snapped into existence in front of Binney. She roared a Viking salute. "Hail the Reeve!" Will stepped out into the room, his Reeve robes fluttering in intangible wind. "You look troubled, O omniscient Reeve. What has happened?"

Will clapped his hands, and the Book of Faces cracked into existence. He opened it, and pointed to a new inscription. "Here." Binney gasped. "In Takei's name! Monday has stolen our film night!" Will nodded. Binney grabbed her raygun. "This will not stand..."

Bryn Dickinson

Little Miss Moffat - A fairytale analysis

So, the origin of various fairytales has been the subject of much debate, scholarly and otherwise. In one particular case, I have recently decided that I have some light to shed upon one of our most classic nursery rhymes. I can, here, exclusively reveal from my extensive textual analysis skills that the author of Little Miss Muffet can be exactly pinpointed to one man - Steven Moffat.



Yep, it's him.

This classic nursery rhyme goes as follows:

"Little Miss Muffet
Sat on a tuffet,
Eating her curds and whey;
Along came a spider,
Who sat down beside her
And frightened Miss Muffet away."

It should be obvious to anyone who has watched Moffat's work that this is a classic example, bearing many of his most notable hallmarks - but lest there be any doubt, I shall go through an extensive, nay, exhaustive list of all the things that show that Moffat is responsible.

1. The plot revolves around a female character, who is totally plot central but otherwise has no independent non-stereotyped personality whatsoever.
2. It packs the plot into six lines when it's clear there should have been twelve. Better yet, just add another stanza; trying to squeeze it into such a short space has made things cluttered and confusing and there's no satisfying ending. *Should've been a two-parter. Again.*
3. The spider gets no background development. Does it have motivations? What even are its motivations? Or is it just a hackneyed trope appearing for arachnophobe fanservice?
4. Using an ordinary/everyday item and then making it extra scary is a classic Moffat trick. Though we'll probably find out in a few rhymes' time that the spider has come back for a ton of cameos, getting less scary each time, and Little Red Riding Hood can defeat like *ten* of them. Blindfolded.
5. The whole plot is based around a single "scary enemy" concept. It's really just a less scary re-hash of "Blink".
6. The curds and whey is clearly another flat attempt at a zany foodstuffs joke. Well, you know what, Moffat. You can take your precious curds and whey and *stick fish fingers in it* for all I care.
7. Monsters based around sight are a classic Moffatism. Weeping angels you have to keep looking at, Silence you forget you looked at, Spiders you look at and run in terror. The spider doesn't even seem to have any actually dangerous abilities; this rhyme's really trying to be a psychological thriller.
8. Miss Muffet seems to have basically no agency as a character. She's literally just there to run away from things.
9. Nobody dies. Nobody even comes close to dying. All anyone genuinely loses in this rhyme is curds and whey, which just doesn't cut the emotional mustard.

10. NONE OF THE PLOT HOLES GET RESOLVED. Okay, so this needs a second list in itself.
- a. Spiders don't have easily accessible bums to sit on. How does a spider sit down? This is a real unexplained deus ex machina for the spider, guys.
 - b. So little Miss Muffet is frightened away. Where to? Does she just get to exit the scene at random? Is this a satisfying plot conclusion for anyone?
 - c. Where did the spider come from? Is this part of a wider plot? Unexplained villains that appear out of nowhere - definitely a Moffat job.
 - d. For that matter, what about Miss Muffet? We didn't even get any prior indication she was an arachnophobe. It's like he suddenly added that to her character when his precious plot needed it.
 - e. She'll probably turn up in the next rhyme sitting nonchalantly on that damn tuffet as if nothing had happened. And she won't even have lost her curds and whey.

So there you have it. It's a wrap; there's simply no question. Steven Moffat has been wreaking havoc, and fans of classic nursery rhymes will soon start to grumble about the old days when at least there were properly developed emotional plot lines. Say what you like about Russel T Davies: at least Humpty Dumpty died a proper death.

James Baillie

Review - Sol In Extremis

A Novel by Nicholas Brakespear

I must admit, I initially decided to review this book as a favour to an old schoolfriend - so consider this disclosure of a potential "conflict of interest" if you're one of these poor misguided fools who still believes in neutral media. I didn't really have any idea what to expect, but I'd read a bit of his peripheral extra material (a bit like one of those CDs from the 2000s that came with a weird little applet of "exclusive bonus material), and found the concept interesting enough to give it a spin.

Well, it was worth it. Sol In Extremis is actually a damned good read - a swashbuckler, for want of a better term. Influences on its setting that sprang to my mind included Bladerunner, Waterworld, Star Wars, The Fifth Element... and the climactic finale has more than a hint of Mount Doom about it. But make no mistake - this is no derivative pastiche. Brakespear weaves his own unique tapestry of a story in which various different plot threads come together in (almost) total harmony.

Briefly, and without wanting to spoiler anyone, our setting is the accretion disc of hot plasma that has formed around the gravity well of an Earth destroyed by an unknown calamity - initially speculated to be a CERN-style planet-ivorous black hole. Circling the cosmic drain, humanity has adopted a somewhat vagabondish existence clinging to planetary remnants and sailing the plasma seas in ships that, one feels, the author set out to make as close to pre-Industrial tall-ships as he dared. They fire broadsides, they adjust for currents and they even have hammocks. It's slightly contrived but the transposition of Horatio Hornblower to the darkness of a post-apocalyptic future is convincing and engaging.

The main character is a well-rounded one; too many antiheroes these days turn out to be just heroes in need of a good shave, but the viewpoint character for the reader is a genuinely flawed and somewhat pathetic figure that one can identify with; he's a sickly, self-interested coward who would probably have a lot in common with Rincewind and Arthur Dent if the three were ever to meet in some insanely bizarre work of crossover.

Plot-wise, things start slowly; Brakespear invests a lot of time in building up a convincing and deep

picture of the world he has created, a warts-and-all vision of the future that is neither a grim hellish black nor shiny utopian white but a realistic dusty brown-grey. For some unaccountable reason (presumably personal taste; it's never explained) the author has seen fit to imbue the whole novel with Anglo-Saxon lingo; names and jargon both frequently sound like they've wandered out of the pages of Beowulf. Once things get going, though, we're taken on a tour of the new world (dubbed the Eddawielm) that encompasses SimCity-like arcologies floating in space, the subterranean ducts and maintenance tunnels of the forgotten past, a monastery, a legendary Flying Dutchman-like spaceship and finally a deserted temple on the long-abandoned surface of the moon. On the way we encounter religious fanatics, corporate assassins, rugged space-sailors (and sailors they certainly are, the way Brakespear portrays them) and, well... spoilers, but let's just say the final section (the novel is divided into four) features a twist that would have brought a smile to Arthur C Clarke's face.

For the sake of maintaining at least a veneer of neutrality, I'd better mention a couple of things that struck me as drawbacks. The backstory is explained as far back as the fall of Earth but no further, which I suppose helps to keep some mystery but does leave some things irritatingly unresolved; I was disappointed not to receive any explanation for all that Anglo-Saxon colour (and indeed the total absence of anything but that and English in the entire novel). Towards the end, as some spoileriffic things start happening, I had the distinct feeling a couple of times that the MacGuffins had been deployed in force to get Our Heroes out of a couple of nasty fixes.

However, these niggles are really minor flies in the ointment; I was pleasantly surprised to find that after my first burst of reading, I **wanted** to get back to reading the rest, so as to find out what was going to happen. And that's surely the acid test of a novel, isn't it? The bottom line is that thanks to Nick Brakespear, for the price of a coffee at Starbuck's you can now get a rip-roarer of a tale set in a strikingly original world, imagined and painted in vivid depth. You won't be disappointed.

David Smith

Prologue to Greater Things

Words. Exactly all of those are vaguely panicky words concerning the fact that, basically, the Bard hasn't yet written anything.

Uh oh.

Boy, it would really be helpful if, in true bardic style, I just had a magical lute which could play me epic ballads on demand.

It would also be really convenient if narrative imperative had enough influence to require that such a lute should appear before me.

Right about now?

Flash.

That's... not a lute. That's a note, on a box.

Greetings, Bard of Jomsborg (Master Artisan (Unheard Univ.))

As a member of the Inter-Denominational Union of Minstrels, Troubadours And General Lowerers-And-Raisers-Of-Tone-In-Intervals-Both-Major-And-Minor, your needs are very important to us. However, we are forced to inform you that due to a high rate of enquiries at this time of year concerned with recovering from Carol-Writing and other associated ailments, we are unable to provide you with assistance at present. We will attempt to get back to you as soon as a spiritually possible, and in the meantime enclose a small token of our regard.

Yours sincerely,

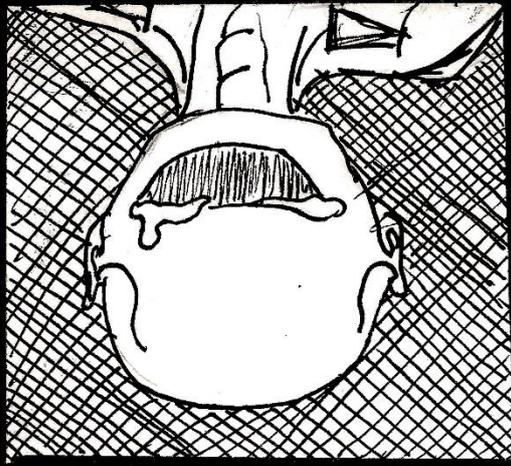
Calliope

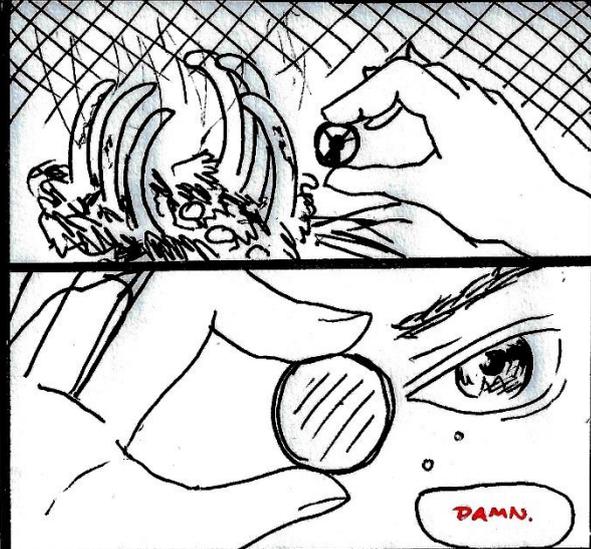
... Right. Box.

That is also not a magical lute. That's not even a kind-of-mystical ukulele. That is a series of metal rings joined together. What *exactly* is a bard meant to do with one of those?

Ah, well. Epic quest to find a story worthy of writing it is.

Danielle Saunders





TO BE CONTINUED!