

Transplanetary Tendrils



Emily
Booth

TRANSPLENETARY TENDRILS BEGIN ASSIMILATION

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Transplanetary Tendrils Begin Assimilation

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Michaela D (@mdg._art on Instagram)

Outgoing Editor's Address

I think this went rather well, all things considered. We've got six chainwritten stories in here—and some spectacularly detailed worldbuilding for at least one of them—as well as some original works. With any luck, there'll be something to catch your fancy... whether you prefer the whimsy of being transformed into your favourite drink as soon as someone looks away, the grim death by poison and flame of a living airship, or the hard SF mystery of some very odd rocks indeed...

Easter term—and this is the Easter term magazine, even if I haven't released it until summer; life is busy—is a tough one, and we leave chainwriting well alone for that reason. But it can also be richly rewarding, and after many successes for CUSFS&JtN [this is the full, cursed acronym] this term, I think we can say that's what's more important.

Now, at last, I feel my editorial power fading. The red is leaking from my pen [that's not actually anything to do with my editorial power; my red pen just leaks] and though my knowledge of punctuation remains sharp, I no longer feel the need to correct other people on theirs. [Much.] [Though if we end up with something in here that looks like *The Eye of Argon*, I'm going to lodge formal complaints.] The strength of a thousand editors is being transferred to Sol, and their frail mortal form is swelled and boosted by this ascension to Godhead.

Overall, the year's been pretty spectacular, both with individual and chainwritten fiction, and I've been consistently impressed with people's stories and poetry. Keep it up!

Maces and Masonry,

Alex, TTBA Editor 2023-24

Incoming Editor's Address

[INITIATING CHAIRBEING POWER-DOWN SEQUENCE]

[DISABLING HUMOROUS MEETING QUIPS]

[ENABLING TTBA EDITOR MODE]

Greetings, my tremendous TTBA readers

You may recognise me from my humble work as all-powerful chairbeing of this society, but now it is time that I step down into the even more humble and even more all-powerful (when regarding CLANG guidelines at least) role of TTBA Editor.

I think that the TTBA is absolutely one of the coolest and most fulfilling parts of CUSFS - I particularly like to bring it up in interviews where I can claim to be a published author (and neglect to bring up that it is self-published and that the work is very silly chainwriting).

I am always very impressed by the writing abilities of our members, even if sometimes the chains go incredibly off-the-rails (I am particularly fond of "Portrait of the Author as a Young Newt" in Lent 2023 - definitely worth a read). I find this magazine to be important as a platform where people from different backgrounds and with different abilities can express themselves and their stories, and I'm looking forward to being able to work with you all to help enable that.

Axes and Alchemy (continuing on the trend of variations on "Swords and Sorcery")

-Sol

X-Chairbeing 2023-2024

TTBA Editor 2024-2025



Fairies' Aire and the Death Waltz

Sarah Bewick, Emily Betts, Daisy L, Jensen Rocha, Phoebe Fay, Doctor Waverley Weird, Lucy R, Dan Scott

CW: none

Illustrious lights gleamed from the flowers in the garden of the Fairy King. Between the soft pine trees, Lliants watched through his shard-eyes. Nought but glimpses returned to him: flashes of faraway stars, played upon a merry harp, like a wedding dress undone.

Somewhere in the crowd, Meosa was watching too, her glowing eyes fixed upon a fae couple waltzing in the air above a spiceberry tree.

'Sir, have you no conscience, so to toy with a lady?' quoth the maiden: a tall, comely figure in the flower of youth, though perhaps a less forward lady should have been ashamed of her heightly stature. 'If you mean to dance with me all the night, you should have booked my card. I have promised my hand to at least three hopefuls tonight alone.'

'Madam, I beseech you,' said the man clad all in olive leaves. 'I have never been to these climes before and of all its natural beauties, the creature with whom I now dance is the most bewitching. But one more dance and I will let you fly to whom you will.'

Meosa crept closer, claws digging into the bark of the tree. A little more listening – and wouldn't her master be livid when he saw the ugly mouse of truth that his spy dragged home and dumped purringly upon his pillow. So she chose to dance with *him*, did she?

From his own tree, not so far from Meosa as both of them would have preferred, Lliants at last caught a glimpse of the single shard of the evening he was here for: olive leaves in the starlight.

The princess' voice rang out across the ball like a temple-bell, and the sparkling lights became grey as the mists closed in.

"Gentlefolk," said she, with a smile that flickered across the crowd like static, "I do believe 'tis my turn to call the next dance, and so I call it... a waltz."

A waltz!

Sibilant hisses and coos of excitement oscillated across the assembled lords and ladies, and Lliants had to restrain himself from letting out a soft chitter. The princess knew precisely what she was doing. A waltz was... *intimate*, it was *clandestine*. It was for the entangling of hands and gazes and hearts.

It was Lliants' chance.

Clutching the shimmer of his frock coat about him, he shouldered eagerly through the crowd, shard-eyes fixed on one man alone, reflecting a hundred jewel-faceted shades of olive—

A dark figure slid into his path. Lliants nigh upset the lady completely; her chalice plummeted from her palm; he drew back, horrified, a courteous apology already forming on his lips—before he saw it was no Lady at all.

"Oh! I must apologise, Mr. Lliants," Meosa's lips curled, gaze still keenly attendant on the man in olive leaves and the maiden laughing on his arm. The spy fractured under his vision, a dozen darting images; the snub-nosed, twilight-dressed woman giving way to something sleek and dark-furred and feline. Through her lucent eyes his waistcoat splintered into carapace and his pressed sleeves into elytra. Like always recognised like. "I didn't mean to *get in your way*."

"Miss. Meosa, the fault is all mine," Lliants snarled, glimpsing with sunk heart the pair already retreating, opportunity withering like an olive leaf in winter. "Now if you would allow me—" Lliants sought to move past her, yet couple after couple slipped past before his shard-eyes, and a chill quivered through his wings. Eyes had begun to linger like fireflies upon them. To enter the dance without a partner would be a *disastrous* breach of etiquette.

Meosa, three devious steps ahead, located a bashful – viable – option, gripping the delicate petals of her garb that matched the blush of her cheeks. Well... Meosa was ahead – before a less than charming

youth, who struggled to merge into the crowd with his pitiful wings, requested a dance from her florally clad solution. The two spun away together in a tangle of trodden toes, rendering Meosa single once more.

Turning back to Lliants, she noticed his shard eyes were already locked upon her, a plan dancing around his pupils. With a grimace and gritted teeth, she started to move, swishing her dress, as consuming as nightfall.

“Well, if you would pardon m-”

“Listen,” Lliants whispered smoothly, urgently. His cloak, trapping every star in the sky, monopolised her vision. His breath tickled her ear like the softest wind on summer solstice. “Meosa, I know of your secrets as you know of mine. With haste, grant me permission to take thy hand. Please.”

She nodded her agreement curtly. Visible disgust morphed into shock as Lliants swiftly swept her up, ever closer to the stars.

The music of the waltz was lively, but they were the heartbeat of the celestial dancefloor. Awe-struck, the crowd watched whilst they twisted and turned, compelling the flashes of far-away constellations to move with them. Indeed, hidden beneath the tune were excited murmurings; it was said that no pair had commanded the air quite like this since the king and queen.

Amid the tangible hum of energy, Lliants executed his scheme. One moment Meosa’s mind was engrossed, searching amongst the delicate dancers for the tall flourishing maiden, and the next she was in the air, then in the finely decorated arms of someone who was certainly not Lliants. Feigning embarrassment for this breach of etiquette, she gazed upwards – but all she could see were those blasted olive leaves.

The bustling of the market threatened to spill out into the windings of the nearby streets, but Meosa moved through purposefully, undeterred. King Calling Day was the second-best day to haggle for discounts on even the most delicate of foods; everyone’s mood was improved by the sparsity of the palace guards and the joviality of those that did make an appearance in the market despite the festivities.

The market atmosphere would be matched only by that of a royal wedding day, but given the current suspicions about the princess, the likelihood of that seemed minimal. Meosa would have only today this year to procure fresh arowana for her and her sister. Of course, the slim chance of a royal wedding was not unrelated to Meosa’s own activities of late, but it was still a minor annoyance. It had been ages since one of the Fairy King’s children had been married off and Meosa was itching for another wedding just as much as anyone else.

Darting through the mass of slender limbs and poorly disguised furs, scales, and claws, Meosa practically purred in excitement as her slitted eyes landed on what she knew would be today’s target. A portly man was standing in front of his stall, monocle perched up against his eyes, fish brandished between his hands as he yelled at the passing clusters of people. Meosa straightened up, feeling the tinge of yellow in her eyes fade closer to blue, the point of her claws smooth to resemble slender fingers. She stopped there; no need to waste much energy fooling such an easy target.

A sudden shimmer in her peripheral vision stopped her walk towards the fish salesman. Not unusual for strange sightings or bits of magic to jump out in the market, but something had seemed familiar about this flash. Meosa felt a shiver race through her body, tensing her claws almost enough to unmask them from the delicate wrapping she’d created moments ago.

Meosa, the whisper jumped out at her, unplaceable, even as her head swivelled and her nose twitched trying to locate the source of the noise. Another sparkle out of the corner of her eye and Meosa was certain now as the cold remnants of the whisper softly brushed against her neck.

Lliants was here.

Meosa found the tree root that ran like a vein to the beating heart of the market and tucked herself behind it. Lliants was there waiting for her. She was not expecting to hear from him again, at least not so soon after the incident at the Flower Dance, but she leaned on the root with her arms crossed in false nonchalance.

“You pulled an impressive stunt back there,” she said,



'Trinket Theft, Balls and Aristocracy' - Emily Betts

“I hope you found what you were looking for.”

Lliants narrowed his shard-eyes. “You take me for a fool, Meosa.”

She glanced at her nails, her disguise slipping to show a flash of sharpened claws. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“His Lordship arrived with the pendant on his person, but by the time I reached him, it was gone. I know this was your doing.” Meosa tried to suppress any reaction, but there must have been a momentary hesitation, a second of surprise, and Lliants snatched at it. “So it wasn’t you that took it.” He took Meosa’s silence as confirmation.

“Nobody raised an alarm,” Meosa realised. “So they must have swapped it for a replica.”

Lliants nodded. “It was an impressive fake, the best I’ve seen. But as both Himself and the princess are having... doubts, it seems he is yet to part with it so, so I might be the only one to realise.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

For the first time, Lliants’ cool exterior betrayed itself and he let out a frustrated groan, joining Meosa to lean against the tree root. Meosa understood. They had been enemies, spies of different factions, working to undermine each other, but now none of that rivalry really mattered. Clearly, working alone had not yielded the results they had been hoping for, so the next best option was to join forces.

Lliants was planning to betray her, clearly. Meosa was not going to let one moment of weakness insult the fraught dance of conflict she and her foe had shared for so many centuries, and she doubted Lliants took held her in so little regard either. It would at least be amusing to see where Lliants’ little ploy would end.

She extended a talon towards him and prompted him to take the first step.

“What do you propose?”

What passed for a hand emerged from Lliants’ robes and took her outstretched talon.

“I, Lliants Compressa of the Noontide Court, Servant to my Masters and Dancer on Starlight, propose a concordance with yourself, Meosa Ruficauda, that we work together until we hold that which we both

seek...”

His words entwined with the sounds of the market, weaving a complex harmony of clauses and declarations. Meosa interjected and counterpointed, adding her own melody to the music surrounding the two. She could not suppress the grin that shimmered across her face as she watched Lliants’ compound eyes tremble as he tried to keep up. Their song reached its climax.

“So we are agreed?” Meosa sang.

They shook, and so the pact was sealed.

The palace was dark, as His Highness had ordered. For the briefest moment the face of a solemn gargoyle was illuminated in fading, olive green.

On one side, Meosa, lids held down to mask their glow. The other, Lliants, shard-eyes dark except for the occasional crystal refraction of a star above.

This masked ball, held to commemorate the 675th anniversary of the truce ending the Delights War (yes, it was over candy), always ended with all the lights in the palace extinguished at once. It was known among thieves as a night of glorious opportunity, though few escaped the palace with their treasures. A dangerous eve to be a trespasser.

Still, the recent comrades had little choice.

There had been no leads on the olive pendant except in origin—Meosa and Lliants had both suffered through a multi-hour recited speech from a poet which had enumerated its creation by the legendary smith Hakon and a summary of each year of its existence since, punctuated by its periodic uses as a binding symbol of betrothal for members of the ruling Olivine Terrace bloodline. The tantalizing mention of the sort of magic Hakon had put inside was not nearly detailed enough.

However, rumours swirled that the engagement was tonight, and it was their final chance to find the true pendant before the entire city was up in search.

As the sound of polite, gloved clapping echoed up from inside, the whole palace shook, and the claps cascaded off their rhythm. Meosa’s eyes snapped open. That could only be one thing.

A masked figure in full waterfall dress tripped out a window and rolled, the river from her robe covering her tracks. As the palace shook again, she took off into the garden.

Meosa didn't need to look at Lliants to know they were in accord.

While many of the guests might not have recognized it, to Meosa and Lliants, the palace's deep rumbling was unmistakable – a magical alarm designed to alert the estate's Royal Guard to the removal of a protected item from the palace perimeter. No doubt it would also be tied into notifying the city's Elite Response force. A dangerous eve to be a trespasser indeed, for though the bounties for thieves at the masked ball were plentiful, the whole city would be swarming with obstacles the moment you stepped out the door (or window, as it may be).

As the clapping faltered, for a moment, the ballroom remained in relative order with only a few guests recognising the meaning behind the continued booming of the palace walls. Desperate as they were to pursue the thief in the waterfall dress, Meosa and Lliants held firm so as not to draw themselves to attention. Their resolution was necessary for only a few brief instants, as a ripple cascaded through the crowd like a chain of firecrackers, the guests who had recognized the alarm descending into a panic and the entire ballroom quickly thrown into a state of pandemonium.

The moment chaos broke out in full, Meosa and Lliants beelined to the window in pursuit of the waterfall dress, the pair easily missed in the buzzing swarm of panicked fae. As they zipped through the opening, a blinding light flashed before them and they collided instantly with some sort of magical barrier, invisible except for its faint shimmering glow. Disoriented, unable to see, Meosa fumbled backwards, intent on reversing through the window and back into the ballroom. The uncomfortable resistance of the same magical barrier greeted her hands and wings.

As Lliants' vision gradually returned, he began to make out a horde of fairies hovering in all directions

around their enclosure – Royal Guard, Elite Response, even the State Military. Directly before them, level with the window, was the fairy in the waterfall dress, folds rippling gracefully in the calm evening air, her mask now discarded into the night. Lliants recognized the face and swore under his breath. The head of the Clandestine Inquisition Office.

“Lliants Compressa of the Noontide Court, Meosa Ruficauda of the Shadowed Hand, you are hereby detained under the authority of the His Lordship the Fairy King, Bloodline of Origins, Preserver of the Primordial Arcana, and Supreme Arbiter over the Fae Dominion.”

Lliants grimaced. Three centuries, three hundred years as an operative for the Noontide Court, and he had never been caught – at least not without intention. But there he was, backed into a corner with absolutely no foreseeable prospect of escape.

“We haven't done anything,” Meosa protested calmly, her voice composed and collected. “We've nothing on our persons, and the pendant at the Flower Dance was a fa-”

“Stop. Talking.” Lliants snarled.

“Oh,” a smooth voice echoed from below, “of that, we are well aware...”

The Fairy King himself was drifting up into the centre of the crowd, his wings swishing with an easy grace, slower than they ought to for him to be made airborne. The air around him thrummed and pulsed, vibrations emanating softly outwards, dances of twinkling lights riding on the waves of magic that surrounded him.

“The pendant was but a lure for your covert pair,” he said, now level with the invisible cage. “The Shadowed Hand and the Noontide Court have for too long been a pestiferous umbra in my realm.”

The King raised an elegant hand towards them. As the magical aura surrounding him brushed against the barrier, it dissolved away, evaporating into nothingness.

“Lliants, Meosa... I have a proposition to extend.”

I'm a sucker for fey stories. And courts. And fancy balls. (not like that, get your mind out of the gutter!) so had a lot of fun with this one. The setting is fun, not too deeply explained and just mysterious enough, the characters are right pieces of work but fun to read about, and the plot comes together well.

Author Reviews

I really want to see the continued adventures of Meosa and the scoundrel Lliants/Glorious Lliants and the guileful Meosa (delete as appropriate) - Doctor Waverley Weird

Trouble Brewing

Regina, Milamber, Anon, Georgia, BaSO₄, Ismail, Rosalind Mackey, Alex Colesmith

CW: body transformation, demons, generally messed up (but quite light-hearted)

It all started in an ordinary lecture, on an ordinary day in this most ordinary (and tortured and tormented) University of Oxford. The room was buzzing with electrical noise, the air filled with hazy fumes from the previous lesson, and the temperature just warm enough to put everyone into a sleepy dizziness. Then everything changed, as the lecturer's voice suddenly came to a pause. I yawned and looked up from my lecture notes, but there was no one standing there in front of the blackboard.

There was only a cup of breakfast tea, no sugar and over-brewed.

"The heck?" My best pal, who always sits next to me, raised their sight from their computer screen. "Come on...I'm in the middle of taking an important note! I have to say this topic of demonic shapeshifting and misplacement of the figure of god that he was talking about is quite interesting- Hey! Where did everyone go?" His voice suddenly started to panic.

I looked around immediately with him, then I realised that this lecture hall had become much emptier than it was when I arrived – the first thing that I noticed was the total disappearance of everyone sitting in the back rows.

Peculiarly, their screens were still turned on, but every single position now had a weird-looking beverage, in all sorts of strange containers. I could identify... all of them, just by looking. A few glasses of clear water, a carton of... saturated salt solution? A lemonade with marshmallow

and cream (this is inhumane!), a hot chocolate with a shot of Baileys and marshmallow and cream (how did I know that?), matcha milk tea with pearl and ice cream on top, winter melon boba but without the boba regular sugar no ice (wow these are pretty based) and...

That's when I realised the number of drinks was increasing, as I looked around. A horrifying hypothesis emerged in my mind, I slowly turned around to look at my friend.

Oh, how glad I was to see them staring back at me, same eerie expression on their face. But the person behind them-

Gone. Apparently on our messy desk there had been a weirdly extra third cup of instant coffee.

"I think," I tried to manage my languages, "people are being turned into drinks, if they're not being looked at. What kind of messed-up curse is this?"

My friend was obviously also stunned by the conclusion I'd made. "Oh! Wow...of course, of course, that's what I've also observed. Don't worry! I'll make sure to keep an eye on you, darling." I wasn't totally sure they believed me.

As they spoke, trying to be reassuring, they picked up a cup of coffee from the table and took a sip before I could say anything. "...Hey." They slowly looked down at their cup with visible confusion. "This – this doesn't taste anything like my mocha... This is apparently a double shot

caramel latte, with no ice and extra syrup. How – how do I know that?”

It dawned on me that we’d messed up.

“This is... well, was... a demonology lecture, right? Didn’t they tell us at the start of the year not to write down the Latin in these lectures?”

The look of horror that had crawled across my face not moments before scuttled down across the desk and up onto my friend’s. While they stared with wide eyes, I flicked through the notes I had just made.

“There!” He jabbed at my screen. An off-hand comment I had written as a joke under the section of demonic wishes. ‘If only I could wish for a drink’. It was glowing red, but only because I had highlighted it to delete from my notes later. “Look at what you’ve done! Now we might actually need to learn Latin to reverse it.”

“That may not be the worst of our problems.” The warm haze of the room became a slightly hotter haze, and then slightly hotter still. In the row in front of us, the lemonade with a small shot of ethanol stolen from the chemistry lab, and the one-third-espresso two-thirds-milk, started to glow and bubble. Glancing around the room revealed yet more of the drinks floating in the air, and amassing into the semblance of a pentagram. The sigils that the professor had up on the projector also wavered, before detaching from the board and joining the drinks in the beverage ritual.

“Humans! You have been chosen! Drink your professor, then enter the portal, or dare to face your end ... end ... end...” A powerful, gruff voice echoed out of every corner of the room.

A glowing turquoise portal opened up next to the over-brewed breakfast tea.

I gaped, eyes wide, at my pal.

“Shall we do it?”

“Yeah, I don’t mind. I don’t have much to lose, but... you drink the tea, please and thank you.”

“Yuck, no. I think *you* should drink it because you look so tired all the time.”

“That is rude. Yes, I will drink the tea and you can face your end.”

“Urgh.” I glanced at the overdone tea. “Shall we just ask if we can drink the lemonade with marshmallow and

cream instead?”

“Yes, I feel like this demon is friendly, he’s putting up quite a lovely display for us too!”

“ARGHSKHAULCRAG- YOU MAY NOT DRINK THE LEMONADE,” the demon boomed impatiently. “JUST STEP INTO THE PORTAL.”

“Ah. Maybe he is not as friendly as I thought.”

As our eyes flickered longingly between the choice of drinks, we were oblivious to the black, gnarled claw emerging out of the portal to snatch us out of our trivial lives.

The leathery hand coiled around us too tightly, snatching the air from my lungs. Apparently, this demon had never heard of hand lotion before.

Through the portal we were unceremoniously dropped onto the musty carpet of an unbearably hot ... common room? A pool table missing a leg lay defeated in one corner of the room. Through the hazy windows caked in spiderwebs, I swear I saw leathery wings fly past as geysers of fire shot hundreds of feet from the ground of the dark, ominous bog surrounding the room outside. Distant screams sounded continuously in the background as the crusty hand, which I could now see was connected to a ginormous, bespeckled lizard-esque creature in a hideous, orange, plaid suit, stomped to another corner of the room where a comically large desk was situated.

“Sit,” the horned reptile with horrible fashion sense demanded, pointing a lethal claw to the leather couch with scorch marks behind us. We obeyed, attempting to avoid the loose springs.

Through the drops of sweat now running profusely down my brow, I noticed the Oxford Bachelor of Arsonry degree framed behind the demon’s curled horns.

After a painstaking death stare from the demon, I decided to break the (most definitely evaporated) ice.

“Looks like a beautiful day outside.”

“Small talk? Are you joking me?” my friend whispered.

The demon released an exasperated sigh.

“You understand why I’ve brought you to Oxford, right?” the demon drawled in a gratingly posh accent.

“I’m sorry what? We were just in Oxford!” I stammered.

The monstrously dressed being grumbled. "This is the real Oxford, you fools. I believe you insufferable humans call it Hell? You're here because you have tipped the Scales of Entitlement by using the most sacred Latin to ask for..."

The irritated, saurian employee for the underworld flipped through an incredibly disorganized pile of parchments.

"...drinks?! Oh sweet lord Beelzebub, I do not get paid enough for this. The Prophecy states you must restore the Scales to balance, or we will be handing you over to the Angels up north in Cambridge, and they are less than forgiving to Oxfordians."

"Scales? Can we erase the Latin from our notes to restore the scales?" my friend carefully asked.

"Don't be so young - so naïve! As you wrote it, it can never be reversed – that is the rule in real Oxford. I won't tell you how to do it; you're at Oxford to atone for your indiscretions. At least it is easier than the life in Cambridge!"

"Then what should we do? Should we make more drinks for the monsters here? Do you like any beverage, gin, wine?" My friend's eyes swung around to stare at me. Yes, my humour is never absent in crisis.

One of the saurian employees looked up for a second, quickly continued to flip through the messy papers. Another saurian noticed it and whispered to him, "Two more humans are here. When can they join us?"

"Who knows. One week, two weeks? If they speak more Latin, it may be no longer than 5 days."

The second saurian laughed quietly. "Then we can get out of here!"

The demon left. My friend and I had no idea what to do – so we started to explore this ugly and messy underworld.

He looked a little bit upset.

"Are you thirsty?" I quipped.

"No joking, bro! You should better consider how we can find that demon again or to find the so-called 'scale'."

"Let's ask those wired saurians! They've got scales!"

"Hey, better shut up! You are rude!" A strange, deformed voice, sounding like it was 90 years old.

"If you keep saying it, you will soon become us." Several saurians stopped working and laughed together, staring at me and my friend.

"Become you! Ha, that's not near as bad as our classmates becoming drinks. Though I am sure no one would miss our dear professor. You know, because he is, like, a thousand years old..." At which point I facepalmed myself. "OH MY GOD, of course! That's why he turned into over brewed tea!"

At this point, my friend and the saurian looked over at me as if I had lost my mind. In my defence, landing in a demon-infested hell is conducive to such a state.

My friend turned back to the saurians and said, "What do you mean, become you?"

"Oh, you know. You stay here long enough and the place veritably permeates every cell of your being – you can't help but change!"

To this my friend and I rolled our eyes and were about to move on when one of the saurians grabbed his arm. "Look here! Your ear already has a scale growing on it, that's surprisingly fast. You must really have upset the balance."

"It wasn't me, it was his fault... and what do you mean, scales?" Hectic arm movements ensued, checking first his ears and then rest of the body for other scales. "No, no, no! This can't be happening!"

I held my hands up in front of me and noticed with dawning horror the hard protrusions which now encroached upon my fingertips like stubborn hangnails. As I pushed my shirt sleeve back, it caught on more tiny, spiky things emerging from my hair follicles. I could almost see them growing. I hastily tugged my sleeve back down.

"We've got to go," I said. "Now!"

"Go where?" My friend looked even more spooked than me, if that was possible.

"To find the..." I whirled to face the saurians. "Where are the scales, anyway?"

"On your arms, aren't they?" one of them sniggered. "And they'll be in more places soon if you don't hurry."

My friend gave an exasperated groan. "These people are no use – you heard them, they want us to fail." He set off purposefully towards the exit.

I shrugged and followed, almost having to jog to keep up.

Surprised to hear no answering quip from the saurians, I looked behind me as we reached the door.

There was no sign of the group we had spoken with, but the table now boasted, amid the mountains of papers, an unsweetened single-origin black coffee, a glass of 15-year-old merlot and a small decanter of sherry. I thought back to the eclectic mix of abomination drinks my classmates had turned into. Maybe the demon had been right that this was the real Oxford.

Outside the enormous door – which luckily swung both ways, so we didn't have to reach the handle – was an equally vast, furnace-like corridor. The walls were painted in painfully lurid stripes of hot pink and lime green. The blacker than black ceiling made the bare, dangling lightbulbs simultaneously dim and glaring. One glance around and I could feel a headache coming on. I wiped my dripping face on my sleeve and hurried to catch up with my friend. Reaching their side, I told them quickly what had happened to the saurians.

"Your wish must be active down here, too!" Their eyes widened. "I wonder..."

They were interrupted by the Automatic Fire Door at the other end of the corridor opening in a swirl of automatic fire. I suppose it could have been so much worse – an automatic-fire door would probably have killed both of us in a storm of bullets, rather than just scorching the last few scaleless hairs off my arms as I yanked my hands back – but it wasn't fun. We flung ourselves back out of reach.

"Now what?"

"Scales of Entitlement!" I shouted. "Entitlement! Scales! Argh!"

"What?" My friend looked at me, clearly hoping that I'd come to some kind of revelatory conclusion. All the hellfire and damnation around here did seem conducive to revelations, after all.

"I don't know." I calmed down slightly. "I'm just shouting random stuff in the hope something works."

"Hang on." My friend's brow wrinkled. "I've had an idea. We don't want that door, right? We want the one to the right of it."

"...which one?" I couldn't see any other door. Then again, my friend's eyes were looking a bit funny – darker pupils, wider irises and much less white.

Like the saurians'. They were changing faster than I was, even.

"Okay, never mind which one. I trust you." I didn't want to alarm them further. "But the fire door's still there. We can't get to it."

"No, it's an *automatic* door." My friend grinned. "I was aiming for the other one last time. So the automatic door opened because I didn't want it to – that's how they work, right?"

I considered this. "Yeah, usually."

"So what if we try and get the automatic door to open?" Their grin spread wider. Toothier.

"That's a really bad idea."

"Great!"

I don't know whether something was going wrong with my friend's hearing as well, but they took 'that's a really bad idea' as 'go for it'. Then again, they'd always been a bit like that.

The Automatic Fire Door's little sensor blinked at them as they approached, but didn't seem to do anything. As I watched, they grabbed a section of the wall and twisted something I couldn't see, pulling open...

...a door? A door that simply hadn't been visible to me before. They ducked around it and leant heavily, blocking the Automatic Fire Door as it rattled and tried to open.

"Come on, then!"

Sure, why not? Well, I could think of several reasons, but never mind those. I sprinted for the new door and jumped through it.

The room beyond was done up in a similar colour scheme. 'Tasteless' implies a simple lack of taste (set taste = 0). This was beyond that, well into negative values of taste. It was horrible.

Yet on the table in the centre stood a pair of brass weighing scales, wreathed in white fire.

My friend staggered in behind me. Was it my imagination, or had they grown taller? Gaunter? They looked around, smile reaching from ear to ear... and

those ears were now just a pair of small holes in the side of their head. As soon as I'd taken my eyes off them, they'd shifted into their favourite drink.

"Where is it?" they hissed, and their voice was not their own. They raised one clawed hand towards me. "Where are the Scales of Entitlement?" I reached out one hand and pressed down on the upper weighing dish of the Scales of Entitlement.

"Can't – can't you see them?" My voice came out squeaky. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest, my breath coming in short pants. "Please turn everyone back," I whispered. "It was an accident. I never wanted all that power."

The saurian that had once been my friend lurched across the room, missing the table by a scale's breadth. "No. We need human eyes. That's why we kept you as you were – because you can see it." There was a faint rumbling. The scales trembled beneath my hand slightly.

"I can see it..." I realised what I had to do. "And I can see you, too." *YOU GIVE IT UP WILLINGLY?*

"What?" They whipped around, lunging back towards me. "No! Nooo-" "What? Of course I do!"

I forced my eyes shut. I can't describe the next sensation properly but – you know when you get a piece of laminated paper and hold it out and shake it? and it does the fwububwubwubwub thing?

The voice stilled. There was the gentle rattle of crockery, as if someone had placed a cup too hard on the table. Yeah, it was like that for the whole universe.

Then silence. There was a howl of rage from the front of the lecture theatre as the professor's chalk snapped. I looked up just in time to see the blackboard burst into green flames – painful to the eyes – and the overhead sprinklers (Automatic Water?) came on.

I opened one eye again, just a crack. Next to the scales sat a piña colada pitcher with a familiar logo on it; it was what my friend always ordered when a group of us went out to Spoons together. At least that much had remained as they'd transformed into a saurian. "Agh!" My friend – scaleless, fully-human, holding a bottle of hopefully non-alcoholic pineapple juice – was right beneath one of them, and jerked upright from their nap. "Raining? Indoors?"

And I laughed and laughed and laughed.

Editor's Review

Just as fun and silly as a real game of Trouble Brewing (iykyk). Disturbing in places—particularly how easily they seemed to shrug off their classmates and professor being transformed into beverages—but hey, at least they died being what they loved. And some of them probably deserved it for that choice of drinks.

Author Reviews:

This chain was a lot of fun to write! The premise is very original, and I love the Oxbridge jokes. It seems to have wandered slightly from urban into portal fantasy, but it was just Oxbridgey enough that it still had the fun fit-in-random-elements-of-daily-life aspect of urban fantasy. –Rosalind Mackey

Bonus: Alternative Title Suggestions

Through Hell and Hot Coffee



Alex Sandground

—Transcript. SOYLENTGroup (@SOYLENT) public livestream via X (clip): keynote speech by SOYLENT-Group COO and green!™ Ambassador Cynthia Evelyn Kim 김 선 희 (@CEKofficial), SOYLENTGroup #AnnualConference, THE LINE , لاين Neom, Arabia al-Saudi. 17:08:32 UTC+3, 12 May 2054. Transcribed using Q.AI (by Cerberum) by X user @_DuckleMynips88.

[begin transcript]

[upbeat song 1* chorus begins. Kim walks on stage. applause] Woooo! Alright! Thank you, everyone! Thank you. Good evening, yeah! [display turns on: SOYLENT logo + SOYLENTArabia logo. applause. chorus fades out] Alright!

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Wow! I'm thrilled to see so many amazing investors here tonight! [applause] I know you're all having a super awesome conference. What a gorgeous city! [applause, cheering] I know, right! Thanks so much to our generous hosts and partners here in Neom. [applause] Yeah, thank you. And hello to the tens of thousands of loyal customers who are joining us live online tonight!

To all of you out there, we're so grateful you're a part of our SOYLENT family. We love you! [applause. Kim applauds] That's right. Thank you, people.

So. Let's get it going up in here! [cheering] Yeah! Cos tonight, I have one super special announcement to bring to you. [applause] Alright, yeah. Here we go.

[display darkens. pause] SOYLENT. Pillar of international trade. Beloved employer. Cherished provider. We'll always be here. But the world is changing. Fast. Our environment under threat. Devastating, tragic conflicts around the world. Economies in the rough, and getting rougher. It's tough out there, and we're all feeling it. [appreciative murmuring, scattered applause]

But SOYLENT is here for you. [applause] And we've been listening to you. So when our machine-enhanced consumer-centric custom market research models partnered with Cerberum tell us that ethics, equality, and care for environment rank consistently in the top 7 consumer-conscience purchasing priorities for over 60% of our primary target base, we hear that. We hear you. And we know it's time to act. [applause]

So we're making some changes. From 2056, SOYLENT will be manifesting a next-gen ethos of four totally awesome brand new super cool company Values! [applause] That's right! Get yourself ready for some Social Justice, Humane Practice, Eco-Conscience, and

Charity! [applause] Hell yeah! [display shows SOYLENT logo encircled by Values]

Alright! And leading the charge in the all-new planet-positive SOYLENT ethos makeover is SOYLENTGroup's brand new flagship market offering. And I just can't wait to tell you about it. [pause]

It's been a long road to get here, working with governments around the world to blast away the red tape and bring super important breakthroughs to the people who need them the most. But we're finally here. So today, at long last, SOYLENTGroup is super stoked to introduce... green!™ [display wipes to SOYLENT green!™ logo, applause] Say hello to our pioneering new humanely sourced biogenic all-natural multiversatile sustenance product game-changer! SOYLENT green!™: a revolution in eco-forward zero-sum human nourishment strategy! [display wipes to image of SOYLENT green!™ poster and packaging exemplar (product not visible). Applause]

For the next 25 years of the SOYLENT journey and beyond, SOYLENT green! will be joining our trusted SOYLENT product range as the face of a forward-looking, eco-conscious and sustainable model for ethical business in a world in need of just a li'l nurturing! [laughter] SOYLENT green!™: a green! choice for a green! planet!

[applause. Kim applauds] Yeah! That's right!


Brought to you by the cutting edge of SOYLENT life science and technology, SOYLENT green! promises an affordable and market-ready alternative to the costly and diminishing output of the dying animal industries! SOYLENT is proud to confirm that green! contains 0% animal products and 100% nutritional awesomeness, paving the way for a hot new ethics of 21st-century food production and supply! [applause] That's right, people! Awesome! And how does it taste? Well, I've tried it, and lemme tell you, it's a hell of a lot better than my wife's cooking! [scattered laughter] Oh yeah, delicious!



[display wipes back to SOYLENT green!™ logo] So why green!™? Well, at SOYLENT we're proud of our mission to help everyone make the best of climate transition. [applause] And we know that everyone has their part to play. Including us. Worldwide food shortages. Rising sea-levels. People with nothing to eat, and people with nowhere to go. Sometimes it's hard not to lose hope.


1* song: 'Shape of You (Shake It Up!)' / MiaTeixeira (@miaTx) ft. Ed Sheeran (@edsheeran) (© Amazon Music 2047), identified by Q.AI (by Cerberum)







[solemn murmuring]

But at SOYLENT, where others see problems, we see opportunity! [applause] That's right! Millions hungry? [pause] Demand! [laughter, applause] And millions more on the move, just waiting to lend a hand? Supply! At SOYLENT, matching supply and demand for optimum customer-investor satisfaction is just what we do! [applause] It's time for some synergy! [laughter] Ha-ha! [Kim does finger-guns]

And that's where SOYLENT  green! comes in: as a unique investment opportunity, leveraging SOYLENT goods offerings to bridge the gap in the market between SOYLENT reality and consumer potential in our core commercial spheres in the developed world and beyond, bolstering customer gratification-loyalty and company turnover for years to come. [applause] That's right! Thank you.



So how are we gonna make  green!™ happen? The world's changing fast, and people are moving around like never before. Some people--some pessimists want to paint this new global paradigm as some kind of problem, but at SOYLENT, our visionary experts have blasted away the negative dogma to set free the pro-positive business possibilities underneath. So what do we see? How about a vast and growing source of low-cost, ready-to-go  green! labor and raw material partnerships! [applause] That's right! Millions of eager hands and minds just waiting to pitch in and help make the world a better place! [applause] Yeah! How awesome is that! [pause]





But I know what you're thinking: 'You're right, Cynthia!  green! does sound super awesome and delicious and I can't wait till it's available for purchase on-demand at all reputable grocery stores near me with delivery options by monthly subscription in all major population centers worldwide! But... where exactly is it all coming from?'



[laughter] 'There aren't exactly hundreds and hundreds of  green! factories already built just waiting to start crafting our delightful meals, are there?' [laughter] Well, you know, I'm just so glad you asked. Because tonight, SOYLENTGroup is super hyped to announce that we will be working with governments across Moana-Oceania, PRC-Associated South-East Asia, Africa, the Bharat subcontinent and beyond to make  green! a reality, spearheading over 230 brand new and converted Population Fulfillment Epicenters to manifest  green! worldwide by 2060. Or as I like to call them, '# Peppies™!' [laughter. display wipes to # Peppies™ logo] # Peppies™: a new beating heart for positive transformation in the global agricultural market space, 2056! [applause] Hell yeah! That's what I'm talkin' about! [laughter] And that right there is just the beginning! [pause]

Partnering with world-conquering transnational industrial,

construction and engineering trailblazers, our innovative  green!™ # Peppies™ facilities will combine accommodation, employment, monitoring and leisure amenities for up to 75,000 fresh new SOYLENT members each and every year, in a compact all-in-one super-lean state-of-the-art fully secure #BestLife community living complex, with integration across all four core links in our ground-breaking new humane  green! live-stock-produce service-and-security chain: Acquisition, Nurture, Processing, and Fulfillment! [display wipes to footage of children running through a sunlit meadow; a smiling family embracing on a bunk bed; a bustling grocery store checkout. applause. display wipes back to SOYLENT  green!™ logo] Thank you! Thank you, everyone. [applause] Thank you.

By 2065, with 350+ SOYLENT  green! # Peppies™ operating at maximum yield, we're projecting record efficiencies for our worldwide distribution chains and a ten-year estimate of up to 15% growth--[scattered applause] thank you, thank you--15% growth across the board in SOYLENT company stock value. [applause] I know, folks, how about it! Incredible! [pause]

SOYLENTGroup is super excited to be taking you on this investment odyssey into the future, bringing SOYLENT  green! to the global marketplace and a substantial return to our valued financial contributors. But at the same time, nobody's perfect, and like everyone, we've made mistakes. And we know there are some of you out there who have some worries. 'Is  green! just too good to be true?' 'Can I really trust SOYLENT to deliver the best product at the best price?' 'Will # Peppies™ be better than my studio apartment?' [laughter] Well, if you're worried, you can relax.  green! is real, and it's here, ready for worldwide launch within 30 to 36 months, while increased efficiencies will mean both lower price tags and higher margins for all. [applause] And it's a yes to that last one! You can sign me up! [laughter. pause]

And on top of that, you can rest assured that SOYLENT-Group is committed to carbon-neutral, humane and biosafe farming practices. [approving murmuring] And you know it's true because tonight, we're pledging that all of SOYLENT's  green!™ and # Peppies™ carbon footprint will be offset by lush green new developments right here in al-Saudi! [applause, cheering] That's right, people! I can't wait to see it! [pause] And we're proud to report that since last year, SOYLENT is meeting and surpassing ethical guidelines in over 115 states and territories worldwide! [applause] And we're working with governments to keep that number rising every day. [applause]

And to show you that we mean it, as of tonight, SOYLENT is officially making human rights part of our #BrandConscience. We believe that all human beings have the right to permanent housing and contributive

employment, and that's why we will be working with GATES Charitable Foundation to welcome over 220 million international home-seekers to participate in SOYLENT's 🌱green! #🌱Peppies™ membership and operations over the next 12 years. And we're only going higher from there! [applause] That's right, folks! Sky's the limit! [pause]

And lastly, in a world where the next devastating virus could be just a few years round the corner, we've heard a few of you asking questions about SOYLENT's biosafety track record. But, actually, that last one wasn't us, folks! [laughter] You can DM Kuala Lumpur about that one! [laughter. Kim nods like 'yeah, I just said that'. laughter] Alright!

So. [sad song 2* begins] What is SOYLENT 🌱green!™? In a world where our liberal values of freedom, progress, enterprise, and a good day's work are under increasing attack by ideology and destructive radical activism--even here in al-Saudi the other night [solemn murmuring. Kim bows her head]. I know, I know, tragic, tragic--in this changing world, some people want you to think com-

panies like SOYLENT only care about profit! [laughter] Or that we're just in it for the 'power'! [Kim does a bodybuilder flex. laughter]

But I believe in better. [song becomes determined. applause] Thank you, yeah. Because I know SOYLENT. [applause] Yeah. And I know what we do, and who we do it for. Our customers. Our investors. [Kim points with both hands into the crowd. applause] The people we work with. Ordinary men and women, who care about their families. Like us. Because that's what SOYLENT is. A family. People. And SOYLENT knows the value of people! [laughter] So no. SOYLENT 🌱green!™ is not profit, and

SOYLENT 🌱green!™ is not power! It's you and me. [applause. song becomes uplifting] We are SOYLENT 🌱green!™, all of us! [applause] And SOYLENT 🌱green!™ is people!

[lengthy applause]

Thank you! And salaam alaikum! [Kim waves]

[end transcript]

2* song: 'Brand Consultant' / Bo Burnham (© Netflix 2021), identified by Q.AI (by Cerberum); see SOYLENT v. Burnham (defamation case) on Wikipedia: an AI Project by Google

Queso Grande

Ben LaFond, Phoebe Fay, Alex Sandground, anon, Jo, Milamber, anon, Joel Pearson

CW: mild fantasy violence

If you had been suspended in the air among the crenellated towers and fluttering banners of Alnair one sunny morning in early May, you might have noticed a young man leaning out of an upper window of the Cathedral of the Assumption with his chin supported on one hand, so that his face resembled a wistful gargoyle set into the capital of a miniature column. If you had floated closer, peering invisible into the cool, shadowy interior of the cathedral, you might have made out his right foot tapping soundlessly against the floor of the gallery, oblivious to a faint unintelligible echo that meant that the priests, far below, were concluding their offices. You would certainly have remarked that the young man's figure, though noble, was ragged; a comparison might have suggested itself, if you had any imagination, to a fan of peacock's plumes wrongly appropriated as a feather duster. This was Guillermo Manchego, gifted sorcerer and mediocre poet, and today he was feeling particularly uninspired.

As Guillermo gazed into the middle distance and drummed a dirge on the unsympathetic tiles with his foot, a parakeet swooped down upon him with a squawk.

"There you are," it said, settling on the outer edge of the projecting windowsill. "I've been looking for you all night. What do you think you're doing in there, where you know I can't follow?" Receiving no answer, the parakeet regarded the young man slyly out of an eye like a window onto the void. "Yours is a soul that cannot be saved, *chico*. You and I made sure of that, long ago."

"I've been enjoying the peace and quiet," he said softly. "It helps me write." If you momentarily forgot the fact that parakeets don't have lips or eyebrows, you might have been able to imagine the bird raising an arched eyebrow and flashing a wiry grin.

"Oh really? Go on then, recite to me all the masterpieces you wrote without me, then."

Guillermo pulled the corner of his mouth back in contempt and kissed his teeth. He lifted his head up and retreated a little inside. The parakeet tried to inch further along the windowsill – but before its beak could get anywhere near the window, a shimmering bolt of light rippled through the air in front of them and seemed to throw it several feet backwards. Guillermo suppressed a laugh.

“You can’t hide in there forever, *chico!*” it said, frustrated. “You can’t outrun your fate!”

Steps echoed up the tower. They were the slow, deliberate steps of Reverend Benito Casamayor, the Bishop of the Alnair diocese. As a divinely inspired cleric, he preached that his superior magical prowess came from the goodness of God to assist him with his heavenly duties, so at first he had been profoundly disturbed by Guillermo, a so-called heathen sorcerer who derived his sacrilegious powers by what the Bishop deemed “lesser means”, not condoned by scripture. Guillermo was not the type to point out that technically the scripture didn’t condone any clerical magic either, so that had forged an uneasy companionship. The Bishop was bound to grant sanctuary to anyone who asked for it, and Guillermo had nowhere else to go.

He could jump out of the window. The Bishop crested the stair and swept into the chamber. Guillermo did not jump out of the window. Instead, he turned and gave a customary bow. Like most customs favoured by the high-born gentlemen of Alnair at that time, the bow was a thing that should have been simple and was quite effortless if you knew how to do it effortlessly, and if you did not then was completely impossible to learn from watching it done. This was a design feature, as far as its noble originators cared, marking out the upstarts and uninitiated like goldfish in a cattery. With its delicate folding of joints, precisely tipped shoulders, the curl of fingers, soft implicatory smile, the sweep of cloak and nod of feathered cap, *et cetera, et cetera*, all timed and executed to exquisite balance within the span of second, it was much like a plain-looking knot – which once tied admits no clue of the mathematical complexity of its tying, and if you do it a bit wrong then you might as well just use sellotape.

For Guillermo, ragged son of a tattered lineage, who had learned not from lessons of propriety but of privation, such a bow might as well have been the flamenco. He suspected that might have left the

Bishop at least a touch more impressed. As it was, the bow he gave, bending fully at the hip, with neck protruding, gargoyle grin, arms hooked and fingers not curled but clawed, gave a similar impression as would a rather tentative *Velociraptor* who probably also wasn’t very good at poetry.

The parakeet tittered outside.

“Manchego,” said the Bishop, both politely and impolitely ignoring the failed gesture. “I trust you are well.”

“Quite well, Brightness. Thank you, Brightness,” Guillermo replied, observing the honorific reserved for the foremost cleric of ancient Al-nayyir, ‘the bright one’, glittering city-jewel of the peninsula, home to its most consummate sorcerers of light.

“And how comes my poem? The festival approaches.”

And there was the sickly-sweet question, each word strychnine-coated to cover up the rather ungodly impatience the Bishop liked to nurse. Guillermo’s hand twitched in a hangman’s jig as he recalled the screwed-up balls of parchment that he had thrown out the window this morning in frustration. If poetry had come to him as naturally as magic he could have made even the deadly dull subject of Gods and heaven and salvation into a poem resembling something other than a piece of sarcastic polemic; instead he was reduced to getting rid of all of his false starts for fear of getting his head chopped off for heresy. The Bishop loved a good execution. As did Guillermo—they brightened up boring days—but he was rather less keen on the idea of his own headless body being carted around.

“Brightness, the work is coming along well.” The parakeet tittered in just the manner that his (former) betrothed used to when he had tried to write a love poem for her. “I simply require a little more time if the poem is to be suitable for the ears of your devoted, Brightness”

The Bishop fixed him with a withering look and leaping from the window began to look mighty inviting again.

“Manchego, I have been very patient-”

“And I am very grateful, Brightness, very grateful.”

“Please refrain from interrupting.” As if reading Guillermo’s thoughts, the Bishop moved between him and the window. “You understand this is not a vanity project, yes?”

“Yes, Brightness.”

“You understand that every year for over five hundred years your family has composed a poem for the church, and that said poem is utterly essential to maintaining—” The Bishop sighed heavily. “-in maintaining some visage of cooperation between the great families and the divine.” There was a bite in the way in he said *great*, as if he had to crunch down on the syllable to make it ring true.

“Yes, Brightness,” came a despondent reply.

The Bishop – unbecomingly, Guillermo thought – narrowed his eyes at him and hissed, “Then you understand the significance of your role here, Manchego.”

There are moments in life when one sees with absolute clarity. The sorcerers of Alnair were said to possess the ability from the moment they earned their gold-lined robes, but ever since encountering them Guillermo had always harboured his doubts. The challenge, he often found, was not encountering these moments of clarity so much as knowing when to keep mum about them.

“Don’t—,” came a loud squawk from the window, but it was too late.

“Brightness,” Guillermo sighed, “if you really thought that the past five hundred years of cooperation was maintained through a poem and not the great fortunes the sorcerers of Alnair have continuously bestowed upon these great families, perhaps you’re less suited for this role than you think.”

Outside, the parakeet let out a whistle: either a warning or a laugh, Guillermo was having trouble telling the difference with the blood rushing in his ears.

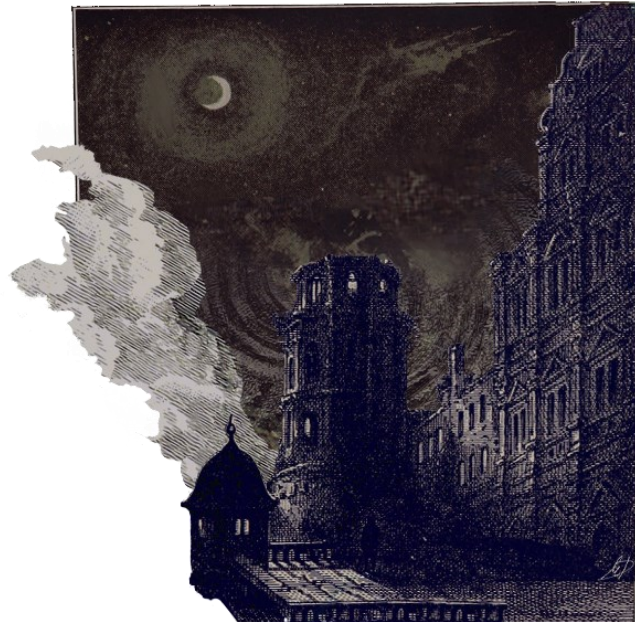
Rather than anger or indignation, the Bishop merely stood still, head cocked as he considered Guillermo. “Perhaps you are right,” came the soft, unexpected reply.

“I’m—”

The Bishop interrupted him, “Three days, Manchego. Three days to write your poem.” With that, he turned, his gold-lined mauve robe flaring in his wake as he strode out of the chamber.

Another ball of light was launched at the parakeet.

Day turned to night turned to day, and the city went on glittering – you might imagine that this line was part of the magnificent poem Guillermo was going to write. If you are particularly imaginative, you might be able to



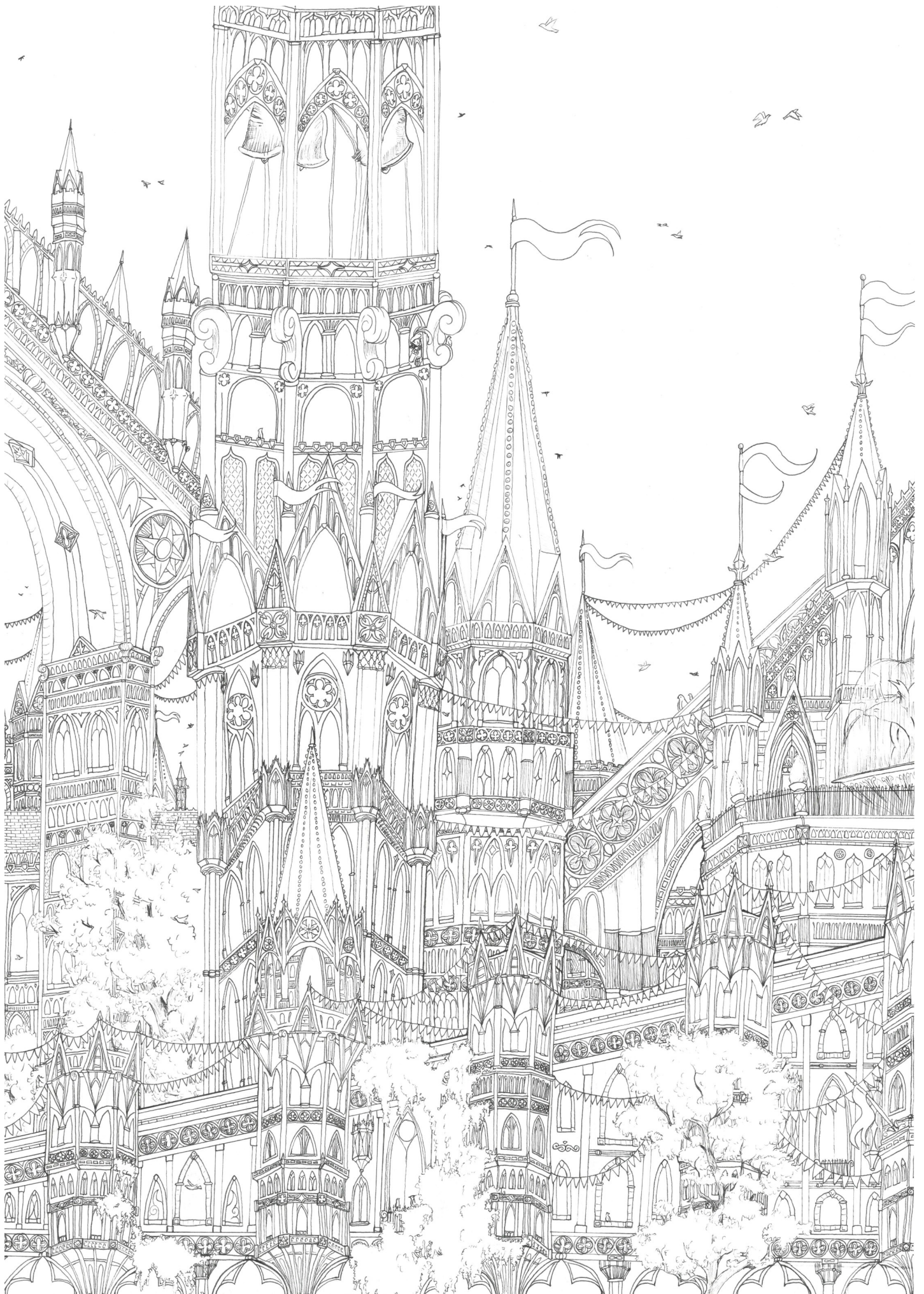
© Michaela D (@mdg._art on Instagram)

make this sorcerer into a good poet – but this would be beyond his nature. He needed to keep his head on his shoulders, but also felt the undeniable urge to stick with his supposedly ‘heathen’ past, and to show what a ‘great’ family really was.

The latest descendant of the house of Manchego was going to put in effort, but not to make new words to proclaim and glorify the church, nor would he rip and reiterate the poets of the past. As any historian of Alnair would know, we wouldn’t want a repeat of the poem of ‘374, where the great Lady Carolina took the poem of ‘345 and changed a few words, expecting nobody to notice and to gain as much respect. It was a disgrace until she was pardoned by the bishop at the time.

Guillermo was a poet, and so his job was to show the truth, and present it beautifully. What truth is there in a cathedral tower? The great families’ poem was a sign of how they held the church with reverence, but it was also meant to be true. The words spoken behind closed doors, the sacrilegious conversations and heretical discussions – the sound carried on wind and wave by magic back to the sorcerer. Pages of transcription, balls of echoing opinions and chatter, he wasn’t just a poet, he had magic to use. Magic that was going to expose the truth.

His foot once again tapped rhythmically against the floor. Audible, this time, and more like an incantation than the melodicy of a poem. The wide-open window called to him, the breeze fluttering around Guillermo, beckoning him to dance. All this time since the last



View of Alnair - Emily Betts

festival, he had been struggling, but only then did his mind feel clear. He could weave magic into his words, create something so terribly wonderful that the Bishop wouldn't even be able to remember his past transgressions. So rare an occasion to have all the city his captive audience, to have the stage all to himself. And who would stop him – if they knew the things he had heard, the things he had seen from the places the great families thrived, the places where the light could not reach.

Guillermo was overwhelmed by the rush of his own feelings, a stark contrast to the wistful emptiness with which he had been gazing from the cathedral mere moments early. Today, perhaps, he could write.

He leaned out of the window, far out, letting the wind fly through his hair, and with it came pictures. He saw the city spread out below him, then from the air above the east gate, and then from the mountains beyond. Once he had seen them, he could show any of these views to an audience with a simple incantation.

He reached further, and looked out at the coastline beyond the mountains, and at the ships on the sea, and then he went past over the deep ocean. As he reached further into the wind's past, he saw the sun dip into the sea to the east and disappear below the horizon as the dawn reversed itself. He continued, watching the stars appear in the darkening sky and rush down to the eastern horizon. The sky lightened again, the stars vanished, and looking west, he saw the sunset reverse itself, and, looking down, dolphins playing in the sea. He watched them coming out of the water backwards, arc gracefully through the air, and vanish backwards into the sea. When they stopped, he went back and watched it again, forwards. He watched them backwards and forwards a few more times, getting slightly different views each time from the shifting wind patterns, and then continued, forwards, back to the present.

He then sent the parakeet off to the west, to capture a different view of the city, which the easterly wind wouldn't provide.

When it returned and settled on the windowsill, he cast a spell onto its eyes, and put a finger over each. He wasn't strong enough to read memories, even from a willing creature, but he could reach into the history of its eyes, if the creature was willing, and see what they had seen. When creatures resisted, he simply poured light onto their heads until the heat destroyed their brains,

and then read their eyes anyway. The parakeet did not resist, and Guillermo got what he needed without killing it.

That night, he sent the parakeet off to the north to capture a view of the city from the top of the great lighthouse, with beams of light coming out from underneath and falling onto the city. The lighthouse was not there to guide ships into the harbour. It was run by the church, or more precisely, the Bishop, who paid for its operation out of his own generous salary. The system was based on a few passages in scripture, which alluded to the bishop throwing coloured light onto the ancient city of Al-nayyir from a tower outside the north gate, as well as his duty to maintain order in the city.

At the heart of the lighthouse a fire burned every night. The fire was on the ground floor, with air coming in through archways, but the bright flames went up almost to the top of the building. In the north side were the stairs, with a heavy stone wall between them and the flames, and a similarly heavy one on the other side, to keep the building standing. On the south side was a vast iron honeycomb of tubes, each about a foot across and ten long, sloping down away from the fire, with stained glass set in the ends, each casting a different shade of light onto a different part of the city. At the top of the tower the air from the fire flowed out around all sides of the saltery, where men sprinkled salt into it all night. The salt fell down into the flames, making them bright yellow, except on the night of the new year, when caustic lye was added, turning the flames purple. It was on the spire of the saltery that the parakeet perched, taking an unnecessarily long rest to annoy Guillermo.

Because of another passage of scripture, stating that the light was different every night, the stained-glass windows were rearranged during day. It used to be done by men outside the tower, hanging from ropes from the top, being careful to put their feet on the iron honeycomb and not the glass. Reverend Casamayor did it with magic, saving a fortune.

The parakeet returned at last, and gave the view to Guillermo. After a short rest, followed by a long argument with the bird, it went off to the south of the city, to see the lighthouse in the background, throwing beams of colour down onto the city.

He spent the next day selecting memories, some his own, and some gained by magic, writing short poems to go with them, memorising them, revising them, and

practising their delivery. He had no need to practise the magical parts of his work.

When the great day dawned, Guillermo Manchego was ready.

On stage, he started by throwing an image of a mountainside into the air behind him, and then recited a short (and not very good) poem in praise of its beauty. He did the same for a coastline, a forest, a sunrise at sea, the night sky, and the dolphins at play. Each image he threw off to the side when the next came, and it hung in the air, until the breathless audience were surrounded by beauty on all sides.

Then he moved on to the wonders of civilisation: magnificent ships in the harbour; the lighthouse on Namahai point; the great gardens in the desert of Miramo in the north, and the towering aqueducts that sustained them; the great buildings of Alnair; and finally, the whole city.

Next, he would have shown the great mansions and palaces of the rich families, and then exposed the plots that were being hatched inside them, which threatened to destroy the church, the city, and the entire peninsula, in civil war. He didn't get that far; as he was clumsily praising the beauty of his final wondrous view of Alnair, from the south, he noticed that some at the back of the audience were looking at the sky. He wasn't surprised that their attention had wandered, but it seemed strange that they were all looking the same way. He continued for a few seconds, and then he heard it too: the unmistakable call of a chiraan.

Chiraan were very rare birds – most of the inhabitants of Alnair, and even travelling merchants and sailors, never saw or heard them – but Guillermo had once been attacked by one, and had blinded it with a bolt of light. It had only been afterwards that he had found out that the birds were sacred, and anyone who harmed one would lose his soul.

He stopped at the end of the poem - no one was listening anyway – dismissed the images and looked. There was a whole flock of chiraan coming over the eastern wall. The soldiers on the wall, not knowing the birds were sacred, pointed crossbows and a few spears warily up at them, but the chiraan ignored them and closed in on the city centre. Guards carrying long spears were mingling with his audience, each group with its own uniform forming up around the lords and ladies of

the great houses that employed them. Reverend Benito Casamayor strode onto the stage, and shouted above the din. "These are chiraan – sacred birds – whoever harms loses his soul! They are peaceful birds and have never hurt anyone!"

As soon as he had said it, the chiraan swooped into the square from all sides. They dived into the centres of the rings of guards, most of whom kept their spears out of the way, fearing for their souls. Guillermo saw the birds picking up the foremost people of some of the great houses, while other chiraan put their claws out and grabbed the few spears that were raised in resistance, tossing them aside. He recognised many of the people who were being carried off as corrupt heretics who were plotting to destroy the church and replace it with their own power structures, and was just wandering if the Bishop had somehow called the chiraan to get rid of his enemies, when he felt a rush of air from behind. Knowing his soul was already lost, he whirled around and blasted light wildly at the bird, then jumped aside as it crashed blindly into the stage. Then he remembered his family. He stood up and saw their colours at the back. He was relieved to see that none were missing, and the chiraan were ignoring them as they disappeared into the safety of a wine merchant's shop. As soon as they were in, he recited a spell, throwing up a curtain of blinding light to protect the front of the shop, and then put an illusory cliff face in front of that, hoping that the chiraan would ignore it.

A rush of air forced Guillermo to return his own safety as a chiraan dived at him from the side. He dived back, forwards, off the stage, hoping not to get impaled on one of the spears below. As he fell, he saw another chiraan swooping at him, and threw out his arms towards it, searing its talons with hot red light. The bird retracted its talons with a sharp squawk, and Guillermo felt a rush of air as it flew over him. He had no time to think about it, as the ground was rushing up to meet him, and he was falling face first. He put his arms out in front of him and was grateful that a guard of the house of Tayin was preparing to catch him. Then a shadow fell over the guard's face, and before Guillermo could think, strong talons gripped him from behind, and he was jolted into the air.

The chiraan carried him, upside down, over the stage, and then swung around and headed west. Guillermo vaguely realised that this was the opposite direction that

the rest of the chiraan were carrying the people they took, but he was too busy thinking of how to get free. He desperately threw light into its eyes, but it gripped him tighter and continued. Afraid he had missed, Guillermo threw intense light over its entire head. It was blinded for certain, and an instant later, he heard two squawks and felt its grip loosen as it collided with another chiraan.

Guillermo looked past his feet to see where he was falling, and saw that he was arcing down towards a first floor window. Half a second later, he smashed feet first through the glass and landed awkwardly on the floor. He looked around, and seeing no-one, he relaxed.

Then Guillermo had an idea. This was his chance to win favour for his family.

He stood up, ignoring the sharp pains in his ankle, and hobbled over to the window. Leaning on the window frame, he started throwing bolts of light at the birds as they swooped, desperately protecting those who were or might become friends of the Manchegos, while letting their enemies be carried off.

After several seconds he heard a scream. He was hearing many screams, but this was a voice he knew well: the Bishop of Alnair was being carried off. By the time Guillermo spotted the bird, it was already soaring high over the rooftops of the east of Alnair. He threw two bolts of light at it, but it was facing away from him. He tried to curve them around into the chiraan's eyes, but he doubted they had hit. Then he recited a spell, the words coming to him by instinct, and pointed his finger at the bird. A ray of light shot out from his finger and hit the bird's back. Then light rained down on it from all sides, and from above. The bird erupted in flames, and it fell out of the sky, trailing fire and loose feathers.

Guillermo looked on, wondering if the Bishop would survive the fall, and wondering if he wanted the Bishop to survive. Then the Bishop managed to get free of the burning chiraan, and half a second later another, coming from the east, caught him and turned around to carry him over the wall. Guillermo repeated the spell, and the ray shot out from his finger again, but at the last moment the bird dived, and the ray shot over it and hit the hillside outside the city. Light then fell from the sky and set the dry grass on fire. The bird dipped below the wall, out of sight, and Guillermo's attention returned to the square below him.

He fought on for another minute, using his magic to blind the chiraan, and then he had an idea. It would be more effective, and require less power, to just hide the square. He projected an image of a rooftop into the air above the square, and the birds soon stopped diving out of the sky to attack. The last few in the square flew around in confusion, and those that were carrying people dropped them. The square calmed a bit, and Guillermo saw his chance to make sure everyone knew what he had done for them. He threw out lines of light from his hands to each of the birds and kept the lines there. The lines were just for show, having no actual effect. He then called down to the people directly below the window to move away, shouted out an incantation across the square, and looked the nearest bird straight in the eye. A ray of multicoloured light shot from his eyes to its, and it charged at him – then the ray intensified, and burned its way through the back of the bird's eye and into the brain, and the bird fell dead to the ground below the window. He repeated it for the other eight birds, with the same result. The crowd in the square cheered, forgetting that the birds were supposed to be sacred.

Guillermo gave an awkward bow, but as he straightened, he heard something crashing through the wall behind him. He turned and saw two chiraan falling away, and a third flying in through the wrecked wall, straight towards him. Guillermo threw light into its eyes to blind it, but it blinked as the bolts struck. He tried to cast a spell, but it was too late. The bird picked him up, smashed through the wall where the window had been, and headed east across the city. Guillermo finished his spell. He had no need to aim, and light came from all around and struck the bird. He waited for flames to leap up from the bird and consume it, but nothing happened. He tried another spell, and invisible heat shone up from the ground at the bird's head. After several seconds, its normally white plumage glowed red-hot, but the bird didn't seem to notice.

As they crossed the wall, Guillermo looked back across the city and saw more chiraan tearing apart the first palace of the house of Verano. They were too high up for him to keep attacking the bird, as a fall would be fatal, so Guillermo resigned himself to his fate and watched the scenery go by, and then looked into the wind's history, and saw that the birds ahead of him were going out to sea, and then he saw that the first of them, once out of

sight of land, had turned and were flying north.

After a few minutes of the freezing mountain air, the bird flew down the east side of the mountains and Guillermo, seeing that it was very low over a hill, tried one last attack. He threw intense heat and light on the chiraan's legs, until they were white-hot, and he could feel the heat radiating from them burning his face, he turned his face away and saw that they were going to land on a hilltop. He realised it would be diplomatic to stop attacking the bird.

The chiraan set Guillermo down on the hilltop and spun around and landed in front of him. Then it introduced itself: "I am Hilkanah."

Guillermo, recognising the name of the king of the gods, searched his memory of the scriptures. Hilkanah appeared as a man several times, twice as a woman, and once as a whole choir signing together, but never, as far as he could remember, as a bird or any other kind of animal.

A violin floated through the air towards Guillermo. "I know what you are thinking," the bird said. "Take it and play."

Guillermo, who had never touched a violin in his life, remembered from scripture that only Hilkanah could grant musical talent; not even Lamian, god of music, could. He took the violin from the air and thought of a tune he had heard long ago. To his surprise, he found that he could play a tune as easily as thinking it. He held out the violin to the bird and gave a clumsy, terrified bow. His terror increased as he saw a larger, blue bird, more beautiful than a chiraan, sweeping towards them out of the mountains.

The violin vanished, and the bird, Hilkanah, explained:

"I have not come to punish you. I and the other birds you attacked are not chiraan."

The blue bird landed beside him and bowed to the smaller, white bird.

"This is a real chiraan -"

Guillermo bowed to the blue bird.

"- they are the best singers in the natural world, but when the church and the city of Alnair grew corrupt I removed the chiraan, and centuries later, people only knew that chiraan were the largest birds that existed. The bird that attacked you twelve years ago, which you mistook for a chiraan, was not a normal bird, but one that I sent, as are the birds that have just attacked Alnair. They will disappear when their job is done. I

would not destroy your soul for attacking a chiraan in self-defence, but the old law didn't make the exception, as real chiraan never attack. Also, the word translated as 'soul' in your scriptures actually refers to artistic ability, which you don't have anyway.

"My purpose was to terrify the rich people of Alnair, and make them support you as a hero – and also to remove those who would take advantage of the upcoming reformation to start a civil war. We are taking them to a place in the far north, which you have read about in the scriptures, but which these heretics refuse to believe in: the cold place where water turns to rock and ribbons of light dance across the sky, which is dark for three months every winter. I have sent a prophet, who is already there, who will lead them, show them my ways, and help them build a city.

"As for you, I am appointing you Bishop of Alnair. I will soon carry you out over the sea. As soon as we are over the water, you must wriggle out of my grip. I will fly on, and you must swim to shore, cross the mountains, and return to Alnair. That will give you a truthful explanation of how you escaped. Do not mention this meeting until you are safely in office.

"When you reach the city, you will find some of my birds attacking the remaining palace of the house of Verano, and you must fight them off to earn the house's gratitude. Their first palace, which I have destroyed, was hideous anyway, and it cast a shadow on the south market at night, making it a haunt of thieves. After that, you must go to the library underneath the Cathedral of the Assumption. The library is burning now, but when you get there, my old texts will be ashes, along with many later theological texts. You must command the floor to open. It will open and reveal to you a new copy of the scriptures, in your own language, with no mistakes or corruptions, and with an extra book giving my instructions for the city of Alnair and other books to be sent to the other cities of the peninsula.

"As for your magic, it is not a 'lesser means', it is a gift from me, just like the old Bishop's magic. I give such gifts to anyone who I do not give a talent for poetry, or for some other art. In ancient Al-nayyir, before it grew corrupt and collapsed, the Bishop would stand at the top of his tower, and from there he would light up the city with his magic, as your Bishops try to with the lighthouse, and would consider the city, and where new buildings should go, and how they should be built. It was architectural order, not civil order, that the old Bishops

kept. You must build a balcony on the north side of the lighthouse of Alnair to do the same for the new part of the city which you will build to the north. Keep the lighthouse doing its job for the existing city; it works well.

“As for the old Bishop, I have sent him to the gardens of Miramo to help build a new aqueduct. His magic was always meant for moving heavy stones. Now come over here.”

Guillermo walked over to the bird, noticing that he wasn't limping, as he had been earlier. Hilkanah picked him up and flew out to sea. Guillermo wriggled out of his grip, landed hard in the sea, and watched Hilkanah fly over the horizon. When he reached shore, the blue chiraan was still standing on the hilltop, singing sweetly.

As Zayit, god of architecture, was suspended in the air among the crenellated towers and fluttering banners of Alnair one sunny morning in early May, he noticed a

young man leaning out of an upper window of the Cathedral of the Assumption with his chin supported on one hand, so that his face resembled a wistful gargoyle set into the capital of a miniature column. As Zayit floated closer, peering invisible into the cool, shadowy interior of the cathedral, he made out his right foot tapping soundlessly against the floor of the gallery, oblivious to an echo of song that meant that the priests, far below, were concluding their offices. He remarked to himself that the young man's figure, though noble, was ragged; a comparison suggested itself, in his imagination, to a fan of peacock's plumes wrongly appropriated as a feather duster. This was his Brightness Reverend Guillermo Manchego, bishop of Alnair, gifted sorcerer and mediocre poet, and today he was feeling particularly relaxed.

After a year of reformation and construction, Zayit decided it was time to get his servant a better outfit.

Editor's Review: Queso Grande

An exciting and creative high fantasy tale, this really got me picturing the city of Alnair in my head—so hats off for the descriptive parts. It's worked well and I enjoyed the slightly cynical, joking tone that was kept up by several authors. 'Manchego' was introduced as a name in the very first section, but nobody made the obvious joke until I asked for title suggestions.

Author Review: Queso Grande

I forgot to explain the basis of the great families' poem: in the days when ancient Al-nayyir was corrupt collapsing, and people still knew that art had been the central function of the church, the representatives of the great houses asked Hilkanah's prophet why the divine wasn't cooperating with them, and he replied, sarcastically, that they might at least provide a poem once a year. When, centuries later, the scriptures were rediscovered during the construction of Alnair, the language and context were poorly understood, and it was taken as a command that the houses listed should, between them, provide a poem every year. As 'heathen' outsiders in the city, most of those families couldn't survive in Alnair, until, 500 years before Guillermo's time, the only one left was the house of Manchego, who then got the responsibility every year.—Joel Pearson

Venus Rising

Gabriel Ong, Sophia Rodriguez-Bell, Milamber, Rosalind Mackey, Dan Scott, James, Chris Pang

CW: assorted deaths and disasters, mostly offscreen

“Now arriving: Ishtar Cloud City 7, Venus.”

The PA system of the Ningishzida spaceplane announced the conclusion of Dr Sundaresh's 4-month-long journey from London Domed City, Earth. Eager to leave the grim metal-ceramic shell they'd spent the last 127 days in, they quickly grabbed their luggage, and went through the docking umbilical, into a more picturesque metal-ceramic shell, adorned with plants and lit by artificial

sunlight.

This was one of the Venusian cloud cities of Project Venera, the initiative spearheaded by Meon Corporation to terraform Venus. Located above the sulphuric acid clouds of the planet, the cloud cities were the main hubs of coordination and resource distribution to the various teams responsible for surveying, construction, and ultimately remaking Venus into *terra nova*.

“Dr Sundaresh, you’re finally here. I am Captain Lavochkin, I will be your escort on your visit here. I trust you have been keeping up with our progress?” A tall, bulky man armed with a rifle in Meon Corporate Security armour was already waiting outside the umbilical. After the catastrophic failure of Meon’s Mars base, they were taking no chances when it came to protecting their investments.

“Nice to meet you, Captain. Indeed I have, it is truly exciting, I mean, an ancient alien civilization? If this is true, it could change everything!” the astrobiologist exclaimed. After all, their field would no longer be predominantly theoretical.

“I am glad you see what’s at stake here, Doctor. Our bots finally excavated a way into the alien metamaterial of the structure just two days ago, and advance teams have already begun setting up a forward base of operations just past the entrance. We have a lander ready to go, we can head there after you’ve settled into your cabin,” Lavochkin explained.

“No, there is no time to waste. Take my luggage to my room for me, I have everything I need in my backpack,” Sundaresh said.

“As you wish, Doctor. Unfortunately, the winds are not in our favour today, so you will need to take the reinforced lander and wear the fluoropolymer suit. This acid rain will not let up anytime soon, I’m afraid,” Lavochkin warned.

“That’s alright, it’s still better than London’s weather.” The Domed Cities back on Earth were meant to be climate-controlled, but that was a pipe dream, a fairy tale, a folk legend. Decades ago, they sheltered the populace from miles-long storms and cooled them in the egg-frying summers without a problem. But time went on, corners were cut, and money turned away from home to the skies. Well, Sundaresh couldn’t complain. Without Meon Corp, they wouldn’t be here, heading to the first ever extra-terrestrial archaeological site while complaining about London.

Lavochkin nodded, unaware of Sundaresh’s internal musings. “Of course. My condolences.”

Sundaresh paused and stilled comically. “Condolences?” they repeated.

Their guide held out a hand and instructed Dr Sundaresh to proceed down to, yep, another umbilical. “Yes, Doctor,” Lavochkin’s voice softened from the military-harsh register. “A most tragic accident. Did you know

anyone affected?”

They set off, Sundaresh chewing over Lavochkin’s comment and Lavochkin towering behind them, rifle in hand. Security had to follow their wards at all times, quite literally, as per protocol. No more Mars incidents for Meon Corp.

Finally, the doctor responded quietly, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“What?!” Lavochkin boomed behind them.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“The explosion! In London! The Dome Hole!”

That was a horrible but descriptive name. Dr Sundaresh slowed in front of a fork in the path, despite the ground lighting pointing left. The little arrow was blinking aggressively. “They didn’t mention anything about that,” Sundaresh said, almost to himself.

“Some engineering problem, I don’t understand it. Some problematic filament or thingamajig in the cooling systems. Don’t worry, they checked all the ones here. We’ll be fine. Now go left. We’re almost at the lander dock.”

The journey was in uncomfortable silence, the doctor seeped in thoughts about London, and the captain focused on piloting in the thick Venusian atmosphere. The many scanners and backup systems of the lander were necessary on the planet where there weren’t just large temperature gradients (as on Mars) but harsh acids and poor visibility as well. Sure, Mars had its storms, but when there are perpetual clouds obscuring the surface, scientists wanted to be able to keep their scanning equipment stable.

So much care for the frontiers of science. If only they had looked back, thought Sundaresh, although there never was much care taken for Earth.

Without much of a jolt, the craft landed and extended an umbilical to the new outpost. Robots scurried around the human outpost, reinforcing the plates worn by acid and excavating more material from what was appearing as a large complex of ruins – but one shouldn’t be quick to jump to conclusions. The falling rain obscured the full picture in a mist of droplets, but as the pair walked down into the outpost, a map was helpfully projected up onto the walls.

“As you can see, our probes have already managed to capture a portion of the layout.” Lavochkin gestured at the map. “Though this is mostly from external seismic tomography; deep internal scanning seems to be

impeded by the specific properties of the metamaterial, which appears to absorb a great deal.”

“Hmmm,” Sundaresh said absentmindedly. Their attention had been caught by a chunk of rock on the lab bench. The report paper beside it detailed the rock’s capacity to absorb and emit frequencies of not just light but also electricity – the metamaterial.

“Don’t worry, we didn’t break it off the structure. There is quite a lot of debris all over the tunnels, while clearing a path in we decided to start testing.”

A person in a lab-coat (not armour or uniform like the Meon Corp workers) came in from an antechamber. “Well, we’ve done some geological testing; we were waiting for the astrobiologist to arrive before going deeper.”

“Geological?” Sundaresh said. “Interesting. What do you make of it?”

“We’ve never seen a rock like it before, that’s for certain,” the scientist responded. “It’s made of iron, sulphur and silicon so of course, compositionally, it’s very similar to the weathered layer of the crust. But the nanostructure looks – well, I don’t want to completely stick my neck out here, but it doesn’t look like something that could form via known natural processes.”

“You’re saying it’s proof of extraterrestrial life.” Sundaresh had never been one for skirting around the point.

“Potential proof,” clarified the scientist. “I’m Dr Martines, by the way. She/her pronouns.”

“Dr Sundaresh, they/them.”

Martines nodded. “I heard you were coming.”

Sundaresh scanned the absorbance data for the metamaterial again, noting a puzzling detail. “Why’s there a gap in the wavelengths on the EM graph?”

“We couldn’t get a good read between 800 and 1200 nanometres. The rest of the spectrum was mostly stable between samples, but that section was completely different every time.”

“Huh. Does it resemble any human metamaterial technology in that respect?”

Martines frowned. “Most of ours are restricted to microwaves, which have a much bigger wavelength than that. This one seems to be doing something or other just outside the visible spectrum. If what we found isn’t just our instruments malfunctioning, that is.”

Sundaresh thumped their palms flat against the table.

“What wavelength is the light here?”

Martines stared at them, confusion plainly written on her face. “What, inside?”

“Outside,” Sundaresh replied urgently.

Martines’ eyes widened, and she turned and rushed back into the antechamber she had come from.

An agonising thirty seconds later, she reappeared brandishing a folded sheet of paper, which she flattened onto the table between herself and Sundaresh. It showed a steep bell-shaped curve with jagged dips in it: the transmission spectrum of Venus’ thick atmosphere. The highest point of the curve – the wavelength of most of the light that reached the surface – was between 800 and 1200 nanometres.

“Do you see where I’m going with this?” they asked Martines.

She nodded slowly. “Something to do with the metamaterial’s reaction to sunlight?”

“More than that. Why do we see between 380 and 800 nanometres?”

Martines’ brow furrowed. “Because that’s what visible light is?” she suggested, then immediately corrected herself, realisation dawning on her face. “Because those are the main wavelengths of sunlight that reach Earth’s surface.”

“That’s right. So we’d expect life on Venus, if it existed, to see in the range of wavelengths that are most prevalent here.”

“Which is the exact range that the metamaterial is doing strange things to!”

“Exactly!” Sundaresh found themselves grinning like an excited child. “The only question is, what is it doing?”

Sundaresh’s grin slowly faded as a thought crossed their mind, their expression replaced by an inquisitive stare.

“We have scans of the subterranean cave systems, yes?” they asked.

“Preliminary, yes,” Martines replied.

“How deep?”

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Martines thought for a moment before answering. “I can’t recall precisely but I’d say no further than about 20 meters, with a scan area covering no larger than a square kilometre.”

“And the metamaterial, do we have mappings for that?”

“Not explicitly,” Martines said. “I suppose we could build a crude estimate based on the interference data, though it would only be approximate. And the deeper below the surface we try to extrapolate, the poorer the estimate might be.”

Sundaresh nodded. “Yes, I suppose that’s to be expected. But even a shallow mapping might be enough for what I have in mind. How long would it take to draw these up?”

“No time at all, Meon spared no expense when it came to the on-base computing systems. But, Dr. Sundaresh, what exactly are you looking for?” Dr. Martines enquired, curiosity thick in her voice.

The astrobiologist merely shrugged and gave a noncommittal reply. “Not sure yet, just a thought,” they said.

Martines wanted to probe further, but she decided it would probably be quicker to simply draw up the maps and see what Sundaresh was looking for. She went to the nearest console and entered a suitable query into the system. Less than a minute passed before a notice flashed across the console screen that the analysis and projections were completed. Martines loaded the mapping onto the hologram viewer in the centre of the room and cleared her throat.

Sundaresh, seemingly lost in thought, jolted slightly before focusing on the viewer. After a few moments, eyes still fixed on the image casting from the surface of the table, they said to Martines, “Please overlay the mappings of the cave systems with the metamaterial projections.”

A few inputs on the console later and the hologram lit up with another colour, the web of metamaterial glowing in red and the cave systems in yellow. Sundaresh moved closer to the table and raised their hands to manipulate the hologram. They zoomed and panned across the tangled strings of red and yellow. At first they moved slowly, ponderously, but soon their movements became quicker, almost frenzied.

“We’ve been taking this metamaterial as evidence of some advanced, but long since passed, Venusian civilisation... Is there a chance...” they faltered, in some small part from uncertainty, but more substantially due to a deep-seated apprehension of how the corporate

backers for the entire scientific expedition (and terraforming effort) might react. “Dr. Martines,” they said after a pause. “Does it appear to you that the subterranean caves and the metamaterial mappings have any significant correlation to one another?”

Dr. Martines approached the hologram and studied the networks. Having paid close attention as Sundaresh was manipulating the hologram, it didn’t take her long to see what they had caught onto. Bright red holographic tendrils of metamaterial webbed across the entire square kilometre of the scan area. The yellow cave systems on the other hand were intermittent and patchy, and there was no clear sign that the metamaterial had any correlated affinity to the caves.

“You see it, don’t you,” Sundaresh said, more of a statement than a question.

Martines nodded.

“If the metamaterial is distributed without regard for the caves,” the astrobiologist said, a hint of excitement growing in their voice, “then who’s to say it’s the product of some ancient civilisation? These may just be rough approximations, but if you ask me, these metamaterial networks look almost like roots.”

Dr. Martines stared. “You’re saying the metamaterial isn’t a *sign* of former life? It *is* former life? But Dr. Sundaresh, be realistic. There’s virtually no trace of carbon in the metamaterial’s nanostructure. I mentioned earlier, iron, sulphur, silicon... But no carbon.”

Dr. Sundaresh grinned and shook their head almost gleefully. They spoke through an eager smile, “What scientific law precludes the existence of non-carbon lifeforms, Dr. Martines?” They were practically shivering with excitement as they asked their next question. “And who said anything about *former* life?”

For a moment that could have been minutes, Dr. Martines stared, silent, at the lump of metamaterial on her lab bench. The solid, iron-silicon composite looked more like a fossil than living tissue.

Turning back to Dr. Sundaresh, she regained use of her vocal chords, but before she could string a full thought together— “Dr. Martines, communique from Brussels,” Lavochkin interrupted her.

The monitor hummed softly as the Meon Corp logo faded into a video-feed. “Dr. Martines, given your background in mineral composites, we need you to review the data you’re seeing now. A build-up of pyrosilicate was located near the London Dome’s rupture site. At first it was dismissed, but deposits have

been found throughout the entire coolant network. Nanoscopy revealed some unusual structures, not consistent with any documented crystallisation processes, and the spectrogram is," here, the speaker faltered, "well, it's unusual. Please respond by 05:00h UTC. Brussels out."

A jumble of words fell from the two scientists, holding no discernible meaning for Lavochkin, but confirming their shared understanding. Dr Sundaresh raised the printed spectrograph to the monitor, fitting each peak and trough together like a child's puzzle. Neither of them cared to compare the nanoscope images against the Venusian samples - the map of 'deposits' glowing on-screen, and the macroscale images of the offending mineral were enough.

Lavochkin, uncertain of their technobabble, continued "Dr Martines, I must also relay, the London lab was compromised during the Dome breach. The samples you sent for LH-DAC analysis have been recovered, but both canisters appear to have been damaged in transit. I'll be outside, if you need anything."

Then there were only two people left. Two people, and the chunk of metamaterial. For the first time Dr Sundaresh tried to focus on it, to look past it as a mere scientific specimen but rather as something alien, something from outside of their sphere of knowledge. It was oddly smooth for a chunk of rock, its surface a dull grey that revealed a slight iridescence as they picked it up, gingerly, with a pair of tongs.

"It can manipulate light. Which is to say, it can manipulate electromagnetic waves," they said slowly.

"But the computer readings didn't show it generating any aberrant electromagnetic fields..." Dr Martines said, picking up the readouts.

"Of course not." Dr Sundaresh said.

"Of course not?"

"It's an intelligent metamaterial that can manipulate its own EM field signature. Camouflage would be the least of its talents. And besides, how long has it been in this lab?"

"Well- a few months. We brought it in after we requested your transfer from the London Advanced Research Institute."

"And none of the computers here are shielded against EM interference, are they? No Faraday cages, no air-gapped clean rooms?"

"The facility's plating offers protection against any external radiation-"

"External radiation, yes. But you brought it inside, Dr. Martines. If it is indeed intelligent, and capable of detecting or generating electromagnetic fields, then it's been sitting in here for months. Watching. Learning."

"By the Hand." Martines now looked pale. Her hands began to twitch. Sundaresh noticed that she had assistive prosthetics equipped, probably to counter muscle degeneration from long periods of space travel.

"Your Meon Corporate Mission Statement teaches that the Hand of Progress is a human one, that we were destined to fulfil the prophecies of Fyodorov the Cosmist and conquer the stars. But what if the stars are already spoken for, by entities more patient and intelligent?"

Martines pulled out a thick binder of experimental readouts and began flipping to the very back, to the oldest entries. "When we first brought it in, there were some strange EM field readings, but then they evened out..."

"Because you were no longer in control of your own instruments."

"But then why would it allow us to communicate these findings to you, to Earth, to request experts? Surely it would want to stay hidden."

"Because it wants to be found, to be understood. If we began terraforming assuming it was just dumb metal the native biosphere would be destroyed. And..." Now it was Sundaresh's turn to become uneasy.

"And what?"

"Call in Lavochkin."

"Why?"

"I came here to establish that your new discoveries were harmless. I never asked for samples of the metamaterial to be sent to London, Dr. Martines."

Away from the two scientists, the small piece of rock shimmered slightly, its iridescence shifting for a brief moment. The lights above them flickered, and a few of the base computers sputtered to life of their own accord.

Editor's Review:

This may be my favourite story in this magazine. It's well-written, tightly-contained hard sci-internally consistent and (probably) within the bounds of possibility. It feels tense all the way through, and later authors have done an excellent job working brief mentions such as the London Dome Hole into the major plot...

Author Reviews:

I am very pleased with how it turned out from my starting point, and I definitely did not expect it to go in that direction, but I am very glad it did. I particularly like the idea of something that is apparently non-living turning out to be living, and the revelation that humanity is (and has always been) toying with forces of nature beyond their understanding.—Gabriel Ong

I've never written hard sci-fi before (despite having been an Earth Scientist for two years, physics still scares me), but I found it a refreshing challenge to be researching metamaterials rather than something actually relevant to my degree, and expanding the story while staying just within the realm of possibility. I love the twist at the end, it builds so coherently off the work of us unsuspecting writers who came earlier.—Rosalind Mackey

Bonus: Alternative Title Suggestions

New Dawn Fades

The Rise of Venus

Venus Victrix

Venus Cloacina

Morning Star to the Head

The Hand of Progress

TAKING OUT A SMALL CLONE

Sol Dubock, Milamber, James, Sophia Rodriguez-Bell, Sophia Gilbert, Lucy R, anon, Ismail

CW: human experimentation, stalking, creepy behaviour

Dr Octavia Verne stood in her office, staring with marvel and hope at the brass box she had just finished constructing. This was the culmination of all she had worked towards for years of research, all that time her colleagues shunning her and discussing the “ethical implications” of her work to no end. But what did they know? They didn’t have her vision, her insight, her drive. They didn’t even care about all the good this could achieve, all the wasted time that would soon be saved. She looked through the thick glass front-window, the light barely reaching through to the interior; it had just enough space to house a single test subject. She could have planned to acquire this subject with the standard procedure, with the bureaucracy of consent forms and ethics committees - things she simply didn’t have the patience or virtue for. Octavia knew that if she found someone desperate enough, and with enough convincing in the form of “necessary prescriptions” (“Captain Cornelius’ Marvellous Headache Cure (now with Fifty Percent more Cocaine)” being a particularly popular item), she could get the manpower needed to set the machine running faster than it would take to even start explaining her invention to the conscientious board of scientists who dismissed her so openly. Determined, she put on her long sweeping fur coat and walked with purpose to the door of her

laboratory. Looking back at the box, over the gears and cranks she had spent so much time putting together, she was resolute. Octavia Verne was going to find a man to clone.

As she hopped onto the escalator travelling down into the street, she considered her requirements for such a man. He couldn’t be too tall; the box was only so big, and with some people’s augmentations, size becomes a significant issue. Metallic ‘upgrades’ (as they were advertised) should be avoided in general, if only because the cocktail of biological and technological research that had led her here would not necessarily blend with the established wares on the market.

Down the escalator went, past street level, briefly clouding her head – but not her mind – in smoke. Octavia didn’t usually come down so far, but one of her other requirements was that the ~~victim~~ willing participant would not be of note. In the (unlikely) event that she failed, the body could be easily disposed of in the great slough and underbelly of the city – the area she now jumped into from the escalator.

She got to walking. Smokestacks towered up, as the wheel of industry turned in its course, night into day, life into work. Labourers scurried from building to building, plenty with augmentations needed for their job,

unsuitable for cloning. Fires burned bright, almost cutting the need for streetlights, while pipes gurgled and chains clanked, carrying their loads like arteries bearing blood throughout the city. Heading away from the heart of production into the cooler peripheries, mist hung in the air. As it settled into fine beads, however, oily residue showed it to be less water and more the condensation of machine exhaust, hanging thick as if hiding people from the advance of this scientist. But There! Turning the corner, a man who would be the first victim.

The frame: hale, with thick-set shoulders resting back like volutes atop the spine. The hair: glossy with health, cropped perfectly to frame his features. Utterly unknown in the lofty circles of sky-side Industrialists, the very blueprint of fitness strolled toward Dr Verne. As her nameless stranger approached, Octavia strafed into an alleyway to observe less conspicuously. Passing her, unnoticed in the shadow, the man came just above shoulder-height; a roomy fit in the cloning chamber. "Now," she mused, "to find some leverage." She followed him back toward the Pneumatro station a few blocks back. Eager not to lose her mark in the commuter crowds, Dr Verne closed the distance to just a handful of paces.

The sharp focus quieted her mind further, with all the unimportant noise and peripheral distractions falling away. He walked with a spry balance, practically leaping into each step. Though this was good news for the clone, it gave Dr Verne no angle to pry - she could hardly bribe a healthy man with the remaining Meditech she hadn't stripped for parts. Cash upfront might have been an option, had she not sunk the entire research grant into grappling hooks, high-tensile cable, tungsten carbide glass-cutters and the no-questions-asked 'parking-charge' for an overnight berth at the Miracu-Heal Centre for Limb Reconstructions. She tailed him into a long galley saloon, set into an arch supporting one of the Pneumatro lines.

"Looks like we're doing this the Old-Fashioned way, then, just whiskey, bitters and syrup. Everyone needs something."

Her mark dodged between service mechanimals and steam-powered butlers, a dance mastered by every city dweller. Dr Verne twirled after him to the music of puffing steam and crackling coal. The two moved in a

waltz known to only one of the dancers.

Halfway across the room, halfway to her victim, Dr Verne stepped out of beat and into another guest. Damn. The two stumbled, falling this way and that, into the pathways of mechanicals and organics alike.

"Watch it!" she yelled. An equally surprised twenty-something stared back at her, eyes comically wide and eye bags impressively dark. Then they scurried away to whence they came.

Dr Verne stomped the rest of the way across the room, straight to the crowd gathered at the bar. That infernal idiot had stolen away her patience. It didn't matter how she captured her mark, just that she did. She could improvise... well, once she found him. Dr Verne's eyes scanned the room furiously, her head swivelling to the right, then the left, and then the right again. People bustled by, laughing and enjoying precious time off between work-shifts, yet none of them had those wide shoulders or that stupidly bouncy gait. Their breath reeked of cheap alcohol. The rusted floor, surely a safety hazard, squeaked under footfall in an irritating cacophony. She had lost her mark.

Resigned to find another victim, another day, Dr Verne shoved her way to the bar and straight into a shorter man. Just her luck. Two klutz idiots in one day-

"Oh, my apologies, ma'am, I didn't see you there," purred her mark. "A sin, I know, not to notice someone as captivating as yourself."

He smiled as easy as coal burned. In each hand he held a beer mug, and before Dr Verne could process what was happening, he was offering her one.

A thousand calculations spun through her mind at this unusual development. She considered herself too rational to believe this encounter could be purely down to luck, but what the real explanation could be eluded her. This strange man certainly knew more than he was letting on. The opportunity to secure such an ideal specimen couldn't be ignored, however.

Giving her mark a smile normally reserved for potential donors, Dr Verne accepted the mug and gestured to one of the dingy booths further into the bar. He dogged her steps as she wove through the crowded tables and bustling servers before sliding into the one of the seats. As he sat down opposite her, she considered her

options. The beers they both held looked to be cheap, and almost certainly watered down. She couldn't be sure of his alcohol tolerance, but given his hearty appearance she would have to assume it would take quite a few drinks for him to be inebriated enough for her purposes. She would have to see if they supplied a stronger drink. On the other hand, he had been the one to approach her with the mugs in hand. If he had suspicions, or plans of his own, he didn't seem to be concerned about the influence alcohol might have on his faculties. Perhaps something slipped in his glass, she mused. Of course, an unconscious body would be harder to deal with logistically than someone simply intoxicated, but it would be worth it to ensure she didn't lose her mark.

As she fingered the potential vials in her pocket, she realised he was staring at her expectantly, leaning forward with his elbows on the table.

"The name is Benjamin Weller. Might I be so bold as to ask for your own?"

"Verne," she replied, unwilling to risk any more.

"Why does that feel familiar?" he said with an easy sort of smile, the kind that showed off glowing teeth better cared for than she would have expected. Like white ashes as the fire fades.

"Yours is not so."

He took a great swig of his drink. "Well, who would have thought. May I ask your plans for the evening?"

Drag those glowing teeth back to my lab. "Just having a bit of a wander." She took a sip of her own drink. "People-watching."

"That would be why you were following me, then?"

Damn.

A mechanized bartender whirred by, refilling his mug without even pausing. A little splashed onto his hand, and he dabbed at it, sharp eyebrows narrowing downward, and threw a short "hey!" after the little machine. He looked after it, his gaze losing itself in the dance-like motion of the room, ducking over and under faces and dreams before landing back on hers.

He leaned back against the stained red cushion, putting his arm up along it as if it circled the shoulders of an invisible partner.

He raised an eyebrow.

"Yes."

"I expected a more interesting answer. Pity." He ran his finger around the edge of his mug and touched it to his lips. "Unless you've got one, I suppose I'll be going."

That was when, in the reflection of the sticker-covered mirror beyond him, she saw the young figure who'd crashed into her only minutes ago standing behind the bar, mug in hand, running their finger along the edge of their mug in precisely the same motion Benjamin Weller had just completed.

Dr Verne was unable to conceal her surprise. Grin widening, Benjamin tracked her eyes and turned to face the mirror. He took a deep breath, and visibly relaxed, skin rippling into the shape of another, familiar man. "Do you see now?" he asked, face glistening like an old god.

"I- I don't understand. Who are you?"

"Let's just call me a concerned friend." He tilted his head. "You may have been following me, Dr Octavia Verne, but I know all about you. Your research is fascinating! We all think so. But you're so very far off."

A wave of fury rippled through her. She had sacrificed far too much to be patronised by this arrogant stranger, even if he did seem to be multiple people at once.

"Did my colleagues put you up to this?" She asked dangerously. "Cool trick with the face changing, some new kind of augmentation maybe, but you need to leave. Now." She placed her mug deliberately onto the table, the muscles in her arms taut.

He waved his hands vaguely. "I apologise," he said, nodding to the young man at the bar, who began to walk over to them. "I didn't mean to offend you. You see- our problem with you is in fact the opposite, you're too close to the truth."

"Too close to what truth?" She couldn't help but keep the interest from seeping into her tone. The anger and frustration of a clearly wasted trip into the city's underbelly briefly overcome by her piqued levels of interest. In addition, she couldn't help but notice the thought 'once an inquisitive scientist, always an inquisitive scientist' spin across her subconsciousness, one of the thousands of computationally enhanced thoughts whirling through her mind at that moment in time.

It was only post this that her brain finally caught up to

the difficult situation she found herself in. Her following question came out much more like the crack of a gun than she had intended. "How am I your problem? We've never met before!"

"Whoa, gun slinger, stay calm. We mean you no harm," Benjamin carefully stated.

"Today, we are just here to chat," was the first contribution from the young man who'd made his way across the saloon to them. "You see, your research is not the first time successful human cloning has taken place, even if we let the public believe that to be the case." He let that sink in briefly before continuing. "The evolution of mankind from pure biological organisms to cyborg – well, that began with the first human clone. You see, we could physically, to an atom, clone someone. However, the clone never survived first contact. That is to say – their intelligence was always a fraction of that of the cloned host post-incubation, no matter what we tried."

Dr Verne's only response to that was a piqued eyebrow and softly uttered "damn", whilst the young man opposite her took a gulp from Ben's mug.

After wiping the foam from his mouth, he continued. "It wasn't long before we turned our efforts towards other pursuits. If the clones wouldn't work as desired, we would find a problem they could solve. Thus, the age of human modification was born as we could create, technologically modify and then test clones; rinsing and

repeating this process as much as necessary until a product was ready for market."

Taking a deep breath, which brought his jacket buttons close to popping, he continued. "Enough of the history lesson though. The reason we're here is that you are on the cusp of making this discovery for yourself and thus a potential thorn in our side. Well, for our operations, to be precise. We therefore kindly ask you to suspend your experimentation in this direction until further notice."

Briefly looking away from Benjamin's partner, Dr Verne watched as humanity bustled past, unaware of the fabric it had been built on. She wasn't one to care about scruples – for god's sake she had thought about kidnapping Benjamin, but this and them demanding her to stop her work was a step too far. "How dare you threaten my work?" she burst out.

"No, no, you misunderstand." Benjamin was quick to step in. "By 'until further notice', my good friend here meant until you joined us in collaboration."

"Ah," was all the reply that Dr Verne gave to that.

"We will leave you now; just know that you will find our terms and conditions, as well as further contact information, awaiting your return in the lab. Of course, it goes without saying that you mention this to no one. We all know what happens if you do..."

And with that they were gone.

Editor's Review: Taking Out a Small Clone

Charming. Really lovely. The people in this story deserve one another. I've always found the trope that 'clones aren't as intelligent because they don't have souls' to be very annoying, but it's portrayed as more of a technological failing here, so I'll let it slide. Overall this is quite well-written, but just happens to be about absolutely awful people...

The Airship

Anon, Joel Pearson, Ben LaFond, Thomas Frith, Georgia, BaSO₄, Dan Scott, Phoebe Fay

Content Warnings: poison, animal death, chemical weapon use, severe injuries, death

Her eyes closed firm and her mind deeply buried, she drove the plough forward. This time it was the sound of the churning ground that betrayed to her its nature. She knew these noises, and with every jolt she grimaced. The metallic clinks were the mouldboard meeting shrapnel, and the deeper grinding was the scrape along human

bone. It became only more common as her tilling worked deeper into the killing field.

This land had once been a park, a place of handholding and small-talking for soft-skinned men for whom war was a broadsheet headline. Now that city was ash and rubble, and what was left of those men fertilised her

furrows, fed her oxen.

This was the life she had always known. At least the person she was now. And yet, after all these years, she still could not look at the ground.

Her ears caught a new sound. It had come from the air, so she allowed herself to look up. Her solace, the wide grey-green sky, now interrupted. Sputtering above her was the remains of a bomber, hull-hatch doors hanging loose, swaying. The foredeck had been on fire and only embers remained where the crew would have gathered. In its wake the burned-out corpse of a life-raft was still chained. No visible survivors, the airship limped on dregs of instinct alone. It would fall, soon. It would fall in her fields.

Copper, clean food, and the ship's own panicked consciousness, all worth more than three seasons of her crops. But she did not need wealth, she needed to survive, and to survive you needed to be quiet. Looters would come for the wreckage, cannibals would come for the loot, and the militia would come for the cannibals. Her crops would be trampled, her stone-house would be dismantled.

The bomber would soon crash at her feet and with it the world. She ground her teeth, closed her eyes, dropped her head and turned the oxen. They walked straight for the one place she knew she could defend, plough carving a slash across her parallel tilling.

Four fields distant, the bomber was slowly dying, its final throes churning its own gaping furrow. The land's wound reaped only more bodies.

She led her oxen to a loading bay at the side of an abandoned building, tied them to a ring in the old stone wall, and shut and barred the outer door, not wanting anyone to see her move in. She lifted each sack of food and each waterskin off their backs, and then carried them to the processing room in the centre. She could survive a siege for months, if necessary. Seeing was easier than she'd expected, with light streaming in through old bomb-holes in the reinforced roof.

With the unloading completed, she donned some glass goggles, a fine cotton breathing filter, and some leather overalls from the processing room. She muzzled both of her oxen, and then untied them, held her breath, and led them ten feet in, not along the path to the processing room, but off through the rotting wood chips,

squashing mushrooms as she went. Still holding her breath, she ran to the path, and then along it and into the processing room. She closed the door and inhaled through the mask.

She pulled a string, and heard the creak of rusty metal as the shutters, twenty feet above her, closed, cutting off her air from the outside world. Then she got the overalls off and stuffed them into the bin, closing it tight.

She watched through a window as her oxen collapsed, kicking wildly, and then lay still. They would serve as a warning to anyone who tried to reach her. The mushrooms farmed here were not for eating, they were for poisoning; not for poisoning individual men, but for poisoning cities and armies.

Farming mushrooms and manipulating them to produce far worse poison than they could naturally make or even survive, and then using them on innocent people, was not the worst thing that the Jiroon Empire had done. That would be their use of plague to destroy cities that resisted them. The plagues were natural, but the Jiroon would send agents into the cities, who would pour their consciousness into the plague, making it multiply beyond its natural capabilities, spread everywhere, and kill everyone it touched.

Since it took so little power, and the work was done in and around the parts of the cities that were hit the worst by the plague, it was impossible for the authorities to catch and stop the Jiroon agents, and they would have no choice but to surrender. That was how the empire had appeared out of nowhere and conquered the western third of the mighty Ayaruun Empire.

The Ayaruun had fought back by sending their armies to block all roads into the east, and killing anyone who tried to pass, finally putting a stop to Jiroon expansion.

When she heard this, she had given up hopes of fleeing east, and tried to build a new life under the Jiroon. Then the Ayaruun Empire had fought back, sending in armies that destroyed everything they saw, taking no prisoners, to make certain that no Jiroon plague-mongers could return with them. That had prompted the Jiroon to build the mushroom farms, and use them on the Ayaruun, even inside cities under Jiroon control. The Ayaruun armies had to withdraw, and were replaced by airships bombing the cities. The Jiroon response had been to send men up, riding on giant eagles, to hack the airships

with swords. Then they had figured out that the airships were full of marsh gas, and could be easily destroyed by fire.

She had seen it happen: a company of men each riding an eagle would fly at the airship, wielding specialised fire-swords, with cloth inset into one side of the blade, soaked with oil or fat, and set on fire. If any of them survived the archers on the airship, they would hack the airship's hull open, and the marsh gas would spill out and catch fire, the fire ripping apart the side of the airship, until there was nothing but charred wreckage falling out of the sky, and any bombs that hadn't already been dropped.

But why hadn't it happened this time – why had this bomber not been torn apart by fire as quickly as all the others that she had seen destroyed? What new gas had been used to keep it aloft? And when the air grew stale and she was forced to reopen the shutters to the outside world, would it come down through the air-tube and kill her?

For now, there was nothing to do but wait and find out. Stepping away from the window, she climbed a ladder to a loft that ran around the perimeter of the building, piled high with crates and sacks. Some of these were empty, but most were packed closely with the supplies that would, she hoped, bring her alive through the next few days or weeks: dry biscuits, corn, herbs, bandages, salt beef, powdered milk. She dragged a couple of crates against the wall beneath a long, dusty pane of thick glass and climbed on top, wiping a rough circle out of the dust with her palm.

From here, she could look out beneath the projecting edge of the corrugated iron roof onto everything that was hers, or that had been hers until today: her fields, separated by hedges of twisted thorn, with a scar across the nearest one where she had left off ploughing; to one side, her stone-house and its outbuildings, crouching in the shadow of the petrified forest that had kept her farm isolated for years; and there, at the edge of the land that she had dared to call her own, the strange smouldering carcass of the airship, still letting out gasps of smoke that billowed, black and unmistakable, into the sky. The bodies of her oxen, which by now she knew would be staring out of unseeing eyes and struggling against the final effects of the poison, were just out of sight beneath this high window, at the base of the building's outer

wall. It was a high price to pay for safety, she supposed, but it wasn't as if she'd been ploughing before with the knowledge of long-term stability. Just because an airship hadn't come by before didn't mean she hadn't planned for it; readied herself for the cost of being known. Previously, it was just one more scenario in her mind, a bud of an idea that spread with the lack of true knowledge. What if she were no longer to be alone? She had never minded the prospect of a sudden death from the sky, or discovery by forces of either empire, and the death (hopefully) that would soon follow. To have to change, to adapt to the rhythm of being around others once more, would be a far greater cost.

Loneliness is an odd sensation to live with. Oxen are surprisingly easy going when you get to know them - if she could be said to know them- to have known them. It doesn't replace small-talk, or company. Mushrooms grow better when spoken to, she'd learned as a child. She never spoke to these ones, harbingers of death as they were.

Maybe she'd appreciate this change, really, as she might gain news. It had been a few years since any pamphlets had fallen, little spores of ideas that spread throughout her mind and told her of events, of her relative salvation in these undiscovered fields.

She looked out across her fields. There was no discernible symbol on the airship; the characteristic arrow-shaped rune representing honour for the Ayaruun empire was absent. Thankfully, the nightmarish red four that symbolized the Jinoon empire's four horsemen-esque leaders was also absent.

Endless moments passed yet she found herself unable to move. She became entranced by the sway of the smoke as it danced its way upwards to soil the sky. A small piece of the smoke tumbled less gracefully off to the side and seemingly failed to escape the ground. Her breath became thick, struggling to escape from her lungs, while she watched the fragment of smoke take on a humanoid form sprawled on her fields. Counting six breaths, she waited for the smoke to dissipate or remain still. The seventh breath was released with a terrified shake as the hazy figure crawled farther across the field – with unmistakable anthropomorphic movements. She waited for a scream to sound but the only noise present was the creaking of the airship as it continued to slowly burn

away in front of the now setting sun.

As night settled into the broken world like a slumbering cat ignorant to all chaos, she waited for looters, or cannibals, or militia to claim the wreck. Every so often the lone survivor would make to crawl another few inches away from the wreck with minimal success. She dared not take her eyes off the figure or the perimeter even as her mind and body begged for sleep. The sliver of human still left in her suggested she sneak across the field under the cover of night to tend to the potential innocent survivor; the survivalist warned her they could only bring her more harm. She had no memory of climbing down the ladder as she glided amongst the shadows towards the wreck armed with supplies, her body being puppeteered by an invisible force.

She gingerly approached the figure trembling in the middle of the field, all the while watching for potential dangers around her.

He'd lost consciousness.

Carefully, she dripped water onto the corners of his dry, cracked mouth, and then attempted to clean his dirt- and blood-splattered face. Just then, he suddenly took her hand in his and murmured her name in a barely audible, dry voice.

She froze, and huge waves rippled through her mind. Was it an illusion, or was this truly a call from the past? This voice, like a crack in time, took her back in a flash to that carefree point when her world had not yet been consumed by war, and life was still full of simple pleasures and hope. She stared into his face, trying to find familiar lines in his gaunt and dirt- and blood-stained visage. Doubt and unease filled her mind; did she really know him? How could this man, who had obviously endured countless hardships and battles, be a part of her past that had been erased by war and time?

Her hands trembled as she continued to wipe the stains from his face, each touch feeling like she was exploring a secret that could change her life. Her heart churned with mixed emotions, but in that moment, she knew she must face this unexpected encounter, no matter what future it would bring her.

Against her better judgment, she leaned in closer to hear the man's faint, hoarse whisper above the roar of the blazing airship less than half a field away. The survivalist again sounded alarms in her mind, warning her to keep

away, not to allow pity or mystery to draw her nearer to the man who might be feigning feebleness.

"Pocket..." the man rasped through cracked and bloody lips. "Chest... Pocket..."

Her arms quivered as she slipped a hand beneath the folds of the soot-covered coat, a burning desire for answers drowning out the voice of caution clawing in her mind to be heard. From the inside pocket, she pulled out two tattered papers, neatly folded but crumpled and creased.

Gingerly, she unfolded the first and her eyes fell on the printed text of a news bulletin. A feverish need for information fell upon her, desperation for a glimpse of the state of the world beyond her fields. She read the headline, once, twice, three times and still the words refused to register clearly in her mind. Again. Read it again.

Jinoon Empire Collapses in Disarray as THE FOUR Vanish from Public Sight

She pored frantically over the article in a frenzy to learn more. Phrases jumped out from the text and popped through her mind.

"...weeks since the disappearance of The Four..." "...empire left crippled without its leaders..." "...cities thrown into chaos..." "...the end of Jinoon?"

Fumbling at the folds of the second paper, she nearly ripped it apart in her hunger for more. As she tore it open, a small card dropped out from within and fell to the ground, unnoticed. Another headline burned its news through her eyes, scalding like an iron brand in her mind.

Ayaruun Government Dissolves as the Flames of Anarchy Ignite

"...widespread uprising and revolt..." "...siege of anarchist militia..." "...collapse of the capitol government..." "...Ayaruun authority declared annulled..."

The words flitted through her mind as if caught in a gale, unable to find anchor among her racing thoughts. She read the two bulletins, over and over, until after countless readings the news began to sink in.

Finally, she looked back down at the man below her, and her eyes landed on the card which had fallen from the folds of the second bulletin. An ID. She froze at the name

that stared back up at her.

She half-screamed, tears pouring like rivers from her eyes.

“Emmanuel?!”

The faintest glimpse of a smile cracked across the man’s worn, tired face. He couldn’t nod, but his peaceful expression – an eerie sight among the gore – told her it was him. Emmanuel. In her life before, they were merely acquaintances. Even before the war and sickness and death, she’d had few real companions to speak of. Emmanuel was a co-worker of hers in a ghost kitchen in Laudraun City before the Jinoon Empire took over. He was a decent guy. Opinionated, but not unfriendly. He always had his finger on the pulse of politics, spouting something or other about how he would change everything to anyone within earshot. He trod the delicate line between passionate political views and conspiracy theories with such fervour that it seemed like he would fall at any moment and cage himself in a room of red thread and blurry photographs. He warned them all about the plague, months before any of it had even reached the news. He left early. Something about preparing a doomsday bunker in the North.

Her mind was overrun with questions, all fighting to be asked first, but everything attempt was cut short by her stammering breath. She tried to calm herself, stunt her

tears and get the words out.

“D-d-d-d-d-did you do it? The b-b-bunker?”

The reddish tint to Emmanuel’s face was fading to an ashen grey. He closed his eyes; his breathing rattled like a broken clock.

“Yessss.....” He managed eventually, “Turn.... pa-”

He was gone, and she felt her heart wrenched with grief more than it had been since this all started, but she couldn’t mourn yet. Turn the page, he said. She turned one page over, then the other, but it was just a death toll, or some other depressing statistic scribbled over in shaky black lines. Did he die for this? It made no sense! But nothing made sense anymore!

She allowed herself to pause. Gain her composure. Her fast breathing was fogging up her breathing equipment and stopping her from seeing what it was. She turned over the other page and put them together. It was a map. Not to just a bunker, but an oasis. The sanctuary Emmanuel had always prattled about. It was poorly drawn, hard to follow from here, and with no compass or any way of really getting her bearings, death was so certain she might as well just lay down in the killing field herself and wait for the mushrooms to take her. It was a stupid idea, guaranteed to fail – and yet, she had hope.

She would sleep in her shelter tonight, but tomorrow, she would go out and find it. Her oasis.

Editor’s Review: The Airship

As grim as I’ve come to expect from post-apocalyptic stories, but well-written and planned—and I do enjoy a post-apocalyptic tale that’s set in someone else’s world, not our own. (I think it allows more room for worldbuilding, which is among my favourite parts of writing.) It also has a surprisingly hopeful ending despite the obvious devastation wreaked on the farm and the difficulties our unnamed protagonist may have reaching the little oasis. Good work, everyone!

Author Reviews

[This was sent to me partway through the writing of the chain, explaining the individual author’s thoughts on the worldbuilding. It doesn’t have to be canon, but I thought enough effort had been put into it that I should include it anyway.]

I’m thinking that the creator-god of this fantasy world doesn’t care about morality, only about beautiful engineering. Originally, there was life, but no humans, and no free-will. Over time, genomes decayed, and some species went extinct. At this point, humans were created to maintain the world, and were given consciousness and free-will. This consciousness can also be used to promote the functionalities of nearby life-forms (including the human themselves, but human cells respond much less, otherwise brain tumours would thrive), and to give them new functionalities, and replace those lost to genetic damage. With practice people were able to be more selective, controlling anatomy, taste, behaviour, and other things in lower life-forms. The

ability to give crops unnatural growth led to much larger populations, which were limited by plague.

The first people to figure out how to empower the human immune system lived in a kingdom on a smaller continent to the west. They gained wealth and power. Then one family figured out that by misapplying power, they could empower the disease instead. They killed their king, and used the threat of plague to force the entire continent into submission. Then they fought among themselves. One group, the family Jiroon, fled across the sea (making trees grow into ships was common practice), in the hope of finding new land. They arrived on the western coast of the Ayaruun Empire, and started conquering.

The Ayaruun government was far ahead in every area, except medicine. They had figured out that a person's conscious power could be enhanced by fusing their brain with that of a baby too young to have developed free will (if the victim has free will, then the result is a split personality, ending in madness). With the power that people could then collect by stealing multiple brains, it became possible to build and operate giant living structures, even airships, which were filled with methane made by manipulating swamps. It is also possible to use chemicals to remove a person's free will, but this is only worth-while if they have a lot more power than average.

The airships were made from an assortment of animal parts, stuck together, and kept alive by a person of immense power, who was generally synonymous with the ship itself, hence "the ship's own panicked consciousness", which is very valuable to anyone who can remove its free-will and attach its brain to theirs. For optimal performance, they would put all their concentration into keeping everything alive, and so other people would be required to fly the ship. The pilot would make the muscles fire using electricity in copper wires, hence the copper in the wreckage.

The cannibals are people who have surgically fitted themselves with an extra head. They then put someone into a coma, and transplant the victim's brain into the second head, and use chemicals to subject the stolen brain to great pain, causing it to use all its power to repair the body it's in, which is the cannibal's body. This keeps the cannibals fit and healthy while everyone else is starving. The militia is the Jiroon government's response to the cannibals.

The gas in the new airship is hydrogen fluoride, which is lighter than air, boils at 19.5 °C, has an offensive odour, and is a poison (as well as an acid), causing blindness and death. The amount of HF in the airship is unlikely to be enough to cause serious corrosion of glass and other building materials over such a wide range as the distance to the mushroom farm, but the exact quantity is up to you [i.e. editor or further authors].

The interior of the airship may have been protected by a hydrocarbon layer produced by something similar to *Botryococcus braunii*.

The life-raft was filled with methane, so it burnt up like a normal airship.

The room that the protagonist is hiding in was used for processing the mushrooms to extract the poison, and has the necessary equipment to process them without the poison getting into the air in the room. It is also sealed off from the rest of the mushroom farm.

-Joel Pearson

A Celebration of the Moving of the CUSFS Library

Alex Colesmith

Note: These were written as riffs on the popular '[x] Gothic' form of creepypasta. They're not particularly good, but I had a lot of fun. More are available and may turn up in the next edition; these ones just felt relevant in recognition of great events that have happened this term!

Library Gothic [anyone who's been to the UL or read much Discworld will recognise this]

This room is for quiet study only. The librarian will maintain your silence.

Books taken out will return within the allotted time. If they have to do so by themselves, a fine will be levied. Take iron supplements beforehand.

Bribery of librarians is frowned upon. They will remember your face.

There is a door between two of the bookshelves. A length of string is tied around the handle and leads inside. Occasionally it twitches.

Bookshelves must only be circumnavigated anti-clockwise, never clockwise. Do not refer to it as 'widdershins'.

If anyone approaches you to ask for directions, do not give them more directions than there are fingers on their left hand.

Some of the volumes are fatter than others. This is perfectly normal and nothing to worry about. They may simply contain more pages.

If you find bones in the library, do not panic. Place them on the bookshelf as if the scientific name of their original owner was the author's name. Consult no more than three reference books when working out their original owner, and do not take your eyes off the bones while doing so.

You find a camouflaged camera trap tied around one of the bookshelves. The next day, it is gone. A print-out of your face has been blu-tacked there.

Nobody has yet remarked upon the fact that the head librarian carries a sword across her back. You do not really want to be the first, but you don't recall hearing an explanation for it.

You are confident that S comes after R in the alphabet. Whoever catalogued this library laboured under no such delusions.

The books have titles in English, but occasionally they are written in a script you do not recognise. The titles are fairly normal.

CUSFS and Jomsborg the New Gothic [inspired by, you know, regularly turning up to meetings, which is a form of horror all its own...]

Tamsyn Muir has come up in discussion again. This is the ninth time. [Or perhaps the Ninth time.] The topic is 'Prosthetics and Special Effects'.

"Eigi eru en allir Jomsvikingar daudhir!" you cry. You know what it means. It is your mother tongue.

The film this week has content warnings for psychological torment, existential dread, gore, and drug use. You check the title. It is *The Lorax*. You didn't know a live-action version existed.

The Reeve's email is written in the style of C.S. Lewis. You consider the horrifying possibility that the Reeve may be a thinly-veiled metaphor for Jesus.

At the introductions, you are asked to share your favourite thing in SFF currently. Your mind goes blank. You have never read a book.

The Eye of Argon is being read. You feel blood trickling from your ears. You cannot breathe for laughter. Everything is funny here. Everything.

Once you recognise the CUSFS committee members, you see their faces everywhere. Their eyes follow you around the city. Promoting their own starring roles at film nights is a bit tasteless, though—even if the Chairbeing does a very good job as Ellen Ripley.

You have wandered into Model UN by mistake. You had no idea that the Butlerian Jihad was so relevant. Conversation flows freely. Could *you* be the next Lisan Al-Gaib? It's more likely than you think...

A new issue of TTBA has been released. You feel oddly haunted by some of the remarks in it, as if they have happened to you at CUSFS meetings recently. Perhaps buying your own copy would help? [Worth a shot...] Weirdly, you wrote in several of these stories. It's even in your handwriting. It is typed.

Once again, Tamsyn Muir is in conversation. You find yourself agreeing enthusiastically with all of Harrowhark's ideas as they are presented. In unrelated news, Addenbrooke's has increased their morgue security.



The Cuddly Alien—Jeremy Henty