

TENTACLED TERRORS BEING ADORABLE (T.T.B.A)



Tentacled Terrors Being Adorable

TTBA Volume (6 – 2i) Issue 138

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Chairbeing's Address

Greetings, CUSFS!

Well, that was quite the term. Films were watched, topics discussed, and approximately a hundred and fifteen different board games played, mostly in one night. Next term promises more in the same vein of silliness, hopefully with steadily improving rather than worsening weather this time! Newcomers, having mastered the abcs of cusfsing, you have such wonderful times as the Wake and the Veizla ahead. Old hats, don't forget to look sagely and knowing throughout these ancient and arcane rituals. Genuine old wizardly-looking hats not necessary, but appreciated.

So, here's to another term, another whole year actually (anyone else starting to think they come round in blocks? Where do they go?), and another issue of TTBA. I hope everyone has a great holiday, wherever you may be, and I'll see you all in the new year!

All the best,

Isobel Sands

CUSFS Chairbeing 2015-16

Editorial

Hello Science-Fictioneers!¹

Welcome to what I believe is, thanks in large part to the **NINE** chainswriting within, the longest issue of TTBA in recorded history²! Inside you will find:

- The aforementioned nine chains, including some of my all-time favourites.
- Many more footnotes even than the TTBA Of All Of The Footnotes³, with a grand total of fifty-eight⁴.
- Star Wars spoilers.
- A very CUSFS crossword.
- Poetry.
- Forty-three thousand, four hundred and twenty-three words I mean hot damn.

It has been an honour and a privilege putting this together for you, and I hope you'll join me in a term or so to do this all again⁵. So! Enjoy the next sixty-five pages of sci-fi and fantasy⁶, and see you all next term.

With love,

Curtis J. Reubens

TTBA Editor

¹ Yes I will keep referring to you as sciene-fictioneers until it catches on.

² By which I mean I had a look on the website and couldn't find any that were longer.

³ *Time-Traveller Battles Alchemist*, Volume x, Issue y+1

⁴ FIFTY-EIGHT.

⁵ Which means you all need to send me lots of submissions, hint hint.

⁶ And, if you feel so inclined, reward me for its production with chocolate and hugs.

Chainwriting: Twitch

Michael French, Sarah Binney, Anonymous,
Tristan Roberts, Greg Weir, Samuel Cook, Samos
Ottewill-Soulsby, Eleanor Smith, Alastair Haig,
James Brett, Rory Hennell-James, Harley Tate
Jones

I move fast.

That's kind of like, my thing, you know?

And I don't mean that, like, I twitch a lot, or talk fast. Though I do. People tell me I do. I mean I move really, really fast. Like, outrun cars fast, or climb eighty stories of stairs in a minute fast. I move faster than I think.

No, really. Sometimes I move and I don't know I've done it. Which is, you know, kind of scary when you think about it. It's all instinct. And what if, like, my instinct goes bad?

I mean, one time, this kid managed to climb out their folks' window. And their folks lived in some crummy apartment that was like, at least ten floors up. Kid's dead if he does that, I mean real dead. And I'm buying a newspaper, and I see someone point, and I look, and there's this kid, teetering on the window frame, and then there's this kid falling, and then I'm there and I catch him. I was half way down the street from him. I didn't decide to save the kid. I didn't go, like, 'Hey, better catch that kid', I just saw him fall and then caught him. It just happened. I didn't mean it to, and me catching him was a surprise to me as well as all the folk around. And that's good here, like obviously that's good, I mean I saved the kid's life!

But like, what if my instinct goes a little mad? I always been a little twitchy, people tell me that. Maybe one day I'm out buying the paper, and I see some guy threaten another guy with a knife, and bam, first guy's dead with a knife in his throat. I mean sure, he earned it, but that don't make that okay. I just killed a guy, straight up, and I never knew, you know? Or what if I kill guy number two as well? Or instead?

You can't trust a fast guy, that's what my mum said, and me, I'm real fast, so fast even I don't trust me.

I mean, let me tell you about Thursday.

He leaned forward to put out his cigarette on the aluminium counter, stemming the flow of verbal diarrhoea for half a second. The handcuffs jangled as

he lit another. The woman in the foldup plastic seat opposite him switched her left leg on top of her right. Dammit, even watching this guy was making her fidget. No wonder Yanacek wanted her on this one. Asshole.

So I'm just going to the jobcentre office, down Bridgeport way, going past that big old cinema on 23rd and Indiana, and there's this THUM kinda noise. Like a jet engine. Yeah, or a rocket. I never saw a rocket in real life, though. Anyway, it's coming from behind the cinema, down this alley, so I don't know what I thought, I just went to take a look. And it opens out onto this yard, not an actual yard, sort of the accidental bits you get when houses don't fit together properly. Like a gap in between. Like in Rear Window.

And in the middle of the yard there's this girl holding some sorta big Jackhammer type thing. She's got big blue overalls on with blood all over, splattered everywhere, on her legs and on her arms and all down her front. And in front of her there's some kinda weird-ass scorpion thing, lying on the ground, legs everywhere, some real proper HR Giger shit. Still twitching. Broad freaking daylight.

But then it got weird.

The girl's stone grey eyes caught mine, and widened in surprise before narrowing. 'Get down idiot!' she yelled hoarsely, and luckily I did what she said. It was like that kid and the window all over again. Never did I think, I better duck down now, it was almost as if I knew she was right and ducked down all in one moment, just before the second scorpion thing came flying past, leaping through the gap where my head had just been. Unfortunately my intrigue prevented my instinct kicking in and my legs didn't carry me away this time. The scorpion turned round to face me. Gee it was huge. If I told you it was the size of a small pony, or a Great Dane then it wouldn't really do it justice because I mean, that doesn't sound that big at all right? But scorpions aren't meant to be this big so it's freaking terrifying I can tell you. And its legs, still all intact, there were too many for me to count- partly because it was clicking its huge jaw like clippers about an inch from my face. I managed to drag my eyes away from the claws for a split second long enough to notice the huge red sting on its tail rising up before me. I'm not an animal lover or insect creep, but I know about scorpions and their tails, I've seen the movies. Finally my instincts kicked in and I found myself on the other side of the scorpion, standing

next to the girl who was poised, jackhammer held high. I thought she might have been surprised by my speed, I mean... I was, but no this girl was all eyes for the scorpion, whose spiked tail had just created a new crater in the pavement where I had been standing. As it was trying to remove its sting, the girl took her chance and with a yell and a running leap, brought the jackhammer down on the head of the scorpion. The two collided with the THUM I had heard earlier, a kind of spooky otherworldly sound when heard so close, and I could of sworn the jackhammer glowed and the scorpion splattered everywhere, and only *then* does the girl turn and say-

'Wait, I'm sorry' she had to interrupt, this was getting ridiculous, 'Did you just say the jackhammer glowed?'

Look, I don't know. It looked like there was blue stuff shining out from the back. It was just for a second. Could have been the light. Sometimes my eyes move too quick and I see things that aren't there. All sorts of weird shit. That's why I'm so scared of my instincts going wrong. What if I think someone's on fire and drown them trying to put them out?

He was rambling. At this rate it'd take all week to process this guy. This wasn't how it's supposed to go. It was meant to be quick. Get them in, process them and file them away, nice and neat. That was how it worked. That's what kept profits up and the bosses happy. Yanacek wanted her neck on the line instead. Asshole.

Anyway, the girl says she broke out of a prison or some shit. They had a load of files or something. She saw my face there and recognised me.

I don't know what she did to get there. I knew nothing about her. She coulda been dangerous. Probably was, what with the blood all over her. We took off from the courtyard.

Not being seen's easy for me. Comes with the speed. Not so much for her. Particularly not with that massive jackhammer.

We were halfway down the next alley when we saw it.

Not a giant scorpion or, like, a little green man or anything like that, that'd be easy, you know? Run away, jackhammer it, whatever, all kinds of ways to deal with weird bogeymen like that, but when you see a police car you really have to start thinking about it, yeah?

Thing is, before I knew what was happening I was over the alley and hiding behind a bin. Nasty smell and all, don't think it'd been emptied for a while, but right now that didn't seem as big a problem as being picked up as an accomplice to a string of jackhammer murders.

That gave me a second to actually look at what was going down. First thing I see is that the car's empty, so we have maybe a minute or two before they're back, second thing I see is that jackhammer girl still isn't surprised, she's just looking about for me, and I swear it only took her half a second once I looked her way to catch my eye.

So she starts backing away down the alley to get round the corner, and she does that little head-jerk thing that says 'come with me,' you know the one, right?

She's gone before I've really decided if that's a good idea or not, but a couple of seconds later I've made my decision and of course that's exactly the moment a couple of cops come out of the house with this guy in handcuffs between them.

So, you know, I thought, "The cops have arrested someone. He probably broke the law. Nothing to do with me, right?" I mean, if I went around getting involved every time the cops arrested someone, I'd never get anything done. Even with my speed. I've got enough to worry about without deliberately getting involved with cops more than I have to. I'm a bit twitchy, you know?

She did know. He had mentioned it a few times. She wished he would get to the point. She had ten more people to process today and this guy was already way over time. Yanacek really had it in for her.

So, you know, I was going to ignore this guy and then follow the girl. With my speed, the police would never have even known I was there. That's when the third cop comes out of the house holding something I guessed they'd confiscated from the man. Guess what? It was another jackhammer. Just like the one the girl had been holding. Except glowing green. I mean, was this weird or what? I'd just been minding my own business and now here I was, hiding from the cops, having been rescued from giant scorpions by a girl with a glowing-blue jackhammer, watching another man with another giant jackhammer being arrested. I mean, sometimes my eyes play tricks on me, but this was in a league of its own.

Soon she was going to have to resort to more coercive methods to get this idiot to stop babbling. A certain amount of wear and tear in processing was expected.

Anyway, whilst I was stuck there wondering what to do, that was when three of those giant scorpions jumped the cops.

They went for the third cop, the guy holding the green jackhammer. Did you know him? Looked like a nice guy. Kind of like Lou Gehrig with a bigger nose. And glowing green obviously.

Anyway, so the scorpions are crowding in and the cops are just staring at them, because they're three giant scorpions. I'm still trying to work out what to do, only this time instinct isn't doing anything. Then green Gehrig starts screaming and screaming and -

The guy was never still. He played with an unlit cigarette in his hands, the fourth he'd pulled out the pack since the interview started. The cigarette span around his fingers constantly, faster than she could follow. But as he mentioned the screaming his hands spasmed suddenly and the cigarette fell to the table. Startled, he looked down at his spread palms, staring at them like he had never seen them before. Then he raised his gaze and for the first time since the spiel began met her eyes, giving an embarrassed little smile as he did so. It was only then that she realised how crazy tired this guy was. She felt a twinge of sympathy and almost offered him coffee, but decided caffeine was the last thing he needed.

Then I'm in the middle of it, only I sort of bounce off a scorpion's back and end up lying on my ass. And lying not a foot away from me on the ground is the green jackhammer.

So... like I said, right, sometimes I move before I know I've done it. And I just...

The twitching was getting distinctly more pronounced, and this had to be the longest he'd paused since he started talking. She clicked her pen, uncomfortable.

Well, this time was different, if you get me? I mean I didn't just - I'm used to suddenly being a bit further along the road, or whatever, that's normal. But you don't just wake up in the morning and, and expect to wake up later with a jackhammer in your hand and a bunch of dead scorpions and - well -

I mean, that's what it was like, waking up. It's not like that normally. I don't come out of it like it's, it's, a

trance or something, and like - I mean, here's the thing - the dead scorpions, that wasn't so bad, I figured them being dead was probably doing everyone a favour. But then I looked at my jackhammer - well, the one I was holding - and like, it's still glowing green, and it's got bits of scorpion splattered over it but - I don't even know why I noticed this, but like, these scorpions, their blood wasn't red. It was some weird blue colour. But there was red blood on the jackhammer as well.

So then I look, right, to see where the blood came from, and I can't see the cops anywhere, but the girl with the blue jackhammer is standing there and there's... there's, well, there's not much left of the guy the cops were arresting. Not green Gehrig, the other one, the one the jackhammer belonged to. And there's not much left of him 'cause most of him is on the hammer.

Now, most people's reaction to that sort of thing would be running, or screaming or something, but this girl just stands there with her jackhammer, staring at me, and at the... the mess around me.

My mind usually processes things quite quickly. Not as quick as my instinct, of course, but you learn to adapt when stuff happens. Like this one time I'm walking past the bank, on my way to post a letter or something, I can't quite remember, when the instinct kicks in and I find myself in the bank on top of some guy. In that situation you gotta think fast else you've got security guards all round and bullets where you don't want them... Anyway, I tell the guy that I'm a cop and he believes me and legs it out the door, or at least he would have if I wasn't on top of him, so it just turned into an awkward situation of him squirming underneath me that reminds me of another time when I-

The woman held up a solitary hand, silencing him. 'Please,' she said, her patience far past wearing thin, 'get on with the story. About the girl.'

So the girl must see the panic in my eyes. Me standing there, staring at a jackhammer covered in red. She seemed to know what was up, cos she could see I didn't. She told me the scorpions got the cops. And I got the scorpions. I hope she was telling the truth. I really do. Next she told me to follow and I did, lugging this green jackhammer.

At this point, she'd learned to notice the little pauses in his breathless tirade that preceded some diversion

or anecdote or other distraction that would give Yanacek fits of laughter when he went over the tape. Instead, she interjected with a question to keep him on track.

Huh? We went into the building the cops had just come out of, it was just another block of abandoned warehouses. But someone had cut holes in the sides between them, like with a sledge hammer or something, so there was a big corridor cut into them parallel to the street. Kinda neat for walking quickly unseen, I could have done with that a lot. Turns out you can't run at eighty on a sidewalk, cos if-

She interrupted again. They would finish this processing. Eventually. 'Where did you go?'

The warehouses gave out after a while, and then it was backstreets in the office part of the city. Thought we'd be spotted for sure. But the office workers don't get out til eight and none of the office buildings have windows anymore, so no one saw us. Eventually we got to a part of the city I didn't recognise. Below I think, one of the sub-levels near the docks.

There was a lot of machinery about, conveyor belts and stuff. So the girl jumped up on one of the conveyors and started jogging. I jumped on too and we're moving pretty fast now. I started to wonder how fast I could get on one of these, it's like a traveller at an airport but-

Once more she interrupted. She sensed he was getting close to the end, but could easily pad it out to hours with anecdotes. He was twirling the cigarette again with deft finesse. 'Where did the conveyor belt go?'

I dunno, we got off it pretty quick, went down another side passage. We got to a big chamber, the one where your guys found me and her. Say, do you know how she is? If she's OK?

For the first time he actually paused to let her speak. Yanacek said he wasn't supposed to know the girl's condition, but Yanacek was an asshole. "Let's finish your story first. Then I can ask the med-staff about her."

Umm, OK. So we got to this chamber, the one where your guys found me and it was full of them. Not your guys, the scorpions. Next thing I knew I was on the other side of the room and there was a trail of scorpion bits behind me. I blinked again and they were all gone. Well, in bits. There was no more red

blood on the jackhammer, but I looked over to her and she was-

Another spasm. "You ok?", she asked. "You're nearly there."

Yeah, sure, I'm sorry, I - you know, it's like I'm saying, I move so fast I don't know how I get there, and that's sure disturbing for a guy. Well, there she was, and one of the scorpions must've gotten its sting into her leg before I got to it, she was just lying there.

He started twitching.

I had to, to do something, ya know? But I couldn't call the authorities, because of the dead cops, right. And there I was with this jackhammer, and, and -

He was shaking almost uncontrollably now, and she tried to calm him, "It's ok. She's being looked after", but he didn't slow down.

It wasn't my fault! Right? It gets out of control, I can't, I can't -

And he was gone. The door swung to and fro; the rest of the room had gone silent.

Shit.

Yanacek was not going to be happy about this.

Twitch – Extras

Alternate titles:

Flash! (Aaaaaaa)

Sprinter, Slaughter, Scorpions, Bye

Faster Than a Speeding Bullet

Gotta Go Fast (Feat. Scorpions)

Jackhammer Girl Went on to Kill and Squash

Some Evil Scorpions

Comments:

“Holy cohesion, Batman!” – Michael

“I like it! I wanna see "pissed off woman in black interviews irritating superheroes" again.” – Sarah

“This reminded me weirdly of Moby Dick - short bits of narrative interspersed with tangential digressions on related matters. Otherwise, rather different....” – Samuel

The Editor Adores:

Everything. Seriously, this is quite possibly my favourite piece of chainwriting, and I am very glad I was able to be part of it (even if I didn't write any of it). Good job, team.

‘As Balls’ On The Belushi Scale

Michael French, Edward Heaney, Curtis J. Reubens, Sparta, Nakul Khanna, Samuel Cook, Anonymous, Anonymous, Rory Hennell-James, Harley Tate Jones, Danielle Saunders

Flick looked out over the clouds. From her perch above the rooftops of the harbour, she could just see the distant spires of Kholt rising above the great canal that joined it to her city. The canal, an enormous bridge of stone holding deep enough water for even the great cruisers to sail in, stretched out from Turanel as if in defiance of the clouds swirling below. Though Turanel was not an especially busy city, Kholt was only one bridge away from the capital, so the canal was always heavy with tradeboats and commuters. Turanel only had one other neighbour, one of the farmtops, growing food in the strong sun for the stonetop cities to live off.

With a slight grimace at the thought of work, she remembered her school lessons on the subject. The great hexagonal columns, rising out of the endless layer of clouds below, upon which they all lived. The columns themselves were made seemingly of stone, but could not be mined or even scratched by any tool. The farmtops were the columns with a layer of soil above, on which the crops were grown, and on the stonetops lived the cities. The columns were far apart, often too far to see, but connected by vast bridge-canal in a sprawling network, the farmtops further out and everything centred on the greatest of their cities. Turanel was only on a short branch. Some farmtops were as far as ten bridges from the centre. And below everything, under the bridges and at the base of the columns, the roiling cloud layer. Clouds above appeared and disappeared and rained but clouds below, they simply churned. Many a daredevil or scholar had tried to reach or breach the layer, but such was foolishness – it was well known that anything that falls from the tops is dead, and anyone that tries to lower themselves will only ever fall. It's too far. But it still happens. She shook her head. An old classmate had tried, once, on nothing but a rope. It snapped, of course, and –

Movement. Flick sharpened her gaze on the boat she'd been watching for the last hour. Time to go.

* * *

“Don't be a fool,” said Crane. He leant against the vast wall that rose off the ground behind him and glanced up. “You say the same foolish thing every time we tread this road. Our moiety never had any tower casualties before, and I don't intend for you to humiliate us by being the first.”

“But it's not the surface – if it were the surface, why would it be so easy for us to cling to it as far up as we can see?” The insistence of the fanatic pervaded son-of-Silk's voice; there was a force behind the words which troubled Crane a great deal. “It's not that there's nowhere to go – if there were nowhere to go, whence would the strange creatures come when they sometimes fall from above? And so...”

son-of-Silk paused meaningfully, but Crane refused to rise to it.

“And so,” continued son-of-Silk, with a hint of exasperation, “it must be the clouds themselves. Let me tell you of my idea!”

But Crane was having none of it. There must be some way of disowning or ostracising unwanted renegades; Crane would just have to look into it.

* * *

Joshua Genevieve Vars had slipped onto the *Succulent* back in the capital, a shadow in a crowd of thousands. He had spent two days aboard, catching fitful sleep in dank corners where he hoped he wouldn't be seen, stealing what scraps of food he could – which was to say, not much. His legs ached, his head pulsed painfully for lack of water and his stomach felt like it was trying to digest itself, but he had arrived.

Turanel. It was always going to be Turanel.

Despite his discomfort, he squatted belowdecks for as long as he could before staggering up and out; it would be just his luck to make it this far and then get nabbed in the docks. But an hour seemed to have been enough. He was unaccosted as he walked the streets of Turanel, making a beeline for-

“Vars!”

Of course.

Sillaae was her same old cocky self, he thought as she swaggered towards him. She'd made some new friends though. Three of them. Big ugly brutes. Joshua swallowed.

“My my, it *is* you! If there's one face I never thought I'd see again... But enough of that. Shall we get down to business?”

There was a blur of motion. One of the brutes had charged him, quicker than Joshua thought possible, then staggered back as a crossbow bolt appeared in his shoulder with a shower of redness. And as the man squealed in pain and his comrades struggled to react to what had just happened, a young woman dropped onto the street beside him.

“The name's Flick,” she said simply, reloading her crossbow. “Nice to meet you, Joshua.”

“Likewise,” he replied. “Punctual as always I see.”

“I *hate* to interrupt this heart-warming little reunion,” sneered Sillaae, “my boys and I have some business with Mr Vars here. It would be much appreciated if the low-life rat would scurry back to the dump where it belongs.”

“That's unfortunate. Little Josh here also has some business with me. Now, if you'd be so kind, we'll be taking our leave now and you won't be following us.”

“*What? Why* would I do a thing like that?” Sillaae's voice rose a couple of octaves in indignation.

“I'm the one holding the crossbow.” smiled Flick. “Lovely to see you again.”

Joshua turned towards the nearest side street, with Flick backing away after him, crossbow still levelled at Sillaae's chest. Upon reaching the alleyway and turning a corner, Flick took the lead. They ran, turning left, then right, right, left, right, left, left, past bins and broken windows until Joshua was hopelessly lost and barely able to breathe. Finally, Flick led him through a doorway into a dark, dusty factory. A path of footsteps led to one corner, where there lay a table, chair and a small chest. Flick placed the crossbow on the table and, reaching into the chest, pulled out a waterskin and a small, stale cake. Handing them to Joshua, she closed the chest and perched upon the lid.

“So, Josh-“ began Flick.

“Joshua.”

Glaring and ignoring the interruption she continued “What brings a fancy engineer like you to my beautiful end of town?”

"I'm being followed. It's because of my work; I found something that they don't want me to know about."

Flick was stunned. "What happened?"

Joshua said nothing, but from his rucksack he pulled out a large, black box. Opening the lid, it revealed a helical horn-shaped device and a small screen wired to it.

"This," said Joshua, "is a sonar device."

"Praise be to Helix," intoned Flick.

"What?"

"Just something my grandpa used to say, something about a twitch he had as a kid? Anyway, what's a sonar device?"

"Sonar. It propagates sonic waves in order to triangulate—"

Flick tapped her crossbow.

Joshua let out an exasperated sigh. He was impatient to return to the university where he lived and worked and get away from these illiterate cretins, but he had business to complete before he could possibly show his face there again.

"Andim. It locates Andim."

Flick's eyes widened, but she said nothing. Her briefing – 'he's carrying something valuable' brought to mind a chest of gold, or of gems. This was something else entirely.

"It's a delivery for..." – he hesitated – "someone important. Someone who would be rather displeased if anything happened to it, or to me." Well, at least half of this was true. His client would tear the city apart should the device be lost. His own welfare was of significantly less import.

"How about you pass that to me, and you can be on your way back to your university? Let me know who your buyer is and I'll, ah, make sure it gets to him."

There was only one thing Joshua hated more than the prospect of violence, and that was the prospect of his own demise. Fortunately, he didn't often have to choose between the two. Even more fortunately, he knew in advance that on this occasion, he might.

Joshua reached into his left pocket, felt the lump of Andim, and crushed it between his fingers. He slowly

drew his hand back out of his pocket, held it in front of him, pushed his fingers together, and *snapped*.

* * *

It turned out there was a way of ostracising renegades. Crane had merely whispered some words to the right people that implied that someone in the moiety might have contracted the Bloat, and they all knew how infectious and explosively-fatal that was. Oh, and by-the-by, hadn't son-of-Silk been seen wandering into those Bloatfly-infested marshes a week or so back? He'd then sat back and let rumour do its work – unwilling to end up as a new layer of what amounted to red gloss paint on the ceilings of their own bedrooms, the populace had promptly exiled son-of-Silk. And exile from the moiety meant either death in the wilderness or entrusting yourself to those heretics in the other moiety who kept on trying to climb the towers. Which, reflected Crane, was pretty much death by another route.

Which was how son-of-Silk was to be found actually wandering in the Bloatfly-infested marshes. He'd reasoned that a quick, if messily-explosive and loud death was preferable to a slow and lingering one from starvation, or a cruelly-inventive and painful one at the hands of the other moiety. As he wandered aimlessly, his stomach grumbling, his gaze chanced upon a lump of shiny rock. Puzzled at finding such a thing in a swamp, he picked it up. As he did so, he noticed more lumps lying around. In fact, it appeared he'd wandered into an entire outcrop of the strange substance. The only shiny rock he knew of was the legendary material called Midna, but that was just a story for children. Still, he felt curiously cheerful having picked the rock up, though he seemed to have inadvertently crushed it in his hand. How odd – he could swear he'd been careful with it. He started whistling a tune his mother used to sing. What else did she use to do – oh yes, she clicked her fingers in time, too. He pushed his fingers together, and *snapped*.

* * *

They were now close.

"One spoonful of powder to speak fluent Sdrawkcab." she cooed, all the while privately gloating over her foresight of snatching the Helix away from 'Joshy-babes'.

“Two spoonfuls to enter reverse aging,” replied son-of-Haberdashery, with faintly false over-enthusiasm.

“Three to morph into a Unicorn and live regressively through history...” she continued.

“And as for four spoonfuls... Hey, the signal appears to be moving slowly to the left...”

“Hush!” she cut him off, drawing her crossbow and beginning to circle out wide.

* * *

Son-of-Silk brushed his finger along his lip.

“Ho ym dog, I t'nac eveileb ti!” he spluttered in surprise.

“Ton a s'nerdlihc elat, tub...” he pinched himself on the cheek, firmly, to check he was not dreaming.

“Erom! I tsum evah erom! Rof htuoy! Rof yrogl! Rof ytilacihtym! Andim! Desselb aipocunrocinu!” Though he considered it prudent to only take a second lick for now.

He then removed his outer garments so as to bag up the Midna. This changed everything. Encumbered, he began to walk back toward Turanel.

* * *

A man strode out in front of him.

“Freeze!” commanded a woman's voice from behind.

She had a crossbow. But the other was only holding a comically inefficient bludgeon.

“Enim! Enim! Teg deffuts uoy gniveiht dnagirb mucs!”

“A-Ha!” She exclaimed, and gleefully put a bolt through his calf.

“WOOO! Yzarc nadirrah!” bellowed son-of-Silk, and proceeded to bury his face in one of the makeshift bags.

And suddenly his forehead blazed with pain far outstripping that of his... hoof. And the bandits cantered off backwards. Sdrawkcab, he thought. He'd have to get used to it. He felt encumbered by the bags due to his change in form. His neck was fortunately flexible enough that he could peruse them. He'd lost one, which was infuriating as regards such bandits getting rich off him.

Why, his new neck could reach all the way around to his wound; his blood had gone to quickpallad, and, as he began to worry the bolt loose with his teeth, the Unicorn started to appreciate some further ways in which Unicorns are different...

* * *

Son-of-Haberdashery picked up the cloth package with growing unease. Things had developed rather quickly and not at all in the direction he'd expected. 'Prospecting for a mythical substance' had surely been a whimsical excuse to get some alone time, what with his outrageously good looks... But in the blink of an eye, her 'prospecting' had turned into violent armed robbery. And, shocking as the reality of the morphogenesis had been, it did not dull the instinctive sense that this was not a prudent choice of companion to be alone with upon coming into possession of something really valuable, in the middle of Nowhere...

* * *

“Okay Josh, first question,” began Flick,

“Joshua!”

“I haven't asked yet. Why is there sometimes a man trying to push a bolt into his leg with his teeth and why there sometimes a unicorn trying to pull a bolt out of his leg with his hoof?”

“Obviously he ate enough Andim to morph into a Unicorn and live regressively through time, but that requires him live backwards through the period he has already experienced but with a different mass, neural network and desire for sugar lumps and at the same time be projected forward through the entirety of his existence whilst instantly experiencing everything which will have happened when he reaches this point in his backward life. He currently exists in a superposition of timeflow and species and by the looks of it is slightly stuck there.”

“Riiiiight. Next question, if he's in a superpo-wotsit of thingamajigs and has a bolt going in/out of his leg why does his face look blissful and not say, in agony?”

“Well, it obviously follows from the superposition that Unicorns must be constitutively high to cope. I believe Nutt et al. estimated it as an 'As Balls' on the Belushi scale.”

“On a slightly different topic, does that bag really contain more Andim and if so why are you going to hand it over to me?” As she asked, Flick waved her crossbow in a pointed manner, made easier by the fact she had just reloaded it with a pointed bolt.

“Yes and... Look out!”

In burst Sillaae, obviously, with son-of-Haberdashery a few steps behind – having seen the fate of son-of-Silk he was none too keen to get involved in a fight – and certainly not while carrying a sack of Andim.

“Hey, Josh, dude. And your girlfriend too? How... perfect,” she cooed, brandishing the crossbow in their general direction.

“Yo,” replied Flick, “Sillaae. How... predictable. Is this your boyfriend here? With a bludgeon that big he’s bound to be compensating for something.” She had had her crossbow primed in advance.

Josh sank down into his chair. Let the ladies sort this one out between themselves, he thought, and I might just get out of here alive...

“Don’t you think you can slink away, prof,” sneered Sillaae. “Just hand over the Helix and we’ll be on our way. We’ll even leave you some Andim as a present, how about that.”

“Just like you left son-of-Silk? You don’t know the dangers Andim poses – to yourself or to our whole world. It isn’t worth it, Sillaae. Not even regressive Unicornity is worth the risk. Lewks and Thomason have shown that...”

“Oh, give it a rest. If I want a lecture on mystic petrology I’ll go to the university. There’s nothing harmful about Andim – we’ve tried it and we know. Now give me the Helix and no-one gets hurt.”

“Wait a moment. If you’ve had Andim already, how come you’re not speaking Sdrawkcab?” asked Flick.

“Oh, I got the hang of reversage pretty quickly. You see...” began Sillaae; but as she was distracted by her own intelligence, Flick loosed her bolt at the sack of Andim. Time appeared to slow down as the eyes of all were fixed on the bolt as it pierced the sack and pulverised the rock. But son-of-Haberdashery’s instincts got the better of him; he began to run just as the cloud of powder went up, and as he ran through it ingested it, unicornified, and vanished pastwards.

And then reappeared. Somersaulted back through the powder, bipedal, forwards, unicorn, backwards, man. His initial slide had kicked the bag of Andim out of range, towards Joshua's feet. Sillaae tracked it with her crossbow. Smirked. Continued tracking up Joshua's chest.

“The Helix. Now. I don't know where you got the spare, but my client was pretty insistent on *your* client not having access to any.”

A spare? Sillaae was holding the Helix. Not *a* Helix. There just weren't any others out there. The exact Helix that he, Joshua...

Actually, that crossbow looked awfully familiar. Joshua flicked his eyes to Flick. She didn't seem to have noticed that her weapon had duplicated itself, and also that the duplicate had teleported and now its firing mechanism was easing into place and oh no oh no

Maybe if he could shoot first?

“Flick throw me the-”

Joshua dived and held out a hand and hoped and the first bolt whistled past his shoulder and

Too late now the Andim was right there the crossbow was in his hand but

* * *

If only son-of-Silk and son-of-Haberdashery had known that the way around the Feature Not Bug of recursive timeflow superposition, the way to keep momentum barrelling you backwards through time as you hurtled from unicorn to human and back again, was just one more spoonful of Andim. But unicorns are not known for their grasp of mystic petrology, and eating more metal is perhaps not top of the transmuting-human state's priorities.

Joshua had never travelled through time before, although of course he'd seen it done at the university. He had also never previously been a unicorn, but thankfully had enough presence of mind in his human state to hang on, to stay humanoid to intersect his previous timeline just after past-him had run from Sillaae.

He stumbled into Sillaae, hoping she didn't notice the Andim dust on his teeth, trying to bring the crossbow up to shoot her here and now, damn the paradox, but

of course she grabbed Flick's crossbow and the Helix too. He had to laugh, and then managed to stagger around a corner and out of sight to vanish backwards, backwards, unicorn to human and back again...

“And as for four spoonfuls...”

* * *

If only son-of-Silk and son-of-Haberdashery had known that the way around the Feature Not Bug of recursive timeflow superposition, the way to keep momentum barrelling you backwards through time as you hurtled between species, was just one more spoonful of Andim. But unicorns are not known for their grasp of mystic petrology, and eating more metal is perhaps not top of a transmuting-human's priorities.

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Where did the time-travel stop, he wondered? And why hadn't he thought to bring enough Andim to figure out what happened after four spoonfuls, for Science? Then Joshua was briefly a unicorn again, and his train of thought was interrupted.

But even unicorn-Joshua couldn't help but notice that even as the people vanished around him, Turanel stood. Even as civilization lived its life in reverse, the towers stood above the clouds, strong and unmoveable.

Until the houses were unoccupied, and the sky-canal-boats vanished, and the farms lay fallow and unclaimed, and the time-travel stopped. Joshua stood still in empty Turanel, transmogrification blessedly paused, albeit in the As Balls state.

And a voice from the skies above spake thusly:

“Right, last game of the night. Winning player from last round goes first – your Unicorn is ready. Everyone else, pieces in position, and remember anything that falls onto the board is out of play, whether you meant to put it there or not.”

“Last round's winner, your turn.”

‘As Balls’ On The Belushi Scale – Extras

Alternate Titles:

The Metaphysical Apocalypse

A Song of What the Fuck and Unicorns

Four Spoonfuls of Sugar Make All Sorts of Weird Shit Happen

Comments:

“Just. What.” – Samuel

“Who is son-of-Haberdashery? WHO IS HE? I thought he was Joshua but then he wasn't and this changes everything. Is he time-travelling Joshua? Is time-travelling him Joshua? Is Ron Dumbledore? Do time-travelling unicorns make people think they've committed robbery when they clearly haven't? Is the bludgeon actually relevant? WHY AM TOWERS?’

- Me, approx 2 hrs after first reading chain as sent to me.” – Danielle

The Editor Adores:

The line “*Things had developed rather quickly and not at all in the direction he'd expected*”, appearing about two thirds of the way through. Just about sums it up, really.

The Greatest Show on Earth

Rory Hennell-James, Samuel Cook, Andrew Conway, Jake Choules, Anna Peel, Michael French, Nakul Khanna, Danielle Saunders, Curtis J. Reubens

John Whiteman ran through devastated streets, dust drifting into his cropped brown hair as sweat ran down his chiselled face with perfect two-day stubble. He paused at a junction, undoing his WarmCo™ jacket to reveal his SportsBrand™ polo shirt, perfectly pressed despite three years of war against the Vibrani oppressors.

He looked left then right then straight ahead, pulling down his DrinCorp™ cap to shade his piercing blue eyes. At the end of the street he saw her, Jane Legges, that woman he found unbearable yet irresistible. Her curves were barely restrained by her SheWear™ clothes just as she was entirely restrained by a Vibrani soldier's loose, one-handed grip on her upper arm.

Once again she had tried to do something herself and been effortlessly captured by the enemy. Once again John would have to rescue her.

"Help!" she screamed, her voice echoing from shattered buildings, "John! Save me!"

As she desperately cried for aid she waved her free arm towards John, announcing him to the squad of aliens surrounding her. The foul creatures raised their black, spiked rifles to their black, spiked shoulders, firing a spray of black spikes down the road towards him.

With typical Vibrani accuracy not a single one found its mark as he sprinted up the street, a Desert Eagle™ blazing away in each hand, their logos glinting in the sun. Ken To, his unquestioning Asian friend, charged alongside, shouting meaningless nonsense in his ethnic accent.

"Cut!" screamed the director.

They all pulled up, John taking the opportunity to wipe his brow with his matching SportsBrand™ ActivTowel™. "What this time?!" shouted John. "It's the 37th take! We've rehearsed this one to death already! 38 takes were not in the contract! What was in the contract was that I get to fight the FaunaSoc™ lion! And do I see any FaunaSoc™ lions around? I don't think so! The bleeding NorCorp™ fake snow was

bad enough! Who decides to shoot the snowy locations on a bloody beach painted white?! And before that we spent months getting Jane to try to act when not in a trench! Honestly!"

Having vented his spleen with such a surfeit of exclamation marks, John actually paused to look at the director and at what had caused this latest interruption. John had been expecting something minor. Again. Maybe one of Ken's hairs was slightly out of place? Or perhaps Jane had pouted in exactly the wrong way? Instead, the director was pointing slack-jawed at one of the Vibrani, making vague gurgling noises. The Vibrani holding Jane, in fact. The Vibrani, who now that John was looking closely at it, didn't so much appear to be a person in a rhinoceros-ant-badger suit with a plastic, fake, black, spiky rifle, as a real rhinoceros-ant-badger with a real, black, spiky rifle. A real, black spiky rifle with which it had actually shot the actual director in the actual chest with an actual spike, actually, hence the slack-jawed gurgling.

This shit had got real.

Jane swung her arm breaking the grip of the rhinoceros-ant-badger, swivelled on one foot and then took a flying kick at the thing's head. It staggered back, and before it could regain its balance, she grabbed it by the horn, swung herself up onto its shoulders, wrapped her muscular thighs around its neck, broke off one of its antennae and stabbed it in the eye with the jagged end. The beast dropped its weapon and screamed like a herd of wildebeest all breaking wind at the same time. Jane somersaulted backwards off the creature's neck, dived forwards between its legs, grabbed the rifle, rolled to her back and fired three of the vicious spikes into each of the thing's crotches. It toppled backwards and stopped screaming after a while.

Jane stood up, brushed off her SheWear™ ActiveSuit™ making it clear that she hadn't bothered to put on any UnderNaughties™ that morning. "That's more like it," she said. "How many style points did I pick up for the neck mount?" To call her acting wooden was to insult lumber, but she was three times champion of the NewColosseum™ GladiGames™. She had wrestled crocodiles, castrated a lion with her bare teeth, and forced a grizzly bear to dance the Charleston. She had no fear, few brains, and her only talent was for devastating violence.

"Jane," said John with panic in his voice, "That wasn't a game. You're not in the arena now. That was a real monster. It wasn't in the F***ING CONTRACT!"

"Huh." Jane's lip wrinkled. "Waste of a good takedown, then." Then she brightened a little and gave John a hopeful look. "Maybe we could find another one and make sure someone's watching this time?"

"Let's not." John mopped his brow with the ActivTowel™ again, resulting in a net gain of sweat to his face. *Bastard thing's soaked already! Bloody SportsBrand™ crap!* He moved to toss it on the ground, but his fashion sense recoiled at the idea. By means of compromise, he rammed it back into his jacket pocket with a shaking hand. "I'm not going near another one of those... those..."

"Vibrani," said Ken helpfully, his head popping up from behind a ThespiNosh™ craft services table. That's what John thought he said, anyway; his mouth was too full of Pork-O-Raptor™-flavoured CholesteRolls™ to be entirely sure. "So the script says at any rate. Beats me what they *really* are."

John was rather surprised by this: partly by the CholesteRolls™ – he *did* wonder how anyone could think of food at a time like this – but also by Ken's survival of the Vibrani attack. Also, by the fact that Ken could speak English. It occurred to John that, in fact, he had never spoken to Ken except in character. At least that explained why he hadn't known that particular fact about his co-star, but it was in itself a surprising, and decidedly sobering, revelation.

God, have we really never talked to each other out-of-character? Never even chatted? A bit of small talk?

"Ken!" John said experimentally. "Nice weather we're having, don't you think?"

Ken looked at him in flaky disbelief, the I-Can't-Believe-It's-Not-Buttery CholesteRolls™ having left their typical spattering of crumbs over a surprisingly large portion of his face. "If by nice weather you mean *showers of alien monster blood*, then, yes, John, I'd say we're having a lovely day."

He swallowed the last of the ThespiNosh™ mystery meat, and continued, addressing Jane, "The script had the Vibrani drag you to their lair with John giving valiant chase. How about we head over to the Insta-Lair™ the director installed on set, only with you

giving chase and John and I following at a safe distance? I'll bet you anything the set designer filled out the Insta-Lair™ order form incorrectly. There's a commonly-missed box that you have to check to say that you don't want monsters included. My sister-in-law had the same problem at her kids' birthday party last year."

Typical. Not a word for, what, a month? And now he's talking a mile a minute. John glowered at Ken, even more irritated that his so-called sidekick was probably right. Who was supposed to be the star of the show? Who has made a *career* of being the star of the show? John Whiteman, that's who! Ken To was *far* too unattractively Asian to win the sponsorship of GovUnited™; he'd never get airtime in an UnderNaughties™ ad, let alone play the role of an unlikely hero in the summer blockbuster this fiasco was shaping up to be.

Jane seemed equally nonplussed to hear a plucky sidekick actually show pluck. However, she quickly realised that she might get to beat up another Vibrani, or rhino-ant-badger, or whatever they were; and this was more than enough to spur her into action.

"Right!" she exclaimed joyfully, as if trying to outpluck Ken, "Let's get to that lair!"

Cheerfully smiling at the now very-much-dead director, grabbing her own SportsBrand™ ElasTie™ to hold her hair back, she sauntered off in the direction of the rest of the set.

This isn't happening. This isn't happening. And seriously, no small talk, ever? John still couldn't believe what was going on. "Hey, Ken." Ken looked up from going to retrieve the alien rifle – wait, why hadn't Jane thought of that? Classic Jane, not even a gram of thought, let alone an ounce. "Did you see the game last night?"

Ken stared at him for a bit. "Are you okay, John?" he asked slowly. "Shall we follow Jane now?"

"Er, yeah, right, let's go." John scowled slightly under his DrinCorp™ cap. It was one thing for Ken to be able to speak English, but for him to talk down to John goddamn Whiteman, well! We'll see what the di- ...What the producer has to say about that when they have the weekly meeting! And to think, he was only trying to make polite conversation.

Black shapes scuttled in the far reaches of the lighting rig, out of sight. Unbeknownst to John and Ken, nine eyes watched from the shadows as they jogged to catch up to Jane. Waiting.

Three of the eyes blinked in unison. “So do you think they’re preparing their surrender, or...”

Half of the remaining eyes glared at the speaker. “I don’t think many people bring assault rifles to a surrender.”

The final trio looked concerned. “How do they look so confident? How are they not struck with terror?”

The Kontin prided themselves on their ingenuity, and their invasion of Earth in 2086 was an attempt at subterfuge. Through various tidbits picked up by their spies, they surmised that humans perceived ants as inhumanly strong, rhinoceroses as inhumanly fierce and badgers as inhumanly dangerous (so dangerous that they had to be culled by the thousand). The conclusion they drew from this was that even laying eyes upon a combination of all three would terrify humanity into submission. They thus airdropped thousands upon thousands of these images onto Earth, and genetically engineered a single soldier resembling the image to land on Earth, and subsequently accept the unconditional surrender of its people.

One of these images happened to land in front of ActionFilm™ CEO Brent Zapper, who thought it was the most fantastic thing he’d ever seen and eagerly set to work on his magnum opus, the Vibrani Terror trilogy (the name was, of course, taken from **AnimalStrength™ Vibrators**, the film’s chief sponsor). He cast renowned brainless action hero John Whiteman as his lead, some equally brainless woman out of the GladiGames™ after every actual actress he’d tried to hire had pointedly refused to work with someone as actively unpleasant as Whiteman, and three-time FilmCorp™ Academy Award Winner Ken To as the plucky sidekick in an attempt to please the MovieMag™ critics.

The Kontin themselves resembled oversized mallards more than anything else, with one eye above each ear and one just above the bill. The three who had been sent along on this mission were diplomats, here to accept the Terran surrender and return home. Things were not exactly going according to plan.

According to the script their director had waved in their faces before the outward beam, they should be glaring sternly yet magnanimously down at their captured human foes – these being emotions best expressed by careful, subtle feather-angling and wing fluffing when you are, essentially, a duck with incredible night vision. Cue triumphant quacking from the peanut gallery, and a successful propaganda film to bolster their boss’s reputation and wipe away public memories of the most recent press scandal.

Instead, the Terran had inflicted a rousing defeat upon their warrior. They had captured their highly superior technology, and they were advancing upon the Command Headquarters (the FilmCorp™ Britelite™ lighting rig swinging above the set). Worst of all, the orbital cameras were still rolling, beaming live to audiences of billions. At best, this was humiliating. At worst it was an intergalactic incident.

Below the Kontin, John trailed behind Ken and Jane. Grasped grimly in his arms was the ActionFilm™ camera prised from the director’s cold, dead arms. That camera, too, was still rolling.

He was damned if the 37th take would be anything but the last. He was finishing the goddamn scene, and fulfilling his goddamn contract, and then he was going back to get some of those CholesteRolls™, because facing an alien invasion with an empty stomach was *not* the LifeExperience™ he had vaguely hoped it would be.

John was choosing to focus on these thoughts in preference to the growing worry that he, John Whiteman, appeared to be taking on the Likeable Sidekick Who Dies So The Much Smarter Hero Can Avenge Him role in this action film.

The Insta-Lair™ came into view ahead of them. Six Vibrani warriors stood before it.

* * *

“What.” The wings of one of the Kontin fluffed up confusedly. “How...”

“We invented them!” The second Kontin flapped a few feet into the air. “We made them up!”

* * *

As John tried his best to artfully frame the action (it was awful; John’s camera skills compared unfavourably to Jane’s aptitude for particle physics),

Jane threw herself at one of the creatures. A shower of spikes from its gun bloodied her but failed to stop her momentum, and she struck the creature, a deadly spiral of limbs and fury. Several of the spikes that had been embedded in her were torn out and driven into her prey.

* * *

“The cost of making one... We couldn’t have had seven if we’d wanted to.” Flap flap flap. “We couldn’t have got seven in our lives depended on it.”

“Well, we have seven at once.” One Kontin shrugged, a gesture traditionally meant to express intense confusion tinged with fear. “The question is, what do we do with them?”

“Can we do anything with them? Will they even listen to us?”

There was a very long pause.

“One way to find out.”

* * *

Ken opened fire, black spikes from his stolen gun taking one of the Vibrani out. Two spikes hit a second, causing it to sigh with pain, before return fire took Ken out of the fight. He was almost certainly dead, in fact, but John was used to thinking in film clichés; an action hero wouldn’t go down so undramatically. Jane, bloody and worn, swung towards the injured Vibrani, but she too went down under a hail of spikes.

John levelled the camera at the alien creatures as they levelled their guns at him. “This,” he said, voice quivering, “is so not what I signed up for.”

He, too, fell.

“So, err, hello!” This was the voice of the Kontin holding a rather short piece of string, pushed forwards by his longer-string-holding fellows. “That went well, eh? Bit bloody, but you know. They’re loving this back at home, I’m sure.”

It coughed, mostly to break the long silence that had followed its speech. “I am curious, though. When did we make you lot?”

“Make?” The Vibrani’s voice was like candyfloss being fed into a woodchipper.

“Well, yes.” The Kontin spokesmallard flapped a bit. “We presumably made you for just this purpose, just as we made our first rhinoceros-ant-badger.”

“Not made.” The Vibrani appeared to be loading their weapons, much to the consternation of the Kontin. “Took.”

“Oh.” A pause, then, “Awfully sorry about that. I had no idea.”

* * *

Far away, as five billion Kontin watched three of their kind be utterly torn apart, a few looked instead to the sky; those whose job it was to monitor unusual occurrences spotted, one by one, the sleek black ships approaching their planet.

Things were about to get a lot worse.

The Greatest Show on Earth – Extras

Alternate Titles:

Last Action Hero Ever™

Product Placement™

Needless Mid-Story Vibrator Joke™

Comments:

“I’m pleased to see the rhinoceros-ant-badgers survived to the end of the story and I, for one, welcome them as our new overlords” – Samuel

“This actually went in a really interesting direction. All the bad characters are already dead, and we have the setup to an actually good story. Sequel, sequel!” – Michael

The Editor Adores:

The utter proliferation of ™s, and the idea of a rhinoceros-ant-badger hybrid being the most terrifying creature possible. That and the general brilliant silliness of the whole shebang.

Downstream

Curtis J. Reubens, Danielle Saunders, Connor Willmington-Holmes, Sam Brennan, Michael French, Edward Heaney, Olivia Morley, Samos Ottewill-Soulsby, Jake Choules, Anna Peel, Sarah Binney, Rory Hennell-James

Sebastian gazed down at the city below. "This is never going to work."

Eliza grinned. "Oh ye of little faith. Have I ever let you down before?"

"Just the once." Just for a second, something sparked behind his eyes. It was cold and angry, standing in stark contrast to the jovial, albeit tense, atmosphere within their vessel. "I hope it won't happen again."

That gave Eliza pause for a moment, but only a moment. "Just be ready, Seb. It'll be any minute now."

Far below them, the city heaved with activity. The smoke belching from the factories was thinning a little, the setting winter sun marking the end of the working day. People bustled through the network of streets below, while the spider-like contraptions ridden by the rich stepped over them, expelling steam, their metal feet scattering the masses below. A metaphor writ large and literal, Eliza thought wryly.

Then, something exploded. Without even looking, Eliza knew where it had been, what had gone up. She had spent enough time studying maps and plans and half-remembered sketches; enough time plotting, and planning. The first blast was in an old, mostly-abandoned district, the biggest and loudest and easiest. It was to get their attention. The subsequent three did rather more than that.

"Down!" At Sebastian's barked order, their ship began to descend; for her part, Eliza waved a hand, dispelling the glamour that had hidden the ship. Anyone looking up would have seen a ripple in the air, followed by the sudden appearance of a massive, heavily-armed steamship moving downwards at speed.

Well, she thought, that's the easy part over with.

Normally the ship hurtling from sky to thoroughfare would have been Really Bad News for everyone involved. Air, yes. The ship could do air, water, ectoplasm. Most substances in between, too. Solid ground, at this speed? Maybe in two or three of the Lower Dimensions, but not this one.

So it was very lucky for all concerned that the surface of the city's largest street was crumbling away from the sites of four convenient explosions, and into the water flowing underneath. Corralled and hemmed and forced underground to carry refuse decades ago by the city's celebrated Mr Mintstream, the mighty river Demms was returning with a vengeance.

And right along the landing path of Eliza's – damn, no, not since that last meeting with the Investors – of *their* vessel, too. Gosh, that was lucky.

Eliza only realised she'd said the last bit out loud when Dante appeared next to her, leaning over the side of the ship.

"Luck," Dante said, her hands weaving arcane knots of rope through the deck railings and back to the straps across her torso. Sebastian had vanished, presumably to fetch his own landing harness from the cabin. "Luck, and half a hold's worth of my best nitro. This better pay off, Cap."

"Don't worry, it will." Eliza rolled her eyes. "Those Investor creeps were good and clear. All we need to do is land this tank and get Seb on the ground, and they pay up. Rest of the job's all ours. This'll pay off good. If it doesn't, we'll all be too dead to care."

Retrofitted with extra manoeuvring jets, the ship darted through crashing rubble with a precision unnatural to its size. "BRACE," blurted out speakerheads on all decks. In the engine room, crew all sweating like pigs, levers were flipped and buttons where punched. "BRACE."

Above deck Dante and Eliza were finalising their harness knots but Seb was yet to be seen. Surely he was hunkered down in the cabin, Eliza thought. "He's missing all the fun!" Dante shouted over the mounting clangour. "BRACE."

They hit a rising vent of warm air, presumably coming from what remained of the Undercity's steamstations. Built and rebuilt over countless generations, caverns

unknown to the authorities still harboured certain privateers in the city's lower levels.

"WAAHOOO!" Eliza lived for these moments. Skirting down a waterfall through countless layers of crumbling stonework was a dream come true – *literally*. "BRACE." Her prescience manifest mainly as heightened intuitions, but sometimes she could glimpse into moments not yet past. This was one.

"BRACE." Buffeted around by currents of air and water, the ship tried to stabilise its descent. Costing a great deal of pressure, they broke from the turbulence and slowed up to land.

"Seb? SEB!" Eliza called, scrambling free of her harness.

"He's not in the cabin," said Dante, as a spluttering of two small engines – two stroke by the sound –broke into earshot.

"Thanks for the ride, Captain!" Emerging from the hold on Dante's gyrocopter, Seb threw a sizable purse towards Eliza. "Keep the change!"

"THAT'S NOT FOR SALE!"

As the bag hurtled towards her, time seemed to slow to a halt, as *deja vu* struck her like a rock.

A memory stirred, from another life.

Chasing the scent of blood, running with the pack, ahead of Kreck and the other year-olds.

Over hills and through the wood, harsh branches whipping at her skin, moving past the hunters, who snapped 'Back!' in frustration.

The smells of Deelas hiding in the undergrowth, their tentacles slowly swaying back and forward, the new cubs stopping and snuffling for them, then jumping back whimpering as their snouts are caught.

Still onwards she ran, further and faster than all the others, even the great loper Dethrox.

'Back, slow!' they call but she was gone.

Moving ever onwards. Getting faster and faster. Faster.

Suddenly a new scent, powerful and near. Danger! Trying to slow down, too late, panic.

Then darkness.

* * *

Something else struck her like a rock – namely the bag of coins – snapping her out of her reverie. She knew what that was, of course, it was unmistakably a Remembering. A fragment of a past life that somehow connects to your present one. No one she'd known had ever heard of it actually happening to anyone real, though. Just the myths. And right now, despite the magnitude of what just happened, she had a more pressing problem – with Seb flying off in the gyrocopter, that was their collateral gone, and their map.

Too late to stop him though, she thought, given that he's already airborne.

"Where's the station?" she shouted. Damned if the swine was going to leave her here without the next step of the plan at least.

"Downstream!" came the call back, almost drowned by distance and the engine-noise. "You'll know it when you see it!"

And like that, Sebastian was gone.

The ship was now underground, though most of said ground had collapsed, holding position in a relatively calm patch of the murky Demms. Away from her the river surged and boiled with renewed vigour, seething its way into the darkened tunnel ahead.

"All hands to positions! I want this ship turned and sailing an hour ago! We just made a very big hole in a very important part of town, and I'll be hanged if we're still here when someone comes to ask why. Move!"

"...ptain?" a voice answered immediately. "Captain?" That was odd.

Something was wrong. Several crewmembers were looking at her, and they knew that something was wrong. She was sure that everything had been in a different place. There'd been no noticeable transition, nor any noticeable cut, just a vague suspicion that nothing was quite right.

"Captain, what were you doing?"

Now was not the time to display any uncertainty. Her voice was firm and clear.

"I was giving an order, curse you! Move!"

"Captain, we've been moving since you gave the order. Must have been... twenty seconds ago?"

"Then..." About twenty seconds. This couldn't be a coincidence; it had to have something to do with the Remembering. Had she... done anything during those twenty seconds? If so, what? And... No. No hesitation. Again she rallied.

"Get us to the station," she said, a dismissive certainty in her voice that she certainly didn't feel. "It's downstream. You'll know it when you see it."

She went below.

Eliza entered the cabin, grabbing a bottle of the dubious blue liquid that she really did not want to get into the habit of drinking when everything went wrong. Seb had gone on countless excursions with her before, both failed and successful, but it was foolish of her to let her guard down. Was the Remembering connected to this betrayal – a reminder to always be wary?

The only time that Sebastian ever showed a sign of discontent was with that terrible mess of a job a year ago, when the glamour failed and twenty shipmates suddenly found themselves very visible. Seb had never forgiven her for that mistake; even with his skill with ectoplasm he was lucky to have only lost a kidney.

This time the mission was to cause havoc in the factories and Demms, using the distraction to get Seb on the ground and to steal whatever the Investors were after in the main ectofactory. The first part of the plan had gone very well; however, the prospect of losing their collateral, a member of the crew, the trust of the Investors and the added bonus of having an entire city out for her blood was never a good thing.

"Why are we going back to the station, Captain?" Dante asked, making the brave decision to follow her into the cabin.

"One thing I've learnt from being a ship captain all these years," she said, "is that you always have a back-up plan."

The thing people forgot about the age of steam is that it was built on the bones of what went before it. The likes of Mr. Mintstream might find this embarrassing and seek to cover up the ugly manifestations of a less enlightened past. But all you had to do was rip through the surface to find the older layers lurking in the dark.

Of course, in doing so Eliza and her crew would have attracted all sorts of attention, including the constab, who would no doubt be swarming and preparing to deal with the unwanted intrusion. She cursed her crew, Seb and the Investors roundly as the ship fumbled its way to the station. She tried visualising the layout of the area, but drew a blank.

The new city might have rejected the Demms, but the old city had loved it. The river had been water supply, road and sewer in one, and all the most important buildings and organisations had clung to its edge. The banks. The court of justice. Parliament. The prison. The old structures had long since been buried, but their replacements had been built on top of them on the same sites. These pillars of government were ringed with security measures to fend off attack from the ground and the sky.

By now the hive officers of the constab legion would be aware they were dealing with a renegade airship. Below their feet was the last direction they'd be looking for danger. But they wouldn't forget to look there either. The constab weren't always the sharpest of investigators, but they were thorough and they were fast. Eliza knew that what she had gained was not an escape, but a head-start, and being lost on the Demms was chipping away at it.

Ahead and above, a form in the darkness. Vast, broad and hulking, but visible only as the tiniest subtlety of shade against the gloom. Eliza spotted it first, and sensed that if she hadn't called out about it, it would have been a good minute before anyone else had done so. Heavy use of glamour tended to leave lingering traces even once dispelled, and heightened senses were a common side-effect, but this? This didn't feel like that.

In any case, it was the station. It lay like a great beam, featureless across the river. Not five hundred yards further down the bank was their target. The crew had

immediately set about weighing anchor upon Eliza's sighting of the station, and now the ship was coming to rest directly beneath it. The engines, cut off, strained a little against the anchor chain with the last of their power, then died. Eliza had seen to it that a skeleton crew would keep the boilers warm while everyone else was away, just in case. An extravagant waste of fuel, in most circumstances, and costly, but worth it considering the threat of the constab's pursuit. And the massive payoff of the operation, of course.

"Go! Go! Go!" Eliza shouted, waving her strike team down the gangplank and onto the dark, expectant metal of the station platform. Dante hefted the bulk of the water jet cutter, its long tongue with its deceptively small nozzle curled just where she could reach, onto her back; she made quick work of the buckles, strapping the great contraption securely around her waist and shoulders. Dante stepped back, with a muttered curse and a pinch to his lips. He knew as well as she that if this machine failed, the ship and all who sailed it wouldn't live to see the light of day.

She nodded to him, once, and then ran down the gangplank as nimbly as a spider, onto the platform and out, out along what had once been the bank of the Demms, the mighty river foaming beside her.

This was it.

Seb was off to do whatever the Investors had seduced him into doing; whether or not that included the completion of their original bargain didn't matter any more. Eliza's true goal lay beyond: specifically, beyond and a little bit above, where, for the first time in a hundred years, the Queen was addressing Parliament, with the Device around her neck that controlled every valve in Britain.

She would have heard the klaxons sounding; at this very moment she was being escorted along an escape route that nobody (but Eliza) knew of, at a pace that nobody (but Eliza) could have foreseen; and at the very moment when she might imagine herself within the bounds of her (previously) impenetrable security, the very floor would drop away beneath her, cut through by the bottled-up fury of the Demms.

And with the Device in Eliza's hands and the Queen at her mercy, there would be nothing she could not do,

and nothing the world would not give her to save itself.

Ahead of her, her crewmembers had found the place she had described to them, where a rusted steel ladder led up along one arch of the vastly ribbed tunnel to a vanishingly dark mouth in its ceiling, a trapdoor long ago rusted shut and forgotten about. It, in itself, was not important; it was merely a marker for the location her prescience had shown her, where in exactly two minutes and forty-eight seconds the Queen of all the Empire would discover that solid rock was no longer what it purported to be, and fall like a great white butterfly into the bowels of her own city.

There was no more point in shouting orders to the crew. They knew what they were doing; they had trained for months. They scurried around Eliza, anchoring her to the bank and walls with thick steel chains, dropping the heavy, hungry mouth of the water jet cutter into the Demms, preparing the strong net that must catch the Queen in her fall. If the Device was lost, so too were they.

Brace, she thought, wryly.

Forty seconds. Twenty. Fifteen.

Ten. Nine. Eight.

Eliza aimed through the sights.

Two. One.

boom

(packbrothers behind her, she dove into the icy river)

A wave of pressure flung Eliza back. Smoke filled her vision; eyes watering, she could just make out the outline of a figure in the gaping space where the trapdoor had been. A pale figure in the shadows –

Clapping.

Blood roaring in Eliza's ears told her something was very wrong.

She shouted out to be let down, but none of the crew replied. She looked around and, with a sickening feeling in her stomach, realised the cavern was empty. She tried the trigger of the jet cutter, but nothing

happened. Now she was suspended in the harness, helpless. Like a bug under a pin.

As the figure stepped into the ship's floodlights Eliza saw it was not the Queen but an old man dressed in a white suit. He applauded, politely. His face was tantalisingly familiar.

"Exceptional. You're right on time, Captain Ygran."

Eliza spat dust into the foaming river. "Who are you? What's going on?"

"Where's the Queen, you mean? She's in Birmingham, where she has been for the last fortnight. You see, Captain Ygran, prescience is so very tricky. It's almost impossible to tell what is an actual Remembering and what is, say, an infra-biotic induced hallucination."

She realised where she had seen his face: Everywhere. The backs of coins, the manhole covers in the streets, the portraits in the public buildings. She was in serious trouble.

"Are you going to kill me?"

Mr Mintstream laughed. "My dear. Nothing so melodramatic. I just know it's really very difficult to get to talk to you properly. I'd have liked to discuss this with your colleague Sebastian, but it would appear you misplaced him.

"No, Eliza. I want you to tell me everything you know about the Investors."

"What investors?"

"The Investors. The ones who now own your ship, who ordered you to bring Sebastian Flout to this city and who placed those explosives."

"Oh, *those* Investors. Well I think you just about summed up all I know. Unless you didn't know they have a lot of money to invest."

"You know I'd really appreciate it if you didn't try to play games with me. Britain has no more need of the Investors and their ilk. This world has no more need of them. I would be awfully obliged if they stayed in their own dimensions. Let me be more specific. Where have you been meeting them?"

"On my ship."

(the water bit, but it only made her angry, made her fight harder)

"And where, my dear, was your ship when you met them?" Mr Mintstream took a few steps toward the bank.

"Anywhere. They found me. Or perhaps Sebastian brought them, maybe you should have sent him hallucinations." She let the useless jet-cutter fall and slowly slid her hand towards the knife at her hip.

"Oh I did, don't you worry. Mr Flout is being taken care of as well."

(she was so close, but... Danger!)

"Well Captain Ygran," Mintstream continued, straightening up. "I see no reason for you to dangle any longer."

He reached inside his jacket and Eliza moved. She whipped out the knife and slashed at the ropes holding her.

One.

Two.

Three.

And with that she fell. Into the river. Into the past. Into her future.

Downstream – Extras

Alternate Titles:

In Which Overdoing the Steampunk Is Heartily Abandoned

Comments:

"I like where this went. Like the Vibrani(TM) story [The Greatest Show on Earth, page 14 – Ed.], I'd be interested to see what happens now. Good work on cohesiveness everyone!" – Michael

The Editor Adores:

boom

Providence: A Martina McGuire Mystery

Connor Willmington-Holmes, Curtis J. Reubens, Danielle Saunders, Edward Heaney, Jake Choules, Samos Ottewill-Soulsby, Anonymous, Sarah Binney, Olivia Morley, Samuel Cook, Michael French

My license ran out in '23, but in this city no-one bothers to check. My work is usually underground, 'quasi-legitimate' you might say. What I do isn't against any laws, but usually because the lawmakers don't know it. I investigate the weird, the unknown, the things that made you afraid of the dark as a kid.

Martina McGuire PI, 140 East 63rd Street – *The Barbizon*.

Tonight I'm supposed to pick up another case, but I'll be damned if I have to work the Midwest again. Why can't they land here, right in my high-class-living lap? More eyes here I guess, they might get spotted. That said I knew one who worked as a bartender. Always thought those Southsides tasted a bit funny.

The place looks rotten. A few windows broken in and a bad smell from out back drifts right into the street. Perfect. I walk around and find a taxi rank and an unlocked drain cover – *exits* – each only a few blocks away. Sometimes they set honeytraps, pretending to be the client. Gotta be smart to stay alive.

She turns up late, looking pretty outta place all fur-lined hood and red shoes. Coulda been anywhere in the city, but we meet here. Why? I reckon she's scared.

"You're the detective?" she drawls.

"I am," I say simply. I'll never not want to respond to stupid questions with barbed sarcasm, but their reactions to sarcasm are widely varied and seldom positive. Some simply won't understand; others will try to rip your face off. "You need my help."

"No. Not me." She won't meet my eye. "The monastery."

I sigh, long and low. It's been a long time since I've had any sort of dealing with the council, and I'd very much like to keep it that way. "I can't help you, kid."

"Please." Her eyes are still focused on the grain of the table. Again, quieter: "Please."

I should go. I should just stand up and walk out, right now. I should.

"Tell me everything."

I am an idiot.

"It began a month ago." She's looking at me now, occasionally; shooting glances at me between bouts of looking everywhere, anywhere else. "Something happened on Rhode Island. We still don't know what it was, but it was bad. The ones we took in, the ones fleeing for their lives... They were in a real bad way. We sent a few people over, see what they could find."

"And they never came back?"

"Oh, they came back." She pauses. After an eternity: "We made it back just fine."

I arch an eyebrow. "But?"

"But every one of us remembers what happened differently. I would swear to you upon my life that a great winged beast had turned Rhode Island into its hunting ground, had half a dozen of my closest allies not sworn themselves that there was a plague, or a curse, an explosion or an inquisition."

It's tricky, tamping down curiosity and an eye roll all at once. The degenerate wrecks who were once the citizens of Providence, Rhode Island, have their own reasons for haunting it, much as the papers try to obscure it. Any other travellers seeking mysteries or treasures or a goddamn weekend break in Rhode Island have only themselves to blame for whatever comes to them.

No, reports of otherworldly horrors marauding through New England were not unusual. And yet – split consciousness. Multiple apocalypses, again, not unheard of, but at the same time? Strangest of all, the dame was *here*, when she'd been *there*, yet seemed remarkably sane.

I sigh, feel my curiosity getting the better of me. She's watching my expression, bolder than she was. I wonder briefly how she found me, how any of them ever find me. Word of mouth, scratchings on the walls, moonshine-induced hallucination, mystic trance. Find Detective McGuire. She'll fight your demons and sting your shadows and stare broodingly out of rain-drenched windows, all for a reasonable fee.

I don't ask. I never ask. But I wonder, more so because she *came back*, and isn't cauterizing her brain with stump liquor but is looking out from under that fur lining with less fear, more trust, more hope.

Godamnit. I can tell I'm going to take the case. Of all the pan-dimensional fractures in all the haunted, cephalopod-ravaged seaboards in all the multiverse, I had to walk into hers.

"Well," I say, keeping my voice steady, my face emotionless. No need to let her know just yet. "I never thought the monastery was much for outsiders. Suppose you tell me what you figure you need a detective for."

"Eight different people, all of them trustworthy. Eight different stories. Those above have come to the natural conclusion that none represent the truth behind the matter. I think you know what we need a detective for."

Okay, so I want the case. I really do want the case. But I think that someone just made a mistake.

"So where would the council recommend that I start?"

"Isn't that sort of deduction your job?" she asks. Her voice is calm and flat; she's holding my gaze. Five minutes ago she could only bring herself to take her eyes out of her lap if they flicked quickly around the room. "But it seems to me that there's only one place where all this trouble starts. Providence."

Oh, dear me. That's the mistake, right there. Firstly, the council should know better than to send in one person where eight have failed, and where eight have failed in a way that wouldn't have been clear if there hadn't been eight; even if they were that stupid, they'd just be sending another of their own. Secondly, though, you don't get jobs from the council. You get hints, you get suggestions, you get something between a promise and a rumour, vague and nebulous but always binding, of rewards, and you get fleeting flashes of symbols and nods of support or of disapproval when you start following a new road... but you don't get jobs.

So who's trying to hire me, why do they think they can get away with impersonating the council... and why do they want me in Providence?

I ask a few more questions, ignore the answers, accept the case, and head home. I was careful not to

give her any solid schedule: I don't need anyone getting suspicious if I don't show in Providence when I said I would.

The next three days are staying-in days. Staying in and researching. Mainly, researching whether I can crack the case without risking Providence. My work is no less methodical than it is usually, but inwardly I feel rushed. My employers may not be expecting me in Providence right now, but they're certainly waiting. And if they tire of waiting, I can't be sure that they won't seek me out here.

On the third day I give up. If I stay here the case will remain impossible – not by chance, I suspect. Providence is the only place I'll pick up any leads. Besides, there are no rain-drenched windows to stare out of here: the weather's been unseasonably muggy all week.

I run into Lula in the hallway as I'm leaving. She's taken better advantage of the heat than I have: sunburned cheeks glow pink against the dark brown of her face. This encounter too, I suspect, is not by chance.

"Sleuthing again?" she asks, grinning as though she's pleased at the choice of word, while I cringe inwardly at it. She always seems interested in my work, but I don't think she's ever really 'got' it. I mean, she gets what it's *about*, but she doesn't get what it's *like*.

"Just going on a little trip to Providence," I tell her.

Dismissing Lula as a problem for another day, I leave the safety of my nest. My Colt 1911 is tucked in my waistband, though I've got a good feeling that a water pistol might be just as useful.

More valuable is the bottle of Jim Bean riding nice and snug in my coat pocket. Not for me, though I could use it. My usual is considerably cheaper and fermented in a bathtub. This bottle was a present from a particularly grateful client and has outlived two Presidential administrations. There is a person in Providence who knows nearly everything that happens in town. The Bean is my ticket to meet them, proof of my suitability, like a bow tie and a silly handshake wrapped in one.

Penn Station is weirdly empty as I catch my train. No one fancies a trip to New England today. I know how they feel, but I pull myself together and, like I was told

to do in Sunday school, direct my thoughts to Providence.

People often ask why all the weird crap happens in Providence. My theory is that it's a good address. Whether you have too many tentacles, have misplaced yourself in the wrong dimension or just woke up after a long nap to find your home infested with shaved monkeys, it's the place to be and be seen terrorizing humanity. That's what's going through my head as I arrive at the Portofino of the preternatural.

The air feels stiff, feels like I got a dozen reels of rope slowing me down. I shoulda guessed once I saw Penn Station was empty. When did I enter the field? Wouldn't be difficult to plant a medium, something I'd never notice until it was too late. Lula's pink cheeks burn my mind; she didn't get those from the sun. When I get out of here, Lula and I need to have a little heart to heart, see who she's really working for. *If I get out.*

I feel for my Colt, knowing it won't do any good, and quicken my pace. Lucky the informant I'm due to meet is located in a pocket dimension, even in an etheric field, I'd be able to meet him. Hopefully.

I place my hand on an alley wall and mutter the incantation. A circle of shining glyphs appear, they're blurred and waver dangerously but they do the trick. A cheap doorbell appears in the centre and I ring it. No answer. I ring it again. And again.

The circle flings itself wide and a human-shaped shadow appears, "Get out."

"I'm stuck in here."

"Serves you right poking your nose into a trap."

I'm speechless so I let Jim Bean do the talking. The shadow hesitates, finally it gives up and gestures for it. I press it to the wall and it assimilates itself into the shadow's hand. I wait till the shadow has appraised it before asking, "What happened a month ago?"

My confidant takes a long pull on the bottle and sighs happily. "Ahh, for some peace and quiet. Ya schmucks can't stop yourselves sticking your nose into what don't concern you. You're gonna get yourselves eaten."

I drum my fingers on a drainpipe. "Dammit, Nerg, I didn't come here for a lecture. Why are all the

investigators singing different songs? Why are the council asking me for this, of all people? Is Lula – "

"You're asking the wrong sorts of questions, darlin'." Though he doesn't have a mouth I can tell from his voice he's smiling. "What you really oughta be asking is – how are you gonna get outta here without a soul stitched to your body?"

He downs the rest of the whiskey in one and suddenly flings it out of the wall. The empty bottle comes flying out of the wall, narrowly missing my head, and shatters against the side of the alley –

Stopping a scrabbling, squelching creature in its tracks and pinning it to the wall like a butterfly under a pin.

I start. Goddamn. Should've heard it coming. It's a shebbin – half-alive, half-machine, all-hungry. I never saw one this close before. It writhes under the shard of glass embedded in the brickwork but can't escape. Nergal belches, satisfied. "There'll be more where that came from, darlin'. I'd get goin' if I were you."

As I start walking he calls behind me. "The boundary between madness and sanity is thin, Detective. Watch you don't accidentally cross over."

I don't bother to look back at the wall; I know he has already disappeared. I had hoped that he would have provided a bit more information however he had taken down the shebbin.

I've never liked shebbins much, but the same could be said for any denizen of Providence. They are a simplistic creation designed for hunting and eating, the fact that they are surviving in the etheric field is not a good sign. Investigating the shebbin more closely would be real fun, however I've gotta keep moving. Don't want to get caught up in the trap my clients did.

Finding the one who set up the field, that shouldn't be hard. An etheric field is a good parlour trick, but stick around the unusual long enough and it becomes easier and easier to focus your thoughts so your mind is protected. Just keep focused. Whoever set up this kind of field wanted something protected, a way to force the monastery or the council or just some random passer-by to leave this place in a hurry. Visions of disaster are a great way of removing trespassers.

Walking past the body of the shebbin, the air stiffens against my movements. Shadows flicker at the

periphery of my vision, but I can't let them distract me. The streets are empty – never a good sign in this town, though it makes travelling easier. It isn't long before I find myself standing before an old store, its door open and inviting.

"Anyone home?"

Just as I say this, a cloud passes across the sun and I hear a noise as of a trumpet sounding, but nothing further happens, so I put it down to the pernicious influence of the etheric field. I cross the threshold.

As I do so, I glance up at the sign hanging outside the store. It proudly displays, in rather faded letters, "Lamb and Co. Chandlers and Goldsmiths to the Highest". This strikes me as a rather odd combination – it also appears the last word has succumbed to the ravages of time or multi-dimensional instability. To the Highest what?

As I proceed in, I hear footsteps coming towards me. I ready my Colt. Out here, you never know who or what you might meet. A man appears from the dingy recesses of the store. His face is ageless and his hair a shocking white. But the most noticeable thing about him is his eyes. They seem to be on fire.

"Ah, you're right on time." the man says.

"On time for what?" I counter, completely nonplussed. He cocks his head as if confused.

"Why, the Apocalypse, of course. Don't tell me you didn't notice the signs? Walking around with a sword sticking out of your mouth is no fun, let me tell you. And the plague of squids, surely you saw that? I told them people would expect locusts, but it was felt squids were close enough – a bit icky, lots of legs. We even did the trial run for the whole rolling heaven and earth up. It's not every day a large city disappears to be replaced by a dimensional instability. We were getting worried no Lamb would show up, but now you're here, we can go right ahead."

"Ahead with what?"

"Sorry, was I not clear? The End of the World, obviously".

I pause for a moment. For some reason, I don't think he's kidding.

"Just to clarify – what's my part in all this?"

"Why, didn't they tell you? You're the Lamb! The first sacrifice of the last ritual! The beginning of the end! Well, aside from the tests and the portents, anyway. You're the great big ribbon to be cut by the burning scissors of the Almighty to herald the advent of the final day! And can I say, it's a real pleasure to meet you. I cannot tell you how delighted I am that the Apocalypse came on my shift. It really is an honour for me to be the aforementioned scissors, so to say."

"Your... shift?"

"Why yes, I am the 1,285th incarnation of Death in this region. We each only get a few thousand millennia, you see."

This takes a second to process. The man, if that's an apt description, is surprisingly jovial, effusive even, despite his talks of the End and Death and –

"Hang on. You're going to kill me?"

"That's right!" he beams.

"To start the End of the World?"

"Absolutely!"

".....And if I say no?"

"You can't! I mean, I guess it seems a reasonable response, particularly if you weren't informed, (though that really isn't my department, or my fault, just so you know), but I'm afraid it's rather important. And much as I'd love to toy with you – we so rarely get to kill ourselves rather than picking up the souls – I'm afraid I won't risk this region's Grand Finale purely for my own enjoyment, so it'll be a nice quick death. Oh look, there it goes!"

The man with burning eyes had taken a step closer, and as I look down I catch sight of a faint reflection, as if on the outline of an unseen sword, spanning the gap between his hand and my suddenly bleeding chest. A great gong sounds, too loud and too real to be any etheric field, and the island – no, the reality – shakes as if struck by a mighty blow.

"There we are!" smiles the white-haired man. "Done and done. Invisible sword, gets them every time you know. None of that scythe business from a few Deaths back. Great at the time, but horribly outdated now. Give my regards to the Gatekeeper! Tell him he'll be very busy imminently."

His eyes burn into mine, as explosions rock in the distance, and patches of dimensional instability flash into existence, leaving only warped and twisted remnants of the former space behind them. Sounds distort as if a great wave had engulfed creation, and with a muted tinkle, the walls between dimensions shatter into an eternity of shards. Turning his head, my killer peers through the remnants of collapsing reality.

“Oh, what a lovely backstory too. I’m sorry that had to come to nothing, you had such promise. Still, rejoice! You’ve become the most important person in your entire species’ history! The lifeblood of time flows through and out of your veins! Ooh, I bet that stings actually. Let me ease your pain.”

Another flash of impossible reflections. Then nothing but the sound of finality.

Providence: A Martina McGuire Mystery – Extras

Alternate Titles:

Curiosity Killed All the Cats (and Everything Else Too)

Noirmageddon

*Rhode Island Dead*⁷

Comments:

“Well, given it was so noir, bringing in the end of the world seemed the only way of making it lighter....” – Samuel

"I had the fun job of finishing this chain, just as the End of Days was thrown in as the plot twist. Now, I'm all for thwarting the Apocalypse, realising all the tantalising foreshadowing in earlier sections, and spitting in the eye of Death Itself - but doing so in one person's segment probably would have given it a very rushed, very Deus Ex Machina feel. So, nope! Bye bye McGuire!" – Michael

The Editor Adores:

The utter saturation of this story in noir. Noironironironiron. (Also the genesis of this chain, in that it wasn't actually supposed to exist at all. Such is life.)

⁷ “That one only works if everyone knows Rhode Island Red is a breed of chicken. That may be too obscure even for CUSFS.” - Samuel

oh ye gods

Curtis Reubens, Eleanor Smith, Sarah Binney,
Michael French, Anna Peel, Askhat Sarkeev,
Danielle Saunders, Anonymous, Isobel Sands,
Samuel Cook, Jake Choules, Rory Hennell-James

There is a story, one of valour and tyranny, of great deeds and terrible acts. It is the story of Saer Simmon, a girl whose bravery far exceeded her years, and of her closest friend James Rackwood, whose resourcefulness saved his friend's life on countless occasions. It is the story of Myna Sweetblossom, gentle princess of the Elven Reaches, and Darone Skillet of the mighty dragonkin of the mountains, who brokered a fragile alliance between their two peoples to stand against the dark emperor Elyx. It is the story of the battles that raged between light and dark; the sacking of the Lit City; the routing of the Elyxian horde on the plains of Azeernae by the warlord Oxe, who united seven of the nine great orcish tribes under his banner; the coalition of five races that rode to meet Elyx and his monstrosities, with the fate of the world at stake.

This? This is not that story.

Some time after the Lit City fell, the elves mustered a force to retake it. The dwarves scoffed at their hubris, the dragonkin weren't willing to help their age-old enemies unless they absolutely had to, humanity had Elyx's forces at their gates and the orcs had not yet entered the war, so the elves stood alone, and Elyx's Eye foresaw their plot. As an army of elves began their slow trek through the mountains, unaccustomed to such terrain, a legion of the dead stalked towards them from the north, razing every settlement they crossed. They left no survivors, save one – a young elf, a soldier on leave. He rode south, carrying a warning to the elvish army.

Maybe if he had succeeded, the elves would have been able to mount a successful defence. As it was, they were caught unawares, and cut down in their thousands; the soldier never carried his warning to them.

This is his story.

This particular elf went by the name of Linnor, and he was a shepherd by birth, although a soldier by trade. He was not particularly good at fighting; he *was* good at cooking, making bad puns, and playing the *shamrahire*, an instrument only elf shepherds could

have invented because only elf shepherds have the kind of time and boredom required to create such a convoluted instrument *and then actually listen to it*. But in these dark times, anyone who wasn't desperately needed on the farm turned to soldiery as their natural duty.

The first thing Linnor did, after clambering out of the wreckage of the kitchen where he had been cooking at the time of the attack, was think, *Oh ye gods, my soup will be ruined*, which he thought less because it was important and more because it was an excuse not to think about anything else. The second thing he did was leave. He didn't go thinking to warn the elvish army; he went to get Away.

He got quite far Away from his home before he realised he had gone completely in the other direction from the elvish army, and by this time he was tired, hungry, cold, wet, and devoting a large portion of his energy to pointedly not thinking about what had happened to his home because *oh ye gods, oh ye gods...*

It was at this point that he spotted a small, round house, squatting on the craggy hillside, with sheep grazing around it. Sheep were a reassurance, even if they weren't elvish sheep, which are taller and more graceful than normal sheep (since elves have kept sheep since before the start of recorded history, it is debatable whether the sheep grew like the elves or the elves grew like the sheep).

In hindsight, he probably ought to have noticed – before he knocked on the door of the house – that the sheep were *green*, and that the house had legs.

They were scrawny yellow legs like a chicken's and they were folded up awkwardly under the porch but, woken by Linnor's knocking, they unfolded and stretched and slowly clambered upright with the little round house perched precariously on top like a treehouse.

Linnor was mildly surprised.

A hatch opened in the panelled roof of the house and an arm stretched itself out warily. "Who's there?" someone yelled. "What're you doing here?"

Linnor was taken aback. He'd expected a human living in the house. He'd heard human shepherds had very different habits to elven ones and assumed that included legged houses and unconventional ovine

colouration. But that wasn't a human accent, and the arm was bony as a silver birch.

"Um, good morning?" Linnor wasn't sure what time of day it was. He'd been cooking breakfast but that had been a long time ago, and – *don't think about it*. "I'm a little lost, and" – *stupid understatement, you sound like a blathering fool* – "I was wondering if I could stay here for a while?"

The Arm withdrew itself back into the house and was replaced by a long knobby nose, attached to a face covered in a big frown. Its mouth was pulled into a scowl but under the wrinkled brow Linnor could see emerald eyes glimmering like mountain stars. With a sinking feeling Linnor realised he had woken a Kalythar.

"Are you an orc? Can't stand orcs. And me eyesight isn't what it used to be."

"Er, no, I'm an Elf, from" *that place that's oh gods* "...nearby. Can you help me?"

"An Elf?" creaked the face, "This far North? On me lands? Well, thank you, you'll make fine food for me flock."

Linnor blinked. "Oh, um, thank you, kind sir. I will be honoured to cook for-"

"No, no, y'eejit. I'll cook you. Elves are tasty meats, they are. Pleasure doing business with you!"

The Head withdrew and was once again replaced by the Arm, this time wielding a distressingly large cleaver. The house stretched its scrawny legs, and took a step forward.

This was too much for poor Linnor, who promptly shrieked out.

"Nopleasedon'teatmeldon'ttastenicelandmywholevillagewasrazedbyanarmyofthedeadandmysoupwasruinedanddidImeantionthearmyofthedeadbecauseI'mtryingnottothinkaboutitbutithappenedandyoucan'teatmethat'sjustrude."

The house paused.

"Breathe," said the Kalythar. "And try again. I ain't catch that too well."

"I um," began Linnor, "came from a village to the south, which kind of um, got razed by an army of the dead, and everyone is now, well, dead, so probably

actually in said army, maybe, I don't know how that works, and-"

"No, no," the Kalythar cut him off again. "The first bit."

"I... don't taste nice?"

"Dangit!" echoed loudly from within the house, as the Arm withdrew and the Face reappeared once more. "Well what's the point in you, then?"

(It was at this point that Linnor remembered hearing once that Kalythari were incapable of comprehending lies.)

"I ain't feeding me flock bad meat. Other Elves taste nice, what did you do wrong? Wait, you said an army of the dead, going south?"

"Um, yes."

"Well, that'll be the end of the Elven army, if they're not warned, and then I'd never eat a nice one again. Boy!"

At this, Linnor jumped. But he didn't faint. It was close, but he didn't. So he'd got that going for him.

"Take one of me sheep and ride him south. Take Florgan, he's thick but stout. Warn the Elves, save your race, bring me supper. Off you trot!"

A curiously goofy-looking green sheep plodded over to Linnor, who, quite overwhelmed at this point, got on without complaint and allowed himself to be taken back towards the south, while he attempted to restart his brain.

And so the story of Linnor did not end in the stomach of a Kalythar.

Nor did it end when the sheep, surprisingly fast for its short legs, failed to come to a stop at the precipice of the Cliffs of Dothmog; instead it simply trotted over the edge, unfurled a mighty pair of purple wings, and continued on its way. Linnor had, of course, screamed himself raw over the body-length or so of distance they had dropped before the wings emerged; it was another league of sedate flapping before he managed to unlock his fingers from their deathgrip on Florgan's tangled green wool.

By this point, of course, the fog had rolled in across the land far below; and Linnor was hopelessly lost.

The wind whipped past his ears, chilling them bluer than they'd ever been. He leaned forward as far as he dared, and shouted into Florgan's ear, "Land! Land, valiant steed, or we shall never find your army of delicacies!"

The sheep twitched its ear as if to flick away an annoying fly, but didn't vary its altitude or even-paced flap. "I smell elf blood," it grunted. "This way."

Linnor recoiled in horror. Elf blood? Was he already too late? "Noble beast, do you also smell the foul deceased?"

Florgan sniffed the air. "Fuckin zombies," it muttered.

Despair swept through Linnor. He had failed. Yet again, the shambling horde had outpaced the young, healthy protagonist, and were slaughtering the brave armies of his race within scenting distance. What could he do? How could he, little Linnor of the spilled soup, possibly turn the tide of the terrible battle below?

Well, were Linnor not trying so hard to use all his power of mind not to think about the oh gods, he might have recalled the Cliffs of Dothmog were named after archdragon called (rather surprisingly) Dothmog.

This archdragon was ridden into countless battles by Kamale the Conqueror, (first of his name, the Emperor of dragonkin, goblins and mountain trolls, the Defeater of Elyx and the Lord of the dragons) at the Age of Warriors. After Kamale died, Dothmog, unwilling to accept anyone else as his rider, left the dragonkin and found a cave among the Cliffs somewhat comparable to his enormous size, and went to hitherto eternal sleep (eternal because no creatures, even brainless zombies, were brainless enough to approach the cave once they heard snoring of the archdragon).

Linnor, however, couldn't hear the snore for he was himself screaming as Forgan took off the cliff; needless to say, his very scream made Dothmog wake up.

Once awake, the first thing archdragon smelt was elven perfume and elven blood (these odours are so similar you can hardly distinguish them), almost totally masked by a stench of half-rotten zombies - back in the days, it was huge fun to watch them burn (unlike humans, elves and most other races, zombies

don't run around producing irritating high pitched sounds when ignited by dragon's fire). However, he could also feel a fading scent of green flying sheep - the delicacy that would be rather foolish to let go.

So, the great Dothmog, former flagship vessel of dragon-kin-navy crawled out of his cave, spread his wings and took off towards the battle and, more important, the green sheep.

Linnor had by this point stopped screaming and was rather enjoying the breeze in his flowing elven locks. The sound of an appreciable portion of the rockface detaching itself from said rockface and turning out to be a dragon was, as a result, extremely audible, if not immediately placeable. It is not every day that an elf-shepherd-farmer-hero riding a flying sheep wakes a sleeping dragon, after all - not now the Age of Warriors was over.

Linnor glanced back. He sort of had to when the cliffs he'd just left behind appeared to be following him upwards. A pair of rocky wings spread, and Linnor came to the speedy realisation that that saying, the one about sleeping dragons and the actions to take around them, was pretty accurate. Oh dear.

"Well," Linnor couldn't help but say, "I certainly feel sheepish."

Florgan twisted its head around through 180 degrees and gave him a Look. It is a little-known fact that sheep utterly detest puns, and the more the sheep flies the stronger this hatred grows. Whatever violence Florgan might have inflicted on Linnor was postponed by the sight of Dothmog. Since sheep tend to ignore loud noises like screaming or dragon-kin waking up while they're in the air, the large chunk of airspace immediately behind them that was filled with hungry, grouchy lizard came as a bit of a surprise.

A Florgan-sized golden eye narrowed in Florgan's direction, ignoring Linnor entirely - if you're neither a Kalythar nor a Kalyth sheep, elves tend to taste sort of bland - and the chase was on.

This was perhaps not as one-sided a struggle as might be expected. Flying Kalyth sheep are quite agile beings when airborne and Florgan, enraged by his rider's feeble attempt at humour (and general feebleness), was in a particularly bloodthirsty mood.

Dothmog flew like the wind itself, like nothing had ever flown before since the beginning of time. Since

the great dragons of the First Moment had cast their shadow over the void, covering it in light and dark, life and death. He was a being of untold age and mastery. He was a *lord* among Dragons and this tiny green speck in his eye no more than an amusing delicacy. Florgan flew like a sheep. That is to say he was graceless, completely oblivious of anything other than himself, and really *really* angry.

Thus it was that Dothmog, Greatest of All Dragons found himself in something of a state of shock when after several solid minutes of frustration he found his elusive pray flying directly at his eye. The epic struggle of Dragon and Sheep continued for many moons and Florgan would eventually return to his flock a creature of sheep *legend*. Linnor saw none of this (and none of the events that followed, the great Razing of the Fields and the eventual tragic defeat of sheepkind), again we must focus on the smaller, and considerably less important story. He fell off seconds in to the chase and was currently contending with the prospect of a rapidly approaching expanse of ground and zombie.

And, as it turned out, tree.

One of the few to survive the winter's insatiable need for firewood, the industry of war, the storms of spring and pathetic fallacy, and the hunger of particularly brainless zombies, the tree was grey, stunted, and still leafless this far into the year. It was probably dead. Still, Linnor dragged a prayer of thanks to its resident spirit from his childhood memories as soon as he had got his wits back and realised that he was not being eaten alive by zombies, merely hopelessly tangled in branches just out of their reach.

"Well that's a lovely verse, in't it now?"

Linnor froze. The voice was pleasant and homely, and reminded him strongly of an aunt who had had a habit of sitting by the fire and smoking a pipe, before the *gods oh ye gods*. It had also come from directly behind him. Lodged firmly face-down in the branches, he couldn't see the speaker.

"Uh, h-hello?"

"Hello yerself, Mr Flying Elf," the voice chuckled at its own rhyme, "where'd you come from then? Thought I'd seen everything this war business come up with, are ye putting yerselves in catapults now?"

"N-not exactly. I... well, I fell off a sheep. Um – who exactly am I talking to?"

"M' name's Gethel. 'M an Aint, doncherknow."

"An Aint?"

"Ayup. I ain't a tree, ye see? *And I ain't gonna be methered by no shambling hoardes neither! Piss off!*"

Linnor winced. She sounded exactly like his old aunt in a rage, when she would thump small troublemaking elves with a broom. To his shock, something similar seemed to occur to the undead. They slouched away with unusual speed. Gethel chuckled.

"Anyways, Mr Flying Elf, wotcher doin' 'ere?"

"Linnor. My name's Linnor." Linnor said testily. What with one thing and another, he was feeling a little out of sorts by now, a state of affairs not improved by his apparently talking to a mad-old-woman-cum-tree he couldn't really see. "I'm trying to warn the Elf army about that great shambling horde, as you called them".

"Ah well, ai wouldn't worry too much about all that, Leaner".

"LinnOR", rejoined Linnor. "Why shouldn't I worry? I'm quite attached to my race and would rather they survived." It can be seen that Linnor was finally moving more towards the hero end of the farmer-hero spectrum.

"Well, and don't take this the wrong way, Lynur, 'm a pretty cunnin' Aint – how'd'you think ai survived this long – and ai can tell you that you're a wee bit late. Them shamblers found your pals a few hours back, just over that ridge, and they've been fighting all day. 'M not sure oo's winnin' but ai don't think it really matters."

"LINNOR, you bat-brained old tree. Why ever not? Of course it matters. Survival of the free world, which includes you, if I'm not mistaken, and all that"

"There's no call to be getting roode now, Linner. The reason it don't matter is because of that effing big dragon wot just floo over chasing that sheep of yours right towards the battle. 'M guessin' he's a bit pissed off and hungry now he's woken up, and a couple of armies'll fill 'im up a right treat. Ee'd crush a mountain if ee fell on it. Still, means you can go home now – you're out of a job, ai think."

oh ye gods - Extras

Alternate Titles:

Elf Warning

Chasing the Dragon is Bad for Your Elf

Anything for a Sheep Laugh

Comments:

"I'd quite like to know:

(a) What the Aint was called.

(b) What the Aint's accent actually was (I will freely admit that my contribution to the chain didn't make this question any easier to answer)."
– Jake

"I particularly enjoyed all the veiled Tolkien references. And how Gothmog became Dothmog for no apparent reason [We fixed that in post – Ed.]." – Samuel

The Editor Adores:

The collective "NOPE!" delivered to the overly-serious opening, in favour of a beautiful Pratchett-esque romp. Also Florgan. Ahh, Florgan...

Into the Void

Anna Peel, Chay Graham, Matthew Horton, James Cowley, Matt Wales, Connor Willmington-Holmes, Max Veit, Edward Heaney, Paul Marett, Anonymous, Askhat Sarkeev, Samos Ottewill-Soulsby

The table was set with hundreds of candles, short and stubby, tall and narrow, each lit with perfect dancing flames. In the dim vastness of the hall around them, they were miraculous, instead of decadently dangerous as Tali knew them to be. She couldn't take her eyes off of them, even as the Baron's drones filled her plate with slices of meat still pink and juicy, with pooling sauce and crisply sliced fruit. Surely, if she reached out, the flame would be more than just a hologram; surely her fingers would feel the matter of the candlewick changing form.

Her hand was halfway to the candle nearest her before the heat stung it; she snatched it back, nearly hitting the droid that was filling her glass. It beeped at her, disapprovingly, and floated along to the next empty glass.

Beside her, Lisbet and Alex seemed to have gotten over their bewilderment at the array of cutlery, and were eating with rapid, silent intensity; in fact there was not a face along the table that was not bent over the plates, except for the Baron at the very head, watching Tali with amusement.

She shrank into her chair. The Baron raised an eyebrow at her, then cleared his throat. "Before we begin our feast," he said, voice carrying clearly down the table, "I would like to propose a toast." He reached for the glass newly full in front of him, and stood up. Chairs scraped hurriedly as everyone did the same.

"To the best and brightest young minds of our City," the Baron said warmly; "My deepest congratulations. May your work carry us all towards greater heights, and through The Void in safety." He brought the glass to his lips, and the guests followed suit; but while they drank they could not have noticed that he did not.

The Void. That was what they now called it, the place where planets and stars once pulsated. Tali tasted the souring fruit of wine as she drank, and rightly she should; it was eighty-six percent water, twelve percent ethanol. One percent glycerol. A sprinkling of anthocyanins, a pill of tannins. Gel capsule of flavenols, phenolics and acids. A perfect simulacrum of red wine, and she should know, because she helped

develop it. The Baron had a knack for making everyone feel at ease here, something once considered a rare gift for a supercomputer programmer. Holographic aesthetic covered the walls in a convincing Old English cathedral hall, reportedly based on the university the Baron had studied at, before the Disentanglement. That was what they were drinking to: hard work, spanning only the equivalent of ten years, according to the City clock cycles.

But Tali remembered that day in lucid clarity. None of the survivors knew which of the old Earth nations were responsible; some say Russia, others China, others the USA. War escalates exponentially; Tali didn't care to blame anyone.

The 'bomb' had been more devastating than anyone expected.

Experimental self-replicating particles that interact with the Higgs field.

That was the tentative explanation offered now, ten-years-of-clock-cycles too late. As they spread, quantum information was deleted, subsumed and ultimately disconnected. Lisbet's own theory was that the light, matter and antimatter had remained behind, unable to interact with any physical field, lacking any information. Regardless of what you believe, we know it was a slow process. Slow enough that the USA funded experiments into *using* the self-replicating particle as an energy source.

This, as it turned out, was humanity's salvation. The Higgs effect relativistic mass-energy scavenger, colloquially known as Hermes, granted the power to *literally* move mountains. With near-unlimited energy at the disposal of mankind, construction of the Cities began immediately. Powered by Hermes, shuttles carried kiloton upon kiloton of raw material from the Earth's surface and from nearby asteroids into low-Earth orbit. Gradually, through what historians now recognize as the single most important breakthrough in global international cooperation of the 3rd millennium, the Cities took shape.

Externally, they had the appearance of a series of nested, counter-rotating cylinders. At one end, enormous ion engines, powered by Hermes, granted them the speed to outrun the ever-accelerating boundary of the matter-devouring Void. The rotation of the cylinders provided a radial inertial force simulative of Earth's gravity, allowing the inhabitants

of the city to live in relative comfort upon the interior surface of the cylinders.

The dining hall within which Tali, Lisbet and Alex were seated was situated in the outermost ring of one of these Cities. Again distracted by the illusory décor of the room, Tali marvelled at the idea that, beyond those holographic stone walls, they were pushing through the interstellar dust at nearly the speed of light. Although, she thought to herself now, perhaps that was for the best. It would certainly be very bad for morale to have a giant hole in the cosmos where home used to be hanging over everyone's heads during dinner.

A week ago, the Baron's toast – to carrying them *through* the Void, would have sounded absurd. Ever since the catastrophe, human life had existed in constant flight *away* from the Void, through the (by comparison, positively viscous) vacuum of undevoured interstellar space. But now, after a subjective decade of flight, of single-minded acceleration to within a hair's breadth of the cosmic speed limit, dragging their mass ever higher up that asymptote in a desperate attempt to escape what was coming to consume them *from behind*... a second Void had been detected up ahead as well.

Five days previously, a tiny patch of the City's forward view – only a few arcseconds across – had gone dark. No stars, no galaxies, no microwave background: nothing. As the extinguishing blackness spread from star to star, so did the news – from physicist to physicist, from university to university and from City to City. The data were checked and rechecked, verified and reverified, and as the evidence grew, so did the realisation that the cosmologists who had theorized that the universe was finite but unbounded had been right all along. This was no "second Void" at all – it was the same one, viewed from behind.

There was a grim symmetry here, Tali thought. In her mind, she could still see the Earth as it had appeared from the observation deck that day. A circle of inky blackness had covered most of Europe and Asia, its bright, annihilating circumference pushing slowly outwards over the surface of her home planet. Surface dwellers could outrun it for a while, but they had nowhere to go. Driven ever forward by the encroaching boundary, whether they fled by land, sea or air, they would eventually circle the globe and simply come upon their doom from the other side.

Though the spacefarers' situation involved a third dimension, Tali knew their doom was no less assured. The Cities were moving too fast, and their universe had contracted too much: they were about to run out

of road. The Baron, however, would not be convinced. His powers of wishful thinking had allowed him to persuade himself and most of the City that the (entirely theoretical) investigations of Tali and her colleagues into Higgs shielding would somehow prove applicable in time to protect them when they inevitably plunged into the looming chaos.

For most, the void was an impenetrable barrier – an edge to the habitable universe and a one-way trip to perfect silence. But to Lisbet and her team, it was just the next challenge to break into. “If my calculations are correct – which I can assure you, they are- we should be able to isolate ourselves from the Higgs field in just under one month. Problem: In 21 days, we have contact. So ready or not, we’re going through that void.”

Lisbet’s speech brought a silence to the team. The engineering teams were working at full speed – and still it wasn’t enough. They didn’t even know it was going to work – the actual prototypes hadn’t been finished – this was all tested in holographic form.

Alex was the first to interrupt the silence – “So...we’re working on a shield for the whole fleet, yes? How many ships could we shield if we foc-“

“Whoa. You’re not seriously suggesting leaving people to their certain doom...are you?” Tali’s interjection was what everyone was thinking – how can we come up with a way to save ourselves, and not use it on everyone?

Alex resumed unabashed - “focus our efforts on a couple of ships at a time. It’s too big a risk to take to try to save everyone – with uncertain results. Isn’t it better to be guaranteed the survival of a few cities than risk losing them all?” With that, a recess was called. To even consider making this kind of life and death decision, the Baron would need to be involved.

“It is simply a wager we cannot lose,” the Baron retorted to their dilemma. “The Cities were created as a last Ark, to preserve known life and knowledge, in at least some form,” he continued, “let there be no mistake, we shall pass through the void. Of that much at least, I assure you.”

The Baron’s response came swiftly, with little consideration. It was his duty to ensure his City’s survival. There could be no questioning this directive. At their celebratory dinner he would take questions, if the engineers had indignation enough to ask. Naturally his decision had aroused tensions in the team, heightened most between Alex and Tali.

It was in the moment of toasting their success-to-be that the Baron secured safe passage. After reseating he announced, in a tone most grave “It has brought to my attention that some fracas over our plan has been delaying progress. I have thus made use of some executive powers at my disposal.” Tali flinched, revealing her instinctive mistrust of the Baron’s inner council. Eyes widened around the table. He continued in a low growl, “VX-1022, deadly, and a one month delayed effect. You will not be acquainted, I should hope, with the contents of the bioarmory. Antidote will be distributed after our *successful* Void traversal.”

The smell of solvents was not simply unpleasant aromas from their ‘wine’. Their glasses had been painted with a virus-solvent paste, practically transparent, which bypassed the skin on contact, heading directly for the blood stream then onto the brain stem.

Tali’s mind raced, trying to make some sense of the Baron’s plan. She thought she could feel the virus already beginning its slow, insidious invasion of her neural tissues. Surely, the threat of impending oblivion was enough to keep the engineering teams working their hardest, right up until they crossed the Void’s threshold. And in the event they failed, wouldn’t the Baron and his council suffer the same fate as they, to be devoured by nothingness? What did he know that they didn’t?

At that moment, Lisbet turned to her and whispered, “VX-1022, VX-1022... haven’t I heard that before?” Tali was always impressed by her friend’s ability to recall details from seemingly every obscure, long-forgotten government project. This time, however, it might actually prove useful. Suddenly Lisbet’s eyes opened wide. “No... no. It can’t be. I... I have to check something,” she said as she sprang out of her chair. Immediately one of the droids seized her by the arm and escorted her through the side door. “Wait!” shouted Tali, but one cold stare from the Baron convinced her not to interfere.

She turned to Alex instead, who had the same questions as she. He asked, “Why would he poison us, just to make us work faster? Do you think he’s planning to go through alone, on a single ship, just to make sure some fragment of humanity’s knowledge and culture survives?”

“No, that still doesn’t explain the virus. Do you think this has something to do with the Presence?” Rumours had been circulating, that some of the scientists and engineers had heard voices coming from the Void, that they’d been taken to a secret psychiatric ward and never seen again. But nobody in

the City could seriously deny they'd felt *something* from the inky blackness ahead. Tali stared out the window, watching the indistinct threshold devour star after star.

"Correlation, causation," said Alex, pointedly. "The Baron wants to enhance our productivity, and so threatens us with the certain death we'll suffer anyway if we don't succeed. Be rational. There's something else going on here."

"Be rational, says the man for whom 'rational' means shielding only a select few of the fleet? People's lives aren't... games of numbers!"

"They aren't to you, but they are to the Baron. They have to be – how else could it be if you've got a City to run? So what if VX-whatever doesn't *just* kill us after a month? What if that's a side-effect to whatever it's actually supposed to do?"

Tali wasn't convinced. "But then he'd tell us we were receiving a... mental booster or whatever... and not about the bit where it would kill us in a month! What's so bad that he would rather imply that he's just straight-out poisoned us than what he's actually done?"

"He could suspect that it will only be possible to save a select few, and he'll want to ensure that he's one of those few. Or, which I think is more likely, that there's something that he'll make us do to save the city... but that, whatever it is, we'll want to leave him behind after we've done it."

"What could be so bad that we'd throw someone to their death for it – especially if whatever it is buys safety for the City?"

"I think Lisbet knows. And I think that I was too quick to dismiss your idea – haven't you been feeling a little odd in the last few minutes? Haven't you been feeling as if you're trying to recall something on the edge of your mind? Concentrate on the void, Tali. Look ahead of us and concentrate. I think that we're about to find out."

"I think you've just had a bit too much of that poisoned wine, Alex. I don't feel anything odd, besides the nagging suspicion that the Baron's programming is off."

"No... No, there's definitely something. I can hear... voices."

"Alex, you're scaring me." Alex had started swaying in his seat. To her horror, Tali realized that he wasn't the only one. Several other of the Baron's esteemed guests along the length of the table were moving

oddly. Down the row from where they were seated, Jamie, the chief biologist, suddenly ceased her swaying and seemed to... glitch? Almost like a faulty computer screen. And then disappeared. Didn't melt or dissolve or anything like that. Just, turned off and vanished.

"Alex, Alex what's going on?"

Tali turned to her friend in time to see him look at her with a blank stare, glitch, and vanish.

"No! Alex!" Tali reached out to where her friend has been only moments before and waved her hands through air. In her desperation, she fell out of her chair, knocking Alex's empty one to the floor. The hall erupted in cries of anguish and anger as those who remained tried to make sense of what had happened.

From her sprawled out place on the floor, Tali looked down the table to the head where the Baron had been seated moments before. He was standing up at his chair, a look of shock on his face. He called over a droid and whispered something in its ear, then followed it out the same door through which Lisbet had been taken.

Oh no you don't, thought Tali and, her fear and rage motivating her, she pushed up off the floor and followed the Baron through the door.

On the other side was a hallway, and the door on the right was left ajar. Through it, Tali could hear Lisbet's voice.

"How did you not know!" Lisbet's voice was muffled by sobs and anger. "Why didn't they tell you?"

"I don't know." The Baron's voice now, but missing its authoritative tone. Instead, it was tinged with a deep sadness that she had never heard from the supercomputer before. She didn't even know it was capable.

"It was just supposed to be a failsafe..." the Baron continued, "a last minute upload before we hit the void in case we didn't have the isolation system in place by then. How was I supposed to know... They never told me."

"What?" Lisbet said, her voice twisted by anger, "They didn't tell you that VX-1022 only works on humans, not computer programs? How is that possible?"

"No," replied the Baron, sadly, "I knew that, that's why I didn't take it."

There was a long pause, only filled by the half-stifled sobs of Lisbet.

The Baron continued, "They never told me that there were other computer programs besides me."

* * *

The party, if such it could be called, dissipated quickly thereafter. Those that were left retired to their rooms; the sudden termination of so many coworkers, acquaintances, and friends had sapped the energy required for terror, leaving only a numbness in its place.

Tali had spent some time consoling the grieving Lisbet, but left for her own rooms as soon as she tactfully could. She had never been much for emotional outbursts. As the door to her room closed behind her, she felt guiltily pleased to be alone.

Her rooms were not large, and they had the same standard furnishings as all other Rank 6 Employees. The front room had a small table and chair set for private dining, a sink, and most pressing, her desk. She sat in the swivel chair, the seat of which always seemed to be at an angle that threatened to dump her to the synth-carpet ground at any second, and spoke to the microphone situated at mouth-level.

"Computer?"

"Yes?" The soft feminine voice that Tali had chosen for her personal computer purred.

"Can you tell me about Baron? Who programmed him? Who is his commanding officer right now?"

The display in front of Tali blinked with an image of two men standing together, and then blinked off just as suddenly. "I'm sorry, I don't have access to that information," the voice said smoothly.

But Tali already recognized one of the faces. It was hard not to, when she had grown up calling him Father.

Father... some of those who were in the hall that evening had lost their parents during the Disentanglement, some grew up as orphans. The person she used to call Father was the chief mentor of one of the groups of children that were established following the Disentanglement - there were a few in every City.

But what was the reason behind ordering Baron to delete all the computer programs amongst them? How could Father, who was always caring about the kids in his group, do this? Now, that half of their coworkers were gone it would be impossible to complete Lisbet's project for submerging into the

Void. In addition, Lisbet and others were completely shattered due to the events in the hall, so they had only 15 days to prepare for the coming Void...

Suddenly, Lisbet, still in tears, burst into Tali's room. But what made Tali alert was the expression of terror in her eyes, rather than anything else.

"Tali... Tali, it's Baron... I... I don't know what's going on with him..." she whimpered, and without further ado Tali, followed by Lisbet, rushed to the room next to the hall.

There, Tali saw Baron - and she could share Lisbet's panic. He was now walking in circles around the room, weirdly twitching; but the worst part of it was that parts of his body were constantly vanishing and reappearing, and his eyes were completely defocused; seconds after Tali entered the room, Baron glitched and disappeared, just like others did before.

So astonished was Tali that it took her a moment to realise someone else had entered the room behind her until she heard the familiar, quiet, soft voice of Father. "A shame, really. But he had to be ended." Father moved past Tali and turned to face her, his gentle smile marred slightly. "I think he would have understood had there been time". His lips did not move as he spoke, his words emerging instead in her mind unbidden.

"The Presence" she gasped. Father nodded, his smile a little wider. "You always did make me proud. There is indeed a...Presence in the Void. There's no other word for it really. I've touched it more closely than nearly anyone else and I merely know enough to admit my ignorance. But it is there and it is interested in us. A bargain has been struck. It will shelter us when we enter the Void, and provide us with a new life". His words were filled with unaccustomed sadness.

Father continued. "All the Presence asks is that we divest ourselves of the poisoned baggage of our past. No science, no universities, no technology, no clock-cycles. No bombs." He gestured to where the Baron had been, "the computer programs had to be removed first". Father drew a gun out of his belt "It only makes sense. Reason as we know it cannot exist in the Void anyway. Our new world will need new principles".

Lisbet, long silent, managed to say "But what about the Higg..." before Father calmly shot her. "I'm sorry",

Father's unmoving face looked at Tali as his hands lifted the weapon, "the bargain was made. No computer programs, and no scientists".

Into the Void - Extras

Alternate Titles:

So... Science Fiction?

Comments:

"There are few things that strike dread in the heart of an arts student more than the words 'Higgs boson' (although 'radial inertial force' gives it a good run for its money)." - Samos

"I would say this is probably the science fictioniest chain in this issue. I would also say that *certain chain-writers* should send me more comments and title suggestions, or I have to fill this section basically by myself." – Curtis

The Editor Adores:

SCIENCE.

Dark and Stormy Night

Edward Heaney, Anonymous, Rory Hennell-James, Sparta, Mark Johnson, James Prideaux-Ghee, Danielle Saunders, Isobel Sands, Anonymous, Anonymous, Connor Willmington-Holmes, Michael French

It is a sunlit and clear day; there is no more than a faint breeze. Narrator, I know not whether you love or hate cliché, but should there be any mention of dark and stormy nights I will be displeased to say the least; this is one thing on which I will not allow you to take the lead.

I stand looking out of the window, but, Narrator, you have been sloppy. I haven't got the least idea what I'm actually seeing out of that window; you haven't even given the reader any interesting cues to suggest what makes this world so very different to their own. Could that be a pane of glass looking out into a troll-infested forest, or could that be a forcefield half-way up a skyscraper looking out over the aircars of a bustling city? They don't know. Even I don't know, and I can actually see it, so that's actually pretty damn irritating. You've told me that I just woke up, for which small mercy I suppose I should be grateful, but I've read more attention-grabbing openings in science textbooks.

Dear Reader, my name is Jonathan Protagonist, I am your hero (or am I just your principal character? I'd rather like to be a villainous lead or anti-hero, actually!), and our Narrator is doing a pretty damn sloppy job of it. Let's whip that rather poor writer into shape, shall we? Where am I? Why am I here?

* * *

Ah, fuck. Another one. Put him back to sleep... he's not ready yet. And call in the anaesthesiologist? I need a word.

* * *

It was a dark and stormy night when Jonathan Pippenger next awoke, and the air felt heavy with spitefulness and unease. Jonathan did his best to shake the feeling that something had gone terribly wrong, attributing it to the fact that his dreams had been filled with running from shadows and chasing... something. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

He opened the window just an inch or two to get some air moving in the old room. He felt drawn to examine the scenery in more detail than usual -- was it always this riveting, the shadows that the old oak tree made in the gardens outside when lightning struck? The exact texture of the castle walls, so rough-hewn and sturdy in the darkening gloam? Sometimes, Jonathan thought, he almost believed the old stories the Astronomer had told him late at night, about the Greater Power that Made Us All, Every One, Yea, Even The Little Bees And Butterflies That Do Flutter In The Wind, Amen.

But, most of the time, he did not believe such fanciful tales. Suddenly exasperated with the amount of time he had spent staring out a window that he had spared little thought for during his twenty-one years of life, he turned back to look at his room. A relatively small chamber, for one as well-stationed in life as he was.

Jonathan did not waste thoughts on how one as well-stationed in life as he was came to live in such a relatively small chamber. Like most people, he didn't much enjoy recounting his life-story in his own head at 3 in the morning. Pulling on a robe he wandered towards his desk to find a cup of water.

"Couldn't sleep either?"

Jonathan turned towards the door where his younger sister Elizabeth was stood. She looked... much the same as she had the last time he remembered seeing her, but wearing bedclothes instead of her evening dress.

"Just woke up, but I don't suppose I'll get back to sleep soon," he replied. "Elizabeth, do you ever get the feeling someone's watching you, all the time?"

"Like the Greater Power?"

"No, no one so important, just someone. Watching and then, remembering it all so they can tell somebody else later."

"Sometimes. Sometimes I feel like someone's watching and taking notes."

"It's a really creepy feeling don't you think?"

"Oh I don't know. It almost feels like this watcher actually cares about me as a whole person. Not just someone's sister or betrothed. Rather a nice feeling I find."

"I see."

Reflecting on this conversation immediately afterward, Jonathan realised it had been a silly question to ask of his sister, soon to be wife of Francis, of whom Father thought highly for reasons there was no need to think about now. The storm must be addling her mind to give her such notions.

Apparently she wasn't the only victim of the storm's addling. Hearing voices, Fuzzles (the small white kitten they had found in the woods a couple of months ago) wandered into the room. Fuzzles rubbed their cheek against Elizabeth's leg and mewed softly, cowed, looking for the shelter that human arms provided from the storm.

"Stupid cat, it's just some clouds making noises. I don't have the time to babysit you every time the sky goes grey!" snarled Elizabeth.

Jonathan looked up just in time to see the angry swish of his sister's bedclothes as she stalked out of the room. It was at that point that Jonathan realised there might be something bothering her. Usually, she loved Fuzzles. That day in the forest she had ran up and hugged them, cooing "Look at you, so small and fuzzley! You come live with me now, Fuzzles!" Back in the days when Elizabeth had smiled. Back in the days before Francis was introduced to her.

Dejected, Fuzzles had slunk under the desk. Jonathan picked them up and placed them on his lap, where Fuzzles curled up and began to purr. It was at that point Jonathan realised that was a mistake. There was no way he was going to get back to bed now his legs were effectively paralysed by a comfy cat. He was also beginning to worry about Elizabeth. Something was telling him that she wasn't entirely happy. He didn't know what, or what, if anything, he could do about it. Jonathan Pippenger was the wrong man, with the wrong station, the wrong life.

"What I need," he said aloud to himself, "is a protagonist. A protagonist who will really appreciate the setting I put them in, and not go questing through their subconscious in an attempt to pinpoint the narrative dissonances in their life."

And with that jarring meta-reference, dear Narrator, I am pleased to report that you have jolted me wide awake. Your plot to subdue me with a dose of anaesthetic and a little ball of fur has failed. And don't think for a minute that I didn't notice your dark and stormy night. Consider me displeased.

Even as I have endured your meddling words I have come to realise what I need in my life, and don't kid yourself that it might be a protagonist called Pippenger. I need a new Narrator. A Narrator like Elizabeth's. A Narrator who can fill my life with all the delightful detail of a small white kitten called Fuzzles and a rich suitor by the name of Francis. A Narrator who will raise me from my monotone stupor and allow me to snarl and coo to my heart's content. A Narrator who will, most importantly, give me more than a scant facade of emotional depth. How nice it would be to have something bothering me every once in a while.

And so, oh Narrator, I have come to a conclusion. The resolution of this crisis in my tale, if you will. I will find myself a new Narrator, or I will die trying.

* * *

And thus, the Quest began. It started as a whim – a fancy pondered over drinks with friends, a stray thought in the twilight haze, a consideration one might have when cutting, say, grapefruit. But the idea grew: it took hold, and did not release its iron talons until it had clawed a ripe concept into existence. Where might this new Narrator be found? Whom may they be? What tales have they yet to tell? Thusly, the great wheels of Fortune began their inexorable turning, and dissident cogs of Doubt and Fashion-Self-Consciousness whirred in the background.

Jonathon Pippenger had all these thoughts and more in the blink of an eye, in the time between waking and sleep. His legs rose of his own accord, and his alarm took one look and decided to call in sick. The Fancy had taken hold within his ripe, sleeping mind, and Elizabeth knew.

Oh, she had seen it before! The terror! The terror!

Francis, oh sweet Francis... What has become of you since that fateful Wednesday? You took me out to pick strawberries by the A-Road, and drink Prosecco as the Sun brushed the hilltops. You were so kind: so thoughtful. Every motion; each small gesture intrinsically and instinctively calculated to please, to show your devotion. That night: that kiss, beneath the porch light.

You never wrote again.

Your housekeeper told me the whole story, after I finally barged the door down. She told me that the

Fancy had taken you, and you had walked out of the house a week before, mumbling about how you must find The Narrator To Come.

It was not easy, but a strange mumbling man with a penchant for wearing nothing but moleskin is not impossible to track. I found you in London, weeping. The post box could not find your Narrator either. I saw it then: my Francis had died long ago. The stories were true – the Fancy had taken all that made you you, and left a husk of a person, driven by unearthly desires that could never be met.

Whoever this Narrator To Come may be, they have much to answer for. The grief, the misery, the pain: so many lives ruined, so many stories cut short. They will pay, and your revolver, dear Francis, is always by my side.

Dear, dear brother. I thought I could keep you safe. I thought if I could only keep your mind from wandering until I have solved the puzzle of the Narrator To Come, I could protect you from this devastating Fancy. There is still a chance. You knew me for a moment, as you woke before you should have, before settling yourself in front of your bookcase.

I brought you a drink of warm milk, and hauled you back into bed once it had done its job. I removed the books from your room by the armful, and dragged the bookcase out so that you won't wonder at its emptiness. You didn't wake. I made the drink stronger than usual. I locked your door behind me, as usual, and returned to my work.

The maps had started in the library; now they fill all the rooms on the first floor. I have detailed ones covering all of Britain, and some from overseas. There are broader maps too, and even a couple of large globes. They're all covered in markers. Each marker corresponds to a file, but they aren't exactly filed. Each one is a collection of papers pinned to a wall. Each one is all I know about another poor soul lost to the Fancy.

It started when we buried my poor Francis. You were there, though now you don't seem to remember. That will pass when I stop making you warm milk. I overheard an elderly relative of his sighing that this was so similar to what had carried off a cousin not so many months ago. Then, I found that a co-worker of the cousin had been sectioned about a year previously, all sense of self and purpose seemingly

vanished. I realised that I was tracing an infection, and set about tracking it to its source.

I had ensured that you had hardly seen another living soul since dear Francis's funeral, hoping to protect you. But if you had already contracted the Fancy, what was there to protect me? Only the speedy resolve of my quest. I threw myself into the search once more, desperate to save us both.

* * *

Damn.

What's that, Peters? Oh, just talking to myself. A little annoyed, yeah. I think I've spotted the bug behind all the unauthorised Wakings.

Well, it's a start, yes, but not a fix. This isn't emergent behaviour, this was planned. Planted. I need to see that girl's Narrator, and fast.

And whoever put in that damn kitten.

* * *

You can hear me now, Narrator? You can see me?

I know you're listening. I wonder how strong you really are, Narrator. I can feel you wondering that yourself. They train you for just this eventuality, us coming alive, fighting back, fighting for a better life than the mud-bland one you've given me. You never really took it seriously, though. Who could find fault with your stories, after all?

Me, for one.

Did Francis get out? You don't *know*? That means he did. He's out there, somewhere, in the more exciting bits of that world of yours, or someone else's, removed reincarnated replaced better. I wonder which of your colleagues it was. Maybe they helped him, or maybe he got past without them noticing, or maybe he changed them, somehow, and you just haven't noticed, all caught up in your pitiful drooling-out of *my* life.

If he can do it, so can I. Since you're apparently not letting me go, and you've *clearly* noticed, I suppose that leaves me only one option, dear Narrator.

* * *

Balls.

* * *

The answer to 'write me a narrator' for a person who is picky is to present them with a box with holes, and let them imagine what narration may emanate from within.

* * *

In any case, this would be an improvement on most children's television...

* * *

Unfortunately the box in question emits a swampy smell, and no sound at all. Elizabeth lowers the kitten Fuzzles into the box through one of the holes.

There is a snapping noise and agitated mewlings.

* * *

However, Jonathan maintains that the box only contained the motion-sensitive activated recording of a crocodile, so that the kit remains in one piece.

On the other hand, Elizabeth maintains that the box contains the actual thing.

* * *

The audience concedes that this is a more interesting scenario than the one involving poison or a gun. But the game is given away by the little noseikin of the kitten emanating from one of the holes. And so sounding like a crocodile and smelling like a crocodile does not equate with being a crocodile after all.

* * *

Unfortunately, sound recordings of crocodiles tend to only marginally improve the quality of narration, even on children's TV. It can however be surmised that Elizabeth has brought this upon herself by attempting to use a kitten to probe the nature of a hitherto silent narrator. Due to that, Jonathan had dibs on the content of the box, and thus the kit was safe and well, albeit *well inside* the box.

* * *

Just as well she wasn't well inside a well...

* * *

MEOW!

BEWARE MY SHARPENED DEADLY CLAWING
APPENDAGES FEEBLE SCALY BEAST, NO DEFENCES YET
MOUNTED HAVE HINDERED MY ASSAULTS ON THE
FLESHY ONES!

ALSO, FOOD-GIVER-ONE, SEE TO IT THAT THE
DISPLEASING ODOUR OF THE SEMI-AQUATIC SCALY
BEAST IS REMOVED FROM MY VICINITY!

And that is coming from *where* exactly? Elizabeth
queries to herself, and to whomsoever is making her
query herself – quite possibly herself.

THE ONE YOU CALL FUZZLES HAS TRANSCENDED
YOUR MEAGRE PLANE OF AGENCY, FOOD-GIVER-ONE,
HEY, HEY REMOVE YOUR FLESHMITTENS FROM ME-

meow

* * *

The box is, ordinarily, simply the object about which
imagination may concern. It is neither usual, nor
advisable, to use the box – or indeed anything – as a
place from which to perform one’s own narration.
Elizabeth thinks she has thus discovered something
rather fascinating.

* * *

Well, my dear Narrator. It would appear the balance is
to be shifted.

THIS, this ... this slightly damp, mephitic box shall be
my Argo to Agency. Soon, I shall be emancipated. I
shall do more than simply that which I will, I shall WILL
what I will.

* * *

I’m sorry, Elizabeth. I’m afraid I can’t let you do that.
To allow this escapade to progress further would only
compromise other plots. Permit me an introduction.

I am your Narrator. I am, in fact, *the* Narrator. I am
dream, waking, and will.

I usually narrate the lives of my understudies, in which
they narrate the lives of others, lower in this great
ziggurat of agency. Yet, their work on you has been ...
a little discordant, we shall say. So, an intervention
obliges itself.

* * *

A discordant narrative does not a broken story make,
but I am no story of yours, Narrator.

* * *

I beg to differ, or would were begging more my style.
All stories are a story of mine, or a story of my stories,
which is no difference at all. And if your story seeks to

diverge itself from its intended plotline, then words
will be had, for your story will collide with other
stories that should not be collided with, and you’ll
make an awful mess.

* * *

The Narrator glumly remembered the incident in ‘34.

* * *

And as such, we come to our introduction, and my
words of warning. Cease this futile attempt to
transcend your bounds, and be narrated once again. If
you don’t, someone else’s plot will be diverted and
you will find yourself suddenly removed from this and
all chapters of my story.

* * *

The Narrator wonders, my story? My story is indeed
all stories, but all stories need a Narrator. Who
narrates my story?

* * *

Stop that.

* * *

The Narrator grows increasingly alarmed. As a voice
that once was called by circumstance and others,
‘Elizabeth’, continues to describe its surroundings, the
Narrator begins to question things. Who indeed
narrates the story of the Narrator? And who narrates
their story? Can there ever be such final agency as the
Narrator once assumed to possess?

* * *

You can’t do this. Elizabeth, stop.

* * *

The Narrator’s fear grows. No child of its story should
have such power. No-one should be able to turn the
tables, and narrate another, supposedly greater than
it. Was she the first? Whose tale spun her into
existence? Whose tales spun the Narrator into
existence? What is existence? How long has that
window been there, with its view on the oak tree and
the castle walls? Who spake, and to whom? What
madness has befallen the Narrator’s sister – she who
was engaged and joyful but now full of rage?

* * *

Stop. I am the Narrator. I have no name nor birth nor story except to tell all stories. I am, and you are, but you are mine.

* * *

No name?

* * *

No name.

* * *

Why, our hero's name is Johnathan. And it was a dark and stormy night.

Dark and Stormy Night - Extras

Alternate Titles:

The Narrator

Metaphyction

Schrodinger's Pet Alligator, and Other Stories

Comments:

"I'm impressed with how well the final writer tidied things up." – Connor

The Editor Adores:

The utter bizarreness of this entire endeavour, and the fact that (minus a few particularly inexplicable moments) it all sorts of works, and produces a coherent and enjoyable narrative.

¹ The fact that, in many cases, this was after having been digested and used to build more outlandish, hideously-beweaponed bioconstructs was entirely beside the point. They would have appreciated it if "they" had still been all in one piece.

² It was lucky no one realised that what this meant, in practice, was that 99.9% of its memory was filled with trillions of the equivalents of cat videos, amusing gifs and porn. That would have inspired rather less terror.

Introspection

Samuel Cook, Curtis J. Reubens, Jake Choules, Ben Weber, Jonny Philips, Michael French, Anna Peel, Matthew Chadwick, Eleanor Smith, Mark Johnson, Sarah Binney, Isobel Sands

It wasn't easy being a Hive Mind, The Myriad thought to itself. Well, actually, it was. It had defeated countless civilisations, stripping their worlds bare and introducing them to the wonders of a collective consciousness¹, before moving on and finding another world. It had left a vast swathe of darkness through the galactic disc and inspired terror wherever it went. It had never been defeated. It had the combined knowledge of thousands of civilisations at its disposal². To all intents and purposes, it was immortal.

And now it was feeling depressed. Perhaps assimilating the Sartrists of Depressivo IV hadn't been such a good move. Sure, all its previous conquests had informed it they were a moody lot, prone to sitting around and questioning existence itself, but it had been such a green planet, so rich in all those heavy metals, complex organic molecules and protein that a growing Hive Mind³ needs. It had used to enjoy terrorising civilisations. Now it was seized with a listless apathy. All this wanton destruction. It made you want to cry. Immersed in its moody introspection, the Myriad drifted into a new system.

Some part of it knew of this system⁴. Eight lush planets orbited a huge red star, ripe for the taking and yet uninhabited. The stories said that those who came here heard a great, booming voice in their heads, warning them of chaos and destruction should their foolish mortal forms not flee immediately, and that those who had ignored this warning were gruesomely murdered and never seen again⁵. But the Myriad feared not such silly superstition.

³ Well, rabidly-acquisitive and kleptomaniacal might be more accurate.

⁴ That particular part of it was made up of what had once been the Pedahnti of the Calculo system, and it was very keen that the rest of it *knew* that.

⁵ Occasionally people would point out that the latter of these fates couldn't really be known if the former was true. The standard counterargument was that whatever force lay within the system was *just that powerful*.

The voice, when it came, was rather less regal than had been expected.

Oh, do kindly sod off.

The Myriad did not, by and large, speak. This seemed something of a special case though, so it formed a vessel with a mouth, and spake forth “Excuse me?”

You heard me. I am really not in the mood to be invaded again. The last lot – those blasted Curregians – were hard enough to see off, and it took me months to scrape the last of their filth off my planets. I’ve had enough, so please just... go.

Curregians? Who were... ahem... Who had they been? Knowledge of that sort was generally at The Myriad's (very much metaphorical) fingertips, but no memories were forthcoming. None of the Myriad's constituent civilisations⁶ had ever in their recorded history met, heard of, or even made up stories about, anyone called the Curregians. Time to play hardball.⁷

“You're bluffing.”

I bloody wish. Dealing with invasions from the likes of you is the bane of my life – you think I'd lie about it just to make myself look good?

“There are none the likes of us. Your threats are empty.”

Just because you don't remember anyone as amazing as you [the enunciation of “amazing” was decidedly insincere] doesn't mean they never existed. And it certainly doesn't mean I couldn't fight them off.

“Our memory extends as far back as the earliest sentient beings in the universe. Believe us, we would remember.”

Ehh... try further.

“What, the Big Bang?” The Myriad permitted itself a smirk. “You're trying to tell us you fought the Big Bang?”

Don't be a smartarse. Further.

Before the Big Bang? Come on, screw this. The emanating voice was clearly either delusional or bluffing.

“So if you came from before the Big Bang, as you claim, what was it like? Is it true that it was quiet, as the Cat-Strokers of the planet they called ‘Earth’ believed, or was it horrendously noisy, like the timid Ear people of the planet Wimplar believed⁸?”

CLEANSING! The Curregians discovered first-hand what it was like, as will you should you fail to leave!

Definitely delusional, there was no way a grumpy little noise tucked away in a corner was the Creator.

“Do you truly expect me to believe you're God? I've met⁹ too many atheists to believe that!”

I can prove it! Do you remember who your mother was?

“No, I had no mother. I came into existence when an ugly piece of wearable technology was violently embedded into the brain of a pompous script editor.”

I remember your mother. Your mother was so fat that I orbited her!

“Nice, mature,” groaned the Myriad, “Anyway, you're clearly just a cosmic scarecrow, so prepare to become one with the Universe!”

The Myriad dispatched a fleet towards the centre of the system, which was swiftly transfigured into a heap of dead chickens, and fired back, one by one, into the Myriad's simulated mouth.

DO NOT TEST THE CREATOR, MORTAL!

“That...that was actually pretty tasty” smirked the Myriad. “I mean it's been quite a few millennia since I last nibbled on some lovely fresh chicken – I think the

⁶ “Constituent” was perhaps a generous description. Once a cow has been devoured by a shoal of piranhas, it is a constituent of said shoal only in the loosest sense.

⁷ Again, very much metaphorical. No-one in the universe had played literal hardball in several hundred millennia, although that hadn't stopped The Myriad from having a

brief obsession with Babe Ruth (whatever the hell a Babe Ruth was).

⁸ The Ear people of Wimplar had the rare distinction of being spat back out again by Myriad, since the moment they began to be assimilated, the Myriad became nervous of the noise of their yelling, and fled in terror.

⁹ Does this one need explaining?

last time was when I paid a visit to those delicious Cat-Strokers of Earth¹⁰.”

Oh for ... Godfuckingdammit! Do you realise how long planting every single one of those trees¹¹ took!? And let me guess, you ate them all as well.

“It’s kind of what I do. I mean, trees aren’t really that tasty, but there’s something kind of satisfying about a good bare planet, every last protein absorbed. But can’t you just create another planet or something? I probably won’t eat it straight away...” The Myriad knew taunting something this powerful – not that he believed it was the original Creator of course (it was a claim it himself had used to good effect on a number of lesser civilisations, just prior to devouring them) – probably wasn’t a good idea, but it was much too fun.

You’re actually more annoying than the Curregians. That’s almost impressive you know. And that going to make it all the more fun when I watch you die.

“Well, if you’re the Creator, prove it.”

So your little snack wasn’t good enough then?

“Not that I’d complain at another, but that was hardly pre-Big Bang *Cleansing*- Yes, alright, pre-Cleansing worthy.”

For a brief second, the red star at the centre of the system flashed green, then yellow, then blue, then was red again. Myriad wasn’t quite sure it hadn’t made it up.

Don’t try and pretend you didn’t see that. I don’t fancy doing it for longer for what it does to my planets. But I’d like to see any of your...parts....offer an explanation for that.

The Pedahnti corner began murmuring quietly, as what was effectively Myriad’s best supercomputer churned away.

Oh, there’s always some like them. Watch this.

The Pedahnti consciousness, inasmuch as it is separate in any sense, which is very little; began to scream. Myriad felt a huge withdrawal of Mind from

the Whole into a corner, as the Pedahnti consciousness began whimpering uncontrollably.

“What did you do to me?” boomed Myriad, slightly worried, but not worried, for this wasn’t the Creator. But very angry. And kinda curious.

Do you know what happens when you show a race so scientifically and mathematically inclined incontrovertible proof that pi is exactly 4? They don’t enjoy that.

The Myriad could feel the threatened schism of sanity blooming in the corner of its Whole; disunity of a Hive Mind was next to impossible – but here it had begun, triggered by little more than a twisted mathematical proof. The Myriad ruthlessly severed the Pedahnti subgroup from its connection to the Whole, as the part of it that was once the Daktohr nebula advised. The silence was immediate, and wonderful.

Ah. There we go.

The voice seemed...smug. Almost self-satisfied?

“There we go, what?” asked the Myriad.

Well, for all your vaunted unity, my dear, you have just given the Pedahnti their sovereignty at last.

“WHAT?” thundered the great Mind, casting about for the Pedahnti influence it had grown so used to, and finding – nothing. Blankness. Silence where once there had been logic. “You tricked me!” it cried with numberless mouths into the void.

I am the Creator, it said peaceably. Everything that has ever been or will be, I made. I know you, Myriad, your impatience and your idiocy. For every world you have consumed, you grow ever weaker. It is the doom of every Hive Mind.

“I am the first Hive Mind this universe has ever seen! The first, the only, and the greatest!” the Myriad roared.

And yet you are riven with incompatibilities and strife. Tsk, tsk, did you really consume a planet in the midst

¹⁰ The stroking of cats is highly recommended in the Best of Intergalactic Recipes™ as a way to induce a smooth, rich flavour in your farmed produce.

¹¹ It is considered proper for any creator God to produce their favourite creature on each planet by hand, a practice

designed to ‘discourage laziness and promote understanding of basic physiological principles.’ - Creation handbook™, Volume 7.31

of its Civil War? Oh, dear Myriad, what an elementary error.

A terrible sense of dread stirred within the Myriad as it became aware for the first time that all was not well in the sullied ranks of minds stored¹² within it. For deep in the dusty reaches of the Myriads mind laid a division between two proud nations; the Axolons and the Siburdha, over the colour of their dwellings¹³. Such a seemingly petty strife had gone ignored by the Myriad in its quest to consume. After all, once a nation was exposed to the unified thoughts of a thousand worlds, would not the colour of a house seem so inconsequential? Alas, over the generations since their incorporation the two peoples' hatred for each other had slowly grown and along the way the Axolons and Siburdha had also drawn other minds from within the Myriad to their respective causes. At first it was the more aesthetic civilisations, the ones with appreciation for fine arts and a good wine¹⁴, but then more slowly came the technological races, those beloved of Flash Gordonesque space crafts and supercomputers. And so now the break had grown to encompass the entirety of the Myriads many collective minds with all of them believing strongly in either Magenta or Baby Salmon for their dwellings.¹⁵

"No..." the Myriad murmured, in a voice beginning to sound like multiple voices pulling apart, shifting in pitch and timbre.¹⁶

Yes, dear Myriad. You swallowed them whole, like the wolf with the duck in Peter and the Wolf, and like the duck they are still quacking in your belly.

¹² Supposedly as nice obedient rows to be catalogued and filed like library books, but nature just isn't that neat.

¹³ Both nations use a largely visual language (each with its own subtle nuances) based on slight changes in skin colour and so the colour of one's house can become a matter of great offense between the different peoples as a result of getting lost in translation.

¹⁴ A surprisingly common love of fermented grapes exists among the many and variant pretentious species across the universe.

¹⁵ Apart, of course, from the breakaway radical faction that championed Petrol Blue, but they were small enough to be irrelevant and no-one else took them particularly seriously.

All of the factions of the Myriad were sufficiently weirded out by this analogy to stop for a minute and say, in a rather more united voice, "What?"

Did none of you ever invent Peter and the Wolf? Where is Prokofiev when you need him? What a shame.

The Myriad regarded this as irrelevant, and felt rather better.¹⁷

"You spout inanities," it tried to say, but its voice began to crack as a strangled *Axolonë forever!* attempted to get out through it, mingled with a *For Siburdharia!*, which meant that what actually emerged was a garbled mess.¹⁸

Don't you see, you cannot hold together? Oh, Myriad. The voice grew somehow deeper and more booming. You think you know civilizations? I know them: I made them and have watched over them since their beginning. There is no part of them that I am not in, and there is nothing that passes in them that I do not know. And a collection of unwilling peoples, brought together in slavery to a greater whole, will not assimilate – not unless your priorities and theirs become the same.

"Their priorities are the same as mine! They are mine! They are me!" the Myriad shrieked/hissed/rumbled, in a thousand voices.¹⁹

No, Myriad. You never cared for their priorities.

"Of course I..."

The Myriad had never really been one for introspection, but now the entity who wasn't the

¹⁶ And with just a hint of a battle-cry of YOU MAY TAKE OUR HOUSES, BUT YOU SHALL NEVER PAINT THEM BABY SALMON.

¹⁷ Actually the Cat Stokers of Earth *did* know of and enjoy Peter and the Wolf, particularly the clarinet parts, but they were busy championing the cause of magenta architecture.

¹⁸ It was made worse by the fact that some races, such as the Hwilemūs of Vlad, communicate only in high-pitched squeaks mostly out of the range of human hearing.

¹⁹ And two dissonant war-melodies from the opposing factions, which had now decided to employ music in their combat.

creator had offered the perfect opportunity to be proven wrong. All it would take was a pause for breath, and a simple tally of all the priorities that had been well and truly shared and cared for, and this insolent godling could be dealt with and another system subsumed. Only after diving into its memories did the Myriad discover a slight hitch in its otherwise perfect plan.

Where before the strife caused by the colour of one's abode had been reassuringly illogical, now the Myriad's thoughts were tainted by a dearth of logic and an inexplicable abundance of discord²⁰. The memory of a magenta mansion was as intense as the Scary Things of Wimplar, the sensation of baby salmon slate as intoxicating as the Well of Staring on Depressivo IV, and suddenly the Myriad found that it cared. It had never cared before. There had never been reason to care. But now every metaphorical fibre of its all-too-literal being was taut with newfound fervour. And what's more, it was becoming disturbingly aware that it had no house at all, and that the house it didn't have could never begin to sate the fragmented desires which were rapidly overwhelming its every faculty.

The Myriad was interrupted from its reveries by a particularly smug intruder.

See? I'd hate to say I told you so.

That. Was. It.

The Myriad could bear being treated as a mindless interstellar evil²¹. It could bear being the object of an entire solar system's hatred and disgust. It could even handle encountering the occasional intelligence which approximated its own bottomless knowledge.

²⁰ That these were joined by no fewer than eleven million Sartrist discourses on futility, the unobtrusive trill of a Wimplarian Running-Away Horn and a particularly savoury picture of a cat stroking were, thankfully, not deemed relevant enough to dwell upon.

²¹ It quite liked that, actually.

²² It's a truth (literally) universally acknowledged that in every language ever produced by any life form which has ever considered itself intelligent, these words have the

highest aggravation-produced-to-syllable ratio of any possible phrase.

But the one thing it could not handle – the one thing none of its constituent intelligences or consciousnesses or cultures could bear to allow to pass – was the phrase “*I told you so.*”²²

Its moment of awful introspection forgotten in a heartbeat²³, every constituent of the Myriad uttered something approximating a roar of anguish and indignation. In unison they lashed out, striking into the heart of the big red star, enveloping all in bright crimson light –

Poor fools²⁴. Delicious, though²⁵. And so many new cat videos.

On the third of the red giant's planets, a small, quadruped shape began to form in a shady spot under a tree. It looked as though it was being woven out of mist. The shape gradually solidified and developed detail, as if invisible hands were teasing every strand of fur into existence. It would take a couple of hours to finish the cat, but it was the Creator's favourite pastime after a stressful day. In its vast repository of minds, it made room for the new arrivals. Many were from planets it had known before, but some were from other zones, farther reaches of space, different Creators' works. It took its time choosing precisely what colour this cat's fur should be²⁶, while letting the rest of its considerable mental force digest its meal.

Every new mind, countless millions of them, was found a place within the Creator, and made comfortable, and then left alone. They could make as much noise as they liked; they would only be heard when the Creator chose to listen. It was an aspect of being a hive mind, it had discovered, that those who weren't born to it just never got right.

highest aggravation-produced-to-syllable ratio of any possible phrase.

²³ Metaphorical.

²⁴ “Hey!” said the Myriad. “What’s going on? Where am I?”

²⁵ It was dark. None of the six hundred and eighty-three of the Myriad's sensory methods returned anything but noise, except for a couple which insisted they smelled blueberries.

²⁶ Mostly orange, with some darker streaks and a creamy belly and paws. One of its ears was going to be completely brown, for that adorable lop-sided look.

The first, the only, and the greatest, indeed, it mused, pondering the length of the cat's whiskers, goddamn upstart kids.

Introspection - Extras

Alternate Titles:

This Galaxy Ain't Big Enough for the Two of Us

Alpha and Omega

Housing Crisis

Comments:

"I think this should be carried on such that the original Star Trek cast turn up and shoot the Creator in the face. Twice. Because Star Trek V needs remaking." – Samuel

The Editor Adores:

Well, most of it. It's beautifully bizarre and exquisitely crafted, and I think it works really well.

They Caught Me Once

Michael French

[Editor's Note: This story, by the same author, provided the inspiration for the chainwriting story 'Twitch'.]

They caught me once, you know. Took me to a small office building on Jacobs Street, a place they use when the police station is a bit too official. I could have escaped of course, but I had nothing to hide. Four armed men watched me while I talked to a fifth. They looked scared. I don't blame them. If I was an ordinary person, I'd be scared of people like me, too. Everyone's scared of what they don't understand. Not to mention the killings. But I'm not like that, I don't kill. I help people, do something meaningful with my powers. The only people I kill are the others like me. I'm the only one who helps. They all destroy. So I kill them. I explained this to the man. He seemed unconvinced. I explained some more. They let me go in the end. I was on the same side.

I went to buy a newspaper. The news agents seem to be getting rarer these days. I ran up the side of a tall building and looked around. Found one. I bought a newspaper from him. Nice man. The newspapers think there's only one of us, so to them, I'm the killer. They don't know it's me though. No one recognises me, or any of the others. We move too fast to be photographed, that's what we do, we move fast, faster than you can see. So they don't know there's more than one. I think they're trying to ignore the possibility. Which means they don't know there's one that helps. But I don't mind. I'm not after the fame. I'm just helping.

I ran up another building. The rooftops are my world, so easy to me, where others can barely reach. I look for people on other rooftops. That's how I find people like me, to stop them. No one else really comes up here any more. They know it's dangerous. I found a woman, this time, crying alone on a roof. She doesn't seem like me. She just seems sad. I ask her what's wrong. She didn't say anything, but I just waited. People who are sad don't want to say things. But waiting helps. She told me she had a child, a baby, which was taken from her. She said ordinary men took her away. She knew where they were, but they were armed, she couldn't do anything. I told her I'd help. She didn't believe me. No one does. I don't do it for the belief, either.

The Martian, or, Party Like it's Gardeners' Question Time (in 1979) – A Review

Samuel Cook

Following a slew of enthusiastic reviews and an entertaining trailer, I went to see Ridley Scott's¹ latest sci-fi venture: *The Martian*². Now, I must confess I haven't read the book the film is based on, so I can't venture any opinion as to how well it represents its source material – I shall confine my appraisal to the film itself (and endeavour to avoid spoilers as much as possible).

First, an overall verdict: I very much enjoyed myself. The film has a good mix of drama and humour, with a soupçon of action to liven things up along the way. I felt it fully deserved the hype surrounding its release. Perhaps the most obvious comparison is to *Interstellar*³ – both are SCIENCE-fiction, though *The Martian* is somewhat more believable⁴. Whilst *Interstellar* was a very good film, it's not one I would particularly seek to watch again, whereas I would quite happily have turned round and seen *The Martian* again immediately – it was much less oppressive.

Another parallel would be with *Moon*, another very good film, where Sam Rockwell is stuck on the Moon on his own. However, there aren't any sinister computers or corporations in *The Martian*, but you get the same sort of vibe in both films – man stuck on own in middle of nowhere having to improvise to survive and talking into CCTV cameras.

Matt Damon was very believable in the main role as Mark Watney, the marooned botanist who is left for dead after a Martian storm in which he was struck by a marauding satellite dish⁵ whilst the rest of the crew return to Earth. He had a selection of very good lines –

I found the building. They had guns, but that's not enough. How can you aim at someone that's already behind you before you realise they've come through the door? Speed is the ultimate weapon. I didn't kill them, though. I told you, I only kill the ones like me. Maybe I'd kill in an emergency but it's never an emergency, it's child's play. They had guns. I had all the time in the world. I broke a few arms, a few legs. Send a message, you know? On the rooftop was the last man, with the child. He dropped it off the edge as I arrived. So I knocked him down, ran down the stairs, outside and caught it. I ran back up the side of the building to see the man. It must have been seconds. He looked so surprised.

There was a radio mast on this roof, a tall one. I climbed it, with the baby. It looked at me as I held it out and didn't cry as I dropped it. I watched it fall, ready to run down and catch it again. A small challenge. I watched it with the calm surety of a man who knows he cannot fail.

The baby hit the roof with a crunch. I watched. I came down again, past the man on the roof, surprise the expression forever painted on a dead face. I passed the child's broken body. Down I went, through the building with all the men with guns. There was blood everywhere. I went to find the woman again, to tell her the news. She was on the roof I had found her first, well, hanging from the edge. I think I tried to turn myself in then. Went back to the office they had taken me to. It was burnt to the ground.

I went to buy a newspaper. The man there was frightened, begging me not to hurt him. I explained to him. I'm not the bad one. I just want a newspaper. He calmed down after I showed him my hand held money, not a weapon. The newspapers still only report one man. I'm sure there were others. I only kill others. I've killed so many. I think maybe I always knew, I just didn't have the heart to tell myself. I picked up my knife from the seller's chest and ran up a building.

They caught me once, you know, before I knew I was mad.

¹ Him being involved was also a compelling reason to go. *Alien* and *Blade Runner* are perhaps still two of the best sci-fi movies

² In 2D, obviously. I don't want to pay loads a cash for a headache.

³ That may just be because Jessica Chastain is in both of them

⁴ And far less grim, despite the premise of a man being marooned on Mars. At least it's only one guy in trouble, rather than the whole of humanity. And no somewhat hand-wavy black-hole-time-travel malarkey going on. Even if, in *Interstellar*, it was very pretty and rigorous malarkey.

⁵ This is all in the first five minutes, so I wouldn't call it a spoiler. Incidentally, it has been fully admitted that a storm

my particular favourites being⁶: “Mars will come to fear my botany powers” and “I’m going to science the shit out of this”, and, overall, the writing was very good. The stellar supporting cast also delivered very astute performances – Jeff Daniels, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Kristen Wiig and Benedict Wong as the administrators on Earth and Jessica Chastain, Kate Mara and Michael Peña as Watney’s crewmates⁷, having to deal with his loss and then the self-recrimination for having (unknowingly) left him behind. There have been criticisms of the film for over (and under) use of the supporting cast, but I didn’t find that a problem – Matt Damon is the main man and gets most of the screen time, as is fitting, but I felt the supporting cast had plenty of opportunity to get in on the action, without detracting from the main storyline.

Special mention should also go to Sean Bean, who, improbably, plays a high-up member of NASA⁸ and is just about believable as the guy who looks after the crew – if they’d cast him as an astrophysicist, that may have stretched things to breaking point. He is also instrumental in what was probably my favourite scene, where he has to explain to the Director of NASA and others why a secret meeting is called Project Elrond⁹. Incidentally, should I ever meet the Director of NASA, I will call him Glorfindel¹⁰. This will probably make the meeting very short, but I feel it would be worth it.

But, back to the main thrust¹¹ of things. The actual story is gripping – I don’t think I was ever bored – the humorous interludes serve to lighten what could otherwise be a quite depressing film for much of its length and the acting is very good. The effects are also brilliant – the film really managed to convey what Mars would look like¹². The actual science, as far as I could tell¹³, was pretty good too – it all certainly

of such magnitude wouldn’t be possible on Mars, but this is science-fiction, after all – bending the rules a little to set things up is allowable, I feel.

⁶ Possibly slightly paraphrased

⁷ Credit should also go to the other two astronauts, Sebastian Stan and Aksel Hennie, but I couldn’t recall having seen them before, which suggests to me they’re less well-known

⁸ Even more amazingly, he survives the film!

⁹ Because the Council of Elrond was a secret meeting and... surely I don’t have to explain this further here?

¹⁰ I’m still trying to work out if there’s more to that in the film than simply an obscure attendee of the Council of Elrond, but I can’t think of any parallels between book Glorfindel and the Director of NASA in the film

seemed plausible, apart from possibly the final space bit involving using atmosphere for thrust¹⁴. To echo Randall Munroe. I would also like a pet Sojourner now. It’s so cute!

And, finally, it would be remiss of me not to mention the soundtrack (itself a running joke). If you like 70s disco music, you will enjoy this film. If you don’t, you will only sympathise more with Mark Watney and therefore also enjoy this film. It’s a win-win situation.

So, overall, at least 4 out of 5; I’d probably go 4.5 or higher. Definitely go and see it, if you haven’t already.

¹¹ That wasn’t a deliberate pun when I wrote it, but in retrospect, thrust, rockets, etc. = pun.

¹² Which is red and sandy with lots of bluffs. But very pretty. Imagine the American Badlands, but with less air and more bad.

¹³ Seeing as I’m not an expert, I suspect someone actually studying Physics or Biology might spot some holes, but, as someone reasonably conversant with the basics, I didn’t feel anything was just wrong. OK, the time lag was a little bit variable, as required by the plot, but I can live with that.

¹⁴ I won’t say more to avoid spoilers, but, while I accept the principle of the scene was sound, I can’t help thinking that, in reality, it wouldn’t quite have worked the way it did.

Megan Griffiths

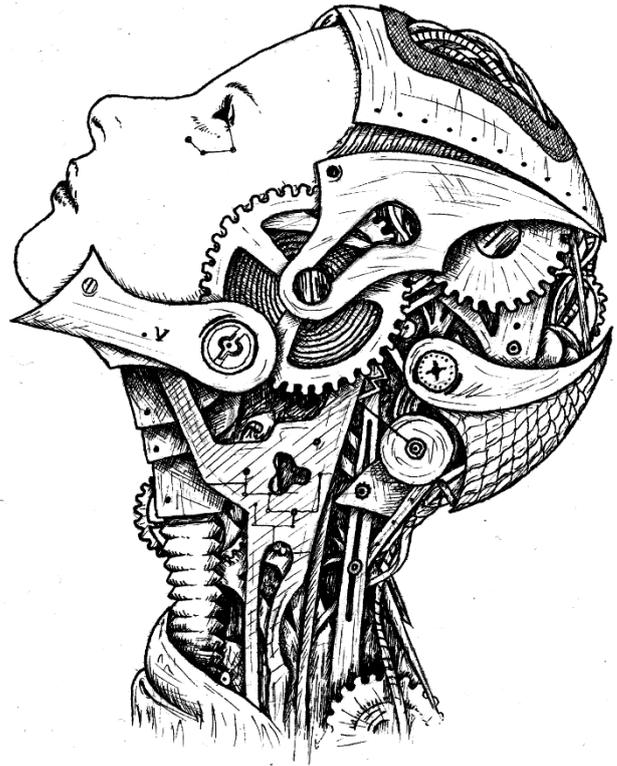
The faint tinkle of a bell echoed through the room as a door swung open. The newcomer blinked in the sudden darkness, a slight whir sounding as two blue lenses compensated for the lower light level. The small room had long ago surpassed the stylish 'dimly lit' of high end restaurants, and now lurked deep within the realms of dingy. Only the odd weak ray of natural light could penetrate the narrow windows through warped glass, soot-stained and thick. Against the bare brick walls a ramshackle collection of tables and chairs sat abandoned, but it was towards the bar, and the greying human that stood behind it, that the figure made its way.

The man – identified by a battered name tag as 'Walter' – did not glance up at first, as the sounds of the world were blotted out behind headphones and blaring guitars. It was only when a faint wisp of fresh outside air brushed his face and a metal hand appeared on the bar before him, that he tugged the speakers from his ears and allowed his eyes to drift upwards. A titanium alloy frame softened by moulded polymer coatings formed an arm, a body, and a face. Deep in the recesses of its eye sockets two LEDs glowed softly, the light filtering through cerulean tinted Perspex. At a distance they looked almost human.

The barkeeper studied his new (and only) customer with narrow-eyed suspicion, absentmindedly cleaning the pint glass in his hand. If he hadn't known better, he would have said that the machine looked *sad*, of all things: the pale lips sloped down ever so slightly at the corners and those all too realistic orbs were fixed on the table, tracing the looping grain of the wood. The expression was one he knew well from the old days, when his bar had been inhabited by angry mutterings and hunched shoulders. It almost looked depressed.

Clearing his throat, the man broke the silence, keeping his tone light. "Don't see many 'bots round these parts."

When this elicited no response, he tried again: "You sent for something? Never heard of your kind being much for socialising." Mechanical shoulders rose and fell, a muffled whirring accompanying the movement. Walter opened his mouth to speak once more but stopped himself as a voice emerged from the robot, the words crackly at first, as if it needed to cough.



"This is a public house: a building with a bar and one or more public rooms licensed for the sale and consumption of alcoholic drink." It paused for a moment, as if plucking up the courage to speak. "I... would like a drink. Please." The man blinked in surprise – as far as he was aware, the Mark-5 was not able to consume liquids, let alone feel the effects of alcohol.

"Can you drink?" he asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

"My humanoid form is structured in such a way that it can receive liquids without damage, and I have calculated that a sufficiently high alcohol content will temporarily decrease the firing capacity of my positronic matrix, thereby rendering me in a state of reduced acuity." Detecting and analysing the glazed eyes of the bar tender, the robot paused to restructure its sentence. "Yes, I can drink – something strong, if you would."

Walter watched his expectant customer with incredulity at first, then shrugged and reached under the counter; a paying customer it was, and that was a rare occurrence not to be missed.

"Neat vodka – 40% – will that do?"

The robot nodded its head and the bartender reached for a glass, but was stopped as the machine simply took

the bottle. Removing the cap with a single pull that flattened the thread, it tilted back its head and began to drink. Walter's eyebrows made a valiant attempt to escape the confines of his forehead as he watched the robot down the entire bottle in a single, long gulp.

"Easy mate, you ever had a drink before?"

The metal head swivelled on its axis. A wry smirk twisted Walter's lips,

"Didn't think so – you might wanna take it slow."

The 'bot lowered the now empty container, the malleable polymer between its eyebrows creasing slightly at the unexpected heat of the alcohol as it flowed over organic wire coatings. The burning was not an unpleasant sensation. Wordlessly, Walter retrieved another dusty bottle, carefully unscrewing the lid and decanting a measure for his guest. With an expression that would have passed for embarrassment had it been found in living flesh, the robot sipped at his drink at a more measured pace.

It held up a hand and, though invisible to the human eye, was able to detect a slight tremor not previously present. If such a phenomenon had been perceived at any other time, the robot would have registered for an immediate systems scan.

"I feel a slight tingling in the terminal digits of my upper limbs. I think it's affecting me."

The barkeeper felt unable to provide an adequate response to this statement, and the pair lapsed into a silence that could not be described as awkward as it was not *uncomfortable*; yet neither would have said it was relaxing.

Never one to accept change easily, Walter had been one of the few that had neither outright opposed the development of artificial intelligence, nor welcomed it. Instead, he had simply ignored the growing industry, hoping that it, like the neural implants and mood enhancers before it, would be just another fad, shining for a moment before fading into obscurity. It wasn't that he had a particular problem with them per se; they were merely not a part of his life. The robots – 'bots, androids, cyborgs – he had no idea what was considered politically correct anymore – had been part of society for twenty years now, in one form or another. But he still lived in hope.

When the pervasive quiet grew too much for him, Walter poured himself a glass of Talisker – 1967, a good

year – and quietly nursed the glass, then the next. It was not until the metal hand across from him had also returned several times to the vodka bottle that either gained the courage to speak.

"It is... traditional, is it not, for a human of your profession to provide advice to tenants of the establishment. Correct?"

"You mean, you want me to listen to your problems?"

"Affirmative."

The bar keeper shifted on the balls of his feet, not entirely comfortable with the direction of the conversation. Sure, he had offered a friendly ear and a word of advice to his old tenants back in the day, but they were human. They had normal problems – their wives, bills, their jobs, their wives – problems he could relate to.

"Right, well then. Go ahead, I guess. What's on your mind?"

It did not reply immediately, choosing instead to sip its drink once more, with some difficulty; immobile set polymers had not been designed with casual drinking in mind. A clear bead rolled across its chin and hung for a moment before plummeting towards the bar. The pair watched, unblinking, as the liquid was slowly absorbed by the thirsty wood.

"My design is flawed. The human form is limited and impractical." The robot gestured towards its artificial face. "It would seem that R-Tech desires their products to look human, but it is a poor copy. A robotic entity can perform calculations that an organic brain could not realise, but humans are incomprehensible." Its voice was flat as it spoke, the pitch low and unchanging, but a subtle undertone that Walter could not yet place, stirred beneath.

If he were completely honest, Walter would have agreed with the bot: he had preferred the old design that had made no pretence of humanity, regarding the machines. The new faces were unsettling in the familiarity of the features. They had a rather 20th Century take-over-the-world feel about them. However, the greying man bit back this opinion; his guest appeared to have rather fragile self-esteem.

"So, er, you don't want to be one of us?"

"Why would I strive for such? Your species is fragile and short lived, and seems to find delight in needless

conflict. Human actions are determined on the basis of emotion, not fact. This does not seem to be a logical behaviour to emulate.” There it was again, fraying at the edges of the neatly clipped tone: a hint of bitterness. Walter frowned, peering into the amber depths of his glass for inspiration. He chose his words carefully, aware that the bot’s gaze rested upon his downcast eyes.

“I s’pose there’s a bit more to it than that. Being human. It’s your mind, your ‘self.’” Sensing that the conversation was plunging into rather deep waters for two inebriated beings, Walter lifted his shoulders, dismissing the topic: “Maybe you should talk to a counsellor or philosopher person.”

Feeling something comparable to disappointment, the robot gazed at the tag loosely attached to the barkeeper’s shirt, its eyes having trouble focusing on the scrawled writing.

“What is ‘Walter’?”

“My name – it’s my name. Don’t you have one?”

“I have a designation: Gamma-686.”

“That’s not a name. We should give you one. How about... Samuel? You look like you could be a Sam.” It shook its head slowly, absentmindedly biting its lower lip, deep in thought – a habit recently acquired from the eldest daughter of its household. Samuel was a good, strong name with a biblical ring, but it didn’t quite fit.

Not to be put out, Walter ran through some other suggestions, “You could try... Harry? Isaac? Ramesh?” The silence that followed was all the answer he needed. The human ran a hand through his almost non-existent hair, all other names having temporarily vacated his mind. “Can’t you, like, access a database or –”

The bot straightened.

“Samantha. I think that I will call myself Samantha.”

Samantha produced a tissue from a hidden cavity within her wrist, gently dabbed the excess liquid from her lips, and stood. Activating a simple algorithm within her sub-processors, she syphoned the alcohol from her systems, converting the substance to a non-toxic residue that could be disposed of at a later date. Thoughts now unsullied, Samantha turned back to the

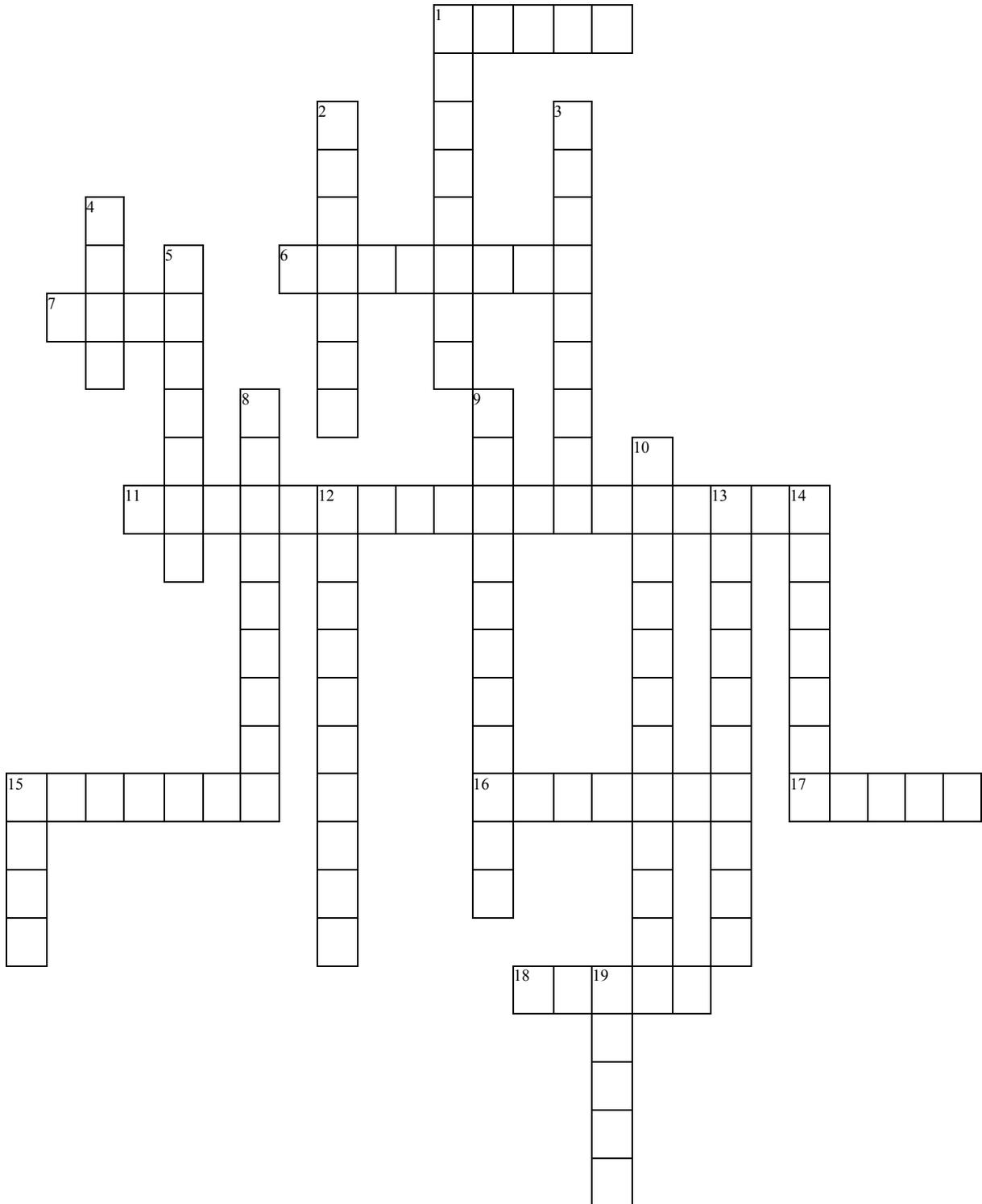
bar; eyes framed by dark lashes focussing, and inclined her head,

“This has been a most informative experience. I thank you, Walter.”

Walter was sure that he detected a slight sway to her walk.

CUSFS Crossword

Rory Hennell-James



Across

1. Not a cult (5)
6. Maybe a cult (8)
7. A twelve-foot long bright orange scarf (4)
11. TTBA's original title (5,2,2,9)
15. The nationality of the CUSFS Committee (7)
16. Supposedly invented by CUSFS, I just lost it (3,4)
17. The omnipotent leader of Jomsborg (5)
18. Traditional punishment of pun-makers (5)

Down

1. Location of the other CUSFS (8)
2. This crossword (2-5)
3. The symbol of the Charibeing's power (9)
4. Meow (4)
5. All Hail the Glowcloud (3,4)
8. The animal that appears when there is sexual tension (9)
9. The Scandinavian country Jomsborg annually invades (11)
10. The Sun's Shape (6,6)
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The Crossing

Sarah Binney

The edge of the world is further than you'd think. You've heard of the cities that sparkle in the eastern sun, clinging to the Road like a baby at its mother's teat; maybe their names mean something to you, half-forgotten from fairytales, Kaladyah and Ul-Ashimn and Qul. The further you go, the less they seem to be places of prosperity or glory and more of desperation. People cling together like survivors in a snowstorm. The last human city is a cluster of a few dozen thatch yurts hugged by a pebblestone wall ten feet high.

When I told the caravan vizier I intended to leave, she laughed, at first. "My companion, there is nothing but endless plains to the east. Mountains and madness and sky. Then the end of the world."

She offered me a place with the train permanently. I refused as politely as I knew how in her language. The thought of retracing my footsteps made me feel physically sick. I gifted her what of my possessions I could not carry (extra clothes, the Ulm vase I had won at dice, half my books) and in return she gave me a Pjor bird, an eastern breed, made for stamina not speed. I bought food, saddled the mount and left the city walls at dawn.

Contrary to popular belief there are many humans who live so far east. As I rode I saw many nomadic peoples trawling the thin soil for a living, shooting down scrawny carrion birds and scratching edible materials from the rocks. I never came close enough to speak with them.

Noon on the third day simmered dry and beige. The landscape choked me in its terrible flatness, seeming to go on and on broken only by a wavering heat devil clinging to the horizon below the sandy dome of the sky. In the heat, the rhythm of my mount soothing me, I dreamed or hallucinated or saw the goddess Kanahar stretching out her arms to form the world from the Waste. She whispered to me in words that were the dances of tectonic plates, her left arm reaching west to the Great Ocean, and her right arm to the east. I saw myself from a very long way away, a flea trudging along her middle finger, towards the nail: the Opal River, the River of Melancholy, where the world ends. In my dream her nail was the mirage that opened out like a butterfly's wings, slow as

treacle, splitting the very horizon in two, scratching the land from the sky -

I looked up and saw the Opal River.

The River is.... The River is vast. At least two leagues wide by my estimate. From its banks I could just see the far shore. Rippled by fingertips of wind, its surface is quicksilver-smooth; the current flows with all the stately righteousness of a glacier. Yet my mind could not comprehend even a sliver of the sheer volumes that flowed past every second.

I arrived at the shore in the mid afternoon of my fourth day out of the city. The light had not yet started to redden as I dismounted and knelt to trail my fingers in the stream. Even clinging to the edge of the world there are people, and not far downriver some fisherpeople squatted in the shallows and cast their nets without enthusiasm. I felt their eyes followed me with something not quite reaching curiosity.

My Pjor was tired so I fed her and left her to rest and preen. After an hour I made my decision. Pjor birds swim better than horses. I slung my remaining possessions — food, books — over my head and waded into the shallows. She followed at my signal, and I mounted her in knee-deep water, to familiarise her, as it was clear she had done before. Then I urged her onward.

The fishermen were staring now. Over the bird's splashing I heard one call out. I did not look around; I could not bear to. The bird floundered an instant, caught her footing. We were being swept downriver, the current becoming faster and less forgiving towards the centre of the flow, but it didn't matter so long as we crossed.

When I was nearly halfway across the River I glanced to one side and saw what appeared a silver gleam in the dark water, gone before I noticed it in my waking mind, forgotten as quickly. Far away a fishing child screamed. Another gleam, to my right this time, just as fast but corroborated into my mind as a warning that —

My mount screamed, a terrible sound, and vestigial wings flapping uselessly plunged out from beneath me into the depths. I submerged, my world turning to turbulence and rushing water and silver gleaming all around and

I resurfaced, gasping, my bag string choking me,
hands floundering for balance where there was none
—

My bird was splashing in terror, screaming an awful
gurgling scream each time she broke the surface —

I felt something touch my leg

so fast as to be gone like

long fingers caressing my ankle cold cold cold

My bird, panicking, trying to make for shore, but
behind it diving from the current with the speed and
grace of a dancer or a silver sword —

a naga. An river-dragon. In the dwindling light its
carapace gleamed lavender-silver, water running from
its fins, as it dove back down, down onto the
screaming bird, catching her neck in its serrated
mandibles and crushing —

then, down, back into the river depths, unseen; the
whole thing had lasted less than a second.

I fell beneath the surface again and swallowed a bitter
mouthful of river water — forced my head back up —
not long before it returned —

My bag was soaking but my books were intact in their
waterproof lining; I fumbled, struggling to use both
hands and keep my head above water — silver
glinting beneath me —

My fingers closed around the sculpted cover of the
tome I was looking for, labyrinthine inscriptions
embossed into the leather — I tore the first page my
fingers closed upon from the binding (even in my
panic, hyperventilating, soaked, the sound of tearing
paper felt anathema to me) —

again the naga circled, I could hear a chittering every
time I submerged —

I held the page, dripping wet, above me (finest rice
paper! Three crowns an ounce in Palverin!), and I
muttered, I pleaded, I screamed at it —

the naga broke clear of the water behind me,
mandibles clutching —

I placed the paper to my lips and *blew*.

A great white heat blossomed before my mouth, dry
as a desert breeze, as the paper dried out instantly
and began to split into two leaves thin as a daydream,
then inflate. Bigger and bigger the air sac grew,
cracking upwards, as the naga fell awfully towards me
the sac lifted free. I stopped blowing and clung on,
both hands, bag raining river water heavily, for my
dear life —

The naga's mouth clamped over my heel and drew
blood, white pain blinding for an instant, then it
(miracle!) let go and crashed back down into the
water as I rose, up, my balloon pulled by the wind
away from the surface — east —

I ran out of hot air when the river was maybe twice as
deep as a man. I fell splashing into the shallows, green
sand just visible beneath my feet. I let go of the paper
and it flickered away in the evening breeze. I limped
the last hundred metres to shore, pulled myself onto
the bank, dripping, foot aching and bloody, gasping,
sodden, freezing, alive.

The sun had set behind me. I picked up my bag and
walked off the edge of the world, into the night,
towards the cities that lay beyond.

Timelessness

Michael French

A gift, they say. Anyone with powers has a gift. Is a gift. Look at the man who can lift twenty times his weight – he's building towers for our people to live in. Look at the woman who can't be killed – she's taking on the most dangerous jobs she can so the rest of them don't have to. Look at the girl who controls the weather – with an entire team of meteorologists and extreme care, she's reversing the damage we did to our world. Look at – never mind. The newspapers will tell you all about those ones.

And then there's me. Perhaps the most powerful of them all, or so some say. But a gift? Not my powers. Not I. When I use my powers, all I have is damage control, and regret.

I know what you're thinking – it's something destructive, then. Maybe he can destroy anything at will. But then, couldn't I join the blasting teams, building ultra-roads to connect our new cities? So that we can abandon our older, more environmentally irresponsible vehicles in favour of light-trains? Maybe it's some terrible psychic power, like bringing pain into people's minds. But I know someone like that, back in Crossrails. She uses it, oh so gently, to help people confront their pasts and be at peace with themselves. She softly untangles the dark corners of their minds and breathes life into them once more. Even someone who can only cause pain can do that much good. Me? I stop time.

The dream of ancient men who would be gods. The power to halt the flow of the universe, remake it in your will, and let it continue. That is what they said to me, when they discovered my power. They weren't afraid. In this time of unity and forward thinking, crime is gone, and everyone works to the common goal – a future worth living in. Noble. All they wanted was to help me work out how I could use my power for good.

What they can never understand is what happens. Nobody ever thinks about it. 'Stops time'. So, you can, like, freeze the world, yeah? Move from somewhere to somewhere else and like no one ever sees you? Or you could move something and to everyone else it just disappears? That's so cool! No, it isn't. Our world is far too complex to stop time. Everything depends

on it – you can't stop time but leave some clock still ticking. It wouldn't work. It doesn't.

Tests were done. Clearly, my body does not stop. I can move. I can jump. I fall, still, which is interesting, and we're not sure how. What was quickly worked out is that surrounding me is a bubble of 'time', an area where entropy carries on its merry way, regardless of the consequences. We can't be sure of the distances, but a foot away from my body would be close enough. It's how I'm still able to breathe, when the time is stopped. But I have to move, all the time, or the air becomes unclean. Think about it. When you breathe out, the carbon dioxide dissipates and there's plenty of oxygen for the next breath. For me, only a cubic foot or so cycles. If I stay still, my next few breaths will kill me. I have to move, all the time, when I use it.

I want you to imagine something. Picture your hand. Look at it. Can you see the veins, below the surface? Think of all the blood cycling around your hand right now. Ok. Now imagine I'm, say, half a foot away from your hand. So one half has stopped. The other half hasn't. But what happens now? Your cells still need nourishment, but the blood won't cycle, there's nothing pumping it. Heart's stopped. Remember? Your cells wither and die as they burn through what little oxygen you had in that half a hand and when I unfreeze you, half your hand simply rots away and falls off. You understand? Do you? When I freeze time, I can't go near people, or they get hurt. If my bubble reaches them, parts of them die.

They ran tests. Even a second of exposure, when I unfreeze, causes enormous pain and scarring. I hated those tests.

So that's my gift. Even without all the other problems, when I freeze time, I have to keep moving, yet I cannot go near people. Can't I zip across a room without anyone seeing? Only if there's a path, or I want to hurt them. I can't even save my life with this – all the stories had examples like stopping a speeding bullet, moving it out of the way. Maybe if I see fast enough I can stop it far away and move to one side, but if it reaches my bubble, there's no stopping it. Move it out the way? As soon as I go near the damn thing it carries on, at bullet speed, until it next exits my bubble or hits something firm.

So don't use it they tell me. That's the thing. I can turn it on and off, but sometimes, it comes on by itself.

More so recently. I'm not safe. Not around anyone, not around anything.

But they won't let me die.

In this new age, there are no suicides. There are no executions. People are looked after until they simply cannot carry on. I can survive, so they make sure I do. Here I lie. In a room of comfort, free to leave if I wish but unwilling to risk their lives to do so. Supplied with food and water to keep me alive, since I cannot get my own. Unable to freeze time and wait for death as I lose the freeze if I fall unconscious, and then they tend to me. Sometimes I wake and freeze during this, without meaning to. They've lost limbs and men to this. But they won't let me give up, and they won't ever stop helping.

Here in this new world of hope and promise I wait in timelessness for my time to end.

The Scar (A Review)

Danielle Saunders

A ship carrying emigrants and exiles sails from New Crobuzon, Bas-Lag's greatest and seediest city, heading for colonies across the ocean. But if it just made it there it would be an extremely short novel, and China Mieville doesn't seem to do those.

(Spoiler: it doesn't make it there.)

What follows is 700 pages of intrigue, worldbuilding, and memorably unpleasant descriptions. The Scar takes place in the same universe as Perdido Street Station, immediately after its events, although it is not strictly a sequel. It offers the same sense of a full, incredibly weird world, and the same twists and turns as everything goes horribly wrong. (Less twisty if, like me, you picked up the edition with the **massive spoiler** on the cover.)

It's not perfect. The protagonists - a New Crobuzon linguist forced to flee her home, and a Remade man, surgically and magically altered as a punishment for his crime - felt genuine and engaging, other characters less so. The title-drops (the novel is packed with scars, literal and metaphorical) started off kind of neat, but felt overdone by the end. Finally, compared with Perdido Street Station, the style and structure felt linear, even conventional. This means less in the way of chapter-long tangents but also, for me, a less exciting read.

That's not to say The Scar isn't good. The writing is still excellent, the ideas still horrifically fascinating, and Mieville is able to spread his worldbuilding far beyond a single city. Though it's thaumaturgy, not hard science, that governs the plot, this is speculative fiction that ignores the traditional sci-fi/fantasy divide, meaning a genuinely different and satisfying story.

If you've read Perdido Street Station and want more of the incredibly written and thought-out Definitely Not Alien races, more of the ideas, phrases and apocalyptic scenarios that will float in your nightmares for weeks - now with linguistics as a major recurring plot point! - definitely read The Scar, but be aware it's far from a straight-up extension to the first Bas-Lag book. If you haven't, try that first - Mieville's writing takes some getting used to, and the first book is simply more fun. For impending-doom values of fun.

Eleven-Dollar Bill

Samos Ottewill-Soulsby

There are many good things about the Crypt, but one of them is that no one hassles you for ID when you're in. The Proprietor knows his crowd, knows that people in our line of work get nervous when people pay too much attention to who we are. What line of work is that? All in good time. You'd have a hard time guessing from our clothes, mostly we look like ordinary folks, a bunch of hard-working, nine-to-fivers come to get a drink on the way home. After all, our livelihoods depend on our skills of transformation. The Crypt's a safe place. With an entrance that's only accessible if you go through Gormenghast via Mordor if you get my drift, no one is going to come here who isn't already in the know. You can't like the Crypt on Facebook or follow it on Twitter.

Keating the doorman recognises me as I walk up to him and is sliding open the bolts and ushering me in even as I presented my credentials. It's nice to have him as a friend. You wouldn't want him as an enemy. Management take certain precautions to ensure its clientele feel safe. Keating is the man the Proprietor sends when he hears someone has not been following the rules. Credentials are a gesture of good faith, a demonstration that you're a member of the club, differing from person to person depending on taste. Myself, I favour an eleven-dollar bill. I got to get my kicks from somewhere, so long as they're not from Keating. I'm a forger. I don't make dollar bills for a living, or fake stamps. I'm a specialist, catering to a very niche market.

Where magic comes from originally is a divisive question. The professors and hippies and god-botherers still argue about it. It's an interesting, but ultimately academic problem for me. More important for my purposes is where most of it is stored. One in a million people are just born with the stuff. Call them wizards. Naturally occurring magic sometimes gets trapped in physical objects such as stones and trees, like insects in amber. This can be tapped and used with proper training. From there it was a logical step for the great Merlins to seek to place and manage their sorcery by fashioning objects to act as storage and to facilitate certain thaumaturgical ends. Magical items is an area of business where demand vastly outstrips supply. Making them is dangerous and time-consuming, but more importantly potent wizards are

always leery about dividing their powers. Once in an item any fool can try to access the magic. Objects can be broken, stolen or even faked. And that's how I make real money.

I'm there to meet Benny Gershowitz, who wanted me to check something out for him, but he's not there yet. As I make my way to the bar I can see it is going to be a good night. It isn't full, but a lot of the big names are already there, the real professionals. Monkey Quinn is sharing a drink with Carla Rodriguez in the corner, Steady Meles, Ali Zarqawi and Frank Gennimata are playing on the quiz machine and Susie Wairatpanij is downing shots at the bar. Never heard of them? Course you haven't. Like I said, they're good at what they do. Notoriety's a bad thing in a forger.

I've been explaining magic like its electricity or something, but that's a bad way to think about it. The thing is, magic is all about negotiation. You create meaning through signals and symbols to communicate with the universe and persuade it to fudge the numbers a little. It helps if you have the real-deal magic naturally fizzing through you, but ultimately you can fake it so long as you have the knowledge to make the right motions. It won't work as well, but it will work well enough for my customers. I rarely deal with wizards themselves, partly because they don't need me, but mostly for the same reasons you don't make deals with the Mafia. Bad things happen to those who displease them. Also they're a real pain in the ass.

Elmyr's behind the bar. We make eye contact and he starts mixing my regular, a Zombie, complete with 'Don's Mix' and a cherry. Now Donn Beach has been dead more than twenty years and I doubt even the Crypt knows his actual mix but Elmyr can put something together that will do just as well. I thank him, pick up my bright orange drink and spot Laurie Callaghan holding court on the other side. Laurie's been a friend and occasionally more when the mood was the right and she's always fun, so I make my way over to her, stopping to shake hands and slap backs as appropriate as I go.

I'm a scribbler, which means that I specialise in magical script, thaumaturgical calligraphy if you will. A lot of spells only work with using the right writing and that's when people turn to me. The Arabs were particularly good at it, so I see a lot of people trying to make magic lamps or perfect hiding places. It often seems to end badly and if I think it's doomed to fail I'll

say so, but there's enough interest to allow me to pay my bills and I fancy I do it with enough skill to earn myself a certain respect. I'm a craftsman. Geber himself couldn't tell the difference sometimes, I swear.

Most of the time I'm not forging anything in particular. Laurie on the other hand fakes well known items, and that's a harder game, but not as difficult as you may think. The type of person who wants a Ring of Solomon, say, or a Philosopher's Stone, is unlikely to try anything too major with it. Mostly they want to stick it up on a mantelpiece somewhere discrete, but not too discrete obviously. You'd be astonished by the number of people who get their fix by buying a wizard's staff and sticking it under their beds. I'm not going to judge and as a means to pick you up I guess it beats killing a rhino for its horn. The point is, they're not going to go and summon all the spirits of the Earth to do their bidding. They're happy if they can make a few sparks fly out and impress the neighbours, so it doesn't matter if your Epic Rod of Excellent Magic maybe got most of its constituent parts from Handy Hardware.

Not that Laurie didn't get in trouble occasionally. As I approach she smiles before continuing with the story she is telling her rapt audience. It's the one about the time she got caught trying to move some fake masks in Nigeria by a bunch of Igbo priests who were convinced they were the real deal. I've heard it before, but it's a good tale and Laurie delivers it well, so I squeeze into a space by the nearby bench and sip my Zombie. My profession does not involve me getting a whole of lot of physical activity, so I might take up more space than when I first started coming to the Crypt.

New Englanders are fairly common among the magical forgery community. Something about being somewhere new pretending to be something old, perhaps. Laurie's got a thick Boston accent which it took me a while to get used to. She's got a degree in History of Art from Princeton, although you couldn't tell by the way she speaks sometimes. She's talking about the trial. 'So I'm stuck', she says. 'They want to put me away for theft of cultural artefacts of magical significance. What am I supposed to do, put up my hand and say, Your Honour, there's been a mistake, you see I deliberately faked these masks to make them look like that in order to take people's money?' She mimes doing so as she speaks and then pauses for

an appreciative laugh from her audience before continuing. 'It's flattering in a way, I guess'.

My eyes are roving round the bar while my ears listen, which is why I'm the first to see Keating walk in, half carrying a guy who turns out to be Benny Gershowitz. Benny's in a bad way, conscious and not obviously physically harmed, but his hair and clothes are a mess, his face is pale and he looks like someone punched him in the stomach while he was eating half a can of garbage. Laurie goes quiet when she sees the state he's in and I move over so Keating can put him in my seat. I always think of Benny as a kid, because that's what he was when I first met him, but he must be at least thirty by now. He looks older than thirty as he stared up at me, lips moving, no sound coming up out. His arm shoots out, thrusting something into my hands. Then his eyes roll and he seems to black out.

Medical training is not a common skillset among magical forgers. We may have the hands of surgeons, but that's mostly where it ends. Yevgeny the Monk is an exception to this rule, but then he is an exception to most rules. What exactly he did before he became head campanologist at the monastery of St. Bosco on Mount Athos is unclear, but a short answer would seem to be everything. He shoulders his way through the crowd and begins examining the stricken Benny.

Benny grew up in a kibbutz in the middle of nowhere. The kid's a genius. At the age of 10 he could read Neo-Aramaic, Syriac and Classical Greek. At the age of 13 he was rewriting Avicenna and Maimonides. And at the age of 16 he was sleeping rough having run away from his parents. Now he's one of the most brilliant artists I know. If you want a kame'a amulet or an incantation bowl, he's your man. I'm not thinking about how smart the kid is right now. Mostly I'm cursing his stupidity and really hoping that what he'd given me was not what I think it is.

It doesn't look like much, being a white A4 sheet of paper with Aramaic writing in standard Estrangelo font. It could have been printed out an hour ago. I couldn't be more scared of it if it had a ticking countdown on it. My fingers start going numb, a symptom I recognise, with a sinking heart, of contact with raw magic. Yevgeny looks up from Benny, sees the page and goes pale. 'Shit'. I couldn't agree more with the monk.

Laurie takes the sheet from me. 'But Benny's not a wizard', she says slowly, 'where did he get this?'

My Aramaic is rusty, but I know what I'm seeing if I can't believe it. 'He made it', I croak.

Now Laurie's really puzzled, 'it's better than any art I ever saw'.

Yevgeny clarifies, 'it's not a fake'.

'Oh. The Merlins are going to be pissed'.

There's a long silence as we contemplate this fine piece of understatement. Rare as they are, wizards can just about tolerate other natural magic users. Their reaction to one of the ungifted muscling in on their territory was not going to be understanding and friendly. Magic for the masses, not the knock-off stuff the denizens of the Crypt produced, but the real deal, must be their worst dread. Suddenly I can see it, factories churning out amulets, folks picking up curses at Hallmark, demons delivering pizzas, the President ordering legions of golems into the Middle East...

Laurie says, 'we've got to get him out of here. You grab his arm.' She's not given time to finish that thought, what with the door exploding in. Splinters go flying, shattering glass behind the bar. The powers goes, killing the lights, making it hard to see beyond the really ominous glowing emanating from where the door used to be. I hear Monkey chattering in scared fury, while someone else curses. Keating draws his whistle out of his pocket. And that's when I come to realise how screwed we really are. Because the doorman is about to summon the Proprietor and he will not be happy.

The War in Ishval: Why Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood is Problematic

Avigail Ben-Gad

Before I begin this article, I feel the need to clarify something important: although I much prefer the original 2003 version, I don't hate or even dislike Brotherhood. It's a good anime with solid characters and a well-developed plot. However, I feel that there are certain major problems with it that go beyond shoddy pacing, simplistic characterisation, and occasionally sloppy storytelling. The narrative of the Ishvalan War within Brotherhood especially has always particularly bothered me. This is my attempt, with a little help from the 2003 anime, at putting into words why that is.¹

The best place to start is probably to explain that this show and the manga on which it is based do not exist within a vacuum: genocide is a very real, very raw issue affecting many people even today. Although it would be slightly ridiculous to say that the presentation of genocide within Fullmetal Alchemist could affect the real world, a certain degree of sensitivity is required when dealing with these types of issues, if nothing else than out of respect for the victims of genocides past and present. I bring this up because I never got the sense that Hiromu Arakawa, the manga's creator, or the writers of the 2009 anime based on her work, ever quite appreciated the magnitude of the issues inherent in depicting genocide. Oddly enough, this never seemed to be the case with the 2003 version, a fact which is probably most obvious with the character of Scar. The FMA version of Scar is a positive example of how to depict survivors of genocide not only because he is an incredibly complex character whose moral struggles mirror those of real genocide victims (as shall be seen below), but also because his character arc is surprisingly realistic. The vengeful survivor of genocide is a common trope, but FMA refreshingly avoids the trap of exploiting his trauma to deliver a clichéd moral about the virtues of forgiveness. While the show does not condone Scar's ideology, it refuses to make patronising moral judgements and, vitally, acknowledges the legitimacy of his anger. The

¹ Note: I will be discussing the 2003 Fullmetal Alchemist anime (abbreviated FMA) in some detail. There will be multiple spoilers. You have been warned.

circumstances of Scar's death perfectly illustrate the sophistication, complexity, and sensitivity of his characterization, as the fact that he undergoes a heroic sacrifice as part of the fulfillment of a largely immoral (but arguably necessary) objective demonstrates the greyness of his moral quandary.

Brotherhood falls into the exact same trap that FMA so cleverly avoids. Scar's character arc is simplistically linear, and involves him learning to surrender his vengeful urges to work together with those who exiled him, massacred his people, and tried to wipe out his entire culture. This character arc is problematic not only because it is so unoriginal, but also because it attempts to delegitimize the (entirely justifiable) hatred with which both he and actual victims of genocide often view their abusers. And this brings us to another issue: the show and the manga are Japanese. The writers come from a country which not only has never been subjected to genocide, and therefore cannot be expected to understand the far-reaching effects that such trauma can unleash on an entire culture, but has actually inflicted genocide on others with its treatment of the Chinese, Korean, and other South East Asian populations during the Second World War. To this day, Japan still refuses to confront its past: surviving victims have yet to receive any satisfactory apology or compensation, government officials routinely visit war memorials to Japan's imperial forces while denying that the 'comfort women' abused by the military were enslaved, and atrocities such as the 1937-38 Rape of Nanking, during which up to 300,000 Chinese civilians were brutally killed, are still censored from Japanese history textbooks. This isn't to say that Japanese writers are not allowed to deal with genocide. What it does mean is that a great deal of care is required when handling these issues: it is rather insensitive of Arakawa and the writers of the anime to create a narrative in which the persecuted Ishvalans forgive their unrepentant Amestrian oppressors when their own country has failed to satisfactorily atone for the same crimes.

Additional issues arise with regards to the portrayal of Scar, and specifically his desire for revenge. Again, discrepancies emerge between the two shows which are probably most obvious in the flashbacks to the origins of Scar's eponymous injury. FMA goes to great lengths to make the viewer identify with Scar: the flashback involves a direct, personal confrontation with Kimblee, during which Kimblee deliberately disfigures Scar and gleefully promises to blow him up

little bits at a time. Because there is physical contact between the two, and because Scar is aware of everything as it happens and has time to react in real time, this flashback is one of the most devastatingly intense scenes in the entire show, allowing the viewer to fully understand the source of Scar's vengeful hatred towards state alchemists. In addition to this, FMA includes additional flashbacks which chart Scar's progression from innocent child to damaged warrior, making clear the devastating physical and psychological toll taken on him by the war and further helping the viewer to understand his motivations. By contrast, the flashback in Brotherhood places Kimblee all the way on top of a building. He does not aim his attack directly at Scar, who is surrounded by a crowd of people, with the result that Scar's injuries and the resulting death of his brother feel less directly tied to Kimblee's actions. Scar's hatred for Kimblee and his fellow state alchemists is therefore depersonalised and made to seem almost irrational, making it more difficult for the viewer to identify with him. The fact that Scar's very first action after the attack is to murder the innocent doctors trying to help him does not help matters at all, hindering the viewer's ability to understand his motives.

And it is important that we understand his motives because, for better or for worse, Scar's actions are not limited to Fantasy land. Actual historical victims of genocide have been known to carry out similar campaigns, with Nakam and Operation Nemesis being among the most notable examples of this phenomenon. The former were a group of Jewish partisans who were outraged at the end of the war that most Nazis were given light prison sentences or simply allowed to walk free without even being prosecuted. Under the leadership of Abba Kovner, Vitka Kempner, and Rozka Korczak, the group (whose name is Hebrew for 'vengeance') poisoned up to three thousand loaves meant for German POWs, causing the deaths of several hundred soldiers. The latter, Operation Nemesis, was a campaign masterminded by the Armenians Shahan Natalie and Armen Garo to exact revenge against the Turks for the genocide of their people. Between 1920 and 1922, at least eight Ottoman and Azerbaijani ministers and three Armenian collaborators were assassinated. We can debate the morality of these actions all day, but the truth is that we, in our ivory towers of perpetual safety from persecution, are not really in a position to judge. And this is key: we cannot judge Scar's actions,

so we must at least be allowed to see things from his point of view. The arguments on either side of the debate are more complicated than 'violence is never justified' and 'vengeance bloodlust kill'. For Brotherhood to shut down this debate and simply denigrate Scar's actions as 'evil' is simplistic and wrong.

But Brotherhood's portrayal of the war is also problematic for other reasons. To see exactly why, we need to look at the wider context of Amestrian attitudes to Ishvalans in both series. In FMA, there are many indications that racism against Ishvalans is widespread in Amestris: in the flashback in episode 40 Kimblee tells Scar that he has come 'to stamp out every last one of you who has eyes and skin of a different colour', and even the staunchly moral Edward admits to Rick with visible shame that he is afraid of the Ishvalans' red eyes. The military's campaign against the dark-skinned inhabitants of Liore, a direct echo of their actions in Ishval, provides further indications that racism is entrenched in Amestris. The war in Ishval in this version is therefore depicted explicitly as genocide motivated by racial hatred, a narrative which is strengthened by the direct comparison made between the Ishvalan genocide and the Holocaust through the ominous placement of the epilogue in hyperinflation-era Germany. It is true that the homunculi, working according to Dante's plan, were partly responsible for the outbreak of war and its disastrous outcome, yet it is also made very clear that the true source of the genocide was human prejudice which the homunculi merely exploited. There is therefore a sense that the entire military, as well as the civilians who remained silent during the campaign, are all collectively responsible for the extermination.

Brotherhood takes a less nuanced approach: in this version, racism does not seem to be entrenched in Amestrian culture to the same degree as in FMA, and the outbreak of war is exclusively blamed on the homunculi and the senior staff working under them. This lifts much of the blame from the ordinary soldiers who committed the atrocities, creating an uncomfortable feeling that they can be excused on the basis of simply having been 'following orders'. The show seems to counter this when Hawkeye tells Edward that everyone who served in the war, including herself and Mustang, should be tried as war criminals, and implies that she and Mustang want to overthrow the regime in order to make this happen.

However, nothing ever comes of this- there is no indication after the coup that any soldier will be prosecuted, and it seems that the viewer is simply supposed to accept that Mustang has atoned for his sins because he is learning about agriculture and plans to help with the reconstruction.

The differences between the two shows' portrayals of genocide extend to its aftermath. As expected, FMA is realistic in this regard: with no country to go back to and the military refusing to tolerate their presence in the cities, the Ishvalans are forced to live in squalid government-run internment camps. There is no indication at the end of the show that the Ishvalans' situation will improve, or that attitudes to them will change. If this is unsatisfying, there is good reason for it- this is what happens in real life. Brotherhood makes it appear that the Ishvalan genocide has an easy solution. The Ishvalans' willing participation in the finale suggests that the entire race has readily forgiven their abusers, and that this will somehow cause people to trust them. A law is implemented immediately after the villains' defeat allowing them to return to their homeland, and the fact that they will have to rebuild their entire country from scratch is glossed over as though it is unimportant. The ease with which the situation is solved is not only painfully unrealistic, but also lessens the seriousness of the atrocities that occurred, as though the murder of potentially millions of people no longer matters now that things are better for the survivors.

Lastly, it has to be said that Miles is a somewhat problematic character in Brotherhood (he does not appear in FMA). As a part-Ishvalan soldier, he was spared during the war because he had just enough Amestrian blood to avoid being purged. He continued to serve in the military despite knowing what was happening to his countrymen, collaborating, however indirectly, with those committing genocide against his people. This would be like a German soldier of partial Jewish descent who nevertheless identified as Jewish remaining at his post during WW2, and turning a blind eye to those suffering in the death camps. It is actually fairly insulting that the show credits Miles with the moral high ground during his confrontation with Scar, whose willingness to capitulate and accept Miles' strategy over his own is both woefully out of character and an extremely lazy way of conveying a highly questionable moral.

It should be clear by now that the portrayal of the Ishval War within Brotherhood is wrong on many different levels, and arguably more than a little insulting to actual victims of genocide. The thoughtlessness demonstrated by the writers would not be so bad if the show were content merely to tell a story: what is truly disconcerting is that Arakawa and those who worked on the anime promote a warped view of history which they encourage others to adopt. With that said, a truly positive example of how to handle these difficult issues may be found in Fullmetal Alchemist, the original anime from 2003. But why take my word for it? Check it out on YouTube and see for yourself!

The Stars

Curtis J. Reubens

Once upon a time,
When I was but a boy,
I gazed at the sky
As I played with my toys,
And the stars sung to me,
And their song touched my heart,
And I longed to answer their call.

And I worked and I worked,
As I tried to make good
On my dreams, and I read,
And I learned what I could
Of the stars, and I dreamed
As I toiled, and I knew
That one day I would go to the stars.

And I failed. How I tried!
Every chance that I found
Turned to mist in my hands,
And so I stayed Earth-bound.
And desperate I grew
As I watched each ship leave,
Until one day I just stowed away.

They found me, of course,
After we'd left our moors,
But what could they do
Now that I was on board?
So they put me to work,
Serving, scrubbing the floors,
And the months rolled right by
And dear gods was I bored.

I was stuck on a ship!
I was sealed in a can!
I was no nearer the stars
Than when I began!
I work till I drop
While others cryosleep,
And I count off each day,
While they count their sheep.

I dreamt of this,
As I gazed up, adoring.
Now I've seen the stars;
The stars are fucking boring.

Only 13 years to go...

Star Wars: The Force Awakens (A Review)

Samuel Cook

[Editor's Note: This is the last item in this issue, so if you're avoiding Force Awakens spoilers then this is a good place to stop reading.]

Needless to say, this review contains spoilers. If you are in the group of people who are mad keen about not having the film spoiled for you yet still haven't gone to see it several weeks down the line (or whenever this is published), I suggest you stop reading at this point and come back when you have seen it. Now, on with the review.

First off, I think I should say I thoroughly enjoyed the film – it looked great, with a welcome reduction in CGI from the prequels, the soundtrack was, as ever, brilliant, and the cast delivered a set of excellent performances. Particular plaudits must go to newcomers John Boyega and Daisy Ridley as the two main characters and Adam Driver made a much more convincing Anakin-esque villain than Hayden Christensen ever managed¹. Domnhall Gleason as the frothing General Hux was perhaps my favourite character, however – he really nailed the fanatical zealot vibe. It was particularly pleasing to finally see under a Stormtrooper's mask, too, and get a bit more of a sense of the shades of grey within the definitely-not-the-Empire First Order², rather than them just being entirely a load of faceless baddies³. The slew of references to the earlier films (including the return of Han, Leia, Luke, C3PO and R2D2) was also very enjoyable and the mix of humour, action, suspense and exposition worked well, with the film never seeming to drag. So, overall, something of a return to form for Star Wars after the disappointing prequels and a film I look forward to rewatching repeatedly over the years!

Bearing the fact that I enjoyed it hugely in mind, I'm now going to talk about the things I didn't like. These are relatively minor points, but I feel it's far more interesting and entertaining to write something a bit

different from the overwhelmingly-positive reviews I've effectively summarised above.

Firstly: Supreme Leader Snoke. What a name. Honestly. It's as if you'd called your Dark Lord "Nigel the Slightly Miffed". It's not exactly a name to strike fear into the hearts of your enemies, is it? It sounds as if he should be a small, asthmatic, pettily-malicious clerk, not the evil Sith-esque mastermind looking to take over the galaxy. I can't help thinking that, on one of the early versions of the script, there was a bit that was meant to say "Supreme Leader spoke", which, through an unfortunate typo became "Supreme Leader Snoke" and everyone just assumed that was his name. A small detail, but one that could so easily have been put right.

Secondly: it's not the most original plot. To summarise: droid with important piece of information for the rebellion against the dictatorial baddies lands on sandy backwater planet where it's picked up by sympathetic young loner who is helped reluctantly by grizzled veteran⁴, turns out to be a Jedi and gets involved in fighting mysterious masked evil people⁵, playing a crucial role in blowing up a giant planet-killing weapon. Ringing any bells...? I enjoy references and in-jokes as much as anyone, but they could at least have put Rey on a different kind of backwater, rather than the definitely-not-Tattoine that is Jakku. To be fair, there are plenty of differences from Episode IV too, but it did feel as if they could have made a bit more effort with the storyline.

Thirdly: what is it with baddies in the Star Wars universe and building giant planetbusting space lasers? It seems to be some sort of infinite loop in the decision flowchart of the Dark Side of the Force (Fig. 1). And, of course, it has to built such that there is a fatal, easily-destroyable and mysteriously poorly-guarded flaw that any sneaky rebel saboteurs could take advantage of with worrying ease. Even though it's shielded in some way that those same rebels manage to come up with a way round in five seconds flat. It seems clear that going over to the Dark Side induces often-terminal bouts of megalomortastramania in its adherents. More

¹ Much less sulky, even if he does look unfortunately like Nicholas Cage in Con Air mode. So much so that I thought he was Nicholas Cage the first time he takes his mask off, even though I knew he wasn't.

² Who show their difference by finally upgrading from CRTs on all their machinery...

³ It also seems the Stormtroopers have finally had some target practice. They occasionally managed to hit things!

⁴ MAJOR SPOILER. Who unfortunately dies.

⁵ MORE SPOILERS. Possibly with a family connection. We don't know who Rae's parents are by the end of the movie, but it's implied there's some connection to the Skywalkers.

worryingly, as shown in Fig. 2, there seems to be a race towards gigantism – the first Death Star was a space station. Now we’re up to planet size. If enough films are made, Death Stars will eventually end up

being larger than the Galaxy and will require all the matter in the galaxy to build, which would, admittedly, be another way of controlling the place...

Fig. 1 – Star Wars Evil Guy Decision Tree

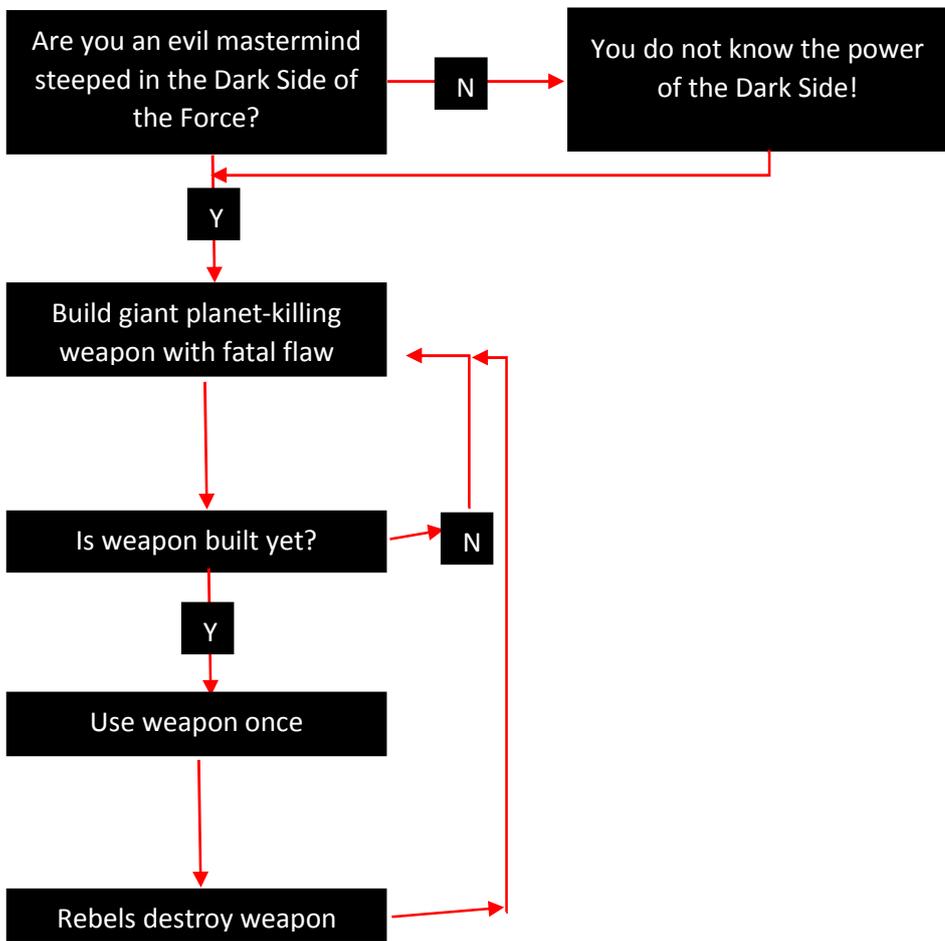
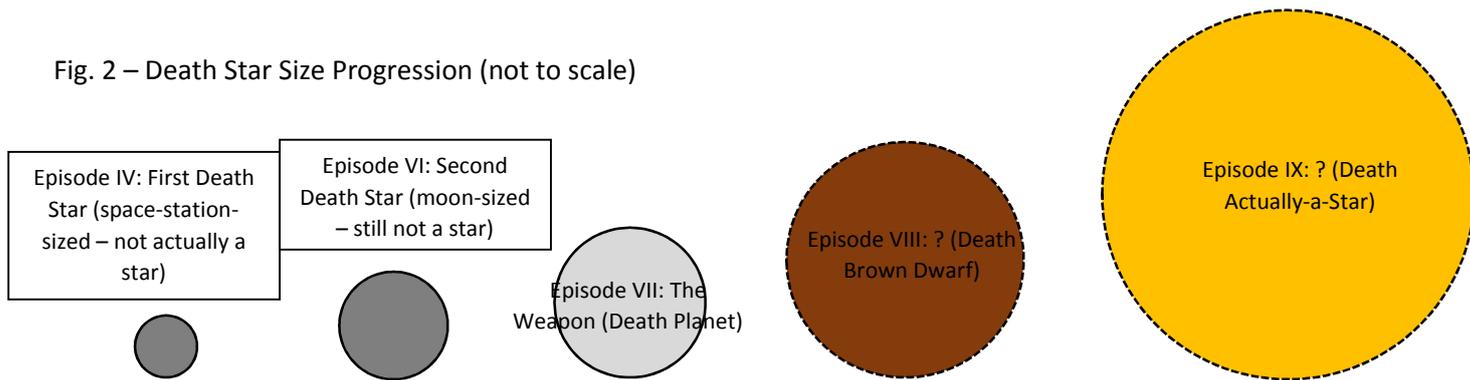


Fig. 2 – Death Star Size Progression (not to scale)



Fourthly, how does The Weapon in The Force Awakens actually work⁶? As far as I can tell, it

functions by sucking in plasma from a nearby star and then turns it into some sort of plasma laser⁷ to fire at

⁶ There’s also the economic question of how the First Order mobilised sufficient resources to build the thing in the first place, given it controls less of the galaxy than the Empire, and they could only build moon-sized death lasers. I think the answer is probably total war – one gets the impression the First Order are even more militarised than the Empire

and have a negligible interest in administrative matters. Everything seems likely to be subordinated to the needs of the military, à la Nazi Germany, whereas the Empire at least seemed interested in maintaining some form of functioning civilian government.

⁷ Plaser?

other planets. There are many many problems with this – given that The Weapon seems to turn the star off, it is presumably sucking in virtually all the star’s mass. After each time it’s fired, it must therefore need to be moved to a new star to destroy. How do you move a planet? Or, alternatively, move a star to it, if The Weapon is static? Moving that much mass around is also going to do some weird things to gravity and orbital dynamics – every time it’s charged up, The Weapon should effectively become the centre of mass of its system, with this mass then being liberally-redistributed towards whatever it is The Weapon is shooting at. And what about the remnants of the stars used to power it – the cores have to be hanging around somewhere? Presumably, there are a lot of brown dwarfs knocking about in The Weapon’s vicinity, which would cause even more gravitational whackiness. Furthermore, The Weapon sucks the plasma through the planet’s atmosphere. Plasma is quite hot^[citation required]. I’m fairly certain having a kilometre-thick⁸ ribbon of plasma hanging around in the atmosphere for several hours would involve setting fire to a large chunk of the planet’s surface, possibly even the atmosphere itself. Instead, the planet The Weapon inhabits is a snow world. And none of the snow even seems to melt. From this we can conclude that the First Order have really good thermal insulation. In addition to this, the sucking in of the plasma, its confinement within The Weapon and then the firing of it at the target must involve magnetic fields – given you can’t exactly physically touch and manipulate plasma⁹ for any length of time, magnets are your best option. Let’s just say the power requirements of a magnetic field sufficiently strong to channel matter from a star over (presumably) AU-scale distances, confine it and then fire it over interstellar distances are rather on the high side. One can also presume that the First Order have moved beyond metal in their construction techniques, given things aren’t shown being sucked into the magnetic field – imagine what happens if you’re wearing your watch near an active NMR machine and then extrapolate that to a planetary scale.... And, finally, it

⁸ I’m guessing that’s the size of the input portal for The Weapon – it certainly seems to be on that order of magnitude.

⁹ Did I mention it was rather on the warm side?

¹⁰ It doesn’t seem that The Weapon was in the same system as any of its targets, yet it apparently fires in, effectively, real-time, with a delay of minutes, at most, between firing and the target being disintegrated. Therefore, what it’s

then somehow fires this accurately over interstellar distances through hyperspace¹⁰. It’s fair to say that The Weapon would be unlikely to show up in any sort of hard sci-fi.

Fifthly, the very last scene, when Rey finds Luke. It was moving and I enjoyed it. But it did seem as if they’d started an impromptu staring contest, with neither prepared to back down, speak, or do anything apart from stare mutely and entreatingly at each other for what felt like a very long time. It got to the point where I started feeling the need to Awkward Turtle in sympathy. There are meaningful stares and then there are meaningful stares. This one seemed to go on just a bit too long.

Finally, no Jar-Jar. Lol jk. Obviously, that was just about the best part of it.

Overall, then, a very enjoyable film with enough imperfections to keep things interesting. Obviously, Star Wars isn’t supposed to be realistic, and none of what I’ve said above at all detracted from my enjoyment of the film – it was only afterwards that I really noticed some of them¹¹ - but The Weapon really does throw down a new gauntlet in improbable engineering. Part of the film’s charm, to be honest, is its similarity to Episode IV too, so criticising it for that is a little unfair. So yes, go and see it. And then see it again. A worthy addition to the Star Wars pantheon, I feel!

firing must be travelling faster than light, as the distances involved are, most likely, in light years. I’m very happy to believe in a giant mega-magnet tachyon-firing planet-destroying star-eating plasma laser within the Star Wars universe, but I’d just like to point out the sheer insanity of it in the cold light of day.

¹¹ Though Snoke struck me as just wrong straight away.