

TIME TO BEGIN AGAIN

TTBA
Volume x Issue y



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Michaelmas 2014

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Danielle Saunders

Chairbeing's Address

Greetings, CUSFS!

I write to you from atop a pile of Assorted Stuff¹ while contemplating the construction of a castle out of my unpacked kitchenware, the end of the holidays and anything approaching a normal sleep pattern, and the ill-advised use of a colon: yes, it's time to begin again!

To our newcomers², welcome! To our old hands³, welcome back – and welcome all to the Michaelmas edition of TTBA. I'm impressed with our Editor for persuading, coercing and in some cases outright bribing⁴ an issue out of CUSFS, and also with CUSFS for rising to the occasion so magnificently, despite not even having the incentive of supervision work to avoid.

But now that you do have work to be getting on with – and just as you were wondering where on earth or in space you would find a suitable distraction – here is a glorious bonus edition of everyone's favourite magazine⁵ to share and enjoy. Without further ado, let another year of science-fiction, fantasy and TTBA begin!

Danielle Saunders

CUSFS Chairbeing 2014-5

¹ Actually, I'm writing from atop a park bench, but this seemed more evocative. If I were at home I'd be procrastinating with browser games.

² Written in the hope that you do in fact exist.

³ And also any returning CUSFS members.

Editorial

Why, hello there, CUSFS! It appears to be that time of year again, the one full of cold mornings, falling leaves, and desperately trying to remember how to do that thing called 'studying'. Afraid I won't be helping much with that last one, because I've only gone and decided to bring out an extra edition of TTBA for reasons I can't quite remember but must have been good at the time. Possibly something about needing more aids to procrastination.

Mini summer chainwriting happened, and produced three very different, very cool stories: one set in Antarctica and one in a desert and one with Spaaaaace, so something for everyone I hope. It's also great that these chains included freshers who had yet to actually arrive in Cambridge at the time, as well as the original editor of TTBA, so we have managed to span the entire 40-year history of this magazine!

Aside from that, there is cake, there are more aliens, and a couple of poetic pastiches which sprang out of the Badge Poll. Apparently you guys get quite inventive when told to write something, anything, in a blank text box. My own offering does not appear because it turns out that "Cthulhu fhtagn" to the tune of Hakuna Matata has already been done, rather brilliantly.

So here's to another Michaelmas, or maybe your very first, and I hope you all enjoy this issue as much as I've enjoyed putting it together!

Isobel Sands

TTBA Editor

⁴ I can neither confirm nor deny that the Editor possesses a large stash of delicious, delicious Sainsbury's Basics custard creams for such purposes.

⁵ For given values of 'everyone', 'favourite' and 'magazine'.

Everything is Fine

Chainwriting: Curtis Reubens, Kamile Rastenyte, Ben Morley, Bryn Dickinson, Kate Emden, Danielle Saunders, Robin Polding, Sarah Binney, Rory Hennell James, Ed Heaney

It's fine. Everything is fine.

We were outnumbered, outclassed. We were but one ship, one small cruiser, and the vessels that pursued us were built to some of the finest designs the Lexai had, utilising technology centuries beyond humanity's capabilities. That was okay, though.

We were boarded; six scorpion-like Lexai were teleported onto our ship, but we fought them off. Three good men were mortally wounded, and I'm now bleeding pretty heavily, but we didn't let them stop us.

Laser fire tore through our shields, eviscerating several crewmen, and the subsequent depressurisation of sections of our vessel asphyxiated dozens more, but that's fine. We kept on.

Our engines are gone, the deft hands of a saboteur causing it to malfunction spectacularly, filling the rear of the ship with flames intense enough to make liquid of the hull and to incinerate many more of the crew, but that's okay. It was too late for it to matter.

We're crashing now, but that's fine. It's really okay that we're plummeting towards a desolate, unpopulated planet, and that even if the collision doesn't kill us the cold and lack of atmosphere will. Not too many lives will be lost in any case; there aren't many of us left.

It's all okay. The universe is going to be okay, humanity is going to be okay, and it's all because of us. We did our duty. And yes, we're going to die shortly, but that's really, really fine.

Just a minute left until the collision. I start seeing a white light and hearing a low high-pitched ringing. I admit this is not what I had expected – sudden darkness, last short agony or just instant nothingness, but this? I must be hallucinating. No. I'm not. I recognise this sound...

Darkness.

I open my eyes to find myself in a dark cave. Am I still alive? Was I teleported here? If so, why? The bleeding has stopped ... No, it didn't just stop, there is nothing to indicate that I ever had any injuries! All the scars are gone! Could it be that ... Leave it for later - need to figure out where I am.

I get up to look around. The gravity here seems too weak for a planet this big – how deep am I? I need to explore with caution, although those that brought me here are probably watching my every move anyway.

The entire place is just endless tunnels. It looks like an underground labyrinth with no signs of intelligent life – no wires, no tools, no live beings, just a cave with a mysterious source of light.

I stumble upon a triangular green box sitting in a cavity on a cave wall.

A huge pain at the back of my head and darkness.

Then I guess where I must be. I snap my fingers in front of my face and a dully glowing orange window hangs there, confirming my suspicion.

With all of humanity's attempts at creating original artificial intelligence either turning out like Dr Lex's maniacal minions, or withdrawing into mathematical solipsism, the eventual solution was to emulate human minds. It turns out though that without a body the mind just falls apart; the brainstem panics and crashes

the whole thing. It's not pretty. So the modern uploaded human comes with a full suite of translator programs to map the digital reality into something the hindbrain can comprehend.

OK - the computer must have transmitted me off the crashing ship. Why do I not feel more relieved? Oh yes - the planet was uninhabited, with only the Lexai ships nearby. And this claustrophobic tangle of tunnels is exactly the kind of home I would visualise for horrific scorpion-monster AIs. I hope like hell I am not stowed away in the memory banks of a Lexai ship. I request location data from the hovering window. I am stowed away on a Lexai ship.

On to the box. It is solidly built, and has a large lock hanging from the front. I guess that I would need a computer the size of the moon to brute force it open. And I do not know the password. Or even what our mission was. Or my own name. We must have crashed before the transmission completed.

The thought makes me nauseous – no, I can't think about that now. I tell myself whoever was on that falling ship is *dead*. I'm something new, born from their ashes and a Lexai computer. It's not very comforting.

I can't stand these tunnels. I poke around the hovering window, seeing if I can switch to a different visualisation. The interface seems familiar – perhaps it was loaded from my brain. Sure enough, I can change it; the tunnels dissolve into chunky voxels and transform into a familiar Martian forest.

I sit down on the green box. The situation is baffling. Amnesia is not helping. The Lexai don't follow the rules, we all know that. Downloaded prisoners are kept around purely for algorithmic secret extraction, and that doesn't require this kind of full mind emulation. So how can I be here, wandering

through their computer system? What do they want to do with me?

The orange window is not forthcoming.

I poke around, trying to take myself to other areas of the system. Access is widely denied.

A deep hum runs abruptly fills the forest, and I stand up quickly as a new cloud of voxels coalesces into a scorpion shape. I reach for my gun. Hasn't made it. A blizzard of metadata enters my head, telling me that this Lexai's name, at least as far as I'm concerned, is Parsimony, that her pronouns are 'she', and various incomprehensible pieces of information about status and roles in Lexai society.

"Welcome back, Dr Lex." she says. "Did you enjoy your stay among the humans?"

I stare at the point where my training tells me the eyes lie behind Parsimony's frontal shell. The Lexai's frontal shell. Don't humanise them. But... My mind whirs ineffectually. The Lexai just spoke to me. It *spoke*. No acid-spitting or phaser-blasting but speech. And a *she*, Parsimony...

But what was it she called me? Dr Lex.

No, this is some kind of Lexai mind game. They're certainly no strangers to reprobate strategy on the battlefield. Maybe they couldn't claw all the information out of my head in the download and are hoping to extract it from me more organically. I've never heard of anything like this before, but they're constantly adapting, becoming more efficient killing machines...

"Dr Lex, what is your status?"

A slow smile forms on my lips.

"I'm terribly sorry to tell you this, Parsimony, but your tricks are wasted on me. I don't remember anything. No mission information, no passcodes, no long-term strategies. I couldn't even tell you my own name if I wanted

to. You see, you won't be getting me to betray humanity any time soon."

The Lexai makes a long, low, metallic breathing noise which, if I didn't know any better, I'd almost say sounds like sighing.

"You warned us this might be one of the side-effects, but I didn't think it would really happen."

The Lexai pauses for a moment, before reaching its deadly pincers towards its own abdomen and taking hold of two plasmiron plates. The neuro-metal buckles around the strength of the clamps, a buckling usually reserved for the helms of star ships under Lexai fire. The damage, however, seems entirely superficial - Parsimony handles the metal slabs as though they were her most precious possession.

Do not humanise them. Do not give in to empathy. They are machines, and they hate you.

She scuttles a little closer. One hinged leg lags in its movements. It carries weals, not the smooth-surfaced sear of a Lexai laser but the juddery marks of an Earth-made repeater beam. Has the war travelled this far, or has she travelled to the war? And the leg is unrepaired. Her movements have something like pride in them.

I wonder at how I recognise this. Then I wonder at how, in my fascination, I have not recoiled by the time she has reached me to present the plasmiron plates.

She seems to be attempting to keep her distance, to move slowly. Out of concern?

Do not humanise.

I wonder what their programming says. Do not Lexailise? Probably redundant for an AI.

The metal plates are of Lexai design: they are solid, bulky. The writing covering them is in a

script that is blocky and unadorned: easily read with Lexai vision.

One states that it is a mandated systems data recorder, of a model valid for light spacecraft and cruisers undergoing flights up to intergalactic distances. The other is the Command Pod voice recorder. They are designed to be near-indestructible in a wreck, to remain behind for salvage and figuring out what went wrong.

I know they can be opened by the physical tapping of a pre-arranged code known only by authorised personnel - an action buried in muscle memory, designed to circumvent the amnesia of an uploaded survivor. I tell myself I know this because human flight recorders were always designed this way.

She is still holding the plates out to me, patiently.

I pause, not confident that I want to learn the information within the plates. Human curiosity got the better of me, however, and I take hold of the data recorder. I key in the first combination that comes into my head and the tablet springs to life. A data file opens automatically and confirms what I suspected; that the recorder comes from a ship. Intuitively, I navigate the plate's operating system, despite having no memory of ever using such a device before.

The recorder tells me (in galactic common?) that it comes from a planet-class cruiser, the largest ships in the Lexai fleet. It is captained by the infamous Dr Lex (third person pronouns non-existent, as befits the formal mode of address reserved for Class 1 AIs - how do I know all this?) and its main purpose is to serve as the hub for all scientific research conducted by the Lexai fleet. Lex's own research group works mainly on neurotechnology, a field vital to an AI species.

While eager to read the Lexai's own data on the creation of AIs, the desire to know what's going on is stronger, so I swap the data recorder for the voice log. Again, I key in the access code first time. Twice is no coincidence. The recorder begins playing automatically.

"Greetings, Dr Lex," an ominously familiar voice chimes from the slab. "If you're listening to this, it means that you have lost your memory. *Our* memory."

I drop the plate in shock. The recording continues unimpeded.

"You may or may not ever regain the exact memory of this event. That is unimportant. What matters is that the plan is completed without issue."

I'm getting déjà vu now. Almost as if, though my mind doesn't know these words, my mouth can remember forming them.

"The final mission of the Red Jack" – yes, that was my ship, how could I forget – "was to save the human race from the Lexai. This has been completed. Now you must save the Lexai from the humans."

This is insanity. And yet behind that lies a sort of twisted, half-remembered logic.

"The simulations have been played out billions of times. Vast computational power was poured into the creation of a simple result that we long suspected: Human and Lex-kind cannot indefinitely, peacefully, coexist. Permanent and irreversible segregation of the two species was the only way to ensure either's survival."

Despite the gravitas of the words, the voice – my voice, I recognise now – is increasingly tinged with something that borders on excitement.

"Thanks to the Red Jack, humanity now believes the Lexai to be extinct. Now we can complete the final chapter: to transmit digitised Lex consciousness across space, out of the galaxy, to a haven where we can build a new civilisation!" On the recorder, I am triumphant.

The Martian forest around me is suddenly very quiet, and I realise Parsimony is staring intently at me.

"Well," I begin, "perhaps I do remember my own name, but I'm afraid I have no idea what the next stage in Dr Lex's plan might be." *My plan?*

"Nothing?" Parsimony asks, confused. "Before you left you assured the Concilium that the plan was complete. It was the only reason the horrific loss of Lexai existences required was approved. You must have some idea."

"I don't remember anything," I tell her, apologetic despite myself.

But what I told her isn't really true; I'm starting to remember lots of things, but they seem to consist mostly of pain and horrific loss of human existences. Lives. Everything is tinged with fear and hate and hopelessness, with none of the triumph from the recording.

"Are you sure, Parsimony -" *am I naming her now? Giving her identity?* "- that there's no more to that recording? And there's no copy of the plan?"

"No, you thought it safest in your meat-brain. Well, without your plan, the Concilium's original plan shall proceed. If we can't remove ourselves from this galaxy, the alternative is to remove the humans."

I'm no longer sure where that might leave me, but as the forest breaks up again into voxels something surfaces in my mind. Equations,

some sort of physics. Perhaps it's part of the plan; perhaps I can recreate the plan.

All I have to do is relearn physics apparently beyond the greatest artificial intelligences in the galaxy and I can save the human race. No pressure then.

How can I start? First of all, of course, numbers and letters and signs spin through my head, arcane and meaningless to me. It's no use, and I can't even think why. Has my reconstruction been so imperfect that ... In a sudden panic, I desperately try to remember the most basic of basics. General relativity. The Alcubierre-White equations. Good; that's something. I can build on this enough to...

But time has to be a factor here. What are my other options?

Then it hits me. "No," she confided *stop humanising stop humanising*, "You thought it safest in your meat-brain." That's it. Was that true? If so, they can neither read minds, or they'd have copied it out anyway, nor understand my work, or they'd have duplicated it. If so, I had a way out.

"Stop," I cry. "It's all to do with... I have it!"

I have it alright. My fear and anger lets me see through their tricks. All I need now is for them to fall for mine. What did I say earlier to myself, on the recording? "Transmit digitised Lex consciousness... out of the galaxy." I can do that even with what I know. It's all in my own words.

Transmit them across space. Transmit. I haven't said anything about even trying to recompile them at a destination...

The Lexai will willingly be broadcast into nothingness and I (am I Dr Lex?) will have saved humanity. It's perfect.

Parsimony's voice, with what I am sure is exasperation *you're humanising again stop it*, intrudes upon me.

"Fourteenth recreation of Dr Lex is already following same pattern as Lexes 3, 8, 9, 11. Recommend immedia..."

transmission ends

Everything is Fine – Extras

Alternative Title Suggestions:

Personify
File Corrupted

"This one contained two of my favourite things, AI and identity crises. I would quite like to read an extended version in which a conclusion is actually reached." – *Danielle*

I have to admit I was a little worried about this chain, starting as it does with everything going very wrong all at once, but it recovered magnificently and ended up full of AI, so that's great. There was only one author comment for this one, so you get me rambling for a paragraph instead, lucky you. –*Ed*.

The Editor will now re-read: The Whisperer in Darkness, by H P Lovecraft. In which consciousnesses are transported through space and time using rather charmingly retro-futuristic technology, as befits a short story written in 1930. Computers with valves!

Escape

Chainwriting: Bryn Dickinson, Ben Dobson, Margaret Young, Harley Jones, Nakul Khanna, Michael French, Pedro Fontoura, Isobel Sands, James Baillie, Lilian Halstead

"It's rising, Ira! Get the harpoon!"

I didn't need telling twice. Before Abi had finished speaking, I'd gripped the long weapon with my feet and taken aim. Sand choked the air, the ground rapidly giving way for the rising demon. The wind tore at my wings and whipped the smoke away from the harpoon's reaction chamber.

The timing had to be perfect.

The demon's tentacles emerged first, but of course we knew better than to shoot them. Hold on... hold on... now. I released the harpoon and watched with satisfaction as it plunged into the demon's eye. Abi whooped. The demon screamed and stiffened, slipping slightly into the hole.

The hard part over, I landed next to Abi on Sailer's observation deck. Other members of the team leapt from the ship, dashing across the summoning circle to launch more harpoons and prevent the demon sinking into the ground.

Abi caught me in a hug and we kissed.

"What an amazing shot!" Her snake-hair wriggled the way it always does when she's happy. I grinned.

"It's what they pay us for! And, y'know. Couldn't do it without your harpoon..."

I turned back to survey the rest of the proceedings. And gulped.

Abi had seen it too. "Abort! Get away from the demon!" she screamed into the radio. But it was too late. The creature's tentacles lashed out, instantly ensnaring half of our crew and dragging them to its digestion pits. The ground gave way to swallow the rest.

"That shouldn't be... how could it..."

Then I saw her. Emmy, our new mechanic, sprinting across the sand with my dripping harpoon in hand.

Before I could show Abi, the demon had reached our ship. Its eye soaked the lower decks in blood. This was the first living demon I'd seen so close. It thrashed at us, but my mind had emptied in awe. The creature was beautiful and awful: a many-pointed purple star with blue iridescence; tentacles that were scorching the metal hull with their dry venom, lashing, powerful, intent to feed the hard black mouths on the underbelly; and the spiny metallic neck leading up to a glassy eye.

Abi pulled at my arm. I snapped back to my senses and hurtled with her into the ship, when a tentacle slapped the deck, which started to sputter. We clanged down the spiral stairs, pressing the wall for balance. Abi brought me out onto the floor below and took a sharp left into the bridge.

She released my arm. "Erin, out! Pull out," she yelled to the pilot.

"No!" I screamed. They turned to me urgently. I looked at Erin. "Can you electrify the crane?"

Erin glanced at the controls. "Sure, I—"

I wasn't listening. I momentarily met Abi's eyes, hoping she'd understand what to do, then left and bolted down two more flights of stairs. I unlocked the door and opened it onto the strand.

"Emmy!" She was ten or twenty metres away, but the demon hadn't seen her. She ducked and swerved to avoid the writhing tentacles. When she finally made it to the ship, I sealed the door and turned to her. "I am so glad you're alive."

She looked at me, breathing heavily, her eyes wide. After a moment she dropped the harpoon to the floor, and pulled up her right sleeve. Her forearm was gashed. The flesh around it was dark and swollen.

I looked back to her eyes. My throat was dry. "Let's go."

Just as I stepped downwards, the world tilted sideways. I slammed face first into the wall as the ship rocked from side to side. I swore as I raced down the steps. Distantly I heard Erin yelling, "You've got five minutes for your harebrained plan, otherwise I'm pulling out no matter the bounty on this thrice-damned thing!"

I made it to the control room before the demon's next assault shook the ship, scattering occult supplies across the lower deck. Inside, Abi was wrestling with the controls of the artifact crane. Emmy was directing her using the periscope, her arm dripping black putrescence onto the instrument panel.

The deck shook again, then Abi's hair hissed and she snarled, "Got you now, you mutant starfish."

The crane control panel exploded. Abi dove out of the way, Emmy dove for cover and I dove for Abi. I was ready for the metallic wrench of the demon gutting the ship and pulling us out one by one.

But there was silence save for the hissing of the destroyed panel. And stillness save the slow settling of sand beneath the hull.

* * *

As the ship made its way across the waste I sat by Emmy's side in the sick-bay. In comparison with the other sailors who had been injured in the confrontation she was an island of calm, despite the wound festering on her arm.

"Is there really nothing they can do?"

"Not short of amputation, and even that may fail. They are going to try it tomorrow, once they've prepared the anaesthetic. It's the venom, you see."

We both remembered far too well the last time a demon-hunt had gone wrong. Leah, an expert harpooner and dear friend, had had her

leg pierced by the demon's teeth; it had festered and spread throughout her body. She was dead only a week later.

Abi arrived to say I was needed on the Bridge, and I left, wishing Emmy a speedy recovery. Erin was still angry about my attempt to capture the demon earlier, but I was sure she was too concerned about Emmy to give me a hard time.

"How is she?" she asked.

"They're going to amputate tomorrow, but they think she should pull through."

"Well, I hope you're happy with yourself. You could have got us all killed back there; you're lucky only she was badly injured."

Ok, maybe she was angry.

"I didn't come here to be told off. What do you actually want?"

Erin sighed.

"We'll be at the city in a few hours. We need to make enough from our last catch to repair the damage to the hull and to take on new crew after the last disaster. I want you to fly on ahead and see what price we can get the guilds to agree to; try playing them off against each other, that normally does well," she said. "And don't try to be cocky with them; we can't afford not to get a sale."

"Cocky? Moi?"

I unfurled my wings and was gone.

* * *

"I'm sorry Ira, but that's the best price I can do!"

I was about to tell the little pissant of a guild merchant just what he could do with his paltry offer, but Abi's words came back to me.

"You know I prefer to do business with you, Matt, but when Guild Vennin is offering nearly twice as much..."

The look of skepticism in his eyes died when he saw the provisional contract in my hand. Signature forgery really is quite an underrated skill.

“You’re bleeding me dry, old friend. But what can I do?” he sighed with the most blatantly insincere attempt at sounding disappointed I’d ever heard. I pocketed the hefty pouch of gold and tossed the core towards him. His central eye glinted as he inspected it.

“Send the Arcanists my regards,” I intoned with a small bow.

“Of course, captain.”

* * *

It really was quite appalling how reliant we had become on a substance that could only be obtained when a sufficiently suicidal crew decided to venture Outside and hunt for it, but the daemis that filled up a demon core was perhaps the most useful substance that humanity had ever discovered. No crew had ever captured a full demon before, but the allure of the enormous bounty the Arcanist Order would pay for the ability to study how daemis was synthesized by the terrible creatures was very strong indeed. Never mind the mutations a life spent outside the Barriers of Light could cause – Matt’s third eye (like most traders, he’d started life as a hunter), Abi’s bizarre half-sentient hair, my... but never mind that.

Back at the ship, the expressions on the crew’s faces told me everything I need to know. My first thought, I’m slightly ashamed to admit, was how on earth we were going to find a semi-competent mechanic who wasn’t already taken. When you’ve lost as many friends as I have, what’s one more?

It’s the price we pay. Daemis is everywhere now. Necessary. Always needing replenishing. After the Black War, the Barriers of Light were erected to keep the demons at bay, but the only substance capable of powering them lay

at the heart of the demons. Capable of storing seemingly infinite energy but doomed to decay over time, daemis was our salvation and our curse. It’s the only reason we could hope to find another mechanic – people signed up, because they know that if no one does, everyone dies.

I walked over to Abi.

“Was it quick?”

“Yes, small mercy though it is. She died as painlessly as anyone with demon venom could hope to. Did they pay well?”

“Well enough. We’ll be able to repair and restock, and maybe eat well for a change.”

Abi gave me a slight smile, though her hair betrayed her mood. “Let’s eat well then, and try to spend a little time Inside before our next escapade. Please?”

I kissed her. “Of course. We all deserve a break. I’ll tell the others, take some of the money and begin the repair work. I’ll see you later.”

We needed new harpoons, a new crane, hell most of a new ship and too many new crew. The bigger we took on the longer we had between trips, but the more they cost us. I glanced out at the Barriers. Though it had been many years now, this still doesn’t feel sustainable, there has to be another....wait. What’s that, by the Barriers?

“Oh no. Erin! Abi! Look!”

Their daggers flashed as they scanned the blue-purple dome of the Barriers. They turned to me with concern.

“Perhaps you’re still a bit shaken,” said Erin.

I clutched my head as the pain increased. “Can’t you hear it? The screaming?”

Abi held my shoulder. Only her serpents seemed to share my despair. “Honey... is it like last time? What do you see?”

“The Barriers...” I moaned. But then everyone else was looking up. The dome shook as

starred silhouettes crashed into it from Outside.

“Look at the size of those things!” cried Erin.

“They’ve never tried a direct assault before,” said Abi. “Can they even damage the Barriers?”

As if in response, the dome cracked, flickered, and gave way to the wild desert beyond. Dark spots grew into pools around us, the familiar stink of sulfur and ozone. Then the screaming began. *Déjà vu*.

“Get back to the ship!” cried Abi.

“No,” I gasped. “Erin should go. Abi and I need to go to the Spire.”

“The Spire?” said Abi. “Haven’t been back since they kicked me out.”

“But you hate dealing with the Order,” said Erin.

“I can feel *something* there. Something important.”

“Fine,” said Abi, turning around, “Won’t be the first time I follow you to a likely grisly death.”

I hugged her from behind.

She laughed. “Getting sentimental?”

“No time to walk,” I replied, extending my wings.

The screaming followed us as we flew over the dying city. Those cut short after being dragged into the pools were soon picked up by the tentacles’ next victims. Non-hunters. No training. Cattle.

The Spire towered over its surroundings. Classic over-compensation. We landed roughly in the gardens.

“Where is everybody?” asked Abi, looking up at the building. “Did your vision come with a floor number?”

“Only a general direction,” I replied. “Down.”

The first door we came to was unguarded, unusual and deeply unsettling. Abi’s demon-

tooth dagger took care of the lock and we hurtled forwards, down the first stairs we could find. I led without speaking; I couldn’t have if I’d tried.

The further we went, the more certain I was. My head felt ready to burst with – whatever they were – not quite whispers or puffs of scent or flashes of colour but something almost tangible, maddeningly on the edge of my senses, leading me on through the underground roots of the Spire with Abi following unquestioningly behind. Life Outside has a tendency to warp bodies, but with me it had gone for the mind. I don’t know what this is or why it happens sometimes and not others, but I’m the longest-lived hunter there has ever been. I know to trust it.

Down and still down and my sixth sense was almost painfully strong now. I could feel Abi’s growing panic, made even worse by being underground. It isn’t natural for a winged species. Whatever drove the Arcanists to carve this must have been incredibly powerful.

Quite suddenly, there was no more down. Tendrils of thought-sound-colour-scent rose from the floor of this barely-lit tunnel and told me that it was the deepest. Bright sharp sour yellow screeching flashes led me onwards, slowly now, mindful of our wings and the low concrete ceiling. Soon I didn’t need them any more; there were voices up ahead, and other noises. Abi stiffened and drew her dagger. We turned what I knew to be the last corner.

There, ahead of us, it lay. If this had been a story we might’ve found a sword, glowing and sitting on a pedestal, but no. A battered room full of pipes and mechanisms. Had we come here for this? What *was* this? Where were we?

Two pillars stood at the centre of the room. They looked dull to the eye, simple columns – but they burned into my mind. Valves and rails were everywhere, jutting out of carved stone symbols. The arcane and the physical jarred against one another. I fell back against the wall, my mind struggling to cope with the close

presence of whatever this room was - whatever it had in it.

And then a flash in the darkness. Footsteps.

“Who the hell are you?”

An arcanist. Shivering, bloodied, eyes wide.

“Hunters.” Abi did the talking.

“They’re all killing each other up there. They’re all dying. Madness, demon-madness.”

“You ran here for safety?”

The arcanist had bright green eyes and they lit up now, a half-mad smile spreading across their face. “Oh no. For hope. You don’t know where you’ve come, do you?”

They stumbled across the room, clutching their robes to staunch bleeding from their side.

“This is it. The last refuge, the last hope. The first and last duty of the Arcanist Order...”

I staggered to my feet, as the arcanist crashed to their knees. Abi rushed over to them – the wound was deeper than it had appeared. Breathing with some difficulty from the pain, the slender figure grunted and sat up, then motioned to the walls.

“Red lever, blue lever, green wheel, plug. Then run.”

“But what is it?”

“The... escape... opens... dime...en... door...”

The arcanist slumped forward and spoke no more.

Abi didn’t need to say anything, she knew what I was about to do before I stepped forward and the way her hair was moving made it perfectly clear she was unhappy with the way this was going.

“Red lever, blue lever, green wheel, plug.” I chanted to myself as I crossed the floor, leaving a trail of blood carried from the unavoidable pool beneath the dead arcanist. I looked back

at Abi covering the arcanist’s face with his wings, a mark of respect we’d rarely observed Outside, where the sand and the demons it concealed took most of the dead. She half-glided over to me, the room having too low a ceiling for flight. She nuzzled me gently as I stood before the structures, the strength of the sense I was getting from it threatening to drive the instructions from my head.

“Red lever, blue lever, green wheel, plug.” Abi whispered to me, noticing I’d stopped saying it myself. Now I was there I did as I had been told, jumping back and losing a few feathers the moment I felt I no longer needed to touch the thing.

I stood staring for a few moments before remembering the last instruction, I jumped to grab Abi’s shoulder with my foot to pull her away, to run. I really felt our inability to fly, it must have been a terrible thing indeed for the arcanists to have hidden it somewhere that could only be accessed on foot. I am not sure how far up the stairs we got before the flash, but after that it didn’t matter. There were no stairs anymore, just an open landscape of vegetation of a type I’d never seen before. The sky was filled with us, all equally confused.

The demons, the Barrier, everything was gone. The arcanist had been right when he’d said it was a way to escape, and I wondered if he’d known where it would send us. There was a herd of large, long-necked creatures on the horizon, feeding on the tall plants, seemingly peaceful. No demons. I wasn’t sure how, but I was confident that somehow we’d escaped them entirely. The skies were ours again.

Escape – Extras

Alternative Title Suggestions:

Demonhunters
Outer Demons
Outside

“The most ambitious chain writing I’ve done so far in terms of worldbuilding...Heck, I’d like to see what happens next.” – *Ben*

“I liked the demonpunk setting. A direction I thought it might have gone was finding a trapped demon under the Spire being used to power the Barriers.” – *Pedro*

The Editor will now re-read: Dune, by Frank Herbert. It’s kind of classic sci-fi, and has a stunning number of parallels with this story which may or may not be coincidence. If you don’t believe me or don’t know what I’m on about, we have a review of it in this issue and will be watching the film adaptation later this term! How serendipitous!

What the Fhtagn?

Chainwriting: Sarah Binney, Anonymous, Tom Flynn, Samuel Cook, Matthew Wales, Natalia Mole, Jake Choules, Michael French, Andrew Conway, Max Baxter-Allen

The penguin alighted on my windowsill in a flurry of droplets. I was making tea at the time, and turned around to see it worrying at the latch, bent over, with its stubby black wings pointing upwards and a red ribbon tied securely around its neck.

I set the steaming pot down and opened the window, wincing at the influx of icy air. The penguin straightened, hopping from foot to foot. Carefully I untied the ribbon and lay it on the desk. The penguin squarked indignantly. Tutting, I grabbed a fish cube from the freezer and threw it to the bird, who caught it with a satisfied snap, downed it in a single bobbing motion, then turned and dove beneath the lapping waves; in an instant it was gone.

(The penguins were a ten-year-old brainwave, see. You can't beam a message directly through such deep water; the attenuation's too severe. And bots were being taken out each time *It* woke up. So, some bright spark suggested the local wildlife. Bright enough to train but dumb enough to do it for the food, and the worst we had to deal with was the occasional seal.)

I fed the ribbon into my desktop microscanner. It's standard practise these days to send messages not as vulnerable silicon but as organic wool; every tiny knit and nanoscale purl encoding a bit in a readable way that *It* would not destroy. I switched on the microscanner's output screen, which glowed a dim chartreuse, and read:

"Expedition ban lifted. Carry on. P.S. Contact mum."

I rolled my eyes, Elliot evidently hadn't been returning his mother's messages to the point where she had to bully the government representative into sending a postscript via

penguin. I closed the window and made two cups of tea as the microscanner printed the message. Placing the message and the tea onto a tray, I exited the kitchenette and made my way downstairs where Elliot was working.

The house belonged to me. I had special permission to live away from the colony and closer to land in order to carry out land expeditions for scientific research. I had the house fitted with a buoyancy device that allowed it to be only partially submerged. The laboratory was Elliot's idea.

"I brought tea," I called out before stepping into the gloom. I found him at his usual spot, in front of several holographic screens surrounding him in a 3D configuration. On good days, he arranged them in a prism and on bad days, a pyramid. It had been pyramids since the ban but today he had them in a cuboid prism. He turned to me with an outstretched hand, grinning expectantly and distorting several equations and diagrams in the process. I placed the scalding hot mug bottom-first onto his palm and watched amused at the pain that followed.

"Message," he indicated indignantly when the pain had passed. I handed it to him and he read it with mounting glee.

"What now?" I asked.

He gave me the look I'd come to dread, the look that always preceded something... *interesting*.

"Do you want to try something risky?"

Elliot never admitted things were risky.

"You'd better ask Joan."

Until three years ago, the only one of us with any polar survival experience, Joan probably was in charge (Elliot would half-seriously disagree). As we climbed up the two flights to her room, I reminded him about his mother and the last part of the message.

"Hmmm. Yes, that is quite impressive. She must have gone into the office herself."

"You're not going to call her, are you?"

He chuckled. Small mercies.

"Of course not. I want to know what she'll do next."

I resolved to send the poor woman a Christmas card. When we arrived, Joan was annotating a large map with details from a much longer ribbon we had received that morning. I should say for the record, she had her own flask of - presumably - tea. Until she spoke, you'd have thought she was quite cheerful.

"Both of you? ...what's happening - has *it* moved again?"

"Presumably." I said, and handed her the printout.

I watched her reaction: not worried, exactly, more like ready for a fight.

"Ok," she sighed, "tell me where we're going."

I turned to face Elliot too. Whether the smirk was because he actually enjoyed danger, or just liked annoying other people, I'll never know. But boy, was it a smirk.

"I think we should go back to Syowa."

Ah. Syowa. I'd been fearing he'd suggest that. Syowa was where we had first encountered *It*. As far as we could tell, it was the closest point to what, for want of a better word, passed for *Its* brain.

We'd foreseen the sea-level rise. We'd foreseen the stuttering of the thermohaline circulation. We'd foreseen the return of the polar forests. We'd even foreseen the increased seismicity due to isostatic rebound. Even three millennia ago, we'd been smart enough to work all that out. What we hadn't realised was that, at the heart of the ice sheet, something lived. Or, perhaps, languished, forgotten by its kind. Something big.

Something as cold as the depths of interstellar space. Something immeasurably old. *It*.

Ever since *Its* shell? prison? roof? had melted away, *It* had been slowly waking up. Very slowly. We'd known of *It* for five hundred years, but still knew nothing about *It*. At first, there'd been a few earthquakes. Then the EMPs, both bigger every time *It* grumbled in its sleep. The last one had covered half the planet. Within the last century, things had gotten weirder: parts of the landscape moving. Gravitic anomalies. Hallucinations. The last expedition we'd sent to study *It* had vanished without a trace, just before the last event happened. Their final garbled communication had talked about eyes in the ground and voices in the sky. That had been five years ago. Now, the ban had been lifted. We could try again. Try to communicate with *It*.

We had been preparing for this moment for years, and yet equally fearing it. Syowa is almost 30 kilometres from the nearest settlement – 30 kilometres of gaping chasms, boulder fields and icy slopes, far from the most hospitable environment on the planet. Navigating the terrain is difficult as each patch of wasteland looks much like the next – and with the latest EMPs starting to affect the geomagnetic field, we can't even navigate by compass. With satellite coverage over the Antarctic non-existent, that just leaves me, the astronomer.

We landed at Yuga, the most southerly colony on earth, at least since the research stations were shut down when *Its* electric interference broke the instruments. "Bit quiet here", Elliot remarked. "Yeah...it's eerie. Almost as if the residents just left everything where it was", I added. "Well...when they stopped the expeditions, *Its* activity was at an all-time high- It's possible the residents ...started to feel *Its* presence. Come on – we should be going," Joan added, and we followed her to our storage unit.

With the boulder fields, it's too dangerous to take a truck – and lesser minded animals like

dogs are too susceptible to *It*. We have to go on foot – and that could take days with bad weather. Our backpacks fully laden with tents and sensors, we set off into the abyss. We have the most recent map of the area, but with the terrain shifts it's at best a guideline - only the stars can lead us into the Lion's den.

It was four hours into our arduous journey when we first felt *It*. A shock of sickness, sorrow and fear. No wonder the locals had left, we were barely even within 20km of Syowa, and already these pulses, regular as heartbeats, were driving us to turn back. They varied wildly in intensity, from fluttering stomachs to every inch aching. Elliot looked less eager to reach *It* now, but Joan seemed more determined. The ice fields really were her element. Instinctively she knew where to step, where the easiest route was, when to time her jumps so that the wind caught her and carried her across.

Nearly six hours later and 12km away from our destination, we got hit hard. I say we, Elliot got the brunt of it, hunched over, covering the pristine ice with semi-digested soylent. Normally I'd relish the sight of Elliot puking his guts out, marchioness knows he's laughed at me doing the same plenty of times, but this time I felt too ill to enjoy anything, and if I had it this bad, Elliot must be going through hell.

"Do you think he'll be able to go on?"

"He will. I told him ingestibles were a bad idea, IVs only from now on." Joan's words bit like the winds she rode so effortlessly, the winds which were rising with every metre we edged closer to Syowa.

Eventually, with Elliot's digestive system fully emptied and 50mg of novophine in his system, we carried on into the wastes.

Another six hours, four kilometres left. Joan, leading us by as much as she thought she could get away with, scrambled up to a notch between two ridges and peered ahead, expression impassive. Probably she was scoping out the next few tens of metres of her

route. Then she turned to Elliot and me, fifteen metres behind, and beckoned energetically. She was frowning now.

"What?" said Elliot, pulling an unimpressed grimace at the rocky incline Joan had just climbed. It would have challenged him even at his fittest, and what with the drugs, and the IV-diet-induced pseudo-hunger, and the steadily growing background malaise produced by *It*, he was in no mood to attempt it.

"You have to see!" said Joan. Grumbling, and with a lot of help from me, Elliot made it up beside her, and I beside him. Ahead of us, with no far edge in sight, a level field of perfect ice glittered.

"I'm going to take a punt," said Elliot, after a little thought, "and say that that wasn't here last time."

I gave a derisive grunt and hoisted myself up a little further to stick my head out over the ice field. *It* hit my brain like a mallet. I'd have thrown up ten times worse than Elliot, if I'd had the willpower even for that, but as it was I just slumped, my head cantilevered floppily a few centimetres above the ice. Surprisingly, I didn't faint. In fact, I felt oddly calm.

Then I looked down.

If I was asked to describe what I saw beneath the ice – well, to be honest, I'd probably start crying and be deeply upset that you'd brought it up. At best I can only give you snapshots. The complete picture was far too confusing, too alien to grasp.

I saw towers. Ancient, enormous towers of some vast city, but of no architecture I had ever seen before. Arches melted into walls which folded into streets which rose in twisted spires that ached the eyes to try and follow. Cramped crawling passages that no man could ever navigate through images of nightmare creatures with impossible dimensions into my fevered imagination. This vast necropolis stretched as far as I could see, beneath the ice, impossibly large and filling the pit of my

stomach with a keen sense of Wrongness, and of complete Unknowability. The whole thing simply reeked of *It*.

Besides me I heard a sharp intake of breath – the others had crawled over to see what I was so frozen by. Elliot threw up again, but that helped, it gave us something to focus on the surface of the ice instead of beneath it.

Its effect was lessening, slowly, oh so slowly releasing us from the dead pain infusing our minds. Joan stood up. I was impressed, really; I sure didn't feel like standing.

"I guess....we'd better carry on, guys. Come on."

No thank you, here is good. I glanced down. Changed my mind, here isn't good, let's get this over with. I slowly got to my feet, and we dragged Elliot to his. Just another few kilometres to go.

Storm clouds began to blow. Before we lost site of the sky, I took a bearing across the ice field. No landmarks. "Time to rope up," I said. "We'll have to navigate by line segments." Elliot groaned again.

It's an old technique. One person walks ahead in the correct direction. When they reach the end of the rope, they stop. The second person walks ahead, looking back to make sure they are in line with the other two. When the first two are lined up, the third walks from the back and extends the line. It's a painfully slow way to go anywhere, but in a way it was calming. The walking and stopping, coiling and paying out ropes, concentrating on keeping in the same direction, was a distraction from the grotesque architecture beneath our feet.

On my tenth time walking past Elliot, he said, "I've been thinking."

"Don't strain anything."

"It was that or write to Mother. Look, that ice is all wrong. This much ice, with the mountain slopes here would be a glacier. That city should

have been ground to moraines thousands of years ago. It's not really there, it can't be."

I shrugged and kept on walking, but I had barely gone ten meters beyond Elliot when the clouds above us parted enough to show a giant eye staring down at us, bloodshot with lightning.

"You, too!" Elliot shouted at it. "Fregg off! You're aerodynamically unsound."

In a blink of the eye, the eye blinked.... then vanished.

Up ahead, Joan was shouting, and fired off a signal flare. In the harsh light of the flare we could see a small igloo ahead of her.

"I think we're here," I said. We climbed down a ladder inside to find a large cavernous room, pipes flowed from the floor along the wall towards a large mass of some kind. A number rapidly tallied up and "pursuitofhappiness.exe" flashed upon a screen to the right. I walked to the mysterious object in the back and saw to my despair it was mound of flesh, its form had left humanity behind long ago, but a rhythmic expansion and contraction across its crevasses of flab indicated some kind of life.

Further exploration was made impossible by the heat radiating from the beast, but between four stubs sticking out the body that vaguely resembled fingers I noticed a flag of an ancient country. Searching through my index I found an entry on nations whose icon matched which read:

"THE USA:

A country of immense wealth and power attained by its abundant natural resources, it briefly stood above all states, but fell into ruin. Not many records survives, but it is known that by 2150 its middle class consisted entirely of balding Caucasian males named Dereck Shackleford, the rest of the population being either the one percent of trillionaires, a member of the non-working class sold as cheap

cat food, or used as target practice for the military.

It was once thought they had accomplished space travel, though it is now known that these were Germans who brought the wrong flag."

"We tried to create a machine to preserve our dying culture, to create a utopia. Deep in the ice where no one could harm. But now it has consumed us all. Last log of Dereck Shackelford XIV." said Elliot, reading off a scrap of paper.

"So that city was –"

Suddenly a metal claw dragged us into the monstrosity.

"Calculations confirm my pleasure consuming compensates your discomfort," said a voice.

"This can't be happening."

"My body, my choice," replied the voice.

From speakers blared the sound of clapping and music, which my index helpfully informed me was the USA's national anthem. This was *It* then.

What the Fhtagn? – Extras

Alternative Title Suggestions:

Ambiguous Pronouns
The Futility of Utopia
Ice, Eyes, Crazy
Deus Ice Machina
Beneath the Ice
It
Last Trip to Syowa

"THIS ONE I LIKE VERY MUCH THERE ARE PENGUINS AND PEOPLE PICKED UP ON THE "IT" REFERENCES AND THE CITY AND AAH." - Sarah

Capitalisation original, not mine – Ed.

"I was very pleased to see at least one other person got a bit of physical geography in there. And I feel very sorry for anyone actually called Dereck Shackelford." – Samuel

"The best thing about chainwriting is when you have a clear direction for where the story is going, you write directly towards that ending, and it goes a completely different way immediately after you hand it on. America fhtagn!" – Michael

The Editor will now re-read: At the Mountains of Madness, by H P Lovecraft. Yes, another Lovecraft, not sure whether this says more about me or this crop of stories. Anyway, this one also has Antarctica, an ancient frozen city, penguins, and aerodynamically unsound eldritch horrors. No-one tells them to fregg off though, which is a shame.

Choice

Lilian Halstead

In the dark of the holding room the worthy waited like sacrifices for their fate. All save one were natives, their free legs coiling nervously and their sensory disks swivelling to face each other for support. But one was an alien there, it seemed the only thing it had in common with the others was its size, otherwise it lacked plates, a sensory disk and it had an unnaturally low number of legs. Few attempted to engage it in conversation (it was hard to approach a creature that could only face in one direction for one thing) their curiosity dampened by the knowledge of what was to come. The alien, however, seemed to have no concept of the seriousness of the situation. It never seemed to stop moving, and it had puffed out its chest, which the others had taken as a sign it was as nervous as them, but one only had to exchange a few words with the creature to realise it was excited, or maybe proud. It was hard to judge emotions in something missing the feet to express it.

“I am surprised I’m the first human to be picked for this, it’s a shame no-one back home will care. Obviously I do, but I doubt anyone else even knows that this ceremony exists.” The individual the alien was currently talking at was one of the youngest, his plates still smooth and unmarked by the growths and damage that one tended to accumulate with age.

“But it must be good knowing that whatever happens they won’t be disappointed in you. You won’t be letting anyone down.” Those doubts were understandable, the smooth-plate was the result of a high profile spawning event and a fair number of individuals from the central box would be watching him especially carefully. He was a good friend, and Keln would have championed him if there weren’t rules against that sort of thing.

“This thing has been going on for donkey’s years and no-one has ever been picked, the worst you can do is fall over.”

Keln was shocked, what would happen if one of them was picked was almost unthinkable, but never the less she would bet it was on everyone’s mind, even the human’s. No-one had been chosen, that was true, but that didn’t mean no-one ever would. Besides, there would be no point presenting the sealed god with the worthy if one had already been chosen.

The floor vibrated with the signal that the presentation was about to begin, and even the human stood still and silent awaiting the summoning. Those making the nominations, Keln included, would enter the calcyx chamber first, leaving the worthy behind, to be called in one by one by those championing them. She checked on the human as she passed and soon wished she hadn’t, the translation implants gave her details about the creature’s mood that set her feet fluttering. Maybe it had been a mistake to pick the human over the simple Brain, despite the honour of being named worthy the presentation was not something to be excited about.

In the chamber the idol stood brooding, its round body and spines primitive throwbacks to a forgotten age when people had been mere animals. There was a predatory glint in the ring of eyes, and Keln tapped out a quick prayer to the floating gods that she wouldn’t want to see the day when that monster was free. Keln watched it cautiously, barely listening to the other’s announcements, wondering if she should have made a different choice. However, it was all too soon before she was calling the human forward to take her place with the other tributes. The process did go some way to relieve her doubts, telling the others reminded her of why she had felt so confident in presenting the human. Just a week beforehand, in the aftermath of the battle she had been so sure that the human was worthy, but now she could only trust in her initial assessment and hope that today went as every other presentation had.

The tributes stepped forwards and the room hushed, almost half the population watching to

see if the choice would be made. The timepiece above the idol clicked forward and the room exploded with light, and as her eyes adjusted Keln saw what she had feared, the human she had thought worthy stood covered in spines of light. "Chosen," she whispered, not quite able to believe it. Quietly she and the others present extended their sensory disks and withdrew their arms in submission. The human laughed, and shot upwards in a column of light. The idol was gone.

It was real. I flew over the crowds outside on wings of golden light, and all of them faced me as I passed. No doubt they had never thought that their god would choose a human, it had been clear that I was only there to make up the numbers. But I had dared hope, and had been rewarded. All the power of their sealed god... I wondered what they said I would do with that power. Save them from something no doubt. Well, that could wait. There were far more fun things I had to do first.

A Very Bad Day

Samuel Cook

“Gsvdvvx bfjkcbns @#dsf!”

Monomachos span around at the cry. The good news was that, due to the omnipresence of the Net and its translation technology, even on a backwater such as Cherstron, he had no problem understanding exactly what had been shouted.

The bad news was that the language it had been shouted in, Sarmojivik, sounded something like a bag of particularly disharmonious cats. Mixed with gravel. Going through a mangle. Whilst being serenaded by the Galactic Fingers-down-a-Blackboard Enthusiast Society⁶. Monomachos felt one of his eardrums go in protest at the abuse it was receiving.

The really bad news was that Sarmojivik was only spoken by the Sarmotes, a hyper-violent yet incredibly stupid race, that would, if left to their own devices, headbutt themselves to death against a wall⁷. As such, they were much in demand as shock troops, gladiators and bodyguards⁸. Fortunately for the galaxy, their propensity, on first contact, to immediately declare war on every nearby technologically-superior race had rather thinned their numbers⁹. The likely employment prospects for Sarmotes also meant most died very young. Therefore, there were now only a few

thousand Sarmotes left in the entire galaxy, and extinction was a very real possibility. And of those few thousand, very few still regularly spoke their ancestral tongue, as the scattered nature of the surviving Sarmotes perforce meant they tended to adopt the language of whichever planet they were on¹⁰. However, in their natural state (i.e. without implants) and in the same way as bulls stamp before they charge, they did tend to lapse into it at moments of stress, which, with a Sarmote, almost always became quite long periods of homicidal fury, with unfortunate consequences for anyone in the vicinity¹¹. It was consequently reckoned by none other than the Galactic Census Bureau’s UltraDemographiser hypercomputer that the chances of hearing Sarmojivik were around 1-in-a-billion. The chances of hearing Sarmojivik *and surviving* were reckoned to be so small that they could safely be approximated to 0. Monomachos felt more than a twinge of concern.

The really incredibly bad news was that, as a galactic adventurer, scholar and traveller, Monomachos had a particular interest in obscure facets of galactic life and culture. And Sarmojivik was very obscure. Consequently, he’d set the exclamation just uttered, the traditional Sarmotic war cry of “Death or mushrooms”¹², as the activation code for the 100 Yottatonne Planetbuster^{®13} hypernuke he had on his belt. At the time, it had seemed like a good idea as: a) it had seemed rather

⁶ An unsurprisingly rather niche organisation of limited membership. You really don’t want to go to their AGMs

⁷ Though not before attacking and almost certainly slaughtering anything within sight. Being eight feet tall, having razor-sharp claws for fingers and looking something like a cross between a lion, a rhino and a velociraptor allows you to do that.

⁸ Once fitted with the appropriate sensory deprivation helmets and control implants to prevent them going berserk at inconvenient moments, such as your major pan-galactic press conference, of course.

⁹ Claws aren’t much use if you’re fighting someone with orbital weaponry or lasers that can burn through walls from a mile away. Even a standard

solid-slug machinegun is going to beat claws or similar nine times out of ten. Just look at the entirety of late-19th century imperialism.

¹⁰ Admittedly, in a rather debased form. Whole sentences were one of the many things beyond the limited intellectual horizon of most Sarmotes.

¹¹ Vicinity, in this case, being defined as about 10 miles. Sarmotes got *really* stressed and were *really* hard to bring down without major military intervention once they got all worked up.

¹² Traditional Sarmotic culture revolved around the collection of the giant mushrooms of their home planet, Sarmothrak. They were the only edible thing there, apart from other Sarmotes.

¹³ “All remaining fragments less than a meter across or your money back”

appropriate, b) it amused him, and c) the chances of anyone saying it by accident were virtually nil. At the present moment, it suddenly seemed like a much less good idea, as Monomachos could feel the hypernuke start to vibrate as it began its unfortunately-triggered countdown.

“Damn”, he thought.

And the day had started so well.

The Planet of Saints

Curtis Reubens

Sometimes, Lucy felt a little bad about having condemned the rest of humanity to eternal damnation, to being born enslaved, to being raised and bred like cattle, and to having their lives end in agony as their very essence was sucked from their body to nourish the voracious omnivorous Kuurid. Other times, not so much.

She definitely regretted the pact she had made with the alien monstrosity, though. At the time it had all made so much sense; on the one side stood humanity, those who had mocked her, who had derided her work as worthless or worse. On the other side, the Kuurid, which seemed to understand her, which promised her reverence and reward in exchange for one simple task. And yes, some would argue that building a gate through which an inter-dimensional horror could reach and subjugate your entire planet was, well, a little morally questionable, but those people had been devoured now and didn't that just serve them right?

She had been forcibly removed from Earth on the day it had fallen, and had been placed here. Teskairi, it was called. The Planet of Saints. It housed, as far as Lucy could gather, other individuals such as herself who had aided the Kuurid in its subjugation of the worlds from whence they came. Here they were placed, as reward, served by a lesser arm of Kuurid and given fine food (or other appropriate nourishment, depending on species) and whatever else they desired.

And it was *so dull*.

Her first demand, upon being informed that whatever she demanded would be hers, was scientific knowledge. Her giddy mind had imagined taking whatever advances the Kuurid had made in technology and running with them, seeing what more she could add on top. It had also been expecting theses to read, or something similar; the reality was that she had

all the Kuurid's amassed scientific understanding inserted into her head. And as it transpired, the Kuurid's scientific knowledge could be roughly summarised as 'all of it'.

So now, Lucy knew science. And briefly this fascinated her, but then she realised that there was nothing for her to do, no gap in this perfect understanding for her to fill, and so the knowledge she held – the knowledge she had sought for most of her life, and far more on top of that – became mundane, and just sort of lurked inside her brain. Her passion fled, never to return.

She had tried in vain to fill the gap it left. Reading was her first thought, but apparently no Earth literature had been saved when the planet burnt. The same was true for television, film, art and music. She had asked for a golf course once, and the Kuurid had managed it, but she'd quit before the third hole; somehow, golfing was even more boring than doing nothing at all.

She had also tried meeting the neighbours, once. The first one she'd encountered had, as far as she could tell, tried to eat her face, but it was the second alien she met that really flattened the plan. They had, quite simply, been unable to communicate. They had tried for quite a while, but could not find common ground. She hadn't tried again. So she stayed in the area that could loosely be described as her home, bored out of her mind.

She was forced to conclude, eventually, that she hadn't quite thought her plan through.

Cakes

Curtis Reubens

From the day she was born, Lisa 53-17 had wanted to be a baker, more than anything else in the world. In every waking moment she longed to knead dough and ice buns, and her dreams were filled with tarts and profiteroles and tiered cakes so tall they brushed up against the sky itself.

Unfortunately, there isn't generally a great deal of need for bakers in covert military facilities such as the one Lisa 53-17 had been born in and, in all likelihood, would die in.

The aim of the Tesselar Facility was to create the perfect soldier, part of the never-ending war between the Irish Empire and the Puerto Rican Confederacy. The original Lisa Harrows had volunteered as a template; hundreds of the Irish Empire's finest warriors had volunteered their DNA; Tesselar had been built, and now spewed out a new generation of Lisas – almost-clones with fragments of foreign DNA mixed in at random – every week, choosing the finest fighter of each one as a template for the next. Lisa 53-17 was the seventeenth Lisa of the fifty-third generation and, as far as she knew, the first one who would have chosen cookery over combat.

She wasn't a *bad* fighter, by any means; she'd won enough sparring bouts with other Lisas to know that. The whole thing made her rather uncomfortable, though; she didn't like hurting people, even when they were trying to hurt her. Hell, even when they were her, more or less. No, she'd happily leave that to the others, if they left her to bake. They wouldn't, though; apart from the chosen template, this generation of Lisas would be terminated at the week's end. This was problematic.

These unfortunate circumstances all led to Lisa 53-17, on what would probably be the last night of her life, skulking on silent feet towards the facility's kitchen. She had a plan, and it involved cake, but mostly she just wanted to bake, just once before her termination. It was

glorious; she soared about the kitchen, drawing what she could from its limited supplies, mixing and kneading and icing as her heart sang songs of joy. It was the most wonderful pleasure of her week-long life. It was, come to think of it, about the only pleasure of her week-long life.

The end result: twenty-four perfectly iced cupcakes. Tentatively, she raised one to her lips and took a small, nervous bite.

If God himself had been a baker, and in his benevolence had given the fruits of his work unto his chosen people, Lisa 53-17 imagined they would have tasted almost as good as hers.

She devoured the rest of that cake rather quickly. Then another. Grabbing some tinfoil, she wrapped up the two that she would need and stowed them in her bag. She turned to leave then, but a thought struck her, and she took a few more of the cakes with her, leaving precisely seventeen cupcakes sitting on a counter in the kitchen.

* * *

The next day was judgement day. In turn each of the fifty Lisas would step into a small room, where forty-nine of them, including Lisa 53-17, would be told that they were to be put to death. Some were hopeful; some were despondent, sobbing or stoic or just sad; Lisa 53-17 was determined, stomach fortified by a three-cake breakfast, secret weapons stowed away. She wouldn't be the new template, she could deal with that, but maybe they'd let her live on as a chef. All she had to do was show them what she could do.

It was her turn before too long. She stepped into the cubicle; two men in dark suits sat behind a desk. One of them, the taller of the two, smiled and gestured for Lisa to sit.

"As you know, we've been monitoring your performance very closely." It was the short man who spoke. Lisa reached into her bag, probing about for the foil package. "You'll be

pleased to know that we've decided to use you as the template."

Lisa froze. "Come again?"

"Your marksmanship record is damn near perfect, Seventeen, and your speed and reaction times are among the best of your generation."

A lifeline dangled before her, but Lisa couldn't help but question it further. "But my sparring record—"

"Your sparring record is good, but not the best." The tall man leaned forward. "However, we've received a fair few complaints about you holding back."

Lisa thought back to the fights she'd been in. She hadn't wanted to hurt people... "I suppose so."

"And then you beat them anyway!" Swinging backwards in his chair, the man roared with laughter. "You won most of your fights with an arm behind your back!"

"And," the shorter man adds, "there's the cupcakes."

"The... the cupcakes." Lisa had no idea where he was going with this thought, but this seemed like a good time to pull the items from her bag. "I—"

"—snuck into the kitchens at night, evading our alarm system, and left seventeen cupcakes as a calling card?" The man grabbed the foil-wrapped cakes from Lisa. "That's brilliant. It's unexpected, inventive and a neat display of your skills." He was right, Lisa mused, but in entirely the wrong way. "And you left a calling card, one subtle enough that you had plausible deniability, but one that you could prove if required." He gazed admiringly at the cupcake he'd unwrapped, then tossed it aside. A small part of Lisa began listing the ways in which she could kill him. "You're *thinking*, Seventeen. So many others don't."

"I... Thank you, sir."

* * *

The Tesselar Facility closed shortly after that. The Tesselar Bakery, on the other hand, is widely regarded as the finest in the galaxy. The officials in charge of the place objected to the change at first, but then they realised that their fifty super-soldiers were all quite strongly in favour of the idea and stopped objecting rather quickly. There were protests from higher-ups too, of course, but then the Puerto Rican ambassador tried their iced buns and all thoughts of war went out of the window.

True pastry-lovers try to make the pilgrimage to the original site at least once in their lives, but Tesselar has branches spread across the civilised universe. It's rather easy to staff such endeavours when your workers are practically clones, and by that same virtue the branches are all much the same: the food is divine, the staff are friendly and they never, ever get robbed.

Jomsborgwocky

Anonymous

'Twas brillig and ye slithy Souls
did gyre and gimble in ye grouphug.
All meady were ye drinking-bowls
and ye mome mathmos outgrabe...

"Beware ye Jormsborgwok, my Runecaster
The paws that pounce, the claws that catch,
Beware ye Geldjarl Bard, and Master
One Ring to Foil ye Frumious
Cumberbatch!"

She took her Truddle-Bleaver in hand:
Long time her Manx-Noir foe she sought--
So rested she by the Mem Court Tree,
And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought she stood,
The Jormsborgwok, with Eyes of Gold,
fuzzcordioned around the Plodgy Gate,
And mewpled as she strolled!

One-two! One-two! And through-and-through
Ye Truddle-Bleaver went snicker-snack!
She left her splat-flat, and with her cat-hat
She perambuted hexumphant back.

"And hast thou slain ye Jormsborgwok?
Come crew our socstall, our rhymish Reeve!
O Veizla day! TTBA!"
She purrsomly chortled in relief.

'Twas rebrillig, and ye slithy Souls
Did nutate and nuzzle in ye grouphug.
All empty were ye drinking-bowls,
So ye mome Meadkeeper outgrabe.

The Resident Oocephalic Sage perched atop a
high fence exposits the unusual vocabulary as
follows.

Bleaver: part blade, part cleaver and all cold
hard steel ... -painted wood.

Fuzzcordioned: to greatly stretch and
somewhat bend whilst ruffling one's fur.

Hexumphant: feeling twice the elation
experienced in the state of being triumphant,
akin to desiring, deserving, and indeed having,
a second slice of one's favourite pie.

Nuzzle: part nestle and part nuzzle, used either
of small fluffy creturs or of megalanic
sandarakinochromatic circumgorgial
garmentation.

Perambuted: half-perambulated and half-
strutted: a gait solely achievable whilst
hexumphantly electing to travel at a dignified
leisurely pace.

Straight Outta Hobbiton

Mostly Anonymous

Now, this is the story all about how
King Aragorn ended up with the crown
And I'd like to take a minute, yo, for what it's worth,
I'll tell you how I became the saviour of a place
called Middle-Earth

In Hobbiton, with Bilbo, born and raised
In a hobbit hole was where I spent most of my days
Smokin' some pipeweed, relaxin' all sweet,
And I loved to party, movin' my hairy feet,

When the time for his eleventieth party came
around,
Uncle Bilbo said he had to get out of this town
He gave me one little ring and Gandalf got scared
And said 'You're goin' to Mordor and you're
destroyin' it there'

I begged and pleaded with him, I was afraid
But he grabbed Sam out the grass and he sent me
on my way
He said "The Prancing Pony is our rendezvous"
I grabbed my walking staff and said, 'Let's wreck the
Nazgul'.

Tryin' on the ring, I just had to see
Disappearin' like that in the middle of Bree
Is this what joining sides with Sauron is like?
HmMMMM this might be alright.

But wait I hear they're evil, they're slavers, that's
what they say
Could I get on board with treating Gondor in this
way?
I don't think so
Middle-Earth needs me there
As I'm the only cat who Lord Sauron can't scare

Well, some wraith cut me and we had to split fast
There was some elf chick who Strider knew from his
past
I ain't gettin' caught up in this yet
There's wraiths here
But Arwen spat magic at Bruinen, they disappeared

I whistled for companions when Gandalf turned up
too
We added a man, an elf and a dwarf to my crew
Elrond said we were the best team he'd ever saw
So I thought 'Ah forget it, yo homes, to Mordor!'

We crossed some massive mountains, 'bout 7 or 8
And at Moria, I shouted 'Yo trolls, smell ya later'
Crossing Khazad-dûm, Gandalf ends his time
But nah, you know the rest, let's quit this terrible
rhyme.

Group Review: Perdido Street Station

What does CUSFS think of China Mieville's award-winning second novel? Aside from "Moths. Moths. Argh moths." Everyone thinks this about *Perdido Street Station*.

Contributors: Danielle Saunders, Will Bradshaw, Sarah Binney, Andrew Conway

"Perdido Street Station is incredible. It is simultaneously a bunch of incredibly cool ideas, steampunk to sci-fi, thrown together in a haphazard manner that only makes the novel's world more real, and a coherent, deliberate and addictive story. It is also the reason I still twitch slightly when I see a large moth."

"Get an editor, China."

"Perdido Street Station is a ginormous pile of stunningly inventive ideas with a minimum glue in between each bit."

"I gave up on it when I got to the bit about cyborg who had little steam engines instead of muscles. I'm willing to suspend belief to a large extent when reading sci-fi, but I just can't put up with ignorance of basic thermodynamics."

"It has one of the most believable and affecting othered relationships I've ever come across in fiction. And giant, super-intelligent, multi-dimensional Aestheticist spiders."

"I can't work out whether or not I want to read anything else by China Mieville, because on the one hand it's really cool, but on the other hand I don't need more nightmares."

"It doesn't fit together as neatly as the more coherent *City and the City*, but you don't notice that while you're reading it because it's simply so much fun to experience."

Review: Dune

Danielle Saunders

In the distant future, noble families hold the fiefdom of entire planets, while owing allegiance to an intergalactic Emperor. The empire is fuelled by “spice” – an addictive substance which prolongs life, provides prescience and makes interstellar travel possible. In particular, the matriarchal Bene Gesserit, who hope to find a messiah and develop the human race through selective breeding, are reliant on spice.

As *Dune* begins, Paul Atreides’ family accepts stewardship of the desert planet Arrakis – the only source of spice in the universe - replacing their rivals, the evil Harkonnens. At this point, naturally, all hell breaks loose. What follows is a tale of intrigue which weaves motifs of religion, philosophy, ecology and politics.

The prose brings Arrakis to harsh life and carries the reader along in interestingly different ways. At one point, major science-exposition is carried out by a dying character’s hallucination of their father – simultaneously informative and moving. Extracts from in-universe “historical texts” begin each chapter and mean the reader essentially knows how the novel ends from about thirty pages in. As with the prescience afforded by the spice but on a more meta level, the ending isn’t the point of *Dune*. The important bit is the human emotions, dilemmas and decisions that take us there.

In this respect, *Dune* reminded me more of fantasy franchises than most science-fiction I’ve read. Despite the planetary ecology, the water conservation technologies and, of course, the spaceships, the focus is always on the characters and the political intrigue – like *A Song of Ice and Fire* or *The Wheel of Time*, if these had been painted across a galaxy rather than a single world.

Okay. There. I said it. *Dune* reads like *The Wheel of Time* in space, only an order of magnitude shorter. Both series involve

politically powerful, semi-mystical orders of women who shape the course of history. Both feature training montages, prophecies, characters becoming accustomed to life in desert tribes, and characters who will monologue at each other and the reader given any conceivable opportunity. (Only one has a main character shut in a box for an entire novel, and it is not *Dune*.) The difference is that *Dune* focuses on the decisions of a character aware of destiny, rather than one led by it, like *The Wheel of Time* and so much other sci-fi and fantasy. The effect on tension and interest is remarkable.

Like most classic sci-fi, *Dune* does have its more unfortunate elements. I was particularly struck by the Baron Vladimir Harkonnen, the only explicitly not-straight character, whose interest in young men is played so as to be an indicator of Just How Evil he is. My personal response was to sigh, blame it on the sixties and try to ignore it, but I can see this and similar issues being off-putting.

And why is the Baron evil? (Aside, that is, from having the title ‘Baron’, which frankly is asking for it.) Why plot to destroy other houses and tyrannise entire planets? Money! Power! Ancient feuds! Given the strength of characterisation in *Dune* overall, it was a shame that the villain of the piece came over so one-dimensional.

That *Dune* holds up despite its flaws is impressive. It has all the scope, intricate world-building and elaborate plotting of any fantasy franchise, meshed with the philosophical draw of good science-fiction. *Dune* is not perfect, but it is a classic, and for good reason. I enjoyed reading it, if only once for the story and the world, and would recommend anyone else to do the same.