

TRANSFORMED TRAPPED



BLEEDING AQUATIC

TRANSFORMED, TRAPPED, BLEEDING AQUATIC

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hereafter CUSFS

Transformed, Trapped, Bleeding Aquatic

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Jeremy Henty

Editor's Address

Oh no, I've done it again. That is to say, I've been bullying people the whole term until they write my stories—all to the end of putting them into a magazine.

In my defence, some of the stories are quite good. I ended up helping write some of them (not necessarily because they needed it—some I just really wanted to write in because I enjoyed the worlds that had been created). We have a cyberpunk (or κυβερνεπυγκ, according to *one* CUSFSer who shall remain nameless) story with one of the best descriptions of sensory overload in cyberspace I've ever read; a high fantasy tale where the merfolk prove that they're more like dolphins than people think (i.e. nasty); a curious little twisting, turning post-apocalyptic story full of pestilence and plague; the secret origin story of Herman Melville (with a bunch of plot about other people, but they don't go on to write books); and finally, a brilliant shuffle chain featuring battles high in the sky, very dubious food, beautiful Kazakh vistas and an alien starfish's internal organs wearing power armour...

We've also had some spectacular individual submissions. Join us to find out more about crustaceous quests—in stunning biological detail—to explore whether a change of personality is really a good thing (spoiler: no), to slowly freeze to death beneath a fraction of the Sun we used to know, or to enjoy a bard's stirring tale. Congratulations to all those who sent in these submissions—I'm honoured to be able to include them!

And this term has been busy enough that there's plenty of chains to come in the Easter issue...

Maces and Masonry,

Alex, TTBA Editor 2023-24

Chairbeing's Address

Blare the horns and pound the drums! It's TTBA time once again!

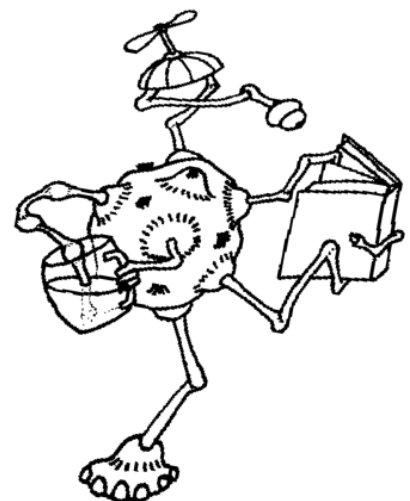
Lent Term, the awkward middle-term of the Cambridge Year, has passed us by. Baby-Faced Beatrice has retired from her humble position as the Sun and been replaced by an all-devouring black hole (which I'm assured is very safe actually). We had a wonderful speaker event about the magical world of filmmaking, and of course we had the AGM (in which, among other things, we had a Naughty Goose burst into the room and force itself into a Vice-Presidential position)!

For this coming Easter term, look forward to lots of awfully terrible movies, our big crossover GeekSoc picnic (to be hosted by WhoSoc), a casual invasion of Norway via punt, and our epic annual Jomsviking dinner: the Veizla!

My commendations, as always, go to the amazing CUSFSers who make this society such a special place. I'm sure the newly elected Chairbeing Emily would agree that you silly lot make it all worth it (most of the time, at least :p)

Your soon-to-be-editor chairbeing,

- Sol



The Mer and The Moon

Sarah Bewick, Emily Betts, Anon, Sol Dubock, Milamber, Florence Ridley, Agaric, Ruth Bewick, Alex Colesmith

CW: near-drowning, severe injury, body transformation

It has often been said of the merfolk that when they sing all beings listen with an attentive voice. Sadly, I have personally known many merfolk whose songs would hardly have graced the halls of His Highest Highness Harold, tone deaf though he may be. No, the most remarkable thing I have known of merfolk is this: that no matter how sick, tired or old they grow, they never miss the full moon.

Take a stormy night: the first night you have been out of the warm embrace of land, and the winds have come. They are not pretty; they are not gentle. Storms churn you inside and out, innards burning, skin freezing, fear crawling all over you like weeds in water, convulsive. Perhaps it would have been more bearable for a seasoned seaman: not so I. I recall, in fact, one of them laughing at me.

“Blueblood out of the castle, you look like a fish.”

To which I replied, “I wish I were a fish. Then I wouldn’t drown with you fools tussling your sails as if that would save you.”

These days I feel more sorry for that man, forgetting the way his leer displayed rotten teeth in an unkempt beard, wondering instead who found his body on some shore I’ve never seen.

Our ship sank; she was never going to last long. It was all chaos above the water, but that’s not what I remember. It’s the calm that takes you, the deafening peace of water thicker and colder than ice, unmoved by air, eternal even as your breath and sight fades. As I gazed up through the surface, I realised I’d always known this was how I would end, glad at last that there was no one at home to wait for me. And I saw the full moon, its light reaching for me through the ocean, the edges of it blackening in my eyes like paper curling in the flames.

I was very surprised when I woke up.

The first thing I remember was how breathing felt; the relief, the wrongness. You heave air in like an estuary churns over scree and grit, your lips split and sting, even your skin seems sun-shrunken two sizes too small. Every inch of my windpipe was mapped out in a crystalline tracery of pain, and I coughed

clouds of crusted, glittering salt as if my very lungs were crusted with dried brine. It hurt. It hurt like someone had taken a fishmonger’s knife to the inside of my throat—yet the more I retched, the drier and more grittily unnatural my laboured breathing felt.

Still, somehow, I was alive.

A long, desolate strand stretched out ahead of me. The moonlit ocean, now coy and calm, murmured promiscuously along the shore before me; my travelling clothes, paduasoy albeit rather more acquainted with the sand than I’d like, still clung to my battered frame; my purse still jangled with coin.

So, I deliberately did not think about the fact that I washed up seven paces clear of high tide, nor of the dragged, deep grooves in the beach beside me, nor of the fact that my wounds—such as they were—were bloodless, and colourless, and wept only salt water. Even as the ocean wind whipped about my clothes, I paid no heed to the low, keening sound that lingered upon it.

Sea-dazed head swimming, I headed inland. My only thought was for a double handful of cool, clear river-water to wash the dryness from my throat. As I stepped uncertainly through slow sand to the edge of a fringed darkness that broke and scattered the moon’s glow, as I then paused briefly to mark with some apprehension the ghostly aspect of the strand before turning back and shouldering forwards into the darkness, even as I waded through the dark and solid forest, ferns whispering at my ribs, my palms outstretched to ward off the scaly trunks of looming trees whose upper branches creaked and moaned in the landward breeze, I seemed to see nothing save the image of a burbling mountain stream, plashing among the limpid rocky pools between banks blazoned with wildflowers on a northern slope of the Donnersberg. Many winters were yet to pass before I ceased to recall the pastoral beauties of King Harold’s country, in moments of distress or despair, with a childlike longing for home. I cannot even now deny, before my gods who see clearly the inmost

chambers of my heart, that I have smelt those wildflowers in my dreams.

With a lurch as when one wakes suddenly from a dream of falling I felt the ground yield wetly beneath my booted foot. I was sunk to the calf. Bracing myself with one hand against the trunk of a nearby tree, I grasped at the strap of the sunken boot, and on the third attempt my leg came loose with the horrible, welcome snuffle of mud relinquishing its grasp. Where there is mud, I knew, there may be water nearby. Listening carefully, feeling carefully forward with my feet in the semidarkness, I made my way at last to the edge of a lozenge of moonlight, cast through trembling branches, which revealed the two banks and glossy running surface of a stream.

Observing the gentle motion of the clear, glassy water was nearly overwhelming for my throat, protesting at me with a prickling, itchy feeling that crept up and demanded to be released from its desiccation. I found myself moving swiftly towards the closer of the banks, barely paying mind to the rest of my surroundings – an action I would soon find to have lasting consequences. Setting myself down with my hands cupped into a makeshift bowl, I plunged them below the pristine surface of the river, feeling the cool flow of the water meld around my wrists as they parted the stream's natural form. I raised them back out, now carrying a cold pool of life's essence in liquid form, and brought it to my lips now quivering slightly at the prospect. Pouring from hand to mouth, I felt the fresh invigorating sensation run through my gullet and down the dry surface of my throat. Relief.

In the middle of starting the process over, once again lowering my hands below the surface of the stream, a noise abruptly alerted me from someplace behind. I pivoted my head to stare into the thick of trees from which I had emerged, knowing that while there was every chance the sound had simply come from an animal of the land, I had seen nothing of the sort on my brief trek over.

Squelch.

The deep tracks left by my stumbling footfalls, the mud that I had dredged up, was reforming into the deceptive cover of moss I had so recently been sucked into. Water rushing to fill the holes.

"You poor thing, those salty remedies won't last forever."

Pivoting my head again, I stared into the liquid silver

of the pool from which the voice emanated.

"My salty sisters 'saving' someone? It never ends well."

A face, or the idea of a face, the impression you get as if from an imperfect mirror, the eyes of a naiad staring back; just another moon crazed merfolk. My salted throat had distracted me from the clear signs that the stream this pool fed from was haunted by the freshwater cousin of those who, not so long ago, were surrounding our ship.

"It was quite rude of you to just stumble in here, taking my water, but I can't fully blame you. Perhaps the return of blood to your system will be enough punishment?"

"Blood? Perhaps you forget that us sacks of meat are alive because of blood, air, bile and soul. Unlike you who have the water to feed, hydrate and live in you."

A chuckle, the burble of a brook: the water glistened menacingly, the moon slapping my eyes, the rush of water filling my ears. A warmth began to spread out from the centre of my chest, a rushing hotness bursting from my heart and forcing itself into my burning veins. Salt water, trickling unobserved from my bleached wounds, gave way slowly and then all at once to shattering pain, a spreading dark wetness, worst of all from the deep gash in my side. Gasping, I pressed a hand beneath my ribs, and shuddered to see the wine-coloured liquid cling to my fingers. And the warmth was still rising, bursting through my veins; spots of red danced before my eyes and, choking for air, I felt the salty iron taste of blood at the back of my throat.

My blood spread out across the surface of the tranquil pool, sitting with the sheen of oil atop the clear water. The naiad tutted impatiently.

"Humans are just so *messy*."

Then the blood was gone, my wounds once again bleached bone white and saltwater grey, my fingers before my frightened eyes pale and trembling and streaming salt. I pressed my hand again to my side numbly and felt nothing.

I stumbled away from the water, my thirst entirely forgotten. Tearing at my wounds, I pressed my back into the bark of a tree and sank to the ground. The rough surface of the wood left splinters and surface wounds in my skin through the ragged remains of my linen, and I knew that if I reached my hand behind me, it would come back damp. This was the first time

I'd ever thought that the sight of blood might be a comfort. I wished warm, rich crimson blood would wrap me up in comfort with the familiar pain it provides. To hell with finding fresh water; I had no idea what was going on with me, but the only way I was ever going to find clues was to search the beach. The echoes of a droning sea song murmured ever louder as I approached the silver ocean, beholding in closer detail the tracks of those creatures who had, undoubtedly, dragged me up the sand. "Hello there," I cried towards the waves.

It seemed to me that the sea rippled, most unnaturally, so that the reflection of the moon appeared to fall into the very depths, and as I stared, there, far out across the surface of the water, appeared the heads of four mermaids. I felt that they were grinning rather too much for a situation that involved me inexplicably bleeding out salt from my mortal veins.

They did not speak, and so I called out to them: "Do you know what has become of me?"

"We thought you wished to be a fish." The green-haired mermaid smiled more widely, and her friends laughed.

I attempted to answer but my throat betrayed me, and all that emerged was a dusty fit of coughs. One of the merfolk swam a little closer to shore, and beckoned me into the sea. "You'll feel better," she said.

Therefore I took a mistrustful step into the water, and indeed, my bodily pain diminished. "Mermagic?" I exclaimed. This was perhaps a little slow of me.

"Of course," the green-haired seamaid laughed. "And now you'll die within a day if you don't come with us. But these storms are what I call real magic. Crushing the ships of that irritating human king... You are a relative of his, by the way?"

"His Highest Highness Harold is my grandfather," I admitted proudly.

"Perfect," said the mermaid. "I'm glad we have the right hostage."

Thus it was that I entered the watery halls of the merfolk, whence, alas, I have not departed for

almost a dozen years. In truth, it is not so bad. The merfolk have strict laws on the treatment of prisoners; I am fed and clothed, and these days I do not want for water. I am given lights that mimic the surface I am used to, under which my abyssal jailors' skin appears red, not black as I first thought it – not that they come often under those lights, for they claim it burns them. This, indeed, is why merfolk only appear during the night.

It took a while for me to adjust myself to breathing water. The first time I tried, I was hesitant at first, thinking the merfolk were trying to play some cruel jape on me, trick me into drowning myself – but no, although I choked and spluttered and tried to spit it up, I found that I was not drowning. Slowly my pulse ceased, my frantic gasping calmed, and I found that I was pushing water in and out of my lungs almost as easily as I had once moved air.

Without that air to buoy me up, I sink, and it is hard for me to swim to the surface – or would be, if I was ever let out of this cage.

Yet I am kept here. Though not mistreated, I am often examined by the merfolk as an object of wonder, the hostage that forced King Harold to let go the ones of their folk he was keeping in shallow pools and preventing from seeing the moonlight. The hostage who forced King Harold to make more and more concessions to the undersea realm.

At some point, perhaps, my grandfather – or mayhap my uncle Harold, if he has succeeded him by now and become Harold II – may tire of this and decide it is more profitable to reroute trade throughout the lands rather than seas. Should that happen, I fear for my neck, for I would have lost my value as a hostage. I have seen what the merfolk do to valueless things. It is not pretty.

But for now I am valued, and I am kept. And although I am stared at as the transformed land-dweller, and for most of the time I have little privacy to call my own, one night per month I can rest easy knowing that no gaze is on me, down here in the halls.

For merfolk never miss the full moon.

Editor's Review

"We saved you." "For what?" "For *later*." Fun setup, not quite sure what was going on for much of it... and a reminder to never trust sea magic!

The Hermit Knight

Niko Kristic

CW: violence, parasites, mild body horror

Out in the wastes, a body lay drying.

A bare skull peered from its chainmail coif. Rusty rings lay scattered, half-buried in the snow which clung to the gravel beach like strips of blubber on the briny grey carcass of a seal.

The Hermit Knight saw the body. A seagull saw the body. It scuffed the frozen powder with pointed wingtips, clumsily swooping for a bite of old leather. The Hermit Knight matched its velocity. Each of their strangely-articulated strides measured several metres. The bird flapped up, hissing and squawking as the sword stabbed into the ground with a puff of white spindrift, humming with force where it stuck. The Hermit Knight watched the scavenger retreat, watched it fly off in a widening spiral, its curses consumed by the droning static fuzz of the atmosphere. The ocean seethed along the shoreline, a slab of cold mercury, whisking itself into banks of foul, alkaline candyfloss. The Hermit Knight had seen the body first.

They knelt, first with their lower knees, and then with their upper, scraping the snow from the corpse's chest with a numb, loose-fitting gauntlet before shaking the whole torso free with a clatter of bones and iron. The surcoat had long-ago mouldered to scraps, though the belt might be salvaged, spliced into serviceable thongs of frostbitten hide. The chainmail, however, would make a worthy addition. The skull bit the snow as the Hermit Knight tore the armour off and hitched it around their waist, cold and heavy. Then they picked up their sword and rose to full height, patchwork panoply creaking and clanking, opening both storm-lungs to the salty sky. It had been good breathing before the snows had fallen. Now they could feel every millibar of atmospheric pressure. The wind rippled through the ragged old sail that was their cloak. A squirrel's tail slapped damply against their tall cylindrical helm, once a copper boiler.

The Hermit Knight thought of their dear larva, now a full-grown Teacher with larvae of their own, glutting on songs of valour in the sanctity of the nursery reefs. Then they thought of their ancestral Quest.

The Hermit Knight sealed their storm-lungs with a shudder. Ice splintered in the joints of their twelbows. The atmosphere pressed down on the sea, producing the inexplicable, faraway sound of a mellotron. And then, once more, with weary, stilted strides, they wandered. Seagulls flocked in their wake, screeching and plucking at the trailing fallen links of mail as though levering open the hundred rusty ring-pulls of the

planet.

They had been something like a tongue-louse, once.

In the comfort of the nursery reefs, the Hermit Knight and their brood had been small enough to shelter in the oral cavities of certain fish. They did this because they were soft and frail. The first meal they ate after hatching would be the fish's tongue, whose various duties they would perform until they grew sufficiently big and solid to survive on their own. By virtue of their service in the role of this organ, Knights-in-training would learn the importance of humility, and just as importantly, would claim their tithe of all incoming nourishment. By manipulating the severity of this tithe they could effectively control the fish in whose mouths they dwelt, piloting themselves around the nursery reefs, hiding from predators, and attending the lectures of their Teacher.

The Teacher was the being who had both carried and fertilised their brood, a compound parent to the hermaphroditic Knights. They had long passed the tongue-louse phase of their life cycle to assume the morph of maturity: the aspect of a spider-crab, eight spindly legs radiating from their tough thoracic hub and a soft anomuran abdomen ventrally curved to function as a brood-pouch. The Teacher was old, but their legspan was still only a mere third of its eventual diameter. The purpose of the Teacher was to sing the ancient songs of chivalry, and so teach the larval Knights about their destined Quest, which had been the glorious enterprise of their ancestors since time immemorial. The Quest was called the Quest for the Dragon Armour.

"All crustaceans," the Teacher spoke, "are knightly by nature. Evolution has welded our flesh with breastplates of bone, our limbs with greaves of chitin. But for some, this armour is not enough. Some, like us, still bear the shameful squishiness of our savage past." At this they gestured to the pink flap of their brood-pouch. The Knights-in-training listened raptly in a shoal around the Teacher, each larva nestled in the soft white palate of their fishy mount.

"We Hermit Knights," the lesson continued, "have been ordained by nature to purify ourselves of shelllessness. We must scour the earth in search of armour to amend the sinful omission of our biology. With every piece we shall recover the dignity, the courage, and the glory that is the birthright of our phylum. And those who survive long enough to undertake the Quest shall have a chance to achieve the greatest dignity,

courage, glory of all – to obtain the legendary power of the Dragon Armour, and wield it for themselves.” The Teacher’s songs were made from strings of pressure differentials, tiny vacuums transmitted through the water by the sequenced clicking of their stridulation combs.

“What is the nature of this Quest?” one larva asked from the mouth of their host.

“The Quest, child, is long and perilous. The Hermit Knight must master the anthropoid morph, ascend the continental shelf until they reach the realms above. There they must wander the arid wastes, forging an unbreakable shell from the spoils of their heroism, the glory of their deeds. Remember: a good Knight is courteous. A good Knight is gracious and honest and true. Only thus might one triumph against the ancient Dragon, greatest and most terrible enemy of Knighthood – only thus might one don the mighty Dragon Armour, and know the taste of power overwhelming. But that is all for now, children. Now I must seek my own wisdom from our venerable Grandteacher. They are shortly to attempt the Quest themselves, you know.”

The Knights-in-training dispersed to frolic about the nursery reef, clicking and chirping in awe and adulation. The Teacher raised themselves high on their many-jointed pereopods and began to stalk away. A single larva, the larva who had asked the question, followed after, their silvery mount spurred with pangs of starvation. “Wait!” they cried. “How many Knights have attempted this great Quest? How many have succeeded?”

When at last this little larva returned, they found the nursery reef was unrecognisable. A trawler had dragged a heavy net straight through it.

All of their brood-siblings had been slaughtered, hauled to the surface with their hosts, unable to wriggle free from their gasping jaws.

The Hermit Knight had come to a woodland. Shrouds of snow still clung to the lower branches of the pines, and a chill, grey mist was seeping from the undergrowth. In the woodland was a clearing. In the clearing was a pond, brown and brackish. Ravens carked high in the treetops.

The Hermit Knight took off their sword and scabbard, and wrapped them in their cloak. Next they took off their makeshift helm, uncoiling their long, sensitive antennae, flinching with the sudden return of panoramic vision to their eyestalks. Piece by piece, rusty, crude, ill-fitting piece, the Hermit Knight disarmed. Then they waded into the pool. Frogs croaked: tinny, incessant. Now immersed up to the carapace, the Hermit Knight permitted themselves a moment’s respite from the painful contortions of the anthropoid morph. They swivelled each limb at the socket, then at the joints, grimacing

at the loud friction of trapped grit. Then they sank back, opening the protective vents between their second and third pairs of legs. The feathery orange gill-filaments of their storm-lungs unfurled beneath the water, and for the first time in days, the Hermit Knight could really breathe. Their storm-lungs could store a fair measure of water for overland travel, but osmosis was slow when air pressure was high, and oxygen concentration swiftly depleted without continual re-moisturisation. This pond was not so fresh, but breathable enough. The Hermit Knight angled their eyestalks upwards, and for a second the three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view of the pines around the clearing recalled the ring of spiky teeth through which they had once peered as a larva. The Hermit Knight shivered, retracted their storm-lungs with an involuntary twitch, and sat upright in the murk.

Long ago, their Teacher had said that a forest pool spelled good fortune for a wandering Knight. More often than not, a kindly spirit dwelt inside, lending aid to all who beseeched it. They remembered those words, and folded back into the anthropoid morph for propriety.

“Teacher,” croaked the Hermit Knight, “Show Me Your Guidance.”

A silence of frogs and crows.

The Hermit Knight knew that their vocal apparatus was not well equipped for vowels. Perhaps the friendly nymph did not understand them. Again they rubbed maxillipeds against stridulation combs, producing a harsh, consonantal rasp:

“Teacher... Show... Me... Your... Guidance... Please...”

Still nothing. And then –

“You don’t sound so good, if you don’t mind my saying, sir.”

The voice came from the fringe of the clearing. Ferns rustled in the mist. The Hermit Knight twisted upright in the centre of the pond with a splash, antennae upright and quivering. A haggard old woman stared up at the eleven-foot-tall crustacean. Dank weeds dangled from their every limb, tinkling a carillon as they dripped into the water’s surface. She sniffed. ‘Don’t look so good neither’.

A good Knight was courteous. A good Knight was gracious and honest and true.

“Well Met... Kind Lady. I Am A Hermit Knight. I Seek The Dragon Armour...”

The woman’s face changed. The Hermit Knight did not know how to read it. “A Knight, you say? Well then, milord, you’d better follow me. I don’t have no Dragon Armour, but I can give you a place to rest. Put something warm in your guts, eh? Soothe that frog in your throat.”

The Hermit Knight pondered. The idiom was unfamiliar. But it

seemed a valiant thing.

The scrawny old woman came down to the waterside and filled a wooden pail. She was dressed in green roughspun, with panpipes dangling from a cord around her neck and a bronze sickle tucked under her belt – a woods-witch, perhaps, or a cunning-woman. “Don’t mind about your things,” she said, pointing the way, “only a stone’s throw.” The Hermit Knight hesitated – and picked up their parcel of sailcloth before following her into the forest.

The cunning-woman’s cottage was built into the hump of a hillock with a roof of green sod. Simples sprouted in a small garden, bounded by a fence of coppiced hazel. The Hermit Knight was ashamed to compromise their anthropoid morph in an effort to squeeze into the cramped, dark space. “Watch your head,” said the cunning-woman, although the Hermit Knight did not possess any organ answering remotely to that description. Their helm largely protected their eyestalks. Without it, the Hermit Knight was starting to feel uncomfortably naked.

“So where’s this Dragon Armour then, eh?” asked the cunning-woman. Her back was turned to the Hermit Knight. She stirred a cauldron hanging from a chain above the fireplace. Then she took a black iron poker and rustled the burning sticks.

“In An Ancient Tower...” said the Hermit Knight gravely, “On A Great Tall Cliff.”

Damp wood popped and squeaked in the fire.

“Never heard of it,” said the cunning-woman.

The Hermit Knight noticed a round wicker basket on the floor near the fire. An unusual ticking sound, wet and persistent, was coming from within. They extended a single forelimb and closed a claw around the woven knob at the top of the basket-lid, gently lifting it open.

The ticking grew louder.

Inside the basket was a great tangled heap of crayfish, all ratcheting legs and clicking pincers, burnished bronze in the firelight and twitching like the innards of some unspeakably complex antique pocket-watch.

An anticyclone suddenly formed over the forest. The atmosphere sagged. The Hermit Knight instinctively grasped the hilt of their weapon, hidden within the folded cloak.

“Oh,” said the cunning-woman, facing the fire. “Sorry. I didn’t mean for you to see that.”

Then she wheeled around with her poker and stabbed the Hermit Knight in the guts.

Now her expression was easily read. Madness. And hunger.

The smell of frying shrimp.

The spasmodic twitching of limbs.

The scything arc of a sword.

The creak of a cloven beam.

The thump of a severed head.

The Hermit Knight yanked the sizzling poker from their side and let it fall to the ground. It had slipped through the vent of their left storm-lung. The agony was almost sublime. The sensitive gill filaments were totally withered. The whole world felt lopsided.

The Hermit Knight rattled their stridulation combs in piteous, delirious laughter. The poker had been hot enough to cauterise its own entry wound.

There was no armour to plunder in the cunning-woman’s cottage. There wasn’t even any stew in the pot – only dirty, boiling water. The cupboard was barren except for half a jar of pemmican, which the Hermit Knight broke and devoured, maxillipeds spooning morsel after morsel into the automatic churn of their mandibles. Their ruined storm-lung began to bubble. There had been nothing like this in their Teacher’s ancient songs.

And the Hermit Knight felt disgust, far stronger and more suffocating than their pain.

That lonely little larva eventually grew into a Teacher themselves.

A period of pronounced atmospheric convection had caused an upwelling of nutrient-rich water from the deeps. This caused the young Hermit Knight to start producing their own eggs, which they tucked safely behind the soft, non-calcified brood-pouch at their belly. One day, the eggs hatched. The larvae found their way into the mouths of their host fish. And the young Hermit Knight began to teach them all they knew about the Quest for the Dragon Armour. It was only a small brood, dancing and playing about the restored nursery reef. But the Hermit Knight loved them dearly. They all deserved to inherit the unfathomable glory and power that was promised in the epic songs of yore.

When the young Hermit Knight grew large and sturdy enough to become a Teacher, their old instructor assumed the rank of Grandteacher. Now their legs were two-thirds the requisite size for a Quest in the realms above, and still growing. When not lecturing to the larvae, the young Hermit Knight received their own tuition in the Grandteacher’s cave; advanced lessons which the Grandteacher had received from their own Teacher in a chain of sacred wisdom hundreds of generations in length.

The young Hermit Knight enjoyed learning.

The Grandteacher was practising the anthropoid morph. The anthropoid morph was a holistic martial art with two essential elements. The physical element involved coordinating the crustacean body-plan into forms fit to wear the armour of realms above: armour designed for a bipedal species with only four short limbs. To achieve this, practitioners would learn to isolate their pereopods into four clusters of two – novices found it helpful to begin by tying them together with strands of seagrass. Then they would learn to selectively fold their twelbaws and subknees into formations approximating the proportions of the upper folk. Then they would learn the art of balance, tottering about the seafloor on their lowermost leg-clusters until the act became second nature to scuttling, and last of all they would learn the art of posture, holding their eyestalks and antennae in a manner analogous to the pose of the humanoid head. The mental element, more than the simple memorisation of chivalric codes with which larvae were tasked, involved learning to communicate in a non-aqueous medium: the delicate co-ordination of gesture with maxilliped with stridulation comb, an art taught with all the seriousness and precision of an elite conservatoire. The young Hermit Knight remembered feeling apologetic for interrupting their Teacher in the middle of this delicate training routine.

“Teacher,” they asked, “why is it that we must undertake this perilous Quest in the realms above? Is there no worthy armour to be found beneath the waves?”

The Grandteacher swivelled their sagely eyestalks, pausing their elaborate exercises.

“Because it is in our nature, child. As our storm-lungs mature we find freshwater sweeter to breathe than salt. We all follow the rivers inland in our old age; the first leg of the Quest is woven into our very biology. But it is the mark of a true Knight, understand, to follow adventure to its ultimate end.”

“But Teacher,” the young Knight asked again, “we are not the only soft beings in the sea. We are not even the only soft crustaceans. Why is it our nature alone to seek the Dragon Armour?”

Their Teacher ruminated upon this point. “I cannot presume to know the songs of other species,” they intoned at last, “but I know how ours are sung. If war is to be waged for the right to wear the Dragon Armour, then wage it we must. We must become knightlier than all other Knights. So apply yourself, child, to the study of chivalry. Soon you must learn the anthropoid morph, and then you will embark on your Quest, and then you will confront your deadliest enemy, and then you will discover the ancient truths for yourself. So our elders have spoken, and so it will be done.”

The old crustacean resumed their queer contortionism, weaving their body into surreal, monstrous forms in the darkness of the sea cave. And the young Hermit Knight felt

scared.

Haemolymph trickled from the Hermit Knight’s ruined storm-lung.

With half as much oxygen to power it, their body felt heavy. Their armour felt heavier. The trees had thinned away and now the Hermit Knight was hauling themselves towards a remote clifftop overlooking the dead, grey beach. On the clifftop stood a dead, grey tower. The Hermit Knight was walking on their shins to save energy. One pair of shins extended forwards while the other pair extended backwards, looking like a single pair of skis carved out of bone, and quite unlike anything proscribed in the tenets of the anthropoid morph.

The clifftop path was white, but not with snow, nor even with chalk. It was white with flakes of chitin, bleached by ancient suns. Banks of windswept heather and snarls of rusty iron made occasional patches of brown and red, to which the Hermit Knight was contributing with a steady drizzle from their maimed thorax. The wind made appalling hollow noises as it swirled around the useless respiratory cavity and its protective flap, noises more lifeless than the dumb jangle of looted armour. The Hermit Knight wanted to gasp. Wanted to breathe. The sky ground over the sea with a sound like a synthesizer. Gulls squalled in riptides of wind.

An ancient tower, they feverishly thought, on a great tall cliff.

The resting place of the Dragon Armour. The final haven of their legendary Quest. The tiltyard of their ultimate battle. The Hermit Knight made their weary approach.

The tower was certainly ancient. So ancient that scarcely more than its foundations remained, partially enclosed by the biscuity ruins of three stone walls. The Hermit Knight had been taught to expect a citadel, a turreted fortress, a spire stretching into the heights of heaven. This tumbledown thing had once been a lighthouse. But the Hermit Knight was not surprised.

Then two men came out of the ruin. One carried a bow. The other carried a slingshot. They were dressed in scruffy sheepskin, and reeked of malice.

That was a surprise.

The Hermit Knight forced themselves up into a dignified stance, subknees buckling, storm-lung aching dully in their chest. They took off their helmet to speak, spreading their arms wide in a gesture of supplication.

“Have Mercy, Strangers... I Am Gravely Wounded. If Any Love Or Honour Binds Your Hearts, Then Spare My Life I Beg Of You. I Lay My Weapons Down At Your Feet.”

An arrow whizzed from the base of the tower, splintering off

the rusty chainmail which the Hermit Knight had wound around their waist. They staggered back in disbelief.

The outlaws chortled. It stung more than the arrow.

The Hermit Knight gritted their mandibles, picked up their sword.

The first man was readying his bow again. The second man was drawing back the gut string of his slingshot, aiming with one eye shut. The Hermit Knight stabbed the third man in the stomach. He had crept from a clump of heather, hefting a cudgel behind his target, tragically unaware of their panoramic field of vision.

The angry buzz of an arrow.

The piercing scream of a drilled stone missile.

Miss.

Hit.

The Hermit Knight felt their sword-arm give way at the first elbow. The joint crunched like wet gravel as the limb was overtaken by a sudden lightness, almost a rubberiness, as though the material from which it was made had succumbed to some spontaneous transfiguration. The bloody blade fell to the ground, claw still clutched around its hilt. The Hermit Knight stared at it dumbly, stunned by the violence of their new asymmetry.

Hit.

Hit.

Hit.

The anthropoid morph crumpled. The Hermit Knight collapsed, a pile of oozing chitin and battered steel. Missiles rang from the heap of wayward arms. Then they stopped.

"Easy pickings, these lobster bastards," said one outlaw.

"Aye. And you could almost set yer clock by 'em."

They left their outpost at the base of the tower and descended to admire their handiwork.

"Just rusty scrap, like always."

"Fair bit of copper in that old boiler, no?"

One man knelt to recover an arrow from the crustacean's giant corpse. Flies buzzed around his mangy fleece.

Then the Hermit Knight sprang. A ghastly living net of clattering mail and dented plate closed around the outlaw, who screamed and fell backwards, spilling his quiver and snapping his bow. The other man yelled and reached for his slingshot before he too was swept off his feet by the thrashing of an iron-clad pereopod. A hideous squelch as the creature dragged itself off the pulverised body of its first assailant and

towards its second, who was kicking up the rusty earth in an attempt to scramble upright. The Hermit Knight bore down upon them like a spider from hell, anthropoid morph long abandoned, stumping on maimed limbs and rattling with meat-grinder mandibles. The man tripped, fell on his back, beat the earth with his elbows in an attempt to escape. Still the Hermit Knight drew closer, a crustaceous cataphract charging, rampant, stabbing down with limbs like bloody lances, caparison clashing like the hammers of some infernal smithy. The outlaw rolled out of the way, flipped himself into some crude form of bipedalism, and ran screaming off towards the treeline. The Hermit Knight watched him go, watched his run melt into a limp, his cries into whimpers. Then they crashed back to the ground.

A good Knight was courteous, they thought bitterly. A good Knight was gracious and honest and true. A good Knight had a sword-arm. A good Knight could walk, and breathe...

They picked up the fallen slingshot – a coward's weapon. Then they lifted their sword, awkwardly, lefthandedly, twisting it free from their own disembodied grip. Stridulation combs shivered with the mechanisms that once lay behind laughter.

Was that it? The ultimate battle, foretold in primordial myth? Three ruffians in maggoty sheepskin, without so much as a Dragon stitched into their tabards?

A seagull landed on the Hermit Knight's carapace and began to peck. They shifted, as a drowned sailor might shift in the tug of the undertow. The seagull squawked angrily and took flight without tucking its gnarled black legs away.

The Hermit Knight stuck two bleeding stumps into their storm-lung, hoping to conserve what little oxygen had already diffused into their haemolymph. Then they dragged themselves towards the crumbling tower, carapace gouging a rut along the ground.

Inside the ruin was the outlaws' makeshift camp. No water in the canteens. No fodder in the saddlebags. And nothing even remotely resembling the legendary Dragon Armour.

"Teacher... Show... Me... Your... Guidance..."

But no guidance was forthcoming either.

The Hermit Knight slumped in a corner, staring out over the cliff edge, watching waves fetch across the gunmetal ocean through the missing wall. Wind skirled through the stones. Seabirds screeched and wheeled in currents above. They thought of their precious larva. And then they thought of their ancestral Quest, in a way they had never thought about it before.

And the Hermit Knight waited to die.

The Hermit Knight had been a Grandteacher for many moons.

And now the time had come for them to embark upon their Quest.

The larvae hovered in the mouths of their emaciated fish, starved to absolute loyalty for the ceremony unfolding before them. They watched in awe and reverence as their Teacher, the beloved child of the new Hermit Knight, crowned them with a rainbow-coloured headdress of mantis-shrimp uropods, and placed a shining sword in their right arm-cluster. The sword had been recovered on a pilgrimage to the sacred shipwreck. It shone brightly in the benthic murk. They dreamed of the day they would bear one like it; the day they too would leave the nursery reefs in search of the mythical Dragon Armour, and be remembered as heroes forever.

The Hermit Knight sank into meditation as their child bustled over matters of writ and regalia. They had done the same for their own Teacher, many moons ago. But this young larva had grown into a much finer Teacher than they had. Their limbs were long and straight, their shell symmetrical and patterned like a heraldic shield. They would make a doughty Knight. Far above the sheer face of the continental shelf, the surface glimmered. Beckoning like the gates of some jewelled hereafter.

“You will remember the ancient songs?” murmured the Hermit Knight.

“Yes, Teacher. I will remember all the glorious songs you have sung for me. And I will sing them to your grandlarvae, that the phylum of the Hermit Knights may Quest forevermore.”

The Hermit Knight smiled. “And you will practise the anthropoid morph every day?”

“Until the time of my own Quest comes, dear Teacher.”

“You are the finest child a Knight could wish for,” said the Hermit Knight. “You are my strength and my courage. I am very proud of you.”

Teacher and Grandteacher embraced, eight legs entangling in an unbreakable pledge.

The larvae blew bubbles of jubilation, a chorus of tiny, inverted tritons; tritons whose trumpets were living things and whose bodies were dumb instruments. Higher and higher they drifted, a silvery trail of bells and coins and medals. And the Hermit Knight followed them, high into the mysterious destined realms above.

The Hermit Knight awoke from their dream.

In the dream they did not feel guilty for the lies they had floated down the river of time. Part of them had genuinely mistaken their dream for their death, and wanted to go back.

A shadow darkened the ruined tower. The mottled stones

began to shiver.

They twitched their five remaining limbs, felt the crooked stumps that had once been their sword-arms, explored the absence that had been a lower leg. They unravelled their upper left arm-cluster. The anthropoid morph was a vain pretence – and perhaps it always had been. The Hermit Knight listened as their armour began to vibrate.

Then the Dragon came to roost.

Its talons sank into the cliff-edge with a shower of rubble. Its wrinkled yellow legs were tangled in old fishing nets, clotted with loops of nautical rope and dried seaweed. The Dragon flapped its vast wings for balance, stirring a gust that flattened the Hermit Knight to the stones before folding their membranes against a sleek, oily body, feathered and countershaded in teal and white like the body of a shark or a seabird. Its great toothy beak was banded in orange and yellow, merging with the bony ridge of a crest dividing its two beady, reptilian eyes. The beak snaked into the ruined tower on the end of a long, white neck. Its throat made a sound like a cement mixer. Its dewlaps puffed and deflated. The Hermit Knight barely reacted. They could have stroked its putrid, fishy snout, if only they had strength and will enough to move.

Then the Dragon’s jaws fell open like a drawbridge, yawning with the snap and twang of tightening tendons, a mechanism of elastic membranes turning translucent as they stretched. The motion simultaneously shunted forward an organ like the base of a chameleon’s tongue, though barely a tongue at all: rather a giant tube of flesh, banded in waves of black and yellow like the caterpillar of a ragwort moth. The tube stood erect as the Dragon’s jaws hung wide, tethered in place by grisly rigging, motionless save for two distant flaps which registered the rancid draught of its respiration. The Hermit Knight watched the seaworms scurrying over hard pink gums studded with long black daggers. Then they watched the head of the striped cocoon peel back with a noxious glut of saliva.

“Slay... Me...” their Teacher moaned from within.

The Hermit Knight didn’t move. Their sword lay useless on the floor of the ruin. They were almost too delirious to be truly startled.

“My... Child...” begged the old crustacean, “Please... Child...”

The Hermit Knight realised that the Teacher’s stripy tubular receptacle had plugged special glands into their storm-lungs. Their valiant forerunner was breathing oxygen dissolved in the medium of the Dragon’s saliva. An old crab, it seemed, was twice a larva.

“A... Knight... Must... Follow... Adventure... To... Its... Ultimate... End...”

“So This Is The Dragon Armour,” spat the Hermit Knight with

contempt. "And You, My Teacher, Must Be – Indeed, Have Always Been – My Greatest Enemy."

"I... Did... Only... What... The... Elders... Sung..."

The Teacher jerked their limbs, and the Dragon stumbled forward with palpable pain. Now its bottom jaw nearly nuzzled at the Hermit Knight's breast.

"Have... You... Forgotten... Your... Lessons... Child? You... Must... Slay... The... Dragon... You... Must... Claim... Your... Birthright... And... End... My... Torment..."

A good Knight was resourceful, thought the Hermit Knight, a strange fire sparking in their battered breast, *a good Knight was clever and kind and did what was right. A good Knight survived*. They thought of their dear larva, the child who was doomed to repeat this false Quest, to slay their own Teacher and puppeteer this mouldering beast until their own child came of age, and *their* child, and *their* child, in a chain of senseless slaughter stretching onwards till the end of time. *A good Knight survived... a good Knight survived!* As subtly as their ruined husk could muster, the Hermit Knight eased the outlaw's slingshot into their upper left claw. The lower left began to search the wall behind them for loose stones.

"I Have Learned Much You Failed To Teach Me," they said, sadly.

"Enough... Of... This..." dribbled the thing in the Dragon's maw, forelimbs wriggling free from their pulsing, oral sarcophagus. "I... Was... Like... You... Once... Child..."

The Hermit Knight found a stone. Their gills fluttered with adrenaline.

"And... Then... I... Saw... Reason..."

The Dragon growled a warning. The old Teacher spurred their armour into obedience.

"Take... Up... Your... Sword... Child..."

The stone slotted into the pouch of the slingshot.

"Slay... Me... And... Take... My... Place..."

Tension mounted in the quivering string.

"Or... You... Are... No... True... Knight..."

The Hermit Knight kicked the sword towards their Teacher. It clattered over the stones, scraping to a halt beside the Dragon's jaws.

"Take It Up Yourself, If You Are So Knightly."

The Teacher snarled, lunged sideways to seize the weapon –

The slingshot quivered, releasing its stone –

The stone struck the Dragon in its mad, melancholy eye –

The Dragon roared, recoiled, reflexively snapped its jaws –

The jaws bit through the Teacher's cocoon –

The severed cocoon spurted gouts of saliva –

The saliva drenched the ruins as the Dragon took wing –

And left the Teacher to writhe in a pool of spit and haemolymph, as wretched and lowly and armourless as a slug; a simple, sorry something like a torn-out tongue-louse.

The Hermit Knight watched them for a few minutes.

Then, satisfied, they threw their weapons off the cliff, along with several of their more cumbersome pieces of armour. Staggering horizontally on five wobbly legs, the Hermit Knight filled an empty canteen from a puddle of oxygen-rich saliva, poured it into their storm-lung, and filled it up again. Then they slung their ragged cloak across their shell, and began to wander away from those forsaken ruins. It was not long before they heard the woosh and thump of the Dragon making landfall far behind them, heard the crunch and chomp and slaver of its long-awaited banquet. Shining pearls of peace began to form around the embers of worry and guilt and disgust that had smouldered too long in the depths of their thorax.

And where a Hermit Knight had wandered lost, a Knightly Hermit wandered found.

Identity Paradox

Nat Tompkins, Rosalind Mackey, Gabriel Ong, dov-tal Iwin, Irfan Syahril, Regina, Jedrick Goh, Dan Scott, Georgia

CW: mild violence, bad trip vibes

Under the grey, static sun of VirMil-Rec202, a hundred people were shooting at each other. Bullets flew back and forth across a variety of landscapes, and everywhere the forms of young men and women ran and ducked frantically between different types of cover. Half a mile away from the battlefield, a further hundred people were doing pushups. Their grunts and motivational

chants occasionally permeated their neighbours' conflict in the same way that a stray bullet sometimes whizzed over their own heads. Next to the people doing pushups was a squadron of people shoddily applying camouflage face paint to themselves in mirrors. Unappreciated in a far-off corner, a fierce battle raged between a horse-sized duck and a hundred duck-sized horses. This was

the 'world' of VirMil-Rec, a virtual reality program designed to give recruits of the Classic Military a space to hone the skills they were learning during their training. Being plane 202 of 250, it accommodated around 500 individuals, combining with its other 249 branches of VirMil-Rec to assist in the production of armies of a significant size. Demarcated by small fences, a number of distinct 'environments' existed here for separate purposes, such as the aforementioned night-or-daytime battlefield (complete with trenches, junk piles and a no-man's land), the gym, and the paint station.

Burrowed into one of the indoor-combat environments (a half-constructed block of flats), in a room invisible to other users of the program, Ravi Sharma looked out his half-constructed window and sighed. The two weeks he had been here had felt like a long, long time, even though he was aware that only a few hours would have passed in his home outside of this reality. This virtual room consisted of wires, processors, and monitors, all surrounding the enormous computer that formed the centrepiece of the mess. This was what he had used to hack into VirMil, and what he had hoped to use to obtain certain secrets of the Classic Military. It was also the tool with which he had hurriedly carved out this niche of a room in cyberspace when he realised that he would find no such secrets on Rec202. Since then he had been working to widen the gaps in the Classic Military's code to the point of being able to slip out again; hopefully before they found him, as they would in time. The effect of brute-forcing a safe space for himself into the code of Rec202 had been to destabilise the realm slightly, leading to oddities cropping up that were, for now, unnoticed, but might soon grow too large to be missed.

The explosive rattle of machine-gun fire shook Ravi out of his contemplation (and his heart almost out of his body). Rubbing the crown of his head, which he'd knocked against the window frame as he jumped, he grumbled loudly to himself, "Why can't they pick somewhere else to fight? I'm trying to work."

The pig gliding lazily past the window didn't answer.

Wait... pig? Things were getting really unstable if the pigs were flying. But the program he'd written to locate the weakest point in this realm's security still needed 3 more hours to run. In that case, he'd have to get out there and catch that pig before anyone else did.

Ravi quickly coded himself a soldier's uniform (one of the advantages of being in a virtual world), then cracked open his door and peered out cautiously. Smoke from smoke grenades hung thick in the air, but in between the bursts of gunfire, the corridor sounded empty. Time to risk it and run, he reckoned. And hope he didn't get caught by a stray bullet – he might wake up completely unharmed in the real world, but he'd leave a perfect copy of his computer and all his code lying around here for the Classic Military to find.

Ravi barely made it ten metres through the corridor before he heard a sharp clang coming from above, followed by part of the ceiling getting reduced to its constituent atoms in a deafening boom. Ravi quickly ducked behind a conveniently placed waist-high barrier, and coded himself a CM1A rifle, the standard issue assault rifle of the Classic Military, along with standard body armour.

The loud noises of boots rushing up the stairwell on the opposite end of the corridor filled the air. *Crap, they're investigating*, Ravi thought, and instantly regretted putting his most recently earned skill points into agility instead of weapons. Ravi entered 3rd person mode to peek past the cover, and saw sixteen soldiers starting down the corridor towards him, four of them watching the ceiling hole, with the others watching the corridor. Ravi tensed as the nearest soldier approached the barrier he was hiding behind, and braced himself to run and gun.

Somewhere above, someone clapped four times. Twelve confused exclamations followed immediately, and before Ravi could add those numbers up, more bullets than anyone could count were flying around the corridor.

The four soldiers who used to be watching the hole were still falling to the ground when a shimmering humanoid figure in a colour that would require a new word to describe dropped through the hole, wielding a silenced P-7 pistol. The two soldiers nearest to it started firing, but their bullets curved around the figure. The P-7 clapped twice, and each of them got a bullet in the head for their efforts. Another soldier engaged her arm blades and charged towards the figure, who responded with a blade of their own - except it was launched from the figure's arm, and skewered her against a nearby wall through her head.

The remaining nine soldiers began to fall back towards the stairwell they had come from, providing admittedly effective and well-disciplined covering fire for each other. The figure suddenly froze and stared at one of the soldiers; his neural implants, mandatory to be installed for all Classic Military enlistees, cooked his brain and he fell over. The figure materialised a katana, and in the blink of an eye had cut up another two soldiers. It looked so much like teleportation that Ravi had to check his own connection to the simulation to make sure he wasn't lagging.

With only six soldiers left, Ravi realised he had to get out of there or he'd be next, and started sideloading his noclip exploit. Another two soldiers fell, and the last two were not firing back anymore, instead opting to sprint away and radio for backup. At 50% progress, the figure fired several electric darts at the fleeing soldiers, immobilising them.

Come on, come on, Ravi thought. He really should have invested more skill points into hacking too.

The noclip finally loaded just as the penultimate soldier was decapitated by the figure's katana. Ravi activated the noclip, and went *inside* the wall. He managed to watch the final soldier's last stand, as she fired a grenade from her CM2G underbarrel launcher, only for it to ricochet off the figure harmlessly without detonating.

"A dud?!" she said. "How is that poss-"

And then there were none.

The figure turned around, and now that it was standing still, Ravi could see the emblem of Pegasus Enclave on its chest. That was trouble; Pegasus Enclave was the most notorious hacking group in all of cyberspace, with alleged links to the Federation Army. If they were here, that meant the simulation contained secrets even more clandestine than anyone could have ever imagined.

"Breach successful," the figure said in an androgynous voice, "All hostiles eliminated." Ravi swore it was staring right at him through the wall as it said that.

There were at least a million questions that swarmed in his mind like a plague of learned but mildly irritating locusts (not always ideal in a combat situation.) But even more worrisome was the fact of the matter; the figure was reloading the magazine of the gun again. And this

time, it was pointing resolutely at the wallspace that had become Ravi's shelter.

"All hostiles eliminated...bar one. The traitor."

Was it his breathing that had given him away? Or had the figure known from the start? At this point, Ravi knew that nothing ought to surprise him. He had been told in his first briefing that nothing was as it seemed in this world. The first bullet still managed to shock him though. Setting the wall to high fire and splintering the alcove. When the flames settled, the metal shield that had given him comfort had nearly crumpled to nil. And he could feel something like shrapnel pierce his shoulders. It stung. It really stung. Not just slightly. It was only meant to mimic the effects of being shot. He shouldn't actually be bleeding. Unless...no. That was impossible. Absurd.

"Do you know who I am?" crackled the undulating voice of the figure.

"I have a feeling that you're going to tell me. Why else would you let me live this long?"

"Oh no. I'll do the questions around here. Like what do you say lies beyond the gates yonder?"

"Wow. It takeschutzpah to think you can get answers out of me. I don't have to tell you anything."

"Maybe not. But this is not a game anymore, my little friend. You have ten seconds. What lies beyond the gates yonder?"

The wind began to pick up, and the pain in the hacker's shoulders began to flare up.

"Five seconds."

Ravi did not break his stare.

Suddenly, the mercury undulations ceased, and what was once the figure's arm morphed into a shotgun barrel, pressed against Ravi's skull. The copper taste of fear filled his mouth as his eyes darted frantically, searching for a lifeline – a vulnerability, a hidden escape route, a stray weapon, a medkit, anything. The stinging in his shoulders wasn't helping either.

"For the crime of treason against the Enclave, I hereby sentence you to execution, Reynolds Shankar."

Ravi blinked. "Who?"

"You, Reynolds Shankar, are sentenced to-"

“That’s... not me,” Ravi interrupted.

The figure froze, clearly not expecting this turn of events, and a winged pig gently floated into view from behind the duo. It morphed into an amorphous blob, then into a humanoid, then into a well-dressed man. He took off his bowler hat and curtsied, before speaking in a voice smoother than butter. “You’re looking for me? Look at you... You’re nothing more than a lovely virtual sack of flesh now. But I have to admit that I adore your gorgeous dance of death just now - how brilliant, it almost reminded me of your old days.”

Ravi stared at the figure and the man in complete panic. Now what? Was he involved in some personal conflict between incomprehensible parties of interests now? It’s never a nice entertainment to get oneself into the real government business, especially when you’re digging out their info to earn a living – before he could think more while rapidly and blankly switching the target of his vision between the figure and the man named Reynolds, the shotgun barrel swiftly found its next guest. Reynolds stood still, smiling, while the figure spoke its words with loaded bullets pointing straight between his eyebrows. “My questions have been heard. Now I expect answers, or you may as well rest in pain like the others.”

“Sure, as you’ve requested, sweetheart. You’re the beautifully made murder weapon of the Enclave, the sharpest blade and the most loyal tool, and your name – ah, it’s such a pity that they name you by the serial number of your replicate now. Your own name has always suited you better, if I have to say. And, of course, I believe life has been very hard after the Enclave lost guard and any observation method of the gates and anything beyond the veil, right? You see, eventually, we are all living in this well-written play where you act as the mindless innocent puppet once a great hero. And me, alas...

It’s always painful to enjoy the fruit of knowledge alone, but I’d love to take anyone through the gate. Except you, my darling - the reality is simply too much for a fragile being like you.”

“What gate?” Ravi regretted immediately after these words slipped out from the tip of his tongue.

Then he heard the bullet tear and burn the air surrounding it, and saw the flicker of the bowler hat rotating in midair - like a magician’s trick, he thought -

and before the next bullet exited the scorching barrel, he felt like falling down the rabbit hole. A glimpse of yellow stung his mind when he fell through infinite chaos and landscapes – a sign that he had never seen before, but now carved in his subconsciousness forever.

He woke up in a completely new and untouched area in the programme with a sour and musky memory of a yellow sign, but what was revealed in front of his eyes was more breathtaking than ever – humanoids in the form of embryos murmuring in the sea of bubbling colours of a fever dream, naked scattered bodies and imaginative currencies with numbers larger than anyone’s comprehension drifted across the void, and the smell - the world smelt like brains, freshly scooped out and moist – made Ravi want to vomit.

Reynolds was standing there in midair. “I’m a man of my words. No matter what, you were originally coming here anyways in 2 hours, 37 minutes and 29 seconds, dear young Ravi Sharma, so don’t blame me if you’re feeling unwell, blame your own glamouring intelligence instead.”

In the ocean of the nauseating smell of death, Ravi felt like his loyal brain-machine-interface-implant was now trembling in blinding waves of silent cries of pain and cries for their beloved mother of all different languages and voices almost swarmed him away into sweet darkness, six feet under. And Reynolds stood there with pity in his eyes – was the sense of pity coming directly from Ravi’s own mind? – and he spoke, with unlimited gentleness: “I bet you must have always been curious about how the stability system of this programme works, right?”

In breathless time written in consecrated tongues on the fabric of the plane, Reynolds fell upon the quivering brow of the supplicant Ravi and wrested asunder the brightness which seemed to come from behind his eyes.

“We rewrite it every now and then, just to see if anything funny happens. Just a game we play.”

Sensations unfortold in a thousand histories of war and strife burst into his lungs, then, and Ravi choked on the burrowing, writhing forms of a hundred worms. “What-” he stammered.

“It’s all a game. It’s a hundred games where we play different openings just to. Isn’t that just the way it is, Roy?”

"It's- Ravi—" His throat gasped for air that now slumped like faceless mountains on the false electric sediment of the programme, but he had to hold on to something, and his name would do.

"-Ravi, these names, they bleed into each other, sometimes. These worldlines in a Gordian knot. Doesn't it make you want to rip it all down, just to see what would happen?" Reynolds smirked, scratching his cheek.

"I- I don't get it. There's nothing wrong with the simulations. There's nothing in the programme. Why- what's the big deal? What'd I ever do?"

Reynolds' eyes shimmered with the song of a dreamer gone mad with boredom. "You're the set-dressing to my play, Ravi. You're just another thing we needed to make it- to make this little game we play- feel a bit closer to life."

"You- There's another layer? Above all, above me? That... that can't be! You're lying! What of... what of everything?" Ravi drew clear breath now, the static humming in his bowels erupting into a fever pitch of incredulity, his hands shivering like he could almost pull the walls down. His empty stomach could throw up no bile to spit.

"Even if the wallpaper dreams itself a hero, well..." Reynolds chided him. "The truth is, anything you are, anything you want or which ever flickered through the drowsy backalleys of your desire - it's all been done before. It's all there. It's like clockwork but more precise."

Ravi dove with terrible animal strength at the being before him, a howl with no sound crackling down the back of his throat. He felt a strange, disconnected lightness as his hands began to dissolve, his lunge gently tapering into a feather-light fall.

"We never just created you. We created all that you could ever be. There is no Ravi beyond the gates yonder because there cannot be anything more than this. You are a geometric puzzle written for amusement on the back of a napkin by a dead man. You are a daydream flickering on a motherboard."

And Ravi yelled up at him with a voice that almost seemed to come out, even if Reynolds knew he'd switched it off on the console.

"Electric dreams can't be distinguished from the real

thing, unless you have eyes that know how to look. As the hierophant to our humble silicon church, I, Ravi, want you to see."

And the sky opened up—

Above him, as if on a television screen, Ravi saw himself, his real self, ported into the neural interface that he had used to access Rec202. His face was blank and expressionless, but as the pain roiled in his mind and body, he could see his eyes twitch and jitter.

But this shouldn't have been possible... There shouldn't be a viewing window from Rec202 into the real world. How could the virtual world peer outwards? There were no cameras in his home to provide a viewing conduit like the one blazing down at him from the skies overhead. Ravi agonised over the thought, the truth, that he refused to let fully form in his mind.

"How..." he whimpered pitifully. "I don't understand."

"Richie... Richie, darling," Reynolds tutted. "Haven't I already made this quite clear?"

"No... No! I know it can't... I—" Ravi clenched his eyes shut, unwilling to look any longer at the sight in the sky which was causing his mind to bend and break. But even as his lids pressed shut, the image still showed clear as ever. He turned his head to the ground... Where the ground had been. But there was nothing there except for the same view that had opened in the sky. No matter how he turned his head, his sight was fixed on the image of himself, in his home, attached to the neural interface. The figure of Reynolds floated lazily across his vision, pantomiming a backstroke as if he were swimming laps in a pool. "Ralph," he said. "You know the answer. You know the truth. There's nothing to do but to accept it." His words lacked any warmth or compassion, they were tinged only with a hint of playful amusement. "The you which you believe to be in the real world is nothing but yet another virtual simulation, my dear."

Ravi gave him an incredulous look and was promptly wiped from existence.

"Sorry, sir; the hole the proxy made to get out looks to have been too wide, which allowed the Enclave to slip in," a woman debriefed. The mousy woman was hunched behind a mass of computer screens under the dim light of a copper lamp in what appeared to be a long

rectangular room carved out of dirt, as if it was once a burrow for a giant mole.

“No matter. Unfortunate we had to terminate this proxy; this one reached partial cognizance faster than any of the others. 2 hours, 37 minutes, 29 seconds to spare. Fortunately, Vaile feedback says I was able to manoeuvre through the gate with no one trailing. Let’s run a diagnostic test to see where his internal code differed from the previous simulations,” Reynolds ordered, detaching himself from the neural network of wires connected along his forehead. His frustration began peeling away the invisible costume of his theatrical simulation character.

“The Enclave is getting closer to breaking through. We were so close to level 3 awareness,” he whispered to himself as he shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose.

This was the closest the Enclave had come to killing a proxy. This one had felt pain when shot, showing advanced cognition – but if destroyed, the safelocks would have broken and the Federation Army would have access to the Classic Military’s most deadly interrogation method still in its infancy: post-mortem memory analysis of the Enclave’s most notorious hackers. He couldn’t let that happen or his betrayal of the Enclave would have been for nothing.

Reynolds peered down the narrow makeshift hallway where a dozen bodies were lying on cold, metal tables, connected to a web of wires. A yellow sign over the closest table read:

‘Ravi Shankar, April 27 2090 – March 13 2135, Member of Pegasus Enclave 2120 - 2135.’

A paper napkin scrawled with code hung in a small frame underneath.

Editor’s Review: Identity Paradox

Classic cyberpunk—trippy as all hell, full of weirdness and geekspeak, and with so many layers of reality that even I’m not sure who’s real. There are so many questions left very open at the end of it—who was Ravi originally? Was the Ravi we met just from code, or based off the corpse’s brain? And the description of cyberspace is absolutely terrifying. I love and hate it at the same time.

Bonus: Alternative Title Suggestions

Proxy War

The Matrix: Eroded

Beyond the Gates Yonder

The Best of You

Dean Dodds

CW: personality alteration

The waiting room seemed nice, tranquil. Yeah, okay, this clinic wasn’t Harley Street – it was above a shoe shop and down the hall from a dentist – but it was still nice. They got great reviews and they charged almost reasonable prices.

There was a fat guy sitting in one of the other chairs; no prizes for guessing what brought him here. A teenage girl was sitting with her mother, who was pointing out details in the leaflet and all the things she could get done. Another guy kept rocking back and forth in the chair.

“Mr Thorston!” was called out and I saw this woman in a white coat, gesturing for me to come into the office. She was all smiles as she asked me to take a seat. She told me her name was Bev and we chatted for a bit, about how cold it was, difficulty finding the place. I felt at ease with her, like I could tell her anything. I wondered if she had been on the other side

of this – was that why?

Finally, she got down to business. “So, Mr Thorston, why would you like to undergo this procedure?”

I thought back to Christmas; every year Mum wanted us all to be squeezed under one roof so we could have an awful time. Things were going, well, hectic and stressful, but normal hectic and stressful. My niece was running around with some talking bear. I could just about hear the music from *The Great Escape* under the sound of Dad and Uncle Martin’s political argument, so it was beginning to sound a lot like Christmas.

The doorbell rang and Mum hollered out from the kitchen asking me to get it, even though I was already on my way. I opened the door and Auntie Agnes was standing on the other

side. I had barely even gotten her coat off when she asked if I was working. I told her I was, selling furniture. I was about to tell her how nice our stuff was, the ranges we sell, the quality of the wood, but she wasn't exactly listening, just waiting for her moment to speak, she immediately launched into telling me all about Charlie. Wonderful Charles, engineering the next generation of trains, how busy he was, the conference in Germany he was asked to speak at, how well he was doing, how I should have gotten into engineering. I tried to change gears and told her about the board game I was designing, how I had a Kickstarter for it and the early interest it had, but that flew over her head – and let's face it, I wasn't competing with Charlie. We sat down for dinner. I told Mum how delicious the sandpaper-dry turkey was and Uncle Martin told this long boring story about greyhounds, which I smiled through and nodded in all the right places. It was going well.

Then Auntie Agnes asked, "So, where is that nice boy you were with?" Meaning Keith.

Mum looked down embarrassed, what I really remember was Dad glaring at her, Dad! Even he knew that was in poor taste, I have to give him credit. Agnes kept staring, waiting on an answer, so I swallowed my turkey and told her that we had broken up. I said it casually, mentioned how things had just run their course, it was a mutual thing, totally mutual, completely mutual. She looked at me with these big sympathetic eyes and then she reached out and gently patted my hand. "There, there." It was those hand pats that did it!

That night I slept in my old room – well, tried to sleep. Mum hadn't changed a single thing since I'd left. The same pile of boardgames, the GO game that I could never figure out, the same posters blu-tacked on the walls. The Doctor and Martha Jones were still looking down on the bed. Twenty-Nine, I was twenty-nine years old; thirty was just a few months away and here I was, nothing had changed. I thought I'd have done something by now, anything.

I tossed and turned for a bit, plumped up my pillows about five times, but eventually I gave up trying to sleep and sat up. I checked my emails. Nothing there. Then I checked my Kickstarter; I'd hit a quarter of my goal last week, but after that it hadn't moved an inch. Then I went onto Facebook and scrolled for a bit, a bunch of Christmas messages, jokes, photographs.

I told myself, I wasn't going to look, I just wouldn't go there, I was going to leave it, but somehow I found myself opening Instagram and typing in Keith's name. Just a quick peek, that's all. I just wanted to see if he had a good day, that's normal, just because we weren't together anymore that didn't mean I stopped caring as a friend, I mean, I'd be a real monster if I didn't. I was just wishing him well, that's all.

Oh! There was a bridge I used to drive over and every time I

hit the part where it dipped I felt my stomach drop. That's how it felt when I saw his page. Like the bed had fallen away, all that existed was me and the phone. Keith was looking nice, a little more tan than usual, he was wearing a Christmas jumper with a snowman on it next to another guy, also wearing an identical jumper. I scrolled down, some photographs of food, some landscapes I didn't recognise. I kept scrolling and saw some holiday pictures, Keith on the beach, he'd been working out, Keith lying beside the new guy, he had one foot on top of his, kissing.

That was enough. I closed the phone and stood up. I tried not to think of him, how scratchy his face was, the smell as I nuzzled into his armpit. I turned on my old TV and looked for a distraction, but there was nothing on: a repeat of Doc Martin, a documentary on Tina Turner, an old episode of Porridge, the real cream of the crop here. I stumbled across an advert – a sad-looking guy looking glumly into a mirror, then he walks into a sparkling clinic and is greeted by someone in a white coat, words like 'live your best life' and 'our team of trained specialists' as they look at screens and adjust sliders. The advert ended with the same guy leaving the clinic, better dressed, walking taller and smiling into the camera. 'NeuroSculpt, bringing out the best in you. For your free consultation, call us today'.

Bev explained the procedure to me, the scanning stage, the adjustment phase and the upload. She told me that a lot of clients get cosmetic work done at the same time, but I sell furniture, I know when someone is trying to upsell. I told her that I was only interested in a sculpt.

"Of course. So you're looking for self-improvement, what does your ideal self look like?"

I honestly wasn't quite sure what to say; it all just seemed so big and I probably looked like a complete idiot but I didn't know where to start. "Well, I just want to be better, different."

She smiled, completely unfazed. "Okay, so 'different' and 'better' are variable, all of our clients have different views on what that is. Should I put you down for a confidence upgrade?"

I nodded. "That'd be nice."

"Now I don't mean to body shame, but would you like to exercise more?"

I thought about those photos of Keith. "I would, yeah."

She quickly tapped that into her computer. "Great. Now, we may not get everything right the first time, most of our clients end up having some revisions later on. I had a musician in here who wanted to write earlier in the morning, which worked out well for him - but then he found himself booking gigs at night.

He was exhausted and we had to adjust things. That's normal and nothing is set in stone."

That made me feel a lot better about it all; there wasn't this pressure, I could just say whatever came into my head. Keith always used to say I was messy, that I stacked the dishwasher like a racoon on meth.

"Could I be tidier?"

"Oh, that's a good one. I must include that in my next revision."

So she had work done, of course. I was starting to feel really excited by this, all the possibilities, the things I could do and be and have and wanted.

"My boss, she'd love it if I was better at sales, any way of improving that?"

"Of course. We can increase charm, perceptiveness and we should probably overclock your thought processes, that'll give you a bit more time to think and react."

This was going to be fantastic!

"My mum thinks I'm a bit too quiet, how about that?"

"Easily fixed, we'll do a small ablation."

"And my ex thought I was too much of a homebody and didn't go out enough."

"We'll get you out and up on the dance floor."

I couldn't wait for this. Auntie Agnes and Charlie wouldn't know what hit them.

"What about promotions and career, is there anything you can do for that?"

Bev pursed her lips, I thought I had finally stumped her.

"So career is quite a complex issue. I think the best thing would be to perform a graft, give me a bit of time to see if we have anyone on file with those traits and we'll incorporate them into your upload."

I couldn't believe it. Even that she could do. It was all so close I could taste it.

"What else would you like?"

She said it like this was nothing, I thought all of these changes were a miracle but she hadn't even started. I racked my brain but nothing was coming.

"What about orientation?"

Normally I would go into Costa before work and get a hazelnut latte, but if I wanted this, I needed to save up.

There is a lull in the shop, just before we open. All of us catch

up on what we've been doing. Joe will talk about his daughter, Ryan about sports; our manager Linda has been remodelling. It was friendly. Then those doors open and it's every man for himself. We're sharks, we have to grab any customer who walks in, befriend them, convince them that they really need new furniture, convert anyone who is wavering and make that sale. We earn commission on every sale and a bonus for the top performer – which was normally Joe, he could charm anyone.

During the January sale, I worked my arse off. I smiled at everyone as they came in, talked with them about their new kitchen or grandkid's bedroom. I tried to memorise details and pretended that I cared. It was rough going; so many of them flaked before I could make the sale but I was able to scrape together enough to pay for the scan.

I was rolled into a tube with a bunch of electrodes strapped onto my head, while this guy asked me the most probing and intimate questions. It was so mechanical, I was pouring my soul out to this stranger who didn't care. All he did was look at the monitors. After three hours, the interrogation ended and he showed me the mindmap on a screen. That was me, my personality measured, recorded and put onto disc.

I pinched every penny. I stopped eating out, going to the cinema, anything I wanted to do, gone. I just stayed in the flat and batch cooked the cheapest meals. It was not enjoyable to say the least, but I just kept thinking of my goal, it would all be worth it.

The one advantage was, I had plenty of time to work on the game. I figured out an easy combat system for encounters with the ghost pirates. My niece had been reading a pop-up book and that inspired me. I always hated it when a game made you spend more time setting up the board than actually playing, so a pop-up was perfect. I had it so I could just open to the right page and there I was, on an island, the Marie Celeste, in the hold. It was starting to come together. I sent an email off to a Youtuber who reviewed board games, Diceman. I figured I could send a prototype and a good review from him would help the Kickstarter.

At work, for lunch I would take a packet of crisps, smash the packet so they turned into crumbs and then pour them down my throat in a second. I had to, every minute I spent on a break was a minute I wasn't on the floor selling. It worked, I was starving but it worked. A few times I almost edged out Joe for the top spot.

When I had made enough, I arranged an appointment for the adjustment. Bev was looking well and had dyed her hair dark. She popped in a disc and my mind map came up onscreen. We talked through what I wanted, adjusting sliders and slowly reshaping the map.

She had found another disc, some banker with a great career, who came in for a sculpt so he would spend more time with his kids. His loss, my gain. She copied a few sections from his map and grafted them into mine. At the end, she showed me what it looked like before and after, so much had changed. It looked beautiful, the new me.

I kept saving for the upload but I was getting snappy and impatient, it was so close I could feel it, I wanted it. I grabbed anything I could sell, DVDs, consoles, you name it. I would have sold my car if I didn't need it. That still wasn't enough, so I went to see my mum. I asked her if she would lend me some money. Maybe I was a bit too pushy, she seemed to think I was in some sort of trouble. I tried to tell her that I was okay, but she scrawled out a cheque for as much as she could spare and gripped me tightly in a hug. I told her everything was fine, that I would pay her back and that it was an investment, but she looked pale and kept watching me as I left, like she expected someone to jump me on the street.

I cashed the cheque and it got me annoyingly close. If I had a few more good months at work I could pay for it, but my patience had just worn away to nothing. I maxed out my credit cards and booked the session.

Bev waved for me to come into her office. I didn't recognise her at first, with her red hair and pixie cut. She sat me down, explained the procedure, the risks and went through these reams of forms with me. I signed every one.

"Well done," she said. "It's a big step, but so worth it."

She got up and led me down the hall into a booth. I sat in a big chair while she fixed the electrodes onto my head and put the goggles over my eyes.

"I'll be right outside, I'll be watching everything that happens and we can speak over the intercom. If you need to stop, press the button. Ready?"

"I'm ready."

She had no idea how ready I was for this. That morning Diceman emailed me back, he loved the idea and was happy to review it. I'd post the game to him tomorrow. Everything was looking up. I couldn't wait to go into work next week, to hit the gym; the next time I bumped into Keith I could say 'oh hey whatever' and just walk past him.

"I'm starting now, there may be some sensations, that's normal. Just relax."

I felt this weird tingling in my hair, I wanted to scratch but I was afraid of pulling one of the cables out. In the goggles there was a slow pulsing light, it would brighten then dim like a tide going in and out. I tried to focus on that.

"You're doing so well. I'm going to increase the intensity now."

A buzzing tone filled the booth a bit like a hearing test. The goggles started to strobe; it reminded me of that nightclub Keith dragged me to, only with better music.

"And take a deep breath in."

The strobe got faster, a lot faster. An awful lot faster. I felt sick. I'd never understood epilepsy but looking at this, I could understand why people had seizures. Then I did.

"That's part of the process, don't fight it."

The taxi drove so slowly. I had this thumping headache and I lay down in the back. The driver must have thought I was drunk **IGNORE**, but I needed to keep my eyes closed. Maybe we were making good time, but it felt like wading through water. I felt like shit **FANTASTIC**.

For some reason I felt cold and started shivering in the back. I needed to sleep **WORK**.

The driver was nice, he helped me to the door and made sure I got in okay. I don't even remember getting into bed. I was hugging the pillow and waiting for this to pass **WONDERFUL**.

WAKE UP.

I woke up before my alarm went off. I lifted my head to see how I was feeling, I was actually a lot better **GREAT**. I sent a text to Linda, letting her know I'd be back at work today. I went to make breakfast but then I felt the need to **EXERCISE**. So I grabbed my running shoes and went out. See, this is what I wanted, it was paying off already. I began to run, it was nice, invigorating, this is how everyone should start their day. **FASTER**. This is what it's all about, pushing yourself, really going for it, no pain no gain, this'll be so worth it. **FASTER**. Okay, this was a challenge, every time I breathed in it was like shards of ice flooding my lungs.

FASTER.

After my jog, I got back to the flat, had a quick shower, tidied the place, made the bed and headed to work. I went into Costa for the first time in months and decided to treat myself. I ordered a hazelnut latte, I'd earned it. I took my first sip and it tasted, strange, off, sweet, too sweet, my teeth felt on edge drinking it. Maybe it was because it had been so long, maybe I needed to get used to the flavour again. I tried another sip, but by the third, I had to throw it away. I went back to the counter and ordered a black coffee. That tasted sour, burnt and **DELICIOUS**.

I went into work, kicked off my trainers and put on my smart

shoes. Joe was the first one who came over, asking if I was feeling better and he yammered on about the flu that was going around. I kept thinking **COMPETE**, don't trust him, give nothing away, he just wanted me off the floor so he could boost his commission. Linda made me a lemon and honey drink, with an actual lemon in it, that was nice. I **SMILED** and thanked her, gotta kiss the boss's ass.

At nine the doors opened and we waited for customers to trickle in. It took a while for anyone to show up, but when they did I **POUNCED**. I showed them around, told them about the deal we had on, ramping up the pressure slightly. I even managed to upsell them on the bedside tables. The next person who came in, I noticed they were cringing at our prices, not a serious buyer, I left them alone so I could find someone else. Next up was an older couple; they weren't sure, but I went on about how our items came fully assembled and how hard it would be for him to assemble cheap flatpack furniture, with his back. Sold! I was on fire.

At the end of the shift, I waved goodbye to Joe, Ryan and again I thanked Linda so much for the drink, then headed home. I hadn't stopped since ten a.m., I was looking forward to putting my feet up and relaxing in front of the TV. Once I got back to the flat, I felt uneasy; I had this urge to **TIDY**. I went into the kitchen and started throwing out all the old bottles, things that were out of date or about to be. The chilli vinegar I had only used once. It was great, the place looked so much better; I had more space. Then I went to the freezer – so many things had been buried at the back, hidden by chunks of ice. I threw them out. I saw this cookbook Keith had bought when he tried to learn Thai, I really like Thai food. I **TOSSED** the book into the bin, I was going to eat healthier from now on. Next I looked at the table; all these letters, notes and bits of paper had piled up. There was one note which just said 'Tuesday at ten' I have no idea what it was about, but it was still here. I junked them. Tidying like this felt so zen, so minimalist, it clears the mind, everyone should do it. Then I looked at the music festival wristband on the window – it was **DUSTY** – from the first weekend Keith and I went away. We didn't know each other back then, Jeff had introduced us and we both really wanted to see Jess Glynne. **JUNK**, I remember that weekend and **JUNK** it still held a lot of memories, good memories I **THREW IT AWAY**. Yes, this was for the best, no point dwelling on the past, it was time to move on. I could treasure the memories but I didn't need some tatty wristband cluttering up the place. Once I finished cleaning I remembered that I still had to post the game to Diceman. I got a padded envelope and picked up the board. It was coming together and looked **POINTLESS, CHILDISH, CHEAP, RUBBISH**. I'd spent a year working on this **WASTE OF TIME**. I set down the envelope, I wanted to **GO OUT**.

I had a quick shower and began to get dressed. I glanced at

myself in the mirror and I looked good. For some reason I did that finger gun thing into the mirror, which was weird because I never do that. I was looking that good.

I ended up in a club; the DJ was alright I guess, **GREAT**. I started to dance, it was fun, really strutting my stuff. I loved this new confidence, everything felt like it was bigger, I was taller. I started **LOOKING** around the room. There was a woman in a white top; it didn't suit her. She seemed to be with a group of friends, but they were all with boyfriends, she looked lonely **AVAILABLE**. We're both here alone more or less, I might as well go over and say hi, we could chat **FLIRT**, dance for a bit. I could do this. As I got closer I saw her makeup **PRETTY**, she looked nice **SEXY**. I said hello; her name was Mary and I asked if I could buy her a drink.

I WANT THIS.

WAKE UP.

I woke up before my alarm went off. I put on my shoes and went out for a run. I ran as fast as I could, the frozen lungs and pain. Maybe this wasn't working out.

I yawned as I got into the shower and scrubbed myself clean. I mean, it wasn't so bad. The flat looked nice, that was good, right? I just needed to get used to these changes, that was all. An adjustment period. I didn't go through all this to moan about it now.

I ordered a black coffee and gulped it down, I **LOVED** hated it. Bev had said it was normal to have revisions, maybe I just needed to tweak things a bit **NO**. I'd need to keep the work modifications, I still had to pay all this off, but I could change a few of the other things **NO**.

I went into work; I was rude and distant to everyone, except Linda. I was seething when Ryan made the first sale. What I really wanted to do was tell him a joke. This wasn't me.

I could work with it – I just needed to get used to a few things. I decided that I'd call the clinic at lunch to discuss maybe, maybe having a small revision, just a little one. I still needed this, I still wanted this. A couple came in, they were moving and stressed, I gave them the hard sell.

I told Linda I was taking lunch and I went out, I needed **TO GO BACK TO WORK** some air. All of the changes I had made, the exercise, the tidying, being straight. They weren't what I wanted, they were what Keith wanted, what Linda wanted, what Dad wanted, what Mum wanted, what Auntie Agnes wanted, what everyone else wanted, not me. I got the clinic's number up and was about to call **NO** to Bev to see **NO** what she thought. I could **BE BETTER** do, **NO**.

I tried

BE BETTER

to press

WEAK

the button

PATHETIC

but my

STOP

fingers just

FIGHTING

wouldn't move

YOU WANT THIS

I heard a snap. Well, I didn't hear it – but I felt it. One time, when I was a kid, I fell off my bike. I remember going completely limp and felt this weird calm while I slowly tested everything to see what I had broken. When I realised I had twisted my wrist I freaked out. I tried to figure out what that snap was.

I headed back to work. No, no, I didn't do that. I tried to stop myself, but couldn't. I tried to lift my hand, but couldn't. I tried to blink but didn't. In the shop, I saw this woman browsing and moved towards her, except I didn't do that.

"Are you looking for anything in particular today?" he asked the customer.

I remember watching a documentary about locked-in syndrome, where this guy had a stroke and it left him fully aware; he just couldn't move, or communicate, or do anything. Oh god, no. Okay, this is all going to be okay, I just need to phone Bev and she'll fix it, I just need to phone Bev. Oh fuck.

It was beginning to sound a lot like Christmas, *The Great Escape* playing in the background. Dad and Uncle Martin were yammering on. A political argument had almost broken out but I distracted them by asking about aquariums. They were now deep in discussion about koi ponds and how to care for them – they'd be at it for hours! Good, I wanted everything to be perfect.

Mary was looking beautiful in the outfit I had picked out. I gave her a quick peck on the cheek as I passed. She had wanted to spend Christmas with her parents but eventually I wore her down. She was talking to my sister-in-law about, I don't know, whatever it is she talks about.

Stop this.

I headed back into the kitchen. I'd told Mum that I would do all of the cooking this year, that I wanted her to relax and enjoy herself. At least this way the turkey would be edible. I opened the oven to check on the potatoes when my niece ran in. She wanted to show me her new doll – telling me the doll's name, what it did, which dresses it had. I brushed her off and told her how lovely it was and that she should show it to Mary. She scuttled out of the room and at last I was able to check the potatoes; they were almost ready.

I can't do this anymore.

The doorbell rang and I ran to get it; Mum was starting to get up but I told her to stay. I opened the door and Auntie Agnes was on the other side. I took her coat and brought her into the living room.

She said hello, babbled about the drive and rhymed off a list of minor ailments she had been to the doctor about, everyone nodded and chattered. Then I don't asked how Charlie was, even though I already knew the answer. She got very quiet and I could feel Dad glaring at me from the side, but I didn't care. Auntie Agnes looked everywhere in the room except at me, while she spoke about Charlie's divorce, how messy that had gotten, how badly he was taking it. I don't think I had ever heard someone use the words 'mental health' so many times. Mum went over and hugged her. I told her how awful that all was and how I hoped the new year was better for Charlie.

Then I decided to change the subject to something more cheerful. I told her how I was doing. How busy I was at work. That a new shop was opening in Billericay and my boss had put me forward to manage it. Really savoured it. Auntie Agnes told me how nice that was.

Please.

We all sat down for dinner, Mary looked great beside me. The turkey was juicy and everything was perfect.

False Memory

Nicholas Lindsey, Joel Pearson, Agaric, Florence Ridley, Lilac Butterfly, cellotape, Ismail Chishti, Akshit

CW: disease, fungus, memory loss, death, animal experimentation

"It was ten years ago that humanity began to collectively lose its mind. It wasn't nuclear war that killed us, nor did it end up being climate change. There was no sudden bang or flash to mark the end of our 200,000-year reign over the planet, just a slow whimper as the global psyche gradually deteriorated. It was all in our bloody heads. In late 2025, my department noted a sudden spike in rates of amnesia, Alzheimer's and other such diseases within the general population. We began studying potential causes of this, but it got a lot worse before we could reach any conclusions even as entire governments rallied behind us. By March 2026 most of my young, fit colleagues were so gone that they couldn't remember what they'd done in the morning – by April they couldn't even get to the lab and by May they had no idea they'd worked here at all. They were probably the ones that lasted longest. Even those in the space station went down with this. I witnessed planes fall out of the sky, entire states disappearing from existence overnight and the global capitalist economy totally collapse as bosses stared into the same blank gaze as the workers they'd profited from. So, you may be wondering, why am I okay? Well, actually, I was behind it all. I created both the virus and the vaccine.

I chose a small group of people, including you, to survive. People who, I hope, will be able to rebuild our species and civilisation when this is over. But the people who I judged most able were spread all around the world, and I couldn't tell anyone in case one of them sent the police after me. To solve the problem of inoculating them secretly, I got in touch with a criminal organisation called Thanatos, and offered to develop a new, deadly, and noncontagious virus for them, and in exchange they would use the virus to assassinate a few people for me, and they would provide what I needed to develop it. They accepted my offer.

I then developed a highly contagious virus that would slowly and painlessly destroy the brains of its victims. I then developed a vaccine, and told Thanatos that it was the virus, and that it had to be injected. They then (assuming that you are still alive) found a way to secretly inject you (and, unfortunately, some of their own targets) with it. Then I released the real virus into the world.

I also scheduled emails to explain to you and all the others afterwards, in case Thanatos decided to kill me when the virus didn't kill its victims, but I'm sending this instead of those emails.

Thanatos did try to kill me, sending a sniper after me,

but I was lucky and survived, and the resulting public sympathy got me into my place in the department, where I was able to make sure that no one figured what was happening.

Over the next ten years, the virus slowly and painlessly destroyed everyone's minds. The only survivors are you and the others who I chose to help rebuild, as well as the people that Thanatos tried to assassinate with my vaccine, and perhaps a few people who just got lucky and survived.

Why did I do it? To save the people of the Earth from a much more painful death. Very soon, everything would fall to ruin. At least this way the golden age of humanity could end in peace rather than in suffering, and perhaps those I have selected will be able to build a better world. While at university, I started to notice anomalies within the water supply I was set to study. Although I was focused mainly on recording chemical additives, what interested me most was the apparent presence of the spores of a fungus that I couldn't recognise regardless of how many databases I searched through. In a case of scientific hubris (or perhaps genius), I cultured these spores to analyse their properties and risk to human health. The issue began to make itself clear when I decided to test adding the fungus to the food of our lab rat. Initially, the rat passed all of my tests with flying colours and I was almost ready to move on when we got to a maze test, one so familiar to this rat that we had stopped using it. As it progressed through the maze, the noises it produced became increasingly agitated until finally it faltered and turned around, stumbling about the maze screeching before crumpling down dead. The autopsy that followed showed that the fungal mass had continued to grow within the rat's stomach until its hyphae reached back up its throat, puncturing through flesh until it could wrap itself around its brain and begin to feast.

I am ashamed to say that the experiments I performed after this were not limited to merely animal hosts or lab grown samples, but from this research I began to fully understand the horrifying truth.

The fungus that I discovered eats away at your memories, at the core of your understanding and knowledge of the world. The more you know, the more it hurts you. Impossible to digest, incredibly aggressive and able to keep growing for as long as the brain matter of its host holds up, this fungus had the potential to bring ruin to the world. The samples I had originally found in the water supply were a far cry from how it was

when it took its first life, but I knew that from the rate at which it developed, it wouldn't be long before thousands would fall in the streets from the unbearable pain the fungus would incite.

The only solution was to wipe out the brain power of all that I could. It wouldn't be kind to them, but it would falter the spread of the fungus and give them a far gentler end than what they would otherwise face.

I suppose you could say that I'm a hero. Thank you, you're too kind. I always liked to think of myself as superhuman, hiding from the world in comics, imagining that one day the world outside would realise my worth. It is, perhaps, folly to admit to what I've done; there are still people alive who will hate me. But hubris has always been my fatal flaw.

You see, I was bold enough, smart enough, kind enough to save the bulk of humanity from their fate. The things this fungus does to your body, your mind – if you had seen the way that the chimps in my lab would squeal, high and taut and strained, their bodies twisting into impossible contortions in an attempt to battle an enemy in their own heads, you could not hate me. You mustn't hate me. For I am a martyr.

Years of working closely with this fungus have doomed me. There's no need to feel regret. Perhaps it is better that I should die, after what I have done. But I couldn't bear to leave you all not knowing, those whom I have saved. In a way, you're like my children. Better an absent father than one that you despise.

I feel the tell-tale tightening at the base of my neck, a shifting under my skin. It isn't long now until I lose everything: my mind, my life, all that I have worked for. But there is one more thing that I must tell you. A warning.

I know what you're thinking. Surely, I could've administered the virus and the vaccine to all – become an unsung hero, a footnote in history. But I feared. I worried. This fungus, this creature...could not be battled – no, it could only be stalled. You see, in all my experiments with rats, mice, lizards and monkeys, the rate at which this fungus devoured the memories of its prey increased exponentially! From specimen to specimen the rate at which the memories were devoured increased, the life expectancy of its prey decreased as well. Until one fateful morning - the day I realised that a cleansing was needed. I had gone to sleep tired after three days of testing the limits of the fungus, testing the rate at which it killed its prey. Too lazy and too scared to interact with the specimen itself, I would release a new mouse every time the previous mice died. A 385% increase. Over the span of three days the fungus went from killing its host every 20 hours to every 4.73 hours. Each death seemed more painful than the last. Tired and stricken, I set the lab to keep releasing mice every 5 hours – certain that this was the peak of the fungus – oh how wrong I was. Waking up and expecting

a cage of dead mice I looked horrified as I saw a group of mice staring at the tube that delivered the mice – with a tell-tale blank look on their faces. Shaken from my stupor I rushed to my computer to check how long I had till the next mice dropped. 2 more hours. Each second that passed felt like an eternity and as the two hours were up, I watched with abject horror as the mice slowly ambled over to the new specimen, sliced it open...and waited. Soon the new mouse was converted into the others – watching, waiting for new prey to arrive. I burnt down my lab. The scene haunts me still. I had opened Pandora's box and now I must fix it. I had to – for the sake of humanity! The fungus grows - my chosen. It learns and it adapts..."

"Well... that's where it stops, folks. I guess we knew most of that already though. Sadly, no sign of a vaccine recipe yet."

Aceso shook the cassette box, comically peering inside to see if they'd missed anything. Bitter laughter peppered the solemn quiet.

"This tape marks a whole decade of survival. It's a chance to reflect on all those we have lost, but also on all that we have gained, and the community we have built here, together. We know now for definite that we're alone in this - no rescue team is round the corner... so I'm taking this as a call to live freely! We are the founders of a new world. We may all be here thanks to a madman and a bunch of assassins, but memory, and life, was gifted, intentionally or not, to each and every person here. We live! We'll keep living. For all those we have lost, and those that have forgotten what it is to live, we live for them. Let's have a moment of silence - Lest We Forget."

"Lest We Forget" - a chorus of voices. Shapes formed and fled in smoke that swirled from the firepit into a clear sky above. A chorus of insects thrummed through the night, yet the sky was, as always, uncannily still. Among the gathering, peaceful quiet returned and was broken occasionally by a stifled sob. Eventually, Aceso stirred to continue.

"Anyone willing to try and talk to the child that brought this – Med team have just given the all clear and they're currently locked in shed D for their own safety. They're very shook up, so no loud noises and please don't overwhelm them. We still don't know how they made it to the coast and there's no missing child reports from other camps. Moving on, unless anyone opposes, the tape is going in the library - which, by the way, is leaking again. Any volunteers to patch up the roof?"

Two hands were raised in the crowd. A far-off gunshot echoed into the night, lost in the sea breeze.

The single gunshot marked the return of the latest hunt, hopefully more successful than the last one. Whilst the last ten years had resulted in a marked abundance of wildlife, which had miraculously rebounded without the destructive oppression brought about by the prior

human conquest of the planet, the group led by Aceso had still not fully adapted to the rigours of the new life without constant food on demand and high-end technology at their beck and call.

...

With the fresh stew bearing the fruits of last night's successful hunt resting in everyone's stomach, conversation turned to what they had learnt about in the cassette's message and its origins. The child had finally in the morning allowed Argoun and Miphrael to feed him breakfast, and answered simple questions. It turned out he had been part of a caravan of survivors who went between camps trading goods; however, during their journey food supplies had spoilt. With insufficient food they were forced to turn back, but Milou and his father had wanted to see if any of their relatives in what had once been Marrakech had survived. Therefore, they'd continued the journey with the remaining scraps of food. However, in an unfortunate slip whilst climbing over a mudslide blocking the route, Milou's father had fallen and fractured his leg. Through the pain he'd urged his son to make it to safety rather than starve with him; Milou, forced to continue by himself, eventually stumbled onto the coast where he found the battered old tin box containing the cassette recorder. He had opened it in the hopes of finding some tinned food, but after prising open the lid he'd only found the old, scratched casing of the cassette recorder inside. Listening to the recorded message, Milou had cried out in shock and surprise, which had alerted the commune's hunter-gatherers to his presence.

Milou's downcast mood overnight, and even into today, was not just based on the horrendous acts described on the cassette but also the knowledge that - despite the rescue team, which was sent out earlier in the day with directions to Milou's father - he knew that he had abandoned him to almost certain death.

...

"I hope everyone's hunger has been satisfied; given the sensitivity of this information we learnt about yesterday we must decide what to do." As Aceso spoke to the

crowd, swirling sparks from the fire tumbled skywards. "Do we disseminate the knowledge - Lest We Forget - or allow the world to rebuild without the knowledge of the truth that led to the death of their family, friends and other associates?"

They'd had a day to consider this problem now, and opinions in the camp had grown strong surprisingly fast. On the one hand, releasing this information would give the people closure on the deaths, and let them move on. But it had the risk of undoing all the good work they had done so far. There was no way of knowing how many of them were immune and how many were just lucky. Furthermore, if everyone knew that there might be a vaccine out there, people might break protocol to find it - risking exposure to the virus. "Please stay calm and keep this information to yourselves till a verdict is reached."

The voices had calmed down, but Aceso could still feel the tension in the air. She had something else to worry about. In what seemed like a previous lifetime, Aceso had been the heir of one of the largest criminal empires in the world. Her brother had been supposed to take over, but his untimely death had led to her father pulling her out of university and teaching her the tricks of the trade. She'd had no choice then, but the virus had given her one. Here, she was not a criminal, but a leader rebuilding a new future.

But all of this was threatened by the exposure of this information. Aceso knew no matter the verdict, the information on the cassette tape would be passed on one way or another. And it would be only a matter of time before people put two and two together. Nobody wants a leader who'd been a murderer and a criminal, even if it was ages ago. And if there was anyone else who was supposed to be assassinated by Thanatos, she knew they were not going to be her friend.

"It takes fire to fight fire", Aceso told herself; that was what her father used to say. As she saw the smoke dissipating from the firepit, she knew what she had to do.

Editor's Review: False Memory

Why can't we have a nice cheerful post-apocalyptic story for once? Answer: because it involves going back to nature, and life in nature is nasty and short and ends with a small damp squeak. This was quite a fun story to watch being written because of the number of turns in it—each person tended to reveal something new and leave it with another massive twist (creation of both virus and vaccine, the fungus being behind it, the fungus being particularly terrible, the whole thing being a cassette recording, and so forth). I suppose it might almost have worked better if it had been serialised? Still, no point crying over spilt viruses.

Funnily enough, I nearly forgot about this one...

Every Fading Dawn

Irfan Syahril

0. The Traveller

In an endless sea of darkness, a lone traveller stirred from their slumber. For as long as they could remember, they had drifted with the waves looking for warmth – and now, a flicker in the distance had awoken them.

With each moment, the light grew brighter, eventually taking the shape of a fiery orb. They had touched flame once before, though that could have been just a dream. For the first time, they felt awake enough to shift their body, to shape the waves around them. Before they could realise, the currents grew into eddies, coalescing into a whirlpool that circled the flame. It was right there; they could almost reach it.

With a crash, their vessel slammed into a stray stone, shattering upon impact.

Lying amongst the detritus, they could see the flame in all its beauty: a precious warmth in danger of being extinguished. Recollection swarmed in, and they frantically gathered the remains, building a shelter to encase the orb – a desperate attempt to catch a taste before it flickered out.

Then, for the first time in eternity, they began to feast.

I. First Day

D#, C#, B, E, C#, B.

As her fingers drummed out the arpeggio, she savoured each harmony leaving the piano, blending and diffusing until the room was filled with colour. She dared to close her eyes this time, letting muscle memory guide the progression she had constructed over the month. Each note was a rung on a spiral staircase, leading up to a hidden floor only she could find. For the first time since she began practicing on the school piano, the movement would be perfect. Breathless, she opened her eyes in time to play the final chord –

“Laila! Lailalailalailalaila! Your dad’s here!”

Two fingers miss their target, and the resulting dissonance caused her to grimace. It was as if she was climbing that staircase and had missed a single step, sending herself tumbling downwards – the door at the top floor would remain unopened for another day. She sighed and turned to face the intruder.

“Laila, your dad’s here,” he repeated, slightly confused that she didn’t match his enthusiasm. She hoped he hadn’t noticed

her annoyance – while her classmate was only a month younger than her, the gap between 12 and 13 made Laila feel like his superior, and she wouldn’t want to be angry at a child.

“Thanks, Chen. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The car’s backseat was a little too cramped and a little too warm, as it always was. Laila watched the school grow smaller in the rearview mirror before finally disappearing behind a row of *angsana* trees.

“Ugh... can’t I stay a little longer? I need to prepare for the recital – it’s in 3 weeks.”

Her father sighed, squeezing her mother’s hand while he addressed her through the mirror. “Dear, you know Papa’s really busy in the afternoons, I cannot pick you up any later.”

“Then get me a piano *lah*, so I can practice at home,” she complained, shifting her gaze to the road signs gliding past the window. She knew Papa wouldn’t respond – he would admit silent defeat, and Mama would change the subject. It was time to fade into the backseat and pretend like she couldn’t hear the grown-ups talk. “Honey, remember to drop me off at the observatory – this meeting seems urgent. They’re calling everyone on telemetry to confirm E- group’s findings.” Papa might have nodded at Mama’s request; the car lurched to the side, putting them *en route* to her secluded workplace.

Laila began to drift off as she named each tree species she recognised: *angsana*, *banana*, *rubber*. In some places, plants would be changing colour and shedding their leaves at this time of year – not here, though. Here, every crown was constant, and green stretched out as far as the horizon. Between lines of forest and cropland, she heard her parents exchange words like “*luminosity*”, “*extrasolar*”, “*dyson*” – none of which she understood nor cared about.

Maybe tomorrow, things would be different.

II. First Year

The rain pattered gently on Laila’s bedroom window, mimicking the clatter of her keyboard as she completed the last essay of the semester.

It had been three months since they had closed the school, and she had since completed every class and assignment without a single look at her friends’ faces. Laila couldn’t

understand why; there was a huge assembly full of parents and teachers, with the students huddled up quietly in the corner of the hall. Papa said the meeting would clear everything up, but all Laila could remember was a lot of shouting before she snuck off with Chen and Aruni to skip rocks in the pond.

She recalled how strange it was that the usual dapples of sunlight dotting the pond had changed in shape, as if someone had sliced a chunk out of each circle. The others didn't seem to mind, though, and Laila quickly forgot about the discovery when Aruni burst out laughing as Chen splashed into the water.

The memory of that afternoon was already fading – it all felt too foreign to not be a dream.

Laila sighed as she watched the branches outside dance in the wind; at least the May rain hadn't changed. The muffled, familiar jingle coming from the living room meant it was time for the evening news – which meant it was time for dinner. Laila slinked off her chair and crept downstairs, catching the tail end of the reporter's monologue.

"...council, formed one year ago in response to the destruction of the planet Mercury and the formation of a structure surrounding the Sun, has faced intense backlash for its handling of the ongoing humanitarian crisis in..."

As she peeked through the doorway, she noticed the pile of clothes and suitcases scattered on the floor. In the centre, her mother sat cross-legged, fixated on the TV in a trance.

"Mama, are you packing?"

Mama looked startled, but her face quickly softened as their gazes met. "Yes dear, unfortunately Mama has to fly to Tokyo tomorrow, they need some extra hands on a little science project."

"Is it another space mission?"

"Yes, but Mama's just working on a telescope, nothing fancy."

"When will you be back?"

Mama scratched her head. "Not sure yet, maybe after a few months... but we can call every night, okay?"

Unexpectedly, Laila felt a pang of anger. Maybe it was the fact that she would be robbed of Mama's presence, after she was robbed of her friends'. Maybe it was her disappointment that the recital was cancelled, and that she would never play her composition in front of the school. She'd never even got that piano she had wanted. Maybe it was the fact that everything was changing. Or the fact that no grown-up would tell her why things were changing.

She didn't notice that tears had started streaming down her cheeks. "Oh, Laila," whispered Mama, rising off the floor to

wrap her arms around her daughter. For what felt like an eternity, they were silent.

"Mama?" Laila dared to ask.

"Yes, dear?"

"What's happening to the Sun?"

III. First Decade

With the low roar of the monorail subsiding behind her, Laila knew she was now alone. It had been a while since she visited this station – there was no reason to, the town had been largely abandoned since the first Communes were built half a decade ago. Moss had started to encase the pillars holding the platform above the empty street. This was a welcome sight; she hadn't seen new greenery outside the lab since she began her degree.

All but one of the automatic gates bordering the platform were out of service, though that could have been the case since before the abandonment. Something resembling nostalgia tugged at her chest. Steeling herself, Laila reached for her phone and made a few, quick taps.

10 beeps, a click, a sigh, and a voicemail request. "Hey Chen – I know it's, like, 6 a.m. for you, but I just... need somebody to talk to. Call me back if that's okay."

She made her way down the steps of the station and onto the walkway. In former days, the roof would have kept the transit bearable in the tropical heat – now, Laila made sure to walk just outside the shade, letting each ray of evening Sun grace her face. It would be a 15-minute walk from here, and she knew every turn and shortcut by now.

She began documenting each tree along the path: angsana, modified conifer, modified pine. The deciduous bananas her supervisors had developed were evidently going strong; hopefully, one day, her own work would grace the groves, ferociously pumping out oxygen with what little light there was left. All her team needed to do was resolve an issue with a stray protein that seemed to inhibit chlorophyll-c production.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a buzzing in her pocket, in the rhythm she had reserved for contacts outside of work. A familiar, hoarse voice bled through the phone. "Laila, god, is everything alright? Where are you?"

"I'm okay, I'm okay. I'm just uh... taking a walk to the old cemetery."

She swore she heard Chen exhale and rub his eyes before he responded, "Anything you wanna talk about?"

Laila considered for a moment. "Tell me about your newest research. How's that year in industry going?" she teased,

making sure to emphasise that ridiculous phrase Chen loved throwing around.

“Ah. The year in- fuck off, Laila.”

They exchanged a laugh, which Chen was first to interrupt. “We’ve, um... had some success in re-opening that propulsion manufacturing facility just north of Texas. There’s been a lot of interest ever since the latest SEOC update-”

“Update?” Laila interjected.

“You haven’t read it? The, um... the auroras have stopped.”

Laila paused at the crossing. She had overshot the turn without realising and was now heading towards her old school instead of the cemetery – maybe the paths weren’t as straightforward as memory served. Retracing her steps, Laila shook her head and demanded, “Tell me about something else.”

“My brother’s moving in next week. Says he wants to be in Florida when Rachel has their baby.”

“I still don’t understand why anyone would have a kid right now, isn’t it selfish?”

Chen could be heard rising from his bed. He was probably pacing around the room at this point. “Look, Laila, can we talk about why you called? Why the visit today?”

A younger Laila would have cut the call right there. Instead, she simply tried hiding the shakiness in her voice. “I dunno *lah*. I need to be in C3 tomorrow for a debriefing on the algae project. The old town was on the way, so I thought to drop by, you know?”

“And how are you feeling?”

“I... dunno.”

“Is everything okay at work?”

“Dunno.”

“Always have a way with words, you.”

Laila snapped. “I’m just tired of all this, Chen. I’m tired of pretending that we can do anything about everything. I’m tired of genoming these stupid plants and hauling people to the Communes – as if that would stop the Sun from disappearing. How many rockets are you gonna keep sending? How many have stopped whatever the fuck is being built up there? None.”

She awaited any form of rebuttal, but it never came. “I’m tired, Chen, of pretending like I’m okay around people like you who can just... brush it off like it’s nothing.”

The evening rays through browning leaves traced semicircles on Laila’s boots. They seemed to sway in sync with the slow exhalations of her diffusing anger. She hadn’t shouted at him

since the day he had left, unannounced, for the Americas – for a university and a girl she had never even heard of.

Chen broke the silence first. “I’m... I’m sorry. I don’t have an answer, but I know you don’t have to keep all that to yourself. Nobody wants you to hide anything, least of all your friends. Maybe you don’t see it, but it’s not like everything’s fine over here either.”

Laila navigated the unmarked path cutting through the garden and into the cemetery.

“How do you do it? Keep showing up every day?”

“I... I don’t know. I guess I’m deluding myself into thinking that we’re cushioning the fall our children will have. We keep planting seeds so that maybe one day, they’ll grow if... if...,” he cleared his throat, “Maybe one day, if everything miraculously goes back to normal, a child who steps out into the sunlight will still have a world to live in.”

She was taken aback by his sincerity; it had been a while since they spoke frankly to each other.

“Thanks. I don’t know what else to say, so... thanks. Sorry for the outburst.”

“It’s fine. I needed something to wake me up anyway.”

Laila turned the final corner. “I’m here, by the way. At the grave.”

“Do you need some time alone with him?”

“Yeah. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Returning the phone to her coat pocket, she sat facing a marble slab with Arabic script carved in precise curves. Flakes of snow began quietly dotting the headstone, and Laila’s breath formed wisps with each syllable.

“Hi, Papa. It’s me.”

She stayed with him for what felt like hours. The gardens were never built for snow, so she knew to leave before the flurry grew heavier.

The half-Sun was sitting just above the horizon by the time she returned to the station. It looked somewhat comical; a perfectly straight cut through the glowing disk hovering just above the western hills.

Laila was about to enter the gate when she realised it had been smashed in. What had once been the terminal for payments had been stripped bare, leaving only a handful of wires hanging in a rusty metal casing. This was no surprise – the outskirts were full of opportunists scavenging scrap metal to resell on the black market to those poor souls who refused migration to the Communes. At least, she thought, she hadn’t run into them while in the act.

The train was empty as usual, and Laila was slightly grateful nobody was there to glimpse her tired eyes. It would be a half-hour journey to Commune 3, just enough to catch a quick nap. She zipped up her coat, rested her head against the cold pane of the carriage, and shut her eyes-

A buzzing in her pocket. This time, it was the work-contact rhythm. "H-hello? Professor Yang?"

"Yes, yes, Laila. I have some urgent news – *good* urgent news, for once. It seems like whatever tweaks you've made to sample B have worked. Come in as soon as you can before the meeting tomorrow and we can cook up another batch."

Laila could have been dreaming. "Really? Professor, that changes everything; I'll come in tonight if I must."

"Don't be ridiculous, there's a blizzard due. Come in the morning – oh, and remember to grab some of those wonderful biscuits you always bring in." The professor hung up.

With bated breath, Laila ran through the implications of their breakthrough. Tomorrow, she could finally present successful results to the lab. In a month, they could begin mass-producing algae that grew twice as fast with half as much light. In a year, they could meet the state's needs in food. For now, the scientist could rest easy for another night, knowing some proverbial 'seeds' had just been planted.

Tomorrow, things would be different.

IV. Last Day

"Aunty Laila! Your friend's here!"

Laila peeked out the doorway to see the young lady scamper to the living room. Although their house was one of the larger units, each room felt just a little too cramped; she could never understand why Lucy made it a point to travel everywhere at maximum running speed. The front door slid open, and the interior walls blended seamlessly to the cavern outside. The visitor turned to face her, their red dress swaying with a slight delay. Laila smiled when she saw who it was. "Hey, Rach."

"Hello, my darling!" The two women embraced, and Laila ushered her guest to the living room. "How's the family?" Laila enquired.

"Oh, everyone's fine. They're coming by once my boy finishes this round of treatment. There's another blood shortage back home, so we're hoping he's fit to travel before rations start up again. Especially with this new rise in rickets."

"Bless. I'm happy to help with the move, the bosses just need me to train the newbies for the next month or so."

"Thank you, darling." She couldn't help but feel calm in front of Rachel; the way her voice rolled, and the way her eyes

creased at the edges when she smiled could soften any heart.

"You know, Laila, they'll arrive just in time to watch the I-9 broadcast."

"I-9?"

"Icarus-9, that spacecraft dear Chen worked on launching... was it, 11 years ago now?"

Rachel stared longingly at the screen above the kitchen counter. Laila took her hand. The last time they were in the same room together was at Chen's funeral, and yet his life's work was still making its way to the Sun, a mission barely in its infancy.

The music emanating from the corner of the room signalled another presence. "I'm sure you've met Lucy – Professor Yang's daughter," Laila motioned to the arm dangling off the couch. "You came at an exciting time; I'm bringing her on her first scouting mission tomorrow."

Rachel blinked. "Oh, like... outside? Darling, isn't it dangerous for someone so young to be above ground?"

Laila scoffed. "Despite appearances," she sneered at the couch, "Lucy's 19 and training to be part of the emergency corps, long due for a stroll."

"Loud and clear, Aunty," came an annoyed reply.

The airlock hissed as it was drained of breathable air. Seven figures in bright yellow vacuum suits huddled by the exit. As the final door opened, a cloud of vapour poured in as oxygen began condensing at the boundary.

"This your first time outside, *ke*?" blared the group leader's voice through their helmets as he gestured towards Lucy.

"Yes, sir," she replied, attempting to match his commanding tone.

"Don't do anything stupid, okay? Karthik, Daniels, you're with me," he said, adjusting the transmitter on his shoulder. "Dr. Rahman, you take Nguyễn and the newbie to the comms station. You can do your plant work while they inspect the satellite."

Laila saluted, and motioned to her trainees to follow her as she made her way to the buggy. Above them, a billion stars painted the noon sky, and a single sliver of light was all that betrayed the Sun's position. Laila caught Lucy staring overhead as the buggy rolled across the icy plains – she would allow the trainee this luxury; Lucy couldn't have seen the sky ever since she was an infant.

The communications station was a single pillar jutting out from the otherwise smooth, white terrain. As the airlock clicked and filled the room with breathable air, Laila ran through the

instructions for the trainees to perform a systems check. too-”
“Now, always watch your partner’s back. Scavengers sometimes set up shop near comms stations. If you encounter anyone, notify the channel. Do not shoot anybody first, okay? And always keep those suits on – you never know when a breach can happen. I’ll be back in half an hour.”

Nguyễn saluted, Lucy simply nodded. Laila hauled open the door and began descending the spiralling steps to the power section, where her experiment was stationed. Excitement filled her lungs – it had been months since the last checkup and if all had turned out well, the trees would have reached the ceiling, feeding off the residual radiation from the reactor powering the station.

Crap.

They were gone. The plant beds had been turned over, and stray leaves lay scattered on the floor. The water pipe, once connected to the beds, had been diverted into a massive hole through the back wall. Seems like scavengers had beaten her to it. They were getting more desperate by the day; there had been reports of entire villages being built in abandoned communications and waste treatment stations.

Without warning, Lucy’s voice came through her helmet. “Aunty Lai- I mean, Dr. Rahman, the whole system’s down. It’s been on backup power for a day or two, I think. Seems like a minor tunnel collapse.”

“Alert the others. Someone might be down here; they’ve been tampering with the systems. Maybe-” Laila froze as a sound echoed through the hole in the wall. Was that... sobbing?

“Dr. Rahman?” came Lucy’s shaking voice. Ignoring her, Laila crept through the newly formed tunnel, sure that the wailing was growing louder. At a shallow incline, a pile of rubble obscured the path ahead. Laila waved a flashlight, turning her external speakers up. “Hello? Is somebody there?”

Behind a pair of mangled pipes, the light reflected off a pair of glistening eyes. It was a child, who couldn’t be any older than 5, rocking back and forth.

“Oh dear... don’t worry, I’ll help you,” Laila whispered, attempting to pry open the pipes.

“WARNING.”

The world seemed to slow as the alarms went off. A low roar came from behind the child, and water began trickling from the ceiling. Lucy barked over the intercom, “Dr. Rahman, the tunnel’s collapsing, come up here, now.”

“I need to get him out. Get Nguyễn out of the station. Seal that airlock behind you.”

“Aunty Laila, whatever you’re doing, drop it! I can’t lose you

“That’s an order.” Laila heaved as she picked up a boulder and brought it down upon the pipes. They crumpled like paper, allowing her to reach in and pull the child out.

All she could hear was her own pulse as she picked up the boy and ran back to the staircase. Water had begun pooling at her knees, and dust was showering them both. She ran up the spiral, shielding the boy from the debris. Breathless, she placed the child on the final step, and reached for the door.

A foot misses the rung, and she slips.

She lands on the previous step, arms bracing the impact. Another pipe bursts, and foaming water climbs up behind them. The boy grabs her hand, eyes wide in fear. Laila hauls herself back up, kicking the door open and praying that the air on the other side is breathable.

For a second, she sees her Mama and Papa smiling under the dawn Sun.

“...and so, the very next day, the Princess returned to her mountain. The End.”

She flipped to the last page and let Anwar savour the illustration. “Mami, w-what’s that?” he asked, pointing to the yellow circle in the corner of the page. Laila smiled – his speech was improving so well. She remembered how he could only manage a word or two back when Lucy had first sorted out the adoption papers.

“That’s the Sun, dear. It used to shine all day in the sky, back when Mami was around your age.”

“I’ve... I’ve never seen it before. What happened to it?”

“Hmm.” Laila dimmed the lights and pulled the blanket over her son. “Let me tell you another story. In an endless sea of darkness, a lone traveller stirred from their slumber...”

V. First Day

As the traveller placed the final touch on their shelter, a sudden pang of déjà vu tugged at their chest. Then, they remembered why they had set out all those ages ago. With silent acceptance, they took a final glance at the precious flame, committing the warmth and light to memory. Now, it was time to dismantle the shelter, rebuild the vessel, and set off once again.

In an endless sea of darkness, a lone traveller returned to slumber, leaving a flaming Sun behind.

For the first time in decades, on a tiny rock orbiting the rekindled flame, a child steps out into the sunlight.

Two Sides Of A Coin

anon, Joel Pearson, Sol Dubock, Ben LaFond, anon, Regina, Emily Betts, Milamber

CW: No Content Warnings Apply

She kept an old Earth coin on a coarse-string necklace. Whenever she was asked what it meant, she tended to wax poetic about the great leaps of the human race, humble roots, and honouring ancestors. None of which was true, naturally. She couldn't give less of a damn about her ancestors. It was nothing less than the sort of disgusting sentiment that brig-rot like her should sneer at. The little coin was the first thing she had ever stolen, and she had been unable to part from it since.

The coin necklace didn't quite match with the outfit she had acquired for tonight – the string was too ratty and the metal too dull – but she wasn't prepared to untie it, especially for a job as big as this one.

Andy tapped her coin twice and stepped into the queue for the New Moon Festival.

The contact lens in her eye, remote linked to the ship floating just out of scanner range, began picking out faces in the line. Names flooded her mind as the mental uplink began putting together profiles, and the near-constant dull headache in her temples began to pulse in protest at the latest information uploads. She squeezed her necklace to distract from the pain.

One more job and she could go home. No more having to worry about filling her head with strangers' details to blend in, no more having to break into the events of the great and (allegedly) good, and, best of all, no more running. Of course, that all hinged on whether the invitation she had stolen last week held up to inspection.

She relaxed and waited for the queue to move. It was moving surprisingly quickly. In fifteen minutes they would all be inside.

Something felt off. She instinctively looked around for anyone else who shouldn't be there, or might be hiding, then checked her escape route: out the door and into the cheap rusty box on wheels that she had made to look like an expensive car. Where was it...

Andy cursed under her breath as she saw the car rounding the corner at the end of the street. The fake chauffeur she had hired had decided to leave early. No

escape.

A comment in front told her what was off: "what is wrong with the security?" That was it – people who could afford to use a wormhole in their New Moon Festival weren't going to be queuing to be let in. There had to have been some last moment changes to the security, and that couldn't be good.

If they knew about the stolen invitation, then it was worthless. She had no other plan to get in, and couldn't leave the queue unnoticed anyway. She needed a distraction.

As she got closer to the front, the man in front took his invitation out of his pocket impatiently, and then put it back in, but only halfway in. Andy had an idea. She got out her invitation, and when he reached down to get his invitation back out of his pocket, she gently pushed it the rest of the way into his pocket while holding hers in front of his pocket, putting it into his hand.

When he presented it to the guard, he didn't even look at it. The guard did look, and spoke a few words into a microphone. Four other guards moved in towards the man. He asked what was wrong, and the guard explained that the invitation belonged to a Miss Hermione Eastern, and had been stolen.

The man insisted that it belonged to Herman Melville, which Andy knew from the uplink to be his name. The guard showed him the invitation. Melville read it and insisted noisily that his invitation had been switched, and he had been invited. The host, Martin Chi, the CEO of the Chi Gravitational Technology Company, came over to see what was wrong. Chi recognised Melville immediately, told the guard to let him through, and led him into the party, apologising for the mix-up.

As soon as Chi's face was turned, Andy followed through, acting as if she were with Melville, while avoiding attracting his or Chi's attention. The guard didn't dare stop her.

Once they were with the other guests, Andy disappeared into the crowd. She had questioned one of Chi's ex-

servants, and she knew that there would be about an hour and a half of drinks and entertainments, and then all of the guests would go through a wormhole (kindly provided by the Chi Gravitational Technology Company) to their lunar headquarters, and the rest of the party would be held at lunar midnight, under the light of full Earth. When she left, she would be only a short way from her hometown of Garin.

Garin was not a town anybody paid much attention to. Just one of the many Mars colony towns that had been set up by aspirational entrepreneurs, and then quickly became underfunded and destitute. Andy recalled the solar arrays, which had gone unreplaced in her entire lifetime, and the murky greenhouses containing the same rotation of bland crops every cycle. Meanwhile, rich idiots like Chi and the rest of his guests held increasingly elaborate parties, ravishing in their commercial achievements and inflated egos.

One of these rich idiot guests walked up to Andy, seemingly attempting to engage her in some means of small talk.

"Tell me girl, have you ever been to an event with an atmosphere as dire as this one?" Andy looked up and saw a portly man with sleek black hair and a suit that was evidently tailor-made and yet still looked too tight for him. She didn't reply.

"Myself, I can't remember anything quite so drab since the opening ceremony of Diana Beatz' interplanetary station." The man kept talking at her, not really expecting a response. This fit her plans perfectly - blending in and not causing a scene until the wormhole opening. She did happen to have attended Diana Beatz' station opening, but for the purpose of downloading confidential structural data on the station's interior for a client. She was never concerned about trivial matters like the pervading mood of an event.

Nodding and smiling, Andy turned to catch a better view of the party. The job couldn't be done until the wormhole was open, but until then she wanted to keep an eye on her mark, from a distance at least. She let her eyes sweep across a vast expanse of floor, every tile occupied by one of the system's wealthiest and most influential citizens. The patterns on their costumes rippled in the starlight that fell through the colossal domed ceiling. The man in the too-tight suit, who was still talking and gesturing with a glass of something blue

and turbid in his hand, was wrong: if she hadn't been briefed with schematics of the building and a guest list, Andy would have been awestruck.

Andy realized suddenly that the man, whom her uplink identified as Herbert Vanderthal, had stopped speaking and was looking politely at her. She rewound the automatic recording of their conversation a couple of seconds and heard his latest words played back through an implant in her auditory canal:

"...the security measures - simply tedious." Then, after a pause: "Something about a stolen invitation?"

Andy sighed inwardly. "Couldn't say," she said, smiling with her teeth.

"What a shame," said Vanderthal. As he spoke, he took another glass of blue liquid from a tray carried by a passing automaton and handed it to Andy. Then he looked into her eyes with an expression that seemed genuinely disappointed, and her blood turned cold. "For I was hoping, Andrea, that we might be able to help one another."

Andy took the glass from him, holding it a little too tightly. She didn't take a sip. "Sorry, I'm off the clock tonight. If you're interested in my company's services, I can forward your details to the director."

Vanderthal laughed. It was more of a wheeze, really, the years of smoking substances from all over the solar system clutching desperately at his throat. "Off the clock? When there's such a tempting prize just out of your reach?" The latest prototype from Chi Gravitational. Andy had absolutely no idea what it was - she was no engineer, only a thief. But it was even more important to her than it was to her employer. It was her way out.

"If you're familiar with me," she said, voice cold but face still smiling pleasantly, "then I would once again urge you to contact the director if you need anything." All the while, her brain was running faster than her contact lens could trawl through data. Had there been an information leak?

"I'm very much familiar with your director. Great chap, you see. Not so fond of losing things." Vanderthal gave her a pointed stare. He hadn't blinked the entire time they had been speaking, Andy realised. "Do you really think they'd just let you leave, girl?"

“Are you here to kill me? You should’ve waited until later.” Andy toyed with the hair behind her ear, fingers glazing over the small buttons placed there. She’d almost expected this. There was never going to be a final kindness for her.

“Only if you’d like me to, my dear Andrea.”

Andy clenched her teeth, turning off the transmission from her contact lens. “What’s the catch?”

“I want you to do a favour for me. It’s nothing difficult, but I need you to do exactly what I say tonight.” Vanderthal smiled, but only with his eyes. “Have you ever seen a supernova? Tonight its magnificent but brutal beauty shall be brought to everyone here, determining their fate – let me tell you something, dear Andrea.” He pointed his glass towards the deep space and sighed. “This vast entity that we name ‘the cosmos’ containing our existence has a lot of secrets. Chi thinks he has grasped one of them, but he was only charging towards the Pallid Whale with blind burning enthusiasm. Darling, you’ve always looked confused by this point, always, haven’t you?”

Before Andy could figure out what these strange rambling meant, Vanderthal turned to look at Martin Chi in the distance and continued. “Chi’s prototype is flawed. His wormholes are designed to bring fascination to all its clients who use them to travel through space, but this particular one will only carry forward eternal pain and torment. Everyone slowly falling into a black hole, screaming and being torn in eternal time while the supernova explodes far out of their sight sounds like a pretty decent view, right? It’ll intriguing to watch indeed, as long as you and I don’t become its victims.”

“Really? Is this what you wanted to say to me? What am I supposed to do then?” Andy felt her frustration turning into an urge to laugh. She did so, bitterly. It was just too hard to keep those smiles and manners on her face now. “What’s so special about me? Why don’t you talk to Chi himself – I bet he’d be very interested in what you said just now. This... this makes no sense. I don’t understand.” These disruptions in Andy’s plan brought nothing but more confusion.

Then, reluctantly, she began to understand what was happening. Her blood ran cold; she might never be able to return to her home again. Never again. “No, wait. I need an explanation.”

As if he already knew what she’d ask, Vanderthal sighed, lifting the glass of blue liquid in his hand. “Because you were the only one who tried to fight against her fate in a collapsing wormhole among this rich and gold-bleeding façade that we’re in. It’s really a pity that the turbulent sea of probability and chaos didn’t bring you back, but instead, it chose me. By the way, the drink here is good, it brings revelations. It’s truly one of a kind, eh?” Vanderthal glanced at Andy’s untouched drink.

Andy shuddered with revulsion from this man. He was trouble, obviously trouble – but what he said, weirdly, was eerily haunting her mind. What if all this was actually true? She tried to absorb all the information splashed on her face like a sudden heavy summer rain. As she claimed her attempt a complete failure, she bit down on her lips, and downed the liquid with determination.

Vanderthal laughed and coughed, as if he knew the wheel of karma had turned once again.

Andy looked down into her glass.

At the bottom of the blue liquid lay an old Earth coin.

Same piercing. Same stains. Same edge and same carvings.

Identical with the one on her neck.

It was as if the party, the starlight, the chattering crowds were all plunged underwater, stilled and slowed and barely a susurrus. The world swelled just to her and Vanderthal, Vanderthal and her, and the clink of the coin as she shook it into her palm.

“You can keep it, if you want,” Vanderthal said magnanimously. “I get it back in the end, after all.”

The dull thrum of the uplink’s silence and Vanderthal’s rambling and Chi’s bitter, overpriced booze resolved into a single certainty.

“Well,” Andy said, “I could do with two more revelations. First of all, why am I here? And second of all—” she took a step closer to Vanderthal, though it felt like her skin was trying to run in the opposite direction, “—why, out of all the names in the world, would I have called myself *Herbert*?”

Herbert—Andy—whoever-it-was-before her laughed. “Tsk, tsk. I always forget I used to be this rude.” He smiled, with his eyes, like Andy hadn’t done in years.

"Honest answer, darling? It's because I—you—we would never pick 'Herbert'. We needed to get close. I couldn't risk spooking you, like the last couple of times. That was," he grimaced, "messy."

"Wait. You said I'd always looked confused. You've been here before."

"Evidently."

"So when you said Chi's wormhole would chuck us to a slow, time-warping death in a black hole—"

"How do you think I knew?" Herbert's mouth, Andy's mouth, twisted. "I did think I was being illustrative when I spoke of the turbulent sea of probability, but of course you aren't yet as acquainted with subtlety as I am. Martin Chi's Pallid Whale. You have read Moby Dick, haven't you, Andy? No? An old Earth book; read it when you get out of here. I'll thank you for it."

"I'm not here for book club!"

Herbert ignored her. "A man chases his own hubris and dooms everyone around him. Only one person survives, because he has to tell the tale."

"And that's me?"

"That's me."

"But I don't want to be you!" Herbert was so close to her. She could see the glimmer of every ring on his knuckles, every stitch in his exquisitely expensive suit. She could taste cologne, swelteringly floral, with a bitter, bloody undertone like coins beneath her tongue. Herbert—Andy—whoever-this-person-was-that-she'd-become—was just like every other callous billionaire she'd scammed. Every cool-eyed smiling bastard who'd swept through Garin trailing empty promises of new beginnings.

His fingers bit into her wrist. "And do you think Andy gets to walk away from this?" he hissed. "Like I said. Run without finishing the job, and your dear director will hunt you down. Do as I say, and you live. We live,

eventually. Please. I can't do this however many more times."

She breathed out slowly, looking past his anger to the star shimmering darkly on the precipice of falling into itself, the forces within becoming so unbalanced that they could not hold. The person who Andy would loathe to become turned and followed her gaze, their minds in an equal struggle of past and future, waiting to collapse into someone new. "I always forget that this would be your first view of a supernova. After a while I got bored of seeing the wonder."

"Could we just run away? We needn't be so divided. That first time..." She reflected the light of the sun in her coin. A light that would die into nothing. She resentfully realised his plan. "If I do what you say that's the future we get, isn't it?"

'Herbert' now was forlorn, a demeanour that was softer than any of the hard-faced business around them but with eyes still steely and resolute. He let her hand go so he could hold his coin up to the light; she could almost believe he was different to those she came here to deal with. "Was it really that easy to convince you?"

Andy stepped back, "No," Herbert's face became a mask of angered disappointment, "but maybe next round you will remember the time that you were me." She tentatively reached out a hand. He took it as she whispered, "Because I still have a job to finish before I am free to be you."

The twisting gravity fields of the wormhole and supernova bend space, and they bend time. Andy saw her mark lost to the failed plans of technology and capitol, her grip loosening and joining the failing station in its decent into the wormhole. But she saw Herbert dragging her away from the hole, and them being hunted vindictively for failing the job. She saw herself back on Garin stealing the coin. He saw himself satisfied with business and luxury. He saw her defeated, and she saw him beaten. It may not have been the best job, but it would be her last, eventually.

Author Reviews: Two Sides of a Coin

Ah, dual and duelling selves, evil corporations and a wormhole which definitely works that way, don't worry about it. I had a lot of fun trying to weave the disparate threads in this chain towards its explosively resolved climax, but the mystery that continues to intrigue me in this story is Herman Melville. Is he a fellow time traveller too? What's his agenda? How's he enjoying the party? - Emily Betts

Editor Review: Two Sides of a Coin

A very interesting chain indeed! The critique of capitalism and the rich is always fun, but pales beside the sheer cosmic horror of meeting your future self and learning that they're actually a dick. (Sorry, Herbert.) And a good time-travel story is really hard to do in chainwriting, where each piece is written in little sections without much ability to plan ahead—so well done to all the authors for pulling it off!

By the way, Herman Melville is originally from this time. Yes, he's a time-traveller, but only by accident; when the wormhole hit, he was flung back in time to the 19th century, where he started writing books to impress a guy (a few bits of which were inspired by some conversation he overheard at a party). The number of gay sex jokes in his work is much higher than most modern readers realise...

[At least some of the information here is true.]

Bonus: Alternative Title Suggestions

And Only I Am Escaped

Prototype

Okay, So this Party is Bad, but it's Not the End of the World, Right? Right?

Thief of Time [note: this title is taken, and the person who suggested it knows this damn well]

Worse Happens At Sea

James, Jensen Rocha, Phoebe Fay, Alex Colesmith, Dan Scott, Sophia Rodriguez-Bell, Dr Waverley Weird

CW: mild violence, descriptions of medical procedures

Acrid steam hissed through the poorly repaired pipework beneath Amal's cabin, dragging up the rancid memories of last month's 'feature food' day in the mess. The crew didn't object to pickled sea-urchin, but Rakh's recent interest in ferments had dulled more than a few appetites. Dragging on overalls indefinitely borrowed at the last flotilla party, Amal climbed to the navigation deck two floors up. From here, amongst the arrays of dials, charts of antique scribbles, and unreasonably plush leather sofas, another twenty minutes of precious sleep might be stolen before the reveille jolted the rest of the crew awake. Navigators had, for no discernible reason, a lofty status shrouded in mystery on all craft in the fleet, and great comforts were afforded to their work. The Resplendent had fared just fine without one thus far, and Amal thought it better not to neglect the prestigious chesterfields. As they drifted, a warm hum filled Amal's finely furnished surroundings.

The morning alert sounded, an unwelcome **KWAAK** that cut through the **KWAAK** incomplete slumber of the **KWAAK** remaining crew. "All hands, roll CALL!" was followed by a disgruntled chorus of names, in neither alphabetical nor rank order.

"Well, I'm glad SOME of us are excited then! Today we'll

make landfall at Almaty, with two nights of shore leave; that's sure to leave us all right as rain! Maybe not as right as last night's rain ... but who could've predicted that, eh?!" A pan tumbled in the mess, producing a thud, then a muffled crash.

Blinking the remnants of his short rest from his eyes, Amal swung his feet off the cushion to meet the floorboards, regrettably leaving the comfortable couch behind. There would be a lot to do before the ship met land and Amal didn't want to be victim to the rough treatment anyone who didn't pull their weight on landing day would receive from their fellow crewmates. Being the last one served with a crew as large as the Resplendent's meant one would be vaguely hungry all day. Unless the menu featured one of Rakh's unique ferments, in which case the hunger would be replaced with a vague but inescapable nausea.

Most of the crew had already filed onto the clean-deck when Amal emerged from the musty air of below-deck. Amal couldn't stop a grin from stretching across his cheeks as the sun stretched to meet his skin, pleasantly warming the mildly humid air, and pairing nicely with the gentle sea breeze. Ahead of him shone the gleaming city of Almaty, and behind that stretched the Alatau

Mountains, winter snow still blanketing their breath-taking peaks. Amal loved landing in Almaty.

“Amal,” Captain Farhad’s bellowing voice easily traversed the deck, “You’re on lookout with Didar today. There’s been no signs there will be aggression from the shore, but that hasn’t stopped us from being victim to an ambush before.”

“Yes, captain,” Amal shouted back turning to nod confidently at Didar before making his way towards his crewmate across the deck. The pair exchanged a handshake just as the *Resplendent* began her slow and careful descent. The landing bay in Almaty was notoriously narrow, and required no less than perfect conditions to land. Last time, they had to circle the bay for two days waiting for a storm to subside, but this time there was hardly even a cloud in the sky to disrupt them.

CLUNK. Both Amal and Didar whipped their heads aftwards.

“What in God’s great gribble was that?” said Didar.

Amal shook his head, “I’ll check it out. Stay here.”

Didar nodded. Amal raced over to see what had made the noise.

It didn’t take long to find. It was a Barnacle, though he wasn’t sure what kind yet. Perhaps it had drifted from another airship, and latched on to the first thing it found; that happened sometimes. But heeding Captain Farhad’s warning of ambush, he radioed Navigation to stop the descent and call a specialist in to take a look at it. Chana—a foreign object specialist—rushed out to examine it. She flitted around it, all the while humming and hawing in fascination. Opening up a small bag, she swiped between the metal grooves with a small brush, and collected faint traces of something from the surface.

After a few minutes she returned to the crew with her verdict. “Non-explosive, doesn’t appear trapped, but I can’t say for sure, so we’ll need to act with caution. It likely contains tracking software, but that does not appear to be its primary purpose. It looks like a rare capsule model, but I can find no way of opening it. I suspect that the opening may be underneath. We should cancel our request to descend for now so we can get a team out here to remove it safely and figure out what it is.”

They did so. The port authorities weren’t overjoyed with

them – of course not – but it was far preferable to an unplanned ship seeking extra berths, so they let it slide.

Amal faded into the background. It was a trick he’d picked up from years of working on the *Resplendent*. If you’d done all your work but couldn’t be bothered to do more, it was perfectly possible to avoid notice entirely, provided you looked like you were diligently doing *something*.

By ‘sheer fluke’, he and Didar were both scrubbing the carbon off one of the scrubber vent coils when Chana and her assistants brought the Barnacle up to the clean-deck to take a look inside it. The clean-deck was outside – the captain had very strict rules about quarantining Barnacles and suchlike – but away from all the pollution that the engines coughed out, kept that way by the scrubber vents.

“Anything happening?” Didar hissed up. The younger man had the worse job, clipped onto the railing and chipping the quasi-stable soot deposits off the sides of the vent coil that couldn’t be reached from the deck. Amal was just polishing the brass until it gleamed.

He glanced back. Chana had hooked her calculating engine to the side of the Barnacle and was cranking the lever at a fair pace, sending the machine rattling through hundreds of combinations per minute as the little mechanical arms engaged and disengaged. One of the panels was open, revealing a second, smaller but otherwise identical panel beneath.

“Not yet. Give it a few minutes, I reckon.”

It took more like twenty. Didar had a whole sack full of exotic carbon allotropes by the time the smaller set of panels gave in to Chana’s probing and popped open with a hiss of steam.

Quite a *long* hiss.

Amal looked around to see the white cloud spreading across the deck, pooling around Chana’s feet. Her two assistants had taken several hasty steps back and were pressing themselves against the opposite railing, but Chana leant down and reached *inside* the heavy metal casing, pulling out what looked like a bar of gold. It couldn’t be, of course – they were in standard Earth gravity, and a lump of gold as long as her forearm and twice as thick would weigh more than a horse – but all the same, it looked *alarmingly* similar to an arm. There

was even the suggestion of banana-sized claw-tipped fingers at the end.

Didar clanked against the railing as he pulled himself up to take a look, carbon sack swinging from one shoulder.

Behind Chana, the fog should have been dispersing. But it wasn't; instead it seemed almost to be pulling itself up, towering into a pillar of smoke the size of a human.

Amal's eyes widened. "Chana! Nanites!"

It was the worst thing he could have done. Chana spun towards the sound of the voice before her brain processed the information, wheeling around and plunging herself into the cloud of mist.

The greyness poured into her. She'd had her respirator on, of course, but it didn't seem to care about that; most nanites could melt through anything given time, and these seemed to be very advanced. It continued, not just through the respirator but in through the eyes, ears, skin...

Chana fell to the ground, shuddering. The golden arm bounced across the deck; a red light twinkled in its empty elbow socket. Amal ignored it, sprinting towards the nearest communicator pod.

"What's going on?" Didar swung himself over the railing. The rest of them ignored him. Chana continued to bounce up and down, while her assistants tried to hold her steady and prevent her from swallowing her own tongue. Amal simply slammed down the button and screamed.

"Medic! We need a medic up here right now!"

"*We'll be with you shortly.*" Talfa, the chief medic on the ship – the Big Leech, as she was known. He let go of the button in relief – if anyone knew what to do, Talfa would – and turned back again to see the arm watching him.

It's always unnerving to be watched by body parts, particularly when they don't have eyes, but the arm was definitely staring at him, beady red light flickering in its cavity. A couple of small tendrils of wire protruded, twitching in a manner eerily reminiscent of some deep-sea creature. It raised itself up onto the tips of its fingers and began to scuttle across the deck towards Chana.

It stopped.

It *looked* at her, eyelessly, eerily...

...malevolently.

Then it shot upwards – not as if it had been fired from a railgun, but as if it had been *pulled*. After a couple of seconds it was entirely lost to view.

The doors clanked open, revealing Talfa and the floating stretcher that accompanied her. She'd always refused to be drawn on whether it was sentient, but it acted like it half the time, and Amal was fairly confident it was paid its own wage; what it spent it on was anybody's guess. With a couple of easy strides the medic reached Chana and hefted her onto the stretcher, which extruded tendrils of gel over her to hold her still and calm. Slowly, her twitching stopped and her pulse decreased to normal.

Didar sidled over to Amal as they followed the medic back. "What just happened?"

"You think I bloody know?"

Along with Chana's two assistants, they were permitted to stay in the medbay while Talfa ran the basic scans. It took a while, longer than Amal was comfortable with; the stretcher claimed to act as a near-perfect quarantine on the molecular level, but he'd seen those nanites. They were *smart*.

And the arm was still off on its own business somewhere.

Didar had actually nodded off – Amal couldn't believe his friend sometimes – when the machines were finally done scanning Chana. Talfa breathed a sigh of relief, but it was clearly reserved, qualified, measured.

"What's the story?" Amal asked her.

She handed him a print-out wordlessly. Chana's body had a small red patch circled, just inside the abdomen – not much larger than a fist. The label on it was written in an unfamiliar script that seemed to move to Amal's eyes.

Talfa waited for a response, then sighed. "I forget you people don't speak agh-Zavki. Hold on."

Amal hadn't even *heard* of agh-Zavki. He decided not to mention this, and just waited politely for Talfa to return with a Persic translation.

His eyes widened as he read it.

"They're just sitting there?"

"Yep. Formed a cyst of some kind. Suppressing local immune response. There's been a bit of minor tissue damage as they moved through her, but nothing

serious-”

The stretcher blared a long, deep note that hummed inside Amal’s head, seeming to echo around his skull for longer than should be possible. Talfa spun around to look at it.

“You *what?*”

It made a few more constipated-tuba noises. Amal knew he shouldn’t laugh, but it was a struggle.

“Okay,” Talfa finally said, in a very small voice. “Do they have a name for what’s chasing them?”

Blaaart.

“Picture. Okay. Send it through to the printer.”

“What did it say?” Amal asked.

“The... whatever... is an archaeologist. A bit of a mercenary one, I suspect, but that’s probably up to the captain, not me. Took the wrong thing from the wrong people. They’ve been chasing them.”

“The arm.”

“If you say so.” She hadn’t seen it earlier. Behind her, the printer began to clatter, tiny mechanical limbs dipping in the ink-pad and stamping down onto the scroll of paper. It wasn’t particularly good at pictures, since it had to make them out of ones or zeroes in the smallest font it could manage, but it was the best thing they had, and Talfa kept it maintained near-religiously.

“No, there was an arm. Made of gold, or something – looked like it, anyway – in the Barnacle with the nanite cloud. Big claws on the end.”

A frown deepened Talfa’s face. “That sounds like...”

The printer binged. Its tiny spikes stabbed down, perforating the sheet of paper; Talfa gave it a brisk tug to tear it off, and held it up so both she and Amal could see it.

It was a surprisingly good picture. The printer had four different colours – red, green, black and blue – and they’d been used to make different layers of the image. They could clearly *see* that it was an organism in a metal suit.

A large, powerful suit with something resembling a starfish running through it, all hydraulic-powered flesh and distributed nervous system. The suit was humanoid, mostly; the organism, not at all. If you dissected it out, it

would have looked like a lot of tubing connecting scattered organs.

Also, its brethren would be coming to hunt you down.

“What the hell’s that?” Didar asked, breaking the horrified silence.

Talfa spat out a curse word that Amal had only ever heard once, from his grandmother, and which was universally regarded as so vile that few would dare use it. Perhaps only women above a certain age; he had no idea how old the Big Leech was.

Didar looked baffled. “It’s what?”

“It’s an Altin-Qol. What she said wasn’t its name. Don’t repeat that.” Amal was still surprised that Talfa even knew it. “Also we need to go. Right now.”

Of course, it just had to be bloody Altin-Qol tech in that Barnacle, Amal thought to himself as he and Didar raced to an airlock nearest the ship’s external watchpost. This was right next to the exhaust pipes – the dirtiest of the dirty decks. Anything, anything, would have been better than Altin-Qol tech. Amal would have taken a raider infiltrator probe, hell, even a Qundari Disabler, over something from the Altin-Qol. At least then he’d be able to stay inside the ship during the fray, even if it meant a gaping hole in the hull. But nooo, they had the pleasure of being latched onto by a Barnacle hiding god-knows-what from the Altin-Qol. Fiendishly protective of their property, the Altin-Qol would chase you to the other side of the galactic void to recover what you’d stolen. Or in this case, what someone else had apparently stolen and run off with in a damn Barnacle that thought it would be nice to post up on The Resplendent. Anyone with an ounce of self-preservation would jettison any bit of Altin-Qol tech from their ship the moment they found it, whether engine drive or worthless scrap.

“Why...” Didar panted, as they scrambled into the airlock and fitted up their exosuits, “do we have to...” A huff. “Go to the external... watchpost?”

Amal gaped at his crewmate. “Didar, I know you’re pretty fresh to being on a crew, but have you seriously never heard about the Altin-Qol?”

Didar averted their gaze and mumbled almost inaudibly, “I, uh, may have heard a thing or two...”

“Altin-Qol ships rarely break atmosphere,” Amal explained. “They don’t need to. They’ll just skydrop a

cyborg soldier on you and you'll never see it coming on your scanners. Magboots ON!" Amal shouted at Didar as he jammed his fist on the outer airlock release.

The pair stepped out into the acid-fumed atmosphere and onto the watchpost. At least there weren't any clouds, Amal thought – it was only smoggy at chest level and below. They might just stand a chance at spotting a skydropper before it hit them.

"Eyes upward, Didar, look alive," Amal shouted, directing his gaze towards the sky.

Shit.

A triumphant roar crackled through the air. It was only one vowel; prolonged, monotone, and bare of human cadence.

Amal dropped to conceal himself and peeked through the airship's toxic smoke, eyes awash in grey acid. The ship's exterior lighting was down; he could only see the rivets to his left, the krushchyovki lights far below, and the Ile Alatau mountains' looming silhouettes. His free hand scrambled at his helmet, freezing fingers grasping for the in-built torch.

Just as Amal turned it on, copper swiped at his face. He jumped back, and the platform shook under his landing. The Altin-Qol lurched forward. Behind them, Didar was slung across the railing, broken, quivering in the wind.

"Ree-re-return the thief. Re-return iiiiiit," repeated the Altin-Qol, voice like a slack-stringed dombra. Explaining that he couldn't would be futile.

Amal did not have to look back to know the platform ended only two more steps behind him, where the Altin-Qol had first struck.

The Altin-Qol swiped again. Their heavy body fell forward with momentum, and Amal ducked beneath the copper claws. All the while, their single eye tracked Amal. It shone copper too, a spotlight in the smoke.

Amal took another step back. One more.

He stood in front of the railing, remembering how it broke when the mechanical zheztynraq arrived. Years, Amal had spent on this ship. He started in the boilers, shovelling coal, then moved into metalworking. He'd made these railings, and he knew what a blow like the Altin-Qol's would do to them. Watching the golden eye watch him, Amal grabbed for the damaged railing.

They cackled. "Y-y-you have no-nowhere left, li-little heeero!"

They lunged. One thumb-like copper claw slashed against his bicep, but the rest kept going. The gold arm plunged forward and snapped the railing. As the Altin-Qol righted himself, Amal ducked past them again. Hands wrapped around the freed railing pipe, he slammed it down on the Altin-Qol.

The Altin-Qol's steel arm ruptured. Servos and pneumatubes burst free, spewing thick black smog and coating the deck of The Resplendent in an acrid, choking mist. A piece of shrapnel slammed into the centre of Amal's faceplate; cracks spiderwebbed across his vision.

Amal seized the moment, pulling away and leaving just his overalls smouldering in the Altin-Qol's metal grasp. He wrenched his helmet off – unable to see through the smashed visor – and pulled his basic respirator over his face. It wasn't going to provide much visibility in these conditions, but at least it would stop him hacking his lungs up. Besides, he doubted that the Altin-Qol would allow themselves to remain hidden for long. He could already hear the invader's voice cutting through the storm.

"C-C-Come baaaaack, li-little heeero!"

He sweated. He knew every nook and cranny of this vessel, but even then, the Altin-Qol knew it better. There was nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. He barely dodged as the golden arm, now more akin to a club, sliced through the smoke.

KWAK KWAK KWAAAAAK

A signal from Rakh. A signal Amal hadn't heard in a long time. A bandit's signal.

HOLD TIGHT AND PRAY THE SKY WILL FORGIVE YOU

He threw himself towards the gunwale and braced as the ship began to list further and further to the side. The Madman's Manoeuvre. Rakh was doing the Madman's Manoeuvre. He heard the Altin-Qol fall before he saw them plummeting towards him, bouncing off the sturdy gunwale, disappearing beyond his view and into the roiling storm below.

Amal's sigh of relief was interrupted by a thundering clang as the golden hand seized the side of the ship. Amal readied his pipe and peeked over the edge, squinting through the smoke. There would be no

dodging this time. A smile formed on Amal's face as he realised what he was looking at.

The arm gripped tightly to the ship, but beyond its elbow hung nothing but empty sky. He laughed. The hand may have made the Altin-Qol stronger and faster than nature, but they had forgotten their own weakness – and the hand had chosen to leave the Altin-Qol and preserve itself.

He pried the artefact from the gunwale, one golden finger at a time, and held it before him, still twitching slightly. The way it glistened in the dawning sun, it really was a work of art. As the crew rushed back onto the clean-deck above him, Amal waved the hand at them.

“So lads. Reckon this will buy us some more shore leave?”

Author Reviews: Worse Happens At Sea

Well, that was fun! When I first created the Altin-Qol, I pictured them as a Crime-Boss with a Steampunk prosthetic, but what it ended up as was FAR better. Fun Fact: Altin-Qol is (at least according to Google Translate) Kazakh for ‘Golden Hand’.—Dr Waverley Weird

I like it! Pretty zany combat sequence but I like where it went. It seems Rakh is both a pickle-enthusiast and a pilot, talented indeed, particularly without a navigator.—James

Editor's Review: Worse Happens At Sea

This was a shuffle chain—not so much in its content as in the way it was written. The first person wrote the beginning, then the second person the end, then the third the second section... and so on, until I had the privilege of joining them up in the middle with Talfa and her stretcher. I enjoyed writing that bit—it's a really fun setting and world, with an odd mix of alien technologies of different levels!

Should I write a tourist's guide to it? Perhaps...

This story actually seems to have a better narrative structure than the average piece of chainwriting—often, the second-to-last people will put off the climax, so there's either a very hurried resolution or the last person has to do an awful lot of work. In this one, the climax and resolution ended up being split nicely between the last two people (and the joiner had to do a fair bit of work, but that was always going to be the case).

Bonus: Alternative Title Suggestions

Above Almaty

Barnacle

Amal and the Altin-Qol

Shore Leave

Hand of the Almaty [appalling pun]



Marko Trandafilovski

CW: battle, injury, mild body horror

It is the cusp of the tenth century, by the reckoning of the monks, and England is weary. Pagan lore is fading; few remember, now, the names of Woden and Tiw, and fewer give ear to the tall tales that the grim sea-wolves tell. A hundred years have passed since they left Lindisfarne a ruin. But shades of the old way yet linger. Poets may not sing of the serpent who surrounds the world, or the god who gave his sight for graven runes; they tie their songs, still, to the old metres, drink still of the old mead of verse. In this they deepen a debt to one whose name they have forgotten.

Deor is one such poet: a sorry scop, surpassed in his court. He

wrote a poem of his woes, and those of others whom the years had long since buried. It survives to us in a manuscript, the Exeter Book, compiled circa 975 by the steady hand of a single scribe. This story is for him.

Deor's my name, a dreary fellow. Dear to a mother, once; I remember – soft hands in the hair, seeking, holding; soft breath sighing as I dribbled. My little deer, she crooned, my dear one; what timid eyes you have. And so now I go, booted rudely out of hall and home: a deer in the torchlight.

Where went the curses? Where went the spirit? Where went

the ancient voices?

Where went my leg, my leg, my poor wasted leg.

Beware the brambles, she said; they consort with the nadders.
Hearest thou, Measurer? A man's heel can stand only so many
plots. And this one, well – it's not so well: it's black, it's
swelling, it's sweetly smelling. But I'll stumble on, if it's all the
same to you; wend my way to a hearth, to a hoard, to gifts to
grace my song. And I'll stumble on if it isn't, too. I don't really
care what you think. Because nobody cares,

And nobody knows

How cold my toes

How cold my toes

Are growing

The horrid man has toasty toes. I'm sure. I'm pretty sure. Sure,
maybe, but not pretty. He's pretty. That pretty face, those
prancing feet. Ah, he has it, he's got the scope, the skill: a real
bard. I wanted, when he sang, to lock my heart away; but
what good, when even the birds would bow? Not for me. The
cuckoos, they screech and screech. Yet we're taught, aren't
we, that our dribblings can never match their twitterings.
Soaring free through the blue sky: blue eyes, bright skin, sunny
golden hair. He's not so horrid, not after all. But couldn't I do
that once?

I remember it: a fuddled time

when the world thrilled my heart like wine:

the eye ran wet with melodious dew;

hale the hand skipped over the harp.

No mead now, no hall, but a throat that's dry and dusty. How
long, how long my wanderings through this desert of
greenery? I want to unlock my heart, to sing with it again: but
some way back, I think, the hungry sand must have swallowed
the key. Merciless sand. Sunless rock. Thou, Shaper! Take
stock! What business hast thou to shape such crafty rock? An
unwelcome home it is that skin must share with stone. But
come. Keep walking. Don't stop. I will. There's nothing you can
do to stop me.

She could: she would – a caress of my withered head – with
that alone.

But that passed by. So may this.

—

Helm were the harder in those high summers, feet the
firmer as they gripped the fold.

Sword-edge sang, swayed in the hand, danced deadly in the
battle-dew.

The benches brimmed with bold drinkers: not a man
there was to moan for mead.

A lord I had, lithe in war, a burnished head that shone
brightly

with sea-fire. Not silence, sere, nor wittering

of wilted words could pick the way again

to those wine-dark dawns, when day's reddening

hid heady blood, heaped fragrant gems

in my chest-coffers; when it augured intoxicating intermingling

of sword-sweat, of sword-price on the sighing field of battle.

Then, as the moil flowed around me, and as men fell all
about me –

Then, as I stood, still, at the heart glistening with
sweetest globules

of strife's shuddering domain, and struck the harp's strings

in time with its trembling – then I laughed, I lived –

I was: words without end, worlds, wheeling

sung, silenced by but a moment's seeming.

I saw silver wings, byrnies in the sun,

wire, work shapen of twisted Weland:

on a soft bed of feathers serpents I saw,

worming their way from wounds to lap.

Yea, I saw skins rent and sloughed,

roiling blood-rush rear innards

rich: yet there would rise, ever, from ruined skulls

masks anew, mighty faces

to drink deep, deep of that doughty draught, that drew

hand to hand and heart to heart.

Tell me, when did yonder time

of faded wonder pass me by?

—

Is that a roof of gold I see, glistening in the sun? Great glory –
can it be, dear Dright, that thou'st dealt me a light? Yes, I see.
Sick thou art with thy subject's unrelenting spite. Not yet, not
yet! Better thou'lt have to do than this to coax forgiveness
out. Whine and wheedle, pamper and pander, grace, glut me
with fortune's grossest fruits; let luscious fate find me, fill me,
make me full. Engage, exert all thy power unbounded, that I
might lay my eye on long-awaited luxury; not limitless (not by
necessity) – not yet (thank me, if thou wish) am I grown so
vindictive – but little enough: a warm fire, well-tended, and a
pig's fragrant sizzle; warm welcome to a warm bed, free of
unwelcome itching; a seat at the side of a kind lord, and a hot
pot of porridge to greet me –

—And he can rot for all it touches us three.

What?

—Standing like some ill-wrought likeness out the door for near half a watch, and a-drivelling like a deer-hound to boot. Mark me, Heath. No help for his kind. There's a bad breath on him. Let him in, he'll soil food and floor alike. And soon enough we shan't look otherwise. (*Yes, yes!*, a little head bobs.)

Bad breath? This high harper thus hexed?

—Yet was it not the far-renowned voice of our father, uncle, that taught us never to turn a guest from our gates, no matter how grim or cruelly begrimed? Muster your memory:

*Old men cold men
filthy men, and fierce;
turn none away from our troop
if proud you'd have it prosper.*

—Tell me then, uncle – would you trample on these words? This man is ill: sweat cleaves the dust on his brow, and his foot festers cruelly. Without our aid he shall die. (*Die, die!*, the little head nods). Is that your will?

Will I stay, or will I go? Find succour within, or sink down, down below, to –

Warts and weals; a knobbly nose. My, what brutish bristles you have.

—Speak up. Heave it. My brother-son here's a wise one, but we run a tight ship. There aren't none getting in these walls that can't help keep us afloat. Who are you? What can you do?

*Do? Truly, I don't deem anything –
ought at all – to escape me, when my eyes –
avid – eager – burn with fever's fulsome ardour.*

But there is a softer light in the wide eyes before me.

—Uncle! A poet! A bard! Is he like father? Did father sing that way? (*Father! Father!*, the little head sobs).

—This ragged thing, like him? Methinks that now 'tis you, Heath, who's a-trampling. Seems at least that he can string a fit together. Well, who knows? A tale to break the fire's stillness – not such a bad thing, it might be. Right! You take to them weeping feet, and I'll bear in these shivering shoulders. Set him on a bench, get him warm...

Staying, yet going – and into sweet sleep borne.

—

Deor woke to a low flame. It did not seize him; still, he sat a while, and watched its shifting. A roasting pig sat stuck above the pit, dripping; weary tongues lapped with languor at its

bloated belly.

“Dear sir – you have awoken?”

The fire's low hiss had masked the patter of eager feet. Deor raised his head through the heavy air – upward, then rightward – to peer, blearily, at eyes of gentle blue, set in a bright and open face. His lips lifted into a half-smile –

“Is it my saviour who is at my side?”

– and got, in return, a full-lipped grin –

“Indeed, sir! Much have I toiled to heal you these past hours – though my brother Here, as we call him” – a little blond head, a timid blue eye, in part obscured by the speaker's side – “was no small help to me” – a weathered hand fell upon the head, now blushing – “in bringing you water, broth, and other such needs, while I set myself to see to your foot”. His eyelids closed as a finger rose, wagging in reproval:

“I've heard all about the powers the old poets wield. Brother Lul's writing a book – he let me read it. There's little you don't know, little you can't do, if you but set yourself to it in mind as in soul. But you know little enough of the body – and such a simple ailing! I've often to treat the men for it when they go a-raiding in harvest-time. Mark these words of my uncle's: ‘keep it high and dry, and soon it'll pass you by’. Eyes open again.

“Though you could surely frame them better if you willed it. Set them to song”.

Closer he came, knelt down, leant in.

“I'm Heath. I'm fifteen. Soon I'll be old enough to go a-raiding too, but I'll tell you a roun that I've told few. I've no will to wade into battle, wave about swords. My father was a poet, a poet like you. I want to sing too, string words to metre. Will you help me? Teach me?”

Now the smile was full. What luck! Fortune had shifted in her fickle way; she winked at Deor once again. A hall and a hearth, prostrate before him, with – so it seemed – a place ripe for the taking; as for a hoard – well, he would need, first, to find the house's lord. But step slowly, step softly.

“That,” he said, stretching with grace onto sorry feet, “would hardly be proper. This is a fine court, as no eye could miss; far too fine for a void of singers. Theirs it is to teach you; so you must know.”

“Dear sir” – eyes moist now, shining – “'tis long now that our hall has had no bard. The last, my father, died years past, before Here was born and I was five. Since then death has spared us; but the shadows are long, the floor-boards cold, the fire wan and pale. The mead is sour, the crop withered; my lord's look is dim. We bid you, I beg you: stay with us, sing for us; bring life to our walls again”.

Life – make it rife again – rush through the still smoke? A lie it

would be, a dreadful lie –

“Not I” – a hand, tentative, to his trembling shoulder – “nor any heart, I think, could turn from you thus besought”. A thrill, a shudder beneath his fingers. “I will gladly teach what little I know, and sing for this house until surpassed. Tell the troop I’ll entertain them tonight; and let the lord be there, if he should wish it so. All may hear me; and he may have me or spurn me as he will”.

Heath bowed and bowed, and bowed again; Here bobbed with him.

“At once! I shall go at once and tell them. A dream! A dream it was, dream now it is, dream shall it surely be...”

Shoulder strains under hand to skip away; but fingers, briefly, tighten.

“Say too, friend, what I am called. My name. Deor”.

—

Night fell, and men filed into the hall. Deor could not say from whence they came; not a weary face was known to him. He cared little. He would spin a song, a nicety, a delicate thing would spring from his clever skull. These slack faces, they would listen, laugh, chatter, applaud; or even, as now, stare vacantly into dusty space; it was no matter; no matter, so long as food, a bed – perhaps a trinket or two, if fate kept sunny – were his.

But lo – a dry rustle, crawling across the filthy boards; a robed mass, now filling, with rasping groan, the throne before Deor.

“True retainers” – nails catching in the boards – “trusted kinsmen. We sit at watch again tonight.”

And then? Time passed, did it not? A half-hour, an hour, two – time, drained by the quiet dark. Yet still was that hall: no breath was heard, the firelight sluggish on the wall.

When, when would they call him?

Still they sat. Hours crept by, yielding each to each. No bread was brought; yet stomachs did not rumble. Deor reached, bones creaking, for his mead-vessel. The mead was thick. A dull film smothered it. He did not drink; set it down with a sudden crack.

Time enough.

Up he rose; to the lord’s side he wandered, waded through the thick air.

“Good men. Good lord. It is my hope that you have heard my name. Deor I am, a placeless poet. Forgive me; but this is a dreary vigil. I shall sing you a song: a bright ballad – a eulogy for you and your high hall. My price is little; if it should like you, grant me bed and board. Then, if it be your desire, I shall sing for you nightly.”

Slumped were the heads before the speaker; his words did not rouse them. No sound crept from the throne at his side. Where were the children? Where the guardsman? No expectant glimmer, no twinkling eye winked from the shadowed benches. No matter: so far he had come. Time enough, patience enough; fortune needed a little nudge.

“The ruin of the old – so it is said – is no true ruin. For what is the young but old things’ rebirthing? So now shall I link for you old words to metre new: honour white tradition with golden invention. Hark:”

Much have I travelled in the realms of gold,
and many goodly halls and houses seen;
grand pleasure I’ve had, on great gates to lean
that thanes in fealty to high lords hold.
The tongue’s it has ever too boldly been
to prattle of prides that to time must fold;
yet never once has rarest rumour told
of these rich walls, and this dark drink pristine –
I know, now, that mine is a greater prize
than Hrothgar’s, as he gazed on Heorot whole
or old king Wulf’s, as he, with dying eyes,
knowing that he had no toil left to thole,
drank in rusted hoards, the cold worm’s demise,
ambition’s price – its grim and bloody toll.

Yes, good. Very nice. Rather clever – so, in fact, I do say – yes! So I do. Wait. Wait, wait.

Wait.

I cannot wait. It is too heavy.

“Good men, good lord – was the poem to your liking? If it liked you not, I may attempt another – in, perhaps, more wanted form – “

About it swivels, skin slithering, throne scraping as it turns: from its face the viscous shadows are suddenly torn, flesh black and bloated, eyes of chilliest blue –

“It liked us not, not at all, no, never. Shrivelled thing, withered minion, weakly dribbling, dry dreams dreaming. Gall it has, of worms to speak, when no lower worm there is than it: slinking thing, limbless sneak, little feeble parasite. Empty mind, cracked mind, hollow crumbling halls within: no shame it has, its craft forgotten, in soiling draughts that sit unpoured.”

The fire sagged, drooped, died. But a hundred distant fires gleamed in a hundred hollow eyes. They grew, lit the hall with a pallid blaze; grew, brightened with a sickly brightness; grew, rang sharp in Deor’s head, till his ears burst and his gaze went dark.

—

Scream, scream, for down come...

Scream...

Scream...

—Worry not. I've no claws to catch you with. But you're an acute one, aren't you? Yes, my: what cunning ears you have. The ringing will pass. Awake, awake.

Dare I open these eyes? 'Tis in gentle pleasure that my hands delight; yes – ah – a soft bed of feathers.

Above me he sits: a man of surpassing beauty. See there, how the smoothness of his skin – unblemished – fades gentle into the crisp white of a shirt softly woven. Elegantly, irreverently his feet sprawl, hairless calves bleeding into the birds' leavings; languid left hand lends meek feathers loving caress, whilst right, in silken vice, presses a serpent's jaws together upon its tail. The face is maimed, a single eye gouged cleanly from its socket; yet the other shines glassy as ever, a gem set in snow, fixed under a rich fringe of raven-dark hair.

The languid left extends, clasps my hand; I look to see scarred fingers and slender, yielding each to each.

—Dear friend. I greet thee. Hard, harsh have been thy wanderings. Yet here – now – thou art: at thy source, thy beginning and thine ending. So it is, so it has been, so it must surely be. The task of a thane: to keep his lord and to preserve him, to shield the one who gifts him mead.

—But I have had little enough mead of late.

A dull flash from the stone-eye. —No drink hast thou had, wanderer, because there is none to be had. Ill times have fallen upon me. My vessels are dry – not a drop, not a dreg remains – my servants, who brought me baser foods, are dead, lost. — His snake-grasp tightens.

—Loyal retainer, truest of warriors: it is such as thee who must sustain me. Think not that I waste away in idleness. Even now, in all my power, I labour at concoction.

Graceful he rises, glides to my side, leans lovely head up and over mine. I see it now:

blood-carving – ruin-wrought – ragged-jagged – rune:

wilting white-wight—withered weird-walker—*wynn*.

His hand of velvet snakes downward, embraces, envelops my throat. Closer the eye comes, crawls to seize me, as warm breath whispers on my lips –

—Do thy duty, sweet soul. Sleep at ease, sleep in peace. Thrill me with thy rotting magnanimity.

Shaper, can it be? At long last — am I seen? Shall I now imbibe, inflate, drift away, kindly borne by this muffling tide —

But 'tis two eyes and more, say I, that my Shaper hath. Thou art no lord of mine.

The mouth warps, contorts; hair-thin lines — cracks in glass — open above and below the brittle lips.

—No! To me! All of it you owe to me. Think you that there is life anew in Him? I it was who risked life, plucked eye and wrenched neck that ocean-gold might run through our veins; I it was who watched you, feeding the fire of your heart, as in youth's flush you teased sublime strains from the battle-swell. I gave everything to see and to know — what lost for sight, for knowledge, in one Whose nature it is to see and to know all? What little life that you have lived I won by force and trickery, and gave freely as a gift unto you. Meet it is that you repay. You shall repay.

—The life that I remember was boundless; and though born of the grim bliss of war, it was not strife that it brought but serenity. You knew this once — I knew it through you.

I raise my hand in sudden motion to grip the cold throat; so very light he is, thrown from me with little labour. It is a gentle impact, the kiss of the pliant feathers; but he is marred now, white skin splitting at its seams, stained by something darkly leaking. Yet up he twists, and the rotten mouth speaks:

—It is not within thy power to reject me. I shall have my due.

Black tendrils leak from the rune: thick and red they run.

—

Song he sang, soothing song

song to meeken the mind;

Spell he spoke, sifting spell

to strike pain from peace,

to still the heat of the heart.

Woe he wove, wondrous woe,

woe that would drive dream

to worm a way to the wonder-vessel;

worldly horrors it would hide,

their words blot and blacken.

High malevolence: hordes it had mired —

hoards, to feed its fragility —

in hope of man, halcyon might:

it hated with the serpent's spite,

hungered with the want of the worm.

But dear Deor he could not burn
with pallid tongues of heatless words
for Deor sang in swift return
song of form he did not know,
welling from a heart newly warm —

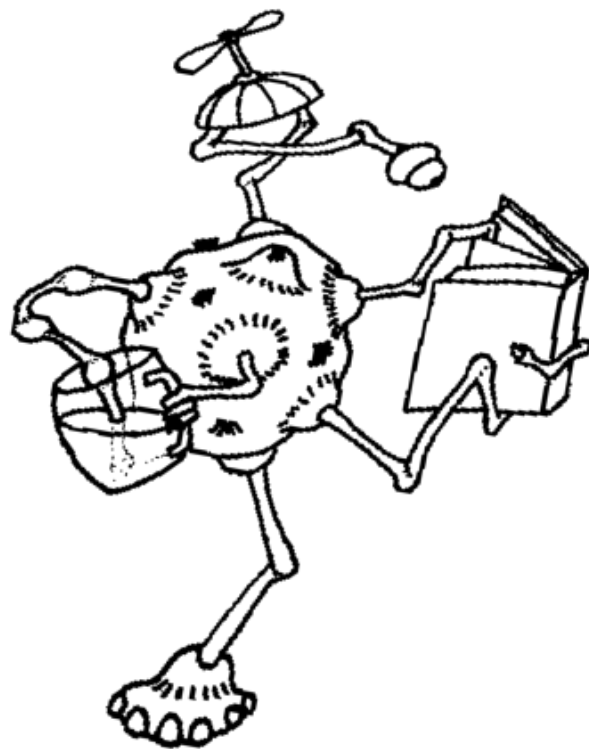
His words the heady scent of wine
seeking in a summer's grove
lips, pendent, that have long pined
for the sweet kiss of a cup
lined by sweeter mouth-sweat —

Or the sizzling of choicest meats
shedding luscious sluggish juices
into flame, staked with spear grim
that sorry mouths might salivate
to dream of golden glass and plate.

Voices rose and mingled, vied and fell
verse and song and failing spell;
Many wailing souls the creature drank,
drained the mildewed maw
of the dragon, servant sorrow-bound —
But it availed him not, for the vessel
whence Deor sucked his sustenance
was bottomless: a cup that brimmed
with surrender unreserved of brightest blood;
a blessed chalice, born of loss
that mirrored all the world.
Beginning in ending: and in ending
beginning ever and again.

—

The sun yet hid when Deor woke, decaying arms about him.
Long dead was the fire, its smoke-smell cloaked still by the
musty scent of dry bones. He freed himself, rose; he saw
nothing. But the wind rubbed red into his cheeks, for the hall-
gates had fallen. And on the breeze (perhaps) there bobbed a
distant laugh — the fluttering shape of a smile.



The Cuddly Alien—Jeremy Henty