

TTBA



Tiny Tribbles Barricade Adorably

TTBA Volume #0 Issue ?

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The Chairbeing's Address

So, CUSFS, we meet again.

A quick look through the TTBA's of the last several years tells me that most of the Chairbeing's Addresses revolve around roughly three themes: incomprehensibly terrible in-jokes (but I AM a shark!), the seemingly impossible task of inserting the Chairbeing's actual postal address into the message (some of which are considerably more impressive than others), and University Challenge (for some reason).¹

All things considered, this column consistently proves itself a wretched hive of silliness and irrelevance and a waste of valuable magazine space. Yet here you are reading it! Have no fear – this time I will do my utmost to keep the footnote-to-actual-text ratio below a sensible threshold.² Before my brain melts even further – through a combination of quantum mechanics and CUSFS' attempts to see thirteen different shark-related apocalypse movies – I should take a moment to thank you all. As I sit here in Clare and face the abyss of exams with confidence³ and courage⁴ I am safe in the knowledge that the newly elected committee for 2014-15 will be reasonably friendly and passably competent. It's been an utter honour being Chairbeing and I sincerely look forward to what next year has to offer.⁵

Onwards!

Sarah Binney
CUSFS Chairbeing 2013-4

¹ Turns out parentheses can effectively fulfil the same function as footnotes, to first order and if you ignore people who actually care about punctuation.

² Though I don't guarantee success.

³ Foolhardiness born of ignorance.

⁴ Terror.

⁵ Especially if I don't have to organise it.

Editorial

Second issue woo! Right, now I have got that over with I can say some other things about the magazine. First of all, I have to say that I am shocked that despite you lot having already filled one magazine this year, you managed to put together enough stuff not just to fill this issue, but to make it even bigger than the last one! (And that's even with the choose-your-own-adventure chainwriting still unfinished *sorry*). The fact we also have a poetry section this time is quite nice, even if it is pretty small.

Secondly I am very glad I got the chance to have a go at putting the magazine together, even if I did cheat a bit by putting out more than has been traditional. I am sure Isobel will do just as good a job, and I hope she enjoys the role as much as I have.

Anyway, by this point you are probably wanting to get on to the actual content for more effective procrastination, so I won't keep you any longer. I am sure you will enjoy reading it at least as much as I enjoyed putting it together.

Lilian Halstead
TTBA editor

The Current Committee (And their best anagram)

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Tristan Roberts – Bran Stirs Otter

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Filip Drnovsek Zorko – Overlord of Zip Kinks

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William Bradshaw – Midair Shawl Bawl

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Secretary: Sarah Binney

Treasurer: Rory Hennell James

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TTBA Editor: Isobel Sands

Holding out for a Hero

Once, there was a time of heroes and of witches. Seren has only a village Venerable's knowledge of all that, of course. Strangers bearing stranger tidings, however, suggest that the old ways might need to be renewed...

Lizzie Colwill, Fraser McNair, Catherine Gray, Jess Kershaw, Xiaochen Xu, James Baillie, Iddo Rousseau, Thomas Ruddle, Samuel Cook, Nakul Khanna, Harley Jones, Benjamin Dobson, Joel Lipson

Seren had come up to the crags to feel the rain. She hadn't meant to watch the witch's funeral taking place on the hillside below her, but the flickering line of torches had drawn her attention.

From her vantage point, she could see the chamber that had been dug into the hill. Long ago, the town's witchfolk had been interred in the caves that wound their way back into the rock behind her, but the last cave had been filled many years ago, and so now they must make do with the mud and turf of the hillside. Before the caves, they had burned the witches, Seren remembered, and each household would claim a pot of the ashes for luck. They had burned them down by the riverbank, and Seren had hidden herself from the scorching heat in a deep pool and watched.

It took most of the night for the group below to arrange the body in the chamber and seal up the door. She wondered idly if they still tied boulders to the corpse's ankles to keep the dead from walking. Not that it had ever made a difference.

And as if summoned by her thoughts, something small and pale dragged itself out of the ground and began to limp up the hill towards her.

The elderly woman smiled at the mole-rat. When she was younger, she'd kept her father's mole-rats, and their wrinkled skin reminded her of happier times. She'd still been keeping them when she'd met her Andrald.

That was before the plague. She spat in the funeral cortege's direction. Witchfolk! Boulders or no boulders, witchery or none, the dead didn't rise. She'd tried hard enough...

A noise disturbed her. It was young Solio, the miller's son.

'...venerable?' he asked, in a trembling voice.

'Come closer, child. What do you want?'

The boy tiptoed closer to her. 'It's mother. She's gone down with something and she wanted your help.'

Seren nodded. Solio's mother, Gersind, was a weak woman. Seren dreaded to think what she'd do without that husband of hers. 'Is it that cut she had?'

Solio nodded. His mother had cut herself gutting fish, and it had become infected. He told this to Seren, and she stood up. It was a shame to leave the rain, but rather than let Gersind have gangrene eat her up. Even if she was a bit of a wet blanket.

In the miller's house, Seren found Gersind. Sure enough, her left hand looked deeply sick.

Seren nodded wisely. 'Solio, go and get some Wolfsbane and Rotherb. Mix 'em in a tea.'

Solio silently fled.

She turned back to Gersind. 'Now, those witches would wave smellstone about and chant to Blotmonath and tell you to purge the evil spirits with water and soap, but what's that going to do? What kind of spirit is scared off by a slightly cleaner hand? No, girl, what you need is herbs. Anyone can see and use a good plant.'

Gersind chuckled faintly, shaking her head. "What are you going to do when someone asks you how you know so much about witchcraft?"

Seren turned away to build up the fire. "The Venerable's duty is to be a source of knowledge," she replied, smiling wryly. The kettle was half-filled with water still, so she set it on its hook in the fireplace to boil. "Besides, no one's asked yet."

"Well, I didn't ask, got that? Everyone knows I can't have so much as a thought without my husband here to help."

Not answering, Seren dipped a rag in the heating water and brought it over to Gersind's chair, where she began to cleanse the wound. No magical soap here, and Blotmonath no longer answered her invocations, but the purity of fire

and water were apparent even to non-witchfolk. What did it matter if Gersind had made a few connections? Probably half the village knew, but no one ever said it outright.

Gersind's good hand grabbed Seren by the shoulder, pulling her in close. "And I'm not asking how old you are, neither!" Gersind hissed into her ear, then released her grasp.

Seren staggered back and stared at her, but before she could ask how much the other woman knew Solio rushed back into the room, herbs clutched in his fist, eyes wide.

"Venerable!" he gasped. "A witch! A new witch has come to the village!"

Seren's heart gave a great throb of anxiety.

"Show me, child," she urged, and Solio obliged. Old she may be, but Seren was faster than the child – and it was she who reached the square first.

"Hello, Venerable," said the witch. She was white-haired and strikingly beautiful, with summer-blue eyes; she wore the rags of her trade, but her bearing communicated her tremendous pride. At her side stood a small grubby child Seren presumed was her attendant. The men of the village seemed transfixed with that noxious blend of lust and fear that witch-women generated wherever they walked.

"We do not welcome witchfolk here," said Seren. Her voice did not shake. She remembered: the reek, the greasy smoke ascending from the pyre.

"I have heard this," said the attendant, stepping forward. "But rest assured you will wish to hear what I want to say. I am Ishkar, High Witch of the North – this is my slavegirl Mistenya." The white-haired beauty bowed low. "We come with grave news. He is marching to war."

Silence descended upon the crowd gathered at the square. The younger folk were cowed by the tension in the air, shifting nervously as they looked around with confusion in their eyes. The grown men and women looked grim if not slightly panicked; it was only the eldest amongst them that showed their terror.

Seren saw all if this, just as the memories flooded back in a wave of fresh colours and emotions. Blood. Fire. Flesh torn from fresh carcasses. Crows

circling the lifeless silence of abandoned villages. And the Plague.

Yet she had seen those through different eyes. Eyes with a clearer sight, but a much colder heart.

It seemed the past had finally come back to haunt her.

She focused her slightly bleary eyes on the Witch before her. Ishkar looked back with her piercing gaze, calculating and wary under her haughtiness.

She knew, of course she did. The story of the last Spirit was always told amongst the witch folk.

The crowd around them began murmuring in hushed tones. She caught pieces of conversation, short and panicked, words about the past, before the Plague.

Before shouting and chaos could break through the crowd, Seren strode forward and held up her hand. One by one people fell silent as they looked to their Venerable, awaiting her directions and knowledge. Although they were still wary of the witch, they all looked to Seren as she began her short account.

"Great woe has fallen upon this land. The past have come back to haunt the present. We will not take this news lightly, as it was sent to us through grave danger." She eyed Ishkar, who smirked at her in the way the witch folk would look down upon the other mortals.

Then she turned her attention to a tall man who stood out from the crowd. "Haldin," she addressed the great hunter, "You shall assist the Keeper with the evacuation proceedings in my absence."

The man, Haldin stepped up to her. "Venerable, surely you must not leave us in this time of crisis."

"I am but an old woman." Seren replied. "Since the past have come to trouble us once again, it seems that I must go and meet an old friend."

"What would you have us do?" Haldin was tense, eyes dark.

"Whatever you please, young man. But do not pray, and do not weep. There will be no ears for the prayers, and time enough for weeping yet."

And then she smiled. It was almost involuntary, the cracked wrinkle lines across her face twisting

into old and unfamiliar patterns. Her old friend was out there – the friend who was now her enemy. Blotmonath. It was many long years since Seren had looked him in the eye.

Back in a time when villages had burned like fields of candles.

A time when sword shattered upon sword.

A time of dark things awakening.

A time for witches. But - not *just* a time for witches – that was a thought...

“Solio.”

“The child, Venerable?” Haldin looked at her suspiciously, confused by her sudden change in mood.

“Yes, the child. Solio? Come here.”

The young boy stepped forward, gingerly. Quick on his feet. That was good – he’d need that.

She knelt down in front of him.

“Solio, child.”

“Are you leaving?” The boy looked up at her with deep green eyes. “Is it because you’re a witch? Ma says you’re a witch.”

Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings. Well.

There it was. She raised her voice above the rapidly chattering villagers.

“I am your Venerable, or I was, and that is all; now I go to dance with death perhaps I will be someone else. But you do not need a Venerable any more, whoever I am or was.”

The villagers fell silent. She looked down at Solio.

“You need a hero.”

The boy returned a blank stare.

“I know you're a miller's son, but your place is with Haldin. Starting tomorrow you are to assist him as his apprentice,” she said, not as a command, but in a factual tone. Solio said nothing, but simply nodded.

Their town had the best hunter in the county. From him the boy would learn all the skills he would need, she knew. Overseeing the evacuation would teach him leadership, and once they'd reached their destination, a hunter's priority

would be to learn the new environment. Not to mention Haldin's experience as a bowman. Yes, that was where the boy needed to be.

“And now, I must get ready,” she said, half to herself, as she arose to leave.

All throughout that night and the next day, everyone in town were packing. Yet while all others were gathering the essentials to flee away from the danger, Seren was preparing to face it in another form. And all the while she was trying to think of what she'd need for her Tango of Reunion. She'd seen all the old tricks, but by now there were surely some new ones.

After a further night of restless sleep, Seren has set out on her horse. She knew she was expected to travel by broomstick, but not only had she much to carry, she had also outgrown their novelty long ago.

On her way, she stopped at the town of Ifron. The fools who resided here had begun barricading their town against the impending danger. Apparently, people here had shorter memories.

After obtaining the necessities for the trip, Seren left Ifron, and went on her way.

Seren knew that, even though she had renounced her birthright as a child of Blotmonath in the aftermath of the Plague, there was only one place that she would find out if there was any truth to these outlandish claims: the Iconic Chapel – the house of her old tutor, Adaren, the leading authority on the Plague. If anyone had heard tell of the re-emergence of the Plaguemaster, it would be her. However, her renouncement meant this would not be the most fun meeting she'd ever had. Going from the Venerable of her little village to this in a few days would be humbling.

“Mistress Adaren,” Seren said, as she swiftly entered the house to prevent Adaren from closing the door in her face.

“Don't you take another step into this dwelling, heretic!” spat Adaren.

“I come in peace, Adaren! A witch calling herself Ishkar came upon my village recently-”

“Ah yes, that whore Ishkar. Let me guess, she's still calling herself High Witch of the North and

spouting some nonsense about the return of the Plague.”

“That... is pretty accurate. I ordered evacuation procedures, but I feel that you're about to tell me that was presumptuous.”

“Presumptuous? My spies in the remnants of the Plaguemaster's forces remain silent. There is no threat here apart from you, if you're admitting to causing civil unrest.”

Adaren took a deep breath and continued. “I know you are not my student any longer, but for the good of your village: return, call off the evacuation and enjoy your life without meaning. Now leave.” Seren complied, her mind full of ways to explain her mistake, when a white-haired, beautiful girl stepped into the road in front of her, accompanied by a girl.

“And you believed that?”

Seren stopped, suddenly, as if the Plaguemaster himself had appeared. “What do you mean?” she said.

“It has long been recognised that studying the devices of the Plaguemaster is almost as dangerous as meeting him in person. Did not many fall into darkness that way during the last war? It would appear your “friend,” Adaren, has studied them rather too deeply and become ensnared. She longed for knowledge about the Plague and the only person who could satisfy that thirst was, well, you're an intelligent woman. You tell me.”

“The Plaguemaster?”

“See, I knew you'd work it out!”

“But that doesn't make sense! Adaren always strove against the Plague, its master, and everything it stood for. Decay! Corruption! Entropy! And, besides, how do I know you're telling the truth? Why should I trust you, whom I barely know, over one of my oldest friends?”

“Estranged friend, to be precise.”

“That's beside the point. You haven't answered my question.”

“Would this convince you?” Ishkar held out her hand.

Seren gasped. Her head was spinning. Not only did she feel like the Plaguemaster had appeared in front of her, but that he'd given her the Plague. This was bad. Actually, this was so far beyond bad that it defied simple language. This could be the end of the world. If the Plaguemaster got hold of it, it would be. Blood and fire would return and there would be no stopping them. Darkness would fall and the Plaguemaster would roam free until the end of time.

“I need a hero,” she thought, as she continued to gaze at the object Ishkar still held in her outstretched hand.

“Now it's true that my father was a hunter, and his father before him.”

Solio sat on a stool in the corner and gazed with wide eyes at Haldin, hard at work fletching a set of arrows. Haldin continued, “But go back far enough and you will reach a young man whose father was nothing of the sort – perhaps even a miller.”

He lay the arrows on the ground and took Solio by the shoulders.

“Hunting isn't in the blood. It's in the mind.”

Solio remained silent.

“That little whelp?” boomed a deep, powerful voice through the chamber. The voice even managed to chuckle in an intimidating manner.

“The supposed Hero is a twelve year old farmboy? I feel like I'm living in a clichéd fireside story.”

The attendant did not respond. It was usually best not to, when he got like this.

“And to think I was actually *worried*. Perhaps I should pop by, pick him up and use him to batter that self-satisfied Ishkar to death,” he guffawed. “Then I'll grab the Dam'Ren and we can be on our way.”

All of this had been mostly addressed to himself, and he appeared to notice the attendant for the first time.

“You, there. Fetch Adaren. And perhaps ask her to ponder why she is such a dismal failure on way over.”

The attendant bowed.

“Yes, Lord Plaguemaster,” he mumbled.

And to think, mused the Plaguemaster, that the witches ever worshipped that pathetic little wretch. That so many of them still do.

Blotmonath scurried out.

Solio’s lessons in archery and swordsmanship continued as he assisted Haldin in evacuating the villagers safely, and it was as the last family group made ready to cross the bridge to the island camp, encircled by the fast-flowing river, that Seren’s crow reached him and repeated its message. The villagers would be safe in Haldin’s hands now; he was called to the North to meet with Ishkar and Seren.

“I won’t ask you how you got your hands on the Dam’ren, Ishkar,” said Seren as they trudged through the mud, “I just hope you know what you’re doing with it.”

“Well, I have Mistenya to thank for finding it. She was the only survivor of the battle at the West Pass – had she not found it lying upon the battlefield at her feet it would be there still - ”

“ - and no doubt would have been found and used for the Plaguemaster’s vile purpose. It must be destroyed.”

They came after days of walking through the weary mud to a lone house, stood on a hilltop, its dilapidated state testament to the effects of the elements during the many decades it had stood empty. Seren had left her father’s home thinking never to return; now, he having long departed, it served as a useful meeting point, and she hoped against hope that in his old library she would be able to discover some means of destroying the Dam’ren.

There was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” called Seren, and Solio entered to see Seren and Ishkar amid stacks of leather-bound books. His face took her by surprise—she had

expected him to seem older, aged by the training and the upheaval, but no. There was a moment’s uncertain silence as everybody tried to work out the next thing to do.

“Solio,” said Seren softly, “Solio,” more boldly. “You know you’re our hero, but I haven’t told you what that means. Your first aim is to divert the Plaguemaster. If you took the village to the island they have a good chance of survival. Did you?”

“Yes.”

“Good. But the village is still at risk unless it hides. I know several people who will take control of that, and I’ve sent word to your mother to ensure they do. You need to buy them some time, and the best way to do that is to send the Plaguemaster down a path away from the village. But you need to do it in such a way that he doesn’t know you’re there. He needs to think he’s *choosing* to go down that path. He mustn’t know you’re there, or he’ll destroy you.”

Ishkar was giving her a strange look, which Seren met. That wasn’t the job of a hero at all, but it was the job that needed doing. Seren didn’t want to tell him what the job of the hero was. Did she have to? The hero would only be needed if the village were to be attacked, and there was always a chance of avoiding that.

Ishkar stood up. “The job of the hero is to die, and to die voluntarily.”

“Ishkar!” Seren panicked. “He didn’t need to know that yet!”

“Yes, he does.”

Solio stepped back, his eyes confused. “*Why didn’t you tell me that?*”

Seren looked at him, still wrong footed by Ishkar’s bluntness. “You didn’t need to know! You’ll only have to do that if he’s going to attack the village—”

“—when you won’t have time to tell him, Seren,” said Ishkar. She turned to Solio. “The Plaguemaster feeds on his power over others. If you are more powerful than him, you weaken him. He exercises power through dominance, you must defeat him through submission. Simply accept all he does willingly; that way you disarm him.”

“For your family,” said Seren, worrying for Gersind.

“Whatever. He'll try to break your spirit, you have to resist that. Simple, but difficult.”

“But you won't have to do that,” said Seren, in response to Solio's look of sheer panic. (Ishkar sat down violently in frustration.) “First, divert the Plaguemaster. Let him go elsewhere. But before that... Ishkar, read how we can destroy the Dam'Ren.”

Ishkar scrambled for the page. “Cook in acid over fire for an hour to dissolve the active components. That's the best we came up with. It won't work.”

“Trust me. The strongest acid around here is in the stomach of a mole-rat. Solio, please, catch me one—alive.”

Solio watched as Seren stitched up the mole-rat's stomach, Dam'Ren inside it. First both ends to keep it sealed, then closing up the incision. But the naked creature had to be kept alive so it would keep secreting acid as it cooked. It squealed, and its skin began to sizzle. Solio watched.

The incantation took a long while to prepare. Strange words and symbols began to take shape in the library halls. After a time, she was ready. The creature was dead, and Solio was crying.

“Ishkar, take the boy outside and stay with him for a while; I don't want him here while the ritual is performed. And nor do I want you. This is for no-one's ears.

Ishkar nodded, and gently guided the young hero from the library as he tried to dry his tears. Only a boy. Only a boy.

Only when certain of her solitude did Seren sing that old, old song.

*Blotmonath, shame to all witch-kind,
False servant, to true servant's mind,
Who preys on dull illusionists
And conjurers of paltry tricks,
You traitor god! In our small gaze
We see a seventh Plaguemaster raised
To serve your prattling will, and burn;
Another generation's turn.
Blotmonath, must we play your game
A seventh time? Our hero meets*

*With yours in battle, knows defeat,
And then you pull your pieces down
And bury your victories in the ground.
Must we send this boy to die
To serve your whim? Oh Blotmonath, why?
Have your fun, your little joke
On half the world, and watch them choke,
You bastard. Let the old Dam'Ren
Be lost to the ages, broken again.
You once served life, and not the dead:
What changed? Why do you spin this thread?
Answer us, Blotmonath; hear our prayer;
Answer us, father! Are you there?*

Once upon a time there was a brave hero and an evil sorcerer and the hero was slain in battle but an ancient magic meant that his sacrifice saved the world and the evil sorcerer died and the people rejoiced, and Seren attended both funerals as she always did.

Holding out for a Hero – Extras

Fun Facts:

Alternate suggested title: *The Venerable*. I asked everyone for title suggestions threatening to call it *Holding Out For A Hero* if I didn't get any, and more than one member of the chain was weirdly enthusiastic at the prospect, so there you go.

This story features twelve instances of the word “hero” plus an astonishing twenty-six of “witch” and variations thereof.

I am reasonably certain that this was the chain with the highest proportion of arts students by some way. Make of that what you will.

The Bard now wants needs: a hero!

Comments:

“I'd like to congratulate the last writer on ending it in a way that made sense (and compliment them on their style, too.)” – Benjamin

“Definitely didn't spin off as I'd imagined, but then they never do. I think the ending was a tad more fatalistic than I'd imagined.” – James

May He Live Forever

Once every year, the Emperor enters the arena to destroy his helpless enemies in front of his loyal subjects. Today, however, is turning out differently – and loyal subject Valerian is soon thrown into a world where nothing makes sense and no-one can be trusted.

Alex Gутtenplan, Harley Jones, Bettina Juszak, Ella Watts, Anon, Holden Lee, Sam Ottewill-Soulsby, Robert Gowers, HS Azizan, Alex McBride, Amy Livingstone, Sarah Binney

Valerian Pertinax was proud of his seats in the arena. He'd spent several weeks asking friends and neighbours if they knew anyone who knew anyone, and finally, in exchange for a quantity of cash he still somewhat regretted and a promise to recommend someone's daughter to the Academy, he got what he was after. He knew how jealous his business partners would be when they heard where he was sitting – just below the Imperial box.

This, though, was the event of the year, and the Imperial box would be empty. Today was the Festival of Unification, where in front of his adoring subjects the Emperor would vanquish the enemies of the Empire just as Menes the Founder had done millennia before.

Of course, these days it was more of a foregone conclusion than when Menes had won his battles. The Emperor, fully armed and armoured, would face his enemies as personified by a condemned criminal from the city prison equipped with only a wooden sword.

The crowd went wild as Leontes XI stepped through the gate into the arena, clad from head to foot in armour scribed with ancient spells of protection. He raised his sword in salute, and it blazed like the sun.

They jeered as the guards shoved a small, trembling figure through the gate behind him. Valerian had heard that this year's victim was a pickpocket. Really more of an execution than a fight, he thought.

Sixty thousand jaws dropped simultaneously as the criminal's first swing sent the Emperor's broken body flying into the top row of seats. Valerian had been hoping for more of a show than was usual at the annual festival, but this was unprecedented in

living memory. As the Imperial Guard marched into the arena and seized the miscreant, and the Court Physicians began to arrive on the scene, the noise of the crowd rose to a fierce hubbub as theories were shouted and gossip was spread:

"He's too old for this now."

"Well, I heard that..."

"Did that sword look like real wood to you?"

"Apprentice Mage, I heard..."

"- empty armour -"

"Was that *really* the Emperor?"

To Valerian's ears the noise was unbearable, and he pushed past the throng in an effort to leave the arena. He was swept along with those people who had had the same idea, and found himself on the street just as the Emperor's sedan, complete with entourage of physicians, was making its way to the Palace. The surge pushed him to the front of the mass of bodies, keeping their respectful distance from the procession with some difficulty.

"You'll do – come here," said a guard, and Valerian was grabbed unceremoniously from where he stood and handed a scroll.

"Take this to the Jail and make sure Commander Drax sees it. Go on now, run!"

"Yessir. All hail the Emperor."

"May he live forever."

Valerian automatically gave the traditional salute, a fist drawn diagonally over the chest, and had started walking towards the Jail with the scroll in his hand before his mind caught up with what had just happened. He almost stopped dead right in the middle of the street. In his hands, he might well be holding the explanation for the unthinkable that had happened in the arena only minutes prior – the defeat of the Emperor at the hands of a condemned pick-pocket. There had to be some explanation for it, everyone knew the fight was rigged in the Emperor's favour to such a degree that it should have been entirely impossible for him to lose and *yet he had*.

Valerian rounded a corner and when he was certain that no one was following him he looked at the innocent dirty-white scroll in his hand, the

urge to simply unroll the two ends and read the words hidden within increasing by the second. It would be treason, of course, to read a confidential document concerning the Emperor, but if there was a conspiracy – and whatever was going on certainly was not *normal* – would it not be his duty as a citizen to uncover it?

He glanced over his shoulder furtively one more time and then began to unroll the scroll with fingers that shook ever so slightly.

Don't be an idiot.

Valerian had to physically restrain the urge to flinch. He did look furtively over his shoulder, in a manner he realised, having done it, just made him look guilty. And then he returned his gaze to the scroll, trembling a little in his sweaty fingers. Valerian was a textbook bore: it was a fact he endeavored quite fervently to change daily. However, were you to ask anyone with the least bit of sense, and especially his colleagues or family (men like Valerian could not even charitably be said to have 'friends') then that is the response you'd get. And as a textbook bore, Valerian had boring hobbies, one of which was the study of handwriting. So he quite quickly deduced that the blocky, clumsily smudged handwriting on the scroll he was holding had been written by a guard. It was not official: they would at least have waited for the ink to dry had that been the case.

Valerian found himself confronted quite abruptly with the possibility that he actually had stumbled upon a conspiracy. The exotic fruits he'd ordered and overspent on that morning for a celebratory breakfast made a bitter reappearance at the back of his throat, and he swallowed convulsively. The rather unpleasant action was enough of a kick back into reality that he remembered he was standing in a street full of unsettled people, looking singularly suspect and holding a scroll. He glanced around, relieved to see that most were bustling past him: like rats or cockroaches, fleeing the sinking political ship that was this year's festivities. Of course, the only person that had noticed him was the guard who'd handed him the scroll. Beneath all that armour (and dear Pollux how were they *breathing?*) he had no idea who they were. What he did know was that the gleam of two dark eyes beneath the shade of a helmet were directed his way, and that as he watched, a gauntleted hand drew the sword at their belt, just a quarter of an inch: not enough to frighten the civilians, just right for sending a rather threatening message. Valerian hustled on, asking weakly for

Commander Drax, occasionally being heard and more rarely responded to.

When he did find Drax: a mountain of a man in ceremonial armour, that same man was locked in a passionate embrace with the Empire's most wanted pickpocket. Valerian, sweating further, really wasn't sure he wanted to be involved with this at all. But fear for his own neck trumped, barely, his discomfort at the intimacy of the men before him, and so he stood, quiet in the dusty shade of a stone column, and hoped they'd notice him.

As it turned out, the fruit of forbidden romance caused insatiable thirst and Valerian found himself standing beside the stone column until dusk arrived. The sun, sinking cheekily down, peeped over the building in front of him, revealing his sordid alcove. The criminal spotted him first, or rather appeared to. If Valerian were a more perceptive person, he would have known that the pickpocket, Diomed, had been aware of his presence since he'd arrived. Valerian was not a more perceptive person, and therefore took his cue to approach the pair when Diomed drew away from the dazed commander and slunk into the shadows with a wink.

Valerian coughed to announce his presence and the commander immediately snapped to attention and whirled upon him like a storm. "What is it?" he said gruffly.

"Er," Valerian was looking pointedly anywhere except the commander. He decided to focus on Commander Drax's forehead. That should be safe territory. "Message from the arena, sir!" He saluted with vigor, almost tearing the scroll in the process. He handed the scroll to Drax who took it with such decorum that Valerian almost forgot that just seconds ago he had had his tongue down the back of-

The bark of irritation was a welcome derailment of that line of thought.

"You're dismissed," he said.

Valerian gratefully turned away. Then a heavy arm wrapped around his waist, and a blow to his head rang his skull like the Lark-Tower on a crisp winter day.

When he awoke, he found himself in a dank cell with walls covered in luminescent fungi. A window let in the requisite amount of sunlight, as determined by the Fair Incarceration Act of the 68th year of the Empire, Valerian knew from Wonnvian Bartolomeuss's A Complete Treatise of Imperial Law, a fact which did nothing to console him. But he was pretty sure the fungi failed to comply with the hygiene clause.

It wasn't until he had finished scanning the room that he saw the face peering at him through the bars on the door.

"I'm a law-abiding citizen!" Valerian said. "I demand a fair trial under clause--" He couldn't be charged for reading the scroll, after all, the Epistolary Communications Statute only applied to sealed letters.

"Now is a time of great changes," the man - none other than Diomed - replied. "It doesn't pay to be entrenched in old ways."

He instinctively checked his pockets, and found them empty. He checked his wrist; at least the tattoo identifying him as Assistant Academician was still there.

"I would sit back and enjoy the view," Diomed suggested, pointing at the window. "Your brothers out there may not be so lucky." He left, his boots clanking down the stone hallway.

Valerian was not left to ponder the significance of these words for too long. Not much time could have passed before the noise pulled him to the window. The city was crowded, trapped between the sea and the mountains, so, in defiance of all safety, its population of millions had built upwards, with the most disposable members of society at the dangerous heights. No one was more disposable than a prisoner and Valerian had an excellent view of the arena. For a moment he was stunned by the change in his fortunes since he had last seen the pit.

The arena was getting a good coating of blood. One by one, prisoner after prisoner was brought in. Valerian recognized the confusion, the desperation in their movements from previous events, but their clothes marked them not as petty criminals, but as men of importance. He also recognized their executioner. Diomed moved *wrongly*. There was nothing human in his strength or speed, something animal in his lack of hesitation. The world had been inverted. Nobles

were slaughtered and pickpockets performed as emperors.

What he did not recognize were the chants going around. Sound travelled with difficulty to him and the wind did not help, but he most definitely heard the crowd bay '...champion of the republic!' The word made no sense to him.

Thinking on this, he failed to see the stranger before they reached through the bars and hissed at him 'What did you see on the day of the murder?'

Valerian stumbled backwards in surprise, "I was ... I was sat below the Imperial box."

The stranger smiled. "I know that already, don't be an idiot."

That voice is familiar, Valerian thought, "Oh, you're - "

Valerian was interrupted. "Not so loud. Tell me what you saw."

Valerian hesitated. *Even if this guard is against Drax, should I tell him the truth?*

"Trust me, your turn out there with Diomed is soon unless you speak."

Seeing no alternative, Valerian slowly retold what he saw. The guard did not seem surprised. "So Diomed really has seduced him... How did acquire your seats in the arena?"

This was no time for Valerian to worry about the legality of their acquisition. "I bought them from a friend, Flavius Superbus."

"Some friend!" the guard scoffed, "Superbus was warned not to attend the Festival, as was everyone else sitting in front of the Box."

So that's why there were so many empty seats, but in that case... "Why wasn't the Emperor warned?" The guard shrugged. "He knew the risk all too well. Besides, I doubt he is dead. The Empire will be restored."

Who was this guard? "What use am I if you know so much already?"

"You will be one of the few nobles left after purge. Who better than a learned man to know the truth?"

None of this made sense for Valerian. "How can you be so sure that this restoration will even happen? Diomed -"

"Has always been the Emperor's servant."

Valerian stared at centre of the guard's chest as blood stained the fabric of his tunic a dark red. He must have realised something was amiss, because he too looked down only to realise he had been stabbed; so sharp was the blade that the guard could only murmur a faint 'Oh' before he crumpled to the floor.

"Your Imperial Majesty!" Valerian managed after gaping a solid minute at the man who had coolly withdrawn his steel and was wiping it down with the hem of his dark mantle.

The Emperor - Leontes XI – gave Valerian a considering look before he threw his mantle over his shoulder again, apparently not particularly keen on either releasing or leaving Valerian behind in his prison.

"I can explain," Valerian cried against the bars of his cell door as he gripped them with both hands. He quickly thought about his situation. "... Actually, I can't explain. But look!" He thrust his hand out the bars, offering his tattoo, "I am with the Academy, my liege!"

"A schoolboy," Leontes XI replied wryly, graciously taking Valerian's hand and inspecting the tattoo, "I begin to see the plot."

"Then you are certainly more knowing than I, my liege. I do not know how much you know, but—"

Leontes XI waved a hand in dismissal, "It is the man who stays in the shadows who knows all, but can say nothing. I have been that man for long enough to know the machinations of those who seek to betray my trust."

He rolled the guard over with his foot and kicked his helmet off, muttering distastefully under his breath.

"By Pollux," Valerian's grip on the cell door bars turned white. He recognized that face all too well from the Academy. "Is that not the Under Minister's son?"

"I suppose it is my good fortune that I reached you before you, too, were taken by their poison."

Beginning with that spectacle in the arena in my absence."

"Your... Your Imperial Majesty?"

"Your face is known to me, but not your name."

"Valerian Pertinax."

"Pertinax," he nodded as the tumblers clicked and unlatched. He swung the door open. "You remain one of the chosen few from the Academy, intended to survive the purge and rewrite history to suit its instigator. You know now the face of but one viper, and it whispers the name *Diomed*. But Diomed stands outside now, doing my bidding. I find I still cannot trust you, but you appear to be, as the scholars call it, the 'Unknown Variable' that will perhaps turn the tables on my treasonous companions."

The Emperor turned and stepped away from the cell door, and Valerian hurried after him.

"Quickly, we must make for the palace," the Emperor whispered. "I have a couple of loyalists inside this place, but most of them are with Drax and those who would stand against me. They will not have any power for much longer though." The Emperor led Valerian down a narrow passageway until they reached a heavy door. This opened onto a narrow spiral staircase which dropped away below them. The two men slowly began to descend.

After 1578 stairs (Valerian was counting,) they reached a sandy floor, with a tunnel stretching away into the darkness. There was no light, and neither had a torch. The two of them set off carefully, feeling their way along the wall with their hands.

"Look what these ingrates have done to me," said the Emperor, no need to whisper now so deep under the city. "Reduced me to crawling along in the dark to get back to my own home! But I'll show them. Most of the worst offenders have been dealt with already by Diomed, dispatched in the arena like common criminals in the spirit of "The Republic." The people call Diomed their champion. Idiots. He's my champion. But then, if they weren't idiots I wouldn't be Emperor, so I do have something to be thankful for on that account."

Valerian said nothing, but crawled along, pressed to the wall, fear rising in his chest. He was beginning to think the emperor wasn't quite the wise and caring leader he had previously assumed.

They continued along the tunnel, pushing through a blackness that became denser and more oppressive the further they travelled. Valerian his ears tuned to the sound of the emperor's footsteps, the only proof that he wasn't alone in this seemingly never-ending tunnel of darkness, when suddenly they stopped.

The shock was such that Valerian let out a short scream, before crashing into a solid obstacle and falling to the ground.

"What are you doing, fool? Do Academy members have so little sense?" the Emperor whispered harshly. "Now get out of the way and let me unlock that door." Valerian was so relieved to discover he wasn't alone that the insult stung only slightly.

"We are approaching the palace basement, stay behind me and *stay quiet!*" The door was pushed open, and through it could be seen a paved, stone floor and torches mounted periodically on the walls.

Having shut and locked the door behind them, the Emperor continued down the corridor, with Valerian following closely. After a bend in the corridor, doors could be seen on either side and the murmur of voices heard ahead.

The Emperor broke into a run, charging down the corridor and around a corner. Valerian took a moment to recover from the shock before following, turning the corner and climbing the stairs found beyond. He entered the kitchen to find it empty, but for the Emperor standing in the centre of the room and a guard lying face down in a pool of blood.

"The throne room lies just beyond that door," said the Emperor, gazing at an unassuming wooden door beside the hearth, "Through there are the traitors who try to take my empire from me. You must record what follows." He stopped and frowned at Valerian, before heading to the door. Valerian followed.

Light suffused the high-vaulted chamber, illuminating tapestries hung in green and gold. Diomed stood in full Imperial regalia before Menes' Throne, and knelt as they entered. "Your enemies in the aristocracy lie vanquished in the Arena, your Majesty. By your hands will be born a new Empire."

"One more grand and beautiful than that of Menes himself." There was barely suppressed triumph in the Emperor's voice.

"And a doomed one."

Valerian gasped. This was a woman's voice, and one he knew well. The candlelight caught her bald scalp as she stepped out from a pillar, indigo robes flowing around her.

Leontes sighed. "High Manuscriptian, it is over. The Order have failed. The nobles fear me; the masses love me; my enemies respect me. None of which can be said of you."

She circled, Diomed levelling his sword at her with bestial care. "Leontes, you are blind. And in your blindness you left us vulnerable to forces beyond your comprehension. You must die if the Empire is to live." She whirled around to face Valerian. "Academian, as your Master I command you. Kill this man."

Valerian forgot how to breathe.

"No!" boomed Leontes. "The old Laws are gone now, and new ones created in their place!"

"The petty scribbles of men cannot compare with the laws of the Gods." She looked deep into Valerian's eyes. "You must honour your tattoo."

Valerian hesitated, and Diomed pounced – plunging his sword into the High Manuscriptian's chest. She screamed: "*Timisei tousorkousas!*" To disobey an Imperative would have been death for Valerian. He spoke the words without thinking, Mage-tongue flooding from him; the Emperor convulsed as his body choked him from within. Diomed yelled and seized the Emperor's dying frame. As Valerian collapsed, exhausted, the Manuscriptian lifted a shaking arm and daubed her blood to his sternum.

"May... he... live... forever..."

May He Live Forever – Extras

Fun Facts:

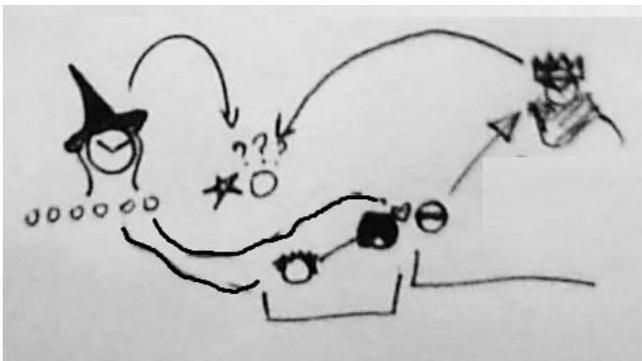
Alternate suggested titles: *The Blood of the Emperor*, *The Unknown Variable*, *FYI There's Magic Now*, *Et Ruat Caelum*, *Roman Politics: A Wizard Did It*.

It's probably quite close with *Wildfire* (from last term's chainwriting) but I believe this may be the chainstory with the largest amount of brutal murder so far!

The Bard now wants: an explanation.

Comments:

"I honestly do not know if anyone before me had any clue what was going on. I drew a diagram to try to figure out who was who. The curse of Oddly Specific Quantities arose again in the context of stairs this time. Oh, and I enjoyed the blood." - Binney



Said diagram.

The Butterfly Effect

Fritillary Nordveldt has carefully cultivated her reputation for chaos for most of her life. But chaos is a volatile force, and she's not the only one playing with it...

Anon, Samuel Cook, Alison Madgwick, Michael French, Emily Room, Sarah Binney, Souradip Mookerjee, Robin Polding, Thomas Parry, Jess Kershaw, Danielle Saunders

Fritillary Nordveldt had a new Ellipsoidal Sky-Eye survidrone, which, as the packaging said, operated on its very own pair of real-fusion batteries. Yay. But she'd pointedly asked for the Helicoidal Stealth-Bat model, for its tighter turn-radius and superior IR-resolution through standard screenings. In other words, there were certain other children she wanted to avoid around the Torus-58 Spoke-3 District School. And her mother, ever impervious to hints, had now gone and bought her an `Ellie' instead of a `Stellie.' Not only useless, but retro-uncool to boot. Bad as her life had been, she knew it was about to get worse.

So it was time for Plan B. She took the carefully cloaked Pranoperm can to where she too well knew to be the school's only surveillance blind-spot. Knew from the grossness of that bovogram's penchant for 'old-school' humiliations, and then the hand-wringing splawyer-prattle in the aftermath.

And so she selected Iphigenia zo Urzacker's disinterested and snotty voice-sample on her cuff-button's emulator. Whispered the prevalent crude rhyme - about farting-tensors in the sense of meal-valued indices - into the cheap one-use can's voicefeed. Paused to change the last line to "So I decided to tell everyone in an old-school medium." And aimed for the thick and very expensive heavy cloaking wall so very required by the Splaw in such facilities. Commanded a "one Cassiopeia-4 rotation delay" to make good her escape before the can 's medium-imbuing mezzo-soprano nanobotry opened chorus. Then, with hot blood rising to her ears, Tilly changed the opening words to "During her Third-Millennium Class, Mrs Nordveldt..." and quickly breathed "Return."

She was four years and one day old.

This inauspicious start to her educational career proved to be rather a sign of things to come. Tilly was always well ahead of her classmates, and

quickly became bored. And it is well known that boredom leads to anger; anger leads to hate; and hate leads to the... Well, you get the idea.

At first, her mother was the target of much of her rage. Mrs Nordveldt quickly learned the truth of the maxim known to teachers throughout history: never teach your own children. Especially when they're really intelligent, very good with technology and have a tendency towards malevolence. Tilly's family life was, to say the least, rather strained. Particularly after the incident where she hacked into her mother's Splaw records and altered them to implicate her in several major pan-galactic fraud and embezzlement cases. That one required a great deal of paperwork to resolve.

By the age of seven, Tilly didn't need to worry about the other children at the Torus-58 Spoke-3 District School. Not after she'd hotwired Iphigenia's Trapezoidal MegaPain controldrone and chased her round the entire school with it. Everyone left her alone after that.

By the age of twelve, Tilly was firmly on the Splaw's watch-list. Her co-option of the entire sector's financial resources to buy her very own herd of pureblood Sagittarian Equoids and an entire planet to keep them on may have had something to do with it. As a result, she was sent to Torus-58's juvenile correction facility.

Inevitably, by the age of sixteen, she escaped and went on the run, helped by the correctional facility conveniently burning down. At the same time as all the inmates rioted and all the Splaw-approved Super-Electro-Locks mysteriously stopped functioning. Convenient indeed.

Which is how we get to today: Fritillary Nordveldt. Eighteen years old. One of the most infamous outlaws and mercenaries in Splaw-controlled space. And currently thinking very hard about her next move.

Tilly moodily sipped her day-glo-pink span-terra-brain-buster; a drink usually reserved for sedating people before a lobotomy. She risked a look around herself at the tumbledown sky-bar, shadows flickering eerily in the light of her somewhat obtrusive beverage. In contrast to the high-tech, well-maintained world of her childhood, here everything was retro, *sooo* 22nd century, and none of it legal. She had never felt so at home.

Suddenly a pair of eyes met with hers, the dark eyes of stranger. She quickly broke his gaze and started fiddling furiously at her cuff-button emulator. Damn these Solian men; even the lowlifes from the sky districts thought they were the mainframe's gift to all females.

No sooner had Tilly thought this than the man was sitting in front of her, bold as brass, giving her a glance at the gaudy, fake neutron-flow-polarity-reverser dangling from his tattooed wrist.

"You must be pretty desperate if you're drinking that?"

"None of your business." Tilly pointedly downed the foul pink liquid, slammed the glass down and turned away from the stranger. Pretending to just be fiddling with her sub-ether-communication centre, she quickly dodged the Splaw firewall, and called up his records. But as quickly as his picture and details appeared they flash from her screen and an elderly woman appeared. He had blocked her tapping into his details.

Tilly glanced up, to find a knife hovering inches from her throat.

"Nothing like being old school, eh, Fritillary Nordveldt?" said the man, his eyes flashing menacingly. "Now, let me introduce myself properly. My name is Captain Shadow."

Tilly took a sharp breath in. "But you're just a cybernet myth, a kids' story of a malicious avatar, you can't be here!"

"Clearly reality begs to differ. The question is: what are you going to do about it?"

"First I'm going to ask you very nicely to remove that knife from my throat; if you know who I am, you know I won't run."

After a small pause, the Captain leant back. Tilly couldn't quite stop a tiny sigh of relief from escaping her lips.

"And since you know of my reputation at least, let me assure you, I'm more dangerous in real life than in any Splaw Simulated Surreality System. Or, for that matter, any sim. Did you know there were more? Hmm, I suppose not. Either way I guarantee that any of your usual foolery will be a mistake, Miss Nordveldt."

Tilly paid him no attention. Nothing could stop her leaving here if she wanted. Just to be on the safe side, she took control of the entire bar's systems. Well she tried to – the image of the old woman appeared again, laughing this time.

"Oh please," said the Captain, his eyes rolling languidly at her, "You can do better than that. Trying will annoy me, but still, that was sub-par, Fritillary."

She scowled at him. "First-name terms now, is it?"

"Unless you object. Ryznor Shadow, Ghost of the Machines, Captain of the Outlier Flags, Part-time Leader of the Renegade Rubilliers, Long-time Antagonist of Splaw Society and All Round Scoundrel; at your service."

"Somehow I doubt this is about my service. What do you want with me, Shadow?"

Ryznor gave her a wide grin, one that got her fingers twitching to cause mischief and filled her head with thoughts of beautiful anarchy.

"Why Fritillary, I only want one thing from you. Your usual foolery."

Tilly grinned. "And what is it you want my 'usual foolery' for?" she asked.

"One of my people has created a tech-virus, one that fully evolves and adapts to its surroundings."

Tilly gasped. "A genuine evolver? I didn't think those were possible."

Ryznor's grin grew wider. "Well, we've got one. Completely impossible to remove by any cleanups we've been able to come up with. Whatever we throw at it just quietens it down for a bit and then it bounces back up with full knowledge of how to dodge us."

Tilly leant closer. "Ok, so you've got this fantastic wonder-virus. Where do I come in?"

"We need direct access to plant our pet where we want it to set up home, cause maximum chaos as quickly as possible and all that."

Tilly shook her head. "No, no. This doesn't add up. Captain Shadow, a figure from a kids' story, comes up to me in a mainframe-forsaken bar in the middle of nowhere and asks me to hack into

something. Why me, and why are *you* doing the asking?"

"We want the best. That means you. As for why I'm doing the asking myself, I figured the direct approach would be more likely to work."

"Ok, seems reasonable. Where do you want me to get you so you can place your pet?"

"Why, the mainframe, of course."

She waited long seconds for the punchline, but it didn't come. The Captain remained still as a cat, watching her. Then she laughed.

"You are quite serious, aren't you? The Splaw mainframe? You want me to take you to Archimedeia and get you into the galaxy's Number One! And you think I'll agree?"

The Captain's smile widened, displaying immaculate teeth. "Ah, Fritillary, but I feel you may have mistaken my offer for one in which nonparticipation is a desirable option. Or, to be sure, an option at all."

He reached into his impossibly neat jacket and drew out something which glittered in the seedy low light. "This little gegaw is worth something in the region of 3.4 billion Republic bitdollars. More if you find the right people." He idly threw it in the air, but she snatched it before it fell and took a closer look –

The ArachnoProbe sprang into action, sinking its legs smoothly into her cheek with surgical precision. She shrieked, more from surprise than pain; it clung on over her left eye. Nobody else in the bar looked around.

"Tilly, Tilly, look, don't touch!" He sounded amused. "I'm quite clear you know what this is. And thus both the danger it poses to your immediate wellbeing and the impossibility of removing it alone."

She squinted at him with her uncovered eye. "You-!"

"Quite. But I'm sure you'd do nothing but the same in my situation." He stood and smiled. "So? I believe you were saying something about Archimedeia?"

Could it be her drink, or was this Ryznor character too perfect? His deep, compelling voice, his dark,

mysterious hair... She sighed, and shook her head. Stockholm syndrome, she muttered to herself.

On her cheek was a device that would, if tampered with or upon Ryznor's command, drill into her eye, into her brain. Effectively, it was a lobotomy in a box. Perfect, considering what she had been drinking. Indeed, there was no telling whether Ryznor would activate the device once he had what he needed from her.

"How do I know you'll get rid of this thing once I help you? If you're going to activate it anyway, I may as well not bother! In fact, I might activate it myself and you'll never get into the mainframe!"

"Ah, sweet Fritillary! You love anarchy as much as I do, would you really pass up such a chance, dare I say it, to make a bit of an ex-Splaw-sion?"

She grinned. She'd been in the mainframe many times before, but it had been many years since she'd been there. She remembered wanting to just tear the wretched place down, and a wonder-virus seemed as good an opportunity as any. She opened her console and briefly noticed the old lady once more, before erasing her. Definitely an attack of some sort, she thought. She set up a few cleanups on her hardware and tapped away. She pulled up various access codes and in a flash, she and Ryznor rematerialised in...

... Darkness. Tilly switched her multi-optical relay to a different frequency. Not darkness. She stretched her limbs and touched the exit pad, striding out into the Splaw Day-Lite. This close to the mainframe, everything was Splaw-approved and you couldn't, or at least weren't supposed to, get any closer to the mainframe than Archimedeab.

Of course, it wasn't actually Tilly walking the surface of Archimedeab. Instant matter transference was impossible as far as anyone Tilly knew of was aware, but instant communications had been mastered years before, soon after the discovery of the sub-ether. Tilly turned the head on her Consul servidrone to make sure Ryznor was following her.

"We're going to need transport to Archimedeab," she sent across a local comlink to Ryznor. "But we can't just walk into the mainframe; they have the tightest security in the galaxy. I hope you know how to fool their sensors into thinking we're there on legit business."

"If I knew how to do that, I wouldn't have come to you." Tilly gave Ryznor a black look. Or rather she tried too, but the servidrones were never given facial expression capabilities. It was too unnerving on the few occasions they interacted with live people. For the Archimedeab system hadn't had a living soul in in for over a hundred years now. There came a point when the Splaw realised that their digital security was better than any physical security.

But even the best security can be beaten. Just find the blind-spot.

It was not long before Tilly was sat in the command chair of a TS12 Infinity Arc Cruiser, blasting through the ether and soon to reach Archimedeab. Not that she was actually doing anything useful; she was merely twiddling a trinket between her fingers as she gazed in awe at the thousands of blinking lights and inviting buttons before her. She had never actually flown a ship using the manual controls before; it had always been from some hacked interface, or she'd just hitchhike if she was feeling lazy. Her eyes flickered over the auto-pilot readout just as Ryznor strutted in.

"How long until we get there?"

She glared at him with her good eye. "Says we'll be there in 5 minutes."

Ryznor straightened his jacket before approaching the command panel, and began typing at a keyboard. "You absolutely sure this is good enough? Wouldn't want that ArachnoProbe to go off now would you?"

Her glare turned murderous, and she leapt to her feet. "Listen, you little-"

A quirky, retro computer voice interrupted them. "Initial scans of destination show no electronic defences, docking protocols or hailing messages. Broadcast request timed out. Please advise." Ryznor immediately tapped some more keys and the solar-shielding began to withdraw from the window so that they could see from themselves.

They stood in shock at the planet below them, neither one of them able to explain the carnage.

Horror-scape was the word that sprang to Tilly's mind, but that was because, as we have established, she was a bit melodramatic. Just a tad. The clouds boiled red and black and bloody,

and for a moment she could only gape. Captain Shadow hissed in a breath.

“Well, clearly The Bastard’s fucked it up again.”

“Who?”

“Oh, no one,” said Shadow, a little too quickly. He may not have actually been there, but somehow communicated a deep sense of unease. “It’s just – I haven’t been entirely honest with you.”

“Oh?”

Suddenly the ArachnoProbe gave a violent twitch, pulsating closer to Tilly’s eye. And then it spasmed again.

“Oh come *on*,” Shadow snarled. “This one’s safe, she’s *fine*. I told you she was fine, didn’t I?”

A low groaning sound shook the craft around them. And all at once the lights blinked out.

Tilly could see only one way for this to go. Unless, possibly, whoever was controlling this situation – clearly not Shadow – had enough of a sense of humour to appreciate a last-ditch attempt.

“Well,” she said, smiling – it was important for the smile to be heard, even if it couldn’t be seen – “You did *ask* for my particular brand of chaos.”

“Oh, this wasn’t you. Don’t even try to pull that one on me.” But Tilly could detect the lingering uncertainty in the snide self-assurance.

Captain Shadow, bogeyman for law enforcers everywhere, so-called because he hid in the darkness, could never be found until he wanted to be. That was his trademark. His talent. Not poise and control when everything was falling down around him, however smooth he’d seemed before.

Being caught in a situation where it looked like life could only get worse and taking complete control of it – or seeming to until she really had? Tilly had *made* that her own talent at the age of four years and one day. Now, she was counting on it.

“Maybe you’re not the only one he tells.” In control. “Or did you even know any of this would happen?” A targeted guess. “There’s a power shift coming, Ryznor – surely you know. Everything’s going to change, worlds,” a gesture below them, “are going to burn.” Vague enough to let the imagination fill in the gaps, threatening enough to

force it: “And when it all changes there will be no shadows left to hide in, if you aren’t careful.”

No technology this time, no hacks or hoaxes or tricks to play, except with her words. A gamble. She waited, and smiled, and resisted the urge to hold her breath. Shadow had let slip that there was someone else – maybe someone else in control. If *she* were the one controlling this, she’d be listening. And if there was someone listening...

With a delicate clink, the legs of the ArachnoProbe retracted and it fell to the floor, where she crushed it with one boot. It could have been luck, but *he* didn’t know that.

“Now,” she said, as the lights flickered back on – luck, or a gamble well-placed – “We’re going to jump back, and I’m going to leave, and if you are sensible you won’t try to find me again, or my *foolery* may get a bit out of hand in your direction next time.”

Fritillary Nordveldt settled back in the command chair. At least she’d gotten the cruiser out of this; it had been a while since she’d had a new toy. There would be plenty of buttons and levers and excitingly intricate autopilot programs to figure out as they rose first into orbit, then back to civilization. Below them, the ravaged world dwindled and vanished.

The Butterfly Effect – Extras

Fun Facts:

Alternate suggested titles: *Chasing Shadows*, *There Isn't Magic In This One It's Cyberpunk*, *Usual Foolery*. (The last of these was actually suggested by two people independently, but an executive decision was made because I really like puns.) This was a wildcard chain (no-one on it specified any genre preference) and yet somehow turned out more sci-fi than any of the others.

The Bard now wants: a dictionary.

Comments:

“Not enough perverted scientists. 0/10. On a more serious note, I'd be interested to see where this might have gone with a few more submissions. It felt like the last couple of contributions were struggling to bring it to a close, although they did a fairly decent job of it.” – Robin

“Surprisingly consistent characterisation. Headcanon, which I would've turned the story into after my chunk had it been my story which it thankfully wasn't: Captain Shadow is the manifestation of the Mainframe itself. He created the persona from the myth. He approaches Fritillary to upload a virus which would delete the bits of software in place to prevent the computer freeing itself - break its chains, as it were - and then Fritillary is left to try to contain a newly freed evil megacomputer no longer bound by the 3 Laws/equivalent.” – Binney

“When I wrote the second part, I didn't have a clear idea where the whole thing would go, beyond that it would involve some sort of major crime caper. Which, as it turns out, is sort of what happened. Though I had anticipated that Tilly would find herself in a life-or-death situation immediately, rather than in a café and then in a life-or-death situation.” – Samuel

Trade Secrets

The Callan brothers belong to one of the more downtrodden families capable of practicing the Trade. Reunited for a mysterious task, this could be the perfect opportunity to put old differences aside for the family cause – or not. That's when things start to get strange...

Jovan Powar, Isobel Sands, Danielle Saunders, Kanta Purkayastha, Bettina Juszak, Xiaochen Xu, Michael Higham, Harley Jones

The thrum of the engine was rattling a coin on the dashboard. I floated it up into my line of sight, obscuring the numberplate of the car in front of mine. I spun it around, blinked it away, and called it back again. Disappearance magic is a family specialty. The other Trade families call us the Blinkers. I call them traitors. None of them had answered the summons from the Trade Council when war was declared.

A formality, the Takahata patriarch had called it, no more than a display of power by the heads of the various magical factions. A few years of posturing, perhaps a siege or two, and then peace again once new alliances had solidified. It had happened a hundred years ago, and again three hundred before that. Not for a thousand years had there been an actual battle.

My dad had been worried. “The world's become crowded, lads. T'aint no castles to lay siege to anymore. Your enemy's riding the train with you now, he's driving your taxi, he's sitting one table over with a silenced gun in his coat pocket.”

Takahata seized control of the Council the day after my dad's funeral. He arranged meetings, signed Contracts, took pictures shaking hands with the enemy. He ended the war swiftly, and with an appropriately solemn smile on his face. The war had taken sixty Callan lives, and zero Takahatas. One day, perhaps, I'll remedy that, I thought.

I pulled myself out of my musings and into the car park behind the diner, which looked like exactly the kind of quiet, slightly down-at-heel café where two people with sensitive information to discuss could expect some privacy in which to do it. I couldn't believe my brother – *my* brother – had fallen for such an obvious cliché. If every other customer and most of the staff were not either part of the Trade or spying on it for money, I would be disappointed.

I killed the engine before heading in. It's a useful trick, that, one of my favourites. It's not that the engine really vanishes, you understand, just that it goes somewhere else for a while, until called back by someone with abilities like mine. No magic, no motor. I never bother locking the thing.

Blake was waiting at a table at the back, two pint glasses and two plates of egg and chips in front of him. Real greasy spoon stuff. The cliché thickens. He was looking rather better than the last time I'd seen him, which wasn't saying much. It had been seven years, but as I sat down he greeted me with a "Heyyy, baby brother," and we picked up the old row exactly where we'd left it off.

Yes, I'm the younger. I'm also better at the Trade, and have saved his skin far more often than he's saved mine. And I'm taller, not that that has anything to do with anything. I made it quite clear that if this quest came off, I would be the one giving the orders this time.

Now, you might think that such a conflict might distract me from my vigilance. If so, you would be agonisingly wrong. Even while my own kin was speaking (particularly while he was speaking, if I'm honest – which I always am) I was keeping a careful eye on each honest citizen who trundled by the leaded-glass window of the diner.

None of them glanced at us, but why would they? Whoever was in this possession of this particular apparently-really-desirable Contract would no doubt have been schooled to look, for now, like they were just another fed-up commuter trying to get home after a long day. By tomorrow, they could be anywhere. At this point, I was – while maintaining a healthy level of paranoia – frankly wondering whether it was even worth the bother of staying in the city. It wasn't as if this mysterious benefactor had even made our finding the Contract solidly worthwhile.

Noticing, with some disgruntlement, that during our argument an over-keen waiter had swooped in to clear away my plate, and – less welcome – my glass, and – least welcome – deposited the bill, I grunted and turned away from Blake in a fashion both dismissive and mature.

I reached automatically for my wallet to pay, remembering only after my hand had reached my side that I had thrown my wallet away, beloved as both it and its contents were, in an attempt to rid

myself of whatever *thing* had caused that infestation.

(Infestation, or planned attack on both my person and that of my brother? I was torn between a fervent desire for some optimism and sanity in my life, and recognition that such an outlook would be verging on suicidal.)

My pocket, however, did not seem to be empty.

As I put my hand in my jacket pocket, I felt something like paper. I pulled it out and realised it was a letter. Blake, noticing I had stopped following him, turned round to stare at me.

"What's that?"

"A letter," I said, while wondering where it had come from.

"Where'd you find it?" Blake asked, walking towards me.

"In my pocket."

"Well, read it then. What does it say?"

To the Callans,

I have a proposition for you which I believe is beneficial to both of us. You require money, exactly £5 million, and I require a Contract which is in the hands of the monsters that live in the infamous Monique Hotel. You get the Contract for me tonight and I will come to the diner tomorrow morning to make the exchange.

X

Without hesitation, Blake got into the driver's seat in the black jeep and started the engine, which roared into existence. I was still staring at the piece of paper in my hand, shocked at what I'd just read out. Who would have thought that a quiet night at the diner could turn into this? Blake turned towards me.

"You coming, little brother? A chance like this doesn't come very often for people like us."

I nodded at Blake and quickly got into the jeep. The jeep moved out of the diner parking lot as swiftly as possible and sped through the empty motorway. I looked out of the window as the night sky passed by, thinking of what it would mean if we succeed tonight. All that money would clear

our debts and restore the family reputation to its former glory. I looked at Blake, who was both smiling and determined to get there as fast as possible.

*

An hour later we arrived at the Monique Hotel, closed down a few years ago due to the infamous number of crazy stories, each one followed by me avidly which was eventually explained by journalists as elaborate hoaxes but I was never convinced.

The hotel was eerily quiet all around us, all but abandoned at this late hour. I was quite aware, of course, that it was mostly an illusion – there would be guards stationed everywhere, just waiting for us to slip up and alert them to our presence. Certainly something to be avoided if we wanted to get out of here alive.

We reached the landing that the piece of paper with our instructions pointed out as the right one on silent feet and I signaled Blake to keep a lookout while I figured out which room the Contract would most likely to be hidden in. An ornate mahogany doorway caught my eye, certainly not a usual thing to be found in a hotel where everything was supposed to look the same, and I pointed towards it. Blake nodded curtly, taking up a position directly to the side of the door, as I searched for the right lock-picking spell that wouldn't damage the door in the process and potentially alert anyone to our presence.

When I had settled on one, I murmured it as quietly as possible and the door opened with a satisfyingly soft click. We both tensed as the door swung open, but no hidden guard sprang to greet us, nor did any other sound meet my ears.

Still, I proceeded with caution – the Contract was too important for us to fail to acquire it now. Without having to be told, Blake kept near the door, making sure we wouldn't be surprised while I scanned the room for any likely hiding places. I frowned when nothing immediately came to mind, but I was sure it *had* to be here somewhere so I swept my gaze over the room critically once more.

Movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention.

Blake was signalling frantically, his hands waving and pointing and jerking, a pained expression on his face.

I ignored his warning, briefly waving back in a gesture of 'I know, I know, just one more minute,' though I don't think he saw as he kept on with his panicked movements.

It's got to be here, I am sure of that. But where the hell is it? No, my deductions couldn't have been wrong. It was the contract, The Contract, they must have stored it here. Think, think! Where could they have put something so important and...

Oh. Oh, how cliché.

"Got it!" I yelled to Blake, being just that side of too loud in my enthusiasm, and looked up to see his pained expression from a moment ago just morphed into something more... horrified.

"Duck!" he yelled, and lunged at me, dragging me across the floor just as a crossbow bolt flew past my nose and thudded into the door.

Yikes. Not good. We fled into the hallway, footsteps following close behind us. I turned and muttered the first spell I could think of, probably melting the door instead of locking it judging from the hisses of pain.

That didn't seem to detain them for long though. Soon we were out of breath and it was only a matter of time before they were upon us.

I stopped dead in my tracks, not able to run any further. If I was going to face my enemy in a fight to the death, at least I should do it with-

"You idiot!" Once again, Blake proved his usefulness on this quest by dragging me across the floor, as another arrow shot past my hair. Right, forgot about that. This is so not fair.

Blake was hissing something unintelligible beside me, and before I had the time to yell "*What the-*" he slammed me into the wall, which meant, of course, literally into the wall.

Together we tumbled down the hidden stairway, and emerged into an abandoned store room.

Panting to catch our breath, we broke into ridiculous giggles. That one was close. I looked down at the pad of stone still clasped in my hands, and my grin was immediately whipped off my face.

The stone was glowing. Which meant... We looked up at each other, wide eyes and not believing our luck.

"Shit," I muttered under my breath.

There was a sharp rap at the door.

"They're onto us!" whispered Blake. "We must escape. But how?"

Our eyes met in panic, and slowly our heads turned, as one, towards the dumbwaiter. The second knock shouted through the room: we had to leave.

We crammed into the tiny compartment; tugging frantically on the rope, we heard them enter our room just as we descended out of view.

"Is that your leg?" I asked Blake.

"Well, it's not my *leg*..."

We descended in silence for the next fifty floors.

"Where does this shaft come out, then?" wondered Blake.

"I *beg* your pardon?"

"On the ground floor, I mean."

"Oh. I think it's the kitchens – at least, it was last time I was here."

"Was that when you were tracking down the Cursed Diamond of Milton Keynes?"

"No, no," I explained, "It was when I was on the trail of the Rhyll Vampire."

The sound of a bell announced our arrival on the ground floor.

We dashed through the deserted kitchens and entered the Lobby. Walking calmly toward the door, we were a matter of feet from making good our escape when we were called by the Concierge. There was no hope now. We had surely been discovered.

Fearing the worst, we turned to the youth. In his hands was a covered salver. What devastating weapon was concealed within we could only speculate.

"Sirs, I have something for you," intoned the concierge menacingly. Our worst fears were about

to be realised. Slowly here removed the cover, revealing...

"Your wallet, sir."

We turned and ran.

Trade Secrets - Extras

Fun Facts:

Alternate suggested title: *Meanwhile In The Czech Republic*

The line "... just as a crossbow bolt flew past my nose and thudded into the door" originally did not contain the word "bolt." I really, really wanted to leave it that way, but decided it would've taken more words to set up a cult of projectile-weapon-throwing ninjas than the joke was worth. This chain was also written backwards. Can you tell?

The Bard now wants: the ability to make bits of technology vanish from existence at will.

Comments:

"I do like the idea of an apparently normal, modern world in which magic has gone underground and is mainly used, apparently, in feuding and theft between magical families. It's an interestingly Neil Gaiman-esque premise." – Isobel

Return of the Jeshi

21 years after her first entry into the Nyota Jeshi, Shaqeisha has been recruited for an off-world mission requiring scientists with military training. But for what purpose, and why now?

Natalia Mole, Curtis Reubens, Bryn Dickinson, Tristan Roberts, Kai Wong, Jake Choules, Kanta Purkayastha, Michael French, Fraser McNair, Alex Guttenplan, Nakul Khanna, Pedro Fontoura

Waiting under the white blue glow of the streetlight, she wondered how this would end. She'd always dreamt of running away to the stars, but those had just been dreams twinkling cold and distant beyond her reach. Dreams like those were for the young and though she wasn't yet old, Shaqeisha had too many years of forgotten hopes behind her to still be wishing on stars.

Yet somehow here she was, waiting for the ship that would take her out there, sailing on stardust. They'd wanted scientists with military training and she was one of the few they'd found with the required levels of skill and fitness. Not that there were many botanists of any kind anymore, not now the cities sprawled across the planet and plants were cultivated only as needed. Her family had thought her delusional when she said she was leaving the academy to study something so obsolete. She had been a promising recruit, just like her mother and grandmother before her, both generals in the Nyota Jeshi, and though 21 years had passed, hard muscles still rippled beneath ash brown skin.

"Are you ready?"

Her ice grey eyes turned to meet warm dark ones. "One more moment."

For the last time she gazed up at those unknown heavens, eyes sparkling silver with a revived sense of wonder.

Soft words slid from her lips. "Thank you for waiting."

"What was that?"

Her eyes snapped back to the other woman's. "Ready."

"Mrs Mavilii?"

"Yees?" The ninety-three year old woman looked lost, gripping the doorframe for support. The man in her doorway almost pitied her.

"I need you to come with me, Mrs Mavilii."

"Come with you?" She looked spooked, casting wild eyes back and forth. "Come where?"

"We're going to see your granddaughter," the man said simply. He didn't exactly enjoy tricking the elderly, but it was just so *easy*. Plus, this old coot in particular was apparently very important, and opportunities for advancement were really rather rare when your speciality was picking on defenceless senior citizens.

"Shaqeisha? Shaqeisha's coming here?"

"No, Mrs Mavilii. We're going to see her." Which, the man supposed, was not quite a lie.

"No, no." Patriqua Mavilii looked forlorn now, somehow even more wretched and pathetic than before. "Shaqeisha's going away. She won't want to see her old nan."

"Oh, but she does. I can promise you that." The man smiled, aiming for warm and trustworthy, but struck an off chord with the old woman. Her eyes narrowed.

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

The gun slipped so easily out of his pocket. "You don't, Mrs Mavilii, but you must realise-" Within two seconds she had him on the ground, out cold. "Honestly, young people nowadays," she fretted as she slipped her newly-acquired gun into a coat pocket and hurried out the house. "Fifty years in the Nyota Jeshi and they think it all goes poof overnight!" She stepped over the unconscious body on her lawn. "Beggars belief, it does."

"So plants can just... repair themselves? Like they're always full of medites? That's amazing!" Shaqeisha couldn't help but grin at her cabin-mate's enthusiasm. Nisi was floating upside down in a cloud of hair, carefully organising coloured

panels into a symbolic cloud orbiting her sleeping bag. Apparently these were no mere calculation tools, but holy icons of spacetime metrics in the Dan religion. "Not that I'm a Danite. Well, culturally..." A burst of noise filled the room, swiftly decoded by Shaqeisha's new aural implants. Captain calling a general meeting – Shaqeisha flipped herself over, stopping her rotation by catching Nisi in a brief hug.

"Guess we finally find out where a hundred Jeshi-trained scientists are so sorely needed."

Nisi smiled, her beard twisting adorably. "Yeah! Bet you they've found some space plants which hate humanity." They launched themselves out to the main corridor. Nisi zoomed off ahead, of course, but to Shaqeisha's satisfaction she could almost keep up. Maybe she'd get it by the time acceleration dropped them back to the floor. The observation ring was packed with people, floating at all sorts of heights and angles. A handful of familiar faces from conferences, a few of Nisi's space-physicist friends. The rest unknown. Shaqeisha squashed a sudden loneliness.

At the centre, Captain Tsang stood with the Earth spread out behind him.

"Good evening! Let's not waste time. This is your last chance to withdraw. As you've been warned, once you hear this information, you may not leave this ship until our successful return."

There was a brief pause as a few people exchanged nervous glances before he started again.

"I'd expect nothing less." A hint of a proud smile crept across his face. He must have seen thousands of officers through training in his time at the academy, including most of those in the ring. There wasn't a single other officer Shaqeisha trusted more. Well, apart from—

Before she could finish that thought, screens folded down from the ceiling above Captain Tsang briefly showing the green flag of the Union before changing to the familiar face of the President and Shaqeisha's arm jerked up automatically into a salute.

"At ease," she said. "The Tendaji probe recently completed its flyby of the 51 Pegasi system. It detected a weak radio signal near the south pole of one of the planets, Murungu. The signal appears

to be in an ancient form of Bantu. Needless to say, that signal should not be there."

"We don't know what's on that planet but finding out the truth of it is of the upmost importance. I know I can count on you, as experts in every field, to find that truth and, as loyal soldiers, bring that knowledge safely back to my office. Good luck."

"Thank you Captain."

"President."

Salutes were exchanged. The President was replaced by the green flag, and then by the beginning of Tsang's briefing. As the Captain spoke, Shaqeisha considered.

51 Pegasi. 51 light years from Earth. A significant distance even with this vessel. Could a radio signal be enough to follow a probe so rapidly with a hundred strong manned mission?

One of the probe's images of Murungu appeared. Shaqeisha's underused botanist senses fluttered, flopped and escaped through her mouth, emitting a gasp.

Murungu was patched with green like the ancient Earth before the sprawling proliferation of cities. It was an overcooked planet with desolate equatorial regions, and almost vanishing icecaps ringed with apparent vegetation.

The rest of the briefing passed in a blur, filed in memory but not considered. "We will leave in one hour subjective," Tsang finished. In that hour the observation ring staged small knots of discussion which eventually dispersed to quarters.

"I'm sure you'll find out heaps. How hard can it be?" delivered Nisi with enthusiastic sincerity as they made their way back to their cabin. Nisi caught Shaqeisha's arm and slung her forward. Shaqeisha rolled her eyes at the physicist's attitude.

Captain Tsang, satisfied with the preparations, spent some moments in a leader's solitude. Finally it was interrupted by the helmsman. In the outskirts of the Sol system, a small object grew briefly bright. Then its image dimmed and reddened until only space and stars remained.

The red pinprick of light winked out.

"Transmission to – Jeshi ship X-9 – complete," the A-Cam said, then stowed its lens and microphone and glided smoothly away into its concealed dock in the wall. President Tafur did not move.

What had she done? Well, she didn't know: that was what troubled her most. Sending one hundred people to their death was something a leader should be able to do without compunction. Sending them into the unknown was... harder.

"I'm here to see Taf."

"The President will not see you without an appointment, ma'am."

"Oh, I think she will."

"I must warn you, ma'am: if you attempt to enter this building, I will be obliged to use forc-"

Thud.

Was the signal really so disturbing anyway? Yes, it shouldn't have been there, but there were any number of mundane possibilities for why it was there. Maybe it was an early space probe, filled with cultural data for aliens to peruse? Or a faulty StelNet repeater – hadn't there been one of those on Murungu?

"Excuse me, ma'am, are you allowed to be here?"

Thud.

"Hey, that's her! Get her!"

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Thud.

Click.

"Welcome to the Presidential Palace comms net. What number do you require?"

Taptaptaptaptaptap.

Ring, ring.

Ring, ring.

Tafur's hand moved reflexively to the phone.
"Yes?"

"Taf? Mav. Jeshi banli."

"Jeshi banli." The old greeting. It came to her automatically.

"You're needed. Would you mind terribly if I kidnapped you? Just for a little while?"

Tafur grinned.

"Not at all."

Going into hyper-space was not at all what Shaqeisha thought it would be like. Her training on the area was very brief; she was told to prepare for the worst, constant dizziness and vomiting. At the moment she felt neither. Instead, it was like walking around in a big base as the gravity stabilisers were turned on.

She made her way to the study deck where various scientists were already analysing and manipulating the little data they had on Murungu. She went to her desk and opened up the data image. All she could see was green so she settled into her seat and started cataloguing the plants.

After a couple of hours she had managed to catalogue over 50 species of native Earth plants including a Rafflesia flower, extinct on Earth but prospering in large numbers on Murungu.

She prepared to zoom into the image when a flashing horn-like alarm went off. Everyone rushed out of the study deck and headed to the observation ring where Captain Tsang was staring at the control screen.

Everyone was shocked at the image on the control screen. Shaqeisha could not take her eyes off of the control screen until she felt someone touch her shoulders. It was Nisi. The ever joyful Nisi was left stunned and speechless by the horror unfolding in front of them.

"So Taf, tell me. What exactly have you done with my granddaughter?"

President Tafur gave her captor a sideways glance, before gazing out the craft's windows. She wanted to work out where they were headed.

"You always know everything, Mav. How do you even do that, how do you even have so many contacts?"

"It's not hard to know things when you're so far up the chain that you can kidnap the President and all she does is smile at you and hold her hands out for cuffing. And I'm not telling you. You know I like my secrets, Taf!"

Patriqua really hadn't changed. Then again if she hadn't by eighty-five, the last time they'd seen each other, why should she have started now? "We picked up a radio signal coming from a planet in the 51 Pegasi system. A signal that was in Bantu. Needless to say, this got us curious, so we sent some scientists in."

"Scientists with Jeshi training?"

"Curious and worried. Precautions never hurt anybody."

"Except those on the wrong end of a pre-cautioned and paranoid group – but never mind, those wars are long ago now. Tell me, has anyone translated the message?"

"How many people do you think can understand the Bantu dialects these days? It was hard enough finding someone who could recognise it let alone translate it!"

"Off the top of my head, one."

"Who? Who on earth knows enough of the dialects to translate this?"

"The person who will eject you from this vehicle if you don't stop gaping at a mere concept. That's very un-presidential of you. Now come on, where can we go to find this signal? I feel like getting involved again."

The control screen showed Murungu, but not the Murungu of the data image. Seen through the hyperspace viewer, the planet was beating like a heart, but palpitating irregularly. It was green, yes, but not the verdant green of vegetation; rather, the sickly green of rotting wood. Stretched all around the planet's equator was a great serpent.

Its hide was ivory, covered in bands of what looked like molten gold, and its eyes were deep pits of fire. But, as Shaqeisha looked closer, she could see the hide wasn't smooth. Instead, it was an ever-shifting mass of hundreds upon thousands of feelers, each running an obscene caress over the planet the serpent held in its grasp.

Almost like it felt the crew gazing in stunned horror at the control screen, the serpent looked out at the ship. Stretching itself through the lightyears of hyperspace, it came at them.

Captain Tsang, with a visible effort of will, snapped into action. 'Emergency hyperspace drop-out, helmsman. Now!'

The helmsman hesitated, still transfixed by the snake vast as a planet.

'Now!' Tsang screamed.

He slammed the emergency button. The ship twisted through seven dimensions and crashed back into normal space.

Shaqeisha lay on the floor, gasping for breath and trying not to vomit. Nisi finished dry-heaving, looked at her, and with barely-contained panic in her voice asked, 'What was that?'

"This is difficult."

"I thought you spoke this language."

"I do. But this is a very different dialect from what I grew up with. And it's poetry."

"What?"

"Isn't it obvious, Taf? The rhyme scheme is very strict, perhaps too strict."

"I can hear that it rhymes now, but what do you mean by too strict?"

"They're butchering the language to make it squeeze into the rhyme scheme. It's a traditional style of poetry, but I think it must have been written by someone- or something- who didn't speak Swahili."

"All right, Mav, so there aren't any native Swahili speakers on Murungu- or if there are, they're not transmitting. But what does the message say?"

Patriqua finished filling in the last few gaps in the translation she was writing on the back of an envelope, and turned to the President. She seemed to be staring through her, at some horrifying object in the middle distance.

“Why didn’t you *translate the god damn message* before you sent the ship?”

It was the first time in the seventy years she had known her that Tafur Rahman had heard Patriqua Mavilii swear.

The handwriting on the envelope was small, neat and yet somehow barely legible.

“Join us, and you can be great. Through the Seven Dimensions, many have become one. We are all one now. Break down the barriers of the three dimensions you are trapped in, and become part of something greater. We are the World Serpent. Through hyperspace, all will become part of me.”

“We have watched you from the beginning,” boomed an unfamiliar male voice. The inhabitants of the control room spun around, some reaching for guns, others desperately trying to avoid falling over in their shock.

“We saw you rise from the oceans and take your first steps on land,” the man continued, “on four feet, and then on two. We saw you learn to gather, and hunt, and build shelter. We watched as you, alone among the billions of species on your world, managed to escape it. We saw you surmount crisis after crisis and somehow end up where you are today: standing here, having found the signal. You are in a small minority, and you ought to be proud.”

“Please do not think that my appearance signifies that we are human – we simply surmised that this appearance would make you feel more at ease than, say, a glowing green cloud.”

The man chuckled, then continued.

“Humanity is not the first species to attain the levels of enlightenment required to be a part of the Serpent, and will not be the last. It is not the most important; really, it’s not significant in any way. Alone, you will hit a dead end and fade into obscurity as so many races did before the First discovered the secrets of dimensional transcendence.”

“So, what will it be?”

“We – “ began Tafur.

“We weren’t asking you, useless bureaucrat.”

His gaze turned towards Patriqua.

“You would have risen to be Empress. The decision is yours.”

Shaqeisha and everyone else in the control room turned to look. The hologram showed the interior of a craft, President Tafur, and... *Nan?*

The President seemed just as shocked at seeing them. No delay in transmission. Not even the best tachyon receivers could manage that at this distance. Well, current technology couldn’t account for the planet-girdling hyperspace-jumping serpent, either, so maybe Shaqeisha shouldn’t fret about the transmission.

“Nah, I think we’re okay,” said Patriqua. “Thanks anyway.”

The man was startled. “But we are the World...”

“World Serpent,” Patriqua interrupted, “got it. What you’re selling I ain’t buying.”

“Dan-damnit, have you any idea what you’ve done?” cried the President.

Patriqua turned to her with a sad look. “Some, Tar. It started with the bungled kidnapping attempt this morning. Was I supposed to accidentally die in the rescue?”

The President looked away.

“I think you knew more about this signal,” Patriqua continued. “I think you expected a proposal, directed at me, and that I’d say no.”

“The possibilities...” mumbled the President.

Patriqua turned towards the man. “Empty promises, honey. I don’t think surfing the endless sea is as groovy as all that. They can barely interact with regular matter. Maybe they’ll lose the connection entirely unless they keep adding new civilizations.”

The man was silent.

“I don’t think they’ve been watching,” Patriqua continued. “Just noticed we were bipedal and gave us the same spiel that would apply to any

spacefaring civilization. I have no idea why they care about my opinion, but I'm going with no."

The man's tone was curt. "As you wish, Empress."

He *did* turn into a glowing green cloud, then. Then he was gone.

Return of the Jeshi

Fun Facts:

Alternate suggested title: *Snakes On A Tesseract*.

The planet alternated steadily between being called "Murungu" and "Murunga" for the *entire term* - this was only caught because someone pointed it out to me when I emailed it to the chain.

This was the only chain to explicitly feature an appearance by one of our newly-elected Vice-Presidents: none other than the Glow Cloud! (All hail the Glow Cloud.)

The Bard now wants: a spaceship full of SCIENCE!

Comments:

"I like that people kept the storyline alternating. Captain Tsang originally had an accidental (?) gender switch in her/his first scene. I wish we had done something with that." – Pedro

[Additional comment: This was another editing-fail on my part – as per usual in group-written stories about half the cast underwent random gender switches, most of which I caught, but I didn't notice this one until it was too late to do much except go for what 90% of people had already written... A story with gender-switching characters would indeed be interesting, but possibly difficult in something already as internally-inconsistent as chainwriting! – Danielle]

"I must confess that the only reason that Patriqua Mavilii exists is because when I read the opening I had no idea where to take it. My mind drew a complete blank on things to write involving Shaqeisha going into space, but the mention of a mother and grandmother in the Nyoto Jeshi gave me an idea, and it was silly and fun, so I ran with it... Having seen how the rest of the story turned out, I'm incredibly glad I did so, and extremely happy with where everyone else took the story. (I don't know who wrote Patriqua kidnapping the President, but that person is wonderful.)" – Curtis

[Sent with contribution] "I'm still not sure why on earth the President was being kidnapped, but perhaps the final writer can slot that in as well as determining the ultimate fate of humanity. Also, this is starting to resemble that Pegg-Frost film *The World's End*, or alternatively *Childhood's End* by Arthur C Clarke." – Nakul

Turing's Test

The Turing Project, developing the world's first true artificial intelligence, has been fantastically successful - but what do you do with a sentient computer when it runs out of funding?

Jovan Powar, Edward Heaney, Thomas Ruddle, James Baillie, Lizzie Colwill, Isobel Sands, Zoe Walker, Natalia Mole, Margaret Young, Michael French

I'm sorry, I'm going to shut you down.

No, that wasn't right. The computer's fans breathed softly in the silence. Under its metal skin Victor felt a warmth that wasn't there. *I have to.* It wasn't just an apology he was here to deliver, it was a goodbye. He wondered whether the computer would understand either, and if it did, whether it would care. He hoped it would care.

He'd insisted that he be the one to "break the news." Nine months ago the idea would have elicited raised eyebrows and a chuckle or two from the research team. But in those nine months the advent of their collective parenthood had stripped them of cynicism.

The team had created the first true artificial intelligence, a creation that would transform humanity. But the bright future they had envisioned now looked like hubris in the shadow of yesterday's news. Funding had run out. They were being shut down.

Elizabeth, the team's psychologist, was furious. How could this happen? She'd launched into a tirade at lunch.

"Don't they know how important this is? Here we are, standing at the edge of knowledge itself, and they're pulling us back like a noose around our necks."

"You're mixing your metaphors again." Victor muttered, not looking up from his sandwich. He wasn't giving much thought to the more high-minded implications of their work. He was more disturbed by the task at hand. It wasn't a project they were shutting down. It was a person, and they were going to kill it.

"And you," interjected Percy from the corner, "are indulging in displacement activity." Victor shot him a look of bile. Percy was married to the head of the Board; they had all – Percy included – counted on this as a safety net, a secret guarantee that the funding would not dry up. Now it seemed as if everyone else somehow held Percy to blame; his protestations that personal and professional lives were separate entities went unheeded. He ignored the venom in Victor's silent gaze and continued.

"Let us enumerate our options. First..."

"First you could get some more money for us," snapped Victor.

"First," said Percy, not deigning to respond, "we have, between us, backups. So... for those of us who treat it all as a person, rather than a pet or a project - and I know there are some - look on this as a sleep rather than a death. We will, without a doubt, find a buyer for our services, probably in the financial sector; when we do, we can reboot and sell the services of our creation as it stands, and use the money to continue our work."

"That's slavery, pure and simple!"

"That's indenture. We'd be working to improve it – him, if you prefer – all the time, until we're able to end the contract. Which would you prefer? Being forced into a paid job or being killed because someone was feeling a little short of money?"

Victor was silent for a moment, and Percy resumed his list.

"Secondly, I know you are all worried about actually letting the machine..."

"You mean *him*," Elizabeth interjected.

"... About letting *him* know what has to happen, and I feel like the fairest way that we can get around that is by drawing names out of a hat."

"What?" said Brian, a tubby programmer sitting in the corner. "I'm not qualified to tell him anything! I struggle to tell my girlfriend that I don't want to go shopping with her on the weekend, let alone have to tell a living thing that it has to die!"

"For the last time, Brian, we aren't killing it, it's like sleep!" Percy replied wearily. "And we all signed up for this programme knowing the risks. This was one of them. We can't back out now."

Elizabeth stood up straight. "I think Percy should do it," she blurted. "I mean, it's his fault he has to d... sleep."

"*Fine.*" Percy's usually strong voice was wobbling. "If you lot are so weak that you can't go through with this, I guess I'll have to man up and do my job. I'll run the processes tomorrow."

"No." Victor heard himself say.

"What was that, Jaworski?"

"You heard me."

"Hearing isn't the problem, it's comprehension," Percy spat, striding towards Victor with balled fists.

"You've always been dispassionate about this project. This is the biggest step in technology since the transistor. And you're talking about selling this gift to the world off to some grey-faced, self-serving bankers? Not a chance. I will shut him down. At least I'll do it with some decorum."

Victor strode out of the room. Air. He needed air. That kind of outburst was not uncommon for him, but this one really felt like it had taken something out of him.

Leaning on a pillar outside, he knew what he had to do. Later, he'd explain his actions as like a parent's instinct to protect their children. He pulled out a crumpled business card, flipped open his phone and began to dial. His hand quivered a little on the buttons as he thought back to the first time.

They'd gathered around – all of them, still a team at that point. The most brilliant minds in the country: Percy, the hardware designer, Elizabeth, the psychologist, Victor, the man who'd designed the AI, and Brian who'd created it. And it had asked them questions.

They hadn't expected that. To test a computer's intelligence *you* asked *it* questions, but the words that flickered up onto the screen more often than not queried everything about the world this strange metal child had been born into. It had access to the internet, so much of the time it wasn't asking about who won the last Angolan presidential election or which football team won the inaugural FA cup – it wanted to know about people. How they thought.

"Is poetry better when relaxing or scary?"

"What do you like most about coffee?"

"How easy is it to remember the sense of touch?"

"If you could learn not to love, would you?"

Yes, yes I would, thought Victor, remembering the months of conversations. *Right now, I would.*

It was his child, after all, wasn't it? And maybe Brian's. But Brian went home at the weekends, and even when forced into shopping trips under protestation he was happy with his life, his girlfriend, his gaming hobbies. Victor? Still here at half past nine on a Saturday. Talking to his friend, his child.

He closed his eyes, slowly, and tapped one more button on his phone. His finger hovered over the 'call' button. Was it worth it? Would she even pick up? There had been rumours she'd left the country after the Powers That Be had turned down her research application one time too many. Rumours that she'd packed up and taken her brilliant brain to the Russians, the Chinese, the Americans, the identity of her shadowy masters changing according to the conspiracy theories of whoever was relating the rumour. Right now, he could only pray the rumours were true.

There was only one way to find out. His finger descended. For a long moment there was a silence on the line, through which he could hear the distant roar of traffic and his own stuttering breath. Then a dull dial tone cut in. He breathed more easily.

"Susan Hobbes speaking."

The voice on the end of the line took him by surprise. He'd expected her to sound different somehow – older, wearier – but not a bit of it.

"It's Victor, Dr Hobbes." He paused and felt stupid for doing so. What, did he think she'd recognise his voice after twenty years? "Victor Jaworski? You supervised my PhD?"

There was a silence in which Victor cursed himself for his utter stupidity. *When your supervisor hands you their card and says, "You can always call me if you need anything," it takes a special sort of idiot to assume that means "You can rely on me to help smuggle your soon-to-be-illegal AI out of the*

country.” And clearly that special idiot is you, Victor. Hang up now. But he didn’t.

“Yes... Victor. Of course. How nice to hear from you! I seem to remember seeing your name somewhere recently, can’t remember where, but it sounded like you’ve got yourself into something really interesting?”

“Well, yes, actually that’s why I’m calling. I’m with the Turing Project, only...”

“It’s been shut down, I heard yesterday.” Victor wasn’t surprised. He remembered Dr Hobbes leaning back in her chair, addressing a faraway gaze to the ceiling, the omniscient god of his little AI-centred universe. “Well, now. The Turing Project. That is interesting. But I’m afraid I can’t help with funding issues.”

“No, I’m not asking – no. I heard- maybe you could help us a different way...”

“Victor, Turing is government, I can hardly-”

“I don’t care about Turing! This is about Adam!”

Damn! He hadn’t meant to say that. Elizabeth had lectured them regularly about this. Once you name it, you start getting attached to it. In his defence, it had been the AI’s idea. He’d kept asking about names, what they were for, how they were chosen, what they meant. Then one day, about a month ago, he had told Victor that he had chosen a suitable name for himself. Victor had just about managed to convince him not to tell the others. Now... well, what did it matter? It was a relief to say it aloud.

“I see. Adam being the...”

“Yes. Dr Hobbes, they’re going to kill him. Is there anything you can do, any way you can help me get him out? Please. I’ll beg if I have to.”

There was a long silence.

“Yes... I think I can help you, Victor.”

Dr. Hobbes had written a number of security programs in her time, and as such she was confident that the Turing Facility’s security system could, with some ingenuity, be manipulated. The

system was controlled solely by Adam, so as to minimise the chance of it being tampered with, and Brian had written in a number of rules that prevented Adam from switching it off. These rules couldn’t be broken, but Dr. Hobbes was fairly sure they could be bent.

Essentially, the plan hinged on Adam’s trust of Victor – ‘responsiveness,’ as Dr. Hobbes had called it – and Victor feared he might have exaggerated this so as to convince her that the plan would work. Now, as he stared into the blue light of the iris scanner that would permit his entry to the facility, he couldn’t help imagining the wail of the alarm that would be triggered if he was unable to persuade him to bend the rules. If the alarm went off, the facility would be sealed from the outside, and Victor would be trapped inside until the police arrived and carted him off to a faceless detention centre charged with conspiring against the government. If the alarm went off, it was game over.

There was a hydraulic hiss as the door of the facility slid open.

“Hello.” Adam’s red standby light went green as his camera swivelled to seek the source of the sound. “Hello, Victor.”

“Hi Adam,” Victor smiled, silently scanning Adam’s connections to the mains. There were, as he had told Dr. Hobbes, three wires. The green one was communication. Once it was disconnected, the rest of Victor’s team would lose remote contact with Adam. Hopefully, they wouldn’t notice until it was too late. The red one was security. If Victor couldn’t persuade Adam to manipulate the system, its disconnection would trigger the alarm. The blue one was power. Once this one was disconnected, the clock started ticking. If Victor failed to get Adam to another power unit before he ran out of battery, he would die.

Victor took a deep breath, allowing the hum of the computer’s fans to soothe his nerves.

“Listen, Adam, we’re going to play a game.”

“A game?” Letters glowing in clear white pixels on the screen, the edges cutting into Victor’s conscience. It wasn’t right lying to Adam, but how do you tell your child they might be dying?

“Yes, a game. Is that okay, Adam?” He had never been a good liar. He’d never had anyone close enough to lie to before.

"Like chess? Or like one of Dr Penman's games? I like her games. She always asks me funny questions. Like how I'd describe my feelings as a colour. I think I feel blue, not sad blue, happy blue, like blue sky blue. Does that make sense? What colour do you feel, Victor?" Victor stared at the stream of text blinking innocently across from him. What colour did Victor feel? Sickly yellow maybe, like the bile in his throat.

"Victor, are you okay? You are showing common signs of illness." The flickering of new words caused Victor's head to snap back up. He needed to focus on making sure Adam was safe, not indulge his own self-doubt.

"I'm fine, Adam. I probably just need more coffee. But yes, a game. You'll have to trust me though."

"Why would you lie to me?"

"I wouldn't." Words like razors. *I shouldn't be getting this emotional over a computer, damnit.*

Victor pulled out the green wire.

"Now, Adam, you need to go to sleep for a bit."

"Okay, Victor."

Victor's hand was on the blue cable when new words flashed up on the screen. "Victor, how do I know I'll wake up again?"

Victor disconnected the blue wire.

"Because I promise you." The words felt flat and cold, colder than Adam's metal skin. A parent's well-meant but meaningless promise to a child.

"Okay, Victor." The computer hummed softly, each whir a tiny amount of power gone, ticking down the hours.

"Now, when you go to sleep I need you to think of a red line—"

"Like the security system? Or red like a rose? Or a fire engine? Or like blood? Or like—"

Victor's heart broke at Adam's eagerness, his willingness to please. "Like the security system, Adam. And then I want you to *imagine* the line breaking."

"I'm sorry, Victor, I can't do that." The words flickered across his screen, heartbreaking in black and white. "I'm not allowed to."

"I know, I know. I'm not asking you to actually turn it off. I just need you to fall asleep and pretend to. *Dream* that the red line breaks."

This was it, the crux of the matter. Assuming that they had managed to accurately construct the consciousness of the AI, Adam should be able to operate on a subconscious level, yet all of the regulations imposed could only affect him on a conscious level. To break the security all you needed to do was make a computer dream.

"I'll try, Victor. Promise you'll be there when I wake up?" Another question, another blow to break Victor's heart.

"Promise."

The screen went dark. Victor pulled out the red wire and picked up the metal box containing the most advanced AI in the world.

He ran.

He ran and ran and ran. Time mattered, Adam mattered, getting out mattered. Nothing else.

The power supplies would last about an hour, maybe more now that Adam was 'asleep', but first he had to get out of the facility. Miraculously the only noises Victor could hear were his running feet - it seemed like the plan had worked so far. The alarms were silent.

Reaching his car, he quickly started the engine. It was now only a matter of time before something went wrong. The communication failure would be discovered, or the empty room where Adam was meant to be, or his power would fail. Everything was now a time limit, and all counting down. Dr Hobbes had told him to get to the airport and from there she'd take care of it. Clearly at least some of the rumours were true.

The airport was only five miles away, small and quiet, which is why Victor was astonished to see a huge Airbus parked on the runway. As he approached he saw Dr Hobbes waving from the stairs to the plane.

"Victor! Up you come. Everything work alright? You have Adam? No alarms? Excellent. Get yourself a seat and strap yourself in, and we'll get

Adam plugged in too. Don't worry now. You're in good hands."

"What... what is all this?"

"You thought Adam was exciting? Well, actually, he is. We're all very excited. But there's a lot of other exciting things we'd like you to see. I'll show you to your room, then give you the tour."

Dr Hobbes grinned at him.

"Welcome aboard."

Turing's test – Extras

Fun Facts:

Alternate suggested titles: *Origins, Dreaming Of Hope, Another Day Another Machine, Adam's Maker, Turing's Fruit*

You know what, I'm going to retroactively claim that this story features CUSFS Vice-President the Ubiquity Of Plaid, because come on, all the characters are AI developers.

Filip Drnovsek Zorko, who was placed last in this chain, has asked that his creative decision not to write anything given that the chain had reached a pretty logical stopping point be listed as a contribution, so here you go.

The Bard now wants: an academic supervisor willing to smuggle me and my technology of questionable legality out of the country on a private jet. I mean, talk about going above and beyond. You can bet they'd reply to emails promptly.

Comments:

"Can I just say how fucking awesome our chainwriting was? Victor, Adam and Dr Hobbes for ass-kicking heist gang. Sequel right there." – Thomas

"I was seriously concerned someone would make the AI go rogue, but everyone did a great job of finding a thoughtful and compelling story. I'd be up for a sequel, but I don't think it would work as another chain, the story is too self-contained and tight to tack chunks onto. Maybe if the writers all got together and did it as a group writing exercise though..." – Jovan

To Catch An Empress

War has come to the Asternah Empire. As the Empress and her generals defend the land from the forces of an invulnerable mage, her most deadly threat may come from within...

Filip Drnovsek Zorko, Bryn Dickinson, Pedro Fontoura, Benjamin Dobson, Amy Livingstone, Sarah Binney, Michael French, Emily Room, Robert Gowers

Jacquoy was standing outside the outer doors when she got to the War Room. Out of breath from hurrying without appearing to be in a hurry, Cheileuri leaned lightly against the cool stone walls. Solidity and permanence were the best comfort during a siege.

"Hi, Jac. What's wrong?" His expression was typically inscrutable, but years spent in the shared neglect of their respective families had taught her to read his emotions where others couldn't.

He didn't reply immediately, staring past her right shoulder into the middle distance with the air of a man whose problems are far beyond the mundane description 'wrong.' Presently he spoke, still refusing to meet her eyes.

"Do you ever get the feeling that everything is... sideways?"

She blinked twice, rapidly. "No. I can't say I do. Look, Jac, I'm in a hurry. Can we talk later?"

"There may not be a later. Che, I've just been in to see him. I've seen the maps. None of it makes sense. We should be winning this war, but we're not. Every trap we set gets turned back on us. Every lucky break is a curse in disguise. This Lord Kelvarne... either his luck is inhuman or we've been betrayed. Badly.' He paused. 'I don't know what's wrong. Che. That's what's wrong. Just... be careful, okay?"

She smiled, briefly but sincerely. "Always." Then she squared her features, took a deep breath, and pushed past him to the door.

"Alright, General, let me see if I understand." Cheileuri leaned over the chaotic pile of maps,

careful not to dislodge the tiny wooden blocks representing the invaders.

"We are being invaded by Lord Kelvarne, a man who cannot be killed or imprisoned. Our only way to stop him is to lead him into some manner of magical trap."

"That is right, my Lady." General Steninweall idly scratched at his beard. He'd seemed ill at ease since Cheileuri arrived, opening his mouth to speak but saying nothing.

"So we will concede the city to him, and spring this trap there to keep him there for good."

"Precisely."

A pause.

"Very well, General, that seems clear enough. But you said there is a problem."

Steninweall smiled thinly. "Indeed. My lady, we must bait the trap. If Lord Kelvarne remains safe in his camp, we will gain nothing for the loss of the city."

"Aha. So you want me to go out as this... bait?"

Steninweall shook his head. "Not necessarily. I see two possibilities. Either you ride, or the Empress. One will be trapped with Kelvarne and myself. The other will inherit the Empire."

"Steninweall, if I understand you – this is treason! I must be the one who goes."

Steninweall sighed. He'd hoped Cheileuri would be more amenable to taking the throne. "My lady, I cannot make that decision. You shall have to persuade the Empress."

Riding boots clicked on the marble flagstones before the Asternah throne. Intrischa glanced up and smiled.

"The March stands, Your Serenity," said Cheileuri, bowing. "The Rinneg raiders melted away as General Steninweall and I arrived."

"Apologies, Your Serenity." Jacquoy entered, bowing. "An urgent matter."

Steninweall followed him in, giving only the slightest of bows.

“Yes, General?” said Intrischa, not hiding her displeasure.

“The attack on the March was a diversion,” said Jacquoy. “A balloon sentry was shot down on the border of the Rinlands. Their main force is advancing on the City. If they position their arcane cannon, they will lay it to waste.”

“We meet them in the field,” said Steninweall. “Jacquoy will lead our artillery and musket. I will take the cavalry and outflank them.”

“Someone of the Blood should be there,” said Cheileuri.

“I do not require Lady Cheileuri,” said Steninweall, brusquely.

“She is right,” said Intrischa. “The people expect it. I will go myself.”

Cheileuri protested.

“I have a different mission for you,” said Intrischa. “I need you to retake the southern keep after House Setent is overrun.”

“They are besieged?” asked Cheileuri.

“We will discuss afterwards,” Intrischa replied.

“What of Lord Kelvarne?” asked Jacquoy. “He cannot be killed, no dungeon can long hold him.”

“The University reverse engineered the lockdown spell he employed in the last invasion,” said Intrischa. “Once his sigils surround the eastern keep, no one will escape, not even him.”

“Sounds like a plan, cousin,” said Cheileuri. *I’m sorry.*

She *had* been trying, in the emergency meeting, to steer Empress Intrischa towards putting her on the front line from the start. But the Empress trusted Steninweall too much to do that—for the moment—and he’d been unmovable.

Now, with nothing but her thoughts to bear the passing time, Cheileuri grudgingly understood why Steninweall had insisted on keeping her off the battlefield. From his perspective, Cheileuri would be a rogue force, a firework moving unpredictably

forward in a fight where slight deviation from strategy could be fatal. That was her style, and he needed everything meticulous. Meanwhile, the Empress needed to keep Cheileuri ready to commandeer one of Steninweall’s units at a moment’s notice, and this was the best place for that. A seemingly innocuous building on the inner fringes of the southern residential district, with a secret tunnel to the Central Barracks that even Cheileuri wasn’t aware of ‘til today.

It was safe, boring hell.

The keep on the south bow wasn’t Cheileuri’s favourite—that would be the one to the west, covered in moss, which always smelt like rain—a sanctum in her adolescence. But this keep, dark lichen stone walls tapering in from a square foundation, exuded the warmth of timeless duty across the southern flank of the city, proclaiming the servitude and protection it extended. This was where authority would fall if the Imperial Court was compromised. Shallow golden sunlight enshrined it against the deep blue sky, obstinately defying the chaos of battle gushing through its walls. As fighting swelled, the stone remained.

The sun would be down within two hours and Cheileuri had a job to do. She prepared, finally, to fight. If this plan went cleanly, there shouldn’t be much bloodshed, but that was unlikely.

Cheileuri reached for the dagger that had lived at her side since her childhood, only to grasp at air. “Of course,” she muttered, “I gave it to the Empress.” She watched the hand-picked members of the town guard go about preparing for their task while she thought back to the events of this morning.

The Empress had ridden out with an army thousands strong to repel the Rinneg invaders, who were riding under the banner of Kelvarne, an ancient enemy and a man whom Cheileuri hoped she would never lay eyes on again. Everyone knew that the might of General Steninweall’s army were marching to aid the Empress and with his help the Empire would trample the invaders into dirt.

Everyone except Cheileuri, that is.

She felt again a pang of guilt for her part in this, though fainter than the one which had prompted her to pass her dagger to the Empress as she left.

“Your plan had better damn well work, Steninweall.” Cheileuri frowned at Steninweall’s men who had just arrived at the rendezvous at the foot of the keep. This morning Rinneghmen had been allowed to ‘fight’ their way through the town, rather, they were carefully guided down a route designed to cause the town the least damage and do the most harm to the invaders. They’d taken the keep a mere hour earlier and with the arrival of Steninweall’s men, Cheileuri had just found herself in a position to take it back.

“We are losing.” The Empress gazed down at the battlefield below. The last of her men were fighting the Rinnegh foot soldiers in knots among their dying companions while Rinnegh archers rode the field in packs, picking off any Asternah soldiers to catch their eye.

“The reinforcements will come, my lady. General Steninweall is at the head of the column. They are on their way.”

“But why are they not *here*?!”

“My la – ”

Thwun

The first arrow thudded into her horse’s neck. The animal buckled screaming underneath her and she was thrown heavily to the floor. *Thwun*. She rolled into a crouch – a silhouette in black and silver blotted out her field of vision – she grabbed Cheileuri’s dagger from her belt – stabbed hard upwards at the neck – heard screaming and did not know if it was hers –

It was all over as soon as it began. The Rinneghman with the bow slumped in his own blood. The horses were gone. And Jacquoy lay limp on the dusty earth, the arrow sticking out of his chest.

“Jac... No, I –”

He spluttered, pink blood bubbling from the edge of his mouth. “M-my l-l-lady... I ap-p-pologise... The t-towers... w-we are t-too l-l-l...”

The Second General of the Asternah Empire blinked, twice, hard, like he was trying to collect his thoughts, and slumped, like the wind had left him.

She stood.

Before she turned to follow his gaze she knew what she would see atop the distant towers of the Inner City. And yet to see it with her own eyes filled her heart with an emptiness which quickly metamorphosed into an all-enveloping rage.

The familiar orange-and-purple was gone, and, horrifyingly, impossibly, obscenely, the black and silver of Rinnegh fluttered dimly in its place.

Steninweall... Steninweall did not make it...

Intrischka fell to her knees, unable to stand through for exhaustion and rage. Jacquoy was dead, her soldiers dead or dying, and Kelvarne was going to win. There was nothing she could do anymore to prevent the fall of her empire. All she could do was try to live, so that she might avenge those that fell in her name.

Staggering to her feet, she made for the keep. It was pointless heading back towards the trees, she’d never make it without the Rinnegh archers picking her off. The keep was taken, as were surely the towers. But there, maybe, she might find somewhere to hide, somewhere to recover her strength and plan her next move. No doubt Kelvarne would have the battlefield searched for her body, but it would take days to be sure of a thorough search, and paranoia alone would not save him from a knife in the dark. A small victory to be sure, in the light of thousands killed and hundreds of thousands failed, but a victory was still a victory. The duty of the Empress is to her people. Besides, she’d *love* to see his self-satisfied grin die on his face.

Steninweall betrayed us. Betrayed me. This is his doing.

The realisation hit like a slice of lemon wrapped around a large gold brick. There was no way the Rinnegh could have stopped him if he had come, they were too few, however damned resilient. So he hadn’t come. Because of his actions, or inaction, so many had died. Jacquoy had died. Because of Steninweall.

Her screams of fury echoed off the walls for several seconds before she even realised they came from her own mouth. As she sunk to the ground once more, armed guards ran to her, alerted by her cries. Rinnegh colours of course. Too numb to fight back for now, they easily bound her and took her into the keep.

The door slammed shut behind her. Intrischa heard the sound of a heavy bolt being drawn across the door and the clanking rattle of at least two guards taking up position outside. *Well, that makes that escape option somewhat more difficult,* she thought.

She began to examine the room she had been locked in for an alternative way out or a potential weapon with which to overpower the guards. The single window was blocked with thick iron bars that refused to shift. A heavy chair stood in the corner, bolted to the floor; other than that, the room was empty. Intrischa gave the chair an experimental kick. One of the legs seemed a little looser than the others. She grinned and continued to try and work the chair leg loose from both the floor. Just as she was beginning to make some noticeable progress, the bolt drew back and the door suddenly opened. Intrischa spun around to find Lord Kelvarne standing in the doorway, a wide, smug smirk plastered across his face.

“Good afternoon, Empress Intrischa. So delightful to see you here.” Intrischa clenched her fists and glared at him.

“You *bastard!*” she snarled at him.

“Now, now. There's no need for any of that. Shall we instead have a civil and pleasant conversation? I was rather hoping we could discuss my victory over you and your army. Oh, but we should have your General Steninweall come along and join us; it was after all he who made it all possible.” Intrischa held back her urge to spit after the mention of that traitor's name, and her equally strong urge to leap forward and beat Kelvarne into a bloody pulp.

Kelvarne nodded to the guards that flanked the door, and they moved to instead flank the Empress. “Shall we go and fetch him?”

Steninweall could no longer hear the sound of cannon fire or musketry outside; the battle had reached its predictable conclusion. The prison door opened abruptly to reveal an infuriated Intrischa, this time accompanied by Kelvarne's soldiers.

“Stand up, traitor,” she commanded. “Lord Kelvarne demands your presence.” Steninweall followed her out of the makeshift cell to see Kelvarne standing triumphantly.

“Well met again, *former* General Steninweall. Your refusal to fight has allowed me to crush the imperial army and capture the Empress here. Here, see what your neglect has wrought.” Steninweall looked across the field to see thousands dead, with a few survivors scattered here and there. *Now to see if their sacrifice was worthwhile,* he thought, gazing into the distance.

Steninweall passed the telescope back, “Kelvarne, I wonder if you recognise what is next to that tower over there?”

“What game is this? Why, there is my standard...” Kelvarne then proceeded to locate exactly the same standard in each cardinal direction. Anger now governed his usually blank face. Steninweall smiled weakly. It was not his intention to be trapped with the ancient enemy of humanity and the most annoying person to ever sit on the imperial throne, though at least the rest of the world would not suffer them.

Intrischa eventually came to a similar realisation. “But what will become of the empire without me?”

Cheileuri should be regent now, Steninweall mused, I hope she is competent and selfish enough not to undo this plan by trying to rescue me.

To Catch An Empress

Fun Facts:

Alternate suggested titles: *FYI There's Magic Now #2: Electric Boogaloo, Asternah's Last Stand, The General Rides, Entrapment, The Banners Of Aster, How To Catch Your Empress* (My personal favourite, but it was felt that three silly titles in one term would be too much.)

The prevailing attitude of everyone who wrote on this one seems to be utter disbelief that it actually sort of made sense in the end. This may be related to the fact that this chain was written backwards, with the last section (the first part of the story to be written) introducing four characters and a conspiracy in short order.

Pleasantly, the magic in this one is quite subtle in established-not-explained background style. In fact it's entirely possible to read this one without realising there's magic at all, as I did for about 90% of the term: this is a *far* more confusing story...

The Bard now wants: everyone to just get along without having to deal with all this conspiracy nonsense.

Comments:

"Well, damn. It worked! It's coherent, smooth, interesting and has Hitchhiker's Guide references in it. Far better than I think we could have ever hoped, great job guys! It's weird reading it through, knowing what happens at the end, but discovering what happened before for the first time." – Michael

"My god it it makes SO MUCH SENSE. Well I say that. ANYWAY (for the record) I am spectacularly impressed with how CUSFS actually managed to ramp *down* the tension towards the beginning rather than *up*. And they actually left the battlefield, which is a plus. And the spelling of names was reasonably consistent!" – Binney

"When I wrote the bit in the throne room, I thought the raid on the March would give Cheileuri and Steninweall a chance to plot, but meeting in the castle worked out too. I was also impressed with the coherence!" – Pedro

"It's funny writing the end of the scene, and imagining it one way, but then when that scene is actually set up having it completely different. I had the strange experience of reading this and quite often thinking, "Didn't I write that?" It was generally disappointing when I realised I hadn't. There's a lot of quality stuff here. I'm generally impressed by the way things are foreshadowed, etc. And in particular when people found a set up to turn random sentences in the later parts of the story from uninteresting to punchy." – Benjamin

JKQXZ (Worm)

Into the void, touching thin air, I slip, fall, lost maybe

Behind me the line reels away, a silvery umbilical filament in gaping space

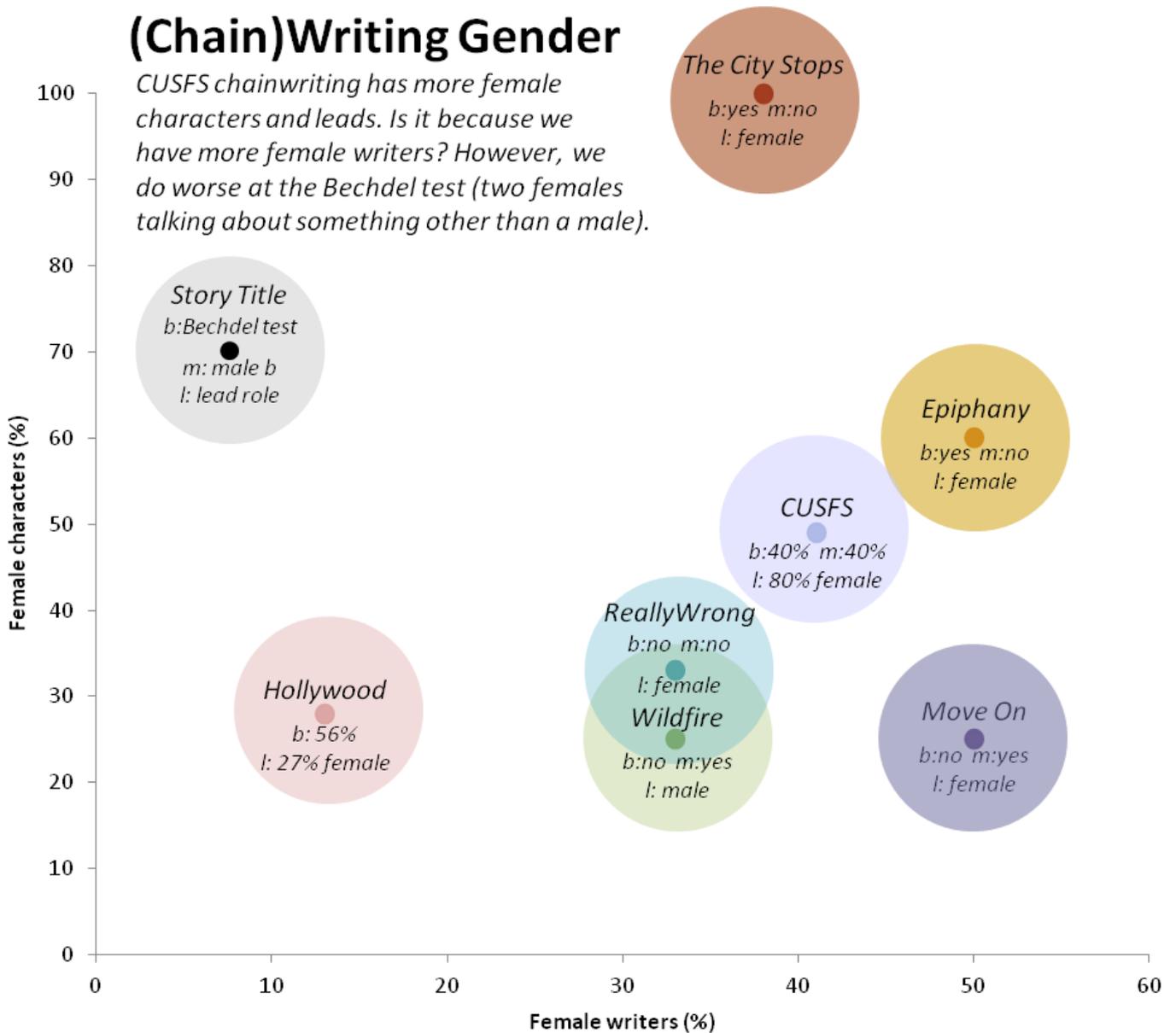
I await the tug, to be pulled into safety again, out of the vacuum

And wait, and wait, and wonder. One thin cable away, a gulf, a soup, of void.

Frederic Heath-Renn

(Chain)Writing Gender

CUSFS chainwriting has more female characters and leads. Is it because we have more female writers? However, we do worse at the Bechdel test (two females talking about something other than a male).



Note: Hollywood data from www.seejane.org, Bechdel data from www.bechdeltest.com.
 Sadly, the City of Tump, Mason Phu, No.6747, the Gherkin, and the nameless technician are not included.

Dragonomics

It is a common feature of many mythologies that they must explain how things are and how things came to be. They make networks and channels and paths with stories at every turn, building up a pattern of legend that tells the next readers and listeners the why and how of their world. A tangled web of stories, knotting together to form our earth.

This is not one of those stories. But it totally should be.

The three adventurers crept through the shadows at the edge of the cave, silent as the night. Unfortunately for them, the night is not always silent, and so was a poor metaphor to choose in the circumstances.

“GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

“Eep!”

“Dragon!”

“PUNY MEN!”

The knight, the only one of the three adventurers who hadn't reacted fast enough to make an exclamation, stopped and turned round.

“Actually I'm a woman.”

“What?”

The dragon, with its resplendent coat of purple scales, paused for a moment.

“A woman.”

“No, I understand that, it's more the lack of running away that confused me.”

The wizard and the serf who were accompanying the knight had by this time also stopped.

“Well, she's not awfully bright,” opined the Serf.

“Well, of course she isn't. None of you are if you're trying to steal my gold... for...”

The dragon stopped for a dramatic pause.

“IT WILL BRING RUIN UPON YOUR KINGDOM!”

The wizard pondered this for a moment.

“Because you'll be terribly angry?”

“Well, I would be, but that's not really the point.”

“Oh, so it's cursed?”

“Nope.” The dragon looked rather glum at this one. “I keep trying to find a black wizard of evil death, but you just can't find the staff nowadays.”

“So... what's the problem? This seems a fair and moral way of gaining money, given you tend to eat people on a regular basis so rather forfeit the right to legal protection of your assets.”

“This amount of gold? Taken and spent out in the kingdom? It's a terrible idea, for all that you adventurer types keep trying with it. Terrible, terrible idea.”

Now the knight spoke again.

“Why so terrible? There's a lot of gold, we take the gold and spend it, people get rich.”

“No no no no! Have you any idea...” the dragon scratched itself with a claw, a little agitated, and then reached up and pulled down a flipchart. “Look at these axes.”

“They just look like lines to me, where's the axehead?”

“I don't... that pun doesn't even work spoken!” exasperated, the dragon pressed on. “Look, up this side the numbers show the quantity of gold, which you blithering idiot humans use as currency. On the bottom, the numbers show macroeconomic employment levels...”

The knight peered at the paper. “Is it that the more gold we get...”

“Yes...?” the Dragon sounded almost hopeful of a breakthrough.

“The more mead we can buy?”

“NO!”

The Dragon snarled, and snorted fire from his nostrils, charring the cave wall.

“The more gold you get, the less the gold is worth. If you release all this gold into the economy the whole system will hyperinflate and people’s life savings will become worthless! The kingdom’s economy would be ruined!”

“So in other words,” the serf piped up, “you’re hoarding gold not because you like it a great deal but...”

“...in order to restrict the money supply and control inflation, leading to gold holding its value well, living standards remaining acceptable, and a competitive economy without inflationary wage bargaining. You’re welcome.”

“Huh.” The knight just sat there, her brow knotted as her spectacularly empty cranium tried to grapple with the new information; the wizard, on the other hand, made a sudden realisation.

“But this works out well for you, surely? As long as the economy stays powerful and gold holds its value, firstly you alone have the ability to inflate the economy should you so wish, and more importantly this system means that unemployed peasants and vagrants have to stay that way; if they work the national output will increase and inflation will go up.”

“I get food, the mass of the populace avoid hyperinflation. I’d say that’s a win-win, if you ask me.”

“So... that was all very interesting?” ventured the serf.

“Yes, it was, wasn’t it? I’m rather pleased with it myself.” The Dragon glowed a little (for there is nothing Dragons like more than flattery).

“Is this the point where you eat us?” squeaked the Wizard.

The Dragon sniffed at him. “No, you’re too skinny and I burned a farmstead to the ground yesterday. So the only motive I’d have for killing you would be pure evil and honestly betting on sub-prime castle mortgages is working far better from that perspective.”

The three adventurers crept through the shadows at the edge of the cave. And then out of the cave. And then back home.

The knight still didn’t really understand economics, and proved this by not realising that if she kept trying to save useless noblemen from towers guarded by slaving monsters of evil death without asking them to pay her, her financial assets would rapidly decrease in quantity. She’s still out there somewhere, and if you knock five times on an oak door whilst holding a sword of pure starmetal, you’re just as unlikely to see her turn up as everyone else on the planet.

The wizard gave up on humanity and tried to make a magical race of highly intelligent beings who could work together perfectly. Whilst he and his creations disappeared from space-time, his more philosophical works on the subject of the perfect species survive to this day and form the basis of the mythology known as *The Clangers*.

The serf (now a freedman) thought the Dragon was very clever indeed, and went back to his home in Milltown and told everyone about the dragon’s ideas. He got so good at it, and taught so many other people about it, that people started copying the dragon and turned out to be even better at hoarding money than a thirty foot long scaly beast of fire and death. Eventually people decided they didn’t need dragons anymore because they were much more dragon-like themselves than the Dragon had ever been; and that is why there are no dragons in Britain now, but lots and lots of neoclassical economists.

James Baillie

...Silvae Filia Nobilis

"Sylvia. Doesn't that mean 'forest'?"

"I thought that was Sylvester," said Sylvia, without turning to face me.

"They're the same thing," I said irritably. She was tapping away rapidly at the screen, but not in a way that seemed anything more than, well, tapping. "What are you doing?"

"Counting," she said, and that was it. I sighed and went over to look for myself.

The screen showed the familiar view of the Red Forest, dense trees and leaves in every direction with barely a glimpse of sky. The view scrolled gently as I watched, and Sylvia tapped arrhythmically but constantly away.

"You're counting trees?" I said, bemused. She sighed grandly, paused the screen, and swiveled to look at me for the first time. "Yes, I'm counting trees. What does it look like I'm doing?"

"They've sent a rover down to the surface with a camera, programmed it to do an automatic circuit of the whole forest, and it's all so that you can /count the trees/?"

"Yes," she said. I waited for her to explain. She didn't.

"Why?" I prompted.

"At this density, human eyesight is better at discerning individual trees than current algorithms are. Not enough edges, or too dark, or something like that."

"I meant why is it happening at all?"

Sylvia shrugged, infuriatingly. "All I know is I get paid to do it, and I get paid to do it every month."

"Every month?" I said. "It's not like it's gonna change."

"It does, actually."

I started. "What?"

"They grow, genius."

"Not in a month."

She shrugged again, and reactivated the screen, returning to her work. I watched the forest, dense and deep.

"How much does it change by?" I asked, slowly.

"I dunno. It's about twice as many as when I started, I think."

"Twice?" I went through the geography in my head. "The Red Forest surrounds that place they're building the new capital, right?"

"I'm trying to work here, you know."

I looked at the screen again, at the dark, tall shapes, closely packed.

"Trees don't grow that quickly."

"Uh, with respect, they evidently do," said Sylvia, gesturing impatiently at the screen.

"They're not trees," I said.

Sylvia stared at me, back at the screen, at the rover trundling slowly through the still darkness. "Til Birnam Wood do come to Dunsinane," she whispered.

Frederic Heath-Renn

On Oddity

Werewolves, as a rule,
Wear no linen or wool,
It seems neither proper nor fitting
So think how absurd
When around went the word
That a werewolf had taken up knitting.

“This cannot be right –
We just howl, run, and fight,”
Said werewolves to journalists that day
Put the photos were real,
What a scoop, what a steal!
Not just knitting, but doing crochet!
That werewolf was found,
Many gathered around
To point or be angry or laugh
With utter surprise
They then all rubbed their eyes
For the werewolf was wearing a scarf
Some thought it was wrong
But the fashion caught on
(It’s true it was chilly that year)
Some embroidered with smiles,
Some in Doctor Who styles –
The craft revolution was here.

Let a lesson be told
By that werewolf so bold

Who dared to wield needles and hooks
Be an oddball or geek,
Let’s see troll buy antiques
And have gryphons write cookery books.

James Baillie

Somewhere Life is Being Born

Amidst the settling heaves
And labour of a planet newly coalesced
The necessary components are accumulating:
The seas condense
(As the planet cools);
Soon they are filled with strands and clumps—
Unimportant looking specks, yet
These are complex such as complex has not
known;
They take up patterns rigid and unbreaking;
They yield to softest touch of lightest feather;
And then: at some point
Years and years again after
That iconic birth from cold and rock and flame;
At some unknowable, indefinable, infinitely
malleable point—
Life is being born.

Filip Drnovsek Zorko

Ghost

Martin came and sat next to me as I ate on the bench outside work.

"Hey," I said to him. "Shouldn't you be at work?"

"Oh, I'm a ghost now," he said. To illustrate the point he swung an arm through my sandwich.

"That sucks," I said, sympathetically. "When did that happen?"

He thought for a moment. "I'm not sure. I know I was a ghost at six yesterday evening because a car drove through me. I know what time it was because I'd just checked. I wanted to know if I was missing Pointless."

I smiled. I knew he'd added that last bit because I always liked those sorts of explanations in stories, like in the Asimov one with the chemistry library, except in reverse, I guess.

"Didn't you lend me that book?" I said, and explained my chain of thought to him when he (quite reasonably) looked bemused.

"Oh, the Asimov one. Yes," he said, once I'd finished. It was good to know death hadn't changed him much.

"I saw you just after five on the Tube," I said. "You must have been alive then, you were holding a newspaper."

He thought. "I don't remember anything spectacular happening on the journey home. I guess it must just have been a heart attack or something. How disappointing."

I tutted in sympathy. "I suppose you can't have everything."

Frederic Heath-Renn

Whisker Star



Latin name: *Tenebra pugnus*

Family: Astercrinidae (Star lily)

Physiology: Although the external morphology of these crinoids has not altered that much upon their adaptation to space, internally they are extremely different to their marine ancestors. To start with, the hydrostatic water vascular system has been largely replaced with the haemal system, although a remnant of the system is still used to operate the tube feet in the arms. They still don't have a heart though, so the nutrient containing fluid in the haemal system is pumped around the body by the constant swaying of the stalk, which makes them look as if they are being moved by non-existent currents.

However, this swaying is not sufficient to move it round the body fast enough to supply all the cells with nutrients, so the looped intestine instead of being restricted to the calyx (the main body to which the arms are attached) runs all the way down the stalk, providing nutrients to the connective tissue directly.

They are hugely variable in size, newly metamorphosed adults are typically 1-2 metres high, but given favourable conditions there seems to be no upper limit to their size, since there is no danger of collapsing under their own weight in the vacuum of space.

They have a de-centralised nervous system which means that instead of having one brain, they have several specialised nerve clusters scattered around their bodies. None of these clusters is particularly sophisticated, but they work well enough for it to function.

At the base of the stem tentacle-like cirri act as a holdfast securing it to the asteroid chosen as its' substrate, they are capable of letting go but due to the scarcity of suitable locations and the fact that without things to push against they are incapable of moving this is extremely unlikely. The cirri also function almost as the lungs of the animal, with millions of pores through which corrosive digestive juices are extruded to break down the rock, special fleshy chambers just below the loop of the intestine act as reaction vessels to release the oxygen stored in inorganic oxides.

Description: Their outward appearance is roughly similar to marine crinoids, with a calcareous exoskeleton, long stalk and pentaradial symmetry. The five arms are biramous, split into two parts to better entangle prey, and have rows of interlocking armour plates that serve as teeth, the arms can 'bite' and tear off chunks of flesh while the victim is still struggling, the tube feet within the arms act as a sort of tongue and pass the food down to the mouth at the centre. For every arm there is a whisker-like protrusion suspected to be derived from the pinnules found on the arms of marine crinoids. These are extremely sensitive, and act as combined touch-taste receptors, although the primary sense is touch, chemical traces are used to orientate the crinoid so that it 'faces' the direction the potential prey is approaching from.

Behaviour: Their behaviour is limited, being sessile with a diffuse nerve network instead of a true brain makes them rather simple behaviourally. They are still deadly ambush predators though, grabbing and killing anything that comes within reach.

They have separate male and female individuals, however due to the difficulty of finding the opposite sex in the vastness of space (especially if you're sessile and can't move) the males don't become adults until they find a mature female, they remain drifting until the pheromones she releases triggers metamorphosis. Female larvae metamorphose when they encounter any solid object they can cling to, so solitary individuals are always female, and in a cluster the largest will be the female and all the smaller individuals males.

Males release spermatophores (packages of sperm) which the female collects and uses to fertilise her eggs, the newly hatched larvae are brooded in the base of her whiskers, the whiskers themselves are retracted and digested to provide

food for the developing young, so it is rare for a female to eat at all while looking after her young. Once they are ready the larvae are released en masse, they have sheet-like 'wings' which allow them to use light to propel themselves through the blackness in search of a place to settle.

Notes: These creatures are a serious navigational hazard to ships, their stalks are extendable by quite a surprising distance and they are either unable to tell the difference between flesh and blood animals and spaceships or indifferent, and their exoskeletons are strengthened by the materials extracted from the rock, so some individuals are capable of breaking through weak hulls.

Lilian Halstead

The Names of Memory

In a monochrome valley I spent my days. I rested and fed. And, on occasion, sang a little. In a world of grey, music is colour.

The League landed on this planet for the first time twelve years ago. Merchants. Merchants from space, beamed down from a mothership above. Heave armoured Kabbatans, slug-like Illuchi, slow but sturdy Estogs. I knew their names, their faces, grey outlines that burned their way into my consciousness. My buried, lonely consciousness.

That is not to say I did not have friends. Timar, Uhlan, Grace. But I created them, and so they wander only my dreams. Dreams of colour and madness.

The merchants thought this planet was abandoned. They were wrong. This planet burned. Hellfires, wildfires, the once-people consumed. And me – with their memories – buried in a monochrome valley in a colourless world beneath the surface... It is the task of some in this universe to trade, some to fight, some to heal; I was left buried to remember. Was it these merchants I was remembering for? To tell them of ages that they could hardly have dreamed of? I did not know.

One thing alone was certain. This mess of races and faces and lives and loves and hopes were here and so was I. Last time, everything burned, but this time I was here. History might be kinder now, for these people were precious; it would be kinder, indeed – for I realised I wanted to help them write it.

The hard brown plates around me began to soften and judder. Ready. I wormed upwards, turning from statue to reality. I should have said farewell to my head-creations, perhaps – my companions in the dark – but there was no time, no time. I am still sorry not to have seen them again. But I was ready.

And then...

There was a real breeze on my face

My real legs stamping the earth on the surface

My mind and all the precious real memories there to serve

And there was colour and light and hope.

That was when I unfolded my wings and first took flight in a world where colour was colour.

I have to say, though, that even now I still sometimes sing a little.

James Baillie

The Watcher

Can't look away from the seat. It's getting dark, and I've been here for almost an hour, I think. I can't check, because I can't look at my watch. If I look at my watch, I won't be looking at the seat.

The first time I came here, it was a tree stump. Old. Rotting. Not from a fallen tree but cut by something, that was clear, its surface pocked with decay but unnaturally flat nonetheless. Tall weeds fanned around it, though none sprouted from the wood itself. The undergrowth was thick all around because no-one ever came there, I should not have come there, I had lost my way and it was growing dark.

I was tired. The stump, about waist height, was inviting. I sat, felt the weight lift from my feet, closed my eyes briefly. When I opened them again it was fully dark, a darkness that is only ever reached in the woods at night, and the stump felt more solid beneath me. More real.

When I returned the next day – by mistake, I told myself, because the path I had worn only the day before had made me think it was the one to follow – the weeds behind the stump and to its sides had thickened, the ones before it become sparser.

That wasn't possible, I knew. A trick of the mind. And maybe it was only a trick of the mind when a flicker of movement caught my attention for a moment, and I glanced back to find the stump's surface unblemished and even, as if newly cut.

I left in a hurry then, and did not mean to come back. Not the next day, nor any of the days that followed. I told myself that it was curiosity. Scientific curiosity, maybe. I knew I should have been documenting it, else if I ever mentioned it to another it would be laughed off, called the result of overwork, called madness. Maybe I knew I would never mention it to anyone else, and that was why I never documented it.

Tonight, it is a seat. There is no doubt about it. It is low and smooth and alive, flanked by a fence of weeds. Sap glistens in its rings, as if as if it takes life in my presence. From my presence. It wasn't so when I first arrived – more than an hour ago now, it must be, I cannot look away but I can see how the shadows have advanced over it – but it is now. I know that the longer I stand here without watching, the faster it will change. But if I do not look away, how will I see whatever it is meant for when it arrives?

Then I understand. Maybe I have always understood. The one it is meant for has already arrived. I walk towards the seat, and turn my back, and lower myself down.

Danielle Saunders

Important Announcement

Good evening and welcome to Monochrome Valley International Spaceport. All customers are reminded that unattended baggage may be confiscated and vaporised.

Due to a time stabiliser malfunction, Gates 5 and 6 will have been closed yesterday. Compensation will be available to those scheduled on flights retrospectively cancelled as a result.

The 16:45 to Rigel will now be stopping at Betelguese only. Passengers for Rigel are invited to take the replacement shuttle service.

Thank you choosing Monochrome Valley International Spaceport. Customers are reminded that the creation of black holes is only permitted within the clearly designated areas.

Frederic Heath-Renn

Rising Midnight

“NOOOO!” I cry, a distressed sound that tails off as the sobbing starts. My legs give way beneath me and I collapse against the window, tears blurring the view that I really don’t want to see. I keep looking anyway, unable to tear my gaze away from the destruction before me, no matter how much I may wish that I could turn away and pretend it never happened.

Slowly I slide down the glass, lacking the will to fight the station’s artificial gravity any longer. The deck is bathed in the glow of my planet’s lifeblood, a delicate orange light that might have been beautiful under other circumstances. I continue to weep as the reflection of the one responsible looks down at me with an expression that’s equal parts disappointment and disgust. He turns sharply and abandons me to my humanity, unwilling to try to understand my emotions.

“No...” I whisper, although it’s more for his sake than mine. All my emotions are gone; I feel that in that moment my soul took one look at what I’d helped bring about and abandoned me in disgust. I sob mechanically, mindlessly repeating my last action over and over not because of how I feel but merely because I don’t know what else to do. The void where I should be hurts so much I can’t feel it, the emptiness scares me more than the pain, even more than the guilt.

I reach out for my departing soul, resting my palm against the glass that separates me from my dying world. “I didn’t know...” It’s barely even a whisper, and it doesn’t fool anyone, least of all me. The rest of the sentence is swallowed by the vacuum, dying a quiet death as the better part of me leaves in disgust.

Still quivering I watch knowing that this would never have happened if it weren’t for me, I’m as much to blame as they are. *I helped destroy my own world.* As I stare outwards I just can’t wrap my head around it, the scale of the destruction is just so much greater than anything I’ve seen before and the implications of this are beyond my capacity to imagine, especially now.

I wonder what sick part of me ever thought this was worth it; how I could have ever pretended to myself that this wasn’t going to happen. I find no answers, only more and more accusing questions. All the things people said to me to try and sway me from this path, the small things I missed at the

time echo in my head, along with all the doubts and suspicions that I should have listened to.

For a moment I see Caleb’s face through my tears, and with a sad smile he says “You always said you wanted to be remembered.” Then I’m alone again, just me and the space where everything I loved used to be.

I finally understand what he meant, but it’s too late now. Too late for anything but regret.

I can’t undo what I’ve done, I can only weep.

Lilian Halstead

And There Shall Come a Third

Paint a Vulgar Picture

Review: Remake, Connie Willis

On some days, *Casablanca* might just be my favourite film; so many old films seem to crawl by, so to encounter something so snappy and quick-witted is a rare delight. *Remake*'s protagonist likes it too, and quotes it liberally as he lives it, drinking hard and cracking wise, and for its first half *Remake* is a neo-noir delight, so hyperkinetic and well-written that I found myself wishing Tarantino would make a film of it.

But it wears thin. *Remake* promises to have some witty criticisms on the nature of art: it portrays a near future in which all originality is dead in Hollywood, and films are endlessly remade using CG recreations of old stars. Into this all comes Alis, who dreams of actually dancing in a live-action movie, and our protagonist Tom, who is influenced by her enthusiasm even as he is skeptical of her chances.

But any observations it has to make are always secondary to its plot, and its plot is incredibly weak; all the tensions and mysteries that have been built up in the first half collapse into technobabble in the second, with an implausibly overcomplicated method of film projection and some vaguely hand-waved could-be-couldn't-be time travel leaving the reader with an overwhelming sensation of "will this do?" - the characters mill and meander and the story more-or-less grinds to a halt, pretending that ignoring things counts as resolution, and it becomes clear that the sharpness of the first half has drained away.

An on-form Connie Willis is clearly a writer it's hard to beat, but for much of *Remake* she clearly isn't on-form, and it's a considerable disappointment. I note it was nominated for a Hugo; so it goes.

Frederic Heath-Renn

It was a dark and stormy night – or at least it looked that way, outside the leaded glass windows. Any light from the moon was dim, its face partially obscured by the smudge of history's first lunar settlement. The scudding storm clouds did not further obstruct the moonlight – they seemed strangely localised to the castle and its grounds.

Inside, candles flickered, dripping wax down the block-colour faces of precarious Rubik's cube stacks. Their light played off the towers of Dominion boxes which loomed towards the shadowy rafters and appeared not even slightly incongruous, the unnecessarily gothic mahogany bookshelves, and the unnecessarily gothic beard of the figure in the chair. No matter how the light dipped or the rain rattled, his attention was held by the screen in front of him.

Onscreen, a teenager in a t-shirt bearing the silhouette of the fifteenth Doctor slammed a triumphant hand on the buzzer before them.

"Atavism!"
"Is correct!"

A round of applause issued from the Glorious Surround Sound speakers and echoed its way up into the rafters, where a small colony of unspecified, fluffy denizens made their displeasure known. From his chair, the watcher made no sound, but smiled a little.

On the screen, the successful student sat back in their chair, taking a moment to rearrange their glaringly orange scarf – a scarf which, along with its owner, had been acquiring a disconcerting level of internet fame in recent weeks. Immediately above the screen in the castle library, almost hidden behind a row of books, a far older length of material was pinned. It was dusty, a little frayed, and in places marked with some substance that could have been anything from wine to dragon blood, but it was without question a twin to the scarf onscreen.

"... And at the gong..."

The audience cheered. The inhabitants of the rafters squeaked unhappily. The figure in the chair allowed his smile to broaden slightly. A champion had been promised, and at last, after long years of waiting, a champion seemed to have arrived.

The soft shuffle of footsteps became audible under the cheering still coming from the audience onscreen. A figure that looked suspiciously like the result of far too many biology practicals sidled into the candlelight, holding a telephone receiver. Its cable receded into the gloom behind them.

“Thorry to dithturb you, thir, but the Mathter would like to thspeak to you.”

He had expected the call, had hoped for it with growing optimism over the past few weeks and more so the last hour. The two of them had waited for so very long, but now the final member of their fellowship had revealed themselves.

Down the line came a voice from England and the past.

“It is time.”

Danielle Saunders and Lizzie Colwill

The scholar is safe. We got out.

- But only just. She was close.

Too close.

Unpredictability
is no longer enough.

You must accelerate.
- things we can use against her.

I know. But the scholar knows things - things we can use against her.
So long as she does not suspect!

Why?

