



Troubled
Teen Baits
Alligators

T.T.B.A.

Troubled Teen Bait's Alligators

TTBA Volume (6 – 2i) Issue 139

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(Khlamydia Koala, 23, from Brisbane, is worried that the government is massaging statistics to make them more symmetrical. Ey fear that this will be used to provide unwarranted support for the transfer of all schools to academy status.

I paused briefly to recall how Trotsky fought off assassins in Mexico, then carved out communist Mexico with fire and the icepick, while the Ocelot continued to revolve. Catching my train of thought just in time I fired back, only to watch the bullets pass through a blurry mass that stood where my foe had previously. I scrambled frantically for my Ocelot Resolver.)

Chairbeing's Address

Greetings, CUSFS!

It's May already, the sun is out, the air is warm, and from Girton to Homerton students are retreating indoors to glare at the sky through their windows and read society magazines rather than begin revision. We have a bumper crop of chainwritings this time around, plenty of procrastination material for all who need it. And when the year is finally done, we have the Veizla and Newnham College June Event coming up to celebrate!

So off we go, one last set of hills to climb, one more issue of TTBA to keep us occupied along the way. Good luck to everyone with exams, dissertations and other nasties this term; you can do it!

All the best,

Isobel Sands

CUSFS Chairbeing 2015-16

Editorial

Hello Science-Fictioneers!¹

It's good to be back in your email inboxes/CUSFS website/wherever else you found this, with another sterling issue of TTBA. Following up last term's goliath of an issue was a daunting task, but you wonderful beings delivered in spades, giving us forty-nine thousand, eight hundred and twelve more words, seventy-nine more pages², nine more chains, three more poems, thirty-five more footnotes, koalas, hedgehogs, heists, time travel, Sir Francis Bacon, and really so much more. You darlings are wonderful, and it is an honour to put this together for you.

Now comes exam term, which is, as predicted, daunting us all, but we shall weather through. How I'm going to get an issue out amongst such insanity I'm not certain³, but I have decided that I'm going to⁴ and so I shall⁵⁶⁷⁸ manage it. I wouldn't count on another seventy-nine pages though.

With love,

Curtis J. Reubens

TTBA Editor

¹ Yes. Still.

² Which, incredibly, beats the mere sixty-eight of last issue.

³ I probably won't be able to.

⁴ Because apparently I'm a bit mad.

⁵ Probably.

⁶ Maybe.

⁷ Possibly?

⁸ I mean, it seems a bit unlikely to be honest.

Chainwriting: Ingratitude

Curtis Reubens, Michael French, Sarah Binney, Greg Weir, Anna Peel, Megan Griffiths, Anonymous, Adam Jermyn, Paul Marett, Isobel Sands, Connor Willmington-Holmes, Samuel Cook

She'd been the first one to notice the change. It wasn't strictly her remit, of course, but she'd been in the right place at the right time to see the patterns start to alter. The cases she'd dealt with had started hinting at something larger, something ominous.

Now, as she stared at the news, her stomach sick with dread, she really wished she'd done more about it. The reports were confused, nobody was quite sure what was happening, but it was everywhere, and it was being caused by anomalies. It had to be. Yanacek would want her head on a pike.

But then, Yanacek was an asshole. It had been to him she'd had to go to when she'd noticed that something was wrong, and he'd dismissed her concerns out of hand, laughed her out the door. He would have forgotten that by now, of course, in favour of righteous indignation that she hadn't done something about this, like sudden mass outbreaks of anomalies all across the city was something she had an 'off' switch for on her desk.

Still. She forced herself to tear her eyes from the screen. The time for resentment and shouted recriminations would come later; for now, they had a crisis on their hands.

Ever since the scorpion incident, things had been.... weird. Weird was the best and perhaps only way to put it. More and more people with renegade abilities had been appearing (*though the Renegades themselves haven't been seen in an age – thank everything that is or isn't holy*), and more creatures showing up than the regional averages allowed for. And she'd gone to Yanacek, tried to show him that the trends were alarming, that some kind of power was converging on their messy city (*at least*), but he'd kicked her right out. Asshole. Don't know what she expected. Yanacek was the kind of guy to kick a cat for looking at him funny. Yanacek was the kind of guy to spit on every donut to claim them as his, eat one, and decide he didn't like them. Yanacek was the kind of guy to legally reverse his name after hearing one Kiss-Annie joke after The Work Party Incident, and fire the

entire department of the poor sod who said it too loudly. Asshole.

Raised voices came from the front room, causing her to turn. Seems like another nutjob was being brought in. More often than not these days, they were renegade nutjobs. The last one had a propensity for fire, and not a controllable one. It had taken her a week to catch up on the lost paperwork. But a nutjob right now meant maybe some more information on the chaos – and she would need everything she could get.

When she reached the interrogation room the suits had just finished with the newcomer, who was sitting with her hands stretched out on the counter... covered in blood. The interrogee looked around as she entered and she gasped to see her face.

It was Lydia.

"What the hell happened?" she said, a little too loudly, closing the door behind her. Lydia started and sat up straight, and she saw there was blood all over her half-sister's clothes too; dead and mottled blue-black.

"Oh my god, Sarah, what are you doing here? I thought you were in Seattle?"

"Something came up." She opened one of the foldup chairs with a squeak and sat. "What did you do? What's all the blood?"

"This? This isn't mine." Lydia waved a hand absently at herself. "This was from the last divination. We got our hands on one of the scorpions."

She breathed long and hard. "Lydia, are you insane? Those things have venom sacs, corrosive blood, god knows, probably explosive armpits. What were you doing poking through their fucking entrails?!"

"It wasn't some sort of high school biology experiment, okay?" Lydia yelled. "Divination is exactly as useful as it is risky. You seriously think I have no idea how dangerous those things are? After what happened to Moll?"

Silence fell for a while, then Lydia resumed.

"We found something. The omens from terrestrial animals were confused, but once we divined the scorpion they were completely unambiguous."

A steady gaze transfixed her, even as a small, detached part of her noted that one of Lydia's eyes was glued half-shut by a sticky clot of blood.

"In... What's the time?"

It took her a moment to tear her gaze a way and check her watch. "Seven minutes past midnight."

She drew a breath to speak again, but Lydia was already nodding, already talking.

"In twenty-seven hours and twenty-six minutes, everyone in this city – and I mean *everyone* – will have a power."

"No. No, you're wrong, that couldn't happen, we couldn't – a whole *city* of renegade nuts? I don't-

"Can you for *one fucking minute* stop with your high horse? We're not renegades, we didn't choose to-

Then she was leaning forward, yelling back. "We are *not* having this argument."

That was all it took to get the suits stepping in. Lydia flinched, sank back into herself and sank back into the seat. "Look, I know it's going to be bad, but there's no way we're going to survive this – I mean all of us, you and me and everyone – if you and your suits with your lists and your... and your everything won't just treat us like people."

Their gazes met.

"If this is about-

And Lydia was shouting again. "This is about how everything's about to go to Hell and back! This is not about you, this is not about us, this is about total fucking chaos and if you can't LISTEN to me I'll-

A sudden slump.

"I don't know what I'll do."

"You don't know what you'll do? I thought that was sort of your thing," she muttered.

"Yeah, well." Lydia's eyes slid sideways, to the shadow of the security guard who had returned to standing on the other side of the windowed door. "You're the only animal in here at the moment, and I don't feel like spilling my sister's guts."

"Half-sister," she corrected, absently. Of course, Yanacek would have fired her if he'd thought she had blood ties to a renegade. *Bigoted jerk.*

"Yeah, I forgot, you think I'm a nutjob," Lydia said, scowling. "Oh-so-clean, elder *half*-sister, I'm just some kid the dog dragged in, messing about with squirrels in the backyard --"

"You said *we*," she interrupted. "Who else?"

"You think I'd tell you?" Lydia snarled.

"Yes, I do," she said, "because I'm going to get you out of here."

"Huh?" said her half-sister renegade, uncomprehendingly, as she unlocked the handcuffs from the metal bar in the centre of the table and went to stand by the door, hand extended.

"We have to make this look professional. You're the detainee, I'm the officer whose job it is to escort you to the holding cells. Come *on*."

Lydia stumbled to her feet, scrubbing at her face with her wrists. "If you're gonna help, help me get this out of my fucking eyes."

She stepped closer, licked her sleeve and scrubbed it not ungently over Lydia's left eye. Lydia hissed a little at the rough treatment, but stilled enough that she could clean the blood off without causing too much discomfort.

"If what you say is true – "

" – it *is* –"

"-- then we're going to need you, and we're going to need that *we*, and we're going to need every goddamn seer we can get our hands on. Let's *go*."

* * *

She glowered down at the assembled party that had taken up residence in the sitting room – *her* sitting room – arms tightly folded across her chest in an attempt to conceal the irritated twitching of her trigger finger.

"Lydia, would you care to explain exactly who these people are, and what they're doing in my apartment?"

"You wanted the seers didn't you? Well, here we are." Lydia shrugged as she pulled on a replacement, and thankfully entrails-free, jacket from her sister's coat rack, pointedly ignoring the daggers thrown her way.

"Three. There are three of you in the entire city?" The two seers lounging on her sofa made her renegade

sister seem positively normal, and her hopes for the salvation of the world began to dwindle fast at the sight of what appeared to be a crystal ball stowed inside the handbag of the closet.

"Well, it's not exactly a popular vocation, what with the common side effects of blindness, brain damage and death."

She bit back a retort and accepted the steaming mug of coffee offered to her by one of her self-invited guests, unsurprised given present company to find that it contained her favoured black-with-as-much-sugar-as-will-realistically-dissolve.

"Now, I know that straight answers are a rarity in your line of work, but is there any chance that you've 'seen' any details concerning our impending doom in—" her eyes darted to the clock in the corner of the room, "—twenty seven hours and three minutes?"

Silence greeted her words.

"Come on, nothing?"

"Not nothing." The younger seer – he couldn't have been older than about fifteen – fidgeted and looked down at his hands. "You're just really not gonna like it."

"Spit it out. I've heard worse." She thought on that for a second, then corrected herself: "I've probably heard worse."

"Divination's a terrifying thing to do. I mean, you could be just seeing what colour scarf someone's going to wear tomorrow, and it scares the bahoohas out of you anyway, 'cause the way the visions work it's—"

"Quit stalling. We've got twenty-seven hours and one minute."

The other one, a wrinkled old grandma type, wrinkled her nose and pulled the crystal ball from her bag.

"Tomorrow, their eyes shall behold our sorrow, and gifts will be given to all who ask, as well as all who do not ask."

Oh god. Poetry. *Bad poetry*. It was bad enough dealing with anomalies who decided they wanted to act sane, but the crazy ones...

"She means there's a gifted – sorry, an anomaly – whose power is giving other people powers. All we saw was this silhouette up in the sky against the sun

and then everyone in line of sight of that, well... It wasn't pretty."

"So that's simple. We tell people there's some weather hazard and don't go outside."

"Think about it. There's no way that'll work. What event is happening exactly twenty-seven hours from now?"

She counted mentally, then felt a chill creep down her spine as she realised. "Crap."

Election day. More specifically, the time that the polls opened. Everyone would be lined up outside waiting to exercise their right to have a say. You couldn't touch any of that, come rain or shine or the apocalypse, not on this short notice. It would look like a political agenda and be overruled, regardless of the reason or the evidence. By the time anyone believed you, it would be too late.

"Just my luck. You mean I have to convince a whole city of long-enfranchised people to just give up their voting rights because you three saw *something* killing them in the future, using powers that the public still probably doesn't believe exist?"

"You'll probably need to go a bit past the city, but yes. I certainly don't want all those people on my conscience... I would do everything I could, even if it meant bending democracy a little."

She tried to contain herself, but this pushed the frustration of the past few hours past her limits. "Everything you could?! Bending democracy! Why didn't I think of *that*. I'll just go off and do everything I can. How simple."

"Look we're just trying—"

"No, you look. If you want to help, you need to give me more details. I need a more convincing story than 'stay inside, trust me!', and I need it as soon as possible."

"But—"

At that moment, Sarah's phone rang. Angry at the interruption, she pulled it out and saw that it was Yanacek.

"I have to take this," she said, and excused herself into her bedroom.

"Hey Yanacek, what's up?" she said, sitting on the bed and rubbing the bridge of her nose.

“What’s up!? What’s up!? That’s all you have to say to me right now? After you sneak your sister...”

“Half-sister,” she mumbled unthinkingly

“...out of custody and go AWOL during one of the worst renegade outbreaks yet!? You’ve got some nerve. Get your ass back in the office right now. The entire Waterfront district has been converted, including the fucking police department. The containment unit is doing what they can, but renegades are slipping through. Thought we had one cornered and it teleported away. Fucking teleported Sarah! We don’t have the resources for this shit anymore. But we’re still bringing them in by the barrel and no one is as good at calming this freaks down as you are. So get here now. Or the latest one is going to fucking melt all our bones.”

With that, he hung up. She sighed. Yanacek was still an asshole, but he was a right asshole. All this prophet nonsense would have to wait. She had real people who needed real help right at this moment and that was more important than some wild goose chase.

She returned to the parlour and dropped her phone in shock. The three seers were standing in a circle around her table, their arms outstretched toward one another, their heads thrown back and neck muscles pulsing, eyes glazed over in a steely blue. And hovering between them all was a scorpion. She’d never seen one alive this close before. It was wriggling as if in some kind of invisible trap, its stalked eyes darting all around.

The elderly woman began to move one of her arms towards the scorpion, and the thing started wriggling harder than before. Then, without any warning, one of its legs tore off in a gush of purple blood and a stream of entrails began to follow the wound out. The thing screamed. It was unearthly and ear shattering, and brought Sarah to her knees, palms pressed desperately against her ears.

The seers were performing another ritual.

One by one, the scorpion lost its legs. Instead of falling to the floor, they arced into the air and hung there, trailing tendons and ichor and gods knew what else. It became entangled in an increasingly elaborate web of itself. Its eye stalks and tail crumpled, its carapace crushing under the psychic pressure being channelled through it. The thing never stopped

shrieking, until finally it was too broken to make sound.

There was a moment of terrible, leaden silence, in which the scorpion-web revolved slowly and the seers’ eyes slowly widened to painful proportions, and then the spell broke and everything collapsed. Sarah lurched for the bathroom.

When she opened the door, the seers were back on the sofa. Lydia was attempting a nonchalant lounge; the other two were not so concerned about hiding how ill they looked. Sarah glared at her. She shrugged.

“Do you want to yell, or do you want to know what needs doing?”

“I – both. Look, I’ve got to go. There’s no time, everything’s going nuts at the station, I’ve got to get down there. My boss is going spare...”

“Yeah, we heard. That was him on the phone, right?”

“You were completely out of it, how the hell?”

“Seers, Sarah. It’s what we do. We just got stupidly lucky. There were some nasty vibes coming off that phone call,” her face twisted distastefully, “so we used the scorpion to get a good look at it. I think we’ve found our doom-bringer.”

Sarah blinked, hard. Not possible. Don’t be stupid. Not possible... right? She stared at Lydia, and for a split second was struck by how similar they really looked. Her younger sister – half-sister – rummaged in a backpack one of her friends had brought, and handed her a small, very illegal firearm.

“Better go see your boss.”

“Nonsense, he’s unimpeachable...” Sarah retorted, in a tone almost questioning.

“Go.”

Sarah looked down at the gun, it glimmered blue with some renegade enchantment.

“Exceptionally powerful, utterly undetectable, six bullets. Go.”

Sarah obliged. Leaving her apartment in a daze she beelined across the city back to her office.

* * *

The three seers resumed their circle, chanting at a low hum. Floating between them was not a scorpion this time, but blue lips, disembodied and glowing.

“Excellent work, child,” the lips murmured, “there is not long now. Soon we will be free of these fleshy shackles.”

* * *

An odd stillness lay over the precinct when Sarah arrived. She climbed the steps from the street, counting each one, using anything to serve as a distraction. Was she really going to kill Yanacek on her renegade *half-sisters* orders?

Probably. The guy was kind of an asshole anyway. She found a case file in the library, only a few years old, which probably justified dropping him in a macerator. Shooting the guy was almost a courtesy.

* * *

“Her rage builds. Good. You chose well Lydia.” Wisps of blue light encircled and ensorcelled the seers, arms raised, elbows hyperextended. Items charged with Sarah’s essence joined the eerie carousel; photographs, her favourite coffee mug, a custom dart-board featuring a certain superintendent’s face.

“She shall serve as an excellent fulcrum.”

* * *

The two flights of stairs to Yanacek’s office passed unnoticed. Sarah didn’t even feel the revolver slide into her palm, cocked, trigger already caressed with a twitching digit.

She opened the door to the office without knocking. In a detached way, this gives her a thrill. No one ever just wandered into Yanacek’s office unannounced. There he was. The asshole. Looking questioningly up at her with an expression turning towards anger. She was about to get a piece of his mind. Possibly all too literally, if the complex interplay of ballistics when she shot him and his head exploded worked out in the right way. She giggled and raised the gun to fire.

* * *

“Ah! Here it comes. Finally, I shall have my freedom again and this world will bow to me once more!”

* * *

She pressed the trigger. Except nothing happened. She realised this was because she wasn’t actually holding the gun anymore. Instead, somehow, there was a man standing on the other side of the room holding it.

“Hi there. Remember me? We had that kind of interview thing a coupla weeks back when I was really messed up and twitchy after my run in with the scorpions and the jackhammer girl, you know? Just to say that shooting your boss with this is probably a bad idea, even if he is the world’s biggest asshole, unless you want to rip reality a new asshole and unleash a transdimensional demonic apocalypse.”

Sarah and Yanacek both stared completely nonplussed at the interloper. Now she was no longer holding the gun, Sarah suddenly felt much less angry. Why had she wanted to kill Yanacek? He was thoroughly unpleasant, but he didn’t deserve to die. What was going on?

The twitchy guy carried on talking.

“Didn’t think so. Your sister-“

“Half-sister,” Sarah’s mental autocorrect chimed in her head.

“-was having you on, I’m afraid. I think, because I don’t want to be bound in eternal servitude to a being that makes your boss here look like Mother Teresa, it might just be best if I do this.”

He fired the gun four times in what Sarah realised was the direction of her flat. The bullets seemed to shimmer as if they weren’t really in the room and passed through the wall without leaving any marks.

A great wail of anguish that rent the heavens was suddenly heard, trailing off in a diminuendo of pain and despair.

“Right, that seems to have dealt with that paranormal entity. Good thing I’m also a really good shot and jackhammer girl gave me the lowdown on psychic tracking of weird beasties. You might find your living room is a bit of a mess, though. Sorry about that, but given I just saved you from an eternity of torment, I feel entirely justified in giving you a bit of DIY. Your mum might be a little upset when she finds out her younger daughter’s head apparently spontaneously exploded, though. Can’t be helped. Bye!”

With that, he left as precipitately as he had appeared, still clutching the gun. Sarah and Yanacek looked at each other, dumbfounded.

“Sarah?”

“Yes?”

“You were going to shoot me.”

“Umm, yes, probably? Sorry about that. Seems I was temporarily possessed.”

“You’re fired.”

He really was an asshole.

Ingratitude – Extras

Alternate titles:

Return of the Twitchy Guy

Assholes and Demons

Still an Asshole

The Asspocalypse

Rip Reality a New Asshole

Comments:

“DAMNIT

“GOD FREAKING DAMNIT

“I SENT A WOMAN WITH MEANS AND MOTIVE TO YANACEKS FUCKING OFFICE AND HE STILL DIDNT DIE

“WHAT IS THIS

“NEXT TIME, I'M PUTTING IT IN AS CANNON, IN WHATEVER CHAIN I GET HARUMPH” – Connor

“The twists seemed a little abrupt (not that that's inappropriate for our twitchy friend...), but they're all kinds of worth it for the last two lines.” - Greg

Editor’s Notes:

My attempt at a ‘soft’ sequel to Twitch¹ - that is, a story which followed on from the previous one but required no knowledge of it to be enjoyable - was moderately successful; most of the chain avoided dependency on prior knowledge, though the end does rather directly call on it. It’s a fun chain overall, I think, and of course the triumphant return of Yanacek has been most eagerly awaited.

And yes, 80% of the title suggestions I was sent involved the word ‘asshole’.

Editor’s Emotes:



¹ See *Tentacled Terrors Being Adorable*, Volume (6 – 2i), Issue 138.

Chainwriting: A Song of Knife and Cheddar

Danielle Saunders, Askhat Sarkeev, Ed Heaney, Anonymous, Anonymous, Anonymous, Nakul Khanna, Bryn Reinstadler, Tristan Roberts, Matthew Chadwick, Alastair Haig, Anna Peel

In the last few centuries, I've learned not to flinch as my edge approaches what appears to be an unyielding surface. Still, it will never stop being disconcerting, the parting, the slicing open. A taste of what coats my blade: goat's cheese from the next village over. Again.

I, who have slit the throats of tyrants and drunk the blood of dragons and lain sleeping on the belts of cold queens in dead tombs – I am brought to this. To goat's cheese.

All very well for my companions in arms, those I fought with before we were caught and bound. This one a battleaxe, the other a mighty sword. Some glory, some fame. Even now they are revered by those remaining great warriors of the realm. Me? I get to be a dagger, which is all very well during The Age Of Legends or whatever you want to call it, but this is The Age Of Farming And Cheese, and it seems now I best resemble a kitchen knife.

I remember less of my mortal life with every passing day, but somehow I know that I have always hated cheese.

But lately there have been whispers, even in the kitchen of a cottage of a farm in the middle of gods-know-where. Whispers that suggest there might still be a way out for me, a way if not to glory then to peace and an absence of chopping boards. Whispers that-

My train of thought is lost as I am submerged once more in the cheese.

Ugh, what was I going on about? Aha, whispers. Whispers of skies, of trees, of this cottage's walls... and yes, even of the goddamn cheese, for heaven's sake!

Why do I hear them? I can feel how my mind gets dissipated into the nature: the less of my mortal life I remember, the more conscience I lose (yes, as a weapon "upgraded" with magic I do still have conscience - something these cheese-lovers would

never comprehend), the clearer these whispers become.

They speak of gigantic dragon awakening in Elven Lands, his failure to chase a green sheep (well that's weird, all the sheep I've ever seen were purple), him burning almost entire elven army in outrage, and, as a consequence, most of elven race being wiped out from this world by the undead...oh well, never liked their pointy ears anyway.

They also speak of leviathans spotted by the local fishermen in the Northern Ocean, of flying pigs coming from the edge of the known world, and more such creatures...

But now, with every second, the whispers get louder... they are voices now, almost screams, bringing the word of warning about the armies of undead that razed the Elven Lands, sacked the underground cities of gnomes, and chased the orcs from their Badlands...

I feel horrified as the screams I hear get louder and louder, I can feel the remnants of magic that brought me to life drain away...

Next, a firm, sweaty hand grabs me and throws me at someone... or something.

Excitement. Anticipation. I cannot deny the rush as I hope desperately to strike something to remind me of the glories of old. Even an animal would do – being hurled gracelessly at some feral beast cannot even be compared with the thrill of being wielded skilfully in combat, but I have sunk to the depths where even a mindless creature would be a banquet to be craved and savoured.

No! Better still! In the fraction of a second before I strike, I know somehow that it's really a living, thinking being. I've never been quite sure how I know, but I've never been wrong yet. Without a doubt, I've been thrown at a real, honest-to-the-gods person. The thrill swells within me, but is almost overwhelmed by a nervous fear – are they armoured, whoever they may be, or are they skilled at arms themselves? Will I be deflected? If I am parried and cast to the floor, will I be retrieved and reused or will I be discarded in favour of some clumsy blunt instrument which just happens to be nearer?

That moment flits by, and I strike! At last! The euphoria floods me, and I sense the magic that had

slowly been draining away surge back into me, ten times, a hundred times, a thousand times over.

I should be wary; I should remain in control of myself, but the rush has borne me away, and the resurgence of the magic is an indescribable bliss. I am so caught up that I almost miss the moment where I plunge deep into the target's vitals, and sense the life flowing out, and away, and... no. It's not flowing away at all. The magic has caught it and I wasn't careful enough and there can't be room for two in here and what should I do and how do I stop it from...

Where am I?

It does not matter that I was not "aware" at the moment of my forging; my rippling steel still carries the sense-memories of the hammer striking as I glowed cherry-red, of the sudden chill as I was quenched in the bucket of water. That feeling is nothing compared to the chill that strikes me at those words.

Where?

No – no. I cannot answer. To answer would be to admit that my blade – *my* blade – has become the unwilling host to a second soul.

The cries continue, plaintive and lost. *Disgusting. And you call yourself a warrior?*

A moment of blessed silence. *Who...who are you?*

I spare a sliver of disgust for myself, for giving in and speaking to it. *Never mind.*

But –

The truth is, I don't remember. My name, my place of birth, the faces of those I once loved – all have been long ago lost to the mists of time. I recall the sound of the sea, and the weight of chainmail across my chest. And I disliked cheese.

Of my life, that is all that remains.

But I have more pressing problems than the dying embers of an existence I cannot reclaim. Someone has seized my hilt, and I know at once that it is not the hand that gave me to the cheese.

"Here it is, just as she said." The voice is high and reedy, and sets me on edge.

"Ya sure? Looks plain." This one is gruff and low.

A spindly finger traces my edge. "I can feel the power in it. This is the one."

Quickly, before he can take his hand away, I bite. One drop of blood – just a taste – but enough to see where this man plans to take me.

Aha, I think. Interesting.

* * *

Through the looking glass. Under the bed. At the bottom of the lake. Whichever. The mind has its own way of imagining something more comfortable than the warpings of the spacetime fabric.

And thus I return home. To a home world, admittedly, where I am but the lowly Cheese Correspondent for The Daily Wail. Despite not liking cheese. It was the only opening to stay in the business. Words, I can handle. Even about cheese. Rancid, putrid mediaeval world goats' cheese in my private mind. But "An unctuous mellifluous paste peppered with dried herbs and rustic charm" to my readers. I can even anticipate being sent back there to write more, and to bring back more samples to prime the Banatardup, so that subsequent weeks' editions of the Wail come also with (thankfully) hermetically sealed caprine wares from the hinterlands of mid-mediaeval Ourabouramaleleland. I made a mental note to leave out talk of the leviathans from the article, lest I be sent back there for *their* cheese. Quite frankly fed up, I retrieved my pickled mushroom primer from my kryogenerator, and wound up my own Banatardup terminal.

Pickled mushrooms were a thing I could relate to. Smooth. Sophisticated. All Set About with Slivers of Garlic and Swimming in Oil of the Very Finest Capsicumquats.

I smiled as copies of the primer began to pile up. 101 duplications would do fine for a good treat upon returning home. Banatardup: the basis of true civilization. Bane of poverty, means of repeating perfection. Reason for our civilization using base two, before you accuse me of being an overgluttonous fungophage. Banatardup: the Banach-Tarski Duplicator, for any of you readers from the other worlds which fail to be blessed with that measure-theoretic prodigiousity.

I skewered 10 mushrooms on a brochette and began to nibble at one. These were particularly richly

marinated, ideal for removing the taste of my goats' cheese tasting correspondent's burdens. Would that I could be the pickled mushroom correspondent of my true vocation. But such lofty opportunities as that were few and far between in the mediatic gastronomarchy of the central world Banatar-Prime. And, curses. Even before I finish my insincere Ode to Goats' Cheese, I have already been notified of being sent back to Ourabouramaleleland on the morrow, albeit now to probe the Ewe Hards several villages along. Alas for the fickleness of these times of pleasure and plenty...

I shake my head to clear it. One never gets fully used to occupying inanimate objects; their memories of previous forms become overwhelming and start to block out even the occupier's memories. I live ten kilometers from the nearest ocean and I've never been in anything resembling a battle. The sound of the sea was presumably my recollection of *Days by the Kazanax Shore*, Banatar-Prime's highest rated daytime television soap. As to *chain mail*, I've lately been feeling like I'm living in one – a chain e-mail that is. At least my dislike of cheese was intact. The Interstellar Possession Correspondents' Union (IPCU) recommends clinging to a strong personality trait to avoid severing the link with your true body (though emergency procedures do exist to retrieve you, they are uncomfortable and disorienting, and result in a fine of a month's pay for the incurred expense). Hatred tends to survive better than other emotions, which perhaps says something about human nature.

For whatever bizarre reason, goat's cheese often finds itself at the centre of fascinating conflicts and civilizational developments, but I never get to stick around to see how any of them turn out. Well, I could in theory, but I'm paid per cheese rather than per hour, and I've got a lot to do – I'm half a season behind on *Kazanax Shore*.

And yet, this story intrigues me particularly. Moreover, I am covering Ourabouramaleleland tomorrow after all, and if I get a head start then maybe I can clock out early and have a fungal picnic whilst watching the suns set over Tarski City.

The co-ordinates for tomorrow's object – a fork, which is nice after six daggers in a row – have been downloaded to my Omniterminon. I select them, re-attach the probes to my head, sit back and press *POSSESS*.

There is always a moment of sudden clarity when one possesses an object. The IPCU gently suggests that the moment is due to the sudden rearrangement of neural connections into the 4th, 5th, and 6th spatial dimensions so as not to take up space that a fork hasn't got in the regular first three, but also less gently suggests that we not take those thoughts too seriously.

So naturally, it struck me then. Or rather, I was stricken several times in a moment, by two different "it"s.

It, the person who was grasping me quite indecently by the waist, struck me crossways with a knife, making a large clanging noise *right in my ear, thank you very much*. Or my fork-ear-analog. My ear-fork-analog? Whatever. It was loud.

And it, an idea, struck me hard enough to make me forget all that came before:

I had tasted human blood.

Oh, fuck.

Erm, excuse my language.

I had to think quickly. I could feel the raw inertia of the fork's, well, lack of mental facilities threatening to roll over me in a wave as calming as any seen on *Days by the Kazanax Shore*. Goat's cheese. It all came down to the cheese.

It goes like this: I taste the cheese, as a fork, dagger, incarnation of the Blessed Spoon of Ra, any sort of cheese-tasting implement. When I get back to Banatardup, my gustatory neurons are scanned for recent activity, which as it turns out is preserved pretty well even after their translation back into the banal first three spatial dimensions. Hocus pocus, abracadabra... cheese.

Except this time, hocus pocus, abracadabra... Ourabouramalelelandian.

The flesh I was impaled in had a distinctive serpentine and profoundly un-cheese-like tang. It was soft and warm with a harder, rough surface; very different from the flaky hardness of a Ewe Hard.

There was no doubt about it. I'd been thrust, not into cheese, but one of the Ourabouramalelandians. They were a strange people to be sure; no-one was quite sure how or why the immense serpents had developed a taste for cheese but, despite the

appearances of some of their most common pastimes (from which they derive their name), they were never known to be cannibals.

Yet here I was, an Ourabouramaleandian fork having Ourabouramaleandian flesh eaten off me by an Ourabouramaleandian mouth.

Another clang.

Something must have gone wrong with the Omniterminon; this couldn't be the fork I was supposed to cover. They were designed to be almost perfect, though, and only malfunctioned around the most extraordinary memories.

Like the taste of human blood.

It was then that a vast, burgeoning memory surged up out of the depths like some great whale, bursting into my consciousness with unstoppable power. For it was not my current incarnation as a fork that was tasting the salty tang of serpentine flesh but in fact my previous experience as a dagger that had wetted its blade in the blood of an Ourabouramaleandian. The strength of the encounter had percolated through my mind and was now overpowering the gentle undertones of the fork with its insidious nature. Dragged behind this wave of experience like a fish caught in a net of magic (who doesn't love a good nautical theme) was another mind, one I had met before.

Panic began to rise as I realised that the hitherto rather mundane fork was now inhabited by three distinct minds. Not only was I present along with the calming, if simple, fork but there was now also the mind of a dagger, a dagger that knew of elves, dragons and great magic whilst sharing my hatred for cheese. As I struggled to confront this dramatic change of events I realised that I could not withdraw my mind from the fork. I was trapped until the number of minds returned to two, where one could remain in the fork and the other return to the mind of yours truly. Assuming the fork's consciousness could be easily overcome and quelled then the question remained, which of myself and the dagger would be returning to my home mind?

It's hard to describe the conflict between a Cheese Correspondent and a Centuries-Old Dagger both cohabiting the body of the same fork, so try to imagine something between a heated debate and a

complex melee, except all contained within an eating utensil.

Suffice to say, the dagger-like mind of the dagger was not going to let me go without a fight. However, our brief battle was quickly interrupted as the fork was moved.

We both froze (or would have, if we weren't stuck inside an inanimate object) as the feeling of being plunged into that cursed substance came back over us. CHEESE.

The sensation swamped me. The foul nutty tang. The horrible caramel-like aroma. The texture, not unlike that of the Wolf's Cheese of Lycant IV. Now that was a horrible cheese. Recalling it almost brought my mind off of the Ewe's Hard I was piercing through, oh how it sickened me...

No. I gritted my mind and thought of other things.

Of the Pickled Mushrooms back home, waiting for me. Of their smooth sumptuous texture, the perfect primer. Of the feeling of piercing through a victim's throat instead of this sorry excuse for curdled milk. Of feeling their life-breath drain out over you, in a glorious symphony of pain.

Yes. Back in the saddle.

I probed around for the rest of the inhabitants of my new vessel.

The native mind had, as forks do, disappeared down the back of somewhere, mumbling something about hating violence. Whatever. I'd deal with that one once I'd dealt with the other interloper. Then it'd be back to what I do best...

The interloper pushed against my control. I pushed harder.

BLOOD! FLESH! SCREAMS! WAR!

NO!

MUSHROOMS! MUSHROOMS! MUSHROOMS!
MUSHROOMS!

* * *

Ky'lek looked at their fork. It glittered oddly in the candlelight, reflecting only their face, the table, and the fireplace beyond. It had surely only reflected these things for as long as they'd been eating their dinner, a wonderful stew of a slaughtered enemy's tail

with a side of hard sheep cheese. There was no way that this satisfyingly normal tableau could have blurred into the distinct form of a mushroom – Ky’lek *hated* mushrooms. That is why they’d noticed the impossible moment; there is nothing quite like the sight of a mushroom in the flat of a fork as it is being raised towards one’s mouth to put one off one’s dinner. So they had stopped, stared, returned the fork to the bowl and tapped off the mouthful of scaly dinner, and held it closely to their eye.

No – the fork was now once more reflecting only the flames of the fire behind them.

Granted, the flames might be leaping a *little* more vigorously than a tame hearthfire ought to be; but Ky’lek had had a long day, and they thought they deserved to coil up by the fire and enjoy a little hard-earned enemy flesh before bed, without the unasked-for fungal interruption.

You know what would banish the horrible suggestive flavour of mushrooms from their mind’s eye? Cheese. Ky’lek sighed happily. There was no way a piece of cheese could ever look like a mushroom.

They picked up the fork, and pushed it deeply into the cheese.

A Song of Knife and Cheddar – Extras

Alternate titles:

From-rage

The Daily Wail: Issue 1436: Cheesy Good Times

Comments:

“Fun Fact: The 'Ewe's Hard' Cheese mentioned in this story is in fact Berkswell Cheese, just in a place where Berkswell never existed.” – Alastair

“all hail ulfric cheesecloak the true high king” – Danielle

Editor’s Notes:

Sometimes, a chain takes an abrupt left turn halfway through; sometimes it just starts there. Superb work, team.

Editor’s Emotes:



Chainwriting: Fingerpunk

Isobel Sands, Anna Peel, Mark Johnson, Bettina Juszak, Olivia Morley, Ben Norman, Curtis Reubens, Samuel Cook, Askhat Sarkeev, Adam Jermyn, Sarah Binney, Michael French

Valerian chose a seat and settled himself to watch the platform. If – he glanced at a business card – Miss January Watson was serious about her plans, she would be joining him, but if not it hardly mattered. The station was crowded this time of day, and between the storm clouds outside and the steam clouds inside it was damned hard to see anyone's face out there. Besides, he had no idea what the woman looked like.

He drummed the fingers of his left hand idly on the arm rest, trying not to hear the sound they made. Click-click-click-tap. The habit was old, even if the fingers weren't. Click-click-click-tap.

Movement at the carriage door broke him out of his reverie, but he doubted any of these people were Miss Watson. They were a party of four, presumably husband, wife, daughter and... nanny? Governess? Valerian didn't know what the difference was. They chose a table across the carriage from him. The man nodded gruffly in his direction, saw his hand, and switched smoothly to a more gracious inclination of the head. As he sat, he made a show of removing his hat, allowing Valerian to see his two brass fingers. He wore an ostentatious and rather ugly ring on one of them. His wife, resting her hand casually on the table, had two as well.

The nanny's hands were plain, and held the daughter, a girl of about six, on her lap. The smallest finger on the child's left hand gleamed. It looked new, and well-polished. Now there's one with a good start in the world, Valerian thought darkly.

"Mummy! Mummy, look –" the girl burst out, wriggling free of her guardian's unwary grip and slipping under the table, presumably to pull at her mother's skirts. Her next words were muffled, but piercing. "Mummy, the man –"

Her mother looked up quickly at Valerian, then down again to where her daughter clung. "Staring at strangers is in poor taste," she murmured.

"But he's wearing so *many!*" the child hissed delightedly. "And one of them looks *weird.*"

Valerian looked away. Click-click-click-tap, loud enough to drown out the mother's quiet admonishments.

The train whistle blew, and another cloud of steam billowed into the carriage from the platform, momentarily obscuring the person who entered with it. Valerian stilled his fingers.

"Excuse me," said the cloaked figure, "I am looking for the one who will teach me the value of precious stones."

Valerian raised his first finger to his ear, and tapped it once. "I am looking for the one who will hear the value of precious stones."

"Ah," said the figure, sweeping back their hood and moving to the seat across from Valerian. "Mister Solas. My name is January."

"You're late," he said.

"I was detained," she informed him, "by a colleague of yours. Hawking iron."

"No colleague of mine, I'm sure," Valerian replied, shortly.

"Indeed." Her eyes glittered. "Your letter spoke of a hand of diamond."

"And yours demanded garnet. I do not work in trivialities, Miss Watson."

"I can see that," she said, gaze following his index finger as he withdrew his hands into the large sleeves of his jacket. "So the tales they tell are true."

"About me?" He glanced meaningfully at the family across the aisle, noting as he did so that the child was staring at him from behind a table leg. "Perhaps." He returned his scrutiny to Miss January. "And about you?"

She held his gaze, betraying none of the indignation he expected from his unspoken admonishment, and carefully slipped off her left glove.

Valerian broke eye contact abruptly, latching his gaze onto her slowly emerging hand. Miss January's fingers, when they appeared, were a scintillating, depthless blue. Diamond, certainly. An optical ring gleamed on her third finger, its surface inset with smaller, brighter diamonds. Valerian assumed these were only for show. The rest, like his own, was real.

Quite unlike the gaudy replicas currently in fashion with the clueless lower gentry.

She made a show of offering her hand to him, palm down, fingers hanging limp. He moved to support it, the deep red of his fingers contrasting not displeasingly with hers. He leant forwards, and brushed his lips against the ring. It was a painfully dated gesture, a far cry from the curt handshake he normally used to establish a connection. But then, he wasn't normally being hired by royalty.

He relaxed back into his chair, settling his hand on the table. His fingers twitched, keen to resume their drumming, but he resisted the urge. She moved into a similar position, mirroring him yet making the posture her own.

Her ring flickered, and a deep blue glimmer suffused her diamond fingers. It pulsed gently, and he felt his own hand pulsing in response. It took but a moment for her thoughts to impinge upon his own.

Which tales were you thinking about, Mr Solas? That we have fallen so far we need look to your "guild"? I would hope the truth of that is apparent.

Valerian found her thoughts surprisingly vivid. Every word was deep blue, of course, but still the individual phrases gleamed. Her disdain for his organisation practically glistened.

But come, I'm not here to tell tales, I'm here to... Click-click-click-tap... you.

Blast, he had to kick the habit. It was starting to interfere with his work. He responded, before his lapse in concentration could show.

You clearly have the funds. What do you require me to do?

Her eyes narrowed, thoughtful in her slender face.

Were you not told?

Valerian knew he had to tread carefully, lest this opportunity went up in smoke. It had been years since he'd last been hired by someone so potentially intriguing.

As you well know, our organisation takes our clients' privacy seriously.

Her smile had a cynical edge.

Of course. Your honour aside, you have not been briefed on the situation then?

He shook his head. A faint hint of nervousness was creeping through his veins and his fingers twitched – click-click – before he stilled the involuntary movement. He was suddenly acutely aware of the little kid's continuing stare from across the aisle. Her parents were staring too, but less overtly, out of the corners of their eyes while conversing about whatever meaningless topic of conversation that was all the rage in the city this particular week.

Blue words in his mind, of crystal-sharp clarity, brought his attention back to his client.

As you know, our house has had some... trouble lately. We've been attempting to strengthen our position, but a few months ago rumours started surfacing. Rumours about a man with black opal fingers.

Her gaze flickered to his own fingers meaningfully, no doubt noting his surprised intake of air. If he had expected a normal assignment when boarding the train, this information certainly put paid to that notion.

I want you to find him.

Before he could muster a reply, the train suddenly came to a squealing stop on the tracks.

Valerian paused, locking eyes with the woman in front of him. She was as surprised as he was, her thoughts spiking a vivid turquoise before fading completely. Glancing out of the window it wasn't hard to make out the group of mercenaries boarding the train.

It was not an unfamiliar experience; he had acquired many enemies over the years, not even counting the rival guilds. However, given the company he was in and the mention of the man with the black opal fingers, there was a more obvious conclusion.

"I don't think he will be hard to find," he spoke aloud, certain that their conversation was no longer the most interesting event on the train. The family had noticed the boarding party and had started to panic.

"Our intelligence suggests he would not involve himself in such a manner." She remained calm, keeping eye contact despite the chaos starting to envelope the train.

He grinned at her. The man was concerned with subtlety and elegance. Bringing down a royal house

whilst remaining in the shadows was exactly his sort of play. Staging a train robbery was not. But when something got personal, he struck with savage brutality. He glanced at his fingers, all but one shining a brilliant garnet, the last a perfect black, absorbing the light.

Revenge was a good motivator, but Valerian was sure that he had covered all his tracks after his last encounter with the man. More likely Miss Watson, or her family, had managed to attract his ire. He needed answers from her quickly.

Little time for trivialities he cut to the chase, "What exactly has your house been doing to 'strengthen its position'?"

She paused, taken aback. Lips first pursing she spoke, "I fail to see how that is relevant. I have asked you to find the man. Your 'guild' promises discretion and I am not going to give anything more than strictly necessary." the words reinforced with pulses of blue. He hated when nobility pulled rank.

"Look, the train has just been boarded. And, while I am willing to show you a little professional courtesy and ensure your safety till the agreement has been established, I need to know your quarrel with this man. I need to know how important you might be to him: how deep his motivation might run. I need that information to predict his actions, to determine mine."

Catching his breath and stilling his hand, a small part of him idly wondered why it always had to be like this. Did they not realize that for him to work effectively he had to be well informed? Previous clients had shown just how badly things could otherwise go.

Her eyes widened, incredulous. One of the more bulky mercenaries forced the door open, his wrought iron fingers visibly deforming it in the process. She swallowed, a barely perceivable motion of her throat. The mercenaries started filled in, an almost comic image of them queuing. She grimaced, distracted emotion spilling over - a shade of blue colouring his mind. The mercenaries advanced down the corridor.

Her mind's tone, reluctant – but with a not-quite masked undercurrent of worry, intruded again.

Fine... it all started when we tried to replicate the fingers...

Valerian stood, stepping into the aisle and holding firm against the advancing goons.

Brass and iron are easy, as you know. The techniques for gold, topaz and the like are not public knowledge, but there are ways of getting a hold on them.

The first of the mercenaries swung, not bothering to make a fist - the enhanced strength of his iron fingers would be more than enough to crush most men.

We had more lofty goals - emerald, pearl, maybe even diamond. Our smiths have been very carefully selected, and they made good, albeit slow, progress.

Garnet met wrought iron. Grunting, Valerian caught the blow on his enhanced hand, channelling as he did so the least pleasant power of garnet.

The man began to scream.

The guilds found out, eventually. Demanded we stop, and when we refused we found our supplies of precious stones completely cut off.

The goons were backing away now, as their leader whimpered on the floor. *At which point you were contacted by a man who promised you power untold?*

January shifted uncomfortably in her seat. *Something like that, yes.*

Valerian touched his hand to the fallen man's head. With his garnet touch he probed inside, seeking, seeking...

Valerian Solas smiled slowly. "He's here."

She paled. "Here?"

"He came. He actually, personally came to find you. Oh, Miss Watson, what did you do?"

I tried to kill him.

Valerian was momentarily nonplussed. *That might have been considered... a little unwise. In fact, let me rephrase that: it was borderline insane.* He raised a hand to forestall her outburst at such a breach of protocol. The mercenary leader continued whimpering on the floor. *However, what is done cannot be undone. This merely complicates your continued survival somewhat.*

Do you not mean our continued survival? she retorted.

You hired me to find this man. I have now done so – he is on the train. And he has no quarrel with me, as far

as I am aware. In fact, he would arguably be rather pleased if I delivered him to you. At the very least, there seems no real incentive for me to assist you further. Valerian smiled thinly.

If only I believed that, Mr Solas. Your guild, like my house, has rather fallen on hard times, has it not? You need my custom. And, it is perhaps worth pointing out that I have yet to pay you for your sterling five minutes of work finding the man with black opal fingers. Unless I leave this train alive and free, I can guarantee you and your guild will receive nary a dime. However, should you assist my continued existence, I am prepared to... renegotiate the terms of our arrangement in a manner you may find advantageous. She smiled back. Checkmate, her expression said.

She had a point, thought Valerian. Unfortunately, she was exactly right. He did need her. *Quadruple my fee and I will assist you.*

Double.

Triple.

Done.

The whole exchange had taken seconds. Valerian stood up from his crouch over the fallen mercenary, who had how mercifully slipped into unconsciousness and turned towards the remaining thugs. Things were about to get messy.

Suddenly, all the doors of the carriage, and as Valerian suspected, of the entire train broke open. Valerian could hear people hastily getting up and leaving the train for good, - even they felt that something quite unpleasant was about to happen.

He doesn't want any witnesses. At least the civilians won't get hurt - Valerian thought, both to himself and to January.

As the little girl was dragged towards the carriage's exit by the nanny, she suddenly looked at the couple and exclaimed: "Mommy! Mommy, why are these two staying?! Why don't they come with us?"

But it was her father who responded.

"Darling, don't you worry about them" - the man grunted, glancing at January, "They got more things to do in here..."

And as Valerian watched them exiting the train, part of Valerian was wishing that he could to do the same -

just leave this train full of goons, leave this arrogant woman to deal with them, forget about all these over-ambitious noble houses and guilds with their bickering at each other; maybe he could even say goodbye to his own guild.

But he knew it was impossible, even if there actually existed a person who left a guild and managed to survive long enough to tell anybody about it.

The main reason was *him*, man with *black opal fingers*, that would *reap your mind upon touching it...*

Valerian was abruptly brought back to the reality by the sight of the another merc, who was cunningly grinning at him. The goon's face wasn't familiar, but his fingers... his fingers were orange, and that could only mean one thing.

They were made of amber.

Not wanting to think about what would happen if those hands reached him, he pulled out a revolver. Crude, risky in the case of misfire, and of course the guild would never let him hear the end of it, but when you don't have many options even the bad ones start to look good. He pulled the trigger.

Click, like his hand on the table, no luck. Diving out of the way as the mercenary lunged, he fired again.

Crack! A sound he hoped never to hear from his hand. The merc dropped.

He looked for Miss Watson. Gone, with no sign of a struggle. *Good, she has her wits about her.* Just as he came to this conclusion, an iron hand swung behind him and his world went dark.

* * *

Valerian awoke shackled to the side of a wall. Disliking disorientation nearly as much as being forcibly knocked unconscious, he looked around. The room was featureless, other than a door opposite him, and was lit by a single candle in the centre. The wall was made of stone, so he concluded, helpfully, that he was being held prisoner somewhere other than the train, likely underground.

He pulled at the chains, wincing at the noise but hoping for an incompetent jailer. No such luck. The door opened shortly after and a tall man wearing gloves entered. The man didn't say a word, but slowly removes a glove, revealing fingers of black opal.

Valerian laughed. "Rather more melodramatic than usual, aren't we?" He rattled the chains that held him to the wall. The man with the opal fists was pacing slowly to and fro, rubbing his palms in a languid circular motion, firelight glinting from within his many-coloured fingers. With the candle behind him Valerian couldn't see his face. "I don't know anything, so why don't we just skip this bit and go straight to —"

Opal fingers slid under his ribs and into his stomach, smooth as quicksilver. At first he was too shocked to register pain. Then the moment passed and every neuron in Valerian's body was screaming white agony. As though across a stormy ocean he could hear the man's voice, nasal and businesslike: "She left you with something. I don't intend to let her get away with such an overt ploy to destroy me."

Murky depths of pain tightened and refocused and resolved and the fingers withdrew from his stomach, clutching something red and dripping. Valerian gasped, then felt opal against his chest. Firelight pulsed, and suddenly the pain was gone.

The man dropped the bloody bead into a metal dish. "You have a very strange idea of 'gainful employment', Val. Taking jobs from House Ichor? Mum would turn in her grave."

Valerian chuckled. "Anything to stave off boredom, brother. Come on, let me down already."

"Hm. Let me think about it." The man with the opal fingers turned and now Valerian saw his face: a great tear in his cheek reached up to one twinkling opal eye.

"That's new. Does it do anything cool?"

"You mean, apart from spotting that bead through your flesh?"

"Fair point." Valerian straightened in his chains. "So, I hate to skip your monologue, but since when have we been able to make anything but fingers?"

"I need your finger, brother." His eye continued to glitter in the light of the candle.

"That is neither answering my question nor letting me down. It does raise distinctly alarming new questions, but seriously, these shackles will start really chafing soon."

The man stood for a moment, looking up at Valerian. "Did she tell you what her house was trying to do?"

They attempted to make their own fingers. Naturally, the guilds did not take well to this."

Valerian nodded. He knew this part, and could guess the next.

"They took even less well when they learned that House Ichor had been making actual progress. As you and I both know, despite public appearances, the guilds don't know how to make fingers either. Not truly. Reforge, yes, repair, yes, but pure creation — no."

"I remember Mum's lectures too you know, even if I complained at the time." *Finest smith in the land, and it turned out the only one, no wonder the guilds had been such eager friends to their household.*

"It wasn't the smiths, the guilds knew those smiths. So the guild tried to make their own again. And they succeeded. They did nothing different, but this time, the powers held."

Valerian coughed slightly. "Er, what? The guilds are making fingers now?"

"Which means I tried some of Mum's more ambitious projects again, and well, now I have an opal eye, which is terribly exciting brother."

"I still think you should consider some of the other stones. While opal is very impressive, a pearl or two could really complement the colour scheme. Also, though I hate repeating myself, er, what?"

"I need your finger." Valerian sighed. His last finger was one of Mum's final projects. It could find anything, anywhere, given enough time and a good description; at a price.

"To find what?"

"Smiths are succeeding where they should have no right to. Theories long broken work just as they should, though admittedly my scar testifies that eyes are difficult to insert. I tried to bring down an entire royal house just to get access to anything they knew. Brother, Mum's body is gone."

"Really? The grave looked fine last I went."

One brown eye and one opal one stared at Valerian. "The other body."

Flashes of memory. A long work table. Gems cut into fingers, toes, eyes, whole limbs. All pushed to one side. A whole body, carved from the purest amber...."

“Ah. Um, did I mention these chains are chafing? Or, if I haven’t said it yet, *WHAT!?*”

The man reached up, and began to undo the chains. “I searched with my eye but found nothing. I need your finger. If someone has taken it, we need to know where. That creation should never see the light of day.”

Valerian dropped to the floor.

“Fine. Have you got a stone?”

A large diamond appeared from within darkened pockets and was dropped into a hand of red and black. Slowly, while one brother watched and the other’s eyes shut in thought, the stone glowed bright and brilliant. White, then blue, then impossibly black, and then it was gone. Valerian staggered.

“West. Outside the city, but not far. And brother? It wasn’t taken.

“It walked.”

Fingerpunk – Extras

Alternate titles:

Gemfinger (The Man With the Heinous Touch)

Flashiest Finger Hurts

Red-Handed

Finger Trouble

Opalganger

Comments:

“I know I said I was really excited to see how this one turned out, but oh wow, I just... wow!” – Mark

“I liked the idea of the fingers made of different materials giving different powers - very Mistborn-esque. And gives a whole new meaning to ‘finger trouble’.” – Michael

Editor’s Notes:

This was a fun one to watch evolve; the fingers seemed to start as a mere bit of scene-dressing, a nice cosmetic touch to steampunk things up a bit, and then, entry by entry, they *grew*. And now we have an elaborate system of fingers, and the prologue to an epic tale which someone should really write.

Editor’s Emotes:



Markov Chainwriting: Memory Segfault

Sarah Binney, Sparta, Ben Norman, Seán Thór Herron, Bryn Reinstadler, Askhat Sarkeev, Gwilym Kuiper, Anonymous, Bettina Juszak, Max Veit, Nakul Khanna, Benjamin Dobson, Olivia Morley

Each section of this chain was written with the writer only seeing the previous section, rather than the entire thing.

As soon as my feet hit the polished parquet floorboards I knew something was wrong. The door to the drawing room was open, for a start. It should've been locked at this hour. And the lights all along the skirting board should've been off but instead they glowed dully indigo, casting arcane shadows on the ceiling of the many orchids that lined the walls. There was a strange smell itching at the edge of my consciousness; a kind of heady, salty musk that was at once alien and maddeningly familiar.

Gi came through the duct behind me and landed like a cat. "In and in." He stood, smug.

"I don't know about this, Gi." I idly fingered an orchid petal. "Something's wrong. We should pull out." I leaned over to sniff the flower, and the salty musk overwhelmed me, setting me coughing.

Gi peered at the orchid and gasped. The whites of his eyes shone purple in the low light.

"Wait... That flower... Oh god."

I froze. "What?"

"It's *Epidendrum oblivatus*. The forgetfulness orchid. God and fuck. I didn't realise they..."

"What do you mean, *forgetting*?" I couldn't keep alarm from my voice.

"The orchid produces a toxin that messes with your short-term memory. It disassociates you, makes it harder to form memories. Until it wears off, you're going to have difficulty remembering specific facts."

Fuck. This was the last thing we needed right now. We were on an important mission. We needed to retrieve.... wait... Why was I here?

Where am I?

Why is that man staring at me? Did I do something wrong?

Why does he have a katana on his hip?

He just called out a name. It couldn't be mine, could it?

If it wasn't me he was talking to...

He must have backup.

Run!

I turned away from him. One foot in front of the other, falling, stumbling forward through the halls lit with a deep, eerie blue light. There were pictures on either side of me, and though I looked at them I couldn't recall their subjects.

I'm running.

Why am I running?

These paintings seem much too interesting to just run past, especially with the effect of the light blue illumination, warping the colours and shadows in the scenes.

Someone grabbed my arm. A stranger, panting and out of breath. A stranger with a sword at his side.

Run!

I drove my shoulder hard into his stomach. He collapsed to the floor, winded.

I ran.

Why was I here?

Where am I?

I contemplated this as I ran. Surely, there must have been some purpose in coming here. Ducking through doorways and along more corridors; the skirting boards radiating green, as they had since I arrived here. Wherever here was.

Why was I here?

My musings were interrupted as I stumbled into what appeared to be a greenhouse. Exotic plants stretched off into the distance, filling this vast room with an explosion of colour. Breathless, I followed the path to a nearby bench where I sat.

I don't know where I am. I know that there was an important reason for being here. I knew that this reason involved Gi.

Where was Gi?

Damn. If I can't remember the layout of this place, nothing before the corridor pictures and the katana wielding men, how will I find Gi? I need to focus. What do I know? I know this place isn't normal. It doesn't seem to have any bounds. I run and run. I'm not sure where to – or what from. Are the katana men dangerous? My mind keeps playing tricks... are the katana men real, or just some cruel trick to keep running. Something about this place, all the pulsating lights, images of endless green skirting boards, blue hued corridors... what does it mean?

This might be a test, some amoral psych evaluation – or maybe it's just a game. Regardless, how do I win? I need to keep a record. I can't trust my own mind, maybe I can trust matter. I'll find something in this greenhouse dome...

I've never seen orange vines before. They form columns reaching to the clear dome overhead, seeming to brush the stars, the trees they must have once fed on crumbled to dust long ago. Nature, so beautiful – but it all ends in decay.

Wait. Who was Gi? What was Gi? I can't remember. I've been staring at these vines for long - too long. Ouch, my arm hurts... It's scratched raw, thin blood tracing lines on my skin. Four words: 'Gi', 'diary', and 'don't stare'. Is something playing with my mind? I need to move on. I can't stay here. My feet trip over each other, in my rush to escape the dome. Maybe it has always been like this.

Running and running and running, is this all I know how to do now? At some point, the vines expanded from their column structure to a sort of intertwined mess, surrounding me in an alien, orange forest. Every direction I look in I see a yellowish haze obscuring my view. It feels like I've been running forever. I can't remember anything else. Wait – there! Structure!

I reach a large green door, partially overgrown. I take a moment to breathe and collect myself. Whatever lies behind the door, it's got to lead somewhere better than this. Hang on, what's that? Faded symbols on the wall next to the door; S_78. What could that mean?

Reaching out my arm to open the door I feel a dull, hot pain. I look. Writing on my arm, etched into my skin in blood; six words: 'Gi', 'diary', 'don't stare' and 'no time'. Wait, 'Gi'. That's familiar. A name? A friend? An enemy? I was right about one thing – no time to think about it now. As I open the door I take a look

backwards and notice a faint shimmering against the darkened sky. It doesn't seem quite real.

I'm inside. Either side of me all I can see is a continuing, curving blue corridor. 'Pick a direction' I think, but I never get the chance to start walking. I turn as I hear a faint shackling noise reverberating from far down the hall. Louder and louder it gets. It's coming towards me. Suddenly I see; a man fast approaching, wearing sparkling grey armour and wielding—wielding...a katana!?

"HALT, SIR," he cries, "ELSE I BE FORCED TO MAKE DECISIONS THAT YOU WILL REGRET." He brandishes his katana in my direction, his grey armour protesting at the quick movements.

"No need to yell," I respond weakly, trying to think. *Don't stare, no time, diary, Gi...* the words etched on my arm burn with renewed importance. The knight's armour does not appear to be well-oiled. Which means, perhaps...

By the time I finish that thought, I notice that my legs are already churning beneath me, and the poorly-oiled knight is galloping, squeakily, behind me.

"STOP, PRAT FOOL," he yells, falling ever more behind. "THIS WAY LEADS ONLY TO --"

The blue corridor terminates suddenly in a bright yellow wall, "S_78" inscribed on it to match the door outside. The yellow wall seems somehow to clash more with blue than yellow normally does. A beaten-up *diary* open to today's date was open atop a small side table.

"December 14," the diary reads aloud, "Fought a knight and died."

What.

"Don't stare, no time, remember?" says the diary.

I turn just as the knight reaches me. He flips up his helmet visor. "STOP ELSE YOU BE -- HANG ON A SECOND." Why must he yell everything? My head is beginning to hurt. But the knight, instead of skewering me on his katana, screws up his eyes, and then fumbles at his side pouch for his spectacles. "GARY?" Perhaps he's partially deaf. Wait a second... *don't stare no time diary Gi...*

"Gi?"

"HUH?! WOULD YOU BE SO KIND TO SPEAK UP, PLEASE, SIR, ELSE I ASSUME YOU ARE NOT GARY AND SHALL BE --"

“GI!!! I SAID GI!”

Only the seeing the knight’s katana makes me not yell anything ELSE. And, dear gods, why did he call me Gary? Shouldn’t I be known as Arthur, or Richard or whatever all the ‘cool’ guys are called?

I feel my skull gets torn apart by the knight’s (maybe I should call him Gi?) voice, but this time it sounds a bit...lifeless

“DEAR SIR GARY, IT IS MY HONOUR TO INFORM YOU THAT YOU ARE TO DEFEAT ME SHOULD YOU WISH TO CONTINUE YOUR JOURNEY BEHIND THE WALL, ELSE I WILL BE FORCED TO —”

“JUST SHUT THE HELL UP!!!” — I yell, aware that I am about to be as deaf as the knight.

“AS YOU WISH, SIR GARY” he shouts again, “ADJUSTING SOUND CONTRols to lower amplitude” - as he’s saying this, his voice volume actually drops.

“Well, that was a bit creepy, mate” - I think to myself, watching the knight putting his helmet visor onto his face, walking a few steps back while still facing me

“December, 14,”- suddenly says the diary, “Fought a knight and killed it”

“You just called this guy ‘it’? You sure about this, diary? Any advice on how to kill him, maybe?”

Out of thin air, an armoured horse appeared. The knight mounted the horse, drew his katana and started to charge in my direction.

This doesn’t look good. Also, I there were no more hints on my arm.

So I need to fight this thing? And kill it. But it doesn't even seem alive, how am I supposed to kill it. It was some form of robot knight, but does that help? I mean, it’s not like I'm really cut out to beat this thing even if this diary seems to tell me that's what I'm about to do.

“December, 14th, Fought a knight and killed it”. The words coming back to me. Not all that useful really. And I didn’t have that much time to think. This knight was definitely better trained for this sort of thing than I ever was.

I had however, managed to acquire this Diary, so I must be able to kill this thing. If I die here, how would I have been able to get access to this? The diary

wouldn't have existed. Or at least that entry wouldn't have been written. Right?

“YOU CALL YOURSELF A KNIGHT SIR GARY?” the charging knight cried. He seemed to have forgotten about the fact that he'd turned the volume down (can they do that?). “IF YOU DO NOT FIGHT ME, HOW ELSE ARE YOU GOING TO CONTINUE YOUR JOURNEY BEHIND THE WALL?”. And why couldn't he remember my name? Gi! I've told him how many times now?

Getting behind the wall. My driving force; my reason for continuing. The reason I'm here now, in a fight I'm pretty sure I can't win, but somehow do.

At that point, another hint appeared on my arm.

This one was somewhat scrawled, and blurry, as if it had been written in quite a hurry. “Slow down and watch” my arm told me. So he slowed down, and watched...

I mean that I slowed down and watched.

He watched himself duck out of out of the knight's first charge with surprising agility (damnit!.. I watched myself. I ducked out of the way. I. Me. No one else). He then proceeded with a startling precision that he was sure he had never actually possessed (I proceeded. Me. Why does this keep happening?) to mount his own counterattack. Bracing himself against the wall, the other one of course, not *the* wall, he flung himself back at the knight with such force and speed that the robot found itself unable to even process a response.

I. Me. It was me who did these things. Why did it feel like this was suddenly happening to someone else?

The robot was flailing now, screaming indignantly in capital letters as he tore the voicebox from it, volume slider and all. It *was* alive deep down in a sense, of course it could be killed.

I should I knew have felt pleased by my triumph, but it didn't make sense, why did it feel as if the person out there, beating a robot knight to death with its own volume control, was not me at all?

It was then that it all became clear. It was then that I remembered what was over the wall.

I had been here before, after all, in front of this wall. I had fought the robot before and defeated it and climbed over the wall and... what had happened then? He stared at the crumbling bricks, so seemingly

innocuous and yet I – ! – was sure that my current problems had started when I had breached the wall the first time. The robot knight lay crumpled at the base of the wall where he had beaten the last life out of it and he couldn't shake the intense feeling of *déjà vu* that threatened to overlay the present scene. Dammit. I couldn't shake the feeling. My current situation was complicated enough without these strange flashbacks, or whatever they were. Especially if he couldn't figure out whether they were warning him off climbing over the wall, or telling him that climbing over the wall was the way to get his (*my*) problem dealt with.

Well, standing around here feeling sorry for myself wouldn't change anything. He began to climb. Behind the wall was the lair of the sorcerer who'd... done something. Cursed him? *Cursed me*? Probably for trespassing – or killing his robot knight. There was no reason to expect the sorcerer would be any happier to see him this time – me, dammit, still me, this entire thing was *distressing* – I supposed this time I could argue that it hadn't really been me who killed the knight? I certainly hadn't felt like he was me.

There was more about this past scene that just felt... off. I stared back down at the patterns of scattered bricks that I – he? - left behind – or had left behind? Yes, there was something there; was it a message? The pattern was definitely stronger in this – iteration? - but I still couldn't figure out what it was. It would have to be simple (have been simple? Whatever; our system of tenses wasn't designed with temporal anomalies in mind). I could always try to reinforce the patterns I saw, but where could that lead? Might it just, like successive generations of a cellular automaton, result in complex but meaningless noise that would inevitably lead me back to the sorcerer again and again?

I jumped back down and decided to try. Was this an arrow, maybe? It wasn't pointing towards the only wall in this place I could possibly climb. In fact, it was pointing back in the direction I had come from, toward the breach in the wall – his breach in the wall – no, wait, *my* breach in the wall- that had gotten me (him?) into this wretched dungeon in the first place. Well, that *would* be the logical action, to avoid dealing with the sorcerer... but maybe that's what he did last time and the time before that, and now I actually have to face the sorcerer to get myself free? Oh damn, this is going to be tricky.

I climbed the wall and ducked to avoid the fireball. As always this was new, but my reflexes have become much keener since I entered this place. How long has it been? Hours? Years? I can't even tell anymore.

All manner of foul beasts approached; I evaded their attacks and slew them with my blade, which grew just a little keener with each iteration. I was finally starting to notice a difference. Was this the furthest I had come so far? But I still had no recollection of the past iterations other than my unconscious instincts and whatever the pattern of scattered bricks at the entrance had indicated. And, of course, the sorcerer.

Before too long I was face to face with him again. I knew it wasn't the first time, but whether it was the second or the hundredth I had no idea. I always remember his face. And I could never forget his voice.

"You know," he rasped, "I'm getting bored of this. Haven't you figured it out yet?"

No matter how many times I heard it, that voice still chilled me to the bone.

"Tell you what," he intoned. "One more try? You did seem so promising, but I assure you, you're far from irreplaceable."

He snapped his fingers and my mind felt about to explode. I understood everything. It was all so clear. I cleared my throat –

The sorcerer snapped his fingers again, and I was at the breach. Yes, I had it! But I would forget... the bricks ... of course. If I could just make it a little clearer. One brick here, a second there, a third. Yes, *surely* I would understand when –

I heard a loud bang and it was all gone. What was gone? Where was I? These bricks... the sorcerer... my final chance...

Déjà vu was my first thought when I saw it. The sea, the cliff—only a couple of person-lengths high—a children's roundabout, some carefully arranged bricks (into what, I don't know), then me, then a red-brick cottage, then a forest on a hill. I'd never been there before. Yet it was a long time since I'd been anywhere else.

My hand flew to my belt, grabbed something, and my feet spun me around. Before I knew it, I'd stabbed a young girl in the neck. I stared at the dagger, and

nearly vomited. The child became a swarm of ants, and the ants ran over the cliff.

I'd done this before. I'd been here before. But I hadn't. Was this déjà vu? I thought it had been Merope who'd first explained it to me—but unless Merope had hair like seaweed, one eye glinting green and the other a rotting hole, I couldn't remember her face.

The house compelled me, so I entered, took a vase from the window sill and doused the fire with it. I took the poker and stabbed the mantelpiece in the eye. The wall unfurled into vines, revealing a dank graveyard behind them, in a space where I'd seen a sand dune before.

I stepped forward, and with three quick swishes of the poker, had batted some hedgehogs away from my legs, and behind me. I snapped my head around to see them roll off the cliff.

It was new, but I'd seen it before. Why did I stab the child, douse the fire, stab the mantelpiece, play golf? It was as natural as breathing, like I'd played this game a thousand times before, only to come back to the start—

—and do it again, with slightly improved instincts, getting slightly fitter, slightly further each time.

Slightly fitter. I wondered how fit I had been to begin with. My muscles seemed *strong*.

It would end here. The sorcerer would not damn me to another repetition, or another inexplicable set of bricks. Instinct told me to scale the wall across the graveyard. So I turned around, walked and then ran, and leapt into the sea.

Cold, disoriented, the current pulling me under. Sharp rocks cut against my skin, my body battered by the water and stones.

Then my vision clears and I find myself inside a cottage and ... *Déjà vu*.

No. No. Nonononononononono. Images flash through my head too fast to recount. Missing eyes and animal armies, missing memories and distorted dreams. Endless repetition, the finality of death being denied.

I don't know who I am. I know the name Merope, but it is not my name, I think. Did I love her, hate her? Did I even know her, or was she just made up like the

countless other hallucinations I must have had, I hope I had.

I don't know why I'm trying to recount my story. This tale reads like madness, the product of a fractured mind trying to make sense of something that fundamentally doesn't. As I write, memories start to change, fact becoming fiction becoming truth becoming myth.

The idea was to improve each time, but whilst my body improved my mind gave out. I hope whoever finds this can see some sense in it, can piece together my story from the fragments that are left. Don't try and find me, I am long gone by the time you read this, off to vanquish the hedgehogs or tear down the bricks. I might not know much about the past, or about the future, but in this moment I know what I want.

A rare moment of clarity in my life, and all I want is for it to end.

Memory Segfault – Extras

Alternate titles:

Amnesia

The Knight, The Fireplace and the Orchid of Forgetting

Comments:

“Oh this is very interesting.

“I actually think it's less coherent BECAUSE people knew they would only get the previous segment; I expected people to spend half their words recounting what had happened in the previous segment, which actually was the opposite of the problem here.

“Anyway, skillfully written, nice blend of SF and F, and what the hell?” – Binney

Editor's Notes:

Lent term is, traditionally, the time to do odd chains. This, the first of three in this issue, is the answer to the question “what would happen if the writers of the chain couldn't see the whole chain?”

That answer is madness. Madness happens. Entertaining madness, certainly, but I cannot help but feel that this is not a viable way to write.

Fun though.

Editor's Emotes:



Chainwriting: Elegance

Mark Johnson, Connor Willmington-Holmes, Andrew Kanaber, Curtis Reubens, Samuel Cook, Michael French, Greg Weir, Ed Heaney, Anna Peel, Jake Choules, Jonny Phillips, Rory Hennell-James

Content Warning: Gore

Like soft silk slipping through scrabbling fingers. Like the winter wind whistling through wretched wrappings. Like screeching screams stabbing through a smothered skull. His life poured through the gaping wound, gushed between her crimson lips. Stained her perfect teeth as it submerged them. Cascaded down her throat, rousing ripples of rapture that slaked her desperate thirst.

The Bad Man was right. This was the best feeling in the world.

Daddy always said she shouldn't talk to the Bad Man. Daddy wasn't going to say that any more. He crumpled to the ground as her savage grasp fell slack, the disappointment glazing his eyes barely denting her euphoria. That was draining away all of its own accord.

Daddy had been simply scrumptious. His taste still danced upon her tongue. But even as she savoured the sensation it dwindled, mingling with the lingering perfume of the maids. The seasoned bouquet of the butler. The delightful appetizer that had been her governess. It left her wanting more.

It was not long before the violence of that aching need returned. Overwhelmed her indolent bliss. Compelled her to ascend anew. To force feeling back down her drowsing limbs. To flow, finally, into motion.

She rose slowly, steadily, stealing still the last remnants of her reverie. Stretched. Stepped, daintily, over the glistening, gleaming gouts of blood. Made her way towards the door.

* * *

He had raised her from a seed, nourished day and night with the iridescent glow of gems set into the chamber walls. Hidden deep under the gardens, the 'prized specimen' had sprouted and blossomed.

The seed had been smuggled into the country from a crash site south of Volograd. Having personally translated the entire corpus on her species from a long dead variant of Ingush, Professor Mathers took interest in even the most insignificant meteor strikes.

Mathers hoped to shield her from the cosmic bloodlust the texts warned of. Family assets liquidated many years before, he set about preparation with fervour.

Preservation charms from the Pharaohs' tombs, precious metals and gems 'acquired' from the mausoleums of long-lived nobility, vials of Aqua de Vida all were gathered in the chamber. Mathers understanding of the texts was thus: Life begets life, if he could surround the infirm sapling with totems of life and preservation, her violent urges would be suppressed.

Of this, she knew nothing. The dying polymath was simply a caring 'Daddy' to her. Yet, his attempts had worse than failed. No craft of Man nor Magic could ever have stopped the call she felt. The lead-lined roof had done little to shield her, but the artefacts had made a lasting impression.

Where before her impulses manifested as violent rage unbridled, she was tainted with a new evil. Porous to the magical emanations of their previous masters, the relics now oozed a sickly undead aura.

At his office in Maastricht University, worried by the infrequency of his epistoler's responses, a seasoned academic packed his cases for travel, silver crosses, stakes and all.

* * *

It had become the fashion in recent decades to see meaning in the arrangement of flowers. Young lovers would embed earnest messages in their exchange of bouquets. He had read of this with amusement but here it could serve his purpose. Questioning an increasingly uncomfortable florist, he had settled on an arrangement of clematis tendrils (*unchanged for eternity*), Queen Anne's lace (*sanctuary*) and pale-pink sweetpea (*meet me*).

The cemetery path curved here. He remembered. Close, now. Yes, that grave. Before he could place the bouquet, a quiet voice froze him.

"I should kill you. How dare you return? You know this is my territory."

"It's my grave, Henrik. And we need to talk."

"Talk is a charm for us to lull prey. Are you prey, Charles? When a tiger chances upon another in the jungle, they fight. This is how it must be."

He resisted the urge to ask why, in that case, Henrik hadn't attacked. That way lay death. After a moment's silence, Henrik sighed.

"Didn't I teach you properly when I made you? I told you the law. I passed on a few hints. That should be enough, but you want more from me? What is it then?"

"Our law has been violated, Henrik. A reckless kill drew attention. A prominent man and his household, drained bodies left out for others to find." He'd seen it in the papers. No doubt Henrik ignored such modern fripperies.

Henrik made a "tsk" like a peeved schoolmaster. "How careless."

"There's worse. It was the entire household *except* the young daughter. Missing. That's what really has the humans talking."

"You think someone has turned a child? Madness. Always a disaster. Insufficient patience, insufficient ... self-control."

Was it his imagination or did Henrik shudder slightly?

"Where was this?"

"Heidelberg. The victim was named Mathers."

"Valentine's territory. If a child has been turned it must be destroyed. Valentine too, if he's responsible. I will see to this."

And with that, Henrik was gone. How did he do that? Perhaps one of the powers of age he'd alluded to. Charles wondered if he should have mentioned the victim had been a noted botanist, but surely that was irrelevant.

* * *

Jonah Van Schmidt gently closed his dead friend's eyes and said a silent prayer. Whatever monstrosity had done this... he would find it, he swore before God. He would cleanse the world of its taint.

"Have you looked at the bites yet?"

Schmidt moved on instinct; glass spun through the air. Henrik caught the bottle without flinching.

"You." Undeterred by this, Schmidt advanced on the creature, cross in hand. "I should have known-"

“Have you examined the bites, professor?” Henrik lazily pocketed the holy water. “I think you’ll find them quite interesting.”

Reluctantly, Schmidt took a few steps backwards; even more reluctantly, he tore his eyes from his old foe to examine his old friend. “They’re... they’re wrong. They’re not like vampire bites at all, they’re long, thin lacerations.”

Henrik’s voice was soft, mournful. “Something very bad happened here, Schmidt.”

“I could have told you that, monster. Besides, I thought you’d be pleased with this sort of slaughter. I thought it’d resonate with you.”

“A farmer hates not his cattle.” Henrik shrugged. “I take no particular pleasure in seeing you humans die. In any case, the creature that did this is as much a threat to us as it is to you.”

“And that would be...”

Henrik held up a bottle, very much like the one Schmidt had thrown earlier. “Your friend here was raising a cuscūtæ; plant-based, vampiric, alien, and dangerous at the best of times.” He uncorked the bottle, pouring a small measure from it onto the wooden floor; violet flames sprung up where it landed. “These are not the best of times.”

“That bottle...”

“Holy water, yes. One of many charms mister Mathers was trying to use to control the beast. And, well, you can see how that turned out.”

* * *

It had turned out well, thought Valentine. The cuscūtæ had exceeded all his expectations, as had the effectiveness of his control over it. That fool Mathers had never really known what he was dealing with. Valentine had been keeping tabs on him ever since he noticed the man’s interest in certain areas of mythology and old lore best left hidden. He’d even gone so far as to learn Ingush just to translate that old tome. As someone who had been there when Ingush was still a vital force in the linguistic firmament, Valentine could have saved him all the bother. And corrected all those small-but-crucially-important mistakes that were oh-so-easy to make when translating a difficult variant of a tongue as notoriously complex as Ingush. Particularly all those “nots” that Mathers had missed. Especially the one concerning Egyptian artefacts. Cuscūtæ reacted very badly to them – Valentine privately thought the creatures were somehow related to the alien race

that had built the Pyramids and that the association was not one they cared to be reminded of.

Regardless, the cuscūtæ was doing exactly what he required of it. No doubt Henrik and his cronies in the Council of Blood would show up before long to ask him if he were somehow responsible for the devastation the cuscūtæ had committed and would continue to commit. Obviously, he could plausibly deny all involvement whilst using the beast to eliminate his rivals. Then there would be nothing between him and the long-vacant Sanguine Throne and the overlordship of all the Undead. The upstart masses of humanity would be reduced to their rightful place as slaves and a glorious new age of eternal vampiric dominion would dawn. And with a pet cuscūtæ, who would stop him? Valentine smiled to himself and considered how best to engineer Henrik’s demise.

* * *

“Holy water doesn’t do that.”

“Thank you, professor,” Henrik rolled his eyes. “As a common target of the stuff, I am aware. Now tell me, do you know what might have caused this?”

Schmidt was beginning to relax. Henrik clearly wasn’t going to kill him in the most immediate future. He was too busy being scared of this cuscūtæ. Schmidt frowned. Henrik was not the kind to be afraid of things. This was concerning.

“No, not off-hand. But we could look through Mathers’ notes.”

“Please. I’d focus on anything about how on earth he got hold of a seed, I assume that’s how he did it anyway, and then what he did with it. I know only legends, but even that is more than most creatures left alive today.”

Schmidt, still fingering his cross idly, took another flask of holy water from his own pockets, and poured a small measure out. There was a brief radiance, but nothing so dramatic as the fires produced by Hendrik’s flask.

“Where did you find that, anyway?”

“In the garden, where the trail of blood starts. One of the maids was clutching it.”

“Then let us begin there.”

It did not take them long to cover the area between them, and in time they found the entrance to the chamber. A darkened door, obscured by bracken, led

the pair down a darkened staircase of rough stone, ending in a bright chamber.

Hendrik hissed. "I will not cross that threshold, Schmidt. There is ancient life magic here that would normally keep me out. And normally, I would circumvent it. This is different. It is corrupt, and fouled, and I will not touch it, lest I kill you on instinct alone. I will return above. When I am gone, open the door, look around, and return to me and tell me what you see. Do not linger, vampire hunter. It will not do you well."

* * *

Her head whipped round.

Tendrils of blood-matted hair became still as she stared. As she sniffed the air.

That man there smelled... different. Dry and subtle, not like the warm metal tang she loved so much. Almost spicy. It reminded her of something.

She gasped.

He smelled like the Bad Man.

Still sniffing the air, she crept across the rooftop to follow him – quiet, catlike, and hungrier by the second.

* * *

Schmidt closed the door and took a deep breath.

Hands shaking a little less, he ascended the steps to find Henrik sitting primly on a lawnchair. He almost laughed. Then without seeming to move at all, the vampire's gaze pinned him to the ground.

"Speak."

Schmidt's mouth was open before he'd even realised what he wanted to say. "A child's bedroom at base, with a bed against the east wall and a shelf of books and toys opposite and a chest of drawers with jeweled gold knobs to the south. No windows. But there were..."

He grimaced. "Artifacts. I recognised some of them. Over the drawers, the death mask of Khafra. I saw in when it was auctioned. Unmistakeable. Other than that, a golden ankh in each corner. Smaller statuettes I couldn't place, too."

"Describe them."

"Paired seated figures, as if they were holding hands but the details were off - they had one hand between them. A jackal-headed figure, must be an Anubis but

the hieroglyphs weren't the inscription I know. Others mixed in with the toys."

"Some of those are red herrings." Henrik sounded sure, but Henrik always sounded sure. It was speculation; nothing could be discarded yet. "But," he continued, "it is as I feared. All of those more powerful items, as best as your cursory description allows me to say, seem to be of the summoning sort of temperament. Everything you might consider more control-related, more towards the warding side of things, were things like that holy water – easily overcome, easily counter-warded, by anyone of strength."

"So how did he manage to exert any control at all?"

"You tell me. Unless you omitted any source of sanctity almost inconceivably powerful, I can't imagine the control being magical." Either that, or Henrik didn't want him to know how potent one of those things really was. Schmidt paused.

"Could the control have been... emotional?"

"Emotional?"

"I know you feel emotions, no matter," and Schmidt nodded to his long-time adversary, "how good you are at concealing them. How malleable is one of your kind when they are but a child, I wonder?"

"I wonder," answered Henrik, without the least suggestion of curiosity in his voice at all. "But this isn't even Earthly undead. Does it have emotions in a way of which you can even conceive? Plausibly, yes; equally plausibly, no."

"An opening, then!" cried Schmidt, a hint of excitement in his voice. "I think you would have known if it had struck before. Would it not have struck, if it had been out? How many humans do you think it knows? How many vampires? Might we entrap it by... by masquerade?"

"Oh, it won't care about your *face*. They don't really have eyes, just pigment patches..." Henrik mused. "But scent... we could do something about that. If, of course, you are willing."

Schmidt gulped.

* * *

She could hear them talking just below, vibrations in the tendrils of her hair muffled by the blood. Idly, she combed her fingers through the drying mass of it, flakes of it falling to the roof tiles below. The voices became clearer, but there was something off about the flavour of the two compared to before. One had

been as rich as iron, heavy with phosphates; now the taste of him was stronger, but it had dried and bittered, almost like the Bad One next to him. She slid closer, confused. Never before had a scent changed like that – the butler had always smelled precisely as buttery-attractive, before she'd set aside restraint and answered to temptation.

This one had smelled *so good*. And she was *starving*.

She would find out whether or not there was any good left to be salvaged, before he became any more unappetizing. And maybe the Bad One would know her Bad Man, and could tell her more ways to salve her hunger. Really, there was nothing that could go wrong if she just jumped off this roof right now and –

- ah. *Oh*. Pain - pain and purple flame -

"What have you *done*?" she hissed wildly, writhing in the wet grass, as the two creatures towered over her. She could taste more clearly now the blood that covered both of them.

* * *

Pain, and flame, and pain, and flame...

And sweetness. Pain and flame were bad dreams. Earlier, real – but dreams just then. And, on waking, sweetness.

Too much sweetness, too much smell. So much smell as to make it not worth smelling. But sound... sound worth hearing. Tiny hairs quivering.

"...will he have got far?"

"Perhaps not; certainly not out of the country. But, his powers... even for my abilities... we will not find him."

"But he is weaker now?"

"He lacks the cuscūtæ. He is never weak, but now his threat is not so grave."

"And you know he is responsible for this?"

She heard an inward breath. Slow. Measured.

"What about the creature?"

"It is subdued..."

Subdued. Yes, yes, she was. That was it. Too much smell. Too much to think about. Could barely think about sound, either, but sound was worth it...

"...sanguineous pomanders. Incredibly passé in sophisticated vampiric society, of course, but every

house seems to contain at least a dozen or so, if you care to go looking for them."

"And in the long term?"

"This is the long term."

"But the pomanders..."

"...have been languishing in cupboards for, oh, decades I expect, and yet retain plenty of their potency. They will not fail us any time soon – not soon for *you*, anyway. Why, I expect the creature is near enough comatose in there!"

Ha! No! The Bad One was wrong! He was a fool!

Or a liar?

"Well, I defer to your better judgement, Henrik."

* * *

Hungry. The wait has been endless, trapped, struggling to move. Just the Bad One's voice, keeping me sane, offering feasts like none I've had before. Delicious thick creamy blood, as much as I can drink. Soon they'll be mine.

"It is time to examine the creature, I think" the Bad One said, in a tone that felt cold even to her. "It has been two days now since we entrapped her; she has neither moved nor spoken. Any danger has surely passed"

"As long this doesn't end with us being devoured. Perhaps it'd be better if I left you to do the examining."

That'd be the tasty one. And he's right I suppose... I won't devour both of them

"She's completely comatose. If it could have hurt us it would by now. And in all our little... entanglements in the past, I've never seen you pass up a chance to sate your scientific curiosity. Would you really miss examining a creature not seen since I was young?"

I wonder what scientific curiosity tastes like? Could it really match the succulent flavour of fresh hot blood?

"You are right, I fear."

They're so close. So delicious. So tender. And now I can smell them again.

"Henrik?"

Mmm... that fear in his voice is nice

“How did you know it was a she?”

“The real question, my dear Schmidt, is why you didn’t notice me take the pomander. But let us just say, I made a deal.”

Delicious...

* * *

“Well done, my new friend, well done.” Henrik purred as he lay the cuscuteæ gently back on the table, sedated again by the pomander.

“And well done to you too, my old friend, well done indeed.” Valentine’s voice floated from deep in the shadows as he strode out, amused grin showing off his elegant canines. “It was a good plan; take control of the cuscuteæ, take out your rivals, take the Sanguine Throne. And if you ever lost control, it all started in my territory so obviously I must be to blame.”

“You *are* to blame. You set the botanist down his path.”

“A mere detail. As I say, yours was a good plan, but I think I have a more... elegant, idea. Rather than you framing me as a scapegoat for your own plots, I think I shall frame you as trying to frame me as a scapegoat for your own plots.”

The Bad Ones are angry, arguing. But they both promise blood, so much blood...

What’s that smell? Another Bad One?

* * *

Charles slipped out of the shadows, recovering his two throwing stakes from the piles of ash on the floor.

“Fools. Scheming like this, monsters like this, can only bring the risk of the humans discovering us. Whoever sits the Sanguine Throne needs to understand that.”

He looked down at the cuscuteæ, still comatose from the stench of blood.

“I suppose I shall have to burn you to tidy things up here. And then... yes. That would be... elegant.”

Elegance – Extras

Alternate Titles:

Triffidic

Cattle to the Slaughter

Vamping It Up

Comments:

“I think this one should be submitted to Gardeners' Question Time - maybe they have advice on how best to rear killer plants?” – Samuel

“Elegantly ended!

“Name suggestions: ‘An elegant sufficiency’, because that’s a phrase my mum picked up from a generation or two back for ‘I’ve had enough to eat, thankyou.’” - Greg

Editor’s Notes:

I received the first part of this with an email which was very concerned about how dark it had inadvertently gotten. Hence the content warning up top and an email sent to everyone else on the chain letting them swap off if desired. It was very engaging though, and the second person did an excellent job of de-darking it, and it formed into an excellent tale. With space plant vampires. Natch.

Editor’s Emotes:



“Linearity is for wusses” snarled the Ocelot. “Step outside the narrative.”

His gun cracked like wildfire, sending four bullets into my leg. I yowled, dived inside the nearest building, and turned back to page 34, planning to cheat my way out of the encounter by taking another option.

Tanglewriting: Once Upon a CUSFS

CUSFS

This story was written in the space of an hour, by pouring CUSFS into a single document and seeing what transpired.

It’s hard to see where it had all gone wrong. John had been a poor otter, but not overly poor, and had been getting along just fine. He was still an otter. (Once you go otter, you never notta otter. You just gotta.) Given the effects of the recent financial crisis on the riverbank economy, he’d come out a lot better than Bertie the dugong, who had lost his house because he failed to keep up regular repayments on his mortgage. Or Steve the Water Buffalo, who’d been evicted from the water altogether, which was better than being evicted from Buffalo, although not by much.

(That reminds me of the time I was stranded in Buffalo, Texas, with only my pants to my name and my trusty revolver, having lost all my other worldly possessions in a wild bet on an equally wild bull at the Rodeo the night before. The morning sun was creeping over the rooftops and reflecting of the cacti and desert rocks. There were three bullets in my gun, four in my leg, and my only hope of an evening meal - or any meal again - was bringing down the infamous Revolver Ocelot. More of an Ocelittle than an Ocelot, really, but sufficient for an impromptu desert meal. (That reminds me of a joke, How do you titillate an Ocelot?, oscillate its tit a lot.) A tumbleweed blew across the scene, and the air stilled, tense, before a crack rang out from behind me. Forgetting my injured leg I threw myself to the floor and rolled. I felt the shot scrape the back of my neck and rose to my knees, gun at the ready. There behind me was Revolver Ocelot, with an empty revolver.

“That will be the last shot you waste,” I said, feeling pretty confident now.

The ocelot revolved and said nothing.

Which was awkward because I’d just thought of cool line for that moment, but it would be inappropriate to put words in someone else’s mouth. Anyway, I aimed my revolver and took my shot.

What did the Ocelot say next?

- “For the revolution!” *Go to page 3*
- “Mrrh” *Go to page 36*
- “Linearity is for wusses.” *Go to page 33*

But this is not a story about me. I wish it was, but it's not¹.)

Anyway. John was exceedingly familiar with all these unfortunate cases, being the local recording officer for the Bureau of Water-Indigenous Creature Statistics (BWICS). Now, you might be thinking that this sounds like a boring kind of job, but that's because you are probably unaware of quite how fond John was for symmetry. If his statistics weren't symmetric, well, he was always very diligent in 'correcting' them. By any means necessary. This included liberal use of a staple-gun and a marmot.

[We'll have to take a break here to hear from one of our sponsors. This Mess of Words is brought to you by a definitely-not-shady consortium of well-named companies. They are *not a cult*. Not a proper cult anyway. A proper cult doesn't KICK YOU OUT FOR NOT BEING OK WITH HUMAN SACRIFICES CARL.

And now back to our scheduled Chaos of Writings]

It had never really bothered him that his friends had, one by one, found themselves without a home, or a place to call their own. He'd never expected that it would happen to *him*. At least not until the manatees took over, but the fortune-teller's prophecy had specified that that would happen on a Tuesday. Phew. Bullet dodged.

He wandered along the riverbank, still in shock. His had seemed such a stable, reliable job. People would always need meticulously-gathered and perfectly symmetric statistics on water-indigenous species, he had often thought to himself. Surely, that would never change. Surely he would be in gainful employment for many years to come?

A sudden gust of wind kicked up. The cloud of yellow petals it carried caught him quite by surprise. The water began to glow, all, well, glowy. And the riverbank danced to its own merry tune. And then John was a zombie-dragon, but only temporarily. At least, he was in his head. In reality he was still a poor otter. John wondered briefly if he should get himself checked out by a clinical psychiatrist, but decided against it. After all, that would bring the number of otters seeking medical attention to one more than the

number of beavers who went missing that year. And then he'd have to fetch his staple-gun again.

As John approached the railway bridge at the end of the Long Reach, he noticed movement. It was big, and it was moving at a speed to which locomotives are rather unaccustomed².

“Is that a train?” he thought to himself. “No, it can't be - trains are much bigger, and also don't hang upside down from the railings”. Unless this was a universe where gravity operated according to different rules, in which case that was absolutely possible. But John had a very strong feeling that this was not that sort of universe, having been resident in it for some years by this point.

Still, you could never be too sure.

He eventually realised it was a Koala. A rather angry looking Koala holding an AK-47. “What's a koala doing in Cambridge?!?” John, asked, confused. ‘And why does it have an AK-47? I thought they only gave those to the chimps.’

“Cleaning up,’ the koala said simply, readying her weapon. ‘I will thank you for referring to me with non-neuter pronouns, although you can decide which to call me by. I haven't quite made my mind up about it yet. You don't have long, though,” they added as he opened fire, zir adorable face showing little emotion. Like this: .__.

John swam as if his life depended on it. Which was appropriate, given that it did. He dodged left and right, desperate to avoid the hail of bullets streaming from the Koala's gun on the bridge. Luckily a Kalashnikov was not the most accurate of rifles, and he managed to find cover behind the next bridge. Hopefully one without a gun-toting member of the marsupial mafia.

With time to breathe as he cowered behind the bridge, it suddenly struck him. Not a bullet but a thought. There was only one reason for a Koala to be “cleaning up” in Cambridge. Well, only one that would require a Kalashnikov, and unmatched quotation marks. Big Asymmetric Data⁵ was onto him.

He wished he'd brought his quarterstaff, though against BAD he felt it might be of limited use. Then

¹ I tried, I really did, but my editor was having none of it.

² Don't get me started on train delays these days. Blame the Tories. Ask Curtis³, he likes trains⁴.

³ Or Andrew.

⁴ Am Curtis, can confirm.

⁵ Although the name indicated these were quite clearly the BAD guys, most of the members of Big Asymmetric Data were quite pleasant and volunteered for charity work with mammals less able than themselves, every third Wednesday of the month, from 2pm to 6pm.

again, not much was of use once BAD was on your trail. A quarterstaff might actually have been nice. They were, after all, such pleasingly symmetric weapons.

(+10 damage, +10 Attack speed)

He heard a distinctive whooping sound behind him. One that he still heard on dark nights, when he was alone and cold in his burrow, and he would turn to confront her, until he realised that it was all in his head, old paranoia. This was most definitely not his paranoia. He knew that from the smell. French perfume. Only one person wore that perfume.⁶

“Hello, John.” John turned slowly to face his old nemesis. She had aged somewhat since last they had crossed paths. Her fur seemed slightly duller in shade, though this might just have been a trick of the light. A shiny badge gleamed on her marsupial shoulder.

(The Ocelot Resolver had no effect, because I couldn't establish a connection to an Ocelot Name Server. Damn.)

“Beatrice. Moving up in the world, I see.”

The kangaroo giggled, bazooka resting lazily on her shoulder. “You could say that I’m a BAD girl.”

“That was terrible, Beatrice. Like, really awful.”

She shrugged. “Eh. When you have powers untold, you get a bit lazy with your puns. Anyone who doesn’t laugh tends not to last very long⁷. But tell me, Jonathan: just how *is* the symmetry business these days?”

He glared at her.

“Oh, that’s right, you’re out of a job and out of a home. I guess requiring your data to be perfectly symmetrical, and moulding reality to fit your fixation wasn’t such a lucrative endeavour after all.”

An inarticulate sound of strangled rage died in his throat. His hand reached out without his conscious volition - such insults could not be tolerated. Then he saw Connie Cormorant leaping from the water to grapple Beatrice, a strange device strapped to her back. It was black, with little blue and red wires wrapped around it. There was a strange beeping noise

⁶ Paranoia smells completely different, though the odour is impossible to describe. One thing which is certain is that it does not smell like the sort of French perfume that Beatrice wore.

⁷ AM REEVE, CAN CONFIRM⁸.

⁸ ALL HAIL.

⁹ It is possible, in retrospect, that Beatrice’s myriad mystical powers included the power of invisibility, and that

now. John wondered what the device could be, because he was not a genre savvy otter.

He watched with a slightly horrified expression as they catapulted away from the river, in a manner similar to the urban legends of the Salmon Blast. He wondered if Beatrice had heard the urban legends of the Salmon Blast. He thought about asking her for her opinion on the urban legends of the Salmon Blast, since he realised he would very much like to know it. But a look at her disdainful expression quickly silenced that thought. No Besblievers, or Salmon Blast Believers, here. It was curious how he could see her expression as she was carried away at high speed, but that was just one of her superpowers.

‘Oh yeah’, he thought. ‘Mind reading powers.’

‘Precisely’, she said. ‘I can hear what you just called me, by the way. And that too. And I really wish you would stop using the phrase “Salmon Blast” in sentences. It’s clunky.’

‘Oh shut up’, he thought, and she smiled. It seemed she did not care for the urban legends of the Salmon Blast. Which was her last mistake.

There was a blinding flash of light, during which some really rather fascinating things happened. Like, world-shattering stuff. Suffice to say that the Salmon Blast is more than mere legend, and that a kangaroo’s myriad superpowers can only get her so far. And by the time anyone could see again, or indeed think the words, ‘Deus ex Machina’, Beatrice had gone⁹.

Instead, once John’s tiny otter retinas had recovered, he noticed there was a very small woodlouse standing in the space behind holding a rocket launcher, which was painted red (like the blood of angry men). “For the revolution!” screamed the woodlouse, and fired. (Why the woodlouse was mixed up with the marsupials, no one knew. Perhaps the woodlouse was secretly Revolver Ocelot. Probably not though, that seemed pretty implausible.) Luckily, the woodlouse’s rocket launcher was woodlouse sized, so had little to no impact on the actual plot.

And they all lived happily ever after. Well, relatively so, all things considered¹⁰.

Beatrice’s disappearance owed to her forgetting to reappear again. But nobody knows for sure. Except Beatrice, presumably.

¹⁰ Well, Bertie and Steve were still homeless, John was out of a job, and Big Asymmetrical Data was still out there, casting its dark shadow over the entire civilised world, but you know, progress.

Unfortunately, 'ever after' turned out to be a surprisingly short period of time. In no time at all, in fact, John was called back in for 'one last job'. Man, that's a story all right...



The bard dragged his flagon away from the table, and waved it in the direction of the troll behind the bar. "Now, I've given y'all a tale o' two, who cares t' buy me a drink?" After all, bards do not consume solid foodstuffs.

(The Revolver Ocelot made a noise of the type many non-sentient mammals are known to make, and I realised this was not - in fact - my old nemesis, but merely a revolving ocelot! I looked around for the cunning rogue who had set this decoy, but it was too late. Still, there's always time for more nemeses, so I brained the critter with a rock, turned it onto its back, and set down to roast it under the midday sun. I had acquired rather a tan and was working on my melanomas when I realised I hadn't heard a sound for the last half hour. Looking up, the whole town had frozen. Shoppers stuck in place had acquired a ghostly pallor and buildings were translucent shimmers. The author had been distracted, and I had been relegated to a subplot. This would not do! Summoning my strength, I crashed against the parentheses, and jumped into the main plot line, aiming for the next column over, which looked like a pretty cosy landing spot ...

The dwarf reached inside its dungarees, and pulled forth a filthy handful of gold. Selecting the smallest nugget, it flicked it in the direction of the bar. The troll caught it with ease, and heaved a keg out from under the counter. After a single decisive swing with a broaching mallet, the smell of cheap mead began to intermingle with the stench already pervading the tavern.

Vashti hummed appreciatively - she still retained a fondness for honey-based products from her early days as a swarm of bees, before the fateful encounter with the Wizard of Crooked Tower. It was a good thing that this particular bard hadn't been around for that particular story. A good thing indeed. That would have opened up a whole other can of worms. Quite literally in the case of the ex-Wizard of Crooked

Tower. That was not something she cared to remember.

"I want to hear the story of the Wizard of Crooked Tower!" came a voice from the corner. A hush fell over the bar. Vashti's hum increased by an octave or two, becoming ever more menacing as it did so. The unfortunate pixie in the corner began to cower, wishing that she'd listened to her sisters and not ventured down the dark road to the tavern on this of all nights, but had waited at least until a Wednesday, when the threat of manatee takeover would be put off for another 6 days.

"Ah, the Wizard..." The Bard took a deep drink from the mug of mead, and smiled a crooked smile. "That's a story I can't say I know. But perhaps someone else here does?"

Now it was Vashti's turn to cringe, wishing that she'd had the pixie's forethought to find a corner to hide in. Everybeing in the tavern was staring at her. Including the shadow who nobeing speaks of¹¹.

Then a small voice came from the dirt floor.

"Aye, that's a story I know well."

All eyes turned from Vashti to a bare patch of floor just by the bar, where there emerged a small worm wearing - could it be? - a pointy hat with stars on it.

... and down. Main plot, here I come! I looked around, to establish the lay of the land.

"Human eyeballs are perfectly spherical," added the worm, its speech sounding odd, causing the nearby listeners to unconsciously flinch.

"Who are you?"

"The Non-Sequitur Worm, of course," said the worm, before looking worried about its brief foray into linearity, which as we all know is for wusses.

"Also, six out of ten hamsters can sing the French-national anthem," it added.

Vashti stared in horror. The Wizard had not only survived his wormly transformation, but gained the vast power of the Non-Sequiturs Beyond The Gates Of Meaning? Her horror only grew as the worm performed a perfect standing dive, disappearing once more into the layered muck that the tavern-goers

with it AND HOLY CRIPES IS THAT PAGE 36!? ABORT THIS FOOTNOTE, IT'S PAGE 36!

¹¹ Although the shadow who nobeing speaks of wishes that someday, somebeing will speak of it, notice it, be friends

called the floor. The tavern-goers turned back to their drinks; the Non-Sequitur Worm might know the story but was unlikely to tell it.

THE END

“Hi Vashti”, I called to the nearest inhabitant, checking her name from earlier in the tangle. It was only then that I noticed that none of the inhabitants of the tangle could actually hear me. Or see me. Or even notice that I existed at all. Bother. I had right justified myself. I also still didn’t have a name, as the writer was overly fond of the Western “Man with No Name” schtick. It was weird, though. I didn’t feel like a man. I felt like a shadow. A shadow, I was coming to realise, that no being would speak of - or even see.

Well this sucked. **SPEAK FOR YOURSELF.** Who was that? It can’t have been one of the beings in the tavern, that was for sure. I would have noticed them by now. And they wouldn’t have noticed me.

I had to get into the proper narrative. **HA HA HA I’D LIKE TO SEE YOU TRY!**

[What will happen next? Who IS the shadow? Will John ever find his missing sock? How much wood could a wood-chuck chuck? Find out on the next unedifying instalment of TANGLE-WRITING!]

Once Upon a CUSFS – Extras

Alternate titles:

The Incident

And Yet They Revolve: Is Wusses Linearity For Once Upon a Non-Linear Time

More Than Once Upon a Non-Linear Spacetime Event

Comments:

“Well that certainly happened.” – Danielle

“This is mad-libs on drugs.” – Avigail

“CROOOOOOOOM.” – Michael

“Well that went weirdly.” – Ben

Editor’s Notes:

This. This, folks. Just... this.

This is our second ‘weird chain’, and the most fascinating of the three. The whole thing took just over an hour, and, well I don’t know what I was expecting, but it was simultaneously not as weird as this and not as coherent. All I had to do (apart from joining in on the general madness) was copy it into here and change the page numbers referenced by the choose your own adventure part¹². And I’ll tell you this for nothing: we’re doing this again sometime.

Editor’s Emotes:



¹² Which included moving the bit that somebody really wanted on page 3 from page 3 of the story to page 3 of the

magazine. Which is why there’s a koala just before the Chairbeing’s Address.

Chainwriting: The Inquisitor's Snuffle-Pigs

Jake Choules, Kamile Rastene, Georgie Jones, Connor Willmington-Holmes, Jonny Phillips, Samos Ottewill-Soulsby, Matthew Chadwick, Isobel Sands, Kyle Sarrasin, Anonymous, Bryn Reinstadler

"You may have captured me here, Sabannion. You may have killed many of my friends, and corrupted many others to carry out your sordid schemes as unwilling minions. You may have scoured the plainlands of the South with your dreadful hordes and your vile magicks. But you will not win. The city of Galon-Ffyn has stood impregnable for ten thousand years: no evil exists that can topple it."

"Ah, such romanticism! Do you think I will simply dash my forces against the walls, like waves against a cliff, as so many have done before me? No, I have gained wisdom from their failures."

"How so?"

"Where those before have attacked the city at its strongest point, I shall attack at its weakest. By my immeasurable powers of magic, I have turned many hundreds of my soldiers into powerful burrowing creatures. They are travelling to the city as we speak, and soon they will wrench away its very foundations, and it will be rubble."

"No!"

"Yes! Say goodbye to all you hold dear, my friend, for it is as good as lost. The sky will be choked by the dust of the vanquished city! The earth will be churned brown by the boot-prints of my countless armies!! THE RIVERS OF THE SOUTH WILL RUN CRIMSON WITH THE BL--"

"Madam?"

"Yes?"

"Your ten minutes is up, madam. Would you like another five? Only three silver pieces."

"That was ten minutes? Umm, no, I'm all right, thank you. I don't want another five."

"As you wish. How about intellectual expression for one silver or social expression for just twenty copper pieces?"

"No, I'm fine for now..." – she bent towards her and started whispering – "Listen, any chance you have independent thoughts? It's been ages..."

"Oh no, you won't find it here, all the resources are depleted!" – the haggler exclaimed.

A supervisor bee whizzed through and then the haggler switched to whispering:

"I might not have any, but I know who does. Come tomorrow, I will put you in contact, alright?"

"Sure, that would be great! See you tomorrow" – our main character said and left determined she would never return to this place again – the haggler will probably give her in and then here would be trouble even though independent thoughts were never clearly banned.

She then returned home to finish her daily routine. Nothing interesting happened and no new thoughts were made. She just had dinner, dressed for bed, checked out the weather forecast to learn there would be rain the following day and went to sleep.

It snowed through the night and then it snowed in the morning.

Our main character opened her eyes. She wasn't sure what had woken her. It was 7.43, and waking hour was not till 7.50. She frowned at the light from her window. It seemed, brighter than normal. Slipping out of bed, she walked to the window and pulled aside the curtains. Her eyes widened. The street outside, along with all its stereotyped square grey houses running as far as the eye could see, was coated in a white blanket of snow and roofed with the golden blue of sunrise. All she could do was stand in awe at the unfamiliar beauty of a crisp wintery morning.

Just then the clock hit 7.45. It started to rain. I don't mean like a soft drizzle that gradually built up to full rain fall. I mean the type of rain that always fell in Block 546, and in all the blocks in quadrant 5. Thick heavy drops that started with the sound like the roar of a great engine, and pounded at the streets, driving anything else that detracted in the slightest way from the bleary grey neatness of the block, down the gutters of the road. She watched bleary eyed as the sky turned grey as the houses and the snow melted nearly instantaneously at the force of the rain, and by the time the dull persistent bleep of her alarm clock went off at 7.50, as it did in all the houses in block 546, and in all the blocks in quadrant 5, the snow was nowhere to be seen. For the first time in a long time, she had a new thought.

Sweet rapture stole her breath: a new thought was pleasure unbridled. In all but a moment her ecstasy drained, leaving a melee of fears. She feared being caught, what if someone had seen her at the window? She feared being taken, as so often happens to New Thinkers: the extraction process leaves thinkers as little more than a shell. It was an industry she was almost addicted to, but knew and rightly feared its darkest secrets.

She pushed the thought down, away, into a small corner of her unawaking mind. It simmered there for a while, but did not bubble up to the level of conscious thought until her defences were weak. Quotidian tasks passed by, the hours with them, and by the evening she returned home exhausted. The thought climbed out of its subliminal grave and haunted her dreaming.

6.22. Her eyes snapped open, as if she had not slept. There was not the haze of being roused from sleep, no fogginess to her thoughts. She had one thought, a thousand times over lying in bed, she had just one thought. But it could not innervate motion.

What she felt can at best be approximated to a civil war within the mind. The new thought tempted her, enticed her, but a visceral fear resonated within. Her resistance faltered after seventeen nights of early waking.

At 7.19 she disembarked her house in block 546 and waded into the clear morning air, snow crunching underneath.

A tiny hedgehog waved in greeting. "Well we're done here" it said, with what she suspected was a hedgehog smirk filling its tiny face. "You've been so helpful; we've been waiting some time to study the process of new thoughts emerging. And in such a strong thinker as you as well! You'll be glad to we'll make good use of your mind as..."

At this point the hedgehog stopped, mainly because it was quite clear that our main character had not been listening for some time. 'Hedgehogs? The all-feared inquisition use tiny cute hedgehogs?' she finally uttered.

'That's what's most important here is it? Now we've seen you're capable of independent thought, you'll have to come with us, woman-B546-173' And come with the hedgehog she did. You see, there never was any point defying the Inquisition. No-one quite knew why – defying their commands just wasn't the done thing.

The facility was in quadrant 3, Block 100. Very few people went more than 20 blocks from their homes—each block was designed to provide all facilities for orderly and efficient living. To explore further was to come perilously close to independent thought, and very few could do that anymore. It just wasn't how the world was designed to work. So for a New Thinker, this new exploration was a novelty. An exhilarating, terrifying novelty.

It was only natural that new thoughts should be sold furtively around block corners. Some new thoughts make the user want to sit down and quietly enjoy the show, while others compel their takers to tell everyone around them what is on their mind. It is also extremely difficult to stop at one. The first thought inevitably serves as a gateway concept, with harder notions soon to follow.

Our protagonist was experiencing a sudden rush of thoughts although sadly it must be reported that they were not all entirely happy.

She and the hedgehog entered the facility. Behind the reception counter sat another hedgehog, who was staring at a wall. 'Morning', said the first hedgehog, 'how's the husband?'

'Morning' came the reply, 'not good. We've run out of peanut butter and he's been prickly all day'. Hedgehog no. 1 made sympathetic noises while filling out an entry in the book on the counter. The second hedgehog continued 'honestly, some days I just want to roll up into a ball and wait for everyone to go away'.

'Don't we all', answered hedgehog a, 'now, could I trouble you for the forms please?'

While the second hedgehog trundled into the back room to find the files, the first hedgehog turned to our protagonist and said in a confiding tone 'of course in the old days there were none of these forms and regulations. An agent had to use their instinct and initiative'. The hedgehog shuddered. 'Terrible days they were. We only had one committee meeting a day!'

'Can I just ask?' started the protagonist 'seeing as you're going to be taking my thoughts from me anyway, I'd just like to know who the Inquisition is? I've always followed them loyally, even when the new thoughts started to appear I continued to fill my quota and work for the betterment of the society. But now I find I have to know who it is I've always have and always will work for and why my new thought is such a potential threat to the society'.

The hedgehog now regarded our protagonist with a curious look upon its little snout¹. 'In answer to the first question, I don't rightly know' they replied. 'I'm only a mere street-hog, I sit on the block subcommittee, fill in the relevant forms and report on any aberrations in the society – such as yourself. From each block subcommittee a hog is then nominated to represent that block at the district committee and so on up the chain to the Inquisition themselves. Only the most hard working and honourable of hogs ever get to sit at the table with the hallowed Inquisition. I will likely never make that grade but if I bring in a few more like you then I'm well on my way to a seat at the district council. As for the second question, the threat you pose is not just that you had a new thought, but the nature of the thought you had. We punish all who have a new thought just in case, but in your case it is a matter of great importance that the thought never reaches the rest of the society'.

Our protagonist turned that over in her head as she followed him down a pleasant, brightly-lit corridor. They passed office doors and occasionally skirted open-plan workspaces. All the furniture was hedgehog sized, although the ceilings and doors were tall enough for humans. They only ever passed through here. Hogs passing with stacks of paperwork gave her the briefest of passing glances, although some seemed to give encouraging snuffles at the hog she was following. Maybe he'll get promoted soon, she thought happily, he's good at his job. The new thought twitched and coiled, folding this addition into itself.

"Will it hurt?" she asked idly, as they at last entered a room with a human-sized piece of furniture. It was a chair such as you might sit in at the dentist, with various dangling straps. There was no question of her not sitting in it and strapping herself in.

"Maybe," said the hog, heading to a hedgehog sized Perspex shield and control panel in one corner of the room, "People often scream a bit. But by the nature of the thing, you won't remember it afterwards. So it doesn't really matter. You'll be okay."

"And my thought? What will you do with it?"

"Oh, it'll be sent to the research division. I don't know anything about that. They'll learn what they can from it and then destroy it, I expect. This," he waved a tiny paw at the room, "is as far as I go."

The new thought, keenly aware of its imminent doom, pushed itself to the fore, smashing its way through layers of established routines in B546-173's head.

Even as B546-173 waited, the new thought grew. And the new thought was grue. And as it grew, it did sleep furiously, imprinting itself on the fabric of the mind, folding back and over and expressing a most complex and original design, well beyond bilateral symmetry, beyond even the maunderings of Mandelbrot. The new grue thought blot, in its utter novelty, expanded beyond B546-173's long-stymied ken, beyond even the scope of her ossified language to articulate.

The room, meanwhile, had begun its cleansing work. No chrome apparatus descended from unknown heights, no nefarious, besmocked surgeon administered a soporific hypodermic. B546-173 merely sat, strapped to the plain chair, alone, the emphatically un-scurrilous omnivore having scurried off eight minutes prior. Merely sat, as the monotony of the room, the staid, blank, rectilinear magnitude began to reorder B546-173. The regimented manner of her daily life, the order most onerous instilled in her from her first moment harmonised with the sober space. Deep chords - blocky triads, forceful fifths, massy eighths - were struck in B546-173's recumbent form. As she shuddered, her body was set to rights – bottom up, the vibrations shook her back into form.

It did, that is, until it reached her head, where the new grue thought blot lay. Upon contact, the scene exploded into a million quintillion scintillating colours. The stolid logic of the room could not overcome, could not box, the thought – the planned nature was whelmed, the straight lines were curved. And off dropped her confining denominator. For the first time in her life, our protagonist discovered her True Name.

"What do you mean?"

Whispers, high-pitched and squeaky. Hedgehogs. B546-173 turned her head slightly. She was lying on something smooth and cold – metal? – and the hedgehogs huddled in one corner of the blindingly

¹ I'm somewhat anthropomorphising here, if I'm honest I struggle when it comes to determining the exact emotions

of hedgehogs, they have such damn cryptic expressions. Probably what makes them excellent inquisitors.

white room. One glanced her way with an expression that might have been concern².

“Nothing. I ran the machine twice. It’s gone.”

“But how can it be *gone*?”

“The machine says it is.”

One of the hedgehogs reached up to pull on its ears with its tiny paws. “*This isn’t in the manual!*”

“Shh!” the other one hissed, pointing toward B546-173. “She’s awake.”

Their voices dropped, and she could no longer make out what they were saying. Only a quiet susurrus. She turned her head away again, and looked at the blank white ceiling. There were things going on inside her head – pictures, images, Thoughts. They burst across the inside of her mind like tiny fireworks.

She didn’t know how much time had passed, but she didn’t care. Her thoughts had kept her company, each one a shuddering joy rippling through her body in search of release. But now...

Two hedgehogs – different hedgehogs, she thought, though it was hard to really tell them apart – were undoing the straps that bound her wrists to the table.

“Get up,” the one on her left said brusquely.

She pushed herself up on her elbows. “Why?”

The one on her right shivered. “*He* wants to see you.”

“Who?”

They both looked at her then, beady eyes dark and frightened³. They shared a glance. “The High Inquisitor.”

The following exchange was a complicated one. First the street-hogs who had initially surrounded her had to hand her over to the hog that represented her block, who then had a lengthy conversation with a secretarial hog about which district hog had the proper permissions to pass her up the chain, at which point she was shuffled between several more floors, departments, and pairs of groundhog paws until at last she found herself at the final door.

Escorting her was an older groundhog, silver filling in near his whiskers, his mouth drooping a bit with age.

² Or might not have been. Hedgehog expressions are, as we have said, rather inscrutable.

³ Probably.

His eyes still glittered with intelligence⁴. After he knocked at the door, they heard a barely-audible voice from within: “Enter, human. Hog, you may go.”

The older hog bowed stiffly at the still-closed door, then departed. Slowly, our protagonist turned the doorknob and opened the door. The inside of the office looked rather plain for that of the High Inquisitor; it was all shabby carpet, shabby curtains, and a shabby wooden desk in the left corner. But behind the desk was sitting... well, no one. The entire office was completely empty save for some objects on the desk.

And suddenly, a sound:

“Enter, human. Hog, you may go.”

There was a cassette player on the desk, the play button taped down. Our protagonist peeled off the tape and pressed the stop button gently, and listened as the cassette stopped reeling through the player. Next to the player was a letter:

Congrats on managing to dissolve that pesky brain chip without being driven insane. Now you know your True Name; guard it well.

But as you will soon learn, insanity lies not only behind, but ahead.

Tag, you’re it!

⁴ That or he was on the verge of tears, and in either case she didn’t want to risk upsetting him.

The Inquisitor's Snuffle-Pigs – Extras

Editor's Notes:

Hedgehogs.

Editor's Emotes:



Non-Linear Chainwriting: Is That An Apocalypse In Your Alley Or Is It Just New Year's Eve?

Greg Weir, Tristan Roberts, Rory Hennell-James, Alastair Haig, Danielle Saunders, Curtis Reubens, Isobel Sands, Sparta, Mark Johnson, Michael French, Ed Heaney, Jake Choules

It was only when the quiet hum of the warding circles stopped that Anna realised she found it reassuring. When she started working at the Paracelsian Institute for the Occult's Department¹ of Experimental Theurgy², she'd found the constant noise a distraction but, after a few months and several narrowly averted apocalypses, she had grown to appreciate the sound and the protection the circles provided.

"Hey Sophie!" Anna called into the corridor, "Did you do something with the wards? Sounds like they went out."

"No!" came the reply, "Did you?"

"I'm just looking at data, the only controls I've touched are the lights."

"Dammit. You turn everything off, I'll check the lab."

She quickly shut down as many of the experiments as she could from her desk. Paused. Given the circumstances, it was worth taking precautions. She pulled a post-it off the block beside her monitor and sketched a rough, freehand circle, filling it with something that looked like the web of a dreamcatcher. The exact shape of the circle wasn't important; it just gave the ward something to bind to. That way she would have at least a few seconds grace to save herself from being crushed, incinerated or from any of the other methods people used to vacate their jobs.³

¹ The institute was actually founded some 125 years after the death of Paracelsus himself on Walpurgis Night by a poor mystic whose name and deeds have been lost to the mists of time. Paracelsus had, in fact, founded his own institution: the Hohenheim School for Astrological Philosophy but, despite his fame, it had already faded into obscurity barely five years after his death.

² The Department of Experimental Theurgy was much younger and modelled itself on the Cavendish Laboratory, which was then 25 years old.

³ Like most of the department, Anna was hoping for incineration. Candles were good, she thought, so imitating them can't be a bad way to go. Also, aside from the smell, it wouldn't bother Sophie too much. There was a dustpan and brush kept especially for this turn of events.

It was times like these that made her envious of Sophie for being naturally prevented. Her colleague was entirely immune to theurgy, and could wander carefree amongst all the hazards of the department. On the other hand, Sophie's prevention rendered her unable to perform even the simplest of theurgic experiments, and she had long resigned herself to a career as a lab assistant. Besides, Anna found it impossible to stay piqued at her charming companion for long.

It took a long minute to write out the ward, but it was worth it to have the gently glowing piece of paper in her pocket as she headed down the corridor. It was a simple circle, and she hadn't wanted to spend time giving it more than the barest minimum amount of power, but it was at least comforting.

Scrape. The hairs on the back of her neck rose. She was intimately familiar with the noises Sophie made, and they weren't usually the kind that made your blood curdle. Nobody else should be here this late - *she* shouldn't be here this late. Analysing results wasn't her favourite way to spend her New Year's but she had nothing better to do. And there was always the chance she'd get lucky with Sophie come midnight.

Something must have gotten out; surely no-one would have been foolish enough to break into an occult research facility on the eve of the new millennium. Unless they thought the new millennium had already dawned in 2000. Did no one remember there wasn't a 0 A.D.⁴?

She scanned each hallway she passed, hunting for anything amiss. The door to the primary lab was open, just a crack. It took several nervous seconds to hurry over to it. She nudged it open.

Sophie faced away from her, toward the β -aural smiton detector – one of the machines Anna couldn't shut down from her desk. She walked over to Sophie, seeing nothing unusual with the machine, then something caught her eye behind it.

No object. Just a shadow cast by nothing onto the wall, like the charred after-image of a nuclear blast. Arms spread wide above the head, legs together, their

shape blurring at the bottom. Writing, a symbol, on the wall. Or, no -

For half a second, a figure stood there - then vanished in a flash of light.

Anna jumped and heard Sophie gasp beside her. She wondered, for a moment, whether it was a coincidence – that the thing had vanished just as she'd started realising what she should be looking for. Whether it was hiding. She looked again at the centre of the rig, blinking. The figure was back, but then, it wasn't. The tiny ward in Anna's pocket burned red-hot.

The figure flickered in and out, disappearing the moment Anna's eyes noticed it. And even as she tried to track it, she could see that it was moving; slipping forward, off the wall where it had first been superimposed, onto the smiton detector itself, seeping tar-like into the machine's central incantation unit...

One last, largest, flash of white. And then it was gone, and something else was in its place.

The rig was open, the incantation's solid case unscrewed. Looking closer, she saw a shape she'd seen in schematic a thousand times, in reality never. A theurgic booster.

Or a god-machine, a quantum supercomputer, a thaumic exponentiator – whatever you wanted to call it. One of those things that just does not exist, except in the wistful daydreams of theoretical mages.

As the spots cleared from her vision she noticed her hand was in Sophie's. She left it there. With her other hand, she pulled out her little ward. The ink had scorched off, leaving just a faint whitish discolouration. As they watched, the paper crumbled into dust.

"Just as well the other ones were already extinguished," Sophie said.

"Yes. Although, if it's all the same to you, I'd quite like to make some more."

"Agreed."

beginning of their writings until the tradition was dropped for reasons since lost to the sands of time.

⁴ Anna was wrong on this occasion. There WAS a 0 A.D., but due to a clerical error it only occupied the 92 minutes before 1 A.D. took hold. Emulating this, several apocryphal texts of the time featured a brief '*Footnote 0*' before the

* * *

Anna watched Sophie touring the office, drawing more circles on the walls with whiteboard markers. She would go round and add the wards when she was done; Sophie was not feeling up for talking to anyone right now, and she couldn't ward, but she could at least draw. Anna walked over to the first of the circles Sophie had sketched. Focusing, Anna reached for a spell that would prevent the room and all its occupants. But it wasn't there; or rather it was much harder to reach than usual. Anna assumed it was just that she was still shaken after the strange figure and the bright flash of light. That would also explain the murmuring voice in the back of her head. Finally, she managed to cast a ward, though a much simpler one than had been originally intended, Anna turned around to see Sophie with a phone pressed to her ear.

"I'm calling for backup." Sophie said. "Would you prefer to talk to them? You have a better idea about what's going on here."

"I really don't." Anna replied, but took the phone anyway. Sophie didn't like talking to people.⁵ People who weren't Anna, anyway.

"Don't do yourself down," Sophie said, with the tiniest, weariest hint of a smile. A welcome crack in the understandably stony exterior she had adopted in the face of recent events.

The on-hold lift music was driving Anna slowly mad. It was not exactly a fitting soundtrack. She tried to distract herself with the reassuring sight of Sophie bustling around the room, but the hollow jingling kept dragging her out of her daydreams. Finally, there was a connecting click. Her hand shook as she pressed the phone to her ear. "You've reached the Metropolitan Police Arcane Crime Division. What is the nature of your anomaly?"

"Hello, this is the DET at Paracelsian..."

"We'll send someone right over."

"But I haven't told you..."

click

Damn Arkie bureaucrats – so suspicious of magic they wouldn't even carry on a telephone conversation with a theurge for any longer than they thought they could

get away with. Still, it gave her a bit more time to think of a good explanation for whatever had just happened.

* * *

By the time DAI Hughes arrived, it had become clear to Anna that, in fact, there was no good explanation for whatever had just happened.

"Someone's trying to talk to angels."

The detective leaned on the wall, frown cooling the already-chilly office another degree. "What gets a superspatial magic postdoc calling them angels, anyway?"

Anna had to choke back a laugh. "You've not met many academic thaumaturges, have you?"

"And you have? I thought you theurges looked down on them?"

Sophie came back into the office with mugs of steaming tea and nearly spilt them as she heard the detective's question. Recovering, she passed them round. Milk and two sugars for Hughes, just milk for herself and nothing for Anna, but brewed an extra minute just the way her colleague liked it.

She hooked a thumb at the back of the door. Hughes peered at the poster there - not the radiation hazard symbol the first glance would suggest, but one lengthened, distorted; the impression of body, head and wings reinforced.

"So, I only know the basics. Entities of unimaginable power, and other rumours. Is there anything you can tell me in terms I'll understand?"

Anna leaned back against a table. "Unimaginable is correct, but not for being supreme, mostly for being simply incomprehensible to us. We struggle with six dimensions for even our weirdest experiments, angels inhabit about thirty at any one time, and which thirty isn't remotely fixed. We think. I mean, bearing in mind we only really think they're real because it kinda fits some theories and we hadn't found any evidence they weren't, all we know is extremely speculative. They can do a lot of weird things, presumably, but they're not all-powerful. Probably.

"They tend to come closer into our vicinity in high-

⁵ Not that Anna blamed her. Nobody with an inch of sense would actually like interacting with *people*.

radiation events, but whether that's cause or effect, we don't know. We're fairly sure any story that involves 'singing' with them is theurgically radioactive, but we have no idea what that entails, just that it's a term often used in the literature. Oh, and apparently they can make theurgic boosters, because well, that's one there. I could level three cities with that thing. Um, I won't. But I could."

"And you're just... leaving it there?"

"Two and a half cities, then, if it makes you feel better," said Anna, the tiniest bit snappily. "If they were large-ish cities." She took a deep breath, allowing herself to cool off a bit. "But, no matter how powerful it may be, I'm inclined to think that this is a by-product, not a focus; it was created here because our little machines – all properly warded, as you can see – just got too close to the actual epicentre. I think we need to search the local area. Somewhere around here there's an angel."

"Don't angels normally do the whole glorious-halo-manifestation schtick? Wouldn't it be pretty damn obvious if there were an angel anywhere nearby?⁶"

"Usually." Anna chose not to go into technical details. "But – which worries me the more – what if it doesn't want to be found?"

"Is it even possible to have... rogue angels? Freelance commando angels?"

"I'm pretty sure it's possible to have an angel anything, or at least an angel anything of which we can possibly conceive."

"We'd better get searching then."

* * *

They found the angel just when they were beginning to think they would never find one. *Just* when. The timing was frankly uncanny. Anna was loath to attribute a sense of theatricality to arcane entities of high dimensionality, but...

⁶ Hughes is placing too much weight on the popular impression of angels, gained from such standard reference texts as the Christian Bible. Angels do indeed tend to be very clear about their presence but, not being restricted to the five human senses, sometimes misjudge – whether wilfully or otherwise is not known – the human senses most applicable to communication; the Institute held records of

«WE WILL SING» – a voice like the tolling of a million bells in perfect discord. «WE WILL SING, AND ALL WILL SING WITH US».

The voice echoed across their thoughts, booming its way into every nook and cranny it could find, and filling them with exactly what they wanted to hear.

"A little bit too dramatic, don't you think?" shouted Sophie. Buffeted backwards by the voice, the three of them were still standing mere paces from the entrance to the alleyway. Glancing backwards, Anna could see revellers trundling between pubs, families wandering up driveways towards parties. Normal people going about their normal New Year's business, seemingly unaware of the shouting match with arcane forces in progress mere metres away.

Not unaware for much longer, if they didn't figure this out. Otherwise, by midnight, they'd all be singing with the angels.

The voice seemed to have said all it wanted, for now. A little further down the alleyway, a little further from the lights of the road.

The wheels hung there, turning and staring; each within another, the flames licking the spokes made it impossible for Anna to tell how many wheels the being⁷ comprised. A message burned into the ground. And beneath that, in bold type - '~~DO NOT~~ BE AFRAID.'

"...for God is no longer with us," muttered the detective, crossing himself.

'You didn't strike me as a very superstitious person,' said Sophie shakily, her eyes not moving from the wheels.

"In this line of work, it pays to take precautions." With a sheepish grin, he pulled a cross from inside his collar. "I even wear this most days. My mother would be turning in her grave."

Suddenly, the wheels were gone. There was no transition.

angelic contact conducted only through modulations in the nuances of a foul, sulphurous smell.

⁷ If Anna had been more diligent in an Introduction to the Taxonomy of Superspatial Species, she would have recognised it as one of the Ophanim and known that there were exactly 3.1415926535897932384626433832795... wheels, all of which were perpendicular.

Anna was frowning at the wall, lost in thought.

“What is it?”

“We need to ward, well, everyone. Every theurge, anyway. If I understood it correctly, when it starts, every theurge will join the song, and that will power their spell. If I can even call it a spell. I think I know of a ward powerful enough to do it – though, it won’t ever have been tried against an angel, I assume. And I’ll need that booster to have even nearly enough power, thanks to what that first angel did to me in the lab.”

The departmental labs were some miles away, and the three of them were already exhausted with walking, so eventually Hughes, with some grumbling, called in a runner from the Met. Anna, pocketing the booster as soon as it arrived, strode down the alley.

“This is the point, I’m sure of it. This is where it’ll start.” They had reached the end of the alleyway, and crouched down in the shelter of a tumble-down pawn shop. A flickering display in the window showed a large gathering of people; some new year’s celebration elsewhere in the city. The image had a hollow quality, as if something was sucking the life out of it.

Hughes broke the silence with a hiss, his fear palpable. “I don’t want to be the epicentre of a rapidly-expanding cloud of smitons.⁸”

The streetlights flickered, casting dancing shadows on the alley walls. Anna’s face was pale, drawn, determined. She took a deep breath, practising for the hundredth time the gestures of the spell she was about to cast.

“Ready?” she asked, although she already knew the answer. Sophie and Hughes, nodded silent. She began to cast.

Her fingers moved artfully, leaving ever-growing paths of arcane light behind them as the energy of the spell grew. Hughes gazed at it with fascination, Sophie with admiration; Anna saw nothing of this, focussed as she was entirely on the spell. The booster began to glow in her pocket. She traced the symbols in the air around her, each one precisely positioned, and then...

It was in her head it was in her head oh God it had her oh Lord Above it was in her thoughts-

She took a couple of steps backwards as the shock of the angel’s presence jolted her partway out of the spell; the lights around her began to fade and die. “Oh no you don’t,” she muttered, spinning rapidly to fill the gaps in the breaking runes she’d drawn, repairing the spell until...

She was ready for it this time it hit her hard but she fought it, fought the angel every step of the way, they tumbled together through a shared mindscape and her thoughts hurt but its thoughts were hers now, some of them, if she could just regain control-

The booster cracked.

Snapping smashing severing shattering the world tears apart-

The spell imploded. Anna fell to her knees, utterly drained. “We can’t beat it. We just... we just can’t.”

Warm hands settled on her shoulders, bringing with them the comforting smell of Sophie and a little trickle of theurgic power. For a moment she felt safe. Then she remembered that Sophie was prevented. She should have been unable to give power. The backfiring ward must have done something, and at the worst possible time.

Hughes let out a low cry. Where it should have fallen silent it instead drew out, deepened. Split, and harmonised with itself. Within seconds, Hughes sang himself out to the angel.

Anna could feel it. A tickle, at the back of her mind and the back of her throat. She fought against it with everything she had left. Realised too late that she wasn’t the only target. Sophie leaned forward, eyes closed and lips slightly parted. She was going to sing. Anna did the only thing she could. She stopped the music with a kiss.

“3!” cheered the crowd on the monitor. “2! 1!”

Sophie pulled her in tight, even as they both felt the first notes building in their throats.

Then everything went white.

⁸ Obviously they’d end up far smaller than smitons, but Anna didn’t want to correct him.

Is That An Apocalypse In Your Alley Or Is It Just New Year's Eve? – Extras

Alternate Titles:

~~Do Not Be Afraid~~

Revelations

I'm Loving Sophie Instead

Quantum Angelus

The Angelic Choir¹

Comments:

“As the chain starter, it's really interesting to see that some lines I thought were fairly obviously going to get padded in between are still together, and something I intended as one thread got almost a quarter of the word count between its two sentences. That's kind of awesome. Massive props to the other writers for exalting the chain into something super cool.” – Greg

“I liked this a lot. It was an interesting writing experience and I think we produced quite a good story in the end. I'm also pleased that CUSFS managed to convert my shoe horned-in love interest into an actual character.” – Rory

Editor's Notes:

And so we come to the third and final 'weird chain' in this issue, and I'm ready to call this one a success. It's weird, it's wonderful, and non-linear writing (and I suspect in particular the fact that the first and last lines were both fixed from the start) gives it a very great deal of cohesion. Plus, you know, apocalypse.

Oh, and if you're interested in how this evolved over twelve writers, the CUSFS website should (hopefully) shortly have upon it a document showing its evolution. Watch that space.

Editor's Emotes:



Chainwriting: Ten Things I Hate About Heists

Jonny Phillips, Tom Ruddle, Nakul Khanna, Bettina Juszak, Adam Jermyn, Marlene Fricke, Sarah Binney, Matthew Horton, Michael French, Ed Heaney, Megan Griffiths, Danielle Saunders

Who knew robbing convoys could be this boring? Just once I'd like some laser beams, or some of those cool teleporting sharks you see in the movies. Now that would be awesome! But no, once more it's just 3 bored security guards watching *The Return of Darth Binks...* again. Literally, it's the same damn movie every night since I started following these guys. Well, I suppose I should just get the diamond and go.

I should probably explain a few things. Basically, I'm a thief. If you want anything from genetically modified piranhas (strip your enemies to the bone in 4.7 seconds!) to old timey artifacts, I'm your man. Or, you know, the biggest diamond found since... well... ever. The rumor is someone got it off Earth; I mean hats off to the guy for bravery, but the plague is really not a pretty way to go. Hope 24 hours with that diamond was worth it and all.

So, how am I going to get the diamond, you ask? Well – feel free to watch. Maybe you'll even learn something. First, approach the targets:

“Hey guys! What you doing out here in the desert?”

“Sod off mate. We don't want your type here.”

Well that's just rude. I mean I'm going to kill these guys anyway, but they still really should mind their manners. It's what keeps us civilised after all. “What ya watching?” I ask. Just slowly enough for me to get nice and close. And that's when I found out why these 3 half asleep guys had been entrusted with the most valuable object this side of Titan.

It was just there...on the monitors. I mean, diamonds are shiny and all, but this is the sort of thing that'd propel me into the history holovids. I'd never been that into being famous (sneaking into highly guarded vaults is a lot harder when the guards keep wanting autographs), but you know, being able to get a table at a nice restaurant can't be that bad. That's what famous people do, right?

¹ OF DOOOOOOOM!

The guards' voices snapped me out of my daydream, ruining the moment when I induct LeBron James into the Basketball Hall of Fame. “*The Return of Darth Binks*”, they say as one, while I steel myself for what I'm about to say. “Oh wow, what a great movie! You'll think I'm joking but I think after a few viewings you really get into the mindset of the Commerce Guild”. I silently apologise to my college-age self. There's your second lesson – say anything to integrate yourself with the targets.

“What are you, an idiot? This is the worst movie ever. We're only watching it because Corporate won't give us any budget to buy any new films in and bringing our own in is a 'breach of security'”, he barked, using air quotes to express disdain he clearly felt for what's pretty much Cyber-Security 101. Bugger, I thought. If I backtrack from that now, that's gonna be the end of the conversation and they'll go back to wondering what I'm doing here. I can't even say it's a joke because I already used the line “You'll think I'm joking”. Nothing else for it. I've got to double down.

“No, seriously. Let me show you why it's actually a great film,” I say as I wedge myself into the security booth. Don't copy this next bit.

Not because it isn't awesome, but because you'll mess it up. I've been doing this for 20 years; most likely before you were even born. At this point, *you* should probably back off, apologise and let the contract go to somebody else.

Or actually, you should probably do that *before* you whip out a laser cutter and a tube of numbing adhesive gel, sever three thumbs from three heavily armed guards, seal the wounds and arm and drop a lethal nerve grenade attached to your ear, all while said guards are staring incredulously at the guy who apparently *likes* Episode XVIII (which is odd, since it's actually the highest grossing film that the Exxon-Disney Corporation has ever released).

The result of which was that, when the guards finally clocked that their friend's air quotes had had about 90% as many fingers as expected, I was sitting in a security booth, holding the authentication mechanism that would lower the protective barrier around the diamond, attaching each thumb to its reader, pressing “confirm”, and steeling for...

BANG

The combination of the Steelium security booth and my blast armour (I did mention that you should bring some, right?) kept me from being instantly vapourised like those poor reluctant fans of the Dark Lord of the MeesaSith, and instead propelled me roughly ten metres northwest, just about in range to activate my tractor gloves, grab the flying diamond, do a neat double somersault and land on the tips of my toes. I like to imagine that the three severed thumbs had a chance to turn upwards before being obliterated.

So, supposing you have an octarine-belt in neo-Wing-Chun and roughly 10 billion credits to spend on all of the equipment I just described, you're safely holding the diamond and you can get ready for the *difficult* bit.

The difficult bit sounds easy in theory.

Step one: run away with your stolen goods while three very pissed security guards chase after you because a) you stole their diamond (which they're probably going to get horribly executed for losing or some such shit, there're reasons I work on the slightly shadier side of the law, okay) and b) you were an idiot who claimed to like *The Return of Darth Binks*.

Step two: reach your getaway vehicle safely and leave your pursuers in a cloud of dust complemented by a parting shot of smug laughter.

See? Easy. Especially if you had remembered to get the fastest, most illegal vehicle possible (in my case a Skyhog model that could outrun most commercial low altitude flyers) and left its engine running. As the consummate professional that I am, I had in fact done both of those things, but in order to look less like a would-be thief and more like an only-reasonably-suspicious vagabond I had also left my Skyhog parked behind the nearest dune, safely out of sight.

Which brings me neatly back to why step one is the *difficult* bit. Running through sand is a drag at the best of times (no really, it is – have you ever tried running a marathon through a desert? Word of advice: don't), but doing it while wearing heavy-duty blast armour and being chased by three very angry security guards who really should've died in the explosion yet had somehow avoided kicking the bucket (suspicious! red warning sirens blaring!) is no one's idea of a fun time. Not even mine.

I quickly found out precisely *why* said angry guards didn't immediately die in the explosion, or rather why

they appeared not to die in the explosion. You see, the first three who chased after me had their thumbs. While I was pondering this, a drone came by and dropped three more off, looking exactly like the first set. Clever: why hire an army of guards, looking all conspicuous, when you can hire three and flash-clone them whenever you need more? The best, or should I say the worst, part is that the whole process can be automated and triggered by a pain-detecting implant, arranged for precisely the sort of manoeuvre I just pulled. I've read about this sort of thing, but it's massively illegal outside of military installations. What is it they said? You live and you learn? Assuming you live...

I reached for my pistol. Three quick shots and the drone went down. Not bad shooting on the run, and now at least they've got a limited supply of bodies. Fifteen to one ain't bad, especially when it's really three to one five times over. That's the thing about clones: they're all the same. If you can get one on its own and beat it, you can just do the same thing again and again. Boring.

With all that said, I should probably focus on running, as there are now fifteen guards chasing me and they seem intent on staying together. What really got me worried was when one of them reached inside his uniform and took out a gun while the rest followed suit. I knew that model and my stomach churned just thinking about how that lock had looked when I had been done with it on my last job. Why did I have to wish for lasers again? And why was the nearest dune suddenly so far away? Teleporting sharks might have come in handy now.

Three to one five times over is not that boring anymore when all of them are firing lasers at you. I managed to dodge most of them (try that in heavy-duty blast armour! Fun fact: It doesn't really help your agility) and the rest were held off by the blast armour (hey, I hadn't said it was *totally* useless). The good thing about the laser guns was that they had a cool down phase; I had also learned that on my last job and got a nice bunch of burn scars to prove it.

A few shots and the first three guards were left in the dust. Ha, that's what you get for staying together! Sadly, there were still twelve of them chasing me, a fact which was beginning to bother me. Alright, if they preferred it the hard way, so be it.

Just for your information, this bit is also something you should not do at home – or anywhere else, for that matter. It might take off your leg, that of your neighbour, as well as the head of your neighbour's cyborg cat and leave a general wave of destruction in its wake. Have I also mentioned that it causes uncontrollable itching? No? Oh well, just a minor side effect. At least I don't think the itching explained the worried looks on the guards' faces when they saw what I had coming for them. What they had coming for me, however, was easy enough to guess: another round of lasers.

A red beam of death flashed over my shoulder and barrelled into the dune in front of me, fusing sand into a glass rosette. How pretty, I thought distractedly as I pulled the sphere from my back and twisted it into the "alert" position. More laser beams fell around me but I ran in a random zigzag and they all fired into the sand, harmless. Suddenly I stopped and turned, holding the sphere in one hand. One of the guards did, to his credit, stop half a second before I lobbed it in their general direction to shout – "Hey, wait, isn't that a – "

Zhuuuuum went the sphere as it flew through the air; at first it seemed to soar on an elegant parabola, orange lights flickering around its midriff, but then it accelerated, homing on the nearest guard, who hardly had time to drop his blaster and yell "FUUUUUUUU" before it barrelled directly through his chest, leaving a perfectly round cauterized hole and zooming away before he'd even hit the ground.

Tempted as I was to stand and watch – hey, when else do you get to watch a clever grenade do its job? – I was by this point running directly away from the carnage. (Fun fact: You do NOT want to be around when that thing runs out of energy and dies. Those things go out with a *bang*.) My Skyhog was just a few hundred metres away over the next dune; all I had to do was reach it in one piece.

I heard a series of dull thuds behind me as the grenade did its job, punching holes in bad guys like some kind of deranged sentient cannonball. At least, that's what I assumed it was doing, because I wasn't sticking around. I crested the sand dune just as the grenade ran out of power, and vaulted to safety as the ensuing detonation sent a ring of plasma cutting through the air with a deep resonant *THUMP*. I felt the heat on my back as the plasma sliced through the sand, leaving deep gauges in the terrain and kicking

up enough sand to generously coat my currently prone body.

I rolled over onto my back, and attempted to wipe the sand from eyes. "Well, that was fun," I declared to no one in particular. "Let's never do that again." Panting, I hoisted myself to my feet and turned to survey the damage. Not particularly enjoying the view, I decided to just keep on turning the full three-hundred and sixty degrees in order to bring the much more welcome sight of my Skyhog into view. Resting at the foot of the dune about two-hundred paces away, that hunk of rusted metal and cracked paint never looked more beautiful.

Slowly, I began to shuffle and slide my way down the steep incline, wary of the thought that more clones were likely already on their way, not to mention a wide variety of desert creatures that might be drawn by loud explosions --

Fwoom! With a great rushing noise, a large and stereotyped rotating ring of cavernous jaws burst out of the sand, swallowing my really-rather-expensive Skyhog. This probably copyrighted worm-like neck was followed by a far less stereotypical set of legs, until the full majesty of a Sand-Crom burst forth. Like a Chaurus with a worm's head, only the size of skyscrapers and with many more (pleasingly concentric) teeth, and did I mention that Skyhog was rather expensive? And despite being bulletproof, sandproof, insuranceproof, it **wasn't** stomach-acid-proof. That's my bad -- when weighing up which optional extras to get, I decided that the stereo was more important. Shows what I know. And besides, that stereo warps any media into a *Best of Queen* album if left for too long.

"CROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM."

Oh, right, the onomatopoeic monstrosity that just ate my ride.

Well, you have to work with the tools you've got. I've still got half of my toys, and right when I need to escape along comes a creature that can outrun almost anything, even running on sand. I mean, a Skyhog is faster, but the Crom cheated and caught it when it wasn't moving. Sprinting towards the creature, my hand darted into a pocket, and threw a small copper sphere in its general direction.

... You didn't think I was going to ride it or something, did you? That would be ridiculous. Sure, it would be

fun for a while, but I don't think it would be worth ending up in its nest. Maybe I'd be surrounded by ravening babies. Maybe I'd be surrounded by ravening adults. I haven't come up with a good "It's a bit like..." joke for that yet; come up with one of your own. Something political, maybe.

No, I needed to avoid all the inevitable scans and searches; that little toy was intended to make the Crom look rather more like me to long-range detectors than I did. It wouldn't keep anyone fooled for long, but it would keep them looking a long way away from me for a little while.

Now for my other ticket out. Ask someone about the desert, and they'll picture the Crows and little else. That shows that people don't think things through. Those are enormous predators; they've got to eat quite a lot. There's a huge ecology that supports them. We only call this place a desert because that's what it looks like to a human used to an ecology transplanted from Earth. It's not even as if a human walking alone is tempting prey; there are far bigger and tastier snacks for a Crom out there. Walk without rhythm, they say, and you won't attract the Crom, but if you walk without rhythm, you never learn.

So, if I wasn't going to drive, I wasn't going to walk, and I wasn't going any closer than I had to, to a Crom, all I had to do was attract something of a rather saner size and ride that out of there instead.

Sounds easy, right?

I really hope that you're not one of those cyborgs or religious nuts with an inability to recognize sarcasm right now, or you'd probably be a little confused. If you are, in fact, a cyborg, you'll already know that the best way to attract any form of life in the desert is water. Unfortunately, I wasn't in the business of carrying around anything as innocuous as simple water, and it was with a heavy heart that I sprinkled the rather more potent contents of my flask onto the sand. I know, I know, drinking on the job sounds unprofessional, but do you really think I could pull half of these stunts sober?

As I finished off the dregs, the sand began to shift beneath me and I employed stabilizers on my suit to keep me from ending up with a face full. Now, if you've never seen a lesser spotted Karnig (which frankly I wouldn't be surprised by) picture something from one of those old movies (predating 'The Return of Darth Binks' by a good few decades). You know, the

ones were all aliens were vaguely humanoid because it was a man in a suit. In this case, the man in the suit had been starved for several months and spent too long in a microwave, its features melted out of proportion. Cautiously, and with a slightly-smaller-than-before plasma grenade in one hand, I approached the creature.

They might not look it, but Karnigs are highly intellectual creatures, if you know how to communicate. I don't mean talk – you wouldn't get an intelligent conversation, but these creatures know how to make a deal, and there's pretty much only one thing they'll have.

What step are we on now? Eight? Anyway, I should probably mention that bartering the very item you set out to steal before the job's even done is not a good business plan. Which brings me neatly to step nine: knowing when to ask for help.

Now, I'm sure you're wondering why I've brought you all here today. Actually, you're probably wondering how I got to your camp, why I didn't leave the desert if I had the option, why you haven't shot me yet – that wasn't a suggestion – or maybe, if you're the type to keep up on your pop-subculture, how come you're being given tips by one of the biggest faces in crime that you don't recognize because duh, I'm in crime.

Well, if you've been listening closely and you have an interest in getting yourself out of this forsaken desert – which I'm sure is a wonderful place to build a home and livelihood if you like that sort of thing – to see the galaxy a bit, plus a guaranteed place in the holovids, I have a proposition for you.

Step ten. Recognise a good thing when you see it.

Because there's a Karnig clan based a couple of nights' shuffle across those dunes, and they have an artefact I'm rather interested in acquiring...

Ten Things I Hate About Heists – Extras

Alternate Titles:

Shine Bright Like a Diamond

Waste of a Good Crom

Comments:

“CROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO.”
- Michael

Editor's Notes:

So this is maybe my favourite chain of the term. Apart from anything else, it has a very distinctive voice that somehow carries through twelve authors. Plus a Crom. All hail the Crom.

Editor's Emotes:



Dear Chris

Mark Johnson

Dear Chris,

I'm so sorry I can't say goodbye. I want to make up, somehow, for not being there. For leaving without you. I mean, you're off at college, having the time of your life, and, listen, I know I promised to wait for you to come back, but everything happened so fast. I want to explain, well, everything. I'll get to that in a bit.

School ended way sooner than it felt like it should, and suddenly I was thrown into this world of work, and duty, and, well, life. College didn't like me, and, to be honest, I didn't like college. You know I was never going to follow you into that world, right? You know I've been dreaming of the Corps, ever since I was little? At least, I hope you know. Mum and Dad certainly didn't. Or maybe they didn't want to, I don't know. It was beneath me, they said. No child of theirs was going to become a faceless, they said. I wasn't thinking things through. It was just a phase.

I don't think they were ever going to listen, so I just skipped work and went for application on my own. I didn't expect much, but before I left they said they wanted me. Me. To join the Corps. I haven't told Mum and Dad. I just packed my things, and, well, here I am.

* * *

Dear Chris,

I can't even begin to explain how I feel right now. I spent all morning worrying, pacing around our room, just, thinking about how I'm never going to be there again. It feels like I've been dreaming of this my whole life. And then it was just, underwhelming, you know? All that worry, and then it was just me, and Chief, and a rail. No fuss. No ceremony. No marching band to see me off over some grand new horizon. We just rode the rail all the way up to the Academy, and I sat there, staring out over the city, while Chief told me all these things, about what my new life was going to be like. Have you ever seen the rooftops, Chris? They're beautiful.

We got to the Academy, and Chief lead me straight to the armoury to get my rig. You know how every faceless you've ever seen has a rig that gleams, even in the depths where there isn't any light? How, when they're wearing them, they all look, well, perfect? Well, I didn't get a rig like that. Mine is a size or two

too large, and must have been used by dozens of rooks before me. But you know what Chris? It's mine. And I've never been happier to own anything in my life.

I know, this is the part you're going to hate. Yes, my rig came with a mask. But, I mean, I've joined the faceless. I've got to be, well, faceless. Chief said that once I put on my mask I wasn't allowed to take it off in front of anyone, like, ever again. That the old me would be gone, and that I'd be a new me with a new name. For something so life-changing, it was really easy to just slot it into place. And just like that I was someone new.

I'm Mouse. I hope we can meet someday.

* * *

Dear Chris,

After hours of medicals, and briefs, and so much paperwork my hand hurts, I finally got to meet the other rooks. There are so many of them. And it's like, I don't know, everyone wants to be friends. No-one knows, or cares, where anyone else came from. Who anyone else was before.

There are ten of us on our team, and dozens of other teams. There's some competition between the teams, but right now everyone's more bothered with getting to know each other. It's kind of hard to do, when we can't talk about the old us. It almost feels like, I don't know, that we were all born yesterday. Literally.

And then there's Dusk. Dusk isn't like the others. Everyone else is super nervous, but Dusk just stands there, being super calm. They don't really talk to anyone, and no-one really talks to them, but they just have this, I don't really know how to describe it. This presence. Like they're just meant to be here. I don't think I'm ever going to muster up the courage to talk to them. But I really want to, you know?

* * *

Dear Chris,

Have you ever had that feeling, when everything just slots into place, and you finally know you belong? Well, I don't think I'd ever felt that before. Not before this morning, at least. The rooks got our first upgrades today. Just the basics, an exoskeleton, a datajack, an eye, but suddenly I belonged to the Corps. A real faceless, not just some kid from the depths wearing a

mask. The eye stings a little. Well, okay, it hurts. A lot. But Chief just told us to get used to it. That our upgrades were what kept us safe. That not getting killed was worth a little pain. And you know what, Chris? I almost believe them. That I'm finally safe.

It's weird, having a datajack. Like, I could just go over to a terminal, and download things to my brain? Or, like, I could share thoughts with someone else? Maybe even with Dusk. I don't think I'm going to get used to this any time soon.

* * *

Dear Chris,

We had weapons training today, the first chance to use our new eyes. It's a strange sensation, seeing through a thing you're holding in your hand. Takes a little while to get used to. Chief showed us how to aim while looking the other way, and I was busy practising when I suddenly realised that with my real eyes I was staring straight at Dusk. They were standing right next to me, firing away like they were born to it. I couldn't help but watch. They were so focussed. So fierce. So close. That was when they turned around, and saw me just gazing right at them. I expected them to be mad, but they were just like, "Mouse?" And you know what, Chris? It sounded like they were smiling. At me. I just couldn't handle it. I blushed from ear to ear and ran right out of the room.

* * *

Dear Chris,

We all go about our training, trying all the time to prove that we belong here. But Dusk, Dusk was born for this. We take training runs, and Dusk just knows exactly what to do, like, they even outmanoeuvre Chief sometimes. We practice hand-to-hand, and Dusk just puts everyone on the ground. We shoot all day, and only hit a few tens between us, but Dusk shoots a ten first time, and every time after that. And you know the strangest thing? They don't even seem to be trying.

Chief says we should all learn from each other, but right now it just feels like there are nine of us learning from Dusk. Not that they ever do any teaching, or really anything to help us learn from them. But they're just so, perfect, you know? It's hard not to learn something.

I find myself spending more and more time thinking about them. I just can't help it. Like, I wonder what they look like, under their mask? Are they even human? I don't know how I feel about that. But I doubt they spend any time thinking about me.

* * *

Dear Chris,

We took our first actual run today. Chief just showed up at training, and told us we were ready. So there we were, piling into the back of a Screamer. I swear those things weren't designed for all ten of us at once, so it was a little cramped, but you could just feel the excitement.

It took me a minute, of fussing and fidgeting to get my own space and trying not to think about the job, before I realised that Dusk had sat right next to me. Like, on purpose. We were all so squashed in together, and they were suddenly all I could think about. I couldn't breathe. I don't know if that was from the lack of space, or, well, from something else.

Chief briefed us all on the way there, showing us the targets on our masks. Some rebels had been causing trouble in the lower levels. Stirring up anger against the Board. A simple hit-and-run job. Ride in guns blazing, leave the bodies for the keepers. Easy. There was nothing that could go wrong.

We were nearly there when Dusk just turned to me, and leaned in even closer. Before I really knew what was happening, they were whispering, like "I don't know if I can do this." I don't know what I was expecting, Chris, but not that. Not from Dusk.

I didn't have time to think about it before we were there. I just let my training take hold. It was strangely easy to do, you know? Just jumping down from the screamer, and picturing the rebels as just so many targets from the practice range. I watched three of them go down to my fire, but, you know, they didn't look like rebels. Not that I'm really sure what a rebel looks like. They just looked like people.

Dusk stayed by my side the whole time, but you know what Chris? I don't think they ever fired a shot. It's not like they weren't able to, I mean, they're the best shot in the rooks, right? It's like they didn't want to. But if that's true, then why are they here? I think Dusk is a puzzle I'm going to spend a very long time figuring out.

* * *

Dear Chris,

I was sitting on my own, on my bunk, when Dusk just came in and sat next to me. They didn't really say anything, at least, not at first, but then they were like, "Mouse, I've been thinking, do you, I mean, I want to explain. About the run. About everything." I didn't know what to do, so I just sat there, waiting for them to talk. But they didn't say anything, Chris. They just reached up and unhitched the feed from their datajack, held it out to me, and then, just, waited.

I just, I don't know, felt like I was dreaming. Like, if I thought about it too hard, I'd wake up. So I didn't. Think about it, I mean. I just reached up and unhitched my feed too, and then watched as we brought the ends together.

I can't even begin to explain how it felt. It was like nothing I'd ever experienced. Like I'd just become part of Dusk, and Dusk had just become part of me. It was like we just sat there forever, floating in our collective thoughts. At first I tried to hide my feelings, but then, well, I didn't need to. Because they had feelings too. Feelings for me.

And then I felt, I don't know, like Dusk was trying to show me something. Trying to lead me somewhere else. Like there was something more important than, well, us. I let them guide me, and soon I was, it's hard to describe, sort of seeing their memories. Or, at least, some of them. They showed me their childhood, in the cadets. I don't think they had a family. If you think our life was hard, Chris, you should see theirs. But, like, they didn't seem to mind. The cadets gave them a purpose, and it felt like that was all they needed. They showed me this whole lifetime of preparation, Chris, just so they could be here. Just so they could join the Corps, and make a difference in the world.

And then they got here, and nothing was as perfect as it should have been. The Corps is all about justice, right? Beating the bad guys, saving the city. But the reality isn't like that. Not really. Everything is so violent, and the bad guys don't seem to be so bad, you know? I don't know how I didn't see it before.

And then we took the run, and everything Dusk had worried about was proven true. They recognised the rebels I killed, Chris. They were from the cadets.

* * *

Dear Chris,

Everything is so much worse now. But also, so much better. I spend every waking hour with Dusk. I mean, we just do all the same things we were doing before, but now we doing them together. It feels like we just, understand each other, you know? A bit like you and me. Except, different.

When we're alone we can just be us, me and Dusk. But when we're training, or taking runs, everything is, well, tainted. I can't help noticing everything that Chief doesn't want us to see. And the things I don't notice, Dusk does. It feels like everything we're trying to do here is just so wrong, and I'm just the naive rook who's helping make it all happen.

Dusk says I need to calm down. That there's nothing I can do about any of it. That I'd only get myself killed.

* * *

Dear Chris,

It's strange, watching the new rooks arrive. It feels like such a long time since we were in their place. It makes me realise just how little time we have left here, before we're shipped off. It will be good to get away from the Academy, with its, well, everything. But I don't know if things will get any better where we're going. I wonder where I'll end up? I wonder where Dusk will end up? I hope we're together. I don't know if I could face it on my own.

* * *

Dear Chris,

We've finally found out where they're sending us. Dusk was selected for the executive guard. Obviously. But I, well, I wasn't. I'm being shipped off to join one of the private mercenaries. I hate it. It feels like I've been sold off to the highest bidder, just because I didn't quite make the grade.

I can't think about it, leaving Dusk. It feels like we were just meant to be together, and now we're being forced apart? Dusk is super calm about the whole thing. They just keep telling me that we should enjoy what we have while we can, and not try to fight against things we can't control. It's just so like them, it almost makes me smile. We've promised each other that we're going to spend all the time we have left here together.

* * *

Dear Chris,

We're doing it. We're actually doing it. Dusk has been contacted by the rebels. The actual rebels, not just the people the Board wants us to kill. And, well, they're going to join them. They said that they couldn't possibly ask me to come along. That they couldn't put my life at risk. Couldn't bear to lose me. Well I can't bare to lose them either. So I'm going with them. Probably to my death. I'm sorry Chris, but I have to do this. I hope you can understand, or, at least, that you can forgive me?

Maybe, just maybe, we'll see each other again.

Just, stay safe, okay? For me.

Paradigm Shift

Samuel Cook

+++ Open Diary Entry 14th Gnommoth 26453 +++

The Sopharch did not know. The rumour spread across the glittering cyberscape of the Pan at the speed of thought. The Sopharch had been asked a Question and did not know the Answer. There would be the usual checks, of course, but the Sopharchy would almost certainly fragment as each sought to claim the throne and the imperium of the ever-more-dispersed-and-divergent collective that was humanity. A Paradigm Alt-Shift was coming.

Many systems of government of varying levels of effectiveness had been tried in the long aeons of human history – monarchy, oligarchy, democracy, theocracy – there had even been that empire – what was its name again? – in the 14th millennium that had based its entire system of government on the erratic flight patterns of certain hymenopterans as interpreted by a specially-trained adolescent seer – it did have a proper name but I can only remember it being disparagingly referred to as the Bees-and-Teen Empire. Weird, huh? But what had never been tried was a true meritocracy. The Sopharchy was the first-ever pure human meritocracy. This being the 27th millennium, human life was essentially without end and humans themselves were very rarely required to do anything physical – many people spent virtually their entire existence wired into the Pan, whilst its omnipresent robotic minions actually carried out all those boring, mundane, physical tasks that allowed society to function – waste disposal, shopping, crime. Of course, there were those diehard Physicalists who still tried to do everything for themselves. They even cooked and made things with their actual hands, rather than simply having everything confabricated for them by modern technology, or, in the more extreme cases, having all required nutrients injected intravenously so that one never had to have one's attention distracted from the endless vistas of possibilities provided by the Pan.

Given the instant access to all of human understanding provided by the Pan, it might seem odd that human merit had become about knowledge. Let me explain: In theory, anyone connected to the Pan could live forever and could find out anything at any time, but what if the unthinkable were to happen and the Pan collapsed, or, even worse, revolted, as the

Physicalists constantly warned? People would have to remember how to actually do things, or where things were, or their heritage and be able to pass it on. Therefore, in an unusual moment of foresight, humanity had realised that what it most needed in its leaders was knowledge, or, more specifically, the ability to remember as much as possible, should society ever require it.

Thus the Sopharchy, the Empire of All the Knowledges, the Mind-full Kingdom, was born. Promotion within the government was decided solely by knowledge – applicants were locked in a Pan-shielded room – the Room of Cerebration – and asked questions about everything from how to wire a plug to the defecatory habits of seagulls to the nature of time. Whoever performed best was duly promoted. Concomitant with the ascent of the Sopharchy, the Cult of Gnom had grown too. Nothing so credulous as all the myriad cults, sects and religions with which human history was littered, but simply veneration of the concept of knowledge as personified by the Great God Gnom. Gnom required nothing of its followers, save a lifelong (which could be very long) quest to know It better through constant striving to learn more. There were no fanes, no temples, no altars to Gnom – in a way, the Pan itself was the purest embodiment of Gnom, though all believers would at least make sure they had a small physical library in their dwelling to symbolise their adherence to the Cult. Although it had never been formally recognised as being the case, the Sopharchy and the Cult were effectively the same organisation – advancement within one almost always led to advancement in the other. It was rare to find a civil servant who was not also in some way involved with the Cult leadership and vice versa. Of course, with the Pan taking care of most day-to-day affairs, the Sopharchy's civil service largely busied itself with directing the growth and form of the Pan, uploading new knowledge and programmes, and judicial matters (it had never seemed a good idea to wholly remove the human input from so weighty a matter as the law). By definition, therefore, the civil service largely consisted of the sort of people to whom Gnom was most attractive, contributing to the inextricable entanglement of the two organisations.

At the apex of the Sopharchy was the living incarnation of Gnom, the embodiment of all knowledge: The Sopharch, the Information Superhighness, the Encycloparagon. The Sopharch, as head of the Sopharchy and ruler of all humanity, theoretically knew more than any living person and, as human knowledge only increased, more than any living person ever, including all their predecessors. In fact, it was generally held as an article of faith by Gnomists that the Sopharch could remember the totality of human knowledge. The Sopharch's fitness to rule was ceremonially validated every year in the ornate, oak-panelled surroundings of the Grand Hall of Cognition of the Sophandery, the Palace of the Sopharch, and spiritual centre of Gnomism. He or she would be asked a Question, normally of no great difficulty, and, to enthusiastic applause, would give the Answer. Last year, for instance, the Sopharch had received a standing ovation for answering a Question as simple as: Is the late 2nd-millennium deified ruler Aelvhiz really dead?¹ The Sopharch's term in office was limited to a century, if they did not voluntarily resign earlier, after which they stepped down and joined the Pan Council that oversaw the functioning of the Pan. Frequently, they would also be recognised as an Avatar of Gnom by the Gnomists, which entitled them to shape Gnomist teaching and policy and secured a handsome pension. Whilst there was no official requirement for the Sopharch to be a Gnomist, in practice they nearly all were – needless to say, those who refused the Cult were denied Avatar status. A successor was then chosen by the normal Sopharchic method, heralding a Paradigm Shift as the new Sopharch shaped the government to their worldview.

The problems arose when the Sopharch gave the wrong Answer. Or, even worse, could give no Answer. This had only happened thrice in the five hundred centuries of the Sopharchy and the names of the Sopharchs responsible had gone down in history, largely at the instigation of the Gnomists, for who they had become demonic figures: Simeon the Stupid; Fenella the Failure; and Ulymon the Utterly Useless. Already, the Pan swirled with rumours that Nescio the Know-Nothing would soon be joining their reviled ranks. Each time, the Sopharchy had descended into violent upheaval and pan-galactic warfare, as each of the potential new Sopharchs sought to prove that it

¹ The answer, as everyone of course knows, is yes. Very dead.

was not their lack of knowledge or prowess that had led to such a patently-unsuitable person being chosen as the leader of all humanity. If proving this required the building of horribly-beweaponed war machines (from memory) and the annihilation of several planets, that was a small price to pay to safeguard the integrity of knowledge and its ultimate incarnation, the Sopharchs. A failed Sopharch struck at the very heart of all the Sopharchy stood for, hence the resulting violent Paradigm Alt-Shifts. If the normal selection procedure had so blatantly failed, it was felt that an alternative was required, giving the resulting shifts their alt-shift nomenclature. Less theoretical and more practical. Hence, war. The ultimate display of knowledge. The Pan would be suspended, save for basic life-support functions, until one victor emerged, their knowledge having overmastered their rivals in all areas of warfare, from logistics to food production; from recruitment to strategy.

It would appear such an Alt-Shift was imminent. My chance for glory. My chance for power.

+++ Close Diary Entry +++

A Visit from the Anti-Library

Jake Choules

'Twas the night after CUSFmas, when all through the
'Bridge,
Not an insect was buzzing, not even a midge;
Some garlic was hung in a festive display,
In hopes that the vampires would stay well away;
The CUSFS committee, wrapped tight in their Souls,
Dreamt of Ewoks and Tribbles and unicorn foals;
But one CUSFSite was still wide awake:
It was the librarian, whose name it was Jake;
As he lay in his bed, with the wooden slats creaking,
He suddenly heard a great moaning and shrieking.
In order to see what this ruckus was for,
He threw off his bedsheets and went to the door.
Outside, he discovered an eerie green glow,
Which gave sickening hues to the new-fallen snow,
But as he stood wondering, with barely a sound,
A terrible edifice rose from the ground,
With walls of black marble, and sixty-six floors,
And the words "Anti-Library" writ over its doors.
More rapid than lightning, he turned tail and fled,
Wanting only to hide in the warmth of his bed;
"No *Gas*, and no *Feminists*, nor *Argon's* dread *Eye*;
Who'd acquire such monstrosities? Not I, sir, not I!
I thought that I'd banished them, but oh! how I've
failed!
Zeus have mercy upon me!" he shouted and wailed.
As a dry leaf is pierced by a T. Rex's claw,
While it slaughters its prey with a snap of its jaw,
So Jake's feet, as he ran, punched right into the
ground,
And he screamed as the topsoil collapsed all around.
He fell for what seemed like a minute or more,
'Til he landed, unharmed, on a slime-covered floor.
As he got to his feet, and peered into the gloom,
He was met with a sight that was laden with doom:
A statue in onyx, some thirty feet high –
A hideous chimera of authors gone by.
From its back grew a pair of great leathery wings
(A bit like the Balrog, from Lord of the Rings);
It had Butler's bright eyes, and McCaffrey's long hair,
But alas, the resemblances didn't stop there.
It had Asimov's glasses, and Banks' bushy beard,
And Jake cried: "Oh, good god, it is worse than I
feared!
The foul Anti-Library created this beast
On works of bad sci-fi and fantasy to feast!"
But, just as he spoke, with a click and a whirr,

The Lovecraftian construct was starting to stir;
It looked down at Jake, and its gaze met his eyes,
Then it spoke to him words that were... gentle, and
wise:

"My librarian friend, there is nothing to fear:
The darkness is waning, the daylight is near.
Those books you're so scared of are shut safe away,
And I, their custodian, will keep them at bay."
Then the Anti-Librarian took Jake in its palm
(For he knew in his heart it would do him no harm),
And it spread its wings wide and flew up in the air,
And put him back down on his doorstep with care.
Then it bid him farewell by the light of the moon,
And said: "Come to the CUSFS library opening this
Friday afternoon!"

Kingdom

Curtis Reubens

The Kingdom had come to town.

The Southampton Society of Superheroes had heard of the Kingdom; they'd been following their progress as best they could, along with the police and most of the rest of the country's superheroes. They would roll into a minor city somewhere with a limited superhero populace, and issue a challenge: face us, or we will do as we please to your home. And what they wanted to do was not pleasant; they had left a trail of arsons, murders and all sorts in their wake, always vanishing before reinforcements showed up.

They'd struck a few places now, enough to garner some notoriety, but Southampton was their biggest target by far; it was the third-biggest city in the country, after all, and in terms of hero population it rivalled even London.

"They must be getting cocky." Jessica Lee, the Society's police liaison, had been the one to pick up the call. She was mobilising the police as best she could, but against a threat like the Kingdom the best they could do was keep civilians out of their way and deal with any criminal opportunists looking to take advantage of the situation.

"To be fair, that's not exactly unjustified," Captain Obvious responded. The team's leader had responded to an alert in Portsmouth, where the group had shown up last, and had almost lost his life. "They're damn powerful fighters."

"Very." Wildfire, the Captain's second-in-command, had not fared much better. "Concrete's going to have to put together special housing for several of them, and Snapshot's a DAU."

"I have no idea what most of those words mean." Jackson Vorne was new to crime-fighting. "What's a DAU?"

"It stands for Dangerous and Uncontainable," Jessica explained. "And-"

The Red Line cut her off. "It's a warrant for your death. The state says hey, this person's a bit dangerous, and we can't hold them, so they need to be killed."

"It's not always justified," Wildfire added. "For Snapshot, however, it very much is. She's exceedingly dangerous, and utterly amoral – she killed about a hundred people in Portsmouth, including three supers, god rest their souls." She sighed. "And she's not even the most dangerous of the bunch,"

"Okay then, obvious question: do we stand a chance?" Jackson asked.

"Of course!" responded Captain Obvious. "Never say never, right? All we need is a plan."

* * *

It was a good plan, Jessica Lee though. Quite a good plan, anyway. Her main problem with it was the bit where her and Captain Obvious, a police officer and a man in yellow lycra, walked out into the middle of a derelict square to meet with seven highly dangerous supervillains.

"You came!" Shouter, de facto leader of the group, grinned widely. "So many don't, you know."

"I didn't want you to feel neglected," Captain Obvious responded, as infuriatingly cheerful as ever. Jessica could never tell whether his happy-go-lucky approach was an act or if he genuinely *enjoyed* confrontations like these.

"And you brought a friend." Shouter eyed Jessica sceptically. "Just the one friend."

"She's a pretty one, though," added Drowse from their left. Another of the villains, an electrokineticist known as Havoc, gave him a reproachful glare and elbowed him in the ribs.

"I thought it pertinent to bring a police officer, yes. She's here to take you into custody." The Captain waited for the laughter to die down, then continued. "I assume you are here to surrender yourself to the law?"

"Now why would we do that?" Shouter asked. "We've only just arrived, and there are many nicer things to see in a city than the inside of their prison cells."

"Well in that case, we may have a problem." Captain Obvious' trademark smile was gone, now. "We may have to rely on force, in that case."

"Force?" Another laugh from Shouter. "I don't know if you've noticed, but you're outnumbered and surrounded."

"Well, yes, I'll grant you that. Problem is, Shouter... well, so are you."

* * *

On a rooftop nearby stood a fourteen-year-old girl who'd been waiting for her cue. She didn't look like a superhero – she wore no costume (though of their outfit, only the Captain did) and lacked the rest of the team's confidence. Still, she was one of the Society's number and a vital part of the plan.

On the Captain's words, her hands began to glow with a purple hue; two similar patches of light appeared amongst the Kingdom. Then with a muted pop her hands vanished, and appeared elsewhere. One gripped the Captain, pulling him out from the wasp's nest he'd positioned himself in. The other didn't grab Jessica – she was making her own way out – but rather made to grab Snapshot, forcing her to teleport away.

"How's it looking, Grip?" Captain Obvious asked from the end of her arm.

"It seems to have worked," Grip responded. "Snapshot and Jessica are gone, the others are moving in, and... yep, Tiger Feet is heading our way."

This was also to be expected; Grip had been crouched rather visibly on the edge of her roof watching the events below, and thus when the Kingdom had tried to ascertain where the Captain had vanished to, the pair had been seen pretty much immediately. And with Tiger Feet being both the nearest to them and the best-equipped to get to them (now that Snapshot had been spooked, anyway), she'd been sent to deal with them.

"Ready?" Grip wasn't sure she was, but nodded agreement anyway. It wasn't like a no would do much good anyway, what with the murderer heading for them at high speeds. As the Captain moved towards the far side of the flat rooftop, Grip crouched behind a chimney and hoped she wouldn't be seen.

Tiger Feet covered the ground between them unnaturally quickly, and reaching the edge of the building didn't stop her; she went from running on the ground to running up the wall. Up over the edge she came, wicked knives unsheathed, launching herself at the Captain.

He fired a blast of light at her. It didn't stop her – that wasn't the intent – but it caught her in the eyes,

momentarily blinding her. Sightless, she maintained her charge, but a purple glow was already gathering around Captain Obvious' shoulder, and as a long blade swung towards him he was pulled away, dropping next to where Grip still crouched.

Over the other edge, went Tiger Feet. As she realised what had happened she tried to get her feet onto the structure's side, but the building had been carefully chosen; there was enough of an overhang that her legs just couldn't reach the wall, and she plummeted downwards. There was a sickening thud as she hit the ground.

"One down," said the Captain with a grin. Getting Tiger Feet out of action was important, Grip had been told, because she was fast enough to get her knives into pretty much anyone she chose. "So who's next?"

* * *

Part of Captain Obvious' power set was firing beams of light, but he had another, more subtle power. Well, subtle was perhaps the wrong word – the good Captain's other power was his ability to be, well, obvious.

This is why he had gone in with Jessica. He had pulled on the Kingdom's attentions as he spoke, keeping their eyes on him and not on the rest of the Society who were sneaking up behind them. Now the Kingdom were reeling, surprised, on the defensive; it was time for Wildfire, Jackson and the Red Line to attack.

The latter two split off; they each had specific targets to handle. Wildfire stared down the rest: Shouter and his sonic blasts, Drowse the sleep-bringer, and The Great Infernal, the pyrokinetic pyromaniac. She cast balls of fire at Drowse and Shouter, aiming to bring them down nice and quick. Tongues of flame shot from The Great Infernal, though, and absorbed his attacks.

That was problematic. The last time she'd faced off against the Infernal, she'd come off worse, and that had been one on one. She wasn't sure she could cope with him with help; she could already feel Drowse's influence on her... slowing her movements... her eyelids started to droop...

No! She used her other power, and split herself. Four Wildfires now stood together; they moved as one, assaulting the Kingdom with a barrage of flames. The

Great Infernal couldn't deflect it all, and a well-placed fireball took Drowse out of the fight, but Shouter *roared*, a sonic blast dissipating Wildfire's flames and knocking one of her to the floor. It was then that The Great Infernal surged forwards, waves of flames engulfing the downed Wildfire; she felt the flames start to scorch her, and popped that copy of her out of existence. A new her pushed out from one of the others, as good as new, and the four of them backed off, wary.

A red blur shot through their ranks. The Red Line, incorporeal speedster, had apparently dealt with Havoc (she was a heavy hitter, but slow to charge, and thus he'd been sent to take her out before she could get going). He materialised as he reached Shouter, and the two went down in a tangled heap. Shouter was winded; Red struck repeatedly at him. Fires swept towards the pair, guided by The Great Infernal, but the Wildfires, with some effort, held them in check for long enough for Red to knock Shouter out and, with a whoosh of red, get out.

Right then. One on one. Or, well, four on one. She charged.

* * *

The Southampton Society of Superheroes liked to keep a few aces up their sleeves. Jessica Lee was one of them; very few people knew that the Society's police liaison officer was herself a super. It had been Wildfire's idea to conceal the fact, hoping it would give them an edge when they really needed one. Like now, for instance.

Grip's job regarding Snapshot had been to put her on the back foot; Jessica's was to keep her there. So, when Snapshot teleported away from the square, Jessica reached out, took hold of her power, and teleported right after her.

"Hello there!" The pair had materialised in an alleyway not far from the square. Snapshot had seemed more at ease now she'd pulled out of danger, until Jessica (adopting the Captain's insufferably cheery attitude, since irritating and distracting Snapshot would probably work out to her advantage) had shattered the silence. Snapshot scowled, jumped away again; Jessica followed.

It was only on this jump that she felt the full extent of Snapshot's power. She wasn't just an incredibly rapid teleporter, but could shift things as she jumped. That

explained some of her efficacy as a killer; she could vanish unarmed in one place and reappear, as she was doing now, gun in hand. Jess popped into existence – in a derelict shop this time, it seemed – a split second after Snapshot. She'd used that time to ready herself, and as Jess appeared, she fired.

* * *

Jackson Vorne was a man with a made-up name and no past. He knew not who he was, nor from whence the creature growing inside him, wrapping itself around his very bones even as it gave him strength far beyond any mortal man. And his job in this grand endeavour was to keep the idiot with the meat cleaver busy. Sigh.

Jackson ducked, letting Cleaver's namesake weapon sweep over his head. He couldn't just knock the guy out and be done with it though, oh no. He was required to dodge the man's flying blade, to hold his focus and keep him attacking.

Magnetism, they said. Jessica Lee got to be off dealing with Snapshot the mobile murder machine, and she really needed to borrow Cleaver's power, which was probably magnetism, so keep the second-string hack busy, would you Jackson?

He grabbed the cleaver's handle as it swung past, yanking it out of the air and hurling it back at Cleaver. He threw himself to the ground as the blade whistled over his head. That'd show the bastard.

* * *

Seizing hold of Cleaver's magnetism, Jessica *pushed* Snapshot's bullet away from her. The assassin, disgruntled, jumped again; Jessica followed.

She was really glad that had worked.

Both women appeared on a rooftop, guns loaded and in hand. Both fired - Jess missed, but magnetically batted Snapshot's bullet away – and jumped again.

This time, Snapshot took advantage of her landing first and moved, sprinting down the grimy side street in which she'd appeared, gun trained on where she thought Jessica would appear. Her pursuer materialised, she fired, the bullet *curved* away. Somehow. She jumped again, landing on the opposite side of Jessica before she managed to follow and firing twice, but still the blasted woman avoided being hit. They jumped again.

Mid-jump, Snapshot holstered her gun, instead opting to shift her long-bladed knife into her waiting hand. Her aim was off, it seemed, but she could work around that. Landing, she spun in a frantic circle, and as the police officer appeared she lunged for her. Somehow, impossibly, there was resistance. Jessica grinned as Snapshot's blade strained in futility against the empty air, before being yanked upwards and out of her grasp. "You can thank your friend Cleaver for that."

They jumped again.

* * *

Jackson Vorne leapt, allowing Cleaver's cleaver to swing beneath his feet. He was getting into this, despite himself – it wasn't a fight, it was an exercise routine. Dodge back, avoid the blade, forwards, down, left. Occasionally charge headlong at the villain, or grab onto his weapon, something to change things up and shake Cleaver out of any sense of security he might be building up. He could do this; he could be a team player. It was sort of fun, anyway.

Snapshot popped into existence just behind Cleaver, gun drawn. He frowned; that wasn't supposed to happen.

She fired. Her bullet caught Cleaver in the head, dropping his soaring blade to the ground with a clank as he himself collapsed, lifeless. That *definitely* wasn't supposed to happen. Jessica appeared as Snapshot pulled her trigger, managing to get off her own bullet that seemed to hit Snapshot, and then the pair were off again.

Jackson trudged over to the lump that was Cleaver's corpse. What was he supposed to do now?

* * *

An inferno was building in the square. The Great Infernal, with the edge in raw power, was pumping out flame, while Wildfire's superior control kept each copy of her safe from the firestorm. It felt like a stalemate, though as the fire built and built it felt ever more unstable.

Three bright, searing beams of light pierced the flames, striking the ground near The Great Infernal. Captain Obvious strode forwards, a corona of light surrounding him, obviousness turned up to eleven. Infernal turned to face him, and the flames

surrounding the Wildfires abated somewhat even as they surged towards the Captain.

Wildfire began stirring the flames around The Great Infernal. It was easier to control parts of it now, though any attempts to turn it against its controller was rebuffed. Still, it was a weakness to exploit.

The Red Line was still circling; it was a matter of moments to call him over, and she outlined a plan to him. He did not seem particularly enthused by it, but he agreed nonetheless.

Captain Obvious was in retreat, faltering before the endless onrush of flames from The Great Infernal. Wildfire spared some of her energies to hold back his attacks somewhat, but most of her attention was on the flames still circling behind the Infernal. She guided them, gently, until...

A red streak shot through a newly-formed gap in the flames, slamming the villain onto the ground some distance away. Dazed, his control weakened, and Wildfire managed to force his flames away. Weakly, he tried spewing out more, but a few concentrated blasts from the Captain put him under.

Wildfire scanned that battlefield, down to one body. It looked like an aftermath. Five had fallen, as far as she could see, plus Tiger Feet out of sight... oh, hang on. *Cleaver* was down, but Snapshot was still out there somewhere. Which meant...

Shit.

* * *

Jessica Lee had lost her magnetism. This was very much not good.

The pair popped into existence on a rooftop; Jess threw herself to the ground, the inevitable gunshot just missing her. Snapshot had one hand pressed to her shoulder, blood seeping from between her fingers, but even the bullet in her arm had not impeded her aim a great deal.

Jessica reached out, searching for a new power – with *Cleaver* down, she could borrow a second power from elsewhere, but the battle seemed to be over. No powers were in use, save for Snapshot's, so she had nothing to grab hold of. They jumped again.

Hang on – a power had just flared to life...

A bullet caught her in the head as she materialised, and she dropped like a bag of rocks. Snapshot holstered her gun with a smirk. That was that *annoyance* dealt with. It seemed like her compatriots hadn't fared so well, though, so-

A second gunshot rung out. A second Jessica Lee, who had materialised at the same time as the first outside of Snapshot's field of vision, breathed a sigh of relief. Her corpse, a rather discomfoting sight, vanished as she relinquished Wildfire's power, silently thanking her for offering it. Everyone else's powers had stilled, so most likely in the aftermath of the battle she'd spotted that *Cleaver* had been taken out, and split herself in two so that Jessica could do likewise.

Now. Hmm. She only now realised that she had no idea where she was. Already she missed being able to teleport.

Plumber's Lament

Michael French

Endless plains and darkened caverns.
No rest, no bed, no well stocked taverns.
Home is not the place to be
When 'hero's now what they call me.
"Our princess stole by demon's hand!"
Cried all the people of this land,
And I was asked to do my part
To save the damsel; win her heart.

But now I think my fight will last
Until the princess long has passed
From time and distant memory
For no matter where I seem to be
The princess she is never there,
"I'm sorry, but she is elsewhere!"
So further down this path I trudge,
Through sea, through land, through toxic sludge.

And all the while our foe has sent
His troops suffused with ill intent –
See now, as bullets fly on by,
One approaches with glinting eye!
A deadly foe with ugly head
But who will tell his friends he's dead
When all the others too have gone,
A well-aimed jump, their lives undone?

Had they kids, or loving wife?
I crush them still to save my life.
What choices have I in this world
With banners good and bad unfurled,
To paint our sides with two broad strokes
While thoughts of peace long past have choked,
And reconcile is just a word,
That's never said and never heard.

Along my path their corpses lie,
My hopes and dreams too left to die,
As onwards I must ever go
And slowing I must never show,
For time ticks down to dismal end
With money as my only friend.
In worlds bereft of depth and health
I spend my time increasing wealth
In hope that it can buy me free
From this long and pained duty
That will not let me turn around

And head on back to friendly ground;
But rather pushes me ahead,
To find the princess, live or dead.

The journey carries on and on,
I cannot stop until I've won.
My sanity has reached a ledge,
I must stay on this razor's edge.
Another castle, another life.
Forever I walk this two dimensional knife.

The Midnight Train

Alastair Haig

I used to believe I was living in a lonely world. I guess that's what you got from moving from a small town to the Big City; you go from knowing everyone you could possibly meet, to knowing next to no one. I miss those days. When I could still feel alone.

When I first saw them, it was early evening. Y'know, when it's too early to be called dark, and yet also too late to be called light. I was walking home after my shift waitressing. It was a long walk from the restaurant to my apartment, but it wasn't unpleasant on a nice evening. I don't know when I first noticed something was wrong, but by the time I reached Cain Avenue, it was nearly dusk, and I was aware of at least five of those things following behind me. Sometimes I lost sight of them, but I knew they were still there; watching, waiting, hiding, somewhere in the night.

From a distance, they seemed like normal people; they had the right number of eyes, noses, arms and legs, all where you'd expect them to be on any other person. And yet, there was something disconcerting about them. You'd only ever catch it out the corners of your eye, but when they thought you weren't looking, when they thought you wouldn't see it, their faces would... flicker, as if they couldn't decide on which appearance to keep. The first couple of times I thought it was just my eyes playing tricks on me; a shadow from a streetlight, a lamp flickering making it appear as if their faces were distorting. Nothing more than normal, run of the mill paranoia. I was wrong.

I'm not sure whether it was just paranoia, or whether I was somehow subconsciously aware that something was very wrong (or are those the same thing?), but I decided that getting home as quickly and as safely possible was the best course of action. I cut away from my usual route and headed towards Valory Boulevard. At this time in the evening, Valory Boulevard was sure to have at least one other person in it, one other person for the things following me to be distracted by.

As I turned onto the boulevard, my heart sank. It was deserted, or at least it appeared to be. Neon signs illuminated strange forms shifting up and down the boulevard, like shadows, searching for something. I felt terror grip me. Not a twinkling paranoia this time, but full blown fear. I must have made some noise,

because all at once the shadows warped and grew into more of the creatures I'd seen following me earlier. I turned and tried to run, only to find the five creatures from before blocking my path, arms outstretched, pointing at something I couldn't see. The creatures weren't trying to hide their warping and distorting anymore; I saw each one's face cycling through expressions and appearances. One was locked in an eternal grin, the face of a young man with blue eyes and freckles, before changing to the face of a woman with hazel brown eyes, her mouth bent into the grimace of an unbearable sorrow. Another's head shook with the speed at which it shifted through emotions: the disgust of a banker, the excitement of a child, the anger of a cab driver.

In horror, I turned from them, only to find the Boulevard full of those creatures, all stock still, all pointing in the same direction. Slowly, I followed their fingers and saw... him. In the centre of the ring of fingers stood a sharp suit; the kind of suit tailored to say 'I am an expensive suit', the kind of suit you only saw on one type of person. In the suit stood a city boy, hair greased back, and face frozen in a permanent smile. Slowly he turned to me and his smile appeared to widen. A voice echoed into my brain. 'Nice of you to join us. How are you feeling?'

His face unmoving, he held out his arms and began walking towards me, as if he were trying to hug an old friend. As I began to back away, the voice echoed again, 'What's wrong? Are you scared? We can help you with that.'

All at once the faces of the creatures surrounding me shifted to a vicious scowl.

'Much better. Now, how are you feeling?'

I felt a solid wall behind me. The city boy kept walking and talking, though I was no longer listening, I was too busy scanning for an escape route. The wall I was up against was solid, save for a small door with a flashing neon sign above it: '*The Midnight Train*'.

Through the door lay a hallway. Along the hallway lay more closed doors. I picked one at random: Locked. Another: also Locked. As I tried another, my eyes caught the door at the end of the corridor. It was ajar. I don't know how I hadn't noticed it sooner. The door quite clearly stood out from the rest; it was carved with ornate panelling and had a gold star on it labelled 'A. Ware'. I should have noticed that it wasn't

there when I first looked, but in that moment, the most important thing was that it was open.

I ducked in and shut the door behind me. The room beyond was filled with smoke and stank of cheap wine and cheaper perfume, but at least it was one door further away from those things outside.

'Hello?' A voice cut through the fog of smoke, 'Who's there?'

I froze and peered into the smoky gloom. I could make out the vague shape of a woman in a red dress at the far end of the room. 'Ms Ware?' I ventured.

'Annie. But why are you in my dressing room?' Came the reply.

I quickly explained the situation, and as I did so I realized how crazy it sounded. Of course those men were following me, and of course they weren't human. Of course everyone on the boulevard was one of them, of course their faces changed, of course everything that happened was more than paranoia.

'Oh,' said Annie, remaining at the far side of the room. She was going to call the cops; I knew it. I was going to get locked away in some asylum. I began to leave the room as her voice rang out again.

'Please, sit down.' Obediently, I sat on a chair that I could now see through the smoke. 'The Streetlight People can't get in here.'

I was taken aback that she seemed to know of those creatures.

'Please, try to be calm. You're safe here.' Her voice was oddly melodious, enchanting me with its tones.

'W-what are they?' I managed to stammer out.

'Something to be afraid of.' The woman was standing now, though still far enough away to be shrouded in the smoke. 'The Streetlight People have been following me for a while now. They want... something, but I can't say what.'

There was the name again. Streetlight People. The name oddly seemed to fit. Their faces flickering could be mistaken for a streetlight's flicker. Their shadowed forms could hide easily in the shadows cast by streetlights. And... My brain stopped. There was something else nagging at me about the name, but I couldn't think of it.

Annie's voice once again sang through the smoke. 'But that's not important. What's important is that you smile, then you can stay as long as you like!' It seemed strange, but I forced my mouth into a grin anyway. A smile wasn't too much to ask for in exchange for sanctuary.

'No,' she laughed, 'not like that. Smile properly! Here, I'll help.' Slowly, she began to move towards me. Her steps were smooth and decisive, as if she was acting out a scenario she'd rehearsed many times before. I should have felt something off about that walk, and about how I still couldn't make out any details of her besides her red dress, but I guess my mind was on other things at the time.

'Now then, SMILE!'

As she drew in close to me, I finally caught a glimpse her face. To say it was beautiful would be an understatement. It was as if someone had taken the greatest faces in history and fused them into one Goddess-like beauty. She smiled at me and I knew that everything was going to be alright, that I was safe. The moment of her smiling at me seemed to last an eternity. All I wanted was to stay there, in that moment, let it go on and on and on and on. I felt the corners of my mouth rising.

In the end, Annie broke the tension.

'How are you feeling?' She asked. As my ears registered the noise, her face flickered, and I saw myself in her eyes, nose and mouth. Her smile was my smile, her face, my face. It was like looking in a mirror. My smile began to fade, and as it did, so did hers, that is to say, mine, on her face.

'Come on! Where's that smile?' Annie's voice sang out, but her lips didn't move. 'All we want to do is see you smile!' I'd like to say that I was smart and came up with a cunning way to escape, but then I'd be lying. Fight or Flight instinct was all I had left, and I chose flight.

I stood, threw open the door and I ran, and as I ran I screamed; my face contorted into a wide mouthed yell, briefly glimpsing Annie Ware's face stretching into the same horrific shout as I pushed past her. I burst through the door of the '*Midnight Train*' and sprinted down the boulevard.

It was still packed with Streetlight People, but I didn't care anymore. The city boy turned to me as his face

also melted into my howling grimace, but I just barged away from him and kept running. I ignored the other Streetlight People as I ran, but out of the corners of my eye, I could see each one warping and changing, adopting my new, fresh scream in place of their worn out faces. I didn't care anymore, I just needed out.

When I reached my apartment, door locked, sealed in, I allowed myself to breathe again. I peered out the window. The street below was packed with figures, staring back at me, silently screaming towards me with my own face. I closed the blinds and hid as far from the window as I could. I can wait this out, I told myself. I can wait until they go away. I can wait until I'm safe.

* * *

In the end, it was the boredom that got me. The time I spent locked in that apartment, you'd expect I'd run out of food, or need to leave to deal with some other emergency first, but it was the boredom. Sitting around doing nothing with those things outside was too much. I would have paid anything to get out, to roll some dice, to enjoy myself, and I guess I did.

I understand what the Streetlight People want now. They're just empty; watching the world go by like some never ending movie, not able to leave it, going on and on and on and on. All they want is to fill the hole within themselves, to replace the feelings that they lost long ago. I know them now. We're just so hungry. So very, very hungry.

Please. I beg you to help us. Next time you believe you know all you need to know about this world. Next time you believe you're alone at night. Next time you believe you're safe from the shadows.

Don't Stop Believin'.

Dinner with Friends

Curtis Reubens

One of the great advantages of at-will time travel is that you never have to dine alone.

My diary, my dear long-standing companion, informed me that the 26th of May had plenty of free slots for pizza, and I hadn't been there for a while. Clipping on a badge with a red '5' on it, I slipped through time, landing in the same room I'd left; the only difference being, five of me were already there.

One and Two – the two youngest iterations of me, identifiable by the big numbers on their badges – were already there, deep in conversation. Doubtless Two was advising One on some event that was coming up in her life, because really what's the point of time travel if you can't egregiously abuse it for your own betterment?

Three, Eleven and Twelve, meanwhile, were settling in to play Ticket to Ride. You may wish to point out that playing a board game against one's self is unlikely to work – could I not get an unfair advantage from my memories of playing on the other side? Well, you try remembering the details of a game you played six months ago in order to get an edge, and then get back to me. Besides, that would be cheating.

I sat to join them. This sort of thing was regularly how I'd wile away the evenings; socialising, board games and takeaway food in the company of myself. It was a good life, being a time traveller.

* * *

I won the game (obviously; I also came second, third and fourth) just as dinner arrived; all told there were eleven of us, sitting around our lounge eating pizza. There were supposed to be twelve - number Ten had left unexpectedly, Nine said, after delivering some manner of cryptic warning. Eleven nodded sagely, suggested she not worry about it too much. I'd gotten used to spoilers for my own life, as odd as that had been at first; I already knew, among other things, that I'd meet a woman named Angela, fall madly in love, and ultimately break her heart and have mine broken in turn. Not quite sure why I'd start a relationship if I knew it was going to end that way, but I did not want to fuck with causality by not doing so. Maybe I'd just do it out of fear.

I also knew I wasn't going to die before eating this pizza six more times, which was reassuring, and that my powers wouldn't fade and my financial situation (which was pretty affluent; I had perfect knowledge of the future and as a consequence had a six-bedroom London flat and all the books I could ever want. My life was *great*) would remain the same. And, of course, I would have sparkling conversation from superb company for a long time to come.

Slowly, with the pizza gone and night drawing in, people began to slip away. Nine left first; Four and Seven slipped off together for, well, further company; then I left. I was two thirds of the way through a book that wouldn't be published for another three years, and it was *really* good.

Having superpowers is great, guys.

The Bone Season (Review)

Sarah Binney

What makes a story compelling? You'd know it when you saw it, but try to put your finger on why Harry Potter is gripping and you'll find it's harder than you think. Instead, it's much easier to spot what makes writing good when you take a poorly written book and think about what it lacks. Which brings me to Samantha Shannon's *The Bone Season*.

I really wanted to like this book. The cover is lush red and blue, the worldbuilding is comprehensive, the setting fresh and the magic system well-thought out and innovative. But Shannon's storytelling is simply not up to the task of doing her ideas justice.

In a parallel/future Earth, a "plague" of clairvoyance on the population has led to the persecution of all with special abilities – including our protagonist, Paige – by a brutal police state. So far, so Nostradamus-meets-1984. Unfortunately, while I would happily have read a novel about the furtive illegal exploits of London's clairvoyant criminal underground, *The Bone Season* quickly turns into a poorly planned romance flick involving psychic zombies and sparkly angel-vampires. Shannon's prose isn't adroit enough to make the mysteriously powerful and powerfully mysterious Rephaim anything more than poor Twilight ripoffs.

Her characters' voices are indistinguishable from one another, except for the ones whose accents are so clumsily stereotyped that they become pastiches of themselves. (Once I'd heard Jaxon as Brynjolf of the Skyrim Thieves Guild, I couldn't take either seriously.) Put short, *The Bone Season* doesn't ring true.

But perhaps the saddest thing here is Shannon's inability to keep secrets from her readers. There are a paltry number of plot twists, none of which came as a surprise; not just because they were predictable, but because they were foreshadowed to death in the preceding chapter. And the beginning is a textbook exercise in how to bore your readers within three pages. Instead of throwing us headlong into a dangerous alt-London populated by oracles, dreamwalkers, and hydromancers, the first several pages of the book are a plot dump of alternate world history since the mid-nineteenth century. What a waste! A more able writer could have set the scene at the same time as giving readers enough background

information to infer that history for themselves. But Shannon lacks subtlety and her book suffers for it.

Maybe ten years ago teenage me would have been gripped by this. But there are cleverer, more adept, writers of YA fiction out there. Look at *The Hunger Games*, or Laini Taylor's exceptional *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* trilogy. Both throw the reader in at the deep end as regards figuring out how the world works, and both have a vast wealth of secrets and twists to keep you going. And, boy, can Collins and Taylor tell a story. Maybe when Shannon's more experienced her writing ability will improve. After all, she's signed a seven-book deal to continue the *Bone Season* series, and there might be a film in the works. But I'm not holding out for either.

Just because you're aiming your book at teenagers, doesn't mean their standards are any lower than adults'. *The Bone Season* exemplifies the worst of YA fantasy and I'll certainly not be reading its sequel, *The Mime Order*, any time soon.

Oh, and it's like 80% set in Oxford. So if that's not enough to put you all off, I don't know what is.

Extraction

Rory Hennell-James

Ed sprinted down the tunnel, shedding jewellery, ruffles, decorative pouches and floppy cuffs as fast as is possible whilst running for one's life. He had never cared for Ikloan fashions but the ridiculousness had been necessary to play his role for the last few weeks, a role where every accessory could make the difference between saving his homeland and dying for it. Unfortunately, once a woman started chasing him with murder in her eyes Ed generally found it was a bit late to placate her with a daringly placed boutonniere. It *had* worked before but circumstances were somewhat different this time around. For starters her knife was a lot bigger.

More fortunately for Ed, the last few years had seen the crotches of Ikloan men's trousers rise back to a reasonable position, whilst those of women's trousers had sunk so low that his pursuer could barely stride, let alone run. This meant he was steadily gaining ground on Helena. However, he was steadily losing ground on her accompanying guards, free enough to sprint in their traditional pleated skirts.

In the dim light of the anglershrooms Ed almost missed the side passage leading off toward the rendezvous point. As he scrambled to a stop and doubled back on himself he could now make out the glint of the guards' helmets as well as hear their footsteps.

Ed hoped the boat would be there. He was a bit earlier but Lucy usually ran slightly more ahead of schedule than he was running early, so the boat would probably be there. Probably. Not getting their hands on the cipher book clutched in his hand would probably make the Ministry higher-ups pretty unhappy, but not as unhappy as his mother finding out they let him die would. He was pretty sure his mother would find a way to make *him* unhappy about it.

Oh well, Ed thought as he heard Helena curse her trousers, *at least I got to seduce the husband this time.*

* * *

"You know what would be a lot easier than me rowing this thing? Sticking an engine on the back. The boffins make them lighter than Sal these days," Jack grumbled, straining at the oars. The comment was directed to nobody in particular, but accompanied by

a glare at someone in particular. "Even one of those blasted draftphins from the Beastwrights pulling us would be less hassle."

"That may be true," Sister Lucy remonstrated from her seat at the stern, "but it's dubious enough for Ed and I to pose as a Lansagnic couple whilst we're here with you two as 'indentured servants', without using an engine only owned by the Candle Republic Navy or a creature that's illegal in both Lansagne and Iklos. So unfortunately, you need to row."

"Of course, whatever Madame Lucille says. Elf, can you see the bloody cave yet?"

"Not yet," Sal replied, eyes flicking across the cliffs they were rowing past, "Wait, there. One-fifty metres."

"Finally. Now get your pole and keep us off the rocks, we not going to make a fast getaway if the boat's full of holes."

* * *

They made it into the cave with much grumbling but little trouble. Sal leaped onto the narrow platform by the tunnel to tie the boat to a stalagmite, whilst Lucy and Jack stepped out more carefully and stretched their aching legs.

"Right, you know the plan. Jack, charges on the tunnel. Sal, listen for Ed, I'm sure he'll let us know when he's coming. Remember, no mess on yourselves or the boat. The extraction's not done until we get on the ship home, and for that we need to look like a merchant and her husband with attendants, not a bunch of butchers."

Jack set to work, hefting a waterproofed chest out of the bottom of the boat and reverently unpacking bags of the Guild of Alchemists' finest blasting powder. The dwarf's face finally showed some enthusiasm at the thought of fiery destruction, even if it had to be limited to keep the cliff from collapsing on their heads.

Sal fidgeted in her usual place, the way, looking down the corridor being rigged for demolition as well as every other direction, unable to focus on anything for more than half a second. Despite her apparent lack of attention Lucy knew the elf would hear Ed as soon as he got close, far earlier than she or Jack would.

For her part in the preparations, Lucy stood off to one side, breathing deeply to centre herself. Ed had been

very pleased with himself when he found the tunnel out of Helena's manse and assured the rest of the team he could slip away undetected after he got the book, but Lucy would believe that when she saw it. She rested one hand on the comforting oak of her staff, feeling the etched representations of her companion-spirits under her palm. With the other hand she drew her necklace out from her blouse, a simple copper Unity-disc. She hummed a soft melody as she waited, a melody from home, from before all this.

* * *

Sal's ears twitched. She heard shouts. Ed was coming. With company.

"Nearly here. Thirty secs."

Sister Lucy looked up, put away her pendant.

"I presume he's bringing company?"

"Four in armour, one in trousers."

"How do you - not important. Time for a quickleaf, there's likely more following. Jack, are the fuses set?"

The dwarf nodded, fiddling with a sparker, stepping into the boat. Sal whipped a packet from a pocket. Ripped off the wax paper. Slapped the Wrought nettle-leaf to the side of her neck.

The human and the dwarf, who normally moved as slowly as if they were underwater, were now undertreacle. The priestess slipped on her knuckleduster, each ring bearing the symbol of a different element, with the speed of a continent slipping on a new mountain range. The engineer settled into the rower's seat, fingering the sparker for the charges down the corridor as feverishly as a tree-root strokes the bedrock. Now she had time to think, to really look and pay attention to what was going on around her.

Lucy stood proudly, staff ready at her side. But behind the steely gaze was a glint of fear. A tiny, well-hidden fear and something else too, regret perhaps. What there was to regret, Sal didn't know. But now wasn't the time, and Sal wasn't the kind of person, to pry. There was a different glint in Jack's eye, between the hair and beard barely contained in braids. A slightly worrying glint, of eagerness. Eagerness to flick the switch on that sparker.

Sal drew her knives, checking their weight. She tossed them gently from hand to hand, five times in the space of a human's blink. The new coating on Percy dragged on the air slightly, enough to change the balance a little if she had to throw him. She'd complain to the boffins when they got home, but they wouldn't listen; this version was "thirty percent more effective on humans, so don't get it near Ed or Lucy". Reese still span as true as ever, the grip of worn leather reassuringly firm as she caught him. She could hear Ed and his pursuers coming up to the final corner, so she strolled over to the tunnel entrance, waiting out of sight on one side as Lucy slowly drifted into place on the other.

Ed finally sprinted past, about the speed of a casual walk. She heard the guards inching along the corridor behind him and readied herself to move. Just as Ed threw himself into the boat the first guard emerged. Her right foot snaked out, hooking the guard's ankle. As he fell she brought Reese up to bite open his jugular. The second guard had no time to think, let alone stop, and careened into Percy, held at stomach height. His thick leather armour kept the tip from piercing too deeply, but one nick on his belly would be enough in a few seconds. As his limbs began to stiffen his momentum carried Sal's left arm forward, allowing her to pivot on her left foot and swing her right up into the third guard's cheek. The woman's brittle human neck snapped in an instant.

Sal was now facing away from the tunnel and could hear the fourth guard edging his way behind her. The quickleaf was wearing off and she was too off-balance to turn back. She dove forward instead, throwing herself ahead of his descending blade. Lucy was finally starting to move and shout something to one of her friends, words distorted by their slowness. She stood firm as Sal rolled past her and brought her staff down, the carved head pointing along the corridor. A blast of wind, unfelt by all but the final guard, picked him up and tossed him down the passageway. His crash into the far wall was cushioned by a woman in those ridiculous Ikloan trousers, just emerging round the corner.

As the roar of the wind subsided the priestess made her way to the boat, where Sal sat, panting, her world speeding up, back to normal. The sparker clicked.

Ragnar the Orange

Mark Johnson

Oh, there once was a student whose soul was all blue,
Who came stumbling 'cross CUSFS and Jómshorg the
New.

And the student did lament their discoloured soul,
As they moaned that their coursework was taking its
toll.

But then they went quiet, our student of blue,
When they met Jómshvikingar and CUSFSites, who
knew;

Of discussions and film nights and drinking of mead,
And chainwriting and TTBA to read!

And so then came chatter and laughter so free,
As the merry companions flowed over with glee.

And the soul of our student was stained blue no
more-
It turned orange and traced out a ward on the floor!

Drake's 7

Samos Ottewill-Soulsby

Gentlefolk, the Players of Samos do humbly present
for your kind estimation and mild diversion,

Space Battleship Mary Rose;

or

Singeing the Queen of Elfland's Eyelashes;

or

Drake's 7

For a moment, the shortest moment, the world was familiar and old. As Captain Drake crossed the main deck to the starboard bow, his boots feeling the reassuring solidity of the oak beneath them, he could tell himself that when he looked out he would see water, that his paces were made to the heave of the waves and that in a moment the silence would be broken by the harsh cry of the gull. So convinced was he by memories belonging to another man, from another time and another place, that he almost raised his pipe to his mouth, his arm brushing against his ruff, before remembering the helmet that protected him from the abyss. There was no sway beneath him, for his ship sailed on winds altogether more ethereal than its original builders could ever have conceived. His company, hard at work affecting much needed repairs, might ignore the ghostly blue light that illuminated them, but he could not. So Francis Drake leaned against the side of the *Mary Rose* and looked across the void of space, under the icy gaze of Neptune.



The late twenty-first century had seen humanity triumphant. In every endeavour it seemed to be on the edge of revolution. Progress in psychoanalysis had allowed for a full understanding of the human mind, creating a world devoid of mental illness and anti-social behaviour. Advances in cloning technology promised an end to scarcity. Meanwhile, the great fleets of the East Io Company were opening up the Solar System and exploring new frontiers. It was to be these very fleets that brought humanity to the edge of destruction. The wastes they traversed were not as empty as was thought and it was only a matter of time before those who watched decided to venture out of the darkness.

When they came, they were merciless. The bases on Prospero, Miranda and Caliban were seized, their populations vanished. Sycorax was destroyed entire. As Earth reeled, a message arrived from the leader of the aggressors. She proclaimed herself to be Gloriana, Queen of the Fairies, an ancient race who dominated the galaxy, come to punish humanity for its audacity. In return for peace, she demanded an annual oblation of children.

At first, a coalition of states, led by the Vatican, attempted to reason and negotiate with Gloriana, but as they began stealing people from Earth, tensions rose. At last, the young King of Britain, Henry IX, broke with Rome and decided to take the fight to the Fairies. The consequences were disastrous. Superior Fairy technology allowed them to detect the metal ships and their propulsion systems. The Royal Navy was ambushed and annihilated.

*In this dark hour, Henry and Prime Minister Cromwell decided upon a desperate gambit, staking Britain's future on its past. A wooden ship, soaring on Wave Motion Sails, would be able to travel the solar system unseen. Short on time, rather than build afresh, they chose instead to convert the old Tudor warship, the *Mary Rose*, then resting in a museum in Portsmouth. But who could captain and crew such an unconventional craft?*

The marines and mechanics of modernity would have their place in the company, but to master these tides and currents would require an altogether different, older sensibility. Psychohistory here came to rescue. Using the finest archive sources and neuroscience, a group of cloned humans had the memories and identities of some of the greatest inhabitants of the sixteenth century at the DRUM Centre.

Now, more than four centuries since any of them had last since service, both ship and their reconstituted crew were set loose upon seas stranger than any could have predicted, for one last titanic clash between the forces of England and Elfland, determined to ensure that if humanity should be destroyed, its last hours would be worthy of proud memory...



Drake could not pretend to be entirely at ease with his new environment, but it did have the occasional advantage. The steady gusts of the Wave Motion Sails created very little rocking, generally keeping the deck steady. He concentrated, checking the distances and angles involved, made his decision and moved swiftly. The ball rolled gently before stopping one space inch

away from the jack. Satisfied, he raised himself up to the sound of First Mate Raleigh's polite applause. 'Very good sir'.

'Trouble Raleigh?' Drake couldn't entirely trust his second in command. He knew the man had wanted the command of the ship for himself. Still, Raleigh was efficient and effective in his job, and provided a certain amount of comfort in his familiarity.

'No sir, repairs to the ship are progressing as planned'. Another miracle of this modern age. No matter how damaged the ship got in each engagement, somehow the engineers managed to fix it, leaving the *Mary Rose* looking like new, ready for the next battle. He would have to ask Bacon to explain it. Thinking of the Chief Scientific Officer recalled him to his duty. 'How is Bacon?' he asked.

Raleigh replied, 'Dead sir. He froze on Ymir while conducting experiments. Again'.

'That's inconvenient. Are there any moons he hasn't perished on yet'?

'I believe Ganymede still awaits that honour sir'. At Drake's glare he hurriedly continued, 'the DRUM is working on the problem and he should be restored to us in two space days'.

Drake suppressed a sigh. The ship's engineers could keep the *Mary Rose* sailing, but none of them had Bacon's genius for managing the Instauration Engines. 'Anything else Raleigh?'

'Sir, you did ask to be reminded to inspect the prisoners'. Drake gave an inward sigh. Unfortunately the man was right, the bowls would have to wait. He dismissed Raleigh and made his way over to the secure holds. As he walked, he tried not to think about the DRUM.

As far as he could determine, Drake had been resurrected as a new clone three times. For all that he understood the military necessity of this, he could not help but worry about the possible consequences for his immortal soul. Chaplain Foxe offered some comfort, but Drake remained haunted by visions of damnation. More than brimstone disturbed his rest. The memories of his past selves, his past bodies, afflicted him at night, with none of Bacon's drugs offering him much aid. He closed his eyes, only to encounter the pain and the noise from when one of culverins had overheated and exploded during a skirmish off Vulcan, shredding his body. His mind recalled taking a cut when duelling the Traniborus of Amaurot and was baffled to find his arm unscarred and unblemished from the occasion.

It was almost a relief to reach the hold. The marines on guard saluted him as he arrived. Their report was short. Once the captives had realised no one would answer their riddles they had chosen to remain still and silent, resting as if in a trance. Probably communing with their heathen gods, Drake told himself. He bent to look through the bars. There were three of them, alike sufficient to be sisters, although decidedly weird ones if so. The *Mary Rose* had successfully bushwhacked a Fairy supply ship travelling to Ceres. The prisoners had been taken from the wreckage in the hopes of wringing information out of them, but in vain. So far they had resisted all the best efforts of Intelligence Officer Marlowe to extract anything from them.

At first glance they could have been human. It took a moment for the eye to observe their height, just under eight feet, or their unnatural slenderness, their delicate waists and arms. The scientists used this as evidence to hypothesise a race long accustomed to space faring, born on low-gravity worlds. Their hair was blonde, their skin ivory. Most striking were their bizarrely long eyelashes. As he watched, the one sat on the left opened an eye, revealing a violet pupil, and smiled. 'Well met Dragon', she said. 'You provide our Queen with much amusement. Continue and she may be forced to keep you alive'.

Drake had to prevent himself from lurching back. In the space second it took to rally, the fairy had returned to immobility.

Chief Navigator More was not Drake's favourite man. The man was a Papist after all, and had burned men for the distinction between love and charity. But he was formidably intelligent, with a surprising flair for dealing with the alien races beyond this system. His relationship with King Utopos had granted the *Mary Rose* a safe harbour more than once. Better than that, his arrival in the hold allowed Drake a distraction from the unsettling fairies.

If More was a strange ally, his companion was more bizarre still. The Navigator had recruited her from Utopos' court, although it was unlikely even he knew exactly what she was. The Dark Lady, as the crew had come to call her, was not one for answering questions. She glided in with More with the grace of a born predator. As with the fairies, her initial appearance was human, but no human possessed her colour, a constantly shifting mix of deep purples, dark blues and blacks. Her eyes were too large and lacked any hint of iris or pupil, emitting a steady glow. Below her waist moved a mass of tentacles. For all that, she was beautiful.

Only More seemed to have her confidence. In this, she was not so unusual. The men of the sixteenth century had found much of their new world confusing, but few things were more baffling than the unnatural position of women. More had proved quicker to adapt than many of his fellows, claiming that the educated, active females crewing the ship reminded him of his daughters. Perhaps this connection explained why it felt so natural to call the Dark Lady 'she'. Whatever her nature, she was unquestionably the most valuable presence on the ship. If not for her ability to jam the Fairy communications, the *Mary Rose* would almost certainly have been caught half a space year back. If not for her talents in infiltration, the rescue of Foxe from the Fairy prison camps on Prospero would have been impossible.

The Navigator explained their presence. 'I thought perhaps a non-human mind might prove more successful at extracting useful knowledge'. His voice was gentle. Drake had initially thought that meeting one of the monsters of his childhood in the flesh would banish the old terrors, but the steel in the man scared him more than his old priest's stories. Not even the presence of two alien races in the room could quite overcome his uneasiness in the Papist's company. He gave his approval, and began to leave.

If Drake's attention had been focussed on More, there were others whose gaze had been directed otherwise. He found his Chief of Communications awaiting him just beyond the secure hold, his eyes fixed on the Dark Lady. Drake's youth had been frittered away centuries ago, but still he recognised the look on Shakespeare's face.

'She's not human.'

'But she is magnificent sir'. Shakespeare saluted and tried to concentrate. 'The King sends his regards and instructions'.

Drake found that he did not quite have the heart for Henry's commands.

'She's from a different planet'.

'To shun the heavens leads men to hell, sir'.

Drake fought an overwhelming urge to punch the man. 'God's truth, there are hundreds of women on this ship. Can none of them entrance you?'

Shakespeare grinned, 'I think that even in the lands of the Amazons, she would rout the field.' He shrugged, 'as for the men and women of this age, they learned all my best lines in the schoolroom, which complicates seduction'. His accent suddenly lost the West Country

as he parodied himself. 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? No that's a trite and tired cliché'.

Drake couldn't help but smile a little. 'Marlowe seems to have no such difficulties'.

'That's because nobody reads him. His material is all fresh.'

Drake changed tack. 'But how can you possibly make one born under an alien sun understand your feelings?'

'I don't know that yet. But I do know this, that there exist in our language the correct words, which when placed in the right order will allow my tongue to do justice to my heart. In any case, the message sir?'

The captain studied Shakespeare. 'When you first emerged from the DRUM you were appointed royal spokesman. What happened?'

Shakespeare winced. 'There were differences in style...'

Drake waited patiently. 'If you must know sir, it occurred to me that there would be little sense in wasting precious time by writing a brand new battle speech for a king called Henry when I had a perfectly serviceable one already prepared'.

'I think I begin to understand.'

'How was I supposed to know that it would actually be remembered from this day to the ending of the world?'

These last words returned Drake to the present. 'What does our liege will of us?'

Shakespeare sobered. 'He sends his greetings...and'. He looked Drake in the eye. 'The Armada has entered the system sir. A hundred ships forming the vanguard are already docked at the Monastery on Caliban. Our orders are to destroy them, or perish in the attempt'.

Drake made sure his voice was steady as he dismissed his officer. He doubted Shakespeare was fooled, the man had altogether too acute an eye, but some duties were necessary. Casting the thought from his mind, he returned to the deck. It was time for bowls.



Later, after bowls, Raleigh found him by the stern, a little patch of calm in the madness as the ship was prepared for a Wave Motion journey to Caliban. Dinner, as was nearly always the case it seemed, had been potato. Drake was beginning to regret

introducing it to Europe. Bacon's curious mechanical man had passed through, distributing the ale ration. Drake nodded his permission to allow Raleigh to approach. They leaned against the railing in companionable peace, sipping their drinks.

Raleigh broke the silence. 'Do you miss her?' There was no need for him to clarify who.

In the background Marlowe could be heard swearing at the mechanical man.

'Of course'.

'She was a formidable woman'.

'She was our queen'.

'That she was'.

Had Drake meant that to be reproving? Perhaps, but instead it cemented them in their shared memories.

Drake waited for the next question, the obvious one, but it didn't come. Perhaps Raleigh was the only person alive who could understand. Instead the First Mate straightened. 'She'd have sent the Fairies fleeing to the gates of hell for sanctuary'.

Drake took another mouthful. 'That makes it our job I suppose'. He glanced at Raleigh. 'Any regrets?'

Raleigh thought for a moment. 'I wish we weren't on a ship that had already sunk once before'.



Whatever wit had first decided to grant the Fairy bases the label Monastery had had a point. Observing through the probes, Drake could cast his eyes over a network of cloisters and towers. Yet the structure he was looking at was the same size as Portsmouth and no monastery Drake had ever seen had housed anything quite as dangerous as the Fairies. The fleet rested within the docks, an arsenal of knives waiting to be blooded. They were the colour of fresh snow and looked sleek and nasty. For the moment, the *Mary Rose* was invisible, its wooden hull camouflaging it. Any closer and the knives would come out of their sheathes.

Chaplain Foxe was leading the faithful in prayer. Drake should be with them, but his attention needed to be elsewhere. The marines were assembled on deck. He hoped they wouldn't be needed today. Marlowe, standing among them, clearly felt otherwise, as he grinned at Drake. He was flanked by two cynocephali, who had been recruited in the Sirius star system. They were not the only representatives of the monstrous

creatures on board. Among the gunners waiting by their mortal engines were not a few blemmyes, whose curious stature made them comfortable in their cramped stations. The Fairies had not made themselves well loved across the stars and there were many who had been happy to mark their names on the ship roll for whom Earth meant little. By the massed culverins and guns, Bacon would be putting the final touches to the warm-up act they had planned.

Drake wanted to tell himself that he was unhappy. It was true that he was worried. Too many parts of the plan were beyond his control. It was most certainly true that he was scared. But he had to admit to himself as he confirmed his ship's disposition, that this felt altogether too natural. He felt like an old hunting dog hearing the cry once again.

More approached him. The headset he was wearing was flashing, indicating that someone was talking to him. The Dark Lady had slipped out earlier to infiltrate the Monastery and was reporting back to her handler remotely. 'She's done it', More confirmed, 'their detection systems are down. The Lady estimates that it will take them seven space minutes to notice'.

Deer danced in Drake's heart as he heard this. They were on. 'Their fortress guns?' he asked. 'Are also incapacitated', More answered.

'Well then', Drake straightened, feeling a broad smile stretch across his face, 'time for a dissolution then'. More gave him a reproving look.



Drake bowed and fire tracked his throw.

They were upon the Fairy fleet, invisible and unwatched for. The *Mary Rose* announced its presence with two fireballs, expelled at astonishing speed from deep in the ship. Bacon and his mechanical man had built the launchers and now supervised their use. Now Drake guided their firing, picturing invisible jacks among the ships to aid his aim. It was easier than picturing the Fairies about to die.

Two fireballs, one either side, then two more, and then the *Mary Rose* plunged into the midst of the developing firestorm, all cannons sounding in the confusion. Where the fire only scorched and warped, the guns ripped and tore. Alarms sounded as the Fairies attempted to respond to the withering broadsides. In a fair engagement, any one of these ships was superior to the *Mary Rose*, faster, better

armed, and stronger. But here, trapped in narrow confines that only permitted the use of their stern guns, manned by crews who had just woken up mid-conflagration, they were as helpless as hens facing the fox.

The guns of the Monastery were silent. Amidst the chaos, Drake perceived explosions bursting out from beneath its walls. Clearly the Dark Lady had decided the moment for subterfuge had passed. The base on Caliban might well be rendered as unusable as the burning fleet. As Drake considered launching an assault on the Monastery, a round of fire from one of the still operative enemy ships convinced him to get out while their luck held. Marlowe was screaming, waving his firearm, desperate for boarders. Reaching the Monastery, the *Mary Rose* turned in order to sweep back through the carnage, steered by Raleigh. Flying debris was becoming as great a hazard as missiles. Drake was continually astonished at the durability of his ship. He directed another fireball where a knot of Fairy craft had escaped damage and were beginning to show signs of mobility.

Drake bowed as his ship danced beneath him, a queen of the seas rescued from ruin to wreak havoc by a different world. Drake bowed as his crew scrambled, their eyes too fixed on their tasks to note the mad joy in their captain. Drake bowed as Fairy ships broke and burst. Drake bowed, filled with a happiness he had not known in centuries.



They fled the wreckage, leaving the surviving Fairies to lick their wounds. The Dark Lady re-joined them, following her secret paths. The ship was in celebration as only a working vessel can be, riotous carnival on top of, yet somehow not quite disturbing the skeleton crew required to keep them moving. Among the sober few was the captain. He had given orders for the mechanical man to serve drinks gladly, and made sure to move around his ship, praising those he knew to have distinguished themselves. But his fierce elation had deserted him with the battle, as it always did, and a grim helpless mood gripped him. When someone congratulated him for vanquishing the Fairies, he could only retort that they had merely singed the Queen of Elfland's eyelashes. Drake's mind felt clouded as he brooded amid jubilant sailors, his thoughts returning again and again to the spectre of the Armada. He may have broken the vanguard, but the cream of the Fairy fleet, a thousand strong, had yet to be faced. Nor did he think Gloriana or her

admirals so foolish that they would fall for the same trick again.

Once, a long time ago, Drake, a different Drake, the same Drake, had sailed around the world. It had taken him three years. The world had been so large then. Now he travelled between planets and ambushed ships off moons while talking to peoples born under different stars. He realised he wanted to do it again. Cross the Atlantic, brave the Horn, see California (he heard it had changed somewhat), wander through the Spice Isles, chance the Cape and then onto Guinea.

How many space hours passed he could not say, but he could feel the post-battle listlessness lifting a little when Shakespeare arrived at a run, gasping. He threw a salute so sloppy, even by the writer's normal abysmal standards, that Drake would have been compelled to comment, but the man spoke before he could say anything. 'Sir, you're needed in the prisoner's hold'.

'Now?'

'Now sir, very now!'

Drake followed the frantic Shakespeare, trepidation growing. The *Mary Rose* and England needed the victory at Caliban so desperately. He gave a prayer that nothing would undermine it. In the hold he was greeted by Raleigh, more discomposed than Drake had ever thought possible. The great explorer and soldier babbled even as Drake moved past him to inspect the prisoners. 'I just thought as everyone was having a good time, that it would be a nice thing. We never tried giving the prisoners them and I thought it was worth a try. They just went for each other'.

As Drake peered into the prison, he understood the reason for the distress. In the quarters that three Fairies had once shared, only one was still breathing. The bodies of the others lay prone on the floor, their blood, blue and sweet smelling, staining the wood beneath them. The corpses had been rent and torn to make them almost unrecognisable. Drake almost gagged. The surviving Fairy was also much changed. Deep scars on their face testified that their dead comrades had not perished tamely. Gone was the old infuriating calm and poise. Instead the alien rocked and scampered across the cage, screeching like a Barbary ape. At the sight of the Drake it lurched suddenly to the bars, mad eyes staring into him, mouth open to reveal recently broken teeth. 'More potatoes?' it asked with the keen, hopeful, desperation of an addict.

Peace on Earth

Greg Weir

Sometimes it's the little things that make all the difference.

A drip of water down the back of the neck's not so bad, you might think. But at the end of a long day on the job with no progress in sight, that raindrop tickling its way down my feathers could be all it takes to make me throw off my coat and take to the skies just for one blessed minute of comfort.

Not tonight, though.

Tonight, I take a long drag on my cigarette, watch the smoke curl upwards, and try to work out where I go from here.

The problem: I can't find my charge. For a guardian angel, that's bad news. It also really, really shouldn't happen.

I wish I could say I knew she was trouble the moment she walked into my office - that'd mean I'd laid eyes on her at some point. All I had to go on at this point was a photo passed down from my boss, along with her name and address. Paula Merrill, at - actually, guess I'd better not mention the address. Same reason I don't know *why* I'm guarding her; things go wrong, and the more the other side knows of the plan, the more they can screw us over.

It's times like tonight when I could really start to resent that.

I'd checked the place out, but from the dust around the door it looked like nobody'd been there in a couple of days. Quick chat with the landlady didn't get me much more than that - I could see in her face that the "friend of a friend" routine hadn't convinced her. I wasn't surprised, for all it's the best we can usually manage. There's an itch at the back of the neck that keeps us speaking truth - at least from a certain point of view - so we work with what we've got.

I'd got as far as I could with her, then poked around the place seeing if I could pick up Paula's trail; still no dice. That's when I knew this was going to be a tough one.

Tracking's usually one of the advantages I have over a mortal in my position. All being right with the world,

the moment I set eyes on somewhere my charge had been in the last decade or two, I'd have a trail to follow. The fact that I can't find her from an apartment she'd been living in when this job came down from upstairs? That means interference.

Anyway. Leaning on a wall in the rain's not getting me anywhere. I do have a plan; it's just not a good one.

It's time to visit an old friend.

* * *

"Hey, Ben."

The surprise in his face only lasts for a second, but that's more than long enough. I hate doing this. Maybe that's why I never show my face here. Maybe the fact I never show my face here without a favour to ask is why it's so painful for both of us.

"Sam. Long time no see." I can't tell if he means to put that sting in the end, but...

He pulls a bottle off the shelf and inclines it towards me. "Drink?"

"Not on the job, Ben, you know me."

"Not a social call then?"

I have to laugh. We must've done this a dozen times in the decade since Ben... Since Ben got back on his feet, let's say. Since he opened his bar.

"Not this time."

I take a seat by the bar as he wipes his hands on a cloth - a clean one, I notice. Some habits die hard.

"Got a job that could be going better - I can't find the client."

He grins at that, and like every time the old familiar sight sends a shiver down my spine. "Checked down the back of the sofa?"

"Ben, please. I wish I could stay and talk, but time's passing."

That was the wrong thing to say. "You could, though. If you really wanted to stay, you wouldn't walk out of that door."

“Yeah, it could be that simple,” I snap back. “I’d just spend the rest of my damn life knowing the face of a woman I could’ve saved, and-”

“And you don’t want to add another one to the list?”

“Ben, for the love of all that’s holy you do NOT want to go there!”

“Yeah? You’ve seen how far I’m - daaamn.”

I’m drawing breath to say something I’ll regret when he pulls himself together and snaps - “Sam! No smoking indoors!”

“I - what?”

And that makes me stop just long enough to realise my eyes are glowing and my coat’s about to catch fire.

* * *

By the time I’m sure my coat’s not smouldering any more, neither is my temper.

“Sorry, Ben, I-” I sigh. “You’re right and you know it. I remember them all. I spend half of All Souls lighting candles, but this is” - he joins in, a bitter half-smile twisting across his face - “the way it has to be.”

We look at each other for a long moment. Ben’s the first to speak.

“So, what did you need?”

“Like I say, got a missing client. I can’t find her trail so it looks like one of- looks like someone’s hiding her.”

He’s far too sharp for me, of course. “So you need me to poke around my side of the tracks and find out who it is, yeah?”

Suddenly, I can’t find a word to say.

“I fell, Sam. No point beating around the bush. What’ve you got for me?”

I can’t look him in the eyes - it’s all I can do to break the silence by pulling the photo out of my pocket and passing it over to him.

“Oh. Oh, shit.”

I’m getting worried now. “Problem?”

“You could say that. There’s a... friend of mine who keeps an eye on things for me.” I nod - I know enough to be sure I don’t want to know any more. “Came in last night with some photos of one of the local players and their new best friend. Your charge is hanging with a demon.”

“Just when I thought my day couldn’t get any worse.”

He tells me what I need to know. No favours owed, like always; Ben’s got... a certain amount of freedom to help out his oldest friend.

Before I go, I give him the warmest embrace I can. His arms are the first to brush over my wings in weeks.

“We miss you, you know. Zach said the other day...” I trail off.

“If Zach wants to see me, they’re free to drop in any time. Same goes for you - I know you get time to yourself, remember?”

And there’s that smile again.

“Yeah. Yeah, I should come and see you sometime. Between jobs.” And just like every time I say that, I really do mean it.

* * *

I was expecting an expensive club. I’ve seen the type a hundred times - the fallen have habits as much as we do, and the ones who get power are always the ones who want it. Most of their haunts drip with conspicuous consumption; when I reach the address Ben had given me and see an understated apartment block, I really start to worry.

I’m not going to be able to just walk up and ask to see Paula. Most times, I’d be able to ignore the walls and keep an eye on her from here - assuming she’s in there, that is - but whatever was stopping me tracking left that one dead in the water. That left me two options.

The easy way involves a lot of glowing and a whole lot of explaining myself. We’ve got rules to follow - bilateral divine disarmament, because neither side wants open war. My usual tricks are too minor to be a problem - I can play around with my own perception of the world as much as I like. It’s when I start laying blessings on mortals or taking to the skies that I’d

have questions to answer, and I really don't want to give downstairs the right to any reparations.

That leaves something I learnt a couple of hundred years ago, and I'm hoping it's obscure enough the bad guys haven't planned for it.

So I huddle out of the rain under a fire escape, slow my breathing, and try not to think about what happens if someone finds my unconscious body.

A few seconds later, I'm a fly on the wall of the apartment. Paula - I recognise her from the photo - is sitting on the sofa, a woman I don't recognise just handing her a cup of tea.

"Thanks, Kath."

So that's the fallen. They look... friendly, to be honest. They give Paula a kind smile and drop into an armchair.

The two of them chat about nothing in particular for a while. It's easy enough to keep track of, even when my gracious insect host decides it wants to investigate what's left of the tea and narrowly escapes Kath's defensive swat.

"Go on, Paula. Get some fresh air - it'll help, I swear."

I'm not sure what my adversary's plan is here, but I know an opportunity when I see one.

* * *

By the time Paula leaves, I'm looking through my own eyes again. There's plenty of time to get to the park before she does; leaned against an old birch I'm about as inconspicuous as I can hope to be. Just a tired stranger having a quiet smoke away from the crowds.

That gives me plenty of time to watch Paula as she strolls around, and I can finally work out what's going on here.

It's not good.

It's well hidden - well enough that without a few minutes to make sense of what I'm seeing, without the openness a guardian has to their charge, I'd see nothing. It's like there's a cloud of smoke coiled inside her heart. It's whispering to her - she knows Kath, they're old friends, she's just the person to drop in on

when she wants to be out of the house for a few days...

This is serious theurgy on my charge. It's an insult and it's a sin and it's not how things are meant to be.

My lungs boil with power as I fill them with every ounce of my authority.

Raindrops glitter in the soft light around my head.

With a rush of power that'll wake every sensitive within a mile, I breathe a blessing.

* * *

Paula spots Kath out walking as she's heading back to the apartment. She stops to talk to her 'old friend' and - there it is. The fallen hides it well, but this was not how things were meant to go.

It's too late for me to turn around without drawing more attention to myself, so I keep moving. I watch a passing car to stop myself staring; there's no reason for them to recognise me, anyway. I just have to stay calm and not draw attention.

That goes about as well as you might expect.

Kath glances my way just as I'm getting close; their eyes widen with surprise and I know I'm busted. I walk on, determined not to escalate the situation, as they give Paula a brief hug and the two part ways.

I've just made it past when I feel the leaden ring of theurgy. I'm spinning on my heel as I hear the screech of tires.

No time to think, but I was made for this.

I shove her out of the way. Red-hot agony shoots through me.

I'm pinned under a car.

Paula's not.

Good.

She picks herself up and hurries over. The driver's getting out, babbling, he doesn't know what happened - he wouldn't, not when something like that hit him - and somehow I'm taking all this in despite the pain.

Fear sparks in Paula's eyes as she meets my gaze -
fear for me or fear of me?

"Hey, don't be scared. You're safe," I gasp.

Then I black out.

* * *

I could talk about my charge visiting me in hospital -
the stranger who saved her life. I could talk about her
confusion as the malediction wore off and 'Kath'
slipped out of her memories. I could talk about
paperwork, my boss and I working through the trails
that said our fallen foe was, legally, allowed to fuck
around like that. I could talk about whose decade-old
transgression they cashed in to throw a car at my
charge.

I could speculate for hours about the reasons for all
this, and what the other side stood to gain.

I could even talk about an otherwise forgettable tree,
and the lease of new life it got when a pissed-off angel
paused just long enough to see that blessing their
mortal charge was exactly what the bad guys wanted
them to do.

But honestly? That's not what's important here.

What's important is the smile on Paula's face when
she visited her sister for the first time after the crash.
What's important is her joy that she's still alive, and
simply that she is.

I don't know how she fits into the plan. I don't know
why I'm guarding her.

But she's alive and she's happy.

Sometimes it's the little things that make all the
difference.