

Small Infinities



Short Stories by P.V. Tims

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With an Introduction from Fran Lock

We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable — but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art — Ursula K. Le Guin



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Introduction
By Fran Lock

Small Infinities is an appropriate title for a book – and an author – so enamoured of outlandish juxtaposition, paradox, and contradiction. While one useful description of this collection is as a work of socialist science – or “weird” – fiction, another is as broadly metaphysical. Metaphysical, that is, in the early modern poetic sense of the term, knocking the square peg of one implausible idea (for example, a living chess game) through the hole of another equally strange, often wildly disconnected idea (neo-noir detective fiction); like the metaphysical poets, Tims' work is marked by philosophical speculation, ingenious conceit, and play with demotic and colloquial language. His short fiction revels in the unexpected metaphor, in the witty use of diction, and a fascinated inclusion of contemporary scientific advancements and theories.

A cohort of 17th century poets might seem like an odd place to start for a collection of future-facing sci-fi, but Tims' approach to genre is omnivorous, eclectic and wilfully strange; throughout the collection he moves deftly between conventions and tropes, alternately playing to and against the roles and imperatives they engender. For example, while 'Enlightenment for All!' follows the outward trajectory of a classic quest narrative, Tims subverts the conventions of that narrative to socialist ends by presenting enlightenment not as a goal obtainable within a single lifetime, vividly concentrate within one heroic subject, but as the effort of centuries, an imperative and a mission braided through the long threads of intergenerational memory. In other words, enlightenment is slow. Really slow. A process so glacial as to be imperceptible within the span of an individual life. Yet enlightenment is also accumulative, built on the steady, incremental progress of those who went before. Tims weaves these lives into a compelling narrative arc so that we, as readers, can see what individual Stack Walkers may only just dimly discern: their contribution toward a momentous coming change. To enter into the slow-time of the Stack Walkers entails a way of seeing violently opposed to both the malignant rapidity of late-stage capitalism, and the narrative-imperative of its mainstay fictions. We must accept that “resolution”, “escape”, “success”, or any other form of narrative satisfaction will not be forthcoming for individual protagonists. We must accept gratification – ours and theirs – as both imminent and deferred. While each individual life is meaningful and meticulously painted, it is as a continuum and a collective, working for others, that the quest is finally completed and – as a result – revolutionary praxis is activated.

If all this sounds heavy, then I am doing Tims writing a great disservice. 'Enlightenment for All!' is an engaging, often humorous work of Gypsy-futurism in which lively characterisation and persuasive world-building is never subordinated to Tims bold and idiosyncratic socialist vision. In this, the writer he most resembles is – perhaps – H.G. Wells; like Wells, Tims seems interested in breaching our 'limited number of pigeon-holes for our correspondence with an unlimited universe of objective uniques' (*A Modern Utopia*,

1905), an idea he applies to the thematic concern and narrative thrust of stories such as 'What Atoms Really Want', but which also represents a way of meeting and manipulating language. For Wells, we encounter a world of immense multiplicity that our language tricks us into thinking of in terms of identity or patterned regularity. For both Wells and Tims it seems that political (capitalist) reality is as much a failure of imagination and linguistic verve as it is of economic and mechanistic tyranny. What science fiction can do – at its best – is create for us the limitless space of the Otherwise, a world in which new linguistic conjunctions, political possibilities, and forms of social relation can come into play. For both authors, but especially for Tims, this use of language is a radical precursor and constituent part of these Other Worlds. His baroque imaginaries require new ways of saying in order to fully articulate and imagine their difference.

Let's put in another way: we can certainly picture what a boring work of genre-fiction might look like. A bad sci-fi story can take place on the furthest-flung planet, populated by the most bizarre and frightening of species, yet if the language doesn't take us there, it might as well be set amongst disgruntled office workers, on a retail park in Leeds. Tims' combination of daft puns and deft verbal parries, his invented portmanteaus and repurposed archaisms, work purposely towards creating his Other Worlds, even when that world is a simulacrum of our own – Slagton in 'Cubed', written with truly superb Dickensian flourish, is unmistakably the South London borough in which the author lived for many years. – It is not merely a case of finding an appropriate language for the stories he wants to tell or and civilisations he wants to bring to life, but of using language so as to estrange us from *our* familiar (material, political) realities, and from the habituated ways of seeing and feeling those realities engender. Where Tims' language is at its most florid, strange or surging our attention is reoriented, we read – and think – afresh.

All of which is to say that Tims is a writer deeply concerned with both the possibilities and limitations of language in shaping our intellectual operations, our imaginations, and our political realities. In this, another significant forerunner is the late Gene Wolfe, an author equally fascinated by the etymologies and odd affinities of words, seeding rare, archaic and invented words throughout his fiction, most notably his four Sun Works. In a 1988 interview Wolfe spoke about trying to press against “the limits of prose, [...] trying to write something genuinely different from what's come before” and being “constantly aware of these paradoxes about language's power and its limitations. Because language is your medium, you become aware of the extent to which language controls and directs our thinking, the extent that we're manipulated by words – and yet the extent to which words necessarily limit our attention and hence misrepresent the world around us.” If this was true in 1988, it takes on far greater urgency in our “post-truth” era, under the all-seeing eye of neo-liberal surveillance culture, at a time and a place where joined-up speaking and thinking feels increasingly threatened. Here we are, performing our opinions in prescribed language within a limited number of characters; wading daily through social media's myriad expressive acts – high in subjective emotional experience, low on detailed factual content – and their fleeting yet incessant demands upon our attention. Here is language co-opted to walk at corporate heel, a smoothly scrolling torrent of

undifferentiated data, disappearing down our feeds into the bottomless limbo of expired “content”. Tims writing often feels like a two-fingered salute to this kind of passive content-imbibing. Reading his work, I’m reminded of the poet Joyelle McSweeney who describes her practice as a “maximal, dandified, camp, ill-gendered, millenarian text”. Tims is a writer who traffics in complexity and excess, hyperbole and panache, in – in other words – all the formal and stylistic tics that “proper” socialists and good proles shouldn’t have and cannot master. He writes this way, we sense, not only for the joyous fuck-you of the thing, but against the deadening of ethical and political nerve that results from reductive linguistic prescription.

Good science fiction, as Darko Suvin notes, is neither an escape from reality nor a description of it. Rather, it can be read as a ‘a developed oxymoron, a realistic irreality’ (*Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, 1979). Suvin’s point is that science fiction is the only genre that facilitates (and demands) a change to the whole literary universe, one which forms a tension with the reader’s world, dislocating her from it, making it strange. Sci-fi oscillates between the shared world of author and reader, and this Other mode, this Other place, this o/Other perspective. In the gap between the two new ideas and ways of being emerge, criticism is broached, knowledge gathered, insight achieved.

Which doesn’t mean *Small Infinities* isn’t funny. In places it’s hilarious. In ‘A Small Story about a Large Misunderstanding’ the (dangerous) limits of language are explicitly yet humorously explored when the human incapacity to see beyond our own behavioural and linguistic defaults leads to a unnecessarily terrifying encounter with an alien race; throughout the collection quantum mechanics, obtuse chess theory, philosophies of consciousness and schlocky pop-culture are variously incorporated, riffed on and signalled in charming, inventive and frankly weird ways. It feels important to stress that this isn’t high-concept sci-fi as some kind of bloodless show-offy intellectual bludgeon. It can be rude, crude and raunchy. It can be bloody. It’s not Harry Potter. It is perfectly possible to enjoy the stories without a firm grounding in the ideas and theories they reference, but Tims’ omnivorous array of inspirations and the pleasure he so obviously takes in playfully mixing and merging these, combine to layer and texture his worlds. As a result we care about his imperilled protagonists, we sympathise with his doomed or oppressed civilisations, and most of all we want to see where the next slice of oddity will take us: a cinematically inflected Cronenbergian nightmare? A cut-throat world of cardsharp magicians, organised into warring guilds?

Or perhaps the reader will enjoy, as I did, Tims’ treatment of the Gothic conceit of the sinister menial in ‘Returning the Screw’. The story exposes the often classist underpinnings of that particular genre convention, even while Tims’ narrator delivers his creepy and incendiary monologue, a monologue which in turn beguiles, amuses, galvanises and chills. There’s humour there, and some silliness, but it operates to a purpose, questioning whose voices and perspectives have been erased or miscast within literary canons. Was Quint’s threat ever to life, limb or spiritual cleanliness, or did he represent a far greater menace: to the established social order? How does it feel to be the staple of someone else’s nightmares simply because you

are poor, or in some way o/Other? Quint “haunts” in the same way that class itself is a haunting, a spectral presence underpinning both our deep social structures and the literary tropes that sustain and express them. Tims nails this, and he makes you laugh while he does it.

I can't help but wonder if the humour in Tims' work is one of the key components of its socialism: if there is a form of coterie address at work in *Small Infinities*, it is not that of the specialist or of intellectual abstraction, it's that of a commons bonded by an ability and a willingness to laugh at even our most cherished tropes and serious ideas. It is a sensibility that says nothing is above scrutiny or beyond ridicule. It lives in the detritus of pop and pulp culture as much as the elite realm of ideas, and it claims all these places for a border-stepping cohort of working-class readers and imagineers.

Enlightenment for All!

20,000 Years Ago

Below Venon's feet, there was only black stone, mottled with reddish swirls. Here it was flat, but in the distance, that same stone formed sweeping mountains of eerie smoothness, as though they were not mountains at all, but impaling spikes made by some gigantic torturer from a bygone age. High above his head was a seemingly endless procession of fat, continent-sized discs, connected one to another by ancient stone stairwells. There was almost no light down here, at the bottom of the Stack; on the lowest and lowliest of discs. The only food and water here tumbled and fell down from the levels above. And somewhere, at the top of it all, was enlightenment- the meaning of life itself, just waiting for someone to climb to the top of the Stack and learn its secret.

Sometimes, Venon imagined the fabled enlightenment as a scroll, on which the purpose of all existence was written in a fine, looping hand. Other times, he imagined it as a fountain- if he drank its waters he would simply know.

He had a lot of time to imagine, as he waited for food and water to come dripping and bouncing down from the upper levels. When it did, he'd dismiss his imaginings long enough to participate in the scramble with the rest of the Lower Dwellers, desperate to get something to feed himself. He was luckier than most- he didn't have a family to support. Despite this, he was still a skeletal figure; still dressed in a patchwork of faded rags- scraps of cloth that had drifted down from above. His skin was the grey of age-old ash and his eyes were a faintly bioluminescent amber, allowing him to see in the dim lighting conditions of the lowest disc. To anyone other than another Lower Dweller, he would look like a horror from sentient-kind's oldest nightmares.

Yet he had his imaginings.

As he stood on the flat expanse of the Inner Desert, waiting for food or water to fall from above, he thought about enlightenment. He was always hungry; always thirsty... but what he craved more than food or water was knowledge. He wanted to bathe in it; to be filled with it; to find peace in it.

His waiting eked on for ows (the standard unit of temporal measurement across a million universes, though Venon didn't know it). It went on far longer than usual. In fact, it went on for long enough for Venon's starved and ever-tired mind to reach a decision.

He would seek enlightenment.

Somewhere above, the daily waste-dump happened and scraps of leftover food and clothing came tumbling through holes in the disc immediately overhead. Venon hardly noticed. In that moment, he had become a Stack Walker.

It took Venon only a few hours to reach the stairs that led up to the next disc. A small settlement had grown up around them, made from sheets of corrugated metal and rotten wood. He had seen its lights at night many times, and knew its location by heart.

As he passed through the shanty town and approached the stairs some of the locals clustered together, blocking his path.

“No one goes up to the next level,” said an old man, gruffly. His voice was not unkind- just firm. Venon heard deep regret in it. He wanted to let Venon ascend, but there was some vast and important reason preventing him.

“Why?” Venon asked- just one word. He rarely had enough water and his throat was always dry. The settlements got the best crop of water from above, but Venon had always been reluctant to live around other people.

The old man looked at him wearily and told him.

It made perfect sense, too. The discs immediately above were barely better off than the lowest disc. They didn’t have any water sources or much natural light either, so they couldn’t grow crops of their own. They each depended on the leftovers of the mid-Stack discs- or so the old man’s forebears had told him. They then threw their leftovers down to the lowest disc. If Venon went up even just one level and happened to reproduce or start a family, suddenly there would be more mouths above the lowest level, and their already-pitiful share would be reduced even further. Of course, just one man going up a level wouldn’t make much difference- Venon alone wouldn’t make a dent in the daily waste-drops (not unless he proved to be the most prolific breeder in history). But if one was allowed to ascend, others would soon follow. Soon, those who stayed would have nothing.

Venon nodded and said he understood and the old man led him to his shanty-hut and shared a loaf of mouldering bread and a cup of water with him by way of apology. That night, he even let Venon sleep on his floor.

Venon’s Stack Walk might have ended there and then, except that he happened to rise early the next morning, disturbed by his bladder. He left the hut in search of an outhouse and saw that he was the only person in the street. The stone spiral of steps that connected the lowest level to the one above it was completely unguarded; unobserved.

The newly-minted Stack Walker knew why he shouldn’t be allowed up, but he also felt that he had a right to try. If someone stopped him, so be it. Otherwise, he would climb.

He was too furtive and worried about being caught to feel any great sense of moment when he put his foot on the lowest step. A question did, however, occur to him when he was halfway up the

stairwell: why didn't everyone just climb? A mass evacuation of the unliveable lowest disc would solve the problem of those left behind having less. In fact, why shouldn't everyone leave the lowest reaches of the Stack altogether? If the mid-Stack was where crops were farmed and water ran freely, why shouldn't everyone simply live there?

Venon never received a satisfactory answer to his questions. Over the course of twenty years, he managed to climb over a hundred levels- most of that time was spent finding the next staircase and the next and the next, and waiting for each to be unguarded. Each level had the same concerns as the one below it- the ever-present fear of not having enough.

Perhaps, he once reflected, that was why there was no mass evacuation: it would take too long. But even an intergenerational effort would be better than nothing, wouldn't it? No, time couldn't be the answer to his questions.

He hoped he would find the real answers when he found enlightenment- and he went on hoping that for twenty years, until, one day, he could no longer raise his foot high enough to get onto the next staircase. He was old now, and he had crippled himself.

There were, however, worse discs to finally fail on, he reflected philosophically, when he realised that he'd never ascend any higher. Though he had not reached the fertile ground of the mid-Stack, he had climbed high enough that almost a river's worth of water was dumped from above every day. This deluge, combined with thin slivers of light at dawn and dusk allowed a few anaemic crops to be grown, and there were straggly farms with actual soil amid the expanses of grey and black rock. An old man could live and die here with a full belly, provided he had something to offer the farmers. Venon liked to think that he could offer tales of his travels.

It transpired that the old Stack Walker didn't have to offer anything- at least, nothing that cost him effort. As he stood and stared at the stairway upwards, a woman a little younger than himself approached.

"If you start climbing, someone will pull you back down," she said, sounding amused.

"I know. My window to start climbing ended twenty mynats ago," he replied wistfully. "I'll never go another level higher."

The woman smiled and invited him to dine with her at her farm. Her father had not long died and having a man stay near would deter bandits and thieves.

Venon followed her back to her abode and, as luck would have it, never left.

17,000 Years Ago

Vymok, whose ancient ancestor had been Venon, put down his satchel and sighed with relief as its weight left his shoulder.

He was one level below the official start of the mid-Stack, and he had every intention of resting well before he crossed that all-important threshold.

For nearly three thousand years, his family had lived and died on one disc. Then, Vymok's father- an eccentric by anyone's standards- had unearthed an old family legend about how his ancestor had ascended from the lowest disc on a quest to find enlightenment. He'd been so inspired that he'd took off there and then. When he'd gotten too old to continue, he'd done what his ancestor had done- settled down and raised a family. He'd only made it up fifty levels- half the number of his ancient forebear, on account of starting older. The difference was that he never let Vymok forget he was from Stack Walker stock. Thus, when Vymok came of age, he'd continued the legacy. And now, just eight years and twenty levels later, he was about to enter the mid-Stack and make family history.

He took a moment to look around and savour the sights and sounds of the disc on which he stood. It was unusual, bordering on surreal, with endless fields of indigo grass and natural springs whose spigots had been carved into twisting, abstract shapes by the timeless forces of geology. Rivers wended their way through the landscape, sparkling with luminous brilliance.

The whole level was uninhabited, however. The land was only good for growing the strange grass, which Vymok had been told was poisonous just one level below. The water of the rivers was saline and near-toxic. In short, the disc on which Vymok stood was a beautiful deathtrap.

It still amazed him that nobody came up this far. The last few staircases he walked hadn't been guarded. Certainly, the level couldn't be settled, but there was nothing stopping people from coming to admire its beauty.

He wondered if perhaps it was the same reason that so few tried to reach the top of the Stack.

Then he put his foot on the first step of the last staircase of the lower Stack and began to climb.

It took many ows, but Vymok finally reached the top of the climb. He emerged through the hole cut in the first disc of the mid-Stack and took a deep breath of pure, fresh air, faintly scented with some kind of natural syrup. Trees with golden-brown bark that bore beautiful blue fruits stretched away in all directions, interrupted only by homes of quaint red brick and burnished wood.

There had been areas of beauty in the lower Stack, of course, but they had always concealed some hostile sting or an underlying bleakness. For the first time in his life, Vymok saw a landscape that was purely kind; a disc that seemed to welcome the habitation of mortal men.

He was so drunk on the sight of it that he didn't see the mid-Stacksmen approaching until one of them snapped at him "Get back down!"

"What?" Vymok asked, blinking at the man. He'd encountered staircases guarded at the bottom before, but never ones guarded at the top. It took him a moment to realise what he was being told.

"You're trespassing! Get back down!" the mid-Stacksman repeated. He was a tall fellow whose skin was silvery instead of grey. His eyes didn't glow, as Vymok's did- part of his ancestral legacy. Instead, they were a cold and piercing blue and his hair was swept back neatly. He and his fellow both wore robes of deep azure, a little like togas, and they carried spears.

"You misunderstand," Vymok assured them. "I'm not here to trespass. I merely wish safe passage. I'm on my way to the top of the Stack."

The two mid-Stacksmen looked at one another and then began to laugh.

"Hark at him!" one of them said- the one who had not yet spoken. "He thinks he's going to the top!"

"You're not going anywhere, my son," the first mid-Stacksman said. "Now get back down. We don't want any vagrants on this disc."

Vymok summoned up all his dignity and said, sternly "I'm not a vagrant. I'm a Stack Walker."

"Same difference," said the more antagonist of the two mid-Stacksmen and struck him on the head with the flat of his spear.

Vymok staggered back, lost his footing and began to tumble down the immense flight of steps he had so recently ascended.

He managed to arrest his progress a quarter-way down by digging his fingers into the pitted rock.

Nothing was broken, but he had run across a new situation.

The stairs between the levels of the lower Stack had often been guarded, but only in a lackadaisical sort of way and on a voluntary basis. Vymok had always gotten the sense that the guards were just trying to maintain a balance between the ecosystems of the different levels. Their reasoning might have been erroneous- he doubted people moving up and down the Stack would cause any real problems- but they had at least been devoid of real malice and easy to dodge. The two toga-wearing men had been professionals, however, which meant there would be no easily-exploited gaps in their guard duties. What's more, they had clearly been chosen for their meanness and willingness to inflict harm.

Vymok knew that, if he was going to get by them, he would have to start thinking differently.

At first, the Stack Walker tried the obvious tack of waiting for nightfall and sneaking past, just as his father and his ancestor had sometimes done. However, the night-guards on duty were positioned right next to the hole through which the staircase emerged.

They were less violent than their daytime counterparts, but just as firm in pushing him back down.

After that, he tried emerging at different times of day- and on different days- so that he'd catch different sets of guards each time.

He noticed quickly that, every time he told the truth about his intentions, the spears would be pointed (and sometimes even used). Thus, he started lying.

To elicit the most sympathy, he found it was wisest to claim that he was looking to become a mid-Stacksman himself by working the land for an established holder. In the lower Stack, such a claim would have been seen as risible or- worse- an attempt to upset the delicate balance of the discs. The people of the mid-Stack seemed to find it admirable, however, and several guards said they would pass on his message to the local holders to see if any of them wanted a hard worker.

For awhile, Vymok held out hope that this tactic would work. After all, if someone needed a reliable labourer, he could do the work for awhile until attention, inevitably, slipped off of him. Then he could bolt for the next staircase and the next level.

However, this too was unsuccessful. He was offered only the prospect of work, never the real thing, which meant he had to stay where he was. No local landholder needed his services at present.

One of the friendlier guards advised him to return during harvest season and Vymok said he'd think about it.

Of course, he couldn't live on the poisoned disc until harvest time rolled around, and he couldn't backtrack either. He had put too much effort into avoiding the security measures of the lower levels. If he slid back down the great ladder of the Stack now, he'd be watched more closely. He wouldn't get the chance to rise again. The quest for the top and for enlightenment would be delayed a generation or perhaps even longer.

Vymok despaired and, in his despair, grew angry.

Rage is a powerful fuel. Part of the Stack, which predated mortals and cared not for their affairs, had been claimed as property by people who saw it as something to control and exploit. Vymok had never seen himself as a philosopher or as someone with political awareness. After all, he never stayed anywhere long enough to become involved in its politics. However, it seemed obscene to him that parts of the eternal Stack should only be accessible to those born there and those who were willing to work for them. The Stack was geology and geography and history- to treat it as a

currency of reward and punishment was, it seemed to Vymok, an insult- not just to travellers like him, but to the land itself.

Thus, with his supplies running low, he marched up to the top of the staircase one last time and found himself face to face with the same guards who had cast him back the first time.

“You’re going to let me through,” he said, simply.

“And why would we do that?” one of them asked. He was the less overtly violent one, but Vymok wasn’t stupid. He’d encountered dozens of different guards since he started trying to enter the mid-Stack and he knew false friendliness and sly contempt when he saw and heard it.

“Because it’s my right,” he replied. “As it is the right of all men.”

“You have no rights here,” said the one who usually let his spear do the talking.

He raised it again now and went to strike Vymok on the head.

This time, however, Vymok was expecting the blow.

He shot his hand up and caught the spear by the shaft. He wrenched backward and the guardsman was so surprised that he actually let go of it.

“I don’t want to hurt you, but you are going to let me pass,” Vymok reiterated, brandishing his prize.

The other guard aimed his spear, however, and lunged at Vymok.

There was a confusing moment in which the Stack Walker acted purely on instinct, ducking, recoiling then lunging reflexively. Then the guard was skewered through.

His companion, from whom Vymok had taken the spear, began to flee yelling “Murder! Murder!”

An icy calm gripped the Stack Walker. The houses were far apart and the leaves of the trees would absorb sound quite efficiently. It would be mynats before the man was heard or noticed.

Vymok withdrew the spear from its first victim, aimed, and loosed it.

He’d had to hunt his food several times as he climbed the lower Stack and his aim was good. The spear went through the fleeing guard’s neck and pinned him to the ground.

Vymok’s sense of emotionless tranquillity didn’t depart until after he’d dumped the bodies of the two guards down the stairs to the level below.

At first, he didn’t even realise he’d stolen one of the togas and put it on, disguising himself as a native of his current disc- and a native with authority no less. It only dawned on him that he was wearing the garb of a dead man when, an ovr of walking later, he happened to look down at himself, puzzled by how strange his clothes felt.

He had an idea that, if he walked with authority and snapped instructions in a brusque enough manner, he'd go unchallenged for at least a few levels, despite his grey skin and glowing eyes. In this costume, people would let him pass.

He learned two lessons that day.

He learned that not everyone could be reasoned with because not everyone had a rationale for wanting to stop him... and he learned the value of violence.

12,000 Years Ago

Mikona was aware of the horrors her forebears had perpetrated as they climbed their way through the mid-Stack, but such things seemed distant- part of a past that had nothing to do with her.

She knew that one of her ancestors had been named Vymok; that he had been the first Walker to kill to make his way up the Stack. She knew that he had been restrained, only striking when necessary, until he had grown too old to continue, settled down and took a wife. She knew, also, that each subsequent generation of his descendents had been less and less controlled. She knew that her position as a well-off woman in the upper Mid-Stack had been bought with a mountain of bodies. But there had been no violence for fifty generations now. She couldn't imagine slaughtering someone and taking their possessions simply to rise to the next level, and the idea of reaching the top and finding enlightenment didn't appeal to her in the slightest.

She lived a comfortable life in a city of ruby towers. When she looked out her window, she saw a glittering skyline, dyed rose by the jewelled city, whose lowliest coffee shop was still carved from precious stone. She didn't need to work- there was an inheritance. She was on good terms with all her neighbours. She was a soft, relaxed pacifist, brimming over with kindly intentions and vague good will.

If she looked a little different from her fellow mid-Stackswomen- if her eyes glowed faintly and her silver skin had a faint persimmon colouration from her ancient, scalded heritage- it only made her a little exotic and appealing to the menfolk who lived in the same complex as her.

If anything, her life was a little too comfortable- her mere day to day existence left her drowsy and apathetic.

At least, it did until someone she'd never met tried to kill her.

It happened as she returned home from a day out in the city, meandering around the little boutiques, meeting friends and taking drinks in the more civilised caffeine outlets.

She entered her home, with its plush velvet sofas and thick red carpeting and sighed with relief as she took her shoes off.

She didn't notice the shape just behind her paisley-patterned curtains as she lit the fireplace, poured herself a glass of wine and sat down to sip it, looking pensively into the comforting undulation of the flames.

She had no warning- no inkling that anything was amiss- until the blade of a knife was at her throat and a man's husky voice was whispering in her ear "I know what you did to get here."

Someone was in her house! That was her first thought. The fact that this someone had come up behind her chair and pressed a knife to her throat barely registered. The real shock was that her little chunk of peace and privacy had been invaded.

"I... I don't know what you mean!" she protested.

"All the blood spilled; all the death and pain and suffering," the voice hissed. "Somebody has to pay."

"I haven't done anything!" Mikona yelped as the knife pressed a little harder into the soft skin of her vulnerable neck.

"Of course you have, Stack Walker," the voice of the man growled.

And just like that, her terrible situation made some sort of sense. She'd heard of the vigilante groups who hunted Stack Walkers, of course. They were the subject of some public debate. Stack Walkers weren't above using violence- Mikona's family hadn't been at any rate- and the various groups who hunted them sought to repay that violence in kind.

"Look..." Mikona said carefully. "I'm not a Stack Walker. My family were, but that was a long time ago. I'm just a normal person- I just want to live out my life on this disc."

"You have no right to be here!" the man snapped. "You blood-soaked little whore, get on your knees!"

He withdrew the knife from her neck and shoved her so she landed on her knees in front of the fire place.

For a moment, she wondered why he hadn't simply slit her throat. Then he grabbed her hair and she understood with horrid and perfect clarity what he planned. He was forcing her forward and she knew that he meant to push her face into the scalding flames.

"Please!" she cried out, barely articulate now.

"Shut up!" her would-be murderer replied. "I'm going to cauterise your filthy line before you can breed any more Walkers."

The fire was less than a finger's length from Mikona's face now.

It was funny, she reflected, how one never really thought of a fire as a collection of individually burning logs. It was a morass, devoid of individuation.

She wondered if this fatuous and utterly irrelevant thought was her brain's way of distracting itself from her impending death- a psychological reflex against hopeless peril.

The analytical nature of her own thinking struck her, too.

She realised, with distant surprise, that she was calm. Her face was being forced into a crackling mass of agonising incandescence and yet she was calm.

Logs.

The thought presented itself to her again- just one word this time.

She had been using her hands to push back against the floor; to resist her attacker's attempt to burn her alive.

Now, she reached out with one instead, barely realising what she was doing.

She reached into the flames, ignoring the smoky smell of her own sizzling skin, and wrapped her hand around one of the scalding logs.

A single, individual log, which blazed like a torch in her blackening hand.

"What do you think you're doing?" snarled her attacker.

By way of an answer, Mikona flung herself downward, not caring that this brought her hair into contact with the fire; that the ends caught alight.

Her assailant hadn't expected that move- it had the desired effect of releasing her from his grip. His hand still clutched a chunk of her hair, but now it was no longer connected to her scalp. She'd severed the connection.

She rolled onto her back and swung upwards with the log she still clutched.

It caught her attacker only a glancing blow, but the shock of it was enough to make him stagger and fall to the floor, crying out in pain.

He was a stockily built man in a plain suit. Mikona had never seen him before and had no idea how he'd found out about her family origins.

Not that it mattered. The calm she'd experienced before was still there, but now it was accompanied by a cool, diamond-hard desire to kill.

The man had invaded her home.

Before he could get up, she straddled him and raised the burning log high above her head.

"Please!" he said, echoing her own sentiment from mere moments before.

Mikona didn't listen, she brought the log down on his face, over and over again until she felt his skull crack, then again for good measure, driving the fragments into his brain.

Finally, she cast aside the log and staggered to her feet. The fire in her hair was starting to kindle, so she staggered through to her bathroom and soaked herself in cold water. She retrieved bandages and ointment from her medicine cabinet and did what she could for her burned hand, then went back through to the living room.

Her cold pragmatism had departed, but it hadn't been replaced by panic. Only numbness.

When she saw that her living room was ablaze- set alight by the log she had cast aside- she just stared dumbly for a moment, unable to muster the will to act.

Eventually, she stumbled to the door and let herself out of the apartment.

Many of her neighbours were gathered in the connecting hall.

"Mikona?" someone asked. "What's going on?"

"Fire," Mikona said simply, and found herself leading a confused escape party to the nearest exit.

By the time they reached the ground floor, the fire had spread and the whole building was starting to burn. Firefighters had arrived.

Mikona felt alone in the staring crowd.

Alone, but not unnoticed. There were men in plain suits watching her.

Vigilantes were rarely solitary.

For three days, Mikona moved from hotel to hotel, but every morning, the suited men were hanging around the lobbies, looking quizzically at her. It was only a matter of time before the next strike.

Fear came to rule Mikona's world. She took to sleeping in halfway houses and hostels far below her station, or spending entire nights in dive bars. Anything to stay in view of other people; anything to prevent the men in the plain, identical suits from getting her alone.

She cut ties with her friends, fearing she would put them in danger.

In truth, she couldn't have said how long she spent in this state, roaming the ruby city, eternally hunted and perpetually fearful.

Then, one day, she found herself on the outskirts of the metropolis, between the true city and the concentric band of agricultural land that surrounded it.

In the distance, she saw something she'd never seen clearly before, because her view had always been blocked by skyscrapers and the clutter of the urban environment.

She saw the staircase that connected her disc to the one above.

For twelve days, she travelled, stopping in small towns and villages, her eyes forever darting around for pursuers.

At first, she saw many, but the route she took wasn't direct. It was zigzagging and gave no real indication that she was heading for the staircase. To any external observer, her movements must have seemed random and, eventually, she stopped seeing the plain suits of the enemy altogether.

When she was sure her pursuers had lost her, she headed directly for the staircase.

She expected it to be guarded by more vigilantes, but its base stood in the middle of a field that looked like it had been abandoned for longer than she'd been alive and there was no one nearby- not for as far as the eye could see.

Someone had erected a gate in front of it, with a sign that firmly stated 'NO TRESPASSERS'.

The lock, however, was rusted to the point of uselessness.

No wonder the vigilantes didn't bother to guard it, she thought. The stairs clearly hadn't seen a Stack Walker in hundreds of years. Perhaps more came up from below- which would explain her hunters- but none ever made it this far.

She broke off the lock with ease- the metal was practically dust before she ever laid a finger on it- and stepped through the gate.

Her breath caught in her throat as she choked back a sob, and she put her foot on the first step.

She had no idea how she'd protect herself if the people of the next disc up hated Stack Walkers as much as those on her current level. She had no idea how she'd sneak past any guards who might be stationed at the top of the stairs. All she knew was that she had put as much distance between herself and her pursuers as possible, and that meant doing what her ancestors had done.

She began to climb.

8,000 Years Ago

The last disc of the upper mid-Stack was a strange and beautiful one. Here, endless sands of sapphire blue stretched away in all directions and trees with multicoloured feathers in place of leaves sprang from the ground at irregular intervals. Great shards of mirror-glass jutted from the sands, towering many times higher than a man and making a fun-house maze of the pseudo-desert.

Upon seeing it for the first time, Konvar fell in love with it.

It was a place unlike any he had seen in his long travels. The rich colours and wild geometry of the landscape and its features appealed to his sense of the decadent and the surreal.

He was different from his ancestors. He didn't hope to reach the top of the Stack in his own lifetime. Enough Stack Walkers had gone before him for him to fully appreciate the sheer, mind-crushing scale of the world whose layers he moved through. Perhaps the settled generations that had ended with Mikona had also introduced a patience and relaxation that had been absent before. In

any case, Konvar's mode of travel was less objective-oriented. He savoured every new disc he reached and spent time there. He knew, as soon as he laid eyes on the azure pseudo-desert that he'd be spending a great deal of time there before moving on.

It wasn't just his attitude that differed from that of his ancestors. His appearance was decidedly other too. His earliest antecedents had had the grey skin and glowing eyes of the Lower Dwellers. His more recent forebears had, through interbreeding, acquired a silvery skin that allowed them to pass as native mid-Stacksmen, albeit with lines of bioluminescent amber showing just below the surface of that skin. By some genetic fluke, Konvar's bioluminescence had spread from localised lines and suffused his entire skin, so that instead of silver it seemed to glow gold. His eyes had the same golden tint.

He was the first in the long line of Stack Walkers to pass unchallenged between discs, for the simple reason that nobody knew what he was and didn't feel comfortable making claims about where he belonged. He was something new; something other. Perhaps this, too, influenced his character. He was easy-going; charming in his fashion. This, of course, would play a role in the trajectory of his life, as it already had.

Konvar meandered through the deep blue pseudo-desert for days, plucking fruits from the feathered trees for food and trusting to the innate kindness of the land for his survival. He sheltered beneath the mirror-shards at night- he carried blankets in his backpack and the cold of the nights never touched him provided he put himself somewhere away from the wind.

He assumed that he was alone. Something about the disc bespoke emptiness; loneliness. It was a land where a man could wander undisturbed.

It therefore surprised him when, after fourteen days of aimless plodding, he came upon a camp comprising many colourful tents. Pennants hung between them, linking each to each. Men and women wandered between them or lay on rugs on the desert ground, sunning themselves.

What amazed Konvar was the mixture of levels they represented. Some were grey-skinned; others were silver; some were silver with the same lines of the glowing amber his forebears had possessed. They wore an array of costumes from a hundred discs, too. Some were in deeply coloured togas while others wore plain white robes. Some wore clothes made from the feathers of the trees while others were clad in hard-wearing tanned leather.

Konvar had always lacked reticence, leaning far more towards curiosity than wariness. He obeyed his first instinct without question, and approached the camp.

It was here that his journey up the Stack ended.

“Greetings, stranger,” quoth a slender man, reclining lackadaisically on a rug outside the front of a tent. “I don’t recall seeing your face before?”

“I’m new to this level of the Stack,” replied, Konvar with a smile. “Try not to hold it against me.”

“Of course not,” returned the fellow. “But if you plan to stop awhile, you should do the polite thing and introduce yourself to the camp-khan.” He gestured towards the most grandiose of the tents, which was dyed deep, emerald green and decorated with gold filigree.

Konvar sauntered inside and knew, at once, that he would never leave the azure desert.

The woman in front of him, reclining on a plush throne, was the most beautiful he had ever seen.

Her eyes were the same brilliant emerald as the tent that served as her court and the face that framed them was one of soft, symmetrical poise. Her figure- held in check by flowing, multicoloured silks- was as lavish as her surroundings, plump and billowing. Her skin was neither grey nor silver, but had the colour of fine marble and the texture of fresh blossoms.

Konvar had no thought of romancing her. He was a wayward traveller and she a de-facto queen. Besides which, he knew nothing of her personality. It was simply that he couldn’t imagine leaving any place capable of producing such exquisite beauty.

“Hello, Stack Walker,” she said.

“Hello, stunning queen. How did you know what I am?” Konvar asked without embarrassment.

“We know our own,” replied the camp-khan.

“Everyone here is a Stack Walker?” Konvar asked, slightly amazed. He’d never encountered others like himself.

“Everyone here was,” the camp-khan said, amused. “But this level has become our home. Those above and those below see only a desert. Nobody wants it and nobody tries to stop us making a home here. Only exploration reveals the bounty of this place and only Stack Walkers explore. Thus, it belongs to us.”

“Can I stay?” Konvar asked.

“I was hoping you would,” the camp-khan replied. “I’ve never seen a man with golden skin before. You interest me.”

“I’ve never seen a woman with marble skin before,” he returned.

“My ancestors were going down, not up. What they were seeking I don’t know, but I have the skin of the people of the upper Stack. You, however... you don’t seem to belong to any level.”

Konvar shrugged eloquently: “I’m a genetic anomaly.”

“You’re a handsome genetic anomaly,” the camp-khan flirted.

What could have ended as flirtation, or ended a little later as a short-lived romance, persisted. The camp-khan- who went by the name of Shantivi- proved to be a match for Konvar's easy-going frankness and relaxed character and their spark, once kindled, burned steadily.

Sometimes- perhaps once or twice a year- Konvar's eyes would alight on a spiral of stone stairs in the distance: the passage to the next disc up, which was also the first disc of the upper Stack. For a moment, he would think about climbing it... but only for a moment. At first, it was simple love for Shantivi that stopped him. In later years, it was the need to stay and be a good father for his children. Eventually, one of them or one of their descendents would continue up the Stack. He wouldn't live to see the next level, but someone of his line would. Strangely, this thought appealed to him more than seeing the upper Stack himself.

5,000 Years Ago

Varnatine breathed raggedly and with great difficulty as she mounted the steps that led to the first level of the upper Stack. She was an old woman.

For three thousand years, her family had lived in the azure desert as rulers and figureheads. They had watched the tent encampments grow into towns of wood and then cities of stone. They had overseen the development of new technologies and new philosophies. The responsibilities of rulership had kept them tied to one piece of land. They were khans first, and the Stack Walker side of their heritage had been put on indefinite hold.

Then, last week, Varnatine had signed away the last of her power to the newly-elected parliament. Democracy had come to the desert and now, once again, the line that had started with Venon could continue its climb. They were nobodies once more, and- as such- were truly free.

Varnatine knew she wasn't going to climb far. She was almost certain, in fact, that she would end her days just one disc higher than where she started. But she was getting the ball rolling again, and that was what mattered.

She was eighty-nine years old and she leaned on the arm of her grandson, Tyno, as they worked their way up the stairs. This was as much his journey as hers and, one day, he would continue on in her stead.

"Do you need to stop, gran?" Tyno asked.

Varnatine shook her head. Her hair was the same marble-colour as her skin, from which all bioluminescence had long ago faded. Her eyes were milky and her skin hung loose on her. But she wasn't as weak as she looked.

“Don’t insult me, boy,” she chuckled. “When mid-Stacksmen from the level below us invaded and tried to claim our lands, these legs of mine kicked an insurgent to death, right in the throne-room. Believe me, they can manage one dusty old staircase.”

“That was a long time ago, gran,” Tyno pointed out.

“And yet, I remember it like it was yesterday,” Varnatine grinned. “Did I ever tell you why those men invaded us?”

“Many times,” Tyno sighed.

“Because we let anyone in!” Varnatine stopped to laugh, coughing as she did so. “They hated that we were as advanced as they were but we still gave safe harbour to Stack Walkers. Hated that we provided a way-station for those seeking enlightenment. Now ain’t that something?”

“It certainly is,” Tyno sighed. “I don’t think I’ll ever understand why so many people think climbing the Stack is wrong.”

“They don’t,” Varnatine replied promptly. “If you’re going up-Stack by a level or two to work, nobody gives a hoot. If you want to carve out a new life for yourself and spend money doing it, they’re fine with that, too. What people hate is that Stack Walkers don’t want anything from ‘em. Walkers don’t want to be tied to one place; don’t want to settle into one society like regular folk. That’s what people don’t like.”

“But why?” Tyno asked.

Varnatine stopped talking a moment to get her breath back rather than to think. She’d had years to think about it and she’d settled on a theory.

“People think jobs and houses and money and a good reputation all matter, but deep down, they know those things only matter if everyone agrees that they do. Stack Walkers don’t want any of it, and that scares people; it makes their lives seem less solid, I think. Or at least less meaningful.”

“You talk as though you’ve been a Stack Walker your whole life. Until last week, you lived in a palace,” Tyno laughed.

“Our family were never meant to be rulers,” Varnatine replied. “We were only ever keeping the throne warm until someone found a better way to run things.”

Tyno didn’t reply. The two of them were passing through the hole at the top of the staircase and about to enter the next level of the Stack.

There was a moment of tense silence. Neither of them knew what to expect.

When they emerged from the hole and stepped off the staircase, Varnatine could only let out a sigh of contentment.

The whole level onto which they had walked had been remade. Here, nature had been abolished and replaced by the will of sentient-kind. The floor was endless tiles of white and gold stone. Vast

Corinthian-style pillars connected the disc to the one above it, though they couldn't have been necessary for support. A row of small, deco tables stretched away for miles, connecting the top of the staircase to somewhere. Each table sported a small lamp that would keep the route lit, even at night.

To Varnatine, the whole thing looked like a hotel lobby, albeit one the size of a continent. The people who inhabited the upper Stack seemed to be opening their arms in welcome.

The old woman and her grandson followed the lamp-line for hours before reaching a huge desk of dark, reddish wood, inlaid with gold.

Behind it stood a smiling woman in a red uniform.

"Good afternoon," she said pleasantly as they approached.

"Good afternoon," Varnatine said. "What is this place?" The way she saw it, she was too old to waste time on pointless preamble.

"You're at the entrance to the upper Stack, of course," said the woman in the red uniform. "Is it just the two of you, or are we waiting on company?"

"It's just us," Varnatine said. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were here to check us in."

"Not exactly." The uniformed woman's smile widened and Varnatine fancied there was something a little off about it. "I'm here to give you the warning. You should know that it's the only warning you'll be given, so you should pay attention."

She seemed to be waiting for something, so Varnatine said "Go ahead, girly."

"Of course, ma'am. It is not the official policy of any civilisation in the upper Stack to hunt or harm Stack Walkers. However, you should be aware that nobody will save you either. From this point on, it isn't hostility you must fear, but indifference and environments that you are not equipped to survive." The woman's smile was now unnaturally wide. Though her marble skin was the same as Varnatine's, Varnatine was suddenly aware of some unspeakable difference between herself and the uniformed figure. "Have a nice day!"

"If nobody here cares whether we live or die, why have a formal warning?" Tyno asked, sounding baffled.

"If you turn back, it saves us paying someone to recover and dispose of your bodies," the woman in uniform replied.

"Shall we go back down?" Tyno asked doubtfully.

"No," replied Varnatine flatly. She'd made up her mind that she was going to die in the upper Stack. She'd initially assumed that it was going to be on the first level, but now she was too determined to stop after one short climb. "Madame, where's the next staircase up?"

3,000 Years Ago

Nyrin had spent his life learning that the inhabitants of the upper Stack were cruel. Not wilfully, deliberately cruel, but cruel on autopilot. He wasn't the only Stack Walker to have made it to this height. Whenever he entered a city, he saw others of his kind- grey-skinned and silver-skinned- lying in the gutters, starving. There was no work for Stack Walkers here and no social provision for them either. Nobody stopped their advances, but sooner or later, they all succumbed to age and weakness.

The line of Stack Walkers that had lead to Nyrin was unbroken all the way back to the recalcitrant khan, Varnatine, and they had survived, generation after generation, by providing the one service that the inhabitants of the upper Stack did want. It was also the only reason that there were successive generations. It was a compromise, but it had allowed them to make progress- slow, arduous progress- up the Stack.

Nyrin hadn't believed his father's warnings about the casual indifference of the upper Stacksmen; had always assumed that if he got into trouble, some kind and reasonable soul would take pity on him.

Two years previously, he'd nearly starved to death believing that.

The violent tendency that had started with Vymok was what saw him through. He turned to criminality to survive. Robbing on one level of the Stack and spending his money a few levels up.

Nobody questioned where he got his money. He had the marble skin of the upper Stack and he dressed the part- all sharp black suits and deep, crimson shirts. So long as he wasn't caught in the act, he wasn't stopped.

Now, he was in Last City, having just arrived via an unguarded stone staircase.

It was beautiful- soaring, baroque buildings carved of pale stone towered about him and every window was stained glass. Yet it did not impress him. He'd seen a hundred others just like it and knew that, for all its externalised glory, there would still be men breathing their last in its gutters while the elegant and pampered walked past, oblivious.

The only aspect of the city that interested him was its name: Last City. His family had long ago climbed through the first third of the upper Stack. He must be nearing the end of the second third. Above and beyond this city, the landscape would be too wild for major settlements.

Things had already gotten strange. In his own lifetime, Nyrin had seen discs with seas of liquid gold that felt cool to the touch and discs where the trees grew upside down, reaching their roots in the air to form twisting, abstract horror-shapes. He'd seen discs where time seemed frozen and if he dropped something, it wouldn't fall but hang in the air.

The closer one got to the top of the Stack, the more the laws of physics broke down.

Last City was the last stable disc before the top; his last chance to encounter civilised life- or what passed for it in this zone of wealthy barbarism.

Nyrin went forth in search of a bar.

At night, the difference between Nyrin and a true upper Stacksman became apparent. His family line had never lost its bioluminescence and, in the darkness of the night or a poorly-lit room, one could see countless colours playing just below his skin like a personal aurora. His father had told him that it was a genetic mutation, brought on by the family interbreeding with the inhabitants of so many different levels. What had once been a golden light had first grown to white and then broken down into a full spectrum of different hues.

Luckily, it rarely aroused suspicion. Actually, it served Nyrin well.

As he sat in an upmarket cocktail bar, sipping something sweet and blue beneath a complicated chandelier of nouveau inspiration, a dark-haired woman in a salacious black dress walked up to him with slinky poise.

“That’s a beautiful implant,” she said, referring to the colours that played beneath his skin. Like most people, she assumed he’d paid a plastic surgeon to install subdermal lights. Upper Stack society had reached such a point of decadence that a man undertaking such a procedure seemed entirely plausible.

“Thanks,” Nyrin murmured, sweeping her with his gaze. “Nice dress.”

“Thanks,” she replied, mimicking his reply and the look he’d given her.

Nyrin signalled the barman, who placed a second cocktail in front of him. He slid it over one space, so that it sat in front of the empty seat next to him.

“On me,” he told his new admirer.

She sat and swigged it back in one gulp before looking him right in the eye and saying “I didn’t want to waste any time.”

Later, Nyrin slid back into his suit in an anonymous hotel room. He’d done this before and knew the drill. He was expected to leave as soon as the act of intimacy was over. Upper Stacksfolk didn’t like to allow time for physical intimacy to develop into any other kind. The possibility of connection terrified them.

The woman on the crisp, white double-bed behind him surprised him however.

“That was incredible,” she said.

Once their needs were sated, most upper Stacksfolk just lit a cigarette and said nothing, waiting to see if their partner would leave or if they'd have to. It was the first time Nyrin had received feedback.

"So were you," he said experimentally.

He expected that to be the end of the anomalous, post-coital interaction, but the woman from the bar replied "Well, I try my best. What's your name?"

First a compliment and now a question- it was a night for firsts, Nyrin reflected.

"Nyrin," he replied. "You?"

"I'm Solathique," she replied. "Have you done this before? You seem like you've done this before."

"Hooking up? Yes. Talking about it afterwards? No. People usually expect me to clear out."

"Sorry."

"Don't be. It's nice to make an actual connection with someone for a change, no matter how brief."

Solathique giggled: "That's good. I thought I was showing my roots a little too much then."

Nyrin turned, puzzled, and for the first time recognised one of his own.

Solathique was from Stack Walker stock- the product of some other family line stretching back to the mid-Stack or even the nightmare world of the lowest levels. She didn't glow like he did, or exhibit any other signs of genetic aberration, but there was a cast to her face and a curiosity in her eyes that he never saw in the born-and-bred upper Stacksmen.

"You're..." he started, then simply said "Me too."

"Up or down?" she asked

"Up. You?"

"My family were going up, but when they realised they could pass, they stopped. We've been here for four generations."

"Do you want to be here?" Nyrin asked.

"No, but I'm afraid to continue into the wilderness alone." Solathique hung her head in shame.

"Together?" suggested Nyrin.

Solathique nodded.

The two Stack Walkers supplied themselves for a long trek and found their way to the stone staircase that led upwards the very next day. It took a long time to climb it. The space between the disc of Last City and the disc above was greater than previous gaps but, eventually, they reached the top and found themselves in a land of mountains.

It was cold here and there were clear signs that the laws of physics were in a state of breakdown. The snow that crunched beneath Nyrin and Solathique's feet sometimes rose as powder into the air and didn't come back down.

Birds flew across the sky but, every so often, one of them would hit a distorted patch of air and fly backwards, as though reversing through time. It would go backwards and forwards several times before the bubble of anti-time popped and it was able to continue.

It was a realm that resisted habitation with geography, climate and the perversion of natural law. But Nyrin saw at once that two determined Stack Walkers could survive here and find the next staircase. There were straggly trees that bore the bare minimum of fruit and plants that looked like the overground protrusions of edible tubers, sticking out of the thinner patches of snow.

"If we climb a mountain, we should be able to see the next staircase," Nyrin said.

Solathique nodded and slipped her hand into his.

Neither of them knew it, but it was the first time since the time of Venon that two Stack Walkers had travelled together.

1,000 Years Ago

Somyn stood in the endless field of cubes. Each one was a mirror-silver box that hung in the air at a seemingly random height. They ranged in size. The smallest were no larger than a man's head. The largest were the size of mountains. There were millions of them and circumstances obliged Somyn to use them to cross the disc. The ground wasn't an option. It looked solid, but it wasn't. When he'd first reached this level, he'd put his foot on what looked like rock and met almost no resistance. It had parted and rippled like water and he'd nearly fallen through, all the way back to the disc below. He'd recovered his balance just in time, made a note of the aberration to natural law, and instead proceeded by climbing across the floating cubes.

The bizarreness of this level didn't overly perturb him. The level below was made of flowing, dancing fire with only a thin path of scalding hot stone to connect the top of one staircase to the bottom of the next. The level below that had been a utopia, abundant in edible crops and fresh water... however, it had also been filled with rends in the air itself, through which countless worlds could be seen. Somyn had considered stepping through and exploring, but something stopped him. The worlds clearly weren't part of the Stack- weren't part of his universe at all- and there was no guarantee that the matter from which he was made could even exist in them.

No, strangeness wasn't new to Somyn. It didn't perturb him even slightly.

Yet he stood stock still, listening, perturbed by something. He had the notion that he was being hunted. Though he couldn't put his finger on what gave him the sensation, he was certain he was right.

Then, as if to confirm his suspicions, one of the cubes behind him exploded and something burst forth. It was no part of the natural world- of that, Somyn was certain. It resembled a triangular hole in the fabric of reality, but the interior of that triangle was full of sharp teeth- a spiral of them that formed a tunnel leading down to infinity.

The thing howled as it swept through the air towards him.

Somyn was fast, however. He leaped from cube to cube with the grace of experience, dancing across the floating forest of silver planes. The thing- the monstrosity that had no place in any physical universe- sped along behind him, its countless teeth glowing unnaturally and spinning like the tips of drills.

No matter how fast and dextrous Somyn was, he knew he couldn't outpace the creature indefinitely. His path was dictated by the geometry of his environment, whereas the triangular abomination could simply hurtle towards him along a straight line course, swallowing or shattering every cube it touched.

It was getting closer.

It didn't have breath, but Somyn could feel a sucking of vacuum at his back: the sensation of a pulling emptiness slowing him down and drawing him in.

Then, suddenly, he leaped up to a higher cube and there was the staircase upwards, right ahead of him.

He put on a fresh burst of speed, skidded across the final intervening cubes and hurled himself onto it. He began to sprint up the stairs as fast as he could with the creature hot on his heels.

The top came into view with merciful rapidity. Soon he would be on the next level- it was a matter of moments.

Then there was a searing pain in his ankle and when he tried to take the final step up to the next disc, he found there nothing on which to take that step.

Unable to engulf all of him before he reached safety, the geometric terror had bitten off his foot.

With a last burst of determination he hopped the final step and collapsed. He just had to hope the entity couldn't move between levels.

He looked about and experienced a wash of relief. The level was surreal, but less harsh and menacing than the ones immediately below. He was lying on an island, half-submerged in a beautiful turquoise sea- the staircase must have burrowed straight through the island bedrock

without opening a passage for the water. There were other islands around him- many of them- but they floated in the air rather than on the water. Some had trees; others had abstract stone structures.

On one of them was an encampment of tents. The Last City had been passed generations ago, but sentient life always found a way to create outposts.

Somyn passed out, hoping that someone would find him before he died of blood loss.

When he opened his eyes, he was staring up at the canvas of a plain, cheap tent. Someone had cauterised and bandaged his wound. In fact, Somyn could see the man responsible for this act of kindness.

He was no upper Stacksman, that was for certain. The men and women who thought of themselves as upper Stacksfolk weren't kind. He belonged to some other, unknown category of life. His eyes were orbs of white, devoid of iris and pupil, yet clearly somehow still capable of sight. His skin wasn't grey, silver or marble white: it was the colour of the night sky and seemed speckled with glittering impurities that imitated stars. He wore a white lab coat and a strange little bow-tie that looked silly on him.

"So, young man," he said. "It seems your Stack Walking days are at an end. If you plan on continuing upwards, we'll have to call you a Stack Hobbler." He chuckled.

Somyn hadn't spent a lot of time around people, and humour was often lost on him. He stared blankly at the medic.

"You're wondering how I know you're a Walker, of course," the man said, mistaking the look of mystification on Somyn's face. "Nobody else sports such unusual genetic anomalies. Skin as white as snow that glows with subdermal effulgence? Only on a Stack Walker, my friend."

"Where am I?" Somyn asked.

"An outpost, established by we few who reside at the top of the Stack," the medic said. "We find it wise to make sure the break-down in the laws of physics is stable. So far it hasn't crept any further down the Stack, but there's a first time for everything."

"What caused it?" Somyn asked, sitting up.

"The footsteps of Metaphysicals- beings that were never meant to walk the corporeal plane," the medic replied. "Hold still- I need to administer a morphine injection."

Somyn permitted the man to apply a needle filled with colourless liquid to his neck, then asked "Metaphysicals?"

"What? Did you think corporeal reality is all there is?" the medical man chuckled. "You're looking for enlightenment, aren't you? The pure knowledge that resides at the top of the Stack? Well, where did you think it came from? It's not like mortals have a clue what's going on. Of

course, you probably don't realise what a foolish errand you're on. Before you ask for perfect enlightenment, you'd be well-served to ask a more pragmatic, mundane question."

"What question?" Somyn asked. The morphine was taking effect. His head was starting to swim.

"What is the Stack?" replied the doctor.

Somyn tried to say something in reply, but the drug was doing its work and he fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Later, when Somyn awoke again, he learned that the medic's name was Fullerac and that he was part of a team of some seventy individuals who had taken a one-way trip to reach their current level. Going down from the top was easy, he said, but if his people ever wanted to go back up, they'd have to start hiking like Stack Walkers themselves.

Somyn asked Fullerac what he'd meant by the question 'What is the Stack?' and Fullerac smiled at him.

"Just that," he said. "You don't even know what kind of universe you inhabit, yet you're looking for knowledge that goes far beyond one universe. How do you really know if you want it when you have so little to base the decision on."

"You could tell me," Somyn pointed out. "You could tell me what the Stack is."

"I couldn't!" Fullerac laughed.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know either- and I'm happy not knowing. Some knowledge can only bring pain."

Following this conversation, Somyn made the decision to stop his climb. Some future generation might continue upwards- in fact, it was almost certain- but he'd lost his appetite for enlightenment.

500 Years Ago

What was the Stack? That question had haunted Mynal's family for five long centuries and now she had to confront the fact that she would not be the one to find the answer. The climb up the Stack had resumed with Somyn's son, Sobrys, but it had been difficult and arduous and many generations had come and gone. Now Mynal, too, was going to die without getting an answer and without receiving enlightenment.

At least, she reflected, the line was secure. Her children- ten or so levels back- would continue the climb when they came of age. Now, all that was left for her to do was let go. She was lying in a pool of her own blood and she wouldn't last much longer.

How had she gotten to this point?

It had been the hermit, of course. She'd found him in the cave where she was now spending her last breaths, the dance of lights of her bioluminescence going dark beneath her night-hued skin.

She'd heard rumours at one of the outpost camps that a man resided on this level who had been told what the Stack really was.

How he'd come by this information was anyone's guess, given that he was too far from the top of the Stack and enlightenment to have gotten it first hand. What was known was that it had caused him to go into seclusion in a cave whose walls pulsed with strange blue light.

The level itself was a harsh one, all brittle desert and endless rocks, punctuated only by cool caves for relief. Sometimes, the sands formed towering shapes of horrible aspect before collapsing back into the desert as though nothing had happened- another sign of the break-down of physical laws. Despite this, Mynal had diverted from her straight-line course to the next staircase to seek out the hermit.

She'd asked him what he knew and explained that she was on a quest to receive enlightenment.

The hermit had become increasingly agitated and she knew, now, that she should have fled. Instead, she'd pushed her luck, begging for answers... and gotten a broken-off stalagmite through her guts for her trouble.

The hermit had whispered as she died "If you knew what I knew, you'd thank me."

Even as she died, Mynal found the energy to reflect on what a stupid thing this was to say to a murder victim.

100 Years Ago

Melrob knew he was close to the top of the Stack in large part because the discs were getting smaller. Viewed from a sufficient distance in space, he imagined that the top layers of the Stack would form a cone. No longer did he have to cross continent-sized expanses to find the next staircase and the next- the distance was down to half what it had once been, even in his own lifetime.

The other thing that tipped him off was how extreme the break-down was. More and more often, he had to circumnavigate beams of light where the ground itself sublimated directly into photons. More and more often, the rain fell in the wrong direction. More and more often, he was chased by monsters that were little more than two-dimensional shapes filled with teeth: they appeared out of thin air and gave him trouble on the loneliest levels of the Stack.

But Melrob wasn't disturbed by any of these issues. The men he met at outposts assured him that the break-down wasn't getting any worse: things had always been thus at this height in the Stack. It was to be expected. After all, he walked in the footsteps of Metaphysicals.

After years of travelling, however, he did eventually come upon something that managed to surprise him- something he'd never expected to see.

He stepped off the top of a staircase one day and found himself in a city.

It was a strange type of city, the one in which he stood. The buildings floated freely above a shimmering ocean of quicksilver and were vertically symmetrical, so that they had spires and crenellations depending from their undersides as well as adorning their tops. Men with night-black, starry skin moved between them on floating platforms of gold, wearing robes of many dark and lustrous hues that billowed about them.

He looked down at himself.

His skin was like theirs, except that a riot of colour blazed just beneath it. His family's bioluminescence, which had only grown stronger with each generation.

He didn't dress like the people of this city, however. Where they wore graceful robes, he wore only a light shirt and trousers, with a backpack slung over one shoulder.

He was on the only solid landmass in the entire quicksilver ocean, which was just a pillar of gold through which the staircase was drilled. It occurred to him that he had no idea how to proceed. Thus, he stood where he was for a long time before deciding on a course of action.

"Excuse me!" he called to one of the men on the floating discs. "Can I trouble you for a lift?"

"You're a Stack walker?" the fellow asked, floating down next to him.

"Yes," replied Melrob. "What is this place?"

"Just a place for people to live," replied the robed man airily. "Though for you, of course, it has a more special significance."

"How so?" Melrob asked, perplexed.

"We've long had a tradition of showing hospitality to Stack Walkers- the few who make it this far that is. In fact, you have the right to ask a question in the Hall of Answers. Just one, mind, so make sure you ask something you really need to know."

"Why only one?" Melrob inquired, hoping that this didn't count as his question. Presumably not- he wasn't in the Hall of Answers.

"It focuses the mind. Being told to ask just one thing forces you to dispense with the trivial and the fatuous. Consider it part of your training for enlightenment, if you're still set on that fool's errand."

“I am. And do you mean to tell me that I’ll be the one to finally reach it?”

The robed man shook his head: “No. A couple more generations yet, I think. We couldn’t build the city any closer- the landscape is too barren from here on up, just as it is between here and Last City. Though, if Last City knew about us, one has to assume they wouldn’t call themselves that.” He laughed out loud at his own joke.

“But we’re close?” asked Melrob.

“Very close... cosmically speaking,” replied the robed man. “Shall I take you to the Hall of Answers now?”

Melrob swallowed awkwardly and nodded.

On the flight to the Hall, it dawned on him that he was in the midst of a civilisation of almost infinite advancement and refinement; a culture that had learned to use the break-down of physical laws to its advantage and which had created technology and a bustling, beautiful urban wonderland that those lower down could barely imagine. Yet these people didn’t bring their marvellous machinery any lower. They knew about Last City, which meant they must know about the cruelty of the upper Stacksmen. Presumably, then, they also knew how mid Stackfolk sometimes hunted or abused Stack Walkers and worked to keep the Lower Dwellers down. They must, therefore, know about the suffering of the Lower Dwellers, who capitulated in their own plight out of desperation, trying to stop others from rising above them.

Yet these elegant robed men did nothing.

Melrob was too many generations distant from the lower Stack to feel the betrayal personally. It was all ancient history to him- something partly preserved in the oral tradition of his line and partly absorbed through tomes that others had written and which sometimes turned up at the outposts. Thus, he wasn’t enraged, but he did resolve, in his slow, patient way, not to entirely trust the city or its people.

The Hall of Answers turned out to be a golden palace of elegant, not-quite rococo design. Though palatial in decoration and shape, it was still smaller than Melrob had expected. Then again, it really only needed a single room.

Inside that echoing room, there was only a simple wooden desk with an elderly man sat behind it.

He had some sort of device in front of him, which Melrob could only assume fed him information in response to questions.

“A Stack Walker?” he croaked as Melrob approached. “Haven’t seen one of you in a few years. Or is it decades?” He paused, then asked “You know the rule, yes? One question and one question only?”

“Yes,” Melrob said.

“Then ask it,” the old man replied.

“What is the Stack?” Melrob asked.

The old man took a deep breath, and provided him with a comprehensive answer.

The Stack, the old man said, comprised an estimated one million discs, narrowing to a point towards the top. Of course, since no one person could walk all of them and the gaps between discs varied, this estimate could be wildly inaccurate, but it was the closest anyone could get. It orbited a spherical star elliptically, so that most of the levels got some daylight, but those at the top got the most. Below its lowermost level was a gravity well that kept everything pulling downward and ensured that nobody went flying off into space. It was part of a wider universe that appeared to be abundant in stars but devoid of other planetary matter. That is to say, it was the only solid, habitable place in its universe.

This, of course, described the Stack physically, but not other important details. Those, the old man also shared. The Stack, he said, seemed to have been created by Metaphysicals. That is to say, it didn’t come about naturally, as the result of ordinary cosmic processes. Rather it was summoned into being by the powerful wills of non-corporeal entities acting directly to create something.

They had done all this seemingly just to place something at the top of the finished structure—something that mortals came to think of as enlightenment.

This naturally raised the issue of why the Metaphysicals who created the Stack hadn’t simply created one level and set enlightenment in it like a jewel in a ring. The countless other levels had to be for something.

Having realised this, the academic community had come up with two competing theories about the Stack’s true purpose. First, that the top levels were meant to be almost inaccessible while the lower levels were easier to reach. Ergo, enlightenment would be protected from all but the most determined explorers, whether they evolved in-universe or elsewhere. The whole of the rest of the Stack would serve as distraction and a deterrent from anyone actually looking for enlightenment. This theory implied that enlightenment, whatever it was, was dangerous and that it wasn’t meant to be looked at or received; that the Metaphysicals themselves had deemed its knowledge so hazardous that they hadn’t wanted to keep it in their incorporeal domains. The second theory simply stated that the Stack was a test to make people worthy of enlightenment, and it was widely ridiculed as dewy-

eyed nonsense. No, the first option was far more likely- that enlightenment was not a desirable state of being and that it had been put on the high shelf of the Infinite by beings who knew better than to leave it within easy reach of impressionable mortals.

“Knowing all that, may I ask a question?” the old man requested.

“Sure,” Melrob agreed, a little hesitantly.

“Do you still mean to continue the journey towards enlightenment? There’s a high probability that it will simply obliterate your mind- or the mind of your child’s child- and leave them a helpless vegetable... but you are one driven by curiosity. What wins? Curiosity or self-preservation?”

Looking at the sparkle in the old man’s eyes, Melrob got the queasy feeling that he was being viewed as some obscene species of science experiment.

There was, however, one trait that had persisted along his family line ever since Venon took his first steps towards the top of the tower: brute stubbornness.

“I’ll continue,” he said.

Now

After twenty thousand years, the end was finally within reach. The disc on which Emblem stood was the size of a small field and it was filled with strange metal flowers, their leaves so sharp that, if he fell into a patch of them, he’d be ripped to ribbons. But he wasn’t going to fall into them. He’d already picked his way through them to the first step of the final staircase. Above him there was only one more disc, on which enlightenment itself could be found. From his present vantage, it looked barely bigger than a large garden, yet it contained the most precious treasure in all existence. Or, at least, he believed it did. Some said the state of enlightenment might be a terrible thing. His own grandfather, Melrob, had warned of the possibility. But Emblem believed what his ancient ancestor had believed: that enlightenment meant the meaning of life; that he was about to learn the final truth of all existence.

He cut a strange figure- half barbarian and half poet. That final generations had been difficult ones, but also romantic, hopeful ones as the millennia-long quest neared its conclusion.

His skin glowed continually with so many different colours and so brightly that it was impossible to determine his actual skin tone. His eyes were orbs of brilliant gold and his lightning-white hair was long and flowing. Yet, for all the romance of his base appearance, he wore only ragged trousers and carried a blood-stained axe on his back. He’d encountered hermits like the one who killed his forebear, Mynal. They had all been as mad as that one had been, too.

Now, however, he unslung the axe and let it fall the ground. Every fibre of his being told him it would not be needed. He began to climb to the final flight of stairs.

The landscape of the final disc was, paradoxically, beautiful and full of death. Everywhere there were skeletons, yet flowers and blossoming vines grew around them like trellises. The grass, nourished by the corpses, was sweet-smelling and turquoise in hue. There was a golden tint to the sky, too, now that there were no additional discs between the point of observation and the sun.

At the centre of all this death and sublime natural elegance was a tree of more branches than Emblem could count. It bore no fruit, but pink and white blossoms fell from it in a continual rainfall of soft colour.

To Emblem's surprise, he was not alone on the final disc.

A decrepit-looking man, dressed in the rags of the lower Stack, was watering the tree with a beaten-up watering can. He whistled quietly to himself as he worked.

Emblem approached him in silence and then stood close enough to catch his attention but far enough away to appear respectful.

After a time, the man stopped work and swept his grey hair out of his face.

Emblem looked at that face but couldn't seem to fix on a single detail of it. It had eyes, a nose and a mouth, but he couldn't have told you what colour or shape any of them were. There was something about the man that seemed to defy physical observation.

He didn't ask if Emblem was a Stack Walker. He didn't ask what he wanted. He took all that as read and simply asked "Are you sure you want to go through with this, lad? These bodies aren't here coincidentally."

"What happened to them?" Emblem asked, quietly.

"Enlightenment happened to them. They got what they were looking for- the meaning of life- and then they sat or laid down and just never got up again. Knowing the answer to the final question seems to have that effect on people- they just give up."

"Are you a Metaphysical?" Emblem asked. It seemed like an obvious question.

"I was. Somebody had to fall in order to stay on the corporeal plane and keep an eye on the meaning of life. Now I'm neither one thing nor the other- neither of the High Realms nor of the physical world. But that's by the by- you never answered my question."

Emblem looked around at the bodies and, for the first time in his life, felt doubt. Enlightenment was exactly what he'd always thought it was- the meaning of life. The Metaphysical had told him as much. But, despite being exactly what he'd hoped for, it had still killed many.

He looked back over his shoulder towards the stairs that led downwards and imagined himself quietly retreating.

The idea was repellent; almost unthinkable. Twenty thousand years and generations beyond counting had brought him to the top of the Stack. A yearning for knowledge that had transcended a single life and become the purpose of an entire bloodline had driven his family since time immemorial. To turn back now would be a betrayal, even if accepting his prize was sure to kill him.

“How do I receive enlightenment?” he asked.

“Look at the base of the tree,” said the Metaphysical.

Emblem did and saw, nestling at the very bottom of its trunk a small stone bowl. The tree had grown over the years and its wood had pushed over the bowl, but half of it still protruded.

It was filled with liquid light- a glowing white water that danced and shone with an energy all its own.

“Do I drink it?” asked Emblem, feeling a little foolish.

“Just touch it,” replied the Metaphysical. “It’s knowledge, distilled to a corporeal state. Pure information. Just dip your finger in- a little goes a long way.”

Emblem took a deep breath, stepped up to the bowl and, with his hand shaking, touched the surface of the water with the very tip of his finger.

The effect was instantaneous and overwhelming.

It was as though a door opened in Emblem’s memory and everything came pouring out. First, he remembered every single detail of his own life with perfect clarity- every disc he had ever seen and every conversation he had ever had were suddenly accessible to him with the ease of turning to a folded page in a book. But then the memories kept coming, going beyond the mere photographic. He remembered being his father, whose genetic material had gone to make him, and likewise his mother. Likewise their mothers and fathers, and theirs, and theirs, and so on back through the generations: the lives of countless men and women were suddenly his lives. And why not? They were part of him. From their existence, his existence had been distilled.

Among this endlessly expanding kaleidoscope of lives, one particular sequence stood out- a direct line of descent dating back to a man named Venon, who lived in a nightmare but dared to look upwards and seek meaning. The Stack Walker part of his heritage stood out louder and clearer than all the other lives, telling the most compelling story.

He remembered living in squalor but accepting it because he knew nothing else. He remembered the hard labour of the generations of farmers and land-workers that had followed until one of his ancestors shirked their supposed duty and took up the quest once more. He remembered being

comfortably well-off as Mikona and ruling as Varnatine. He remembered the cool ease with which Nyrin had accepted the misfortune of those in the gutters he walked past and Melrob's compassion to all who suffered. He remembered mistrusting the city of the robed men and he remembered having lived his own life, in which he'd never seen a city of any kind.

He saw it all- the whole trajectory from the lowest disc of the Stack to the highest. He lived again Venon's first glimpse of hospitable farmland after a life lived on bare, unforgiving rock. He savoured the sight of the azure desert as Konvar. He thrilled at the chase Somyn had experienced through a forest of floating cubes and felt the fear of it once again. Discs surreal and gorgeous flashed through his mind, along with every choice that had been made on them and every thought that had been had on them.

And they had all brought him here.

But, he realised with dismay, the trajectory was neither noble nor heroic. The history of his Stack Walker heritage was filled with blood and violence and living through harsh situations by dumb luck rather than skill or goodness.

He had arrived at the top of the Stack not because he belonged to a line that deserved, uniquely, to be there, but because he belonged to a line that had gotten lucky over and over and over again.

It struck him like a hammer blow.

He had sought the meaning of life and now it was obvious: there wasn't one. The people in the city of robed men had been right. The secret of the meaning of life had been tucked away because to know it was only to know it did not exist. Such knowledge was not survivable. Nothing meant anything. The universe- the Infinite itself- was cruel, random and arbitrary and only measured success by who lived longest and reproduced most prolifically.

With this crushing epiphany, he was released from the constricting embrace of memory and understanding and was once more back at the tree, with his finger just touching a bowl of liquid light.

"If you're going to sit down and die now, would you mind doing it over there? Your remains will rot down to wonderful soil for my roses," said the Metaphysical, pottering about somewhere behind him. "I did try and warn you that you might not like what you found in there."

Emblem's hand dropped to his side and he stared vacantly into space.

It was over. The quest was over and it had ended in the most abysmal disappointment possible.

"No." Emblem hadn't been aware he was going to speak until he did.

"No what?" asked the Metaphysical, absent-mindedly.

"No!" Emblem said again, louder this time.

He tilted his head back to the sky and screamed it: "NO!"

It wasn't a cry of despair. It was a repudiation. He refused to accept what he had been told; refused to lie down and die because there was nothing left to do and because others before him had done that.

If the Stack Walker line to which he belonged had one defining trait, it was stubbornness.

He'd come for the meaning of life, and he wasn't going to take 'there isn't one' for an answer.

There had to be more. He'd barely touched the distilled knowledge of enlightenment. Surely, such a small touch couldn't reveal the whole truth.

He took a deep breath and plunged his face into the liquid light.

And this time, he got a good answer.

Once more, Emblem remembered everything. Once more, he saw every life his genetic line had ever lived. Once more, he saw how arbitrary and chaotic it all was. But this time, there was a sense of something else; something deeper.

When he re-experienced Venon's first sight of liveable farmland, the joy he felt wasn't just joy- it was a bestowing of that joy onto the land. When he once more felt Vymok kill the first man to bar his way, it wasn't just a senseless act of murder. Instead, he experienced it as a struggle for an inalienable right; a battle for the justice that had long been denied the Lower Dwellers. When Konvar came together with the khan of the azure desert, it wasn't just an act of physical intimacy, it was love-making in the most literal sense: the creation of love. When Varnatine chose to abandon her rule, it wasn't just the last act of an old woman wanting to move on, it was the birth of a new system of government that would, she had hoped, be better. When he himself chose to partake of enlightenment, it wasn't just from lack of options- it was the closing of a story his family had been telling with their actions since Venon took his first step upwards.

And Emblem understood. A sunset wasn't beautiful until somebody watched it. Love only mattered because people made it matter. Sacrifice wasn't noble until someone enacted the belief that it was. Violence was just violence until it was motivated by a concept of justice. A life was just a series of events until someone saw the story in it.

Life didn't have meaning, because life created meaning. The farm on which Venon had lived out his life would only be land if it wasn't for Venon. The meaning 'home' had been ascribed to it. Konvar and the khan could have ignored their attraction to each other and continued as Stack Walker and ruler respectively, but they had applied the meaning 'love' to each other and that had made them more. All the strange things Somyn had seen would have been lost, meaningless fragments of a broken universe if Somyn hadn't been witness to them. Because he had seen them, they represented beauty or fear or exhilaration.

With every emotion a sentient being felt; with every step they walked; with every breath they breathed, they gave life to a universe that would be inert and purposeless without them. Life was the engine of meaning; the thing that created it and inscribed it and kept it vibrant.

The first time he had received enlightenment, Emblem had been too tentative, too scared. Thus, he'd only seen the events, not the story they told. The second time, motivated by desperation, he'd taken the plunge and seen the truth beyond the facts. He was, he realised, free. He had the same freedom as everyone else, only he was now consciously aware of it. He was free to create his own meaning.

He brought his head up from the bowl of liquid light, laughing with sheer, uncontrollable delight.

After it was all over, and he'd manage to get his sudden surge of ecstasy under control, Emblem spoke with the Metaphysical who tended to the meaning of life.

"There are still a few things I'm curious about," he said.

"You just received perfect and pure enlightenment straight from a fragment of pure knowledge placed in the Corporeal realm by beings as old as time. What could you possibly still be curious about?" the Metaphysical asked, though he sounded amused rather than irritable. In truth, his indeterminate face was cracked by a broad grin. It was clearly a long time since he'd seen anyone take the plunge into full enlightenment- most people gave up and died after dipping a finger in.

"Why did your people create the Stack?" Emblem asked. "Was it meant to keep people away from enlightenment or prepare them for it?"

"Neither. We didn't create the Stack," the Metaphysical replied. "The odds of the Stack coming into being randomly are infinitesimal, but in an infinite multiplicity of cosmoses, such as the one we live in, even the least likely phenomena exist somewhere. Despite what the academics of this universe think, we didn't build the Stack, we just found it."

"So why did you put enlightenment here?" asked Emblem.

"As I recall, the thinking back in the High Realms was that this universe needed a kick up the arse," replied the Metaphysical, rather more prosaically than Emblem had expected. "Have you seen your species' social structures? If anyone needs a dose of enlightenment, it's probably you lot. But most of you aren't ready for it. Hence the skeletons."

Emblem laughed. The dead around him no longer seemed melancholy or brooding- just silly.

"You don't help by telling people to only dip a finger in, you know," he pointed out.

"Well, taking the plunge has to be the individual's choice, otherwise it doesn't mean much, does it?" replied the Metaphysical with a shrug. "What will you do now?"

Emblem thought about it then asked “How powerful are you? I mean, your footsteps permanently bent the laws of physics, but how much of that energy do you retain?”

“Enough to put you wherever you feel you need to be,” the Metaphysical replied.

“Then I want to go back to the bottom of the Stack. The very bottom. The people down there are my people- I still remember being Venon, and now I feel bad for leaving them. Besides if life creates meaning, then those people down there, who create it under the worst conditions, are more valuable than a million upper Stacksmen. I think it’s about time somebody told them that.”

“Sounds like revolutionary talk to me,” the Metaphysical said.

“Perhaps it is,” Emblem replied and his new friend snapped his fingers.

Now: The Lowest Disc

A young boy sat in the centre of a crowded shanty town, looking up at the disc above and wondering what it might be like up there. He’d heard that, if someone could climb high enough and reach the top of the Stack, they could be rewarded with the meaning of life.

Suddenly, his thoughts were interrupted by a crashing roar of thunder.

The people all around him dropped what they were doing and all stared in one direction- some crying out and some whispering.

The boy couldn’t see what was going on, so he tugged at an adult’s sleeve and said “Lift me up!”

The man was so engrossed by whatever was happening, however, that he didn’t even notice the young lad trying to get his attention.

The boy began to push his way through the staring crowd, which was growing more and more hushed by the moment; every conversation and shout of joy or terror drying up.

At last, the young boy came to the front of the crowd and saw what all the fuss was about.

There was a man standing at the edge of the shanty town. He glowed every imaginable colour and his eyes were brilliant gold.

“20,000 Years Ago, I left this place as a man named Venon, seeking the meaning of life,” the many-hued man said. “I found it, and now I’m ashamed. The first time I left, I rose above you. Now, I realise that I have to rise with you.”

The boy didn’t understand the strange man’s words, but for reasons he couldn’t express, they filled him with hope.

What Atoms Really Want

1

Countless trillions of photons screamed through the window of the Applied Atomic Physics Laboratory at the speed of the Universal Constant... but in such a way that they were easily mistaken for a single, lazy beam of sunlight, travelling with lugubrious lack of haste. They shone on polished white, sterile work areas and sleek black computer terminals. They danced across silver instruments of unknowable purpose and glass lenses designed for precision examination. Mostly, however, they gleamed off the Quark Suit.

The Quark Suit was a marvel of engineering prowess, unrivalled in the field of quantum mechanical studies. It could de-quantise and gradually reduce the energy values of both its own and its wearer's particles, thereby scaling them down to whatever degree that wearer desired. In theory, a man could become smaller than an atom; an electron; a quark; a quantum string.

Of course, since the purpose of the Suit was pure research, merely making a man quantum-small wasn't especially useful. He had to be able to study what he saw in the subatomic world. Thus, the suit was also equipped with the most complex array of sensory apparatus ever conceived by the scientific community, all designed to translate the vibrational fluctuations in the quantum vacuum into sights and sounds an anthropic mind could contemplate.

Inside the Suit, its creator, Doctor Solkairn, breathed a sigh of mingled trepidation and contentment. Soon, it would be time for his invention's maiden voyage into the unknown. He wasn't human, of course- Earth was still a long, long way from such technology at the time our story takes place. However, he was close enough that you can safely imagine him as a slightly-built, middle-aged man with silvery-grey hair: a man of worn but distinguished aspect.

His mission was nothing less than the source of free will itself. Particles, it was reasoned, must be either deterministic or random in their behaviours. Neither behavioural profile adequately explained the emergence of freedom of choice within organic life. At what point did the inanimate, unthinking building blocks of the universe give way to something that could not only reason and feel, but actually make meaningful decisions? More importantly, how did the transition occur?

Many of Solkairn's colleagues believed he was running a fool's errand, that free will was merely an illusion created by the nuances of a sufficiently complicated organic brain; that the chain from particle, to atom, to DNA strand to life was known, catalogued and contained no surprises.

Solkairn, however, was the one with state funding for his research.

On one of the nearby work-surfaces, an alarm went off, telling him it was time to depart.

"Midday. Commencing de-quantising protocol," Solkairn murmured into his suit's recording unit, then pressed a button on the white armour-plating of the chest. Slowly, he began to shrink.

2

The first thing Doctor Solkairn saw on sub-Lilliputian scale was unimaginable, indescribable carnage. Before one could reach the world of atoms and their constituent components, one first had to pass through the eternal battleground of the micro-organisms.

It was a world in which monstrous, spindly grey things with countless unnameable appendages preyed on each other and where the blind, questing tubules that were bacteria killed and died in

their millions, eating one another and sometimes being violently ripped apart by the biological weapons of bacteriophages.

Doctor Solkairn's lab was as sterile as possible, yet its sub-cellular level still contained a field of unending slaughter fit to decorate the cover of a particularly lurid horror novel.

The unspeakable creatures showed no interest in Solkairn- even as he shrank to the point where they became giants to him. Nonetheless, the mere sight of them was enough to knock his confidence in his mission. Here was embodied the sightless, meaningless barbarism of organic existence. Even for a man like Solkairn, the sight made it hard to believe in any noble or mystic core of free will hidden at the heart of the quantum world. Nonetheless, he had come too far to abandon the quest and so allowed himself to shrink down, ever further, until the monsters of the cellular and sub-cellular domain were of galactic scale in comparison and he started to see the strange bundles of buzzing energy from which they- and everything else- were comprised.

3

It took a long time for Solkairn to reach a size where he could study an individual, fundamental particle. Due to the fact that atoms are mostly empty space, by the time he was scaled down to the point where a single quark was as large as he was, he seemed to be alone with it, floating in a void of colourful nothingness while the nearest other particles whizzed about at the equivalent distance of planets or stars.

He tapped the button on his chest that was intended to suspend his scaling-down and marvelled at the thing before him- one of the most essential, indivisible bricks from which reality was built.

The Uncertainty Principle was much in evidence. The quark seemed to be comprised of multiple, overlapping, blurry spheres, all of which were the whole quark, but at different locations within its probability waveform. The different hues of each told him that each waveform-variant also possessed subtly different properties. Their speeds- also in accordance with the Uncertainty Principle- were impossible to determine.

Here, surely, was the secret of free will! Buried somewhere in the radiant mess of quantum probabilities was the ability to make a choice; here, there had to be more than just randomness or mechanical determinism.

Yet Solkairn could not visually detect this third, mystic property within the tangle of the wave-function. Nor could his suit's instrumentation discern anything other than wild, random motion and reposition. Nothing here was suggestive of the spark of intelligent choice. And if there was nothing here, it meant that free will was only an illusion; something created by the architecture of a brain

that had evolved to fool itself; a way for sentient-kind to delude itself that it was something more than an ambulatory coagulation of inert matter.

Solkairn would have cried out in despair, but it was at that moment of utter desolation that he realised he had more pressing, practical concerns: the quark in front of him was still growing relative to him.

He hammered at the button on his chest, but to no avail. It simply wasn't working- he was doomed to continue shrinking.

4

As the quark grew to cosmic proportions in front of him, Doctor Solkairn observed a strange effect- an effect peculiar enough to penetrate his terror and sense of dismal defeat. The particle's wave-function variants seemed to have coalesced into a single, coherent whole. Except that they hadn't. The sky around the quark now seemed to be comprised of multiple variations superimposed on one another and in constant motion. From the particle's own perspective, it remained static while the probability-distribution of its waveform was externalised.

It wasn't the key to free will that Solkairn had sought, but it was the elusive marriage of relativity with quantum mechanics that was, in its own way, just as mysterious.

He had little time to dwell on it, however. As he continued to shrink, the very fabric of the quark became visible to him. It was not, as he had assumed, pure, undiluted energy. It was energetic, of course: at that scale of reality, there was no difference between matter and energy, so it flowed and bubbled and bristled just as one would expect from such a thing. However, it was also disrupted in many places by tiny holes- deep, cylindrical trenches that led to some unknowable locale. And, of course, as his size continued to reduce, the physicist realised that the holes were expanding until any one of them could easily swallow him whole. In fact, he could feel the nearest tugging at him as though it possessed a gravity of its own.

He tumbled towards it and was consumed.

For a moment, the blackness around Solkairn was so perfect that he presumed he had died. Then, he was through the aperture and into the interior of the quark, and what he saw astonished him.

He was hanging in a seemingly endless chasm filled with bundles of lights. He could discern the details of the nearest bundle quite distinctly, especially as his down-scale made it ever larger; ever clearer. It was a collection of luminous, dancing spheres-within-spheres. And inside the smallest spheres, he was certain he could discern the source of the objects' luminosity: stars.

It hit him like a thunderbolt: inside the quark was a multiverse. Not just a multiverse, but a multiverse of multiverses- a cosmos comprising uncountable googolplexes of universes.

He realised he was falling towards one such cluster of universes and that it was now large enough, relative to him, to comfortably absorb him. On this evidence, he concluded that his rate of shrinkage must be increasing dramatically with each moment that passed.

Then he was inside the multiversal cluster and, heartbeats later, an individual universe. He felt himself yanked towards one of its planets- a blueish sphere not dissimilar from his own.

He landed upon its soil as a giant but, thanks to his out of control Suit, was a normal-sized man within moments.

Before he could react, he was shrinking through a second cycle: another battleground of microorganisms; another atom; another quark; another multiverse-of-multiverses; another universe; another world; the beginning of another cycle.

It happened again and again. There seemed to be no bottom to the matryoshka structure of reality. He tumbled through a seeming infinity of nesting universes in such a profound state of awe and shock that he no longer felt fear or despair or hope or any emotion small enough to be contained by mortal words.

He thought it would never end but, eventually, it did.

5

The planet where his tumble finally stopped was a pyramid-shaped world orbiting a diamond sun. Its oceans were the purest gold and the plant-life that coloured its continents was red and danced like fire.

As he reached person-scale on this world, a figure ran towards him. His eyes and Suit-sensors hadn't yet adjusted, so he couldn't see the figure clearly: he only had an impression of amber skin and four arms.

One of them struck him and separated his Suit helmet from his head.

The Suit's fail-safe kicked in and he stopped shrinking.

He gasped, amazed to breathing something his body could process as air.

Then the shock caught up with him and he passed out.

When Solkairn awoke, there was the figure- the woman- who had saved him from endless cycles of shrinking. She stood over him, two of her four arms on her hips, the other two tucked behind her

head in a posture of apparent relaxation. Her face was eerily beautiful and her lips were posed in an amused smile.

“You’re up,” she said. Or rather, she said something that meant ‘ you’re up’ and which, by some strange telepathy, Solkairn’s brain was able to interpret.

“Thank you,” he said.

“You’re not the first race to invent the Quark Suit,” the amber woman said. “You’re not the first to have one malfunction, either.”

“What’s your name?” Solkairn asked.

“Iganda,” she replied. “You?”

“Solkairn.”

“Let me show you something, Solkairn.”

Iganda helped him from the bed where he was laid- a comfortable answer to a bed from his own world, he thought- and led him through to the next room.

Though Iganda dressed in tribal robes of some fantasy-book warrior woman, her living quarters were modern. Solkairn spied the equivalent of a television and mini-fridge among sundry other devices.

Her home was clearly also part of a flat or apartment block, and very high up, because the thing she led him to was a picture window overlooking a thriving city. It was, in many ways, many times more advanced than Solkairn’s own world. The vehicles flew rather than crawled on wheels and the red-and-gold spires were so light as to seem ethereal.

“What are you showing me?” he asked.

“The same thing I found when I first put on my Quark Suit and shrank, uncontrollably, through endless realities. I’m showing you life.”

A smile broke across Solkairn’s face as understanding flooded through him.

He had sought the answer to the riddle of free will and here it was. Life was its own thing; intrinsic to the fabric of reality. It occurred at every level of existence so that each universe’s life was built on the life of infinite cosmoses within its particles. Life built upon life. And through it all, consciousness and will flowed; not a unique freak of one world’s evolution, but inevitable.

It even occurred to Solkairn that if life was built upon life, it might have some effect on the wave-distribution of the particle that housed it. That being the case, the quality of life, and of free will, must be encoded into the very base materials of matter in each reality.

Solkairn looked down at his hands and knew that they were comprised of atoms and, within those atoms, entire cosmoses teemed with sentient beings. Likewise the particles of his brain danced with life. The particles of his whole body- and everybody else’s.

The preciousness of every individual struck him- for each individual was really a multitude. Each person contained the infinite worlds that were the source of his or her own free will and spark of sentience.

“Can I get back to my world?” he asked. He had no pressing desire to return there, he realised. What he had, instead, was a duty.

“I’ve repaired your Suit and set it to return to your cosmic scale of origin,” replied Iganda. “Are you in a hurry?”

“No,” Solkairn grinned. “But I can’t delay forever. People have to learn what I’ve learned.”

“But you can delay a little while?” Iganda asked, sounding hopeful.

Solkairn nodded.

“Then come with me.”

He did, leaving the apartment and walking out into a city of alien intelligence where, for the first time in his adult life, he could experience life instead of studying it.

Death in Chessland

1: Pawnography

Fian Chetto considered himself fortunate. He had, after all, been born during the first prolonged period of peace between the White and the Red. He belonged to the first generation of pawns who grew up expecting to die peacefully in their beds, not gorily on a contested square, sacrificed for the machinations of a king.

When he woke up, he could look out of the window of his tall building over an endless, flat expanse of alternate-coloured squares, unpolluted by the dead and wounded. Better still, he could see pieces moving freely and without fear. He could see White pieces (like himself) mingling with Red pieces with no hostility or suspicion of violence whatsoever.

He lived in a golden age.

He reminded himself of that every morning, before shrugging on his long coat, snapping on broad-brimmed hat and going through to his office to face the horrors of the day.

Even in peacetime, people found reasons to be savages and the knights of the realm couldn't be everywhere at once. So, men like Fian were required: investigators without official sanction or resources but also without the constraints of the knights. Fian had the freedom of a civilian: he could go anywhere and talk to anyone without a warrant.

Of course, not everyone wanted to talk. In a time of peace, Fian had strolled into a violent profession and never looked back. He didn't precisely enjoy his work, but he couldn't imagine doing anything else

The detective's office was a cluttered mess. Piles of notebooks sat on a desk of ageing, rotting wood. There were multiple ash-trays scattered around the various sides and the smoke-yellowed paisley wallpaper was covered in small holes- each one a little obituary for a piece of evidence Fian had stuck to the wall with a pin and then torn away when the case was closed.

This morning, he was surprised to find his office also contained a knight.

The knight in question was known to Fian. It wasn't unusual for the more pragmatically-minded enforcers of the King's peace to come to him when their workloads became too onerous to tackle alone. This knight was one such such pragmatist.

"Morning, Gardez," Fian greeted him. "What can I do for you?"

Gardez just stared at him balefully for a moment. The knight was always slovenly and ill-disciplined in his appearance, but today he looked as though he'd been dragged backwards through

a rough checkmate position. His argent-hued doublet was undone and the armour that men of his rank were supposed to wear was nowhere to be seen. His eyes were bloodshot and his skin seemed ashen.

“Gardez?” prompted Fian.

“I need a drink,” Gardez croaked at last.

Fian removed two dusty glasses and a bottle from his desk drawer and poured them each an ample helping of scotch.

As Gardez drank, the sallow misery of his appearance abated somewhat.

“Well? What’s happened?” Fian asked. “Don’t keep me in suspense. Something’s shaken your cage and you wouldn’t be here if it didn’t concern me.”

“The king is dead,” Gardez replied.

For a moment, Fian couldn’t speak. It seemed to him that the atmosphere itself had vanished and left the whole world silent and breathless. The king- King J’adoube the Peacekeeper- was dead. The man who had devoted his entire adult life to ensuring lasting, meaningful accord between the two sides of the great board had been permanently removed from play.

“Pour yourself another drink,” Gardez said. “It helps.”

Fian was amazed to discover he’d already consumed his first glass of scotch without realising it.

“Did the old man’s clock run out on its own, or did someone tamper with the spring?” Fian forced himself to ask. In other words, did Gardez suspect murder?

“Officially? J’adoube suffered an accident- leaned too far over his castle balcony and took a tumble. Drink was rumoured to be involved. But unofficially... I’m not so sure. Peace isn’t universally popular, believe it or not. I can’t be seen to question my superiors’ verdict, so I can’t investigate. You, on the other hand...”

Fian nodded: “I can poke my nose in where yours might get bitten off. Leave it with me.”

Gardez extended his hand and the detective shook it.

“You’re a good man, Fian,” Gardez told him earnestly.

Once Gardez had departed, Fian left his office-abode and made his way down to the base of his building. It was a long walk through endless, cheaply wood-panelled corridors with rickety, aged floors. Fian, in his flapping coat and shambolic demeanour seemed right at home in this environment, which housed countless other pawns, their homes and their places of business. But he wouldn’t find answers here.

At last, he reached and passed through the dilapidated front door and onto the board.

The building immediately behind him was one of eight identical structures, each one in the shape that symbolised his rank and each taking up exactly one square. They formed a row, those buildings- a bulwark against potential attacks. Behind them were the important structures of state, shaped in the symbolic forms of their occupants- knights, rooks, bishops, a king and a queen. Across the great board, the red side mirrored this exact structure. News of the king's death hadn't spread too far yet, it seemed: red and white Chessmen still mingled freely on the intervening squares. Or perhaps the news had spread and its import simply hadn't sunk in yet. Without the peacekeeper, and with no clear successor in mind, the period of tranquillity was in jeopardy.

However, it wasn't Fian's business to speculate on the political future of his people. It was his business to investigate the death of his ruler, and he had a good idea where to start.

2: The Great Rook and Roll Swindle

The Blind Pig's was located in the queen-side rook building, which had suffered a period of deterioration in recent years. In times of war, rooks were the king's hammer. They were direct, brutal and capable of demolishing an enemy defence long before they fell themselves. In peacetime, their purpose was less clear and many had turned to running businesses with a violent or illicit undercurrent- enterprises that suited their talent for aggression.

On the surface, The Bling Pig's appeared to be a seedy dive bar and music venue, barely better than the kind that might be found in a pawn building. Fian, however, knew it to be something subtly worse. Here, rooks with grievous talents and few scruples could pick up the kind of work that most people liked to pretend didn't exist. More than one 'accident' had been arranged here while some up-and-coming minstrel belted out a tuneless peon on the slick black stage near the front.

Fian strode in with an air of confidence most pawns lacked around rooks.

The doorman moved to eject him on principle but Fian said, calmly, "Ever heard of the touch-move rule? If you touch me, I'll move your face through that table."

The man was old enough to have seen men with Fian's look before and wisely changed his mind about impeding the coated man's progress.

Fian walked across the dark floor to the bar, which had strips of neon embedded in it, and addressed himself to the woman who leaned on the counter. She was no rook, he thought- she lacked the rind of resentment that they all seemed to acquire. His best guess was that she was a promoted pawn.

“What can I get you, boss?” she asked, smiling at him winningly. That smile was part of the reason for her employment, Fian guessed. Men would get drunker than was wise just to keep seeing it.

“Give me a shot of something that burns going down and a quiet word with your boss. You can tell the Desperado I want to flap jaws about a dead king’s ransom,” Fian rapped his knuckles on the counter-top and winked at the barmaid. “If he asks who’s asking, it’s the Knight’s Pawn.”

The promoted pawn gave him a shot of something that burned and scurried off, leaving him to admire the décor.

The whole place was lit with black-lights that made the faux-graffiti on the walls glow. Overhead, a neon chandelier was suspended gaudily. If you lacked class, you might think the place was swank, Fian thought. But he knew that the pretty things in tiny black dresses and the men in big-collared suits were just set dressing for the real business. The drinks were still cheap here, but not as cheap as life.

After a brief wait, a man in an expensive-looking white doublet and britches appeared. He wore the high, heavy boots that so many rooks favoured and wore the fixed, vacant smile of a man who didn’t have to care if those about him lived or died.

“Mr. Chetto!” he beamed. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Fian scowled as the Desperado swaggered up to him.

“I came because the crown doesn’t have a head to sit on,” he replied. “I’m wondering what you might know about that.”

“Me?” replied the Desperado, putting on a look of injured innocence. “Why should I know anything about that?”

“Because the Blind Pigs see everything. Nothing untoward gets done this side of the great board without you knowing about it.”

“I know the knights pronounced our king’s death an accident,” replied the Desperado carefully.

“I know it wasn’t,” Fian said levelly. He didn’t know this- not for certain- but if he was correct, his pretence of certainty was sure to spook the Desperado.

He must have hit a nerve, because the owner of The Blind Pig’s looked about furtively and said “Follow me.”

Fian followed the man through into a private room lit with sickly green and purple neon. The wood on the walls was shaped into complex wedges designed to absorb sound. Anywhere else, the walls might have ears: here they were death.

The Desperado unbuttoned his doublet, revealing an equally florid shirt beneath, then collapsed onto a red leather couch with fake gold decals.

“You’re going to get yourself killed,” he told Fian flatly.

“I never knew you cared,” Fian returned.

The Desperado bit his lip. He seemed, unaccountably, genuinely nervous. The man was gregarious, vicious and self-assured- a murderer and racketeer with the charm and grace of an entertainer. It wasn’t the first time Fian had leant on him for information, but it was the first time he’d seen the underworld kingpin looking scared.

“How far do we go back, Fian?” he asked.

“Long enough to make me feel old and then a little longer for good measure,” the Knight’s Pawn mused. “Why? Are your feet suddenly feeling cold regarding our arrangement? If so, you’ve left it a bit late to acquire a circulatory problem.”

“Our arrangement is fine with me,” the Desperado replied. “I send information about my rivals your way; you don’t mention any of my little indiscretions to the knights. I’d go so far as to call us friends.”

“Except that you’re a sociopath who doesn’t have any,” Fian added for him.

“Well, there is that,” conceded the Desperado. “The point is, you’re the last person on the board I want anything to happen to, but you’re putting yourself right in the path of something dangerous by asking about the old man.”

Fian stuffed his hands in his pockets and looked down at the criminal rook.

“I thought you were the big fish in our little tank,” he commented, mildly. “What’s gotten you spooked? Are we sharing water with a kraken all of a sudden?”

“You could say that,” the Desperado nodded. “Someone had J’adoube whacked- I know that much. Want to know how I know? Because a good number of my regular contractors turned up dead less than an ovr after our beloved leader had his tumble.”

By ‘contractors’, the Desperado meant hit men, but Fian didn’t feel any need to argue the point. The sudden death of a group of paid murderers right after the death of the king didn’t give him any leads to follow, but it was suggestive. Violent men died hard, sporadic deaths, weeks or years apart. The only reason a correlated group would bite the dust simultaneously would be if they were involved in the same bad business. In this case, the timing of the mass dying couldn’t be ignored. But why would someone liquidate a group of hit men right after a king? Unless...

“You think someone’s covering their tracks, don’t you?” he asked the Desperado. “Someone used your best men to kill J’adoube, then had them killed to remove anyone with first-hand knowledge of the regicide. Is that the train your thoughts are riding?”

“You’re the expert,” the Desperado replied. “But I can’t think of another explanation. Can you?”

“No,” replied Fian, wearily. “I just wish our little theory was a thread I could pull on. Having an idea what happened doesn’t tell me who set the wheels in motion or why.”

“Someone might know,” the Desperado replied.

Fian nodded for him to go ahead.

“One of the men who turned up dead- floating in a well, if you must know- had a sweetheart. One of the singers here. She was born bishop but don’t mention that to her when you talk to her.”

“Where do I find her?” Fian asked.

“Her set starts in a mynat and ends in twenty. I don’t suppose there’s any point asking you not to do this is there?”

“None. Thanks for the intel,” Fian affirmed. “You might want to lose your own address for awhile; stay out of the limelight and away from all your usual habitats. Go to ground until this is over.”

“You say that like it’s going to end well,” the Desperado chuckled.

“It’s going to end bloody- I’d just rather it wasn’t your blood or mine,” Fian returned, then turned and walked back towards the main bar and venue.

Fian wouldn’t have pegged the woman the Desperado had pointed him to as a bishop. It wasn’t just that she didn’t dress in the traditional clothes of her rank: she didn’t dress in the traditional manner of any chesswoman. She was wearing a lot of rubber, leather and- Fian was sure- bin bags. She was covered in safety pins and piercings and she wasn’t singing melodiously or with ease. She was belting out a string of melody-infused rage and pain whose lyrics seemed to be deliberately buried in a cacophony of noises. That it was actually listenable was quite an achievement, Fian reflected. She’d created a tune and a rhythm less by controlling the sounds that emerged from her throat and more by wrestling them into submission, but it worked.

When she jumped down from the stage, Fian approached her with a respectful nod.

“You’ve got a mighty voice,” he said. “The Desperado doesn’t typically net anyone with actual talent.”

“If you’re a record producer, you can fuck off,” the woman said.

“I’m not. I’m looking into the death of king J’adoube... and your partner.”

The woman stopped dead and stared at him as the next act took to the stage and began tuning up.

“Come with me,” she said. “We can’t talk here.”

3: The Detective Said to The Bishop

Half an hour after leaving The Blind Pig's, Fian found himself in a very high room in the king-side of the two great bishop buildings, admiring the view through a glitteringly clean window.

These quarters had started off life as exceptionally well-appointed but his hostess had done everything in her power to distress them. The wallpaper had been half ripped off; angry posters adorned what was left; the once-pricey furniture had been broken and mended in a variety of haphazard and inexpert ways.

"Welcome home," said his hostess. "My stage-name's N. Prise, but you can just call me N."

"En Prise..." said Fian thoughtfully. "I'm a little rusty on my war terminology, but doesn't that mean 'in a position to be taken'. It's an odd moniker to self-apply."

N laughed bitterly. "Most people don't even think about it- they just ask me what the first initial stands for."

"I won't. I prefer the air of mystery," Fian replied.

"Well, help yourself to a seat," N sighed. "I'll get us something to drink."

She didn't go to a drinks cabinet but simply pulled a bottle of half-drunk whisky and two dirty tumblers from under a raised armchair as Fian seated himself in another.

He glanced up and noticed the chandelier- a lustrous gold thing with diamond-bulb lights. It was the only thing in the room that hadn't been deliberately ruined.

"What didn't happen?" he quipped. "Let me guess: none of your friends own a stepladder."

"Funny," N said, po-faced, handing him a tumbler. "You said you were here about my partner's death. Corr was a good man, regardless of what anybody says."

"Good... but not above a dirty job, right?" Fian prompted.

"Before he died, he said he was going to do something that would see us set for life," N said. "We never had much."

Fian looked around the room: "You have this place."

"It belongs to the family line. I can't sell it; can't do anything with it except ruin it for the next smug bastard who wants to go into the family business and take up residence."

The 'family business' meant court life, of course. Bishops were the advisors to the king. Fian nodded. He was slowly assembling the puzzle that was N. Born into privilege, she had rejected it- but it was no mere pampered kid's rebellion. There was real, passionate hate in the way she was sabotaging her line's home. And if it was hers to sabotage, it meant that she was the senior member of her family- no parents to vex or rebel against. What had happened to make her dive into poverty and throw away the luxury to which she was born?

Well, it was in the name, wasn't it? N. Prise; en prise; in a position to be taken.

"Someone hurt you- someone with power in the back rank," Fian said aloud. "Was it someone close to the king?"

"You think I had something to do with his death?" demanded N.

"I think your boyfriend was a hit man, and I think he was involved in old J'adoube taking a permanent vacation from the board. But even the bitterest button men don't agree to topple the top man unless they're motivated. Your Corr might have thought he was protecting you, or getting revenge for you. I don't think he'd have taken a regicide job just for the money. What I want to know is who he was working for- because whoever it was chopped Corr's wood just as surely as the king's."

N looked at him for a long moment.

"I don't know who gave him that last job," she said at last. "He never gave me a name... but he did say he was working for a knight."

This was enough to shock Fian. The knights were supposed to be incorruptible. That was the whole point of them: they could charge in where others couldn't because they were above suspicion in every moral and professional sense.

N suddenly looked up sharply, her head swivelling towards the door.

"Did you hear that?" she asked.

Fian had to strain his ears in the silence that followed before he caught the sound that N had picked up on immediately. The girl must have ears sharper than a rook's.

Someone was breathing outside the door.

"They're here for us," he said.

N's face blanched. For all her fire, she wasn't a professional scrapper. Her fight was on the cultural level, not the physical one.

"What do we do?" she asked.

"In a moment, when they're sure we're both in here, they'll break down the door," Fian said, working it out for his own benefit as much as N's. "They'll be hired guns- men like your gentleman caller who don't know what they're involved in. We have to take the element of surprise away from them. Is there another way out of here?"

"There's a fire escape," N replied.

"Good. Use it. I'm going to open the door before they do and try to catch them off balance."

"But..."

"Go!"

N fled and Fian grabbed a heavy brass lamp from the floor and wrenched open the door.

There were two men beyond it, preparing to break it down.

Fian had successfully taken them by surprise and he managed to smash the first one over the skull before either of them could react.

The blow jarred his own arm however and the second thug took advantage of his momentary imbalance to lunge for him.

Fian, wrestling with his attacker, dropped the lamp and went tumbling backwards into N's living room.

The man was on top of him, pinning him to the sticky, abused carpet with superior weight. He wasn't a rook, though- Fian could tell. The man wasn't watching his position the way a trained military man would. His legs were too far apart. Fian brought his knee up between them.

His attacker let out a grunt of pain and loosened his grip.

Fian rolled them both over so that he held the top position and then sent the piston of his fist into the man's face, breaking his nose.

Whoever the thug was, though, he was tough. He clouted Fian about the skull instead of trying to protect himself and sent the detective sprawling across the floor.

Suddenly he was standing over Fian, raising his boot. He meant to stamp on his head, Fian realised. He was a heavy figure, with his muscles barely contained by his vest. He could easily break Fian's skull.

The Knight's Pawn shot out his foot with all the force he could muster, connecting it with the kneecap of the assailant's other leg.

The man fell and now they were both on the floor, but his attacker was winded and Fian wasn't. He rolled onto his front and half stumbled, half scuttled into striking position. Once more, he shot his fist into the cartilage of the foe's mid-face, but this time he didn't stop at one blow. He kept pounding until the enemy was bruised beyond recognition, deprived of teeth and thoroughly unconscious.

He stood up, panting and wiping blood and sweat from his brow.

His gaze turned towards the still-open door and he was amazed to see a knight standing there in full ceremonial armour of shining argent.

The fellow watched him with cool eyes and said "Fian Chetto? You're under arrest for murder."

"Murder? Whose?" Fian demanded. He'd left both of his attacker's alive.

The knight calmly drew his sword and ran it through the unconscious form of the thug Fian had hit with a lamp.

"His," he said.

Fian knew at once that he was looking at the knight who had had the king killed- or perhaps one of several involved the conspiracy. He was prepared to make a fight of it, but the man was too quick.

Before Fian could recover his breath from the last fight, the knight stepped up to him and struck him.

The knight's metal-plated fist ploughed into Fian's jaw with the force of a heavy printing press stamping out a curse. The lights went out.

4: A Hard Day's Knight

Fian regained consciousness in a grey cell illuminated by the unforgiving fluorescence of a bare lighting strip. There were no windows and he could only infer that his place of confinement was beneath one of the knight buildings.

His head was pounding and he was covered in bruises. He hadn't been in such bad condition when he was knocked. The knight who had laid him unconscious must have battered him while he was out, trying to make it look like he'd put up a fight.

Despite his pain, his senses weren't overwhelmed or dulled. When footsteps started coming down the corridor towards him, he heard them immediately. He stepped back from the iron bars of his cell and prepared himself for a fight.

However, the man approaching the cell was Gardez, dressed in his dirty, ill-fitting grey armour and looking incredibly tired.

"They're saying you killed the king," he told Fian.

"Thorough, aren't they?" Fian replied. "I thought they'd just frame me for the murder of that thug." He wondered if his enemy- or enemies- had even been trying to kill him or if their plan, all along, had been to set up him as a fall guy.

Gardez grimaced.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Thorough."

"You don't believe them, do you?" Fian asked, exasperated.

"No, Fian. But we're not just talking about one knight, here. Everyone in the building is towing the line. One person couldn't have framed you that well: we must be looking at a full-blown conspiracy."

Fian could only concur- it made too much sense. Hiring hit men to kill a king, having them killed off and setting up a detective with a spotless record to take the fall all cost money. The kind of money a single knight could never get their hands.

“On the plus side, we know that the knight who brought me in is part of that conspiracy,” he said aloud. “Showing his face wasn’t the smartest move he could have made- and not just because he looks like he put it on back to front and upside down. What’s his name?”

“He goes by Prophylax. If I let you out of here, will you go after him?” Gardez looked uncomfortable.

“Go after him; get answers from him; use his skull as impromptu percussion instrument,” Fian replied. “Why? Do you have a better plan?”

“It’s not that.” Gardez shifted from foot to foot. “If his plan was to set you up- or if it was the plan of his co-conspirators- surely he would have gotten you involved in the case. Bringing you in was my idea.”

Fian scowled. Gardez raised a good point- just not the one he’d intended to make.

“Prophylax is definitely a bad puppet,” Fian affirmed. “But whoever’s pulling his strings didn’t plan to use me from the beginning. That means they can improvise. They’re smart... and that makes them dangerous.”

Gardez nodded.

“You better be able to clear your name,” he said, reluctantly unlocking the cage. “If you can’t break this case, I’m going to spend the rest of my life in clink just for turning this key.”

Fian smiled: “I’ll break it like a fine china plate hitting a concrete floor. If I don’t, ending up in clink will be the least of our problems. King J’adoubé was the only thing between the great board and a great war. Maybe proving a regicidal conspiracy in our own ranks will keep the warmongers too distracted to start things with the reds.”

“Don’t count on it,” Gardez replied. “Now get out of here. You can get out through the stables without being seen.” He pointed and Fian took off.

As it turned out, Gardez was only partially correct. The route through the stables that housed the knights’ mounts was a fast and underpopulated way out. Unfortunately, it wasn’t completely unwatched.

As Fian made his way between the rows of stalls, trying to remain as quiet as he could, a knight stepped out from the end of the corridor, whistling to himself. Fian guessed he was on mount-tending duty and hoped that the fellow would be too low down the chain of command to know who he was.

No such luck.

“Hey! You’re meant to be in your cell!” the knight said.

He was clearly about to yell for back-up, so Fian pounced before he could, covering the distance between them with desperate speed and clamping his hand over the man's mouth.

"I don't want to do anything you'll regret, so listen like you just got new ears and you have to break them in," he hissed. "I was framed. I'm out of my cell because a good man- a knight who isn't in on the stitch-up- let me out. I need you to keep your lips locked and your memory blank, or you'll be condemning an innocent man to a very nasty fate and-"

Evidently the knight didn't believe him, because he kneed Fian in the groin before he could finish his sentence.

Fian dropped to his knees in pain, but still retained his sense. He only had moments to silence the knight before he called for back-up.

He punched as hard as he could. On his knees, his choice of targets was limited, but he hit his opponent's shin hard enough to topple him and bring him down to his level.

Again, he got his hand over the knight's mouth before he could raise the alarm.

"Listen, you stupid little bastard," Fian growled, pushing the knight onto his back and pinning him. "I'm trying to stop you making a really big mistake."

The knight thrashed and then went for the sword at his belt. He managed to get an arm free and swung the blade at Fian's face.

Fian grabbed the young knight's wrist just in time to save himself from a lethal gash and tried to force the man's arm down and away from him.

The knight jerked violently and, for a moment, Fian lost his balance.

He did not, however, lose his grip on the knight's wrist.

The knight went limp and for a moment, Fian couldn't understand why. Then he realised: he'd pitched forward when the knight jerked. The knight must have loosed his grip on the blade momentarily, because it had somehow gotten turned around. Fian's fall forward had delivered it into the young man's heart.

Well, Fian thought numbly, he wasn't innocent any more.

He staggered to his feet and made a final, clumsy run for the exit.

It was the dead of night when he got into the alley next to the knight building and he was surprised to find N there.

"I was trying to post bail for you when your friend tipped me off that you might be making a bid for freedom," she said, as though daring escapes from prisons co-opted by conspiracies were the most normal thing in the world.

“We need to get out of here,” Fian said. “Someone tried to stop me. I didn’t end the way I would have liked.”

N nodded. Fian was amazed that she didn’t feel the need to ask questions.

“My place?” she asked.

“No. If you offered to post bail, the bad guys will know to look for me there. There’s a cheap hotel in one of the pawn buildings- the king-side rook’s pawn. We can hole up there while we work out our next move.”

N nodded again, giving him her agreement with question. She was good in a crisis, he thought- she knew when to offer advice and when to follow it without wasting time.

They set off at a brisk walk, keeping their heads down. By the time alarm bells started ringing at the knight building, they were far enough away not to be hunted.

An owl later, N sat perched on the edge of a cheap wooden chair in Hotel Patzer, smoking a cigarette. Fian watched her closely, trying to judge if she was close to breaking point. The spiny tension in her body and posture was pronounced, but she seemed to be holding herself together better than he had any right to expect.

“So? Do you have a plan?” she asked.

“We need to go after a man named Prophylax- a knight. He’s part of the conspiracy that killed the king, but we can’t go after him at the knight building.”

Knight buildings were both stations and barracks; places of work and places of residence for the side’s knights. N’s next question was therefore an obvious one.

“How do we draw him out?” she asked.

“I know a guy who can convincingly sell me out,” replied Fian.

As one might have predicted, Fian’s plan took the form of a trip to the Desperado, who was shocked at what he suggested.

“You want me to tip off Prophylax and tell him where you are? Are you insane? The guy might not come alone!”

Fian shrugged: “he will if you ask him to. You’re a kingpin who he stands to turn into an ally. He’s not going to risk vexing you. It’s the best chance we have. Just tell him we’re hiding out in the back room here at The Blind Pig’s and let nature its course.”

The Desperado shuddered.

They were all in the neon-lit private meeting room that where Fian had first chatted to the rook about the king’s death. The Desperado looked even more nervous now than then.

“This could go very badly, for all of us,” he said.

“The lives we lead- you just described an average day,” Fian sighed.

The Desperado nodded regretfully and Fian and N settled down to wait.

Fian was, at core, a creature of instinct and, in the end, his instincts proved correct. The Desperado asked and Prophylax came alone.

He came armed though. Swords and warhammers had been the weapons of choice on the great board since the first war betwixt the white side and the red, but Prophylax wasn't at war. In his hand, he held a sleek grey cylinder attached to a grip and trigger. A gun- the kind with the clip in the handle that could expel perhaps a dozen rounds before needing to reload. More of a rook's weapon than a knight's, Fian reflected.

His enemy stood in the doorway, pointing the weapon at Fian and N. Prise.

“Well, aren't you a sight for sore eyes,” Fian said before Prophylax could speak. “They say there's never a knight around when you need one, but here you are.”

“Laugh it up, jester,” Prophylax snarled. “You've caused me no end of problems, but when I take back your body, I'll be the hero who brought down the king-slayer.”

“Yeah?” Fian arched an eyebrow. “It doesn't worry that I was just sat here, waiting for you? Almost like I asked the Desperado to tip you off?”

This comment had precisely the desired effect. Prophylax span around, ready to shoot the Desperado, whom he suddenly imagined was sneaking up behind him. There was no one there, of course: Fian and the Desperado were friends, but the former couldn't ask the latter to knock down a knight for him.

It didn't matter. What Fian had wanted- and what he got- was Prophylax distracted.

Prophylax had won their last fight- nobody could argue over that point- but Fian had been exhausted, in pain and off-balance. Now, he rose stepped across the room and struck Prophylax in the where the back of his neck joined his skull before the man could turn back round.

The blow wasn't enough to sever the spine- Fian wasn't looking to kill the knight- but it was enough to lay him out, and the pawn found the crunching sound his fist made as it connected very satisfying.

By the time Prophylax came to, Fian had tied him to a convenient chair.

“This doesn't end well for you,” Prophylax spat.

“I live in a cheap room in a cheaper building and do a job where I have to deal with men like you,” Fian replied, cheerfully enough. “Next time you want to threaten someone, pick someone with something to lose.” He punched Prophylax in the face, hard enough to break his nose.

“You won’t get away wit this!” the knight screeched.

“I think that’s my line,” Fian remarked, placidly. “Unless, of course, you’re not part of the conspiracy that killed the king, and we both know you are. Except... conspiracy isn’t the right word, is it? You see, ‘conspiracy’ implies that all the participants had an equal level of input, but you’re not the smartest cookie ever baked: there’s no way you helped think up this little gambit.”

In reality, Fian had no idea what Prophylax’s intellect was like. The man spoke like a vicious idiot, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t a brain hidden in there somewhere. He was employing an old detective’s trick- acting like he knew more than he did in the hope that his subject would reveal the rest.

To his amazement, it worked almost at once, without any further prodding or manipulation- Prophylax cracked like an egg.

“If I give you a name, what will you do?” he asked.

Fian put on his best beneficent smile and said “Well, that person would become the focus of my investigation. I wouldn’t have to keep you tied to this chair... or use this on your kneecaps.” Fian produced the gun Prophylax had had when he walked in.

The knight may have been strong and brave when he had the upper hand, but the moment it was taken away from him, he had crumbled. The threat to blow off his kneecaps was the final incentive he needed.

“You’re looking for a queen- calls herself Sans Voir. She paid ordered the hit and paid for everything!” Prophylax looked up and met Fian’s eye with a touch of his original bravura. “She’ll kill you, you know.”

“Did you say... Sans Voir?” asked N, before Fian could respond. “She did this?”

“Yeah. She’s the brains behind it. And she’s right, too. You two are on the wrong side of-”

Fian assumed the last word was going to be ‘history’, but Prophylax never got to say it. N had snatched the gun from his hand and fired it directly into the knight’s face, reducing it to a gory inversion; a sucking prolapse just above his neck.”

“Something you’d like to share with the rest of the class?” Fian asked, mildly.

N’s voice was shaking when she replied: “You asked me if someone close to the king hurt me- because of the name I chose- N. Prise. Well, I... I never answered you but you were right. It was Sans Voir.” N paused for a long time, unable to summon up the words. When she finally continued, her voice was even quieter than it had been before. “She was J’adoubé’s favourite. Everyone trusted

her. Including my father. He used to leave me with her when he went on diplomatic forays to the red side of the board. She... oh my check, I can't say it."

N didn't collapse to the floor whimpering, or do anything so prototypically weak or dramatic. Her eyes, however, fixed on some internal vista of personal devastation and Fian realised he could infer the kind of abuse she'd suffered just from the look on her face. And at the hands of a queen, no less.

He put his hand on her shoulder.

"You know," he said thoughtfully. "I've been told that revenge doesn't make you feel better. Personally, I think its worth testing that thesis for ourselves, don't you?"

N's eyes cleared and she smiled at him- a hard, cold smile.

For a moment- and only for a moment- Fian felt sorry for Sans Voir.

5: Drama Queen

Queens were dangerous. Everybody knew that. Yes, they made up the royal harem, but that wasn't their only purpose- not even their main purpose. Queens were battle-maidens; ferocious she-warriors. Fast, strong and ruthless, when war broke out they were a king's best defence. Their training was second-to-none; their equipment was light, well-made and powerful. A queen who was prepared to sacrifice herself for the cause could rush in and devastate a foe's defences so quickly that they'd have no opportunity to reorganise.

Approaching the queen building that stood besides the king's palace under cover of darkness, Fian was didn't hold out much hope of a successful outcome. If Sans Voir didn't kill him and N. Prise, one of the other queens would think them intruders and do it herself. And yet, he didn't feel inclined to alter his course. He and his friend were about to break into a building filled with capable warriors who could and would kill them on sight... yet he had no yearning to slink away into the knight and leave the case half-finished.

"Ready?" he asked N. Prise.

She nodded.

The building wasn't visibly guarded. It didn't have to be. The people inside could take care of themselves.

The pair did have one piece of real luck on their side, however: there was a window on the second floor, standing ajar, and this was to be their entry point.

Fian ran up to the wall below it, pressed his back against it and made a stirrup with his hands. Without needing to be told, N took a run up, and used the makeshift stirrup to boost herself to the window. She opened it wider, slid partway inside and then reached down her hand to help Fian up.

Glancing around to make sure there were no nosy civilians about, Fian took N's hand and jumped, giving her just enough of a boost to pull him in.

The whole procedure was executed in moments, as though they'd been practising for years. Fian was also amazed by how little noise they made doing it.

Apparently, however, the few shuffling and tapping sounds they had admitted had been just a tiny bit too loud, anyway.

They had wound up in a bedroom- a fully gold-leafed affair of exquisitely over-the-top rococo design- and their entrance had awakened the occupant.

He was a slender man with golden hair- not all queens were female- and before Fian or N could get their breath back from the daring entrance, he had drawn a scimitar from under his gold-leafed, silver-sheeted bed and assumed the pose of a professional fighter.

"Now," he said. "My window is always open to friends and lovers, but you two are neither. I suggest you explain yourselves before I run you through. Even afterwards, I may still run you through."

There was a kind of prissy flamboyance to his speech that made Fian wonder if he was dealing with a promoted pawn rather than a born queen. It was natural for a promoted pawn to invest his or her position with more flamboyance than someone who inherited it dynastically.

Based on this guess, Fian decided to try a camaraderie gambit.

"This is N and I'm Fian Chetto," he said. "I was born pawn just like you. We're outsiders, you and I- that's why my companion and I chose your window to enter through. We need your help."

This was, of course, a blatant fabrication, but it made the blonde man's sword waver a little, as though he were debating lowering it.

"Why should I believe you? You could just be common thieves!" he trilled, re-pointing the blade.

Fian smiled. Giving his real name had been a risk he'd had to take- a grab for authenticity. Luckily, it hadn't jeopardised him: this queen didn't know that a man named Fian Chetto was supposed to have murdered the king. Or, if he did, he hadn't put two and two together yet.

"You should believe me," he said, carefully, "because you know something is very wrong in this building; that the reaction to J'adoubé's death hasn't been quite right. Somebody here didn't seem surprised when it happened. I'm right, aren't I?"

The blonde man actually did lower his sword a little: "How did you know that?"

"Because Sans Voir is the one who had the king killed," N put in.

That did it- Fian and N offering up that name at just the right moment convinced the blonde man- or, at least, convinced him enough. He lowered his weapon completely.

“Talk,” he said.

So Fian did, laying out the entire course of his case from start to finish, not even omitting the suspicion he was under. He didn’t have to. The queen was enraptured with the story... and he wanted to believe it.

“That bitch!” he said, when Fian had told him everything. “I knew she was faking her grief! she wasn’t acting right! And she was spending far too much time with the king before he died, almost like she was trying to get something out of him before time ran out. I’m a fool! I should have warned the king the moment I realised something wasn’t right!”

“You weren’t to know,” Fian said. “Look, we need to find Sans Voir. Do you know where she’ll be at this time of night?”

“Late-night training, I imagine- the dojo two floors up. It’s the big room: you can’t miss it,” the queen replied. “But maybe I should come with you. You two don’t exactly look like you belong, you know?”

Fian did know and seriously considered the offer for a moment before dismissing it.

“No. If my friend and I fail, somebody needs to stay alive to pursue Sans Voir,” he said. “I’m trusting you with this... what’s your name?”

“Isolani,” replied the queen- the promoted pawn who still used a pawn’s name.

“Thank you, Isolani,” Fian said. “N, let’s get this done.”

And they took to the door.

Fian didn’t know, but Isolani watched them go rather wistfully, wishing he could have known them better.

“That was far too easy,” N whispered, as they crept up a flight of stairs that would lead them to their desired floor. Rococo and gold-leaf were the order of the day, even in the corridors, and the bannister to which they clung glimmered lazily in the low light.

“We’re about to fight a queen. Not just any queen, but the king’s favourite, according to your recollections. Perhaps we were due some pre-emptive good luck,” Fian suggested.

“Or Mr. Isolani was lying and he’s going to sound the alarm as soon as we’re too far into the building to escape.

Fian shook his head: Isolani could have cut them to ribbons there and then if he wanted, be he hadn’t. He had no reason to play with them in such a manner. Besides, Fian had another, perhaps sentimental reason for trusting the man.

“Once a pawn, always a pawn,” he said simply.

The ‘dojo’, as Isolani had called it, was a huge room with a domed and frescoed ceiling, filled with mechanical manikins against which training queens could pit their weapons and skills. The walls were completely covered in gold and silver statues, all in dramatic combat-poses.

And in the centre of the room was their target, fighting eight of the mechanised manikins at once with as simple, flat blade.

She stood at least two heads taller than Fian and her pristine white hair would have reached to her waist if it wasn’t constantly billowing and flowing about her in response to her movements. She wore golden armour with complex, argent-white designs etched into gleaming surface and the expression on her face as she fought the machines was one of sincere, unabashed hatred, as though she wasn’t just imagining them as her enemies, but believed that they were.

Fian silently slipped out Prophylax’s gun, aimed at the queen’s leg, and fired.

The failure of this manoeuvre was spectacular.

Not only did the queen’s body twist and flash out the way at the sound of the gunshot, she was across the room before Fian could line up another shot.

He had no doubt she’d have skewered him through the heart without thinking if it wasn’t for N’s presence.

The moment, her eyes caught N, she threw her weapon aside and instead struck Fian in the face with the flat of her hand. She was so fast he was powerless to stop her, and she sent him skidding across the floor with bright white bubbles of pain bursting behind his eyes. Then she picked N up by the throat and shook her, almost playfully.

“Well. I wasn’t expecting to see you with my little fall-guy,” she said, grinning the too-wide grin of the mad. “You must tell me how that happened before I kill you both.”

Before N could tell her anything, however, she bashed her against the wall and rendered her unconscious. Fian tried to struggle to his feet but, in a flash, she was on him, putting her boot hard into his head.

For the second time since the beginning of the case, his world went black.

When Fian regained consciousness, he was tied and gagged and on his knees in some sort of short, nascent crop the colour of dull gold. This, at least, gave him some idea where he was. Around the actual squares of the great board, there was hollow rectangle of farmland, which made a green and yellow border around the red and white zones of habitation and the demilitarised zone in the middle. Beyond this belt of plant-life was... well, nothing. Just the edge of the board and the void

of space beyond. In fact, Fian could see it from where he was knelt- a patch where the blue of the sky seemed thinned and he could see the twinkling of mysterious lights in the inky blackness beyond.

He tried to turn his head, but found that he'd been bound too thoroughly. He couldn't even do that. Every part of his body was locked in position.

After a little time had passed, the queen Sans Voir walked into his line of vision.

"I'm glad I didn't kill you straight away," she mused, though Fian thought she was talking to herself more than to him. "The story little miss Prise told me about how you two met was most entertaining. Now, I just need to confirm something, then I can kill you and there won't be any need for torture or anything silly like that. Who else knows you came after me?"

Fian considered this question. Sans Voir already had an answer from N, which meant that he needed to give the same one if he was to avoid being tortured. If their stories tallied, Sans Voir would be satisfied. What would N have said? It would have to be the name of someone they both knew, and it would have to be the name of someone Sans Voir couldn't easily kill or threaten. Certainly she wouldn't take 'nobody' for an answer.

"Well? Clock's ticking!" she grinned manically at him. "Better speak up before I... oh, I don't know, I'm new at this. Maybe I'll bite off your ear!"

Ironically, the truth seemed like a good bet. The one person both Fian and N knew who Sans Voir might also have difficulty killing was actually the one person who knew they'd gone after.

"Isolani," muttered Fian, and realised he was talking through a mouthful of broken teeth. "Isolani knows what you did."

Sans Voir seemed pleased, beaming out "You're more cooperative than I expected!" in a tone of unaffected joy.

Well, of course he was, Fian reflected irritably. Playing for time wouldn't do him any good if he didn't have enough body parts left to make an escape when the moment came. He needed to secure Sans Voir's good will and then play for time. He thought he'd already done the first thing, now he needed to move onto the second before she chopped off his head or did something equally ghastly.

"You're going to kill me no matter what I say now," he said, making an effort to make his voice weaker than it was while his hands, behind his back, picked quietly at the ropes that held him. "At least let me die a happy man. I have to solve the case. I don't want to shuffle off into the great beyond with a blot on my copy book. I know you had the king killed; organised the whole conspiracy and paid the bills... what I don't know is why."

Sans Voir's eyes flashed and her grin widened. For a moment, Fian thought she was going to laugh at his question, then simply kill him.

What she did instead was say “I’m so glad you asked! Honestly, here I am saving our side, and I can never claim credit! Well, at least you’ll know.” She went quiet for a moment before continuing “J’adoubé was an idiot. An idealist. All his talk of peace... he never consider the possibility that the reds might just toss it all out the window and invade. With every policy he made and diplomatic mission he established, he was chipping away at our defences! I told him what he was doing and he wouldn’t listen!”

Fian could hear the madness in her voice; could hear it audibly reach a crescendo as she approached the word ‘listen!’

For a time, he thought she was done. She seemed lost in thought, but then she continued.

“He used to come out here to think, back before his final insult to us; back before I stopped trying to reason with him.”

“Final insult?” Fian asked, when Sans Voir didn’t seem inclined to continue.

“Hmm? Oh, yes. He wasn’t content just to weaken our defences. One day, he left his palace to come here. He was down when he left- we’d just had another argument about defence policy. When he returned, though, he was high as a kite. High as a kite, and talking about abolishing the rank system. No more kings and queen and rooks and knights and bishops. No more pawns. Just pieces. All without a place in the world.” Sans Voir’s face twisted into an expression of pure hate. “Do you see? Do you see why I had to do what I did?”

Fian had nearly managed to loosen his ropes. What response would keep her talking? What response would buy him time to escape? Should he agree with her? No- she’d just smile, call his death a noble sacrifice and kill him. He needed to wind her up.

“Because you’re bananas?” he suggested.

As it turned out, this was the wrong move.

Sans Voir screamed with fury and then grabbed him by the hair.

Fian was amazed at her strength as she lifted him and threw him. It was a method of execution he hadn’t expected- being thrown over the edge of the board and into space.

As he tumbled away with the air thinning around him and gravity reluctantly giving up her grip, he saw Sans Voir grabbing N by the hair and making her watch. He wondered what might become of her now. Would Sans Voir kill her after making her watch his death? Would she drag her back to the queen building to abuse her for entertainment? Would she hand her over to the knights as a new fall-woman for the death of the king?

Somehow, Fian thought that dying before he found out was the best mercy he could expect.

6: King of the Hill

Fian Chetto was very surprised to wake up alive. The cold touch of space and the lack of oxygen should have combined to kill.

He knew he wasn't dead; wasn't awakening to some beautiful eternity in an afterlife he had never contemplated. He knew this because he was sure the dead couldn't feel pain and he was in agony. In addition to the cuts and bruises he'd sustained while working the case, he was painfully aware that one of his legs was broken, as though he'd fallen on it from a great height.

He seemed to be in a state of shock. Though he was sure his spine was intact and that he should have been able to move his body, he couldn't. None of his limbs were responding to any of the signals he sent them.

He wished he could see more of his surroundings. He was lying in tall grass, that was too high for him to see over. There was something odd about it. It wasn't the right colour. Grass where he came from was green. The grass he was looking at was a deep shade of amber.

After awhile, he heard the crunching of footsteps and a man rolled him onto his back.

Fian looked up into the fellow's face and didn't recognise a fellow chessman. Though he and this other fellow had the same number of limbs each, his apparent rescuer was shorter and squatter than any chessman and his skin seemed to have a pattern of concentric circles shaping its contours.

He was elderly and kind-faced however and, though he clearly didn't belong to the world of Fian's birth, he was a welcome sight.

"I can't move," Fian managed to say.

"I'm not surprised," the old man chuckled. "Falling out the sky will put a fellow into a real state of shock. You know, you're not the first to come here. I assumed, after your king fell from the sky, the next expedition might be a little better prepared."

"My king... King J'adoube... he came here?" Fian croaked.

"Didn't you know?" the old fellow asked, looking perplexed. "I rather thought the discovery of another, intelligent board would be as significant for your people as for ours."

"The king was murdered," Fian said. He was starting to fit things together in his head. The king had gone to the edge of the board to 'think' after an argument with Sans Voir. He'd been in a depressed state of mind, wondering if he was doing the right thing. Had he thrown himself off the edge of the great board and landed... here? Was this land the source of his curious idea to abolish rank.

"I'm sorry to hear J'adoube died," said the old man, sadly. "He was a keen fellow, very curious about our way of life, though he stayed less than a day. He seemed to think he had something important to do back in his homeland."

Fian wasn't surprised.

He was also happy to discover that his fingers and toes were started to twitch of their own accord. He took control of them and moved them volitionally. Just to be able to do this felt amazing.

He tested his legs and arms and found that he could make them move very slightly.

"You'll soon be on your feet," the old fellow said.

"Well, I might soon be back on my foot," Fian sighed. "One leg is broken."

"And you're not crying out in pain? Good grief, you are a stoic one, aren't you. I'll send for a stretcher," the old chap said.

"You can have men come and help me? You're in charge around here?" Fian asked.

"In a manner of speaking. Somebody has to make policy, tax and redistribute wealth. It's all numbers, really. I'm just a civil servant with a fancy title when you get right down to it. My name's Damka."

"Fian Chetto," Fian replied. "You mentioned a title?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes. That old thing. I'm the black King," Damka said. "My counterpart on the white side of the board might want to see you at some point, but you landed rather nearer the black side. Give me a moment and I'll get that stretcher."

Fian was amazed. He had just spoken to a king, but there was nothing regal about the man. Nor did he seem particularly strained by the burden of responsibility. Fian had sometimes heard it said that the crown was a great burden, but Damka treated his royal station as a job.

Of course, the detective didn't have time to be amazed for long. Damka wondered off and returned with two healthy young men and a stretcher moments later. After that, Fian was borne aloft towards a very curious city.

Fian was used to thinking of cities as crowded, excessively organised and made up of many ornate building-types. The city of king Damka had only one type of building: squat, dark cylinders. One of them was slightly taller than the others, but that was all that made it stand out.

This lack of differentiation was not unpleasant or oppressive, however. The buildings (three rows of them) were only placed on the dark squares (which were deep green in hue). The light, cream-coloured squares that they alternated against had been turned into public gardens and arboretums. Water features, flowers and sinewy, blossom-laden trees broke up the sameness of the building and Fian could see countless individuals enjoying their days in languid, easy fashion. Like his own board, he realised, this one was at peace, despite the presence of two sides.

He wasn't brought to the taller building, which he assumed was Damka's palace. Instead, he was admitted to a structure that seemed entirely devoted to the practice of medicine.

His own board had apothecaries and sawbones, of course, but they were spread across many buildings, each one operating independently and charging what they could get away with in that building. Here, all the doctors were in one place and Fian could see nobody demanding payment.

“What, exactly, is this place?” he asked.

“It’s a hospital,” replied Damka, looking taken-aback. “You said you had a broken leg.”

“I appreciate the medical assist, but a splint and a sturdy stick’s all I need. I wasn’t talking about the building. I meant... your board, I suppose.”

“If you’ll agree to sit still and have your bones set, I’ll tell you everything you want to know,” Damka replied, soothingly.

“Agreed,” Fian said, dubiously.

“Then allow me to formally welcome you to Draughtsland,” the king said.

While Fian had his bones set, Damka introduced him to a completely novel concept: a rankless society. Here was king J’adoubé’s vision of the great chess board realised; here was a world without pawns or knights or rooks or bishops or queens or kings. The ‘draughtsmen’ were all equals, all living in state-provided accommodations with enough space and free access to water and power. A king, here, was just a normal man or woman picked to do the tedious but necessary work of government through a mechanism called ‘election’. Fian didn’t quite understand this process, but made a mental note to return to it later.

People still had jobs and earned money amid the low, cylindrical buildings, but it was heavily taxed and so nobody wanted for life’s essentials. Nor did the rich grow excessively rich- certainly nobody was rich enough to influence the political life of the nation.

Fian had once heard that the red side of his board aspired to a less ranked society, but the price was high. Censorship in their media, abuses of power in government. But here was equality in practice. In Draughtsland, economic and social justice wasn’t a distant dream to be paid for with blood: the people of this board were simply quietly getting on with it.

Fian thought that J’adoubé had been onto something when he decided to import Draughtslands ideas to his own world.

Of course, when Fian was a little recovered and had time to explore Draughtsland for himself, he saw holes in its workings. There were people who had found loopholes in the taxation laws and acquired more than they should have. He suspected they wielded more power than they ought to, too. The level of technology also seemed to be lagging behind that of his own board, as though too much peace and equality had dulled the capacity for invention. After all, there was no need of it.

On the whole, though, he had to admit the Draughtsmen were onto something. Some version of a rankless society was clearly possible and blatantly desirable.

After just three days amid the Draughtsmen, Fian sought out Damka once again. He found him in a garden of blue blossoms and purple flowers, talking to a man who looked much like him but dressed all in white.

“Ah, Fian,” Damka smiled. “I was just about to send someone to look for you. This is my counterpart from the white side, king Calculi.”

“Just Calculi will suffice, you old flatterer,” said the other man, chortling. “It’s an honour to meet you, Mr. Fian Chetto.”

“The honour’s mine,” Fian said politely. “But I’m about to make you wish you’d never met me. I have a favour to ask and it’s a big one. If a normal favour is asking for a glass of water, this is asking to put an entire river in a cup.”

Damka and Calculi exchanged looks, then the former said, in a serious tone: “Go on.”

“I need to return to my board, and I need someone to come with me; someone who can testify regarding J’adoubé and what he discovered. Back home, queen San Voir is gearing up to smash the old man’s legacy like a cheap plate. The only way I can stop her is if someone from this board tells the knights what J’adoubé was planning and backs my version of events.”

Damka said simply “I’ll go. Calculi can hold down the fort on my behalf until I get back.”

Fian smiled. The world of a king- even a king from an alien board- would carry weight. Assuming Damka could get him home, his ordeal was almost over. The end was in sight. Sans Voir might not know it, but she was looking down the wrong end of justice’s sword.

This was what Fian believed on that sunny afternoon beneath the blossom trees. He could not have known, then, how badly wrong things had gone in his brief absence.

7: Checkmate

The return to Chessland was easier than Fian could have anticipated. While the Draughtsmen lagged behind when it came to physical, palpable technology, their mathematics were second to none. At Damka’s request, scholars were able to use information from his own crash-landing and king J’adoubé’s to calculate the exact time and location when he had to step off the board in order to fall back to his own.

He and Damka were equipped with thermal, oxygenated foam- and rubber-filled suits to keep them alive in space and cushion their landing. At the appropriate time and place, they simply donned them and stepped out of Draughtsland.

No, it wasn't the journey that proved disastrous. It was the return.

Fian knew something was wrong, even as he fell through the sky and hurtled towards the white side of his native board. There was too much of the other colour in evidence and he could see licks of flame everywhere.

Upon landing (with surprisingly little pain), he was sure of what he'd suspected as he fell towards his board's gravity.

Though he'd only been gone a few days, the political situation had finished its nosedive while he was in Draughtsland. The reds had invaded.

"I assume it's not always like this?" commented Damka mildly, studying Fian's horrified expression.

"No. War's broken out like a bad rash," Fian replied, grimly. "And I bet I know who's to blame."

"This Sans Voir woman you mentioned?" Damka suggested.

"Right. With the king dead and me framed for the murder and thrown into space, she'd want to secure her power-base- maybe even put herself in position to be declared king. With J'adoube dead without issue, she would be the only viable successor."

"And the best way for her to secure that future would be war?" Damka asked.

"Right again. If she antagonised the reds- goaded them into invading- she could come out on top and secure a war hero's reputation before anyone else looked too closely into the old king's death."

"So... I assume my testimony is rather worthless, then?" Damka sighed.

"Maybe not. But it can't do any good while Sans Voir's alive. Wait here."

The two men had landed in the border of arable land that surrounded the main board, and now Fian ran towards the white side of the board, stripping off his space-suit to reveal his battered coat beneath. He didn't wait to see if Damka stayed or followed.

The city was aflame. Men in the grey and vermilion great-coats of the red side were marching through streets, driving screaming civilians ahead of them while fighting white pawns, knights, rooks and queens tried to charge the foe without butchering those civilians in the process. Weapons of every age were employed on both sides, from modern guns to cracked and ageing cannons to the swords and battleaxes that had remained immutable since the first wars. Explosions shook the air and whole buildings were racked by flames.

In all this chaos, Fian was just one more face in the crowd, scampering to avoid injury. Even his gait was unrecognisable. His leg was still in the strange brace the hospital doctors had put it in- a thick white thing that was hard to run in.

But his anonymity was false. He wasn't like the others in the crowd. He had a goal in mind.

Racing between some buildings and through others, he made his way, gradually, to the palace of the king.

He half-ran, half-limped towards the venerable old structure, which was the white of pale, polished opals, and threw himself inside via a window that had already been smashed in the fighting.

Two queens, stationed as guards, stared in amazement as he landed on the pearl-hued floor. For a moment, they were unsure of what to do- after all, he was a pawn of their own side.

Knowing he was in no position to fight them, Fian took advantage of their confusion to say "I have an urgent message for Sans Voir! She's still in charge, I presume?"

The two queens exchanged a glance.

Fian, putting as much fierce authority into his voice as possible, demanded "Well?"

"She's still in charge..." said one of the queens, uncertainly, shifting in her heavy gold armour.

"Then take me to her," Fian snapped.

He was a pawn, but for all these two knew, he'd been promoted in battle. They had choice but to obey him- or rather, his tone of voice convinced them they had no choice but to obey him.

They marched him through Gothic corridors rendered in purest pearl and up stairways of white marble until, at last, Fian found himself pushed out onto a balcony, on which Sans Voir stood, surveying the battle.

"Ma'am... there's a messenger for you," said one of Fian's escorts.

From her tactical position on the balcony, Sans Voir must have been able to judge how well the war was going. It was clearly to her liking because, as she turned around, the expression on her face was one of savage joy.

As she saw Fian, however, her expression changed. Her grin faltered and was replaced by an expression of confusion that would soon turn to alarm and anger if Fian gave it a chance.

"You're... dead..." she said, unable to wrap her head around Fian's presence.

He couldn't beat her in a fight. He hadn't thought about what he was going to do when he got to her at all, in fact.

But now he knew. Now it was suddenly as clear as crystal.

He began to run towards her.

It seemed to happen in slow motion, each footstep carrying him lazily through the air. He felt like he was floating; almost like he was running underwater. The pain in his leg was still there, but it felt distant and it didn't impede his movements any more.

Sans Voir just stared at him, still trying to process his presence.

Her expression seemed to be shifting in slow motion, going from confusion and surprise to dismay to anger.

She drew a sword from a sheath at her belt and swung it at him, but she was working from a false assumption. She was assuming that Fian would slow down as he reached her and fight her on the edge of the balcony. Fian didn't slow down, so her swing was miss-timed. It came nowhere close to hitting him and he impacted Sans Voir at full momentum.

Together, they went over the lip of the balcony.

The world still didn't speed up. Fian had time to appreciate how beautiful the blazing city looked as they tumbled downward to the hard, unyielding ground below. He had time to reflect on how much falling he'd been doing lately. He had time think the words 'case closed' just before the ground greeted him and his enemy.

Sans Voir hit the ground first and probably would have lived, thanks to her armour, if Fian hadn't landed directly on top of her, adding his weight to the force of her impact.

Conversely, Fian probably would have died if her body and crumpling armour hadn't been between him and the ground.

But, as it happened, Sans Voir was squeezed to a pulp in her metal carapace, between the unyielding ground and Fian's body. Fian, meanwhile, had his descent slowed by this process, just gradually enough that he was able to roll off his dead enemy alive.

The expression on her face was horrible, because it contained no fear or pain. It was just terrible, terminal amazement.

Looking at her face, Fian realised that Sans Voir had died thinking she had seen a ghost.

The city burned around him and Fian just lay in the dust and blood of the ground below the palace, listening to the sounds of battle and panicked, stampeding civilians.

He'd done what he set out to do. He'd brought J'adoube's murderer to justice. It was just a shame about the war.

8: A New Game

As it transpired, the war didn't last very long. For Fian, it ended when he was dragged to a set of cells by an enraged queen and flung in. He'd murdered the de facto leader of the war effort and was

assumed to be a double-agent, working for the reds. There was one bright side to this: the cell he was flung into also contained N. Prise- battered, damaged, but beautifully and wonderfully alive.

For everyone else, the war ended less than twenty ows later, when a distant and very reluctant relative of king J'adoubé- a man named Remis- took the throne just long enough to offer the other side a formal draw and suggest, mildly, that they shouldn't throw away the peace his predecessor had built because of the insults of a now-dead queen.

Fian was still believed to have murdered J'adoubé, of course, and he and N waited to be executed for several days after peace broke out.

In the end, however, his story penetrated the thick heads of the surviving knights, thanks to the repeated insistence of Damka, who emerged in the aftermath to explain what had really happened. Corroborating evidence was found among Sans Voir's own papers and, much to his surprise, Fian found himself released into the smouldering remains of the white side, with N alongside him.

"There must have been others involved in the conspiracy against J'adoubé," N murmured as they wended their way through the dazed streets towards Fian's home.

"The knights have Sans Voir's papers now. Gardez has them, I think. They can round up the stragglers."

N accepted this and fell quiet. It wasn't a day for talking.

Later, Fian received a visit from Damka, who stood looking around at his pokey little office in amazement.

"You actually live like this?" he asked.

"I manage," Fian shrugged. "Maybe if your ideas catch on, there'll finally be money to do something about the damp and the insect infestations."

"Here's hoping," Damka smiled. "I came to ask what you'll do now. You're something of a hero, you know- now that people know you avenged J'adoubé rather than murdered him."

Fian considered this. In the little kitchen area behind the front office, he could hear N. Prise making tea. She seemed to have attached herself to him, and he didn't mind that at all. They'd never be lovers- he'd come into her life after the death of her man and that association was probably indelible. But it was good to have a friend.

"We'll take the next case that comes along," he said.

In the end, he was a pawn; a man who worked and was proud of his work. What else could he have said?

Gunweeds

The FTL artery wound through the silken blackness of the infinite void like a crimson ribbon. The warpblood that flowed within it was almost deserted. Only a single cell travelled within it- a sleek red oval of airtight plastic and precision-engineered biopolymers. Inside, a dangerous man sat dozing at the rubbery, pseudo-organic controls. He didn't look dangerous, with his long, hippy hair and his cyan-and-indigo coat, covered in badges. He looked like a roadie for a B-list psychedelic band. Even his veins, visible just below his pale skin, were a mellow teal in hue- though that was a species thing. Or so he told people. He wasn't in the habit of revealing his planet of origin, so the claim was hardly verifiable.

The artery ultimately terminated on the surface of a remote world- a tropical sphere covered in thick, scarlet floral growth- twisting strands of sanguinary ivy and ruby trees that rustled beneath a toxin-green sky.

The man who looked like a roadie jerked awake as the planet's gravity touched his cell and he used the control panel to slow it gradually until it stopped beneath a gap in the arterial wall.

He raised the vehicle to the top of the warpblood channel and popped the lid.

Two three-eyed men in black suits were waiting by the artery exit-gap to greet him.

"Mr. Vu?" asked one of them. "Mr. Vertigo Vu?"

The roadie- Vertigo Vu- nodded: "That's me, my dudes."

The two men- the embodiments of cold professionalism- winced at the informality.

"The boss is waiting," said the one who spoke.

Vertigo nodded and followed him.

If he'd been anybody other than the man they were expecting, he would have been shot on sight. The planet at the end of the artery was one of the most secure in the universe-body. Even the section of artery that connected it to the rest of the cosmos was privately-owned.

Such thoughts amused Vertigo Vu. The man who owned this planet was one of the wealthiest imaginable, yet his need for privacy meant that he deliberately kept his world in a poorly-maintained condition. Vertigo was led along a track that hadn't been repaired in years between clusters of leafy red growth that had been allowed to get out of control. Everything about his environment was suggestive of hostile wilderness- beautiful in parts, but no place for long-term habitation.

The compound to which he was eventually led was little better: big concrete walls manned by armed guards- the kind of nasty place only a paranoid psychotic would consent to live.

Vertigo sketched an ironic salute to the guards and allowed himself to be shoved towards a medical checkpoint. These had become common ever since the Incident on Varmol 3, in which an anti-bioengineering terrorist had unleashed a vicious man-made plague to prove his point about the dangers of unfettered genetic manipulation.

Vertigo wondered if the man had stopped to think about warpblood, the arteries that connected world to world and the living power generators that provided cheap, clean energy across the cosmos before settling on an anti-bioengineering stance. Science wasn't the problem. There was another, deeper failing to consider.

As he pondered on that failing, Vertigo's blood, saliva and skin were sampled and scanned by intricate machine that looked like a many-legged vinyl insect.

It confirmed that he wasn't carrying any custom pathogens and its operator nodded him through into the compound.

Inside the great, concrete walls, the visible security presence dropped away almost entirely. There were only neat gravel paths connecting small, round, white buildings and, of course, the gunfield. Vertigo's host was waiting in front of this last section to greet him.

"Mr. Vu!" he beamed. "So glad you could make it!"

He was a short, roundish figure somewhere in the thicket of middle age, wearing an expensive white suit and wide-brimmed hat. The six digits he had on each white-gloved hand pegged him as a native of Elthrith 9, though he probably wasn't a 100% organic Elthrinite. He oozed a vitality that suggested the presence of non-native DNA, presumably grafted into his sequence after he came of age.

"Yo, Therro," Vertigo replied, turning on his best happy-to-see-you smile despite the tiring journey he had just endured. "What's groovy?"

Therro, less formal than his employees, chuckled and replied "I have some wonderful specimens to show you. I'm so glad you decided to buy from us instead of one of our competitors. Here, let me show you."

He spun about and spread his arms wide to take in the gunfield, where bulbous, slightly pulsing firearms grew from mottled red-and-green bushes. Most of them weren't ripe yet and still looked like misshapen fruits, but some of them were starting to acquire the pseudo-metallic shine that said they were ready to pick.

"These beauties are ideal for making a splash," Therro said, plucking a long gun with multiple clip-slots and a gourd-like growth near the snout that was clearly designed to assist accuracy without sacrificing firepower. "My growers have dubbed them 'Golden Deadlies' because of the

distinct, yellowish shine along the barrel. They can take up to four 20-round clips of manufactured ammunition, but they also grow their own explosive rounds in the primary chamber- provided you remember to give them plenty of sunlight and water. Oh, and they have a range of over three megapaces when used in combination with one of our berry-scopes.”

“Very nice,” Vertigo conceded. “Do you have anything more in the sidearm line? Maybe something that’d complement a Golden Deadly?”

Therro, sensing a connoisseur, laughed merrily and said “Oh, absolutely. As I can see you’re man of taste, I won’t waste your time with the usual cheap stock. Instead, allow me to present... the Black Cherry!

The gun that Therro plucked from its stem and which Vertigo duly admired was, indeed, jet black and appropriately petite. It was also sleek and perfectly shaped, devoid of the anomalous growths that were to be expected with most grown firearms.

“That is a nifty looking toy,” he said quietly.

“Thank you,” Therro beamed. “It’s our first fully-silent, multi-round compact weapon with an effective range of over half a megapace. Nothing compared to a full-on rifle variety, of course, but very impressive for a pistol of its size. And, like the Golden Deadly, it grows its own rounds, though it can also take a clip of thirty mini-bullets.”

“I’ll take them both,” Vertigo said. “And, let’s say, fifty clips of ammo for each. And don’t think I don’t appreciate you agreeing to sell them to me individually. I know, in your line, you usually sell them by the crate.”

“The price you agreed to pay for early access was very persuasive,” Therro replied. “Why don’t I take you to the firing range to test your new purchases?”

“Dude, you read my mind,” Vertigo grinned back.

The firing range was contained in one of the round, white buildings near the edge of the compound and Vertigo was moderately impressed by how high-tech it was. No outdated holograms to fire at here- instead, there were fully-realised, vat-grown organic constructs (mindless, but puppeteered by an unseen computer).

Vertigo particularly enjoyed using the Black Cherry which, as promised, was completely silent.

“I do need one other thing, while I’m here,” he said conversationally. “I don’t know if you’ll carry what I’m looking for, but I figure it’s worth asking. You see, I might need to do some stealthy population control for a client; something that would look like natural causes or maybe a standard screening cock-up if anyone decided to investigate...”

“Say no more!” Therro replied, shamelessly. “I have just the thing!”

He clapped his hands and a lackey appeared holding a case, as though Therro had been waiting for the opportunity to sell its contents.

“Open it up- but only the case mind!” He winked at his lackey. “We don’t want this bad boy getting out of his container- at least, not here. Until we’ve got a vaccine for him, we better keep him for... population control.”

Vertigo smiled politely at Therro’s little joke but kept his eyes on the case as it was popped open.

There was a single vial inside, containing a faintly shimmering yellow liquid.

“Is this what that terrorist dude infected himself with on Varmol 3?” he asked, allowing the awe to show in his voice.

“Oh yes. Of course, people keep spreading less deadly variants of it, carrying it in their blood and whatnot. But this is the original- pure and non-mutated. Drop this on a civilised world and you’ll have a deathglobe within twenty ows. I can guarantee that, because this gorgeous little bug has a 99.9% kill-rate. Officially, he’s panzerfluenza strain 1193k. I just call him Quickdrop.”

Vertigo nodded: “Put him on the bill. I assume the little fella comes with a case? I don’t want a vial of that stuff rattling loose in my pocket with my cell keys, you know?”

“Of course,” Therro said. “In fact, why don’t you take the display sample- save you having to wait?”

The lackey extended the case to Vertigo who took it with a smile. He removed the vial and looked at it admiringly.

“You know, if you were anybody else, I’d make you wait and ship the goods to you,” Therro confided. “But you have a reputation for excellence and trustworthiness I can hardly ignore.”

“Thanks, man. That means a lot,” Vertigo returned.

“It’s so hard to find good, reliable hit men nowadays,” Therro sighed. “I assume from your purchases that you’re currently contracted to a client?”

“You assume correctly,” Vertigo nodded. “Though I won’t be under contract for much longer. The job’s nearly done and dusted, if you catch my drift.”

Therro’s perpetual grin widened as he said “That’s splendid! Maybe after you’re done, we could have a little sit-down and talk about the people my company needs... removing. If it’s not a breach of professional ethics, can I ask who you’re working for at the moment?”

“Oh, it’s not a breach at all. My client isn’t exactly secretive. If you really want to know, I’m actually working this one pro bono- free of charge, you know?”

“A hit man who does pro bono work? Who in the body for?” chuckled Therro.

Vertigo’s smile vanished as he looked Therro in the eyes.

“The Varmol 3 Survivors’ Association,” he said and dropped the vial containing panzerfluenza strain 1193k to the hard, concrete floor of the firing range.

When it was all over, Vertigo walked out the front gate of the compound, stepping over bodies whose eyes had melted from their sockets even while they lived and vomited up blood.

Quickdrop had a 99.9% lethality rate. But Vertigo had known, before he ever dropped the vial, that he was part of the other 0.1%. After all, he’d been on Varmol 3 when the first wave of infections hit; before the disease mutated and it became possible for smugglers to safely carry it in their blood. He’d been there to watch the first round of death while his own body expelled the disease like it was nothing more than a common cold.

When he reached his cell, he climbed in and activated a hologram comms terminal built into the control bank.

“Is... is it done?” the hologram that popped up asked. The face it showed had once been beautiful, but that had been before Quickdrop robbed her eyes and she’d had them replaced by cheap, ugly vat-grown ones. Cheap and ugly because Varmol 3 hadn’t been incorporated into the Universal Health Service at the time of the disaster and the health insurance company had skimmed on payouts.

“Sure thing, good-lookin’!” Vertigo replied happily. “The arms dealer’s dead and his compound’s now so infectious nobody will be able to come near it for a hundred years.”

The hologram-face reddened as its owner, elsewhere in space, blushed a little. It had probably been a long time since anyone called her ‘good-looking’.

“Will you come back to us?” she asked. “To the support group?”

Vertigo considered this, then said “Not my type of therapy, groovy girl. There’s plenty of people to blame for what happened that day.”

“Don’t you want to get back to taking paying contracts at some point?” his hologram-projected friend asked.

Vertigo laughed- a real laugh, quite different from the one he’d used with Therro. The idea of someone caring so much about the fate of a hit man tickled him.

“I’m not going to starve, you know,” he said, and killed the connection.

After a moment, he put the cell in gear and shot back up the artery into the universe-body proper. Nobody knew that the single, lonely cell in that pipe of warpblood contained a dangerous man. The anonymity of the universe-body swallowed Vertigo Vu whole and the artery he travelled in wound its way through the silken blackness of the infinite void like a crimson ribbon.

Saturday Mourning

Chapter One: The Nefarious Doctor Pendulum's Doomsday Clock

1

The day the Narrative started to die and cataclysm came to Cartoon, the space-ways were in chaos. The Nefarious Doctor Pendulum had cut a swathe through the regular pulse of traffic, jackknifing across lanes and hurtling into unmapped vacuum. Ramyd Angoa- better known as The Inhuman Triangle, mighty defender of the Million Worlds- gave chase in his shimmering Starcone.

"We need more speed, Pyrra," he called over his shoulder to his trusty sidekick, who was manning the engines.

"I can't do it, Triangle! She won't take it!" Pyrra replied, mopping sweat from her forehead.

Ramyd himself didn't really have a forehead, on account of the fact that his whole head was simply a golden pyramid with a single, Cyclopean eye in its centre, which he kept focused on the speeding clockship of Doctor Pendulum.

"She'll hold," he said. "I built this ship with my own fair hands!"

"I wasn't talking about the ship, boss- we're doing nine times over the universal constant without operational Alccubierre shielding! The fabric of space-time won't take much more of this!"

Ramyd's head- which floated freely just above his powerful, superheroic body, rotated 360 degrees in frustration.

"Alright- if we can't speed up, we'll have to slow that maniacal time-villain down! Take over the controls, I'm going to try and shoot out his engine!"

Pyrra leapt forward to take the helm as The Inhuman Triangle abandoned it. Meanwhile, the unstoppable champion of the galaxy himself climbed halfway out of the ship's window, drew his beam-gun and shot a zapload of supercharged particles at the accelerating clockship's blazing engines.

The beam struck home and the central engine array exploded in a shower of light and debris, sending the malign vessel into a tailspin.

"By the one hundred and eighty degrees of perfection!" exclaimed Ramyd. "It looks like he's going to crash on that planet down there!"

Pyrra, following the hero's gesticulating finger with her gaze, peered out out the starboard window at the world in question.

“Triangle!” she gasped, shaking visibly. “That world is Shardonax- the famed Planet of Unimaginable Perils!”

“We have no choice, Pyrra, my quaking comrade- we have to follow, lest he escape justice once again!”

And so, the starcone dived towards the sinister planet of Shardonax, leaving a trail of luminous warp-radiation in its wake.

In short, the day things started to unravel was a perfectly ordinary day, and nobody could have predicted what was going to happen.

Cue theme music. Roll opening credits. Show time.

2

With her mane of flowing red hair and three crystal-blue eyes, Pyrra was considered a great beauty on most civilised worlds, which probably went some way to explaining why the Nefarious Doctor Pendulum kidnapped her so often. Certainly, after so many encounters, the evil scientist couldn’t believe that he could successfully ransom her to the daring defender of the known universe, The Inhuman Triangle. Whatever his motives, however, Pyrra had more reason than most to dislike the transtemporal super-crook.

Nonetheless, her burning desire to see him locked up in Hyperspace Prison was somewhat tempered by the knowledge that Shardonax was one of the most dangerous places in the universe. As such, she followed her brave leader onto the world’s surface only hesitantly, and hung back while he fought off the stampede of many-clawed Thunderbeasts that set upon them as soon as they landed. She waited until he’d created a bridge of stepping stones across the Acid River before daring to cross its treacherous rapids. When he leaped across the Chasm of Whispering Voices, she made him carry her rather than attempt the jump on her own.

“You needn’t fear so, my cautious companion! Nothing will hurt you while I’m around to stop it,” Ramyd reassured her, adjusting his black and gold cape slightly.

“You better hope it doesn’t,” she replied. “Who else would keep your ship from falling apart?”

“Well, I suppose I could always get a robot...”

She glared at him.

“... But it won’t come to that,” he added. “You’re perfectly safe!”

Deep down, of course, Pyrra believed him. They had fought Doctor Pendulum over a hundred and twenty times since teaming up, not to mention a plethora of other conniving ne’er-do-wells.

Thus far, nothing worse than a few scrapes and bruises had ever befallen either of them. Of course they'd survive Shardonax and ensure Pendulum's total defeat- they always did.

As they approached Pendulum's crashed ship, it became apparent to both Ramyd and Pyrra that something was slightly amiss. No sound issued from the downed machine- not the curses and half-baked threats of the cornered villain, nor the unhinged cackling of one who thinks he has one last ace up his sleeve.

"This is a trifle odd," Ramyd mused aloud. "Isn't there usually a lot more noise at this point?"

Pyrra shrugged. "Maybe his throat's sore? He has been monologuing at us a lot lately."

"Maybe." Ramyd pushed aside the clockship's bulkhead and lead the way inside.

In the control room of the large ship, Doctor Pendulum sat slumped in his command chair.

"Time to surrender, Pendulum!" Ramyd said. "Your reign of carnage is at an end!"

He was slightly unsettled when the usually loquacious Doctor merely sighed wearily in reply. Slowly, the command chair revolved and Doctor Pendulum faced him.

After a long, unaccustomed pause, he spoke.

"Do you see that clock?" He pointed to one of the many timepieces that decorated the control room.

"What of it?" Ramyd asked suspiciously.

"It's the Doomsday Clock. It's counting down to the final apotheosis- to The End."

"Whatever you've done, Pendulum, it won't work- not while I draw breath!"

Pendulum sighed again. His lack of affect was seriously disquieting The Inhuman Triangle now. Villains weren't supposed to sit staring at you dully, making oblique statements about clocks. They were supposed to rant and rave and try to obliterate you with unlikely and inventive gadgets.

"I haven't done anything, Triangle. Not this time. There's nothing I can do, really. Nothing to be done by anyone. I suppose I should shoot at you or something, though. For old times' sake."

With that, Doctor Pendulum drew a beamgun and fired, just once. His hand was shaking, however, and the shot went wild, missing Ramyd by several inches.

There was silence for a several seconds while Ramyd waited for something else to happen. He could feel a tension in the air that was alien to him- a sense of something waiting to happen.

Then Pyrra spoke from somewhere behind him.

"This isn't how it goes..." she murmured.

Ramyd turned around to ask what she meant and stopped dead. There was a beam-hole in Pyrra the size of small plate. Around the hole, she was beginning to disintegrate.

"Pyrra..." he said, and by the time the last letter of her name fell off his tongue, she was gone.

Doctor Pendulum emitted a hollow giggle like a man at a dead party, desperately laughing at a bad joke.

“You’ll pay for this, you heinous swine!” Ramyd yelled, drawing his own beam-gun.

“We’re all going to pay, old friend,” said Pendulum. “But you’re right: maybe I should be first. Age before beauty and all that.”

Then, to Ramyd’s horror, Pendulum put his gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

As he disintegrated, the Doomsday Clock chimed the ovr.

3

Somewhere in the reality-shaping hypervoid beyond the world, a concept-machine began to whirl loudly, trying to take up an invisible strain. The vibrational noise it made existed somewhere beyond sound and its axles span faster than Absolute Time.

The non-sound heightened to a scream and the axles became howling wheels of light.

Then, just as suddenly as it had started, the concept-machine stopped.

A faint ticking- quieter than the sound of an electron buzzing yet more massive than the heartbeat of a star- filled the hypervoid for a few seconds, then the concept-machine closed its continuity paradox and deleted itself from existence.

4

“I’ve never seen anyone die before,” Ramyd confided to Lekman Oldis, who had been Pyrra’s doctor while she was alive and had taken it upon himself to see to the funeral arrangements.

“Me neither, thank goodness,” Lekman said, patting Ramyd’s shoulder consolingly. “This must come as a terrible shock to you- she was a good woman.

Ramyd nodded sadly then said “You’ve never seen anyone die? I thought part of being a doctor was confronting the hard-nosed practicalities of mortality on behalf of your community.”

Lekman shrugged eloquently. “Romak 4 is a quiet planet with a population in the low hundreds, and I’m not the only doctor on it. So far I’ve been very lucky. There have been a few near misses with space-borne super-viruses, but none of my patients have seen fit to die on me yet... well, until Pyrra.”

Lekman stopped then, making a visible effort not to start crying.

“Excuse me, Mr. Angoa,” he said. “I have to go prepare the remains- they’re only ash but they need to be put in a suitable container. There’s no undertaker in town, so I’ll be pulling double-duty until our Pyrra is decently buried.”

Ramyd nodded and left Lekman’s office.

The town of Adalay on Romak 4 looked much as it always did- neat, square buildings, dyed slightly yellow by a cheerful sun, stood out against a pinkish sky where the star system’s other planets were visible in a picturesque arch.

The weather promised to be fine for the day of the funeral. In the meantime, Ramyd would go and try to console Pyrra’s grieving family.

On the other side of the universe, on planet Gambit, the evil Queen Checkmate stared at a chess board populated by the likenesses of heroes and villains.

“What do you mean, Pendulum is dead?” she said to the lackey who had brought her the news, without taking her eyes off the board.

The lackey trembled. There was something deeply horrifying about the Queen’s skeletal face, leaning out of the darkness above her white-and-black chequered dress. He swallowed.

“Well, your Royal Capriciousness, he died of a single beam-shot through the roof of his mouth. Suicide, apparently.”

“Doctor Pendulum was many things- Nefarious being only one of them- but he was not suicidal,” Checkmate scowled.

“On the plus side,” the lackey said, desperately trying to increase the chances of his own survival, “he did kill your arch-enemy’s sidekick before he went!”

“Pyrra’s dead?” Checkmate looked up from the board, even more surprised by this than by Pendulum’s untimely demise.

“Er... yes, your Magnificent Underhandedness.”

“Well then... I must attend the funeral!” With that, Queen Checkmate stood up, knocked over two of the pieces on her board and strode out of the sepulchral, rook-shaped castle that was her home on Gambit.

It wasn’t until she reached her space-ship, The Toppled King, that she realised how angry she was. She’d liked Pendulum. He was competent and inventive and never told her that a weapon couldn’t be built or a planet couldn’t be conquered. He came up with solutions, not problems... and now he was dead and she didn’t believe for one mynat that he’d shot himself. The Inhuman Triangle was going to pay in blood... or whatever substance he had circulating through his pointy, unnatural head.

“I never knew anyone who died,” Pyrra’s mother, Scalena said, blowing her nose into a handkerchief that, under less tragic circumstances, would have seemed comically large.

“I’m sorry,” Ramyd said. There didn’t seem to be much else to say, though her words had a certain, unsettling resonance.

“She was such a sweet child,” Scalena muttered, apparently forgetting, in her grief, that Pyrra had been a full-grown woman when Pendulum shot a beam-hole through her. “I just don’t understand why that man killed her. No mother should have to outlive her daughter.”

Ramyd hung his triangular head, finding himself unable to meet Scalena’s eyes.

“The nefarious Doctor Pendulum was aiming at me, but he missed,” he said. “I should be the one shunted off the mortal coil, not poor, plucky Pyrra.”

“It’s not your fault,” Scalena sniffed. “She wanted to be there, fighting evil alongside you.”

“Thank you.” Ramyd stood up from the couch Scalena had seated him in. “I really ought to go and check on the funeral arrangements- unless your husband wants to talk to me before I leave, of course.”

“Pyth’s been locked in his study with his record collection since he heard the news,” Scalena said. “I don’t think he’s really ready to face the world yet.”

Ramyd nodded and took his leave.

In truth, checking on the funeral arrangements was the work of five mynats, and Ramyd spent the rest of the day walking the streets in a blank-eyed haze, turning Scalena’s words over and over in his head. “I never knew anyone who died.” Neither did he. Neither had Lekman, the doctor. But what was the significance. He worried at the problem as he paced along the wending, sunny streets of Adalay, but reached no conclusions.

The funeral had barely started- the grieving friends and relatives lined up in neat rows in the Adalay Town Cemetery- when Queen Checkmate’s ship touched down. The Toppled king- shaped, of course, like a king chess-piece laid on its side- landed mere meters away from the bereaved, causing them to panic and dive for cover. They rose from their black folding chairs and scattered like birds chased from their perches.

Ramyd watched in disgust as the Queen disembarked, firing her chessgun into the air. If the beam hit anyone, it would turn them into a living chess-piece for her collection, but now she was using it simply to grab attention. She levelled it at his chest.

“Begone, fowl miscreant,” said The Inhuman Triangle, severely. “You’re interrupting our remembrance of friend and valued companion.”

“And what about what you did to my friend?” hissed Queen Checkmate. “You murdered Doctor Pendulum. You think I’m stupid? That I believe for one moment he took his own life?”

Ramyd blinked his one eye at her and felt a sudden, inexplicable surge of feeling.

“I was there,” he said quietly. “I watched him put the beam-gun in his mouth and depress the trigger. It’s one of the worst things I’ve ever seen.”

After a pause, he confessed the worst part. “I can still see the look on his face, whenever I close my eye.”

Queen Checkmate looked at her arch-nemesis- his single, earnest eye; his suddenly-slumped shoulders; his guileless posture- and knew he was telling the truth.

“I’m sorry. I know you two were close,” The Inhuman Triangle said.

The dark monarch felt tears running down her cheeks and wiped at them ineffectually. She saw the same tears start in the eye of her old enemy.

“He was always so... happy in his work,” she said. “I couldn’t imagine him doing something like this. We were... he liked... he would have told me!”

“I don’t know what went wrong in his mind,” Ramyd said. “But we both lost someone we cared for that day.”

She dropped the chessgun and moved forward.

Ramyd found himself hugging his oldest, deadliest foe as they sobbed onto one another’s shoulders. High above them, the cheerful, incongruous sun continued to beat down obliviously.

7

In the hypervoid, another concept-machine began to smoke. Alignment-governing ethical mechanisms clanked up against shared-suffering algorithms and failed to square the circle. The logic-breach spread throughout the system and more and more of the machine’s run-time bore down uselessly on the insoluble. The point of critical failure cascade was reached and passed. Self-diagnostic subroutines created hardware meltdowns trying to contain the newly-fragmented rule-set.

Overload was inevitable. Like its twin, the concept-machine closed its paradox loop and erased itself from existence.

Chapter Two: Exhuming Something That Isn't There

1

That evening found the Inhuman Triangle, backlit by periodic strokes of lightning, standing alone in a the graveyard where Pyrra's ashy remains had been buried with a shovel slung over his shoulder.

Something the evil Queen Checkmate had said to him during the funeral- shortly after inviting him to the wake that would be held for Doctor Pendulum later that week- had stuck with him.

"I've never known anyone who died," she'd told him.

He'd been hearing that all day- from doctors, from families of multiple generations, and finally from a supervillain whose stated goal was violent conquest of the universe.

Ramyd wasn't one to start ranting, raving and demanding answers- it wasn't a very superheroic thing to do- but he had started to quietly ask questions. In turn, he'd spoken with each of the other funeral attendees, offering and receiving condolences. At some point in each conversation, he'd asked if they'd ever known anyone else who died. The answer was always the same.

And so here he was now, standing in the pouring rain on a night made for dark deeds, hoping to either disprove the nagging suspicion that was gnawing at his brain... or turn it into something actionable.

Digging up the graveyard's one hundred and four plots only took a matter of three ows for the Triangle-headed paragon, and the process gave him his answer. With the exception of Pyrra's grave- which contained a token coffin- every single one was empty. The tombstones didn't correspond to anything- they didn't represent the terminal points of real lives. They were just there, devoid of reposing remnants and sans meaning.

Death, it seemed, was a lie; its anomalous rarity a closely-guarded secret.

The question, as far as Ramyd was concerned, was 'guarded by who?'

Certainly, none of the inhabitant of Romak 4 knew that there were no bodies in the graveyard and The Inhuman Triangle deeply doubted that the supervillains were in on the strange, cosmic joke either.

Further investigation would be required.

Before he left the graveyard, Ramyd meticulously refilled the empty plots, tamped down the dirt on top and relaid any flowers that had decorated them. It was, in some ways, a wholly unnecessary gesture, since no-one had anyone to grieve over beneath the headstones. He did it anyway, because he wouldn't have been The Inhuman Triangle if he hadn't.

2

Concept-machine number three began to glow red hot as a core identity matrix transgressed its parameters. It tried to offload the overflow into the machine that dealt with ethical orientation and registered that that machine was no longer there. It sent a request to the machine that ensured intra-cosmic aesthetic and semiotic consistency for a new algorithm that would allow it to explain and correct the sudden deformity in prime actor 0000000001's matrix.

Before it received a reply, however, the identity matrix reasserted itself and dropped back within preset parameters.

The identity concept-machine began to cool and return to something approximating normal functionality. It logged a note in the overall system's meta-data that read "DISREGARD ERROR ACTIVITY 1020237549. SELF-CORRECTION ACHIEVED".

Meanwhile, the aesthetic and semiotic consistency machine continued trying to generate the previously-requested algorithm. In doing so, it drew feed data from every other machine in the system and discovered two massive gaps in the network. Its solution-generation metaware tried to work around the gaps and couldn't. It spat out a series of ethically-compromised and trauma-inducing algorithms that ran counter to the system's coherence objectives. Self-diagnostics picked up on the issue and so the machine kept trying, producing new algorithms with the same problems.

At critical volume, the unusable data began to leak into the machine's subsystems and corrupt its hard-components. Somewhere in the bowls of the aesthetic and semiotic consistency machine, something gave. The device closed its paradox loop and erased itself with terrifying abruptness. Many other concept machines depended on it. The error cascade had begun.

3

It was four days after Pyrra's funeral. Ramyd found himself being ushered in front of a makeshift podium to say a few words about the Nefarious Doctor Pendulum.

Looking out over the small sea of sombrely-dressed supervillains, he felt strangely emotional.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began, carefully keeping the tremor of unexpected feeling from his voice. “You all know me. Most of you have fought me, imprisoned me, fired planet-destroying lasers at me or stolen my head at some point. We’re on opposite sides- I am proud to represent the world of righteousness and justice. In stark contrast, you’re all equally proud to revel in criminal iniquity.”

This met with a muted cheer.

Ramyd continued, “Regardless of our differences, we can all agree that Doctor Pendulum didn’t deserve to die the way he did. I don’t know what form of madness overcame him at the end. However, the man who killed Pyrra and then himself wasn’t the Doctor Pendulum I knew. I knew and battled against a salacious, time-travelling genius. His plots were sadistic, twisted and labyrinthine... but they were never crass or petty. They were never senseless or self-destructive. He was a monster- nobody can deny that- but he was a monster who was full of life. So when I ask you all to remember Doctor Pendulum, I don’t mean the sad, broken man who ended his life on Shardonax. I want you to remember him as he really was. I will try to.”

The Inhuman Triangle came out from behind the podium to a strange mixture of sobs and clapping. Someone put on the bad doctor’s favourite album and moved the ashes themselves to the podium so the wake could begin in earnest.

“Thank you, Ramyd,” said the evil Queen Checkmate. “That was beautiful. I know he’d appreciate you being here.”

“I’m glad I could help, your Villainous Majesty. Things are different now, aren’t they?” Ramyd asked thoughtfully. “Now that he and Pyrra are dead, things have to change. It’s no longer as simple as you versus me. The stakes are too high now.”

“Yes. I suppose they are.” Queen Checkmate looked away for a moment. “Triangle- I think there’s something you should...” she trailed off.

The Inhuman Triangle followed her gaze. The wake was being held on the top floor of the Queen’s castle and the windows offered a commanding view of the desolate world of Gambit. Checkmate was staring out of one of these high, arched windows now, mouth slack.

It took Ramyd a moment to understand what he was looking at. The sky itself seemed to be undulating and ragged holes- like burn marks on celluloid- were ripping themselves into being.

Slowly, the generalised noise of the wake faded away and the assembled supervillains turned to stare at the strange sight.

“Alright, alright,” chuckled a man Ramyd vaguely recognised as Pardath The Conqueror. “Who set off a doomsday device? We all agreed to hold any evil plans until after the wake, out of respect for our fallen comrade-in-malice. Owe up! Who’s bright idea was this?”

Nobody said anything.

“Well somebody must have done it!” said Pardath, tapping his armoured foot impatiently. “World-ending devices don’t just activate themselves, you know.”

“I don’t think one of us did this,” murmured Queen Checkmate. Louder: “Everybody go back to your lairs. The wake is officially over. Inhuman Triangle, follow me.”

Ramyd tensed for a moment, half-suspecting a trap, then gave in and followed the Machiavellian Queen obediently. She was the only person who seemed to have any idea what might be happening.

4

“What on Romak is that?” Doctor Lekman Oldis exclaimed, adjusting his glasses and staring out the glass-panelled side-door into the sky, where curious fissures had appeared.

“Does it matter, doctor?” Scalena asked. “If its hostile, I’m sure we can rely on The Inhuman Triangle. Can’t we?”

The two of them were in Scalena’s living room- Lekman had been making a house-call to check on the grieving woman when the sky tore open.

“I’m sure we can,” he said soothingly. “I’ve just never seen anything like it. Oh goodness no!” This last expostulation came out a good deal higher than the sentence that preceded it. He had just seen one of the fissures spread from the sky to the ground and swallow a crowd of people who hadn’t moved away from it quickly enough. Their bodies dissolved into soup, then vapour, then nothing discernable.

“What? What’s happening?” Scalena demanded. She was on a sofa facing away from the door and couldn’t see the chaos unfolding on the street outside her home. She could, however, see how ashen the doctor’s face had become.

“Er... Scalena, I don’t suppose you have a basement, do you?” Lekman croaked.

“Yes. Why?”

“I think we should retreat to it immediately. I’ll explain when we’re down there. I think we might be in terrible danger if we remain above ground.”

5

The error cascade had been imperceptible. Now that its effects were manifesting themselves, it was unstoppable. Failures in the complex ecosystem of interconnected concept-machines spawned more failures. The avalanche of self-replicating erratum in the automatic-maintenance reality-code was overwhelming. Loops closed and spread further closures. The centre couldn't hold. Things fell apart.

6

As he ambled back to his ship, Pardath the Conqueror paused to squint up into the ragged mess of the sky. It was, all things considered, a pretty amazing show. He'd always dreamed of destroying the universe, though he knew, deep down, that that kind of plot was way above his pay-grade.

He turned away, humming cheerfully to himself and resumed his walk towards his vessel. He never saw the fissure that swept down from the sky and engulfed him.

7

"After his death, I inherited Doctor Pendulum's machines," Queen Checkmate said, coming to a stop in the deepest dungeon of her castle.

Ramyd drew level with her, stopped and nodded. They were surrounded by devices of deranged purpose. Some were clearly designed for time travel, others for stopping time or artificially ageing their targets. They were all noticeably clock-themed. Except one.

"What's that insalubrious mechanism?" Ramyd asked, pointing at it.

"That's what I wanted you to see. Pendulum built it right after he built his insane 'doomsday clock'. His notes said it leads outside, but that no normal person could survive the trip."

Ramyd ran his hands long the edges of the machine. It looked like a coffin had been melded into an elaborate computational and life-support system.

"Outside of what?" he asked, poking the coffin-lid experimentally.

"He didn't mention," Queen Checkmate said. "But I know that doomsday clock of his drove him to build it. I think he saw this coming- the tears in the sky. I think everything's coming to an end and he knew it. He built this thing hoping to escape to somewhere but realised he'd never survive using it."

Ramyd stared at the device. It oozed menace.

Somewhere above them, an alarm started to bleep desolately.

“That means the planetary structure of Gambit has been irretrievably compromised,” said Queen Checkmate drily. “This world is about to end, and I don’t think it’s alone.”

“Do you think it might be possible to save the universe from... outside?” Ramyd asked.

“I don’t know. Or even think. I just hope. Frankly, I don’t even know if this machine works or if Pendulum’s mind was already disintegrating when he built it. But if it does work, you’re the only person who stands a chance of using it.”

“Why would you tell me this?” Ramyd asked, squinting suspiciously. “Don’t villains like you want to destroy the universe?”

“Personally, I’d rather it still existed so I could conquer it,” replied the Queen, levelly. “Besides, I don’t think anybody actually wants the universe to end- at least, not the bit they happen to be standing in at the time. Now, you’re a hero: are you going to save the world or not?”

The Inhuman Triangle nodded and drew himself up to his full height. There really wasn’t any choice. He opened the coffin-lid like a door and stared into a vortex of blazing white light beyond. He stepped in.

8

Less than fifteen mynats later, both Gambit and Romak 4 vanished from corporeal existence. Shardonax followed soon after. One by one, the Million Worlds began to wink out like guttering candles.

Chapter Three: The Three-Sided Man and the World of Hurt

1

The puddles were alive with reflected neon light and the rain came down in a fast, light patter. The clouds from which it fell were tinged purple with light pollution and two grey-blue moons peaked out from behind them.

The sleek, wheeled machines that prowled along the roads bore only a passing resemblance to the boxy, cheerful cars of Romak 4.

Translucent images hung in the air- holograms advertising alien products and ideas.

For some mynats, the Inhuman Triangle, Champion of the Million Worlds, stood in the middle of it all, letting the sensory overload sweep through him; drinking in the lustrous strangeness of the place Doctor Pendulum had simply called ‘the outside’.

Then a car hit him.

Unlike the other vehicles, which had crept around him, this one had come tearing down the road straight towards him, spraying up puddle-water in luminous arcs. He had been transfixed by the beauty of the droplets in the air, each one reflecting a different colour and simply hadn't moved in time.

Ramyd hurtled through the air, thrown by the impact, but it was the vehicle that came off the worst for the encounter. The fender bent inwards, the bodywork rumpled and the wheels skidded. The Inhuman Triangle was, after all, somewhat more durable than the average car. The machine span out of control and hit a lamppost.

Ramyd Angoa lay, stunned, on his back. Then a woman's face appeared in his field of vision. She was by far the strangest looking woman he'd ever laid eyes on. Her hair was voluminous, her clothes were barely there, her shoes were pointy and garish and she was wearing a pair of heart-shaped sunglasses even though it was night time. She removed them now as she peered down at him.

"Are you okay, sweetie?" she asked. "I'm going to call an ambulance..."

Ramyd sprang lightly to his feet and laughed at the silliness of the idea. "No need for that, ma'am. It takes more than a mere ton of speeding metal to injure The Inhuman Triangle!"

The woman backed away, her face betraying more than a little fear. This struck Ramyd as odd- why would anybody be afraid that he wasn't hurt? Still, such philosophical queries would have to wait.

"Excuse me, ma'am- I ought to check on the driver. He might not be made of the same stern stuff as me." With that, Ramyd marched over the street to the car that had hit him- and the lamppost it was still wrapped around.

The door to the conveyance wouldn't open at first, so Ramyd simply ripped the car in two and fished out the driver. One of the man's arms appeared to be bent at a slightly unnatural angle.

"Excuse me, ma'am- I think you'd better call that ambulance after all. It seems that our careless friend here is in need of some medical assistance.

The woman, however, had pressed herself against the wall of a neon-drenched building and was looking at him with wide, terrified eyes.

Ramyd, carrying the driver under one arm like a prize pig, strolled over to her.

"Are you alright, miss?" he asked, gently.

After a few false starts, she managed to reply: "You... you're him aren't you? You really are. I thought it was just a costume, but you're really him."

"I'm really me," said Ramyd, who had no idea what the woman was talking about but hoped that this would suffice to clear up any confusion. "Would you please call the ambulance now?"

The woman took a curious plastic device from her pocket and poked at it. It took Ramyd a moment to realise that he was looking at a phone- all the phones back on Romak had curved handsets and wires.

The rain eased off while they waited for the ambulance to arrive. Ramyd stood patiently, letting the last drops of water run down his pyramidal head.

"I used to watch you on viewscreen, back when I was just a kid," said the woman with the heart-shaped sunglasses. "I don't understand how you can be here."

"I'm a little hazy on the details myself, my shiny new friend. In truth, I don't really understand where here is. But I know I have to be here to save my universe."

The woman nodded silently and seemed to be struggling to find the right thing to say. At last, she spoke.

"I'm Carmina," she said. "Thank you for getting that man out of the car. You didn't have to do that."

"Of course I did," Ramyd said, blinking his single eye. "He was hurt."

"Lots of people are hurtin', sugar," Carmina replied, ruefully. "You can't save 'em all."

This struck Ramyd as needlessly gnostic, so he didn't reply.

They waited in companionable silence until the ambulance showed up and took away the unconscious hit-and-crash driver.

2

Carmina sat on the curb, within three feet of a cartoon character, and wondered how to tell him what he was. Although she couldn't have said why, she felt eerily certain that he was her responsibility. She could hear him pacing back and forth behind her, evidently considering his next move now that he'd discharged his own responsibility to the driver.

She pulled out a cigarette from her pocket and lit up.

"What's that?" The Inhuman Triangle asked.

Right. Of course. Why would he know what cigarettes were? The broadcasters weren't allowed to feature them in kids' cartoons.

"It's a smoke," she said, taking a drag on it to demonstrate. "It helps calm my nerves."

She debated whether to offer him the cigarette. In the end, she decided that if he was immune to being hit by a car, he was probably immune to carcinogens as well.

“You want a pull?” she asked, holding the smouldering cylinder towards him.

“I can’t. No mouth,” The Inhuman Triangle tapped his head, which- barring the eye- seemed to be solid and innocent of apertures.

“How do you talk?” she asked. “Or eat?”

The living cartoon shrugged. “My head vibrates fast enough to create sound-waves, like a stereo speaker. As for eating- the only sustenance I need is adventure!”

“Really?”

“No- I can absorb nutrients through my skin. I’m semi-permeable.”

Carmina blinked at him a couple of times, then started to laugh. Animated or not, he wasn’t stupid. The big, blustering superhero persona belied a deadpan wit that she hadn’t noticed when she used to watch him on viewscreen.

“Hey, do you have somewhere to stay? While you consider your next move, I mean?” she asked.

“Alas no. I arrived in your world mere mynats before we first met.”

“Well, come on then, sugar. You can come crash at my flat.” She flicked her cigarette into the gutter, stood up, and began walking away.

The Inhuman Triangle followed along, wringing water out of his sodden cape as they moved. The rain had stopped completely now.

At her flat, Carmina sat the Inhuman Triangle down on a ratty, crumpled sofa and went to get changed- her clothes were sopping wet from the rain still. Oddly (or not so oddly, considering his origins), her guest was as dry as a bone. Once the rain had stopped, he’d dried out with bizarre rapidity.

She returned to him in house clothes that left even less to the imagination than her street attire.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, wondering about the possible after effects of the crash.

“A little peculiar,” replied Ramyd Angoa, the Inhuman Triangle, honestly. “You look nice,” he added.

Carmina looked down at herself and realised that the cartoon character had probably never seen quite so much exposed skin before- or, at least, had existed in a universe where desire simply couldn’t take root.

“When you say ‘peculiar’... what do you mean?” she asked, tentatively.

“My heart’s fluttering and I want to touch you. I don’t know why.”

No, Carmina thought. I don’t suppose you do know, do you?

“Here,” she said aloud, fishing a joint out of her pocket and lighting it.

“I told you- mighty though I am, I lack for a face-hole.”

In response, she sucked in a lungful of cannabinoid smoke and blew it into his face. “You said you could absorb stuff through you skin, right?”

She watched in fascination as the smoke seemed to pull into the Triangle through pores she couldn’t see. She smiled. At least he was open to new experiences.

Half an ovr later, Carmina and the cartoon character were pleasantly high. At some point, she’d stumbled over to her stereo and put on some psychedelic music, but she couldn’t remember doing it.

She giggled. They’d been talking about all the things the Inhuman Triangle had never heard of: wireless internet, supranational governmental bodies, recreational narcotics. The whole shebang.

“Okay, okay, I’ve got one,” she said, still giggling. “Have you ever heard of sex?”

Ramyd’s eye widened. “I’ve heard of the sexes: male and female. My brilliant intellect tells me that you mean something else, however.”

Her giggle turned into a full belly-laugh. “Well, duh. I’m talking about lovemaking. Y’know- copulation; procreation; whatever. It’s what I do for money. I’m a street-walker.”

“I feel like you and I are picturing two very different things when talk about walking streets. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

As much to her own surprise as The Inhuman Triangle’s, Carmina mounted his lap and unbuttoned his tight spandex trousers. Whoever had designed him- drawn him- might have omitted certain parts of the male anatomy had it occurred to them, but Carmina knew instinctively that this wasn’t the case.

“I had a boyfriend, a couple of years ago,” she said. “I used to make him dress up as you- you’re famous, you know that?”

“Of course I’m famous,” Ramyd replied. “I’m the righteous hero of the Million Worlds- or however many are left now.”

He laughed and looked puzzled at the same time.

“This ‘drug’ makes everything funny, doesn’t it?” he asked her.

“Only if you’re in a funny mood. Now shh. I’m going to explain sex to you- with a practical demonstration.”

The Inhuman Triangle shook himself awake. The woman whom had introduced him to the mysteries of physical intimacy snored on the couch beside him. There'd been a conversation after they made love- something important.

He tried to remember. The smoke he'd absorbed made it difficult, but a key phrase came back to him.

Tomorrow, I'll take you to the man who created you.

Yes, that's what he had to do. This place that Pendulum had called 'Outside' was somehow the source of his own universe, and if he found the person responsible, they could put things right.

It had taken four 'joints' before Carmina plucked up the courage to tell the Inhuman Triangle that he'd been created by someone in her world, which struck him as odd. The strangely metaphysical nature of his errand didn't bother him in the slightest. After all, he was the Inhuman Triangle: he did whatever it took to save the day. If the whole universe was ending, and it had been created by a normal person, obviously it was his job to find that person and get them to put things right.

"Wakey, wakey, my slumbering tutor in the sensual arts- we have a noble quest to accomplish!" he said, shaking Carmina gently by the shoulder.

"Coffee..." she muttered, so he went and made some. Coffee, at least, was something their two universes had in common.

The building that Carmina lead him to, when she was finally awake, was a tall, corporate-type folly, decorated with a complex array of logos.

"The company that created The Inhuman Triangle has its offices in that building," explained Carmina. "They're called Anima Co. You want to talk to their CEO."

Ramyd nodded. Quite a few of the words that had emerged from Carmina's mouth had meant absolutely nothing to him, but he didn't deem this a cause for concern. He had to speak to the CEO of Anima Co. The fact that he didn't know what a CEO was, or what an Anima Co. was didn't trouble him. The people inside the building would know.

"Excuse me- you're not authorised to be here!" a man in a dark suit accosted The Inhuman Triangle as he marched up to the doors.

Ramyd looked down at him- he was, frankly, taller than most people.

"I'm here to meet my creator," he said.

"Listen here, you delusion whack-job! The Inhuman Triangle is a cartoon character. You're just some jerk-off in cosplay, and if you don't leave, I'll have you escorted off our grounds by-"

The man in the dark suit never got to finish his sentence. Ramyd knew a henchman when he saw one and had simply thrown the abusive figure out of the way like a sack of potatoes.

He had to dispose of several more henchmen with abrupt pummelling sessions once he was inside the building, but none of them posed a serious threat. One of them shot him, but the projectile was only a silly metal cylinder with a snubbed nose that flattened harmlessly against his chest. Inexplicably, the building's controllers had failed to equip their people with zapguns.

He marched up to the front desk and addressed himself to the receptionist who sat there while Carmina picked her way through the unconscious bodies he'd left in his wake.

"Excuse me, citizen- I need to see the CEO of Anima Co. Can you tell me where he is?"

"T-t-t-top f-f-floor, sir," stuttered the strangely terrified desk-worker.

"Thank you! Your aid may have saved a million planets!" If Ramyd had possessed a mouth, he would have beamed at her.

The lift that whisked The Inhuman Triangle and his new friend to the top floor was mounted in a glass tube on the side of the tall building. He was able to look out and contemplate the greyness of the sky and the profusion of oddly-shaped structures that hunkered below it. There was a beauty to the landscape- and a bleakness.

There was little time for such thoughts however, as the lift arrived at its destination with surprising rapidity.

Ramyd Angoa- champion of the Million Worlds- stepped out and made his way towards a chipped wooden door marked 'Anima Co.' He swung it open, and beheld his originator.

Chapter Four: A Man Who Makes Universes

1

Ramyd had expected a larger complex filled with people- somewhere suitably impressive to end his quest. In reality, he was confronted with a single office room with faded floral wallpaper and a large (but rather battered) desk. There was a plaque on this last item that read 'CEO'.

The man behind the desk had put his feet up on it, tipped his chair back and pulled his trilby down over his eyes. There was a newspaper dangling from one limp hand. He was a living pastiche of a man in a dead-end job taking a morning nap.

As The Inhuman Triangle entered the office, he awoke, removed his feet from the desk and leaned forward.

“Hello, Ramyd,” he smiled, checking his watch. “You’re a little late. I was expecting you last night.”

“You were... expecting me?” Asked the Triangle, sitting himself down in the chair opposite the CEO.

There wasn’t another chair, so Carmina simply hovered in the doorway.

“Of course I was expecting you! I made you didn’t I? And now you’re here- hoping to save your universe. Well, good news! That should be a fairly straightforward matter. But first, I think, introductions are in order. I’m Cays Ahrah and you, of course, are the noble opposer of evil, the Inhuman Triangle. But who is the lovely creature you’ve brought with you? You’ve never come here with someone else before!”

“I’ve never come here at all before,” countered the Inhuman Triangle. Then added, because he was a well-brought-up superhero. “And this is Carmina. She helped me find this place.”

“Did she now?” Cays Ahrah murmured. “Well, first things first. Do either of you have the faintest idea what’s going on here?”

The Inhuman Triangle looked at Carmina in case she had a better handle on the situation before volunteering “A henchman downstairs said I was a cartoon character, and Carmina mentioned she used to watch me on TV when I first met her... so, in this universe at least, I’m clearly a fictional entity: a person invented for television.”

Cays Ahrah smiled benignly. “Yes and no. Let me tell you a little story. Once upon a time, reality was very much like the Wild West. You know what that is? Yes, I think you have that reference. Anyway, it was a nightmare. Time tried to run in multiple directions simultaneously, atoms the size of universes coexisted in the same space as atoms the size of... well, atoms, I suppose. Different laws of physics clashed and rewrote one another constantly. Magic was so powerful and ubiquitous that a stray thought could obliterate a civilisation. So my people took it upon ourselves to organise things a little. We built machines that could restructure existence: we chopped up reality into discreet universes and timelines, making sure that each one was the right scale, had the appropriate temporal physics and complementary laws of physics- you know the sort of thing.”

“That’s impossible!” interjected Carmina.

“And yet it happened,” Cays Ahrah said smoothly. “Anyway, what we didn’t realise was that we weren’t just reorganising things forward in time, we were reorganising past history as well, erasing our own origins. If a corporeal thing has no beginning, it can have no end. We became, simply put,

eternal- though scattered wildly across the newly-regimented Infinite. I can't speak for the others, but boredom became something of a problem for me... and of course, I still had one of the machines that had been used to remake everything."

"I think I see where this is tending," Ramyd said, slowly.

"I think you probably do," Cays grinned rakishly. "I got it into my head that I would design a universe. The machines we built originally just let us push matter, energy and natural laws around in the broadest terms- we couldn't design life-forms or even individual planets. But a little fine-tuning changed that: I sacrificed raw, reality-bending power for precision and began constructing a pocket universe. 'But what type of universe should I create?' I asked myself! Well, how about a kinder, gentler one than those that formed naturally? A universe where nobody would have to die or become addicted to narcotics or get their heart broken. A universe where good always triumphed over evil by default. And why not put monitoring algorithms in it? I could sell the footage to broadcast companies to fund my research. Perhaps I'd be able to fine-tune the reality-engines further or find a way to make contact with my people, the other Immortals. You know how it is- you always start off with such grand plans, then your life goes a completely different way. Now here I am, kingpin of an animation empire that doesn't actually animate anything because the one cartoon we're known for is, well, real."

"My universe..." Ramyd said, putting two and two together and arriving at the usual number.

"Quite. But, as you're aware, something went wrong. You see, reality itself has an attritional effect on the kind of joyous naivete I built into your universe. It couldn't sustain itself, so I had to create concept-machines (just think of them as machines made of ideas and information rather than physical parts) and put them in a shell of metaphysical pseudo-space around your universe to maintain it. Even the machines wore out after time, though, due to the internal pressure of free will. So I popped in an early warning system: Doctor Pendulum's madness. Every time your universe was about to collapse, he'd realise it and put in motion the chain of events that leads you here. This is, incidentally, the eighth time this has happened. All clear?"

"Yes," said Ramyd.

"No!" said Carmina. "You can't just create universe! You're just a man!"

"And Ramyd The Inhuman Triangle is a cartoon character with a floating pyramid for a head, and yet he's sitting right there, not drinking anything because I'm a terrible host apparently. Sorry. Can I get either of you anything?"

"I need a scotch," said Carmina, deflating.

Cays produced a small box from his desk drawer and put his hand on it. Reality thrummed around them and suddenly there was a glass of scotch in Carmina's hand and a glass of chocolate milk in front of the Inhuman Triangle (who splashed it against his head in order to absorb it).

"That, incidentally," Cays expounded, "was the machine that remakes reality. The smaller, less powerful version I mean."

2

Carmina felt faint. Everything she knew about the way the world worked was untrue. There were men in grimy offices who could conjure up entire realities.

When she'd thought that the Inhuman Triangle was a cartoon character who'd somehow come to life, she'd been able to swallow the idea (absurd as it was). After all, it meant he was an aberration- something outside of the normal run of things. Now she learned that 'the normal run of things' wasn't what she thought it was and- anyway- had been designed by a man in a trilby hat and stained white shirt. Or 'his people', at any rate.

There were Immortals and machines that could create scotch from nowhere and none of it made any sense.

The room began to spin and she felt herself drifting sideways and down, towards the suddenly-inviting baize carpet.

3

"I'm always amazed at the discrepancies your universe didn't notice. For example, you knew the word 'inhuman', but none of you ever met a human," Cays philosophised. "You still haven't, come to think of it- your friend over there is Tagon, though they look remarkably similar... say, is she alright? She seems to have fallen over!"

The Inhuman Triangle made his way over to his friend and checked her pulse. Finding it steady, he propped her up against a wall and nodded to Cays. "She's okay. Just overwhelmed, I suppose. Can we get back to the fact this has happened eight times before?"

"Oh yes- on a cycle. Obviously, your memory gets wiped each time to facilitate your continued existence in a purposely naive universe. Speaking of which, now that it's just us, this is the bit where I offer you the Three Choices!" Cays seemed noticeably excited by this prospect.

Ramyd blinked at him and waited patiently. He was, in truth, becoming a little tired of Cays. He'd come here to save his world. So far, his originator had simply talked. And talked. And talked. The man obviously liked the sound of his own voice.

"Okay, choice Number 1 is Freedom. Instead of reloading your whole universe, I just re-instantiate its people out here, in a universe that isn't artificially maintained. On the one hand, you'll never have to worry about being someone else's entertainment. On the other hand, your people would be entering a universe that's much less forgiving than the one that was built for them. Choice Number 2 is Reboot: I wipe your memory, fix your reality and your adventures continue. You'll be happy, but cut off from the rest of existence once more. Choice Number 3 is Peace: I shut the whole thing down. Just end it- accept that you've had a truly excellent run and call it closing time. What's it going to be?"

"I assume I've chosen 'Reboot' every time before?"

"Of course."

Ramyd glanced over at Carmina and thought of the things they'd done together.

"If I choose to reboot my universe this time, can you... make some changes?" he asked.

Cays leaned forward and furrowed his brow. "A fourth choice- Change? You've never suggested that before. What exactly did you have in mind?"

The Inhuman Triangle told him and- when he'd stopped laughing and saying things like "my boy's growing up!"- Cays remade the world.

Epilogue: Time and Time Again

1

"We've got an emergency signal," Pyrra said, stubbing out her joint and taking her feet off the Starcone's control bank. "It's Pendulum- he's up to his old tricks. What do you want to do, boss?"

The man with the pyramid head took a moment to contemplate her low-cut top and the wonderful things its contents did in the low-grav environment and seriously considered leaving the villain to his own devices so he and his trusty sidekick could take a personal day. In the end, however, a hero is a hero.

"Better go after him- justice won't enact itself, my feisty fellow adventurer!"

The Nefarious Doctor Pendulum had cut a swathe through the regular pulse of traffic, jackknifing across lanes and hurtling into unmapped vacuum. Ramyd Angoa- better known as The Inhuman Triangle, mighty defender of the Million Worlds- gave chase in his shimmering Starcone.

2

Carmina turned off her viewscreen with a sigh. The world was different to what she used to believe, but she was starting to come to terms with that.

Exoverse

1

“You see, the relationship between matter and energy in the Exoverse is radically different to what we have in our universe,” Doctor Yettersley expounded, her knee jiggling up and down in excitement. She was a voluptuous woman with extravagantly coiffed hair- if it wasn’t for the (needlessly figure-hugging) lab-coat, you’d never have guessed she was a scientist.

The man sitting opposite her in the grey, unremarked cafe was her precise visual opposite: as emaciated as she was curvy, as slate-haired and style-free as she was youthful and sparkling. He wore a military uniform, devoid of the usual insignias of rank, which tended to worry people slightly.

“So the experiment was a failure, then?” he asked. He knew enough to infer the significance of a differential in the laws of physics between two realities.

Yetttersley shook her head vehemently and took a sip of her cream-topped coffee before explaining. “We assumed we’d fail, Marshal. That’s why we sent cheaply-made probes first. We thought that, without our laws of physics to hold it together, any matter we sent into the Exoverse would just fall apart. Maybe even cease to exist. But that’s not what happens. Matter continues to obey the natural laws of its originating universe, even when it goes beyond its confines.”

The military-man- the Marshal- nodded thoughtfully. “So your probes survived in the Exoverse?”

“Yes. We were operating with the idea that the laws of physics are an ambient force, but they’re more complex than that. They’re more like code- instructions written into every particle of existence. They persist wherever you send the medium they’re stored on. But that’s not the best part. Want to know the best part?” Yettersley actually fluttered her eyelashes as she said this.

“Go on.”

“It works the other way round, too. It’s not just that we can send matter to the Exoverse and have it survive: we can bring Exoverse matter back with us.”

The Marshal glanced around, making sure nobody had heard this last bit, then leaned in. The cafe was reassuringly quiet and disinterested and he wanted desperately to know more.

“This,” announced Yettersley proudly, “is a chip of Exoversal matter!” She took out a glass phial from the pocket of her lab-coat and plonked it on the table, between her coffee cup and her plate of Danish pastries. The thing in it glowed brilliant white and rattled about merrily in its container. It also emitted a noticeable heat and made a low humming noise.

The Marshal stared at it, eyes stretching to satirical proportions in wonderment.

“Is it safe? It’s glowing like it’s radioactive...” he said eventually, but didn’t lean back from the object. It was compellingly beautiful.

Yetttersley smiled reassuringly. “It doesn’t radiate anything harmful. I told you that the relationship between matter and energy was different there than here, right? Well, in our universe, you have to burn or use up matter to get energy. Matter converts to energy, you see? In the Exoverse, matter creates energy. The chip is emitting a full spectrum of thermal, luminous and electromagnetic radiation. Also kinetic energy, in the macro sense: not just making particles move quickly to create heat, but making whole things move about, like air currents and its own structure. That’s why it’s bouncing about and humming.”

“How much energy does it emit?” asked the Marshal, dry-swallowing his excitement.

“This chip? Not much. Enough thermal to keep my drink warm. Maybe enough EM to charge my phone. But the amount of energy a chunk of matter emits is in direct proportion to its weight. It doesn’t get used up, either. Like I said- it’s generating new energy spontaneously, not exhausting its own mass.”

The Marshal nodded and met Yetttersley’s eye. They shared a moment of perfect understanding: they were looking at the end of the energy crisis. Exoversal matter could be plugged into anything, from the National Grid to a portable camping stove. Free, inexhaustible energy was within mankind’s grasp.

“People will want to stop this,” said the Marshal. “Corporations with fuel monopolies; governments that don’t want to see energy-industry taxes dry up. Even my superiors are going to want to keep a lid on this until they’ve figured out a way to weaponise it or decided that nobody else is going to. We need to move fast. Can I take this?” He pointed at the phial and its jittery contents.

Yetttersley nodded. “I’ll start sending more probes to get more. The Exoverse is going to change everything.”

2

She was right. Everything did change when Exoversal matter went mainstream. For a start, the global economy collapsed.

People bought the Universal Energy Adapters that the Marshal’s contacts developed in their droves; and they bought Yetttersley’s Exoversal matter to power them. Then they never bought another joule of energy from any other supplier and the entire planet’s complex network of energy-

based fiscal relationships evaporated overnight. Massive conglomerates that employed hundreds of millions of people suddenly found themselves bankrupt and redundant. Even local fuel garages went the way of the Dodo and the unaugmented homo sapiens.

For a long time, Yettersley was consumed by guilt. She and her team controlled the gate to the Exoverse and everything that came out of it, which made her the richest woman on the planet, but only very briefly. She spent her fortune as fast as it flowed in, trying and failing to prop up systems that were doomed to failure. She grew thin and grey strands started appearing in her hair.

One bright, cool morning, The Marshal came to visit her in the mansion she'd bought before things went bad. His military uniform had been replaced by a Hawaiian shirt and beige slacks and his hair was gelled back and neaten up. He looked relaxed and came bearing a gift-basket of Danishes.

"How's my favourite scientist today?" he beamed at her as he walked inside. "Can't you afford a cleaner now you're a billionaire?" he added, casting a sardonic glance around the cluttered, dusty living room.

"I... I'm not doing well," Yettersley admitted.

"I heard you were feeling the strain. That's why I came to see you."

Yetttersley sat down heavily- or as heavily as her diminished form would allow- in a battered armchair and put her face in her hands.

"I've destroyed everything. I thought I was making resources infinite, but everyone has less than before, not more."

"You saved the world, Yettersley," said the Marshal. "Thanks to you, there's no more climate change; no more energy wars. People might be poorer, but a lot more of them are alive today than there would be if you'd kept the Exoverse a secret."

"I just... I thought things would be different." Yettersley's confident, technobabble-laden mannerisms had long since been replaced by long pauses and uncertainty.

"Utopias don't spring into being fully-formed," The Marshal said soothingly. "The remnants of the old world hang around for a long time. But economies will adjust and people will learn to live with the new status quo. You've created an age of infinite energy- the rest of history will be different and better because of you. That's worth a few years of economic shell-shock, isn't it?"

Yetttersley relaxed a little. "You really think it'll only be a few years?"

"Sure. Look, I've been talking to people in the major political parties- here and across the water. The incumbents are pretty intractable, but the opposition parties are ready to look at new ways of running the economies. State projects and redistributive measures to get the money and jobs where

they're needed; new infrastructure to take advantage of the energy situation. Nothing revolutionary- just old ideas given a new coat of paint, really. My point is just hang in there. Give it one General Election, maybe two. Things'll start to get better.

Yetttersley smiled hopefully. It was the first time she'd smiled in a long time.

3

Things did get better, too. It turned out that a lot of people had a lot of ideas about what to do with infinite energy: they just needed funding. Deep space exploration became viable- and potentially profitable- now that you could build ships capable of continuous acceleration and not worry about where to put the fuel. Hologram entertainment systems- once prohibitively expensive due to their energy requirements- took off in a big way. Even world hunger was beaten back: Exoversal energy proved to be just as effective in greenhouses as in batteries.

Energy equality provided a template for other forms of equality, too. Suddenly, socialism was no longer a dirty word and poverty was something to be eliminated, not merely escaped.

Once again, the Marshal's sly manoeuvring had changed the world and Yetttersley was grateful. No more was she the woman who broke the world. Now she was the symbolic figurehead of its new golden age: always in demand to talk at conferences and give after-dinner speeches on the discovery of the Exoverse; wined and dined by the new Captains of Industry who just wanted to be associated with her.

Gradually, the bags under her eyes faded, the hollows of her cheeks filled with flesh and her posture became less and less cowed; more and more upright. She grew fat and merry and vivacious and more like her old self as each passing day proved that the golden age was solid- that it wasn't going to evaporate like escaping steam.

When she bumped into the Marshal again, it was at a brilliant, sparkling evening on an orbital platform, powered by Exoversal matter and connected to the ground via a tapering space elevator. She'd seen him several times in the early days of mankind's surge towards utopia, but hadn't spoken to him properly for more than two years.

He looked different. The casual clothes were gone, but his military attire hadn't made a reappearance. He wore a sharp, dark suit that must have cost a fortune and was thinner than ever.

"I told you things would get better," he told her, but his smile seemed oddly forced.

The event happening around them was a party- a celebration of the first manned flight to another star system. It suddenly seemed like a bad place to talk.

“Let’s go to the observation dome,” Yettersley said, taking the Marshal by the elbow and leading him to a beautiful glass dome, filled with exotic plants and facing the majesty of space- a sort of orbital garden where the planet’s new class of long-haul space pilots paused to take the repackaged air before leaping once more into the infinite.

“You’re looking good,” he told her as they meandered down a path between flower-beds. “The whole ‘elegantly wasted’ thing never suited you.”

“And you look worried,” Yettersley said. “What’s wrong?”

“Someone’s figured out how to weaponise it.”

“Who? Us? Some other country?”

“Does it matter?” The Marshal raised an eyebrow. “The next war is going to be fought with Exoversal matter and, no matter who it’s between, it’s going to be devastating.”

“I’m sorry,” Yettersley said. “Can’t you...?”

“The military disowned me years ago. I’m more plugged into government and the private sector than ever, but I’ve run out of army strings to pull. This thing is out there and I have no idea how many lives its going to cost.”

Yetttersley frowned. She remembered the old guilt she’d felt when she realised she’d ruined the world’s financial systems. She knew she should feel worse now, but she didn’t. The party was nearby and she was Doctor Yettersley, the guest of honour; the patron of the golden age; the big, raunchy good-luck charm to the whole human race. How could that person have done anything wrong? She just couldn’t feel it: the old, hard-bitten sense of responsibility.

Nonetheless, she wanted to make the Marshal feel better.

“Come on,” she said. “You need a drink.”

4

It took years- years of threatening and bargaining and grandstanding among the nations of the Earth- but the Marshal’s predicted war did eventually start. The Israeli government threw a self-perpetuating Exoversal bomb at a suspected insurgency in disputed land near the border with Palestine. When the Exoversal material had been safely extracted, allowing the area to cool enough for U.N. inspectors to come in, it turned out that their intel had been bad. What they’d actually blown up was a field hospital catering to both Israeli and Palestinian fighters.

The political manoeuvres that followed failed and kept on failing. A photograph of a charred doctor’s coat, covered in burned-black blood and hanging from a piece of metal debris, was

circulated round the globe via a thousand news outlets. Public outcry followed. Sooner or later, all the world's superpowers had picked sides.

After the war had been going on for three months, Doctor Yettersley went into her lab where her original, home-brew Exoverse portal hummed quietly to itself. She sat in front of it and stared, trying to work out how she was supposed to feel about the situation. She had publicly denounced the war, of course, using her platform to plead for rationality. But was she supposed to feel guilty? Was she supposed to care that public opinion- on her side for so long- had once more turned against her, the Mother of the Exobomb.

By the time the Marshal showed up, meeting her at her request, she knew how she felt. Tired.

"How are you doing?" he asked her, gently. He wore a trench-coat and boots that gave him an old-fashioned, pragmatic look. For some reason, she'd expected him to turn up wearing his old uniform. They had, after all, come to the end of some type of cycle: from discovery, to ruin, to utopia, to ruin again... and now, at last, to discovery. Not external but internal.

"I have discovered something about myself," Yettersley told the Marshall, who just nodded and waited for her to elaborate. "I have discovered that I don't feel very strongly about anything in this world any more."

"That's understandable," said the Marshal, amicably. "Life's been something of a roller coaster for you, hasn't it, dear."

She couldn't remember when they'd started calling each other 'dear', but hearing it now seemed totally natural.

"You know it's supportive of life, right? The laws of physics are different but the substrate itself meshes very well with organic matter and the laws of our universe."

"Not sure what you're talking about, dear," said the Marshal.

"The Exoverse, of course," Yettersley laughed. "You can breath it- even take nourishment from it. It's not like the vacuum of space in our universe, it's... nurturing, I suppose is the word."

"I thought you said that matter from one universe always obeys its own laws of physics, even when in another. How can a person breath the Exoverse if they can't breath vacuum in our 'verse?"

"Like I said, it's not vacuum. It's something else. Something matter from our universe recognises and can use. I have a theory..." Yettersley said this last part while making steady eye contact with the Marshal. "I have a theory that our universe and the Exoverse must have come into contact before. It must have happened when the nature of both realities was still plastic. I think I might... investigate."

The Marshal stuck his hands in his pockets. "You mean go into the Exoverse? Yourself?"

“Yes. For a long-term research expedition. The thing is... it wouldn’t exactly be sanctioned by any government or funding body...” she trailed off.

“That would make finding staff for the expedition a little hard, wouldn’t it?” the Marshal asked.

“Well, I think I could manage with just one other person to help me.” Yettersley maintained eye-contact.

The Marshal sighed. “The truth is... I don’t feel particularly strongly about this universe, either,” he said.

“I’ll show you the vessel, then.”

Inside the Exoverse exploration craft, Yettersley and the Marshal linked arms and stared out the forward window. The portal opened up before them while Yettersley’s computer-controlled countdown ticked away in the background.

“Want to know something funny?” said the Marshal.

“Sure,” Yettersley smiled at him.

“Marshal’s not my rank- it’s my name. Mr. Marshal.”

“You’re kidding?” Yettersley said. “What’s your first name?”

Marshal told her- and no doubt finally thought to ask for name in turn. However, neither his answer nor his question can be reported with any degree of accuracy, because, by the time he spoke them, he and Yettersley were gone into a brave new ‘Verse. The portal snapped shut behind them. There are worse ways to walk away from something.

The Cascade

ACE

“How did you do the Blank Mirrors card trick, Redsy?” Mr. Palm asked the young magician, and punched him hard across the jaw for emphasis.

Red Evening sobbed. “You know how it was done! It used standard sleights! I’m not holding anything back- you’ve got to believe me!”

“Listen you little shit-” Mr. Palm snarled, drawing back his fist for another blow. He never landed it, however, because his esteemed colleague, Mr. Count interrupted him.

“What my associate is trying to say, young master Evening, is that we know that’s horseshit. For your illusion to work, you had to ensure that two very specific cards were on the top of two separate packs. We know that, because you used the Cut Deeper Force to ensure that your audience volunteer picked the right card. But here’s the rub. You genuinely mixed up both packs. You weren’t using any known false cuts and you didn’t have any cards palmed to drop back on top. So how did the cards you needed to force end up on top of the packs?”

Red stared at Mr. Count the same way some animals stare into rapidly approaching car headlights.

“This doesn’t have to be hard for you, Mr. Evening,” Mr. Count said, not unkindly. “You’re a fine young magician with many years of performance ahead of you... unless Mr. Palm has to break your fingers. Then I guess you might find it a little hard to ply your trade. All we want is the method for one little trick. Is that really worth your whole career?”

“It’s the best trick I’ve ever done,” Red Evening said. “Please- I’ll give you the method for any other trick in my set! I’ll give you the method for Coinblaster, even!”

“We don’t want the method for Coinblaster, Redsy,” Mr. Palm snapped. “We want the method for Blank Mirrors.” To underscore his point, he picked up a cricket bat that was leaning by Red’s chair (he was tied in, naturally), and smashed it against his victim’s knee. Then he bent the little finger of Red’s left hand back until it broke, causing Red to scream in agony.

“It’ll heal- it’s not a career-breaker, Mr. Evening,” Mr. Count said, dispassionately. “Your next little... accident will be.”

“Okay, okay!” Red screamed. “I used a false cut! You didn’t pick up on it because it’s a new one- one I invented. I call it the Moth Cut!”

“Describe it,” said Mr. Palm. This time, he didn’t add any physical communication.

Red Evening described the cut, step by step. Mr. Count removed a deck of cards from his top pocket and worked through the steps to make sure Red wasn't lying about the technique's efficacy.

"It works," he said. "Mr. Palm, please release Mr. Evening and send him on his way. I'll notify the others that he's paid this evening's Idea Tax so he doesn't get picked up again."

Mr. Palm did as he was told, shunting Red towards the small theatre's exit as soon as his bonds were untied.

"The next time you feel like taking a booking in Djedi Guild territory, remember to hand over your method notes in advance, Redsy. We wouldn't want any more misunderstandings, I'm sure."

Red didn't answer- he just stumbled out into the rainy London night and hailed a cab, wrapping his magician's cape tightly around himself to disguise his ripped clothes; his bruised body; his contusions.

Later that night, Red collapsed onto the ancient wooden bed that occupied one corner of this basement flat and screamed into his pillow. He'd already been forced to give up the Moth Cut to Houdini Guild and Angier Guild. Now that three of the guilds knew it, the others would soon barter it from them or beat it out of them. His prized technique- developed over long months- was now completely worthless. No Guild would buy it from him when they could get it from a direct rival and undermine them into the bargain. No independent practitioner would buy it because the Guilds might catch them using "their" new sleight.

He'd have no money to give to Lorice this month.

2

Red was in love. For the past five years, Lorice Bondsworthy had been the object of his affections. She was a Magician's Assistant by trade and Red hired her whenever he performed on the stage rather than in a parlour. Sadly, nobody else hired her and she was always short on rent. She was charming and talented but she was also the wrong size and shape for most magic equipment. She was a little too heavy for levitation equipment; a little too tall for the box that allowed an assistant to be sawn in half and put back together safely; a little too wide for the hidden compartment in a vanishing cabinet.

Red was quite happy to accommodate her by reversing the traditional roles and allowing himself to be sawn in half or produced from an empty cabinet. Regrettably, the rest of the magical world was less inclined to make allowances for her uniquely ill-suited physique.

She knocked on the door to Red's basement flat the day after his ordeal with the Djedi Guild and was horrified when he answered the door looking bruised and battered. Her big, kind heart beat against her ribs like a distressed and grieving prisoner banging at his bars.

"What happened? Was it the Guilds again?" she asked.

"Yes," Red said, forcing a wan smile. "The Djedi bastards took the Moth Cut. I won't be able to sell it now. I'm sorry, hun. I really thought we'd be okay this month."

Lorice pulled him into her arms. "I wish they wouldn't call themselves 'Guilds'," she opined, fervently. "They're street gangs. The police only turn a blind eye because locking up magicians is like herding cats."

"There's a lot of money in magic," Red said, half proud, half miserable. "Wherever there's money, violence soon follows. The Guilds are run by rich men who want to stay rich. They can't abide the thought of new sleights that they can't control or sell."

"You don't need to persuade me, cutie," Lorice said, then smiled suddenly. As always, her grin had the effect of completely dazzling Red.

"So we don't have any cash this month? So what?" she said. "We don't need it. You know why? Because pizza is still cheap!"

She was right- prices at takeouts and pizzerias in London were ultra-low for magicians. The fast food industry was wise in the ways of publicity. Getting people who could entertain customers into their establishments was always a top priority.

An hour later, the two of them sat on Red's bed munching pizza (and, in Lorice's case, several sides); talking about new tricks.

"I want to come up with a new cups-and-balls routine. We can't use the classic version, because the Djedi bastards own it and they always want a cut of the profits," Red said.

"Do you think they'll keep watching you after last night?" Lorice inquired through a mouthful of dough.

Red patted her ample thigh affectionately and sighed. "They're always watching me."

"It's a pity you can't come up with a trick that would make them vanish," Lorice said, wistfully. Red fell quiet.

"Red?" she asked. "Red, what's wrong, honey?"

When Red remained silent, she climbed on top of him so she was straddling him and put her plump, pizza-greasy hands on his cheeks.

"Earth to Red," she called, laughing nervously. "Earth to Red. Come in Red- we're worried about you here at ground control!"

Red's attention snapped to her and he smiled. It was a smile she had never seen before- it was cold, but somehow brilliant, like a clear, sunny day in the arctic circle.

"I just had a great idea," he announced. "Or, rather, you did."

"I did?" Lorice asked distantly, hypnotised by her lover's shark-grin. His expression was so completely unRed-like that it gave her goosebumps. She wondered if the Guild had hurt him more than he'd let on; if it had affected him worse than she'd realised.

"You did," he confirmed. "You said I should make a trick that would make the Guild vanish. That's impossible- but I can design a trick that will hurt them very badly. A dangerous trick. A trick that will kill anyone who does it wrong but which looks so good the Djedi bastards won't be able to resist beating it out of me..."

"But how do you know that this hypothetical trick would hurt them and not you?" Lorice asked. She felt scared, but she also felt... something else. The increase in her heart-rate wasn't entirely unpleasant and there was a pressure building up somewhere inside her that didn't feel like fear.

"Because I'll know the real method, but Djedi Guild won't. When they ask me for my secret, I'll refuse at first. I'll make them torture me until I weep and scream and piss myself- until I'm completely dehumanised to them. I'll make them forget that I'm an autonomous person who can lie and dissemble. Then I'll feed them the wrong method- the deadly method- and watch them immolate themselves."

"Immolate? This trick is going to involve fire?" Lorice wanted to know. She could feel the pressure building inside her, and now she recognised it for what it was. She resettled herself on Red and allowed her hips to start moving in a rhythm as old as humanity itself.

"It has to! It needs to be something flashy and irresistible!"

"Tell me what you see," she whispered, moving faster. It was what she said when she wanted him to describe an effect.

"I see myself with flames dancing over my body- but not just flames: multi-coloured flames and sparks. I see you pouring water over me, but instead of dying, the flames grow and flow over me and onto the floor, following the cascade of water. I see me stepping off a stage and walking through the audience- they can see the flames up-close and can even touch me without being burned..."

"Tell me what you see after the show's over," she gasped, beginning to buck wildly. "Tell me what you see when the Djedi bastards question you!"

"I see Mr. Count fishing in my pocket and taking a vial of liquid. I see myself sobbing that it's a special chemical that burns without heat. I see Mr. fucking Palm pouring it over himself and lighting a match- I see him grinning for a second as he's surrounded by flames... then realising that

there is heat, after all; realising that the liquid is actually aeronautical fuel, or petrol or something and that his pasty skin is going to burn right off his bones.”

“And Mr. Count- what’s he doing? Does he burn too?”

“Yes- they’ve bound my wrists to a chair, but not my feet, because I didn’t put up much of a fight. I see myself kicking him hard, so he stumbles into Palm. They go up together and Djedi Guild loses two of its best enforcers in one night. I see the flesh melting off their bones like meat in a hot oven, exposing skulls that still look like they’re grimacing in pain!”

Lorice orgasmed violently.

“We’re smarter than them, aren’t we?” she whispered, afterwards, as she lay with her head on Red’s chest. It was this thought- this idea of being smarter than their tormentors and killing with their minds- that had turned her on.

“Much smarter,” Red said, stroking her hair. “We’re actually going to hurt them, love.”

3

The stage-lights flicked on, one by one, surrounding Red in simple, white brilliance and plunging the rest of the auditorium into shadow.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, taking a deep bow, “tonight, I want to show you a feat that no other magician has ever attempted. I want to demonstrate the burning magic of the Sun itself... but first, I have to get warmed up.”

With his introduction out the way, Red produced a set of chop-cups and made them expel brilliant tongues of flame. He reached into the flames and seemed to pull out coins, dropping them into an empty glass with a succession of loud clinks. As the last coin entered the glass, a plume of fire and smoke spewed from it. When Red tipped it upside down, the coins had vanished.

Sweeping the chop-cups away, Red produced a pack of cards- more smoke billowed from the deck, suggesting an unseen fire. A spectator came up onto the stage and chose a card. The rest of the deck went up in flame, leaving the chosen card unharmed. Red skimmed it into the audience where it could be examined.

More tricks- all of them involving fire- flew past. The audience were gratifyingly mesmerised... as were Mr. Count and Mr. Palm, who sat in the front row, waiting to see if Red did anything worth taking. None of the tricks he performed held any mysteries for them: they all used well-established techniques. But his presentation... that was something else.

“I’ve never seen someone so...” Mr. Palm struggled for the right phrase.

“Fired up?” Mr. Count suggested, drily. “He’s building to something big. Something worth... asking him about.”

Lorice heard the two Djedi thugs talking. Red wouldn’t need her until the end of the show, so she was sat in the second row, eating popcorn and eavesdropping. She smiled to herself. Her man had gained the enemy’s attention, just as they’d planned.

Only a week had passed since they first discussed the trick that would bring down Djedi Guild, but it had been spent productively. They had found a way to fireproof Red’s suit and implant just the right proportions of flash-paper and slow-burn materials into it. They had talked endlessly about the right patter and the best way to draw attention to the newness of the illusion. They had discussed possible prestiges and denouements and kicker endings until they had the perfect climax. Then they had built the rest of the show and pitched it to every theatre in Djedi Guild’s territory.

Now, she knew, she was about the watch the trick itself. The true culmination of their efforts would be shared by Red, Mr. Count and Mr. Palm in private- but she intended to savour this moment: the part of their victory that could be public.

“You’ve seen the power of fire, but you haven’t seen the fires of the sun!” Red announced. “Now it’s time for my final feat. It’s time for you to witness the mystical flames that have sustained mankind since the dawn of time. Normally, the sun burns far away in space: tonight, it will burn on this very stage!” As he said ‘stage’, Red threw his arms wide. Tiny specks of flame appeared at Red’s fingertips, then travelled to his palms, becoming great pillars of heat and light as they did so. Soon the flames engulfed his body and he became a man-sun. The spot-lights dimmed and went out, allowing Red to illuminate the stage himself... then the flames that wreathed him began to change. Some became blue, others purple, others green.

Lorice stood up from her chair, crying out:

“This isn’t part of the act! This isn’t supposed to happen!” She said it in a way that made it clear that this was part of the act, that this was supposed to happen. The audience was meant to be exhilarated, not actually terrified.

She rushed out of her seat and towards the stage, grabbing a bucket of water that sat at the foot of the access stairs. As she ran up them to Red, she tripped deliberately, throwing the water over him.

As they had planned, the flames weren’t put out by the water: they washed off with it and continued to burn on the surface of the puddle surrounding Red.

Also as they had planned, he dismounted the stage, now wearing a more modest coat of multicoloured flames. He left flaming footprints in the auditorium while spectators ran their hands

through the flames and were amazed to discover that they were warm, but not painfully burning-hot.

When Red reached the end of the auditorium, he swung round, creating a whirlwind of fire around himself... and vanished.

A second later, he was mysteriously back on stage, unscathed and taking his bow.

4

Red Evening's real name was Clay Redthorpe, though nobody ever called him by it. It was the name that had hung around his neck as a boy and a teenager, stammering and repeating himself obsessively; refusing and unable to make eye contact with anyone; barely able to read or mimic facial expressions. It was the name of a lad with fairly severe autism, trapped by a world that demanded its citizens relate to it in a certain way; a world with a hundred million rules that either weren't explained or made no sense when they were.

Clay had come to magic not through a magic set containing easily-learned plastic, prop-reliant tricks, but through a single visit to a single small theatre, followed by several years of uninterrupted graft.

He loved magic from the moment he saw it, though his baffled parents couldn't understand why. They had taken their stiff, literal-minded son along to a night of whimsy and beguiling fiction because they were determined to expose him to things that challenged his inflexible methodology of processing the world; his seemingly joyless determination to categorise and catalogue the universe as neatly and inhumanly as possible. They had expected him to be confused and upset by the show, but thought that- because it was all heart and no head- it would do him good in the long-run. When 12-year old Clay starting clapping and grinning with involuntary and unaffected fervour, they couldn't understand it. It was an unprecedented display of emotion from a child who had received news of his great-grandfather's pancreatic cancer with a round-eyed "Oh. What's for breakfast?"

The truth was that little Clay had seen things in magic that the world at large failed to offer elsewhere. It offered a glimpse of the possible. Films and books and cartoons and games were fun and even a child on the spectrum likes fun things, but Clay knew they were obvious impossibilities, which put them in the order of 'distractions'. Once their essentially fictional nature was understood, they were nothing to get passionate about. Magic, on the other hand, clearly took place in the real world: it wasn't just fun, it was possible. That element of possibility meant that, if he learned how, Clay could do it too. Whereas the rest of the audience saw one card transform into another, or a ball vanish from a cup, Clay saw a matrix of invisible techniques and rules: an orderly system that made

the world a more wondrous place. The obsessive-autistic impulse to understand, catalogue and replicate ad nauseum was here put into service to make reality a little less mundane.

Obviously, these complex thoughts didn't arrive in his child brain in an articulate, reasoned form. The only words that came with the sensations of magic were "I want to do that."

Clay gave his first paid performance as Red Evening when he was twenty years old. His patter was minimal and his presentation was blunt, but the tricks were good. Not yet good enough to attract the attentions of the Guilds (who, back then, were barely getting their claws into showbiz anyway), but good. Certainly good enough to ensure repeated bookings.

He performed at a tiny theatre in Shoreditch and there he first laid eyes on Lorice- tall, plump, liquorice-sweet Lorice. She looked up at him from the audience with eyes that saw the rules, not just the effects, and Red fell for her immediately, before he even knew she worked in the world of magic.

He didn't know how to talk to her after the show, but he started talking anyway and she listened. She listened to what he said, not just the way he said it (his stammer and tendency to get stuck on repeat had made it to early adulthood intact). But Lorice didn't seem to care- not that Red was any judge, really. She got excited about his ideas for tricks and fell over her own gabbling tongue as she tried to get the words out: not just words of encouragement, but ideas and improvements and questions.

When her boss fired her because she got wedged in a hidden trapdoor, Red hired her as his assistant immediately. He couldn't afford it and she should have been looking for better-paid work, but neither of them acknowledged that and, after their first show together, they made love in a too-tight vanishing cabinet, clumsily but joyously.

Two years later, Red was first noticed and picked up by a Guild after a show. They were a minor Guild, with their fingers in all of three theatres. They were called the Dalton Guild and they didn't even torture him properly for information- they just roughed him up slightly while asking him to describe any one of his tricks. Later, when it was over, they gave him a cup of tea, sent him on his way, and didn't demand their 'tax' for another six months. They were old-school and fairly decent, as parasitic gutter-thugs went.

Naturally, they got eviscerated in a turf-war with a bigger Guild a couple of years later.

The bigger guild was the Djedi Guild and they had made Red's life progressively more difficult since they picked the bones out of the Daltons' records and realised that he was, potentially, a

metaphorical goose with an unknowable number of very valuable golden eggs up its platinum-coated arsehole.

5

Red awoke to fading memories of his early career and realised he must have passed out during the torture. His hands were- thus far- only bruised, but one of his feet was twisted round at an unnatural angle and someone- probably Palm- had shoved tiny, superheated fragments of coal into his nostrils. He'd also micturated in his underpants, but he couldn't quite remember if this had been an involuntary reaction to the car battery and jumper cables he saw nearby or a deliberate ploy on his part.

"Oh good. You're awake," Mr. Count smiled at him, coldly. "Now... maybe this time you'll spend less time begging for your life and more time explaining our new method to us."

"Top pocket. Vial." Red muttered this through a mouthful of blood and fragmented teeth. "It's what was in the bucket."

"What about the trick up to that point?"

"Flashpaper; ignition rings; over-the-counter cool-burn chemicals. Nothing you can't figure out. The bucket's the key."

Mr. Count nodded and Mr. Palm took out the vial, sniffed it and found it not to contain any obvious poisons. He tipped it onto his head... and screamed.

Red had initially wanted the vial to set him on fire, but had decided that he might sniff for accelerants and fuels. So he'd altered his plan to include a bluff: the vial didn't contain anything flammable. It contained nothing whatsoever to do with fire in fact. It contained very concentrated, scentless acid, which was now eating its way through Mr. Palm's skull and into his brain.

There was a second vial taped to Red's leg that could be sent flying forward with a single, powerful kick.

He kicked at Mr. Count, but couldn't use his other, broken foot to gain purchase, so the vial plopped wetly onto the floor rather than hitting his enemy with much force. On the plus side, it did land close enough to him for its puddle eat through both of his shoes and one of his feet.

Mr. Count screamed in agony and fled for the street on one good foot and one leg that now terminated in a shapeless, mushy sack of corroded flesh.

Red waited until the acid had had time to oxidise itself to safety, then took a deep breath and screamed until Lorice heard him and came bursting in to untie him.

The anonymous room he limped away from, supporting himself on his girlfriend's arm, had been situated behind a coffee shop. A patron buying a croissant glared at him and muttered "magicians!" contemptuously as he hobbled by.

6

Red lay in hospital with his foot in a cast and calmly explained to the police what had happened, while his broken foot itched inside its cast.

"So you see, I have multiple defences under UK law. First and foremost, I didn't actually do anything, except lie about the nature of an item that was being stolen from me. If the criminals chose to misuse it and hurt themselves, I can't be blamed."

"That might hold up for the first vial of acid. What about the second vial, the one that the survivor says you launched from some kind of leg-holster?" the irate constable asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I had a muscle spasm. If one of the chemicals used in my illusion happened to get on a crook who was torturing me as a result... well, I can hardly be blamed, can I? Not under the circumstances?"

"Frankly," the constable glowered, "I don't buy it."

"Perhaps you'd prefer the obvious legal defence of self-defence. Let's say- hypothetically- that I did what I did on purpose. I was strapped to a chair by murderous thugs at the time. And maybe add a dash of extreme and unendurable provocation, such that no reasonable person would have reacted differently."

"YOU MELTED A MAN'S SKULL!" The constable exploded. "THE FORENSICS TEAM SHOWED ME THE SOUP OF HIS BRAIN IN A PLASTIC EVIDENCE BAGGY!"

"Need I remind you that he did that to himself with stolen property?" Red asked, pedantically.

Later, the constable talked to his superiors, who talked to the Crown Prosecution Service, who told them, flatly, that they weren't going to try and convict an autistic man for successfully defending himself against kidnappers and extortionists. Especially not when the papers were already running with it as a feel-good story of survival and triumph in the face of adversity.

While this conversation with the CPS was happening, Lorice Bondsworthy came to see Red. She brought chocolates and flowers and grinned from ear to ear.

“I still can’t believe it,” she said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “You actually beat them! All these years of running scared and the Guild’s best enforcers are finally out of our lives. One dead and one in prison because he panicked and went to the police! Fuck me, but you’re good!”

“It would have been better if they both died. If they died, they couldn’t enact reprisals. Mr. Count might try to enact reprisals.”

Lorice frowned. “You’re doing that thing where you repeat phrases- are you getting caught in a loop?”

‘Getting caught in a loop’ was their term for when Red’s atypical neurology sent him into a self-referential, self-repeating chain of reasoning. See also, ‘going full Rain Man’. It happened a lot less nowadays.

Red pulled himself together, pushing down the stress that interfered with his ability to pass as a neurotypical. “No. I’m fine. I’ll be fine. Just a little flicker of the bad old days.”

“Do you feel guilty about what you did,” Lorice asked, stroking her lover’s brow.

“No,” Red replied, furrowing aforesaid brow in confusion. “They were bad people. Also, I didn’t have a choice. We couldn’t go on the way we’d been going. I’m just a little worried about Mr. Count. About what he’s going to do.”

“He won’t do shit,” Lorice said determinedly. “He’s in prison. Even if he gets out... well, your foot will heal, but his is just a puddle of viscera on a bare concrete floor. You did that to him while tied in a chair. If he’s got any sense, as soon as his sentence is served, he’ll run away with his tail between his legs. He’ll put as much distance between himself and you as possible.” She leaned in and kissed Red violently on the lips. “My man’s a fucking badass.”

After Lorice left- the nurses snapping at her that visiting hours had ended some time ago- Red lay and thought about what she’d said. He didn’t think of himself as a badass. He thought of himself as a magician- nothing more, nothing less.

He lay and contemplated the effect he’d used to draw in Palm and Count. He wanted to perform it again, under happier circumstances, as soon as possible. He wanted to see that multicoloured fire dance across his skin again- it had been beautiful.

He raised his hand in front of his face and pictured it wreathed in a glove of flame. He felt the gentle heat against his flesh. He felt the way his heartbeat affected the jumping, skittish bop of the tongues of fire. He heard someone yell- a nurse, he thought- “Somebody get a doctor! He’s on fire!”

He was released three days later with instructions to keep his cast on and not to spontaneously combust again. Nobody knew how his hand had burst into flames, but everyone seemed to be convinced it was some magician's trick, designed to build his legend for the papers.

"It wasn't. I'd tell you," Red assured Lorice, as they sat in his dilapidated flat eating cut-price pizza.

"I believe you. So what do you think happened?" she asked.

"I don't know. Something psychosomatic maybe? Something exaggerated by the morphine and by the chemicals left on my skin by the trick?"

Lorice shook her head. Somehow it didn't quite fit.

7

Mr. Count could have told Red what was going on, if anyone had thought to ask him. The only person who expressed an interest, however, was Mr. Dust, the head of the Djedi Guild.

He came to visit Mr. Count in lock-up. He came alone, without lawyers, and Mr. Count wasn't sure why he'd come or why the police had let him in at all.

"You had one job, Mr. Count," Mr. Dust wheezed. "Extract valuable ideas from the cesspool of wannabes. At no point, did I tell you to break them."

"You've never complained about... breakages before," Mr. Count sulked.

"This one's putting himself back together again. You know what that means. He's come out the other side of illusion and trickery. You should have recognised the steel in him- I thought I taught you better than this."

"He was a whimpering boy with some kind of mental disorder! He was a retard with a small talent for sleight of hand only a week or two before he killed Mr. Palm!"

"His neurodivergence didn't make him a retard, idiot," snapped Mr. Dust. "It may, in fact, be what saved him from you. A normal person with a healthy mind would have balked at what he had to do to beat you. Mr. Redthorpe exists in an ethical universe quite beautifully devoid of abstraction and hang-up. And by breaking him- pushing him to the edge of that universe and forcing change upon him- you have given him the opportunity to come back as something lethal and effective."

"How can I make it up to you?" Mr. Count asked, chastened.

"You will find your cell door unlocked and the enforcers of law blind to you. Get out there and kill him before he realises what he is."

For his part, Red had quickly forgotten about his brief bout of physics-defying incandescence- or, at least, ceased to dwell on it excessively. He was much in demand following his stint in the papers as the have-a-go hero who took down two prominent members of a shadowy and nefarious criminal organisation with quick-thinking and self-sacrificing bravery. The fact that this portrayal bore almost no relation to the rage-fuelled and sadistically-calculated reality of Red's actions made very little difference to him. He was rapidly becoming the most popular magician in London, performing on stages large and small.

Most of his new customers were astonished by how little he charged for his command performances, and took it as evidence that he was a humble, demure sort of a hero. The reality, of course, was that Red charged exactly what he thought his performances were worth: the idea of demanding greater fees simply because he could hadn't occurred to him.

"I'm proud of you," Lorice said, helping him with a cravat he'd purchased for that evening's performance- which was to take place in the Savoy lobby.

"Why? People only want me more now because I've been in the papers. I'm not different to what I was a month or two ago."

"Well, I was proud of you then, too," Lorice said and kissed him quickly, before he could start overanalysing.

Red permitted himself to enjoy the moment, putting his arms around her and savouring her warmth and softness.

"Do you want to move in with me?" he asked, the idea occurring to him with sudden obviousness. "We spend so much time living together at my place, we should make it official. Then you could stop paying rent on that flat. It'd be eminently practical."

Lorice squeezed him against her. "Yes! I thought you'd never ask!"

And so, Red Evening performed at the Savoy later that night in very high spirits indeed, with his now live-in glamorous assistant taking every opportunity to brush past him, skin-to-skin as he went through his act, blithely unaware that a man who wanted him dead had recently walked away from imprisonment without anyone noticing.

If Red was in demand, so were the people who knew him. Lorice, of course, was more than happy to enthuse about him in VT segments, morning television interviews and glossy magazines. His parents also found themselves in the limelight, which surprised them because they had so little to do with their son. There had been no cataclysmic argument and Red wasn't a disappointment to them per se... but the vague awkwardness that came with a mentally peculiar relative and the fact

that he'd chosen a career doing something utterly unconnected with the world left very little common ground.

"He was always a quiet kid," Red's father said, in one interview, as though he was describing a boy he didn't know well but who had grown up to be a serial killer.

"He loved magic," his mother put in, subconsciously using the past tense, as though either Red or his obsession with sleight-work had gone anywhere.

8

After laying low for several days (and acquiring a prosthetic foot), Mr. Count made his way to a small magic shop known only as The Place- for a certain type of magician, this title was entirely accurate, as it was the only place of any sort worth mentioning. It existed in neutral territory and none of the Guilds ever questioned its right to neutrality. To the public, it sold packs of cards and toy wands and books on sleight of hand and plastic magic sets, just like any other store. To the initiated, it sold other things.

"I need a... speciality item," Mr. Count told the owner, who stood behind the front counter wearing a rich purple suit and a self-assured, secretive smile.

He raised a perfectly-manicured eyebrow, so Mr. Count pulled out his Guild Sigil (an elaborate ring on a chain of gold). A moment later, he was escorted into a backroom containing rack upon rack of carven wood-and-metal pieces.

"What exactly are your requirements?" asked the proprietor, whose name nobody ever seemed to know.

"I have a potentially dangerous target on my hands who needs cleaning up," Mr. Count said.

The proprietor nodded and picked up a silver and black cylinder from its slot on the wall-rack.

"The .73 Thurston Superior," he announced. "Capable of continuous expulsion for up to thirty-two seconds. Draws 10,000 joules of energy per cycle directly from the wielder's reserve. Precision sighting with detachable tactical scope. Rapid-fire mode ideal for multiple targets."

"Continuous expulsion? Rapid-fire mode? Multiple bloody targets?" Mr. Count stared the proprietor. "I'm not planning on mowing down a bunch of Fool Us in Vegas contestants in a drive-by hexing! I want a normal fucking wand for a normal fucking person!"

The proprietor looked crestfallen, but returned the .73 Thurston Superior to its bracket and removed a dark brown wood and brass wand instead, nonetheless.

"The .31 Carter Standard. 3,000 joules per cycle. Holds eight non-continuous charges at a time. Very reliable- never mis-spells."

“Good. I’ll need something basic but powerful, too, in case things go sideways.”

Mr. Count waited while the store’s owner retrieved a charred rosewood wand of considerable thickness and simplicity of design.

“The .98 Vernon requires no introduction. For when you positively, ab-so-lutely have to curse every single motherfucker in a four-mile radius.”

Shortly thereafter, Mr. Count left the premises with a wand in his pocket and a considerably larger one inside his coat.

Tracking down his target didn’t prove difficult. Red Evening was to give a command performance at the Savoy that evening. There were posters up all across London: the target’s features beaming down at him from behind a fan of playing cards, each red ace glistening like fresh blood and each black ace a little piece of night-sky transposed onto the blinding white medium of its background.

Mr. Count checked his wands one last time as he made his way towards the hotel whose lobby would provide Red’s venue.

He was a big, square man, habituated to overdressing, yet he seemed to pass unnoticed through the city’s bustling crowds. People flowed around him like water. The charm Mr. Dust had imparted to him seemed to protect him from the gaze of all. He had expected to be invisible to the police, but he also went unobserved by anyone who might report him to them. It was a strange sensation: invisibility in the most surveiled city in England.

When he reached the Savoy, he breezed past the doormen with nary a glance, drawing the small, deadly .31 Carter Standard from his pocket.

9

Red stood backstage, waiting for the curtains to pull back and unveil him like a prize on a late-night phone-in quiz show. He wondered vaguely whose job it had been to install a stage in the Savoy lobby and if they’d realised just how overcrowded it would make the venue. A table facing a few rows of chairs would have suited Red’s purposes just fine.

Slowly, the curtains drew back and he stepped into a spotlight that forced him to squint for a minute until his eyes adjusted. When they did, he saw Lorice in the front row (as always) and decided that all was right with the world.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said without preamble. “I’d like to show you something using two rubber bands...” He pulled the oversized bands (custom made to be visible from the back row) from his pockets and launched into the linking rubber bands routine.

“That’s one of the simplest tricks in magic,” he explained. “Now I’d like to show you one of the most complex.” Suddenly, there was a pack of cards in his hands and he was calling audience members up on stage. One by one, they each selected the exact same card from a shuffled and then reshuffled deck.

“That’s particularly hard to pull off,” Red said, “because you have to keep people from noticing that the card comes from a different deck!” With that, he turned over the card (the Seven of Hearts) and showed that, alone among the blue-backed playing cards, it was red-backed.

He borrowed rings and turned them to glitter, only to have them reappear halfway across the lobby in someone else’s pocket. He made coins levitate and handkerchiefs change colour. And finally, he set himself on fire.

As the cool, polychromatic flames spread over his body, he saw Mr. Count sitting in the middle of the audience.

Red’s eyes locked on those of his old foe, and he saw the hatred glittering and dancing there. It didn’t burn: it was a cold, mad kind of loathing. The loathing of a lifelong bully who never realised that he could be beaten at his own game.

Red remembered a boy he’d known as a schoolchild. Everyday, this boy had either insulted him, pranked him or- when bored of mind-games- simply beaten the snot out of him. This had gone on for six months until Red- Clay, in those days- finally worked out what to do. He’d gone to the equipment locker attached to the school gym and waited there in the darkness. His childhood enemy had followed him in, thinking he was trying to hide. Before the boy’s eyes could adjust to dim light, Red had broken his arm with a cricket bat. He made a point of breaking his other arm as soon as he was down, too.

“It’s not fair!” was what the boy had wailed as an ambulance took him away to hospital. Even then, it had struck Red as an irrational thing to say. It was exactly fair- one pain repaid with another. But the boy had hated Red as though he’d been the one to start a campaign of abuse and violence; had hated him because he considered it his inalienable right to torment the weak.

Red (who had been expelled from the school and been pretty pleased about it) saw the same hatred now in the eyes of Mr. Count. It was a self-justifying kind of hate and, as an adult, Red knew that it’s coded message was simply ‘I am going to kill you’.

Of course, what Mr. Count didn't realise was that Red could hate, too. He could hate and he could think at the same time- a rare and fearful combination.

As he thought back to his youth, Red watched Mr. Count's hand dip to his pocket and knew that whatever it brought out would be lethal.

When he saw the wand- the Carter Standard- arching up to point at him, he was reminded of the incident in hospital when his hand had burst into flame.

Had Mr. Count attacked Red in the street, things would probably have played out differently. Red would have been perplexed by the sight of the wand; would not have believed in real magic. But riding the euphoria of his own success, Red was half-convinced by his own patter; his own illusions. He was ready to entertain the idea of magic, not as a trick but as something real.

He saw the wand, aimed as though it was a real, powerful weapon and wondered if it might be. He remembered making his hand burst into flame.

He saw the hidden rules behind the effect. He saw the checklist of circumstances that had to be fulfilled for real magic to work as clearly as he'd once seen the moves and set-ups that had to happen for a trick to work.

Mr. Count's wand flashed, sending a volt of energy hurtling towards Red, but it was too late. Red was already leaping to one side.

The magician focused on the way the flames felt on his skin and imagined drawing them into him; sucking them in through his pores. He willed it; focussing on what it would feel like; forcing his body to experience the sensation as though it was really happening... then suddenly it was.

Red could feel the cool flames inside him, whirling and flickering as another wand-shot from Mr. Count- a sphere of gold, electric light- passed by his shoulder.

He made the flames hotter, imagining his whole form burning from the inside out. There was no pain; only intense, indescribable heat.

He aimed his hand and expelled the force he had created within him.

Mr. Count's eyes widened just for a moment as he saw the jet of flame. He lurched to one side, barely in time to avoid being incinerated. The air near him became so hot that, though he avoided the fire itself, his clothes still melted to his body.

He screamed in rage and pain and drew his larger, more deadly wand. Aiming with one arm and steadying it with the other, he let out a series of short, sharp light-blasts that went off like gunshots and eviscerated the audience around him.

Red saw this- and the panic it created- and immediately understood what was happening. Count was clearing an arena.

The hatred Red felt for Count broke whatever internal dam had been holding it in check. Here was a man who was willing to slaughter dozens of innocent people- innocent spectators- just to clear a space in which he could shoot at Red more easily. Callous disregard for human life was bad enough- callous disregard for that category of human life that attended magic shows was, to Red, obscurely worse.

His body felt hot and electric- a buzzing flicker of Red-shaped fury. Sounds seemed to retreat into the distance as the thunderous, tinnitus rumble of seething apoplexy took their place. All the colours in the room seemed to shift towards the vermilion end of the spectrum.

There is a certain type of anger that doesn't feel like anger. Whether or not it's backed up by magical power, it makes you feel like you're riding your own personal storm. It feels like you're drunk on Molotov cocktails and chewing Semtex like bubblegum. You're a walking explosion- an atom bomb held forever in the moment of nuclear praxis. You're unstoppable.

This was the anger that filled Red, and which caused him to levitate, his feet floating up from the stage as bolts of lightning sparked and crackled around him. It was this anger that caused the deck of cards in his pocket to drift out and start spinning around him in a 52-part tornado. It was this anger that fired them at Mr. Count without any conscious intervention on Red's part.

Those cards turned Mr. Count into something like a pin-cushion- each one creating a combined laceration and stab-wound and then staying stuck in it- standing quivering at attention.

It was the shock, rather than the blood-loss that killed Mr. Count.

The next thing Red was aware of was Lorice hugging him and telling him they needed to leave. The only clear thought in his head was how relieved he was she was still alive. Later, he'd learn that she'd thrown herself under the stage at the first sign of trouble. For now, he simply walked numbly away from the carnage at the Savoy and basked in her continued survival.

10

The concept of a cascade is an easy one to grasp. When something happens, it makes it more likely to happen again. Thus, a single rock falling down a mountain makes it more likely that other rocks will fall, because it dislodges them. They, in turn, dislodge more rocks. This is one of nature's cascades, and it is the beginning of an avalanche.

There is also a magic trick called The Rainbow Cascade, in which a number of cards with blue backs turn into cards with a chromatic polyphony of different back-colours.

What happened at the Savoy started a cascade in both senses. It was something that made the world a more colourful place and a victory over the Guilds that precipitated more victories.

Red had never met Mr. Dust and didn't know who he was. Yet the Djedi Guild's head was found hanged from a lamppost less than a week after Red killed Mr. Count. He was one of many. For years, magicians had found themselves answerable to the Guilds. Now the Guilds found themselves answerable to magicians.

JACK

Naturally, the police looked for Red Evening, but he seemed to have disappeared without a trace after the events at the Savoy. His basement flat was found empty and the venues he was due to perform at all received polite notices that he would no longer be appearing.

The constable who had tried to arrest Red after the death of Mr. Palm interviewed anyone he could find who'd known the performer. Red's parents had little to say on the subject of their son, and other magicians seemed to regard him with a combination of awe and mild dislike. By all accounts, he'd been a hard man to talk to, prone to literal-mindedness and repetition.

The only person who liked Red, the Constable discovered, was a woman named Lorice Bondsworthy, who had also vanished without a trace.

"She doesn't look much like a magician's assistant," he said to one of her former employers.

"She wasn't very good. I don't know what Red saw in her, unless he was a chubby chaser," the man laughed, easily. Unbeknownst to the Constable, he was in a good mood because he'd spent last night torturing a Angier Guild enforcer to death.

After that, the trail went cold, and the Constable was forced to let the case drift in the 'Unsolved' pile.

QUEEN

The proprietor of The Place calmly hung a closed sign on the door and made his way to the back-room. It was filled with boxes. One might have assumed he was packing up and abandoning his shop now that the Guilds were falling apart. The reality was quite different. His vaunted neutrality had protected him, and now a whole new generation of magicians were coming through Illusion and arriving at real magic; their long-repressed anger and gnawing sense of injustice finally bubbling to the surface.

The boxes contained new, lethal stock and the proprietor had given himself the day off to unpack.

KING

Not long after Red's disappearance, London's Tourist Board put a plaque outside his old home, proclaiming that one of the greatest showmen in the world had once lived there. The small-print said that he'd vanished after being attacked on stage and using his tricks to defend himself. The existence of real magic was, at that time, still not public knowledge. It's really quite amazing what a room full of scared people won't see.

JOKER

On a warm, empty stretch of beach in Cannes, France, a man carrying two icecreams walked barefoot across the sand. He had a good-looking, erudite face and smartly-cut dark hair, but there was something a little janky about his movements- as though he'd learned how to walk by reading a book about it. Had anybody bothered to observe him closely, they might have said his feet looked as though they didn't touch the ground with every step. Not that anyone could observe. The gaze slid off him, as though charmed.

He arrived at a sunbathing woman- overweight; pale; clad in a garish bikini; clearly an English tourist- and handed her both icecream cones.

"It's nice here," he said, seating himself on the beach towel next to her.

"Yeah- it's nice place for a honeymoon. How are you coping with not being Red anymore?"

"Clay Redthorpe is fine with me," the man said. "I don't think I need to pretend I'm normal any more." He put his arm around the plump woman's shoulder. "More importantly, how are you coping with no longer being Lorice Bondsworthy?"

"I liked Bondsworthy," she conceded. "But Lorice Redthorpe has a certain ring to it."

"Speaking of which..." Clay borrowed his wife's wedding ring and made it float a few inches in the air. "Real or sleight?" he challenged her.

"Real!" She exclaimed.

Clay smiled and showed her the gimmick he'd used to make the ring float. "I found it at a magic shop in Beijing. It's a new thing- they're doing some really exciting things over on the Chinese magic circuit."

"Take me there," said Lorice.

Clay stood up, picked up the beach towel and threw it into the air.

"Real or sleight?" he asked.

The beach towel momentarily covered the couple and then drifted to the ground. There was no sign of the magician or his lady wife.

A Small Story about a Large Misunderstanding

“They’re so... repulsive!” said Fjrkr, clicking the mandibles that extended from her eyesockets. “Look at how symmetrical they are! One arm on each side of their bodies!”

“I’ve got one arm on each side.” protested Mglrkr, waving them.

“Ye-es, but your arms are lovely. I like the way this one repeatedly bifurcates into a forest of scratching fingers, but this one comes to a single, needle-sharp point. They’re so divergent: just like nature intended.”

“Aw- that’s so sweet of you to say,” Mglrkr smiled, preening the corpse-pallored dome of his rot-skinned head. “You know, I always liked your teeth- the way they stick out from your torso at wild angles.”

“Thank you,” Fjrkr blushed black. “My mother always said they were my best feature.”

The two of them sat in the comforting shadows of the old, disused hive and watched the alien beings shine their bitter, bright electric torches around.

Their movements were horrid- eerily smooth and repetitious, like machines. They didn’t perambulate with the sudden, jerky motions of naturally-occurring lifeforms at all. Everything about them was heinously precise; monstrously mechanical.

“Do you think we should greet them?” Mglrkr asked.

“I don’t know. I’m kind of scared, to be honest,” Fjrkr said, her back-tentacles shivering with embarrassment.

“I can do it if you like. They’ve come all this way- from across the stars. I’m sure any lifeform sophisticated enough to do that must be friendly.”

“Maybe... I’m still a bit worried. What if they mistake your intentions?”

Mglrkr thought about this, then twisted himself around so that he was bent backwards, supported on his arms and low appendages with his belly pointing upwards- a sure sign of submission. Then he bent his head back as far as it would go so he could see where he was scuttling. He distended his jaw until his mouth was an impossibly elongated oval of darkness and made his eyes into two black pits. Now it was obvious his mouth contained no biting teeth and his eye-sockets concealed no hidden, evolutionary defence mechanisms.

“There!” he said. “They couldn’t possibly think I mean them harm now!”

“Ooh- you are clever, Fjrkr said, clapping two of her more prehensile limbs together in delight.

“Well, here I go!” Mglrkr gave her a lopsided smile and skittered out of the shadows into the bright torch-beams of the visitors, emitting the Standard Greeting Screech as he approached.

The lifeforms screeched back and began flapping their limbs and performing other strange rituals. Their movements seemed jerkier and more random than before, which Mglrkr took as a positive sign. Perhaps their earlier, smooth movements had been the result of nervousness. Now, by lapsing back into more normal modes of movement, they indicated that they were pleased to see another being and were inviting him to come closer.

Mglrkr continued his reassuring screech and approached with politely enthusiastic speed, jerking from left to right as he went to show his friendliness.

The new beings began running and leaping playfully away from him. Since their behaviour a moment ago had been so inviting, Mglrkr surmised that they weren't retreating, but leading him. They probably wanted to show him the craft they'd arrived in. He struck out after them, increasing the volume and pitch of his screech to denote his enthusiasm.

He followed the creatures back to their gleaming spaceship and was about to spindle his way onboard after them when the hatches closed and the vessel leapt skyward.

He stood, blinking after it until Fjrkr slithered up beside him.

"What happened?" she asked, gnashing her mouth-claws in confusion.

"They left- I don't know why. Things seemed to be going so well."

"Oh. That's weird. Maybe they'll come back," Fjrkr said, furrowing her facial crags and peering up at the sky as though it might yield answers.

"Maybe. Do you want to go get a bloodshake? I could just go for one," Mglrkr asked.

"Sure. No point trying to understand aliens, after all."

Meanwhile, Captain Johan Birchwill spoke rapidly into his ship's comms unit. "All human and other anthropic species to avoid Planet X3752LB4! Planet is hostile and populated with monstrous life! Repeat, All human and other anthropic species..."

In the background, several members of his terrified crew vomited and shook with adrenaline come-down.

The Ballad of the Great Lacurio

1

The Unbidden Lands stretched away, black and crooked, in every direction for countless spans. The poisoned skies above them were the blistered crimson of imperfectly-healed wounds. Across their stony expanse, ragged tubes of boneless flesh gambolled end over end. Once, they- or their distant ancestors- had been people. They were the least of the Unbidden Lands' horrors.

This blasted stretch of unliveable rock was one of the most monstrous and monumental remnants of a war between the Wizard Kings of old. Magic, like nuclear power, left fallout in its wake and that fallout rendered vast swathes of the world irredeemably toxic. None could survive in the Unbidden Lands for more than a few days. This was known. This was indisputable fact.

Yet someone was crossing them.

The figure- made tiny by the magnitude of his surroundings- wore a broad, conical hat of the kind sometimes called a *sugegasa* and a tattered black cloak. These outer garments belied the splendour of the figure. If one were to glimpse beneath his cloak, one would see clothes of fine silk with many metal sigils (most of them solid gold) sewn onto the fabric.

He walked a road that had remained untrammelled for aeons beyond mortal knowing, but which remained distinct from the ill-used land about it.

After a time, he drew the attention of one of the abominable flesh-tubes, which cartwheeled its way over to him.

Each of its two ends possessed a mouth filled with spines that might, in a less repulsively other life form, be called teeth.

It reared up in front of the cloaked figure, making a noise no natural animal could ever have produced. It was twelve pseudospans in height- twice the height of a tall man- and it had killed many of its own kind to achieve dominance over its territory. It did not register the bony man-shape in front of it as anything more than prey.

The figure made a simple gesture with his hand and spoke a charm and the fleshy horror exploded, showering him with foul-smelling, diseased innards.

The figure's name was Ahjmyr Lacurio, and having removed the obstacle before him, he continued on his way.

Were one to look back along his path through the Unbidden Lands, one would see a trail of unnameable, asymmetrical abhorrences, all of which had assumed they could prey upon him and all of which were now just bones and gizzards, scattered over a wide area.

Lacurio knew many things that he should not have known. He had been born with a terrible burden of knowledge. His first word was a Word of Power that trembled the sky. The first picture he drew was a sigil that burned the paper on which it was writ.

Yet he knew not what he was. He knew, of course, that he belonged to the Line of Lacurio and that his great ancestor, Moorgos Lacurio had been a Wizard King, but even Wizard Kings weren't born knowing magic. Nor had there been anyone to ask; anyone to tell him what he was. The family Lacurio was much degraded and Ahjmyr had been abandoned to fend for himself on the streets of the tattered city of Canthopoly when he was barely old enough to walk. This casual cruelty had not proved a significant obstacle to him however.

The preceding year, he had recovered the manor of Moorgos Lacurio, which had been warded against all intrusion until Ahjmyr broke through it and reclaimed a birthright that had been lost for centuries.

That manor, which sat on an island in the middle of the pearl-sheened Lake of Lanadar, east of Canthopoly, had put Lacurio on his present path, for its library of occult tomes was vast and contained secrets that were long lost, even before the Last War of the Wizard Kings.

They had whispered of Great Mount Neshmar, and the immortal Lords of Neshmar who waited atop its peak and who knew all mortal affairs, for they observed them from the outside.

Great Mount Neshmar lay on the other side of the Unbidden Lands, so, Lacurio had decided, the Unbidden Lands must be crossed.

All who had attempted to cross the Unbidden Lands since the age of their creation had died in the attempt, their bodies distorting into things primal and horrendous.

Lacurio, however, knew how to ward himself against magical fallout. What few gaps there had been in his in-born knowledge had been filled in the library of his ancestor's manor.

Thus, after nine days of steady trudging, he came to the end of the Unbidden Lands, a charred line in the ground marking a de facto border between the poisoned and un-poisoned worlds.

Beyond that line were fields of ice from which luminous blue frost roses sprouted in chill abundance. And from the ice-fields rose up Great Mount Neshmar, whose craggy peak pierced the veil between the corporeal and incorporeal and existed in a realm that was not the world.

Lacurio gazed up at the mountain for several long mynats, savouring the first sight of his prize, then began to climb.

It was a hard journey of many days. None without magic could have managed it. Whatever paths and stairs had once led to the top of the peak had long since collapsed into dilapidation or been washed away in avalanches. Thus, Lacurio was faced with perilous scree, followed by sheer walls of icy rock and wind-blasted plateaus whose cold gales threatened to rob the essential warmth of his life.

He conjured fire to warm himself and charmed the rock walls so that he stuck to them like glue and could make his ascent with relative ease. When he needed to sleep, he enchanted his cloak to turn it into a tent. He ate only what he had the knowledge to conjure and drank only melted snow.

For four days he climbed in this manner.

The sky above the mountain was deepest cerulean at first, but the higher Lacurio climbed, the closer it shaded to black, until- even at midday- he could see the blazing stars above, nestled in nebulae of countless hues, each of which seemed painted on the fuliginous firmament by some ethereal brush.

As he approached the final peak, however, Lacurio noted that a different sky was slowly superimposing itself on the natural sky of the world; replacing it. He was passing through a veil and into a place that was not quite reality- a place where the sky was made of melting indigo and viridian hues. Strange lights that were not stars danced in that sky.

But it was not the air above that interested Lacurio. For the peak of Great Mount Neshmar housed something of infinitely greater value- a lonely and archaic castle of crumbling stone. It so filled peak of the mountain that its only door faced a sheer drop and Lacurio was forced to climb to it rather than walk up to it.

It was locked, but nothing is ever truly locked to a wizard and he gained access in a matter of moments.

At last, Lacurio came into a room he had dreamed of for long aeons- a room that took up the entirety of the castle and whose floors seemed to be made of mirror-clean silver. Great, empty thrones stood around that room- twelve in all- and there was no ceiling, so that each seemed to be framed by the resplendent sky.

For the first time since leaving the manor of his powerful and enigmatic ancestor, Lacurio spoke words that were not Words of Power.

“Lords of Neshmar! The Great Lacurio stands before you and demands audience!”

For some time, nothing happened. Then, slowly, blue lights began to flicker around the thrones. Cracks like thunder filled the air and, one by one, the thrones were filled. Each one housed a giant- a man or woman thrice Lacurio’s height and dressed in flowing robes that seemed to be made of

darkness and light rather than any corporeal material. Each wore a mask of exquisite and unique design and they all looked down on him the way one might look upon an insect.

“You demand nothing,” said one of the Lords of Neshmar sternly. “You are in the presence of immortals and you will bow before you make any request.”

“The Great Lacurio bows to no man,” replied Lacurio, tilting his chin towards the speaker confrontationally. Nobody had ever accused him of having an excess of humility. “To whom am I speaking?”

“I am Vox. I speak for the Lords of Neshmar,” said the immortal. “You have come to beseech us, yet you talk as though you bargain from a position of strength. Such conceit is... unwise in our presence.”

“You have two choice,” Lacurio replied. “I must be the first man to reach you since the Last War of the Wizard Kings. Answer me, and you are relevant again. Turn me away, and you will continue to fester in obscurity. See? The Great Lacurio has no need to bow or scrape.” He smiled.

After a great pause, Vox said “What do you seek, arrogant creature.”

“I wish to know what I am,” Lacurio replied. “My ancestor was the Wizard King Moorgos Lacurio, but even Wizard Kings aren’t born with knowledge of spellcraft or with Words of Power echoing in their heads as I was. So I seek an explanation of myself.”

Vox cocked his gold masked head on one side and the room was filled with an ethereal hum as the Lords of Neshmar conversed in a language that had long ago transcended words.

“We do not know,” admitted Vox, at last.

“But you are protectors of all knowledge,” Lacurio protested. “Come, surely you great Lords of the mountain must have some idea?”

“Some knowledge is hidden, even from us. It exists only at the Library of Ozmaloth, which lies across the Madlands and is the repository of that which must never be known. No mortal or immortal can gain access to it- even a Wizard King.”

Lacurio turned and began to walk from the mighty hall.

“Where are you going?” Vox asked.

“Ozmaloth, of course,” Lacurio replied. He’d heard Vox’s warning, but he was of the opinion that it did not apply to him.

This was how the Great Lacurio’s quest truly started.

Lacurio's path across the Unbidden Lands and up the sheer sides of Great Mount Neshmar had been one of relative ease, for he was powerful and learned in the ways of sorcery. However, even with his unique array of capabilities, the road the Lords of Neshmar had put him on was no lazy or trivial one and his troubles started before he even reached the Madlands.

Betwixt Neshmar and the Madlands lay the Dead Hills of Porthor, which were as frozen and harsh as the land immediately about the mountain. Yet these were not called the 'Dead Hills' merely for their corpse-like climate. Rather, the hills themselves were dead, though they were not actually hills in the most literal sense, for the Last War of the Wizard Kings had made them. They were domes and ragged spires of frozen, translucent blood, with the bones of many foes encased in them. This was what happened when combustion charms and ice charms were combined- the victims detonated and then the blood that blew out from them froze in place, forever trapping the denuded skeleton in a tomb of its stopped viscera. The fact that the Dead Hills were geological in scale was a testament to how many had died during the Last War of the Wizard Kings.

Lacurio expected the crossing to be unpleasant, but never anticipated any danger. Thus, he had no protection as he hiked across the undulating mounds of sub-zero gore. When he was struck across the skull from behind, he neither anticipated the blow nor had any way to defend against it.

He found himself tumbling down an incline of frozen blood, into a jagged ditch filled with ancient, frozen bones. Several impaled him as he landed and he cried out in pain, for even he was not immune to those agonies to which all flesh is heir.

Looking up, he beheld a ragged figure standing atop the hill of frozen blood, looking down at him. It seemed little more than a shadow wrapped in rags, yet there was something oddly familiar about it.

"Turn... back..." it intoned in a voice that was filled with the creaking of pain and sorrow.

Unknowing of what he faced, Lacurio cast a charm of levitation with all the haste his injured form could muster and so raised himself from the spikes of icy bone. As soon as he regained his feet, he passed his hands over his wounds, dulling their pains with one spell and searing them shut with the heat of another. To heal them properly would take time, and he first had to face the ragged ghoul that had pushed him.

When he looked, however, the figure was gone and there was only the whispering of the viscera-scented winds to break the silence of the Dead Hills.

"You are wise to run, my friend," Lacurio muttered to the departed apparition, then collapsed to the ground.

After recovering his breath a little, he set to creating a healing poultice from the few ingredients that he carried with him inside his cloak. A lesser man would have blacked out before he could

make and apply such a poultice, succumbing to blood-loss and shock. As he would have told you himself, however, Lacurio was no lesser man.

Some time after he was attacked, Lacurio came upon an unlikely settlement, which nestled deep in the translucent crimson fractals of Porthor.

It was no great city. It could not rival the proud silver spires of the port city of Antharis or the great, low, flower-dressed domes of Immeral. In fact, the humblest village to border the Unbidden Lands could have shamed the settlement for both size and grandeur. Yet there was nobility in its mere existence, for to eke out a living in the Dead Hills of that land was no mean feat. Curiosity, and a certain admiration for whatever hardy dwellers had contrived the circle of bone-and-thatch huts, drew Lacurio to it.

The men and women who inhabited the village were not Tusarns- Lacurio's own species- for they had not the piercing, jewelled eyes of Tusarns, nor the sixth digit on each hand that truly marks the race. They were squat beings with only five visible hand-digits and skin of mottled persimmon and citrine. Their forebears had clearly come to the world of Onthur during that great, pre-war age when the Wizard Kings possessed the power to travel the universe and gave passage to those beings who lacked the magics to cross the stars themselves.

"The Great Lacurio greets you, noble dwellers," Lacurio spake, bowing low before the small cluster who had come from their huts to see the stranger's arrival.

They were dressed, more or less uniformly, in leather trunks that must have been made from the tanned skins of those poor souls in the blood-formed hills, duly excavated and put to use. The menfolk also wore long daggers of bone at their belts.

Yet Lacurio sensed no violence in them and, when one of them spoke, it was with amused warmth.

"Hark at him! You'd think he was a Wizard King! Come, stranger, we hath broth and marrowbread on which to sup and we welcome company for it so rarely comes," the de facto leader of the group declaimed. "I am Santhir, Chieftain of this Enclave, which we call Por-Admor."

"I have travelled for days and been injured. Your hospitality is greatly appreciated," Lacurio replied, graciously. In truth, he found these short, hardy men and women far more worthy of his respect than the great and distant Lords of Neshmar had been, and he was more than happy to humble himself by stooping through the low doorway of the greatest hut in order to break bread with Santhir and his family.

This family did not, of course, consist of the whole Enclave- which numbered perhaps forty individuals- but a subset of five, including the man himself. The other four had not emerged for

Lacurio's arrival, being occupied in several tasks of obvious importance. A young man, who Lacurio surmised to be Santhir's son, was at work mending the bone walls with some sort of paste. A woman approximately the man's age was cooking over a simple flame-pit while a younger woman- perhaps a daughter or much younger sister- stood by with a sheet of wetted leather to beat out any sparks that made their way to the dry bone floors or walls. The fourth was engaged in no task, for she was very old and probably not capable of moving from her chair.

When she saw Lacurio, however, she set up a great clamour.

"I know thee!" she cried. "Get away from me! Thou art one of them!"

"Now, mother, thy know that's not possible," Santhir said, gently. "Tusarns don't live long enough." To Lacurio, he added. "My mother remembers the Wizard Kings' war more clearly than we do. She thinks thou art one of the men whose spells killed her kin."

So, it hadn't been their forebears who came to Onthur before the war. They had. They were a race whose lifespans extended into hundreds or thousands of years.

Lacurio knelt before the old woman and said, gently, "Revered elder, surely my face is different from the one you recall- even by a little?"

Ignoring him, the old woman cried "They're coming, Santhir! Hide the children! The Wizards are coming!"

Santhir looked apologetic.

"She gets unstuck in time and thinks that now is then. I canst explain it better. 'Tis the trauma, thou knows? It obliterates the divide between past and present."

Lacurio nodded and said "With your permission, perhaps I can atone a little for the crimes of my ancestors and put it back? I have... a little sorcery." Admitting that he was, perhaps, the greatest living wielder of magic alive seemed unwise, given what the people of Por-Admor had been through.

Santhir sighed: "Healers hath made the attempt, but if thou wishes to try, we shan't decline your charity."

Lacurio placed the tips of his fingers on the old woman's temples and murmured a Word of Power that had been created to rebuild that which was broken in the minds of men and women.

For a moment, he doubted it had worked, then the old woman's eyes cleared and she looked at him.

"Once," she said, solemnly, "I watched my kin killed by Wizards. Now a Wizard gives me back my wits."

"I seek to atone," Lacurio said quietly.

This was not the true purpose of his quest, but it was his purpose in that moment and it served to explain himself to the old woman.

When he stood, Santhir, tears running down his cheeks, pulled him into a mighty embrace.

The broth and marrowbread to which the little family treated Lacurio was self-evidently made from the meat and gristle of the perfectly-preserved bodies frozen all around the settlement. Since most of those bodies were Tusarn, Lacurio had to assume that he was committing cannibalism by partaking of the food he was offered, but he didn't concern himself over it. Even if cannibalism could be counted as a violation of the dignity of the deceased, it hardly mattered. The dead in hills of Porthor had been suspended in an amber of their gore; naked and on-display for ages beyond reckoning. Their dignity was already in tatters. At least when the settlers of Por-Admor made them into tools and food, they were given the dignity of purpose.

Thus, the Great Lacurio took sustenance with the last friendly family before the Madlands, and learned much of their ways and history.

The first two generations had come from a distant world called Amdar (from which the name of their settlement was derived) at a time when the Wizard Kings seemed to be the answer to all of the universe's problems, bestowing magical bounty on all the races of the cosmos. Santhir's mother, whose name was Ilgrim, and her late husband, Nar, had come to be closer to the flickering light of their noble majesty. Santhir had been young at the time, but he had come of age and had children of his own- the young man and woman- by the time things turned sour.

The Wizard Kings could have expanded endlessly outward into the unknowable Infinite, but they had grown mean and insular with success. They obsessed over the home-world of Onthur and fought duels for its territories, which eventually descended into wars, and then the Last War. It was in this tumultuous time and its aftermath that Santhir had raised his family. His wife was Tamis, and their children were Ovon and Cathril. According to Santhir, they had adapted better than he had.

Though Santhir still called her his 'child', it was obvious to Lacurio that Cathril was now a young woman- the equivalent of a Tusarn in his or her early twenties. She sat beside him at table and made fulsome use of every opportunity to brush against him. She went so far as to sit with her legs further apart than could be comfortable so that her thigh would press against his.

That night, when she offered herself to him, he did not decline, and she led him out onto the blood ice and showed him how the people of Por-Admor made love. He found her body fat and pleasing, her words of affection honeyed and soft and her style of intimacy passionate and heartfelt.

They slept beneath the uncaring gaze of the distant stars and, come morning, returned to the settlement without shame.

Santhir clearly knew what had passed between them, but only smiled the bittersweet smile of a parent who regrets his daughter's maturation but cannot fault her choice.

Before the sun was perpendicular to the horizon, the Great Lacurio had said his farewells and moved on, making little of the departure. He knew the location of the settlement, and the charms of Cathril, which had nothing to do with magic. He could and would return at his leisure, when not pressed forward by a quest of great urgency, he decided.

The possibility that he would not survive his expedition, nor ever return to the embrace of Cathril, did not then occur to him.

For five more days, Lacurio travelled across the Dead Hills with his spirit much buoyed by his encounter with the people of Por-Admor. Frequently, his thoughts would return to Cathril, whose ample girth and bosom had kept him warm on the ice for the first good night since he set out for Neshmar with the intention of confronting its oracular lords.

However, he had not forgotten the danger he was in. Every time he thought of Cathril, he would force himself to remember the inexplicable ghoul in decaying rags who had attacked him. The thing made no reappearance, yet Lacurio was not foolish enough to think it was truly gone. He had an enemy- or so it seemed- who wished to him to abandon his quest. Such a man or being would not give up after a single attempt on his life, so he had to presume it was watching him; waiting for him to let his guard down; planning its next assault. He feared it not, for he commanded powers that he knew to be greater than any foe's. Yet he would not let himself rest easy in the undulating landscape, which contained too many places for an ill-wisher to hide.

It was almost a relief when the Madlands came into view.

3

The Unbidden Lands were the product of wild, destructive spells and magical fallout. The Dead Hills were the product of cleaner, but equally violent magics. The Madlands, though created in the same war, were something altogether stranger. In the last days of their world-rending conflict, the Wizard Kings of yore had gotten creative. Not content with hurling fireballs and summoning creatures from heinous alter-worlds, they had constructed curses that bent and broke the very fabric of reality; that merged and rearranged things in ways no mortal could survive.

Where the last, wet patches of gore from the Dead Hills ended, there began a landscape that few dared to imagine, let alone look upon.

The ground of the Madlands appeared to be earth and stone, yet it continually heaved and stretched as though it were alive. Faces and reaching hands sometimes formed on the surface as the suffering souls trapped by unstable merging-spells struggled eternally for release. The trees- for there were trees in the Madlands- grew strange fruits. Their branches produced beating hearts and eyeballs that stared at passers-by with a deep and abiding melancholy. There were fruits, also, that appeared normal until one bit into them, revealing brain tissue in place of sweet, edible matter. The sky was a sickly green in hue and filled with apparitions from the oldest nightmares of sentient-kind: staring eyes like the ones that grew on the trees, but writ large, so that they sometimes seemed to fill the horizon; slimy wings that belonged to no known creature; great, distended mouths that were just holes in the sane material of the world. Fingers grew from the ground and tried to clutch at the legs of any who walked the Madlands and, some said, being killed by them would be a mercy. For crossing the Madlands was difficult and no mind could survive the journey intact... or so it was reckoned.

Yet Lacurio had no choice but to cross the Madlands, for they surrounded the Library of Ozmaloth on all sides and the sorcerer knew that only that Library contained the secrets that he sought. Thus, he entered the Madlands without hesitation, casting many wards over his mind as he walked, so that his consciousness would be protected against the lingering lunacy of that mind-fallow place.

The one redeeming feature of the Madlands, he thought, was that no pursuer would follow him into them.

After eleven days of hard travel- slowed by the fingers that he had to burn constantly from his path- Lacurio came to a place where the sky and ground twisted, forming a double-spiral and making a loop of the horizon-line. It was some kind of illusion given substance only by the insanity that infected the landscape, but even with his mind warded, he found it disorienting.

He hoped to cross the spiral in but a few ows, but it soon became evident that the scope of the distortion was too great for that. Eventually, too exhausted to continue, he was forced to make camp at a point where the sky and ground had swapped their usual places, so that he felt himself to be upside-down, stuck to a great rocky ceiling with the abyss of the sky beneath him.

He enchanted his cloak to form a tent, and not trusting any food or water he might take in the Madlands, renewed his drained body with charms instead. Then he tried to rest.

He was wakened, however, less than an owr into his fitful slumber, by the entrance to his tent being ripped aside and a figure hurling itself on top of him.

It was the same ragged shadow-man who had assaulted him in the Dead Hills of Porthor and its presence shocked Lacurio so much that he could not, at first, react to the intrusion.

The monstrous figure straddled him and began beating its fists about his face, breaking his jaw and bloodying his eyes.

“You must turn back! You must turn back!” it shrieked and, though its voice was not truly that of a man, being too distorted and warped to be mistaken for such, it held the same, odd familiarity as its bearer’s shape.

At last, Lacurio regained enough sense to throw the creature off of him. Though its blows were painful and terrible in their effect on his form, it seemed to weigh less than the lightest thought.

To be hurled thus seemed to enrage the creature and it threw itself once more at Lacurio with an inarticulate scream.

The sorcerer reacted, instinctively, with a concussive curse, expecting it to throw the entity back or rip a bloody hole in it. Instead, the thing only dissolved into shadows.

Panting and shaken worse than he would have expected, the Great Lacurio did not sleep again that night. He sat and waited out the night before resuming his onward journey when day broke.

The Madlands were a difficult place, even for the learned and mighty Lacurio, as it has always been a difficult place for anyone who stumbles into it. No amount of preparation could ever truly inure one to its wearing insanity.

Yet Lacurio’s journey would have been lighter and less wearing, were it not haunted by the ragged, shadowy apparition. Far from being deterred by the Madlands, the thing that hunted him seemed to be encouraged by them, for it visited him every two or three nights.

At first, it simply attacked mindlessly, scratching and tearing at him.

Then, more disturbingly, it started pleading with him.

“Don’t go on,” it begged. “For my sake, don’t go on!”

Sometimes, it said things that didn’t make sense. Things like “Why do you think I’m asking you this? You cannot want your mind broken at Ozmaloth!”

Lacurio remained steadfast in the face of the apparition’s wheedling. It had tried to kill him before it tried to beg him. Its begging could not, therefore, be trusted.

Each time the thing appeared, he’d let it talk, though, hoping for some clue as to its nature.

It never got to speak for long, though. It always dissolved into shadows soon after appearing and Lacurio grew to accept that it was limited in some way that he could not yet fathom.

And, of course, the creature’s words weighed heavily on his mind and drained him. He barely slept and each day felt more and more like he was dragging the unwilling carcass of his body along

by sheer-yet-dwindling will. Perhaps it was because of his extreme exhaustion that he nearly died before reaching Ozmaloth.

It happened as he crossed a great bridge that spanned a chasm filled with strange yellow light. Doubtless, the bridge came from a time before the Madlands were the Madlands and, in that halcyon age, the chasm had probably contained nothing more menacing than a picturesque river. Lacurio had been putting one foot in front of the other, joylessly and mechanically for many spans, and had climbed onto the bridge without considering its great antiquity.

When he was halfway across, it began to crumble beneath his feet.

He looked down dully, only half-awake, and failed to react as the stonework fell away beneath his feet.

Only as he tumbled down, down, down into the sickly yellow light at the bottom of the chasm did he awaken to the peril that beset him.

He tried to cast a charm of flight, but the yellow light seemed to sap his magics, and he knew its jaundiced hue for what it was, then: the colour of Isn't, of unmaking and unbeing. What fools the last Wizard Kings had been to tap into a power- or rather, an anti-power- of such magnitude! To try and harness the nothingness that gnaws at the edges of creation! Lacurio knew that if he plunged fully into the gamboge glow, not even the particles that made up his atoms would survive. Total dissolution awaited him. Only the Metaphysicals- the eternal beings who maintained and governed every aspect of reality from above and behind the Corporeal plane- could ever hope to survive an encounter with the anti-power of the Isn't, and Lacurio, for all his great accomplishments and magical wisdom, was only a man.

He struggled to summon what magics he could; struggled to do anything that would prevent or curtail his plummet into the deathly, luminous void. But there was nothing he could do; nothing to prevent his impending demise.

And then something saved him. He felt himself lifted by a magical will that was not his own and, within moments, was deposited on the opposite side of the chasm- the side nearest Ozmaloth.

Looking up, he saw the ragged, shadowy figure that had been haunting and hunting him. It was this that had come to his rescue.

"Lacurio-" it began, then faded away into dark tendrils of night.

Lacurio staggered to his feet.

The entity that had been trying to kill him had just saved his life. Why? What possible motive could it have to change tack like that?

He had no way of knowing. If there were answers, they were undoubtedly connected with the forbidden secrets of his origins and those could only be found in one place. Even if he could turn back, it was now impossible for him to do so, so he resumed the trudge that would take him to the Library of Ozmaloth. If he hadn't been so tired, he would have realised how close he was getting: fingers no longer grew from the ground at his feet.

By noon the next day, Lacurio's tired eyes could see the edge of the Madlands- or, rather, the edge of the circle that contained Ozmaloth and from which the effects of the evil landscape were magically excluded. Across that dividing line, the ground ceased to grow faces and reaching hands; the trees bore normal fruit and the sky went from rotten, horror-filled green to simple, empty grey.

When he reached the edge, Lacurio paused for a moment.

To him it seemed that the Madlands had gone on forever and he could hardly believe he had finally come to their end.

He straightened his cloak and went to adjust his conical hat, only to discover it had tumbled from his head when he nearly fell into the yellow abyss. Nonetheless, he did all he could to restore his poise and dignity before crossing the threshold and entering the land of Ozmaloth.

4

The Library was the only structure in Ozmaloth, for the whole of that country was once set aside for the sole purpose of housing it. To reach it, one had to cross not only the Madlands but the Empty Circle, which had its own, peculiar deadliness. There was no running water in Ozmaloth, except deep below the ground where only the roots of the trees might reach it. Those trees bore fruit, but none of it was edible to men. There was so much arcane warding on the land that it had dyed the sky and the grass grey. No magic could be practised upon such warded ground, so a traveller could not use charms or conjured sustenance to sustain themselves. For a man without provisions, as Lacurio was after crossing the Madlands, the Empty Circle was an endurance test: a two day walk without food or drink.

It would have killed a lesser man but- as has previously been stated- Lacurio was not a lesser man.

Thusly, after two days of methodical walking, he came upon the Library, which from the outside looked like a solid block of cracked and ageing stone, some three spans in height and carved with symbols that were at once abstract and horrible to behold.

As he approached, with his tattered cloak fluttering about him in a hot, acrid breeze, Lacurio beheld a figure at the great, black wooden door of the Library.

It was, he saw, the shadowy figure in the torn and unrecognisable rags that had both tormented and saved him since his journey began.

“Stop a moment!” the figure said, in its weirdly distorted voice and Lacurio- to his own surprise- did stop, for there was something different in that voice now. It sounded almost reasonable.

“Why must you obstruct the Great Lacurio?” Lacurio sighed. “Tell me, quickly.”

“Because what you find in there will break you- will break your very soul. You will wish you had never learned the secrets contained in the Library of Ozmaloth!”

“Who are you to make this claim?” Lacurio demanded. “Who are you to tell me my soul can be broken simply with information? Do you not know to whom you speak? I am the Great Lacurio!”

“I know. I am-” the figure never got to finish its sentence, however, for it shimmered and vanished as it had so many times before. Clearly, whatever caused it to vanish wasn’t voluntary.

Lacurio considered what the figure had said, in light of the fact it had saved his life. But he had come so far and, whatever the entity’s intentions were, they could not be entirely trusted after its early attempts on his life.

He placed his hands on the doors of the Library and pushed.

Throughout history, many philosophers have considered the possibility and implications of an Infinite Library- a library that contains an endless procession of books, containing every possible permutation of letters and characters in a given language (usually up to a certain number of pages per volume). Versions of this library have appeared in essays, fiction and debates about the limits of creativity since sentient-kind first started thinking about the difference between language and the thoughts it is used to express.

The Wizard Kings of Onthur had little interest in the philosophical ramifications of an Infinite Library when they decided to build one. They were concerned only with the practical benefits of creating a limitless repository of knowledge. Thus, they first made and enchanted a building in such a manner as to give the interior theoretically infinite space. Then they cast conjuration spells to create books at a rate of googolplexes per cosend. These spells had certain binding rules: each tome had to make grammatical sense and have some sort of discernible, intelligible meaning or message. Each tome had to be unique and of five hundred pages or less. A tome could not contain duplicate chapters from another text (though individual pages and paragraphs were deemed permissible, as their meaning might be altered by context). One tome could not simply be a longer version of

another. And, of course, each book had to materialise in an appropriately-sized slot on their Library's shelves.

Using these rules, the Wizard Kings kept their spells running until they stopped producing new books, meaning that every conceivable, meaningful text possible in the Universal Tongue had been conjured.

This achievement, however, meant very little on its own. The books existed and made sense, but that didn't mean they contained real or useful knowledge. The Wizard Kings therefore cast truth-detection spells over the whole Library to separate the books containing real, falsifiable information from the ones that contained either whimsy or lies. In this way, they divided the Library into Fiction and Non-Fiction.

Being aware of the risks to sentient-kind's inventive spirit if every possible fictional work already existed, the Wizard Kings then magically erased the entire 'Fiction' section, leaving only the greatest collection of true, factual books ever assembled, which they sorted using spells for the detection of category coupled with spells of teleportation to put like books together.

Thus, the Library of Ozmaloth was born: the last great collaborative endeavour of the Wizard Kings before they descended into war. Even when their wars began, they took time to ward the grounds around the Library and the outer shell to protect it. Even at their worst, the Wizard Kings were not indiscriminate book-burners.

So, generations after the Last War of the Wizard Kings finished and those parts of the world that could be rebuilt were rebuilt, the Lords of Neshmar were able to tell the Great Lacurio where he might find the secret of his birthright, thus beginning the quest that had taken him here, to the great black doors of the stone block that was Ozmaloth's one and only structure.

Lacurio had been told that the Library was inaccessible and could not be entered, but the doors opened before him as they would for an old friend. They didn't even creak.

The Great Lacurio assumed, then, that the warning he'd been given referred only to the protection provided by the Madlands and the Empty Circle. It did not occur to him to wonder if the doors would have opened for anybody else. It was a question that, perhaps, he ought to have considered.

Instead, he stepped into the Library of Ozmaloth and, in so doing, stepped from bleakness to beauty. The floors and high ceilings of the Library were made of stained glass, enchanted to be unbreakable and lit by hovering chandeliers, also enchanted so that their candles of sumptuous red wax would never burn out. The walls were book cases, filled with tome upon tome upon tome, all bound in conjured leather the same regal hue as the chandelier candles.

The aisles- or perhaps ‘corridors’ was the right word- were as wide as the thoroughfares of a great city, for one thing the Library did not lack was space.

Not all the walls were shelves. Some were made of a multicoloured stones the same hues as the stained glass floors and ceiling, and, into these, more passages wound their way, leading to other corners of the infinite structure. Stairways made of floating panes of stained glass connected one level to another- for the Library did not just possess an infinite floorplan- it was vertically infinite also. It had ceilings between some levels, but no true interior roof, for it went upwards forever.

Best of all, in this place, Lacurio felt his magics return, for only the exterior of the building and the grounds around it were warded.

He renewed himself with charms and felt his hunger, thirst and exhaustion ebb away.

Having repaired his body to the best of his ability, the Great Lacurio trotted up a set of stained glass stairs to a balcony on which several reading tables of dark, reddish wooden had been positioned. In the natural course of things, they’d have decayed to uselessness centuries ago, but- by some powerful enchantment- there wasn’t even a speck of dust on them.

He seated himself, took a deep breath, and raised his hand, speaking Words of Power as he did so.

The spell he spoke was one he’d been thinking about, at the back of his mind, since he left Mount Neshmar- a location and summoning spell for any tome including information on the family line of Lacurio.

He waited for only a moment- not long enough to even doubt the efficacy of the spell- and then a book shot from a nearby passageway and snapped into his hand.

He placed it on the table, prepared to open it... and stopped.

Here was the information he had crossed uncountable spansfor. Here was the secret knowledge of his ancestry; the answer to the mystery of how he’d been born with Words of Power on his tongue and sigils at his fingertips. The challenges he had overcome were great, but he had proved a match for them. Yet now... now he was nervous. His prize had come to him so easily when he raised his hand for it. There had been no final obstacle to overcome; no ultimate battle in which to test his will. It felt... wrong.

“Idiot!” he chided himself. “You’ve read too many stories!”

Having thus reprimanded himself, he opened the tome, his magics helping him turn at once to the correct page.

The Wizard Kings had not contended themselves with conjuring the greatest reference library ever conceived. They had also enchanted their books so that, when opened, their knowledge would pour into the reader's mind in a great torrent.

In this manner, Lacurio received a vision that showed him the knowledge he sought, and, just as he'd been warned, it broke his soul.

5

Many centuries- perhaps millennia- earlier, Moorgos Lacurio, chiefest and most powerful of Ahjmyr Lacurio's ancestors- stood before a complex sigil of power etched into the very stone of his manor's floor. It was surrounded by other sigils, all designed to bind whatever he brought forth to his will, for he was attempting a summoning ritual. It was a summoning ritual so audacious, dangerous and, potentially, evil that none of the other Wizard Kings would even consider it.

The sigils glowed with barely-controlled power and he chanted an incantation that he had found in the very depths of Ozmaloth, in a book that should have been destroyed- would have been destroyed, had anyone but Moorgos suspected its existence.

And slowly, sparks began to jump violently about the sigils he had carved, and the room seemed to brighten as something was drawn, inexorably, into centre of the summoning-and-containment cluster.

Moorgos was trying to summon a Metaphysical- one of those eternal beings who stand outside reality as both its wardens and its protectors. He was not seeking wisdom, either, but power.

And then, she appeared, materialising inside the central sigil with such a flash of light that Moorgos would have been blinded had he not warded his eyes and with such a boom of sound that it shattered the windows of the manor and created a great, storm-wave on the surface of the lake that surrounded it.

She was nude and her skin was the colour of night and filled with blinking stars.

She was Space. The Metaphysical embodiment of space, that is: of that that inexpressible aether that contains all matter.

"I have a use for you," Moorgos said, as Space tried and failed to free herself from the magical bindings. "You will bear my child and give the line of Lacurio the ultimate weapon in the coming war- a being part Wizard King and part Metaphysical."

And, in the present, the Great Lacurio screamed, for he knew now what he was. He didn't need the rest of the vision, though it poured into him anyway. He didn't need to see what his ancestor did

to Space, nor the disappointment that followed when the child she bore had no more power than any other Tusarn. He didn't need to see the generations of war and degradation that followed, for they only added insult to the grievous injury that had befallen his mind and soul.

For Lacurio now knew himself to be the final product of a terrible crime- of a mortal man raping a High Metaphysical. His in-born knowledge of magic was not a gift- it was a genetic throwback to Space; a reminder of the abuse his ancestor had committed that had not surfaced with their initial spawn, but which had taken many generations to make itself known.

Like the old woman, Ilgrim, Lacurio lost sense of where and when he was, as though place and time had been washed away by the trauma of forbidden knowledge.

When a normal man or woman loses themselves in time, they merely become lost in their own mind. When it happened to Lacurio, his great magics were spurred to action and he was sent tumbling backwards through the shadows of history, into time; into his own past.

6

Lacurio found himself standing outside the black door to the Library of Ozmaloth, and knew at once he was in his own past, for he could see his past self approaching.

"Stop a moment!" he cried out, barely knowing what he said.

"Why must you obstruct the Great Lacurio? Tell me quickly," his past self replied, irritably.

"Because what you find in there will break you- will break your very soul," he said hastily, trying to explain. "You will wish you had never learned the secrets contained in the Library of Ozmaloth!"

He could see strange shadows forming around the edges of his vision and knew he must surely come unstuck in time once more, and soon.

"Who are you to make this claim?" the other Lacurio demanded. "Who are you to tell me my soul can be broken simply with information? Do you not know to whom you speak? I am the Great Lacurio!"

"I know," Lacurio replied. "I am-" and then he was tumbling backwards through time once more.

He appeared at the edge of a great precipice filled with poisonous yellow light and saw his past self falling into it. Instinctively, he reached out with his magics and pulled him to safety before finishing his sentence: "- Lacurio."

But the shadows were back and he was tumbling backwards through time again.

Each time he touched down in space and time, he pleaded with his past self to turn back; not to go on; not to discover the terrible secret that was currently rending apart the very essence of his self.

But he could never stay put long enough to make himself understood. The backward tumble always picked him up again and sent him cartwheeling through the shadows of his own history.

In desperation, he attacked his past self, hoping to deter him with violence. Why couldn't the other version of him- the one who had already been- recognise another Lacurio? Why didn't he listen?

At last, Lacurio found himself back in the Dead Hills of Porthor and saw himself just ahead of him.

There was a steep slope just below the two Lacurios and, just like that, the Great Lacurio saw a way out. He would never learn the terrible secret if he was so injured he was forced to turn back. He could undo his timeline! He could unlearn that which should never be known!

So, with a mighty blow, he sent his past self tumbling down the hill... and watched as that past self was impaled on spines of bones.

Finally, he understood what he should have understood from the moment he started falling backwards through time: he had become the ghoulish figure who had hunted him since the beginning of his quest. No- he hadn't become it: he had been it all along. He couldn't change his timeline because he had already helped shape it. It was a circle of trauma from which there was no escape.

"Turn... back..." he said, knowing it would do no good.

Then he turned away and surrendered to the waves of shadow that threatened to carry him even further back in time.

Yet Reality proved to be stranger than even the Great Lacurio could have anticipated and he didn't find himself even further back in his own past. Rather, he found himself in a kitchen.

The floor tiles were cheerful red-and-white checkers. The walls were patterned with pleasantly old-fashioned wallpaper. The table at which he found himself sat was cheap blonde wood. And out the nearby kitchen window, he could see the entirety of the Infinite- universes upon universes like bubbles floating in an endless ocean, moving through and around one another, merging and un-merging.

He was so entranced that he didn't notice he was sharing the little room with someone until they put a sandwich and a hot, sweet cup of tae in front of him.

Then he looked up and beheld Space- older than in the vision and more matronly, but still with the same space-black, star-flecked skin.

She smiled warmly at him.

"Hello, grandson," she said.

“Grandson?” Lacurio asked, numbly.

“Well, great-great-great-whatever grandson,” Space said, waving a dismissive hand. “Sorry for pulling you out of the Corporeal realm, but you were having some sort of panic attack. You’d managed to unstick yourself in time and if you’d kept going you’d have ended up at the beginning of all things. You don’t want that!” she laughed. “The beginning of all things was very messy, believe you me- I was there!”

“Where is this place?”

“My kitchen, foolish boy,” Space replied.

“So I see,” Lacurio made a conscious effort to gather his wits. “But what is it really?”

“It’s really my kitchen,” Space assured him. “You know, I’m as old as eternity? One of the first two things to ever come into being? I’ve been around long enough to get over the ‘grandiose’ phase of Metaphysical dominion. I’m not Lord Entropy with his crumbling castle that casts a shadow over all existence, or Causality with his endless nightmare-garden of cause and effect. I’m Space itself, and I think I’ve earned the right to make my domain cosy. Well, our domain- my husband lives here, too.”

“You have a husband?” Lacurio asked.

“Time,” Space said. “We’ve been together so long, we’re practically the same person. Not that either of us are people.”

“My ancestor raped you,” Lacurio said. “Why are you being nice?”

“I know what your dickhead ancestor did!” Space snapped, with surprisingly earthy, Corporeal vehemence. “Believe me, Time was in favour of bursting him like a rotten egg, but saner heads prevailed. Metaphysicals can’t just go around popping mortals. But all that was a long time ago, and the crime wasn’t yours. Moorgos got his in the end, just not from me. That little war did him in good and proper.”

“What happens now?” Lacurio asked. He hated to admit it, being the creature of arrogance that he was, but he was lost.

“You finish your sandwich; I send you back to the Corporeal realm; you live up to the name you gave yourself- the Great Lacurio.”

“You’ve been monitoring me, eh?” Lacurio asked. The idea that a Metaphysical had been taking a special interest in him was oddly flattering and awe-inspiring, even under present circumstances.

“Honeychild- firstly, you’re my descendent. Secondly, I’m Space. Everything that has ever happened has happened inside me, just as it’s happened inside my husband, Time. Between us, we can know anything about anyone whenever we want.”

Lacurio found this an oddly disturbing concept but, unsure of what to say to it, he merely picked up his sandwich and ate.

When he was done, Space said “Brace yourself. I’m not Time and he’s out, so I can’t tell you exactly when you’re going to end up. Just remember, you have more power than any flesh and blood being has ever had, so don’t go wasting it.”

And then, unceremoniously, she snapped her fingers and sent Lacurio hurtling back into physical reality like a comet.

The world of Onthur rushed up to meet him and he hit it hard enough to render himself unconscious. The last thought he had before crash-landing was that it was good to be back... and even better to be forgiven.

7

“Ten years and not so much as a letter, then thou drop out the sky like a comet!”

The voice belonged, unmistakably, to Cathril.

Slowly, Lacurio dragged himself back to consciousness, using her voice like a guide rope. His surroundings bloomed into focus, starting with those closest to him and then seeming to unfold themselves outwards.

He was on a bed or cot made of bone and leather- that was the first thing he knew. The ground immediately around the bed was also bone, flattened and shaped into floorboards, with a simple night-stand next upon. In the centre of the room- which was really the whole interior of a decently sized bone hut- was a firepit. Across from it, in a large, almost throne-like chair, sat Cathril, smiling at him sardonically.

Had she said ten years? Was that truly how long he’d been gone?

He knew it must have been. Cathril had not aged in the time he had been away, for hers were a long-lived people, but the intervening years were visible on her in other ways. The plumpness that Lacurio had found so pleasing when they laid together had increased to an extreme degree, such that Cathril had to make a great effort to haul herself out of the chair in which she sat, which she did then, swaying over to him.

“Ten years...” Lacurio murmured. “For the Great Lacurio, it has been only a few days!”

“Then thy travels must have been strange indeed,” Cathril said, perching herself on the edge of the bed and wiping sweat from her brow. The short walk from one part of her hut to another seemed to have cost her much effort- though Lacurio would have to confess he found her no less comely for

her increased obesity and decreased mobility. She was a woman who seemed perfectly comfortable in herself, which in itself gave her a glow of attraction.

“How have you been these last, long years,” Lacurio asked. “Tell the Great Lacurio all!”

“I hath kept myself well, old lover,” Cathril said. “Soon after your departure, it was discovered that the route across the Unbidden Lands had been made almost safe, for the monsters that used to predate on travellers there were now afeared of them and an enchantment lingers on the road that wards against the magical fallout. All that was your doing, was it not?”

“I believe so,” Lacurio replied. “So you have seen the world, pretty one?”

“Much of it, yes. I braved the Unbidden Lands and travelled to the great cities of Antharis and Immeral. I hath taken many lovers, drunk many exotic wines, eaten well of many cuisines and seen things none in my Enclave ever expected to see. I hath been back here a year- long enough to hath lost the fit legs of a wanderer and become too accustomed to comfort.” She laughed.

Lacurio swung his feet over the side of the bed. He felt well, now that he was awake, despite his unceremonious plummet back into the corporeal world.

“Alas,” he said. “I have missed the most exciting decade of your life!”

“Not necessarily,” Cathil replied, slipping her hand into his. “We shared but one night, yet the connection betwixt us lingers. Doth that not tell thee we are bound for more than these brief encounters?”

“How do you know this encounter will brief?” Lacurio chided, gently.

“Because thou art fastening your cloak, even as we speak. There is work thee must do, is there not?” Cathril asked, and Lacurio could only nod.

Before he left, they shared the little cot just once, and parted with the surety that, sooner or later, they would meet again.

What followed was truly only housekeeping, though on a grandiose scale. Lacurio now knew of his Metaphysical heritage and, knowing of it, found that the well of power it granted him was deeper than he had ever suspected. He was no longer merely a sorcerer, but something other; something changed. Yet he could not countenance the way in which he had come into being; the great crime his existence had cost. He had a duty to ameliorate the horror of his origin by using the gift it had bestowed upon him.

First, he went deep into the Madlands and there found the chasm of yellow light that was really a rend into the Isn't; into nothingness. He passed his hand over it but uttered no Words of Power, instead calling upon the strange force of the Metaphysicals that ran deeper in his blood than mere magic. The yellow light faded and the ravine became, once more, a mere deep river bed.

He did not repair the Madlands in their entirety, for they were a livid and important reminder of the Last War of the Wizard Kings and assured that they would never be repeated. He did, however, carve out a path of raw enchantment between their edge and the Library of Ozmaloth, and propped that library's great doors open, so that mortals could once more study its secrets.

Then he went into the Unbidden Lands and enchanted the path that lead through these too, shoring up the protection he had already provided merely by walking across those blasted wastes once before.

Upon arriving at Mount Neshmar, he spoke with its great Lords and bid them return to the world, for their wisdom would be needed in the new, more connected age for which he had set the stage.

After much negotiation, the Lords of Neshmar agreed to make themselves available to any who climbed the mountain and summoned them, but they would not return to Onthur. With this, Lacurio had to be satisfied.

At last, though he wanted to go back to Cathril, he returned instead to the crumbling manor on the lake that had been his terrible ancestor's, and allowed himself to rest awhile in a high-backed chair in a library of decaying, magical tomes.

He knew what had to be done next, though the thought wearied him.

The greatest gift of the Metaphysicals was their ability to manifest anywhere in the Infinite and to sense every universe at once.

After long delay, Lacurio found this power within himself and gazed into himself and out into the infinity of universes that were now, to him, only a step away.

Some of them were in imminent danger from forces only a Wizard King or a Metaphysical could hope to combat. Some had great tears and gaps in them that connected them to the vile Isn't. Some of them were on the brink of magical wars of their own. They required an expert hand to set them right; a learned man to reset the clockwork of reality where it had wound down or gone awry.

He stood up from his high-backed chair and stepped in a direction that was no direction at all, leaving Onthur behind and entering the vast cosmology beyond.

Some might argue that it wasn't healthy to elect oneself the protector of all reality; that it betrayed an egomania that lay just behind the more noble motivations.

But the act was not surprising. Nobody had ever accused the Great Ahjmyr Lacurio of an excess of humility.

Silver Screen

The Enemy was here. Funny. Now that I think about it, I'm not actually sure who the Enemy was. In the jumbled junk-box of my memory, they're simply a vague, sinister presence. They lack a face and shape and coherent ideology. They are the Outsider- the unknowable and undetectable Other that haunts human consciousness like dead and poisonous roots haunt a surface-perfect garden.

I'm sorry. Now, in the fevered trough of the inevitable, I'm starting to free-associate. My mind flits from metaphor to meaningless image with jittery energy, like pictures on a broken cinema screen.

I will try to set down the facts with as little recourse to purple prose as possible.

I came here in pursuit of the Enemy. I was sent. I do not know by whom, but the defeat of the Enemy was very important. I arrived early in the morning and was permitted entry by the staff...

... It was a lovely old building, this place: art deco in design. On the ground floor was a capacious and beautiful cinema. The floor above was bars and cafes and shops. The floor above that had restaurants. Above that, hotel rooms. The whole thing was a complex designed to separate the rich and elegant from the corporeal and dirty.

Even then there was something eerie about the place. There was an Enemy here, slithering and biding, somewhere on the uppermost floors, yet the people below carried on about their business quite matter-of-factly. The staff all had pleasant smiles for me and the guests and patrons tipped their hats or nodded amicably as we passed each-other.

I introduced myself to the manager and was pointed towards the upper floors. I was told that the very top of the building wasn't in use and that I wouldn't have to worry about collateral damage once I was above floor twenty. Anyone I met up there could be assumed to be hostile.

Now that I think about it, did the manager say "anyone" or "anything"? I don't remember.

There were people on the upper floors- people I presumed to be, collectively speaking, The Enemy. I can't remember their faces now. I know they were real, three-dimensional people, but in my memory they only show up as shadows or 2D cut-outs. Typing this, I wonder if my memory is lying to me now, or if my eyes lied to me at the time. I saw hostiles, but was I just shooting at my own silhouette?

In any case, I did the job- or believed I did. Starting on floor 21 and working my way upwards, I swept the building and terminated everyone I saw holding a weapon. I was shot at, but was not hit.

After a few years of doing this work, you learn the angles to stand at; how to hold yourself so most people will miss you.

I noticed something a little odd, however, as I worked my way up the building. The higher I climbed, the more dilapidated the structure appeared. The wallpaper on the upper and lower floors was the same, suggesting it had been put up at the same time, but the stuff higher up looked older. It was greying and peeling. There were also spots where the floor felt spongy and wrong underfoot.

It wasn't until I had cleared floor 29 that I realised something was seriously off. The whole floor smelled of death- and not the new, clean, efficient death I had brought with me like a sample case full of bleach. Old death, I mean. Rot and misery and disease. The floor wasn't just spongy here, it was actively mouldering. I could hear living, sick things scritch their brittle claws against the insides of the walls. My head buzzed, like I'd been breathing in tinnitus. Yes- I know that doesn't make sense. I'm free-associating again. I can't seem to stop myself.

Deep in my bones I knew that there were no more Enemies to terminate and that the floor above me would be deserted. I could turn back. I could be done with this place. I almost did go back. Maybe things would have been different if I had.

Then, as I stood on the threshold of a decision, a telephone began to ring. I'm aware that this sounds insane, but I now believe- or half-believe- that the building knew I was feeling indecisive and made that telephone ring at that exact moment to lure me onwards.

In any case, I climbed the final flight of stairs and found myself in an area of such acute decay that standing in it made me feel ill. The telephone continued to ring and I followed its sound back to the source: an abandoned hotel room, filled with mouldering furniture and ambient moisture.

I remember thinking that I must have been dizzy or hallucinating, because the room seemed to grow and shrink rhythmically as I stumbled across it.

At last, I reached the telephone and lifted the receiver to my ear with a sense of nauseous foreboding.

On the other end of the line, a voice mumbled to itself, seemingly unaware that its call had been answered. This voice had a self-pitying whine to it and I heard phrases like "I'm boring" and "nobody will help me" amid the indistinct patter.

I listened in fascination to the voice berate itself, becoming ever more convinced that I was listening in on the private thoughts of the building in which I stood.

At some stage, I became aware that the phone felt wrong in my hand- it was soft and spongy, like fungal flesh. Still listening, I experimented by squeezing the receiver tighter. Bits of it began to fall

away, until I was left holding a few pieces of something that was neither organic tissue nor true plastic.

I think I might have made a noise at this point- a whimper or moan- and I lurched away from the repulsive device to lean against a wall. However, this too felt wrong, as though it was palpitating. Drawn by morbid curiosity, I ripped off the wallpaper and discovered living skin behind it.

I ran. I could sense the living muscle and tissue of the building quivering sickly all around me. Somehow, I lost track of where the staircase should be and found myself in another room. In this one, a home cinema projector was set up, playing a fascist propaganda film onto a wall that seemed to flinch away from the images. Tinny, triumphalist music played from a source I could not identify and a voice exhorted me to crush The Enemy.

I stared at the film for a long time as it played on a loop. I thought about the cinema downstairs and about my own action movie quest to defeat some unknown other that had infested the complex.

The idea came to me that this film was somehow responsible for the condition of the tormented, living building. The footage on display had infected it somehow. I could not imagine how long the projector had been set up, kept running by its own malign will. Perhaps this was why I had really been brought here. Perhaps my sole purpose here was to free the building by destroying the projector.

The idea was illogical, but it had the appeal of dream-reasoning.

I wanted to reach out and push the machine over, destroying it and its nightmare footage forever. Yet I found myself unable to advance. I cannot tell you now what, precisely, was so terrible about the footage: it contained no images of violence or abuse, just fresh-faced youths waving red, black and white flags while a voice spoke about the joys of dying for one's country. Nonetheless, I felt compelled to get away.

This time, I managed to run back to the stairs and pelt downwards. As I did so, I heard a noise like a cross between a screech and a sob, and large bits of wall began falling away. Parts of the ceiling behind me collapsed. I kept running.

I expected the rot to stop following me when I got below Floor 21- after all, I had only started to notice something amiss once I reached the disused part of the structure. However, mould and cracks continued to chase me and walls continued to fall apart around me as I pelted for the exit. Reaching the ground floor, I saw people going about their day-to-day lives. Flocks of them emerged from the cinema. None of them spared me a second glance or noticed the building slowly crumbling itself to dust and bone-shards around them, even when I yelled for them to beware.

There was a strange, glassy look in their eyes and I knew I couldn't help them. Worse, I fancied that I recognised many of their faces from the footage I had encountered upstairs.

I flung open the exit doors and sprawled out into the bright light of day. Behind me, the building looked normal; even elegant. I threw away my weapon and sat in the street, weeping and shaking until someone took me away and put me in the hospital where I will now reside for the rest of my days.

I cannot fully explain what happened to me, but I have theories. I have come to suspect that all places have life. Most of the time, this life exists beyond palpable perception- it can only be felt and suspected. But there are places where the barrier between ordinary, corporeal life and that other kind of life is worn thin. These places are vulnerable. They can be contaminated. The diseases of our culture can have a physical effect in these areas. Something strange yet simple- like a film projector set up by a long-ago fascist apologist- can cause a place to sicken and die.

I know that's not much of an explanation. I'm still not sure what I was doing there in the first place, really. I still don't know who The Enemy were or if they existed.

I will never solve these mysteries. I don't have the time left.

I can feel the building calling to me. It was an object that took on flesh and organic life in response to its pain. Now I'm starting to mirror it: a living being becoming more inanimate as the Suffering Inanimate tries to call me back.

I can hear a telephone ringing all the time and I can see the shape of old-fashioned phone wires twisting beneath my skin where veins should be. The world flickers and jogs in front of me sometimes, as though I'm seeing it through a broken film camera, and I know my eyes are no longer real eyes.

The people in the hospital see nothing wrong. They weren't inside the building. They can only see one level of reality. Can only see an old mercenary quivering and expiring, inch by sweating inch while, somewhere, a phone rings forever.

Cubed: A Story in Five Dimensions

Time

Now that I am an old man, with nobody left to impress and the Statue of Limitations on my side, the time has come to relate an incident which occurred in my youth and which ultimately shaped the entire course of my life. It began in a holding cell in the Slagton Borough Jail, and to understand it properly, you have to understand the town itself.

Slagton in the final years of the capitalist economic system was a dystopia that can hardly be credited now, in these enlightened times. In those days, local governments contracted their dirty jobs out to whoever said they could do it cheapest. The Slagton Borough Council had hired a company called Vella to handle waste disposal, and they kept costs down by just not bothering to do it. After a few years of botched or neglected waste disposal, Slagton was drowning in garbage—every street had its own small mountain of decaying rubbish bags. Thanks to the rubbish, there was a vermin problem. Sleek, wet rats like motile turds skittered freely across the roads in broad daylight, unafraid of the dead-eyed humans with whom they cohabited.

Slagton's underlying plumbing system hadn't been updated since the Edwardian era, either, so it was constantly on the verge of collapse, which didn't help.

Even basic socialisation had reached some kind of cataclysmic nadir in that squalid mire of a town: every sunset brought a rolling cavalcade of public sex, violence and dehumanising, biological acts, as though the descent of night was a signal to cast aside the flimsy gauze of docility with which people shaded themselves from the sun.

Into this Hogarth painting of a suburb, enter me: Prectis Knowller, an angry young tearaway living in a council house the size of a cupboard and scraping by on a State allowance for the mentally ill. Those allowances were a brilliant wheeze. In order to get them, you had to jump through hoops that no-one with a serious, chronic mental illness could be expected to cope with. I'd somehow managed to con my way onto this one by arguing that my anger management issues were the sign of a deeper malaise.

But enough scene-setting. Subtract one receipt during a shopping trip and then add one security staffer who refused to believe I'd already paid. What do you get? A brawl in the middle of Scrimp 'n' Save that put the security troll in hospital and me in an unheated jail cell, awaiting trial.

I lay on the thin, cold mattress that adorned my cell's bunk, trying to muster some form of regret for breaking a man's shins with a tin of discounted beans. Unfortunately, the man in question had

been so singularly unpleasant and confrontational that all I could feel was a vague sense of triumph. It was a pyrrhic victory, to be sure, but it was a victory nonetheless.

While I lay there, trying to force my emotions to assume the shape of contrition, night closed in outside and Slagton began its once-daily transmutation from mere cesspool to Boschian carnival of unspeakable depravity.

It was around this time that I became aware of a light in the room that didn't seem to emanate from any conventional source. The tiny window was dim and the bare light fitting outside was switched off (possibly even broken). I searched the miniscule environment with my gaze, certain that sooner or later, I would apprehend the source of the luminosity.

It didn't take me long to see it: a single point of phosphorescent whiteness in the gloaming, so small that it was only visible at all because of the light it emitted.

As I watched, it elongated, becoming a mono-dimensional line- perfectly straight and now shimmering with different colours. A moment later, the line extended sideways, becoming a 2D person-shape in the air, like a cut-out. Slowly, this flattened figure acquired substance until I had to admit to myself that I was now sharing the cell with a fairly dapper fellow in a bowler hat and light grey suit.

"Pardon me," he said, "but am I currently standing in the three dimensions known as length, breadth and depth?"

Unable to speak, I nodded mutely.

"Oh good. And do I appear to be moving forward through the fourth dimension, time?"

Another nod on my part.

"Splendid!" the well-dressed stranger said, beaming. "That means you should be able to perceive and understand me properly. I'm Mr. Trépalle and you, I believe, are the wrongfully-imprisoned Mr. Prectis Knowller- my only son and heir. Well, the only one I know about, anyway. When I was a younger man... but that's a story for another never."

I had thought my state of surprise was total, but Trépalle's words shocked me further. In fact, they seemed to jar my own tongue loose, because I found myself asking "What are you?" in a hoarse, deathly croak.

"What am I? Well, obviously I'm a higher-dimensional being. I would have thought that was perfectly obvious. I'm also your long-lost progenitor. I thought it was about time I made myself known to you, before you ended up imprisoned. Shall we get out of here?"

"How?" I asked, looking around at the four walls of the cell.

Trépalle told me how, and it changed my life.

Depth

My visitor- my alleged father- produced two pieces of paper from his pocket and laid them both on my bunk.

“Imagine,” he said, “that your bunk is a two dimensional universe. The long edge gives us the x coordinate for an object’s position in that universe, and the short edge gives us the y coordinate. So long as the two pieces of paper remain at different positions on the bunk-verse, they can comfortably exist on the same plane of reality. But what happens if we do this?” With that, he picked up one piece of paper and laid it precisely on top of the other. “They both occupy the same x and y coordinates, see? To a 2D being living on one of them, they’d appear, mathematically, to occupy the same space... but the one he wasn’t on would be completely imperceptible to him. Now, as 3D beings, we know that the papers are separated by depth, the z coordinate, but you try being a 2D entity and wrapping your head around that. You can’t! Your entire universe and sensory apparatus is comprised of only two dimensions- you can’t even picture depth.”

“Right, I have read Flatland, you know- you can probably skip the basics,” I said, with what I imagined at the time was wry dignity.

“Well, imagine if one of our little 2D people could rotate themselves up through the z axis dimension at an angle of 90 degrees. They’d still perceive just two dimensions, in the exact way they always have, but instead of perceiving length and breadth, they’ be perceiving length and depth. Because of this new orientation, instead of being a fully-realised 2D space, each piece of paper would be reduced to a single, one-dimensional line in their sensorium, but they’d be able to see both. They’d be able to cross from one piece of paper to the other.” Trépalle beamed. He evidently thought he’d just explained higher-dimensional physics in an easy-to-grasp way.

Because I wanted to get out of my cell, I made an effort to keep up. “So... we’re going to do the same, but with a fourth spacial dimension that I can’t perceive as a 3D being? If I had to guess, I’d say that’s also what I saw when you first came here, isn’t it? You were rotating yourself through a higher-dimension until you were aligned with the dimensional makeup of this plane.”

“I knew you were smart. Now that you have some idea what to expect, let’s crack on. Even with the prep, I should warn you, this may be traumatic.”

With that Trépalle hooked his arm through mine and rotated us 90 degrees through the fourth spacial dimension.

Let me try to explain what turning through a hitherto-unknown dimension looks like. As Trépalle had tried to explain to me, you don’t suddenly get the ability to see extra dimensions: my eyeballs

were still resolutely three dimensional- it was just which three that changed. The entire cell- indeed, the whole of my sensory universe up to that point- compressed into a flat sheet- the walls, bunk and locked door melting into the floor- or, rather, seeming to press down into their own footprints. There was a confusing moment when the ceiling seemed to melt away altogether- its stained grey expanse deleted from my sensorium, cut off as I rotated to a 4D angle that obscured it.

In any case, when that rotation was finished, my personal sense of depth had been replaced with the fourth spacial dimension completely. I was a 3D being standing on a flat plane whose immediate area looked like a rough plan of the jail-house. This plane stretched away beyond my field of vision, presumably encompassing the entire world- perhaps even the entire universal plane on which I had lived all my life up to that point. Well, it was the universe: I just had a new point of view on it. Above me, I could see another, undulating plane, infinitely strange and wondrous.

“Parallel universe?” I asked, gesturing at it.

“Not really, dear boy,” said Trépalle. “It’s just more of the universe- another part of it, like a planet or galactic region, but separated from the you by distance in a dimension you can’t normally perceive. Just as Mars or Venus are separated from you by distance in the dimensions you can perceive.”

“It looks closer than Mars or Venus,” I commented.

“Yes. You could hop right onto it from here, I daresay. However, we don’t need to for now. Just follow me.” Trépalle led me across the plane that was the whole world as easily as if we were taking a stroll in the park.

It occurred to me that what we were doing was using the extra dimension to step around, or perhaps over the prison walls. In two dimensions, I thought, a low wall would block my way, so I might use depth to step over it. This was just the same thing- and it was so easy to step over these walls because they had no presence at all in the dimension to which I now had access. It all seemed so very natural. Thinking of a wall or ceiling as an impenetrable barrier seemed suddenly absurd, like refusing to believe one could just walk around or over a low rock.

As we walked, I realised that the 2D plane beneath my feet wasn’t static: the shapes that were the compressed shadows of people moved and interacted; beyond the confines of the jail, cars still moved. I also realised that not all objects were equally and completely flattened. Many natural objects extruded into the fourth dimension: trees grew slightly, but in very strange ways, into my new universe. People weren’t just flat shapes, either: they had a slight bumpiness, indicating a minute extrusion into this plane they couldn’t perceive.

I asked Trépalle about it.

“The universe as you know it contains a great many dimensions. Is it really surprising that some things push beyond the usual three?” he replied. “There’s no reason for an object’s material existence to stop exactly at the edges of its sensorium. If its made from matter with more dimensions, it’ll probably extrude into those dimensions to some extent. The only reason man-made structures don’t is because shaping an object into a precise 3D shape naturally flattens or displaces its other dimensional aspects... ah! Here will do.”

I looked down and realised that we were standing in- or rather on- a late-night café. We had passed beyond the jail-house and now found ourselves in Slagton proper.

“Take my hand and I’ll slide us back into 3D space,” said Trépalle amiably.

“Let me try,” I said, surprising myself. “If I’m your son, I should have the same capabilities as you. I feel like I can do it.”

Trépalle nodded, his kind, old face breaking into a creased, benevolent smile. “Alright. Just try not to stand on a space already occupied by someone. You don’t want to twist into the 3D universe inside another person. It’d be very messy.”

I nodded and selected a section of café that seemed empty. Trépalle stepped back and nodded approvingly. Self-evidently, I didn’t need to take him with me: he could follow along easily enough.

I recalled as exactly as I could the feeling of muscles turning and stretching that had accompanied Trépalle accessing the fourth dimension, as well as the subjective sensation of movement that had occurred in the privacy of my own mind. I tried to recapitulate those feelings exactly, but in reverse, moving my body and mind in ways that I never had before.

Slowly, the living plan of the café seemed to grow depth around me, the walls stretching up out of the chequered floor to fuse with the ceiling as it billowed into existence above my head. It was difficult, in the same way that taking my first step as a baby must have been difficult, but it also felt ordinary: an exercise that my body could easily grow used to. It wasn’t an exact science, of course: I couldn’t automatically rotate myself exactly into alignment with the 3D plane any more than a toddler could walk along a balancing beam. As such, my first attempt left weird gaps in my view of the world through which other planes of existence could be glimpsed, until Trépalle grasped my shoulder and finished aligning me.

“Well done, m’boy!” he boomed, clapping me proudly on the shoulder he had used to spin me into alignment with the ordinary world. “Bloody good show for a first attempt!”

I became aware that people were staring at us.

“Mr. Trépalle... what did that look like to the people in this café?”

“Well, we were only one dimension out of sync with their reality, so it probably looked like we sprang straight up from our own footprints.” He beamed around at the other patrons. “And if you

want to see more spectacular illusions, you can google The Transcendent Trépalle and Knowller and buy tickets to our next show!”

With the bizarre occurrence explained to their satisfaction, the other café-goers offered us an underwhelmed smattering of applause and went back to drinking greasy coffees from chipped mugs.

Trépalle and I talked for a long time, and I could bore with you a long, rambling father-and-son bonding sequence... but since I'm not a complete and utter cad, I won't. Suffice it to say that when my estranged father left the table and estranged himself once more, I was a wiser, older man myself; my horizons infinitely expanded.

I sat and stared into space, my coffee going cold in front of me, until a man in a fedora and garish purple waistcoat-and-tie combo tapped me on the shoulder. He was so unlike Slagton's usual inhabitants- who favoured the pyjamas-masquerading-as-daywear look- that I initially assumed he was another spectre from an alternate dimension. It wasn't until he spoke that I realised this wasn't the case.

“Excuse me, mate,” he said. “I don't suppose you could tell me where you got that amazing illusion from?”

“What?” I said, staring back blankly. I had completely forgotten that Trépalle had explained away our materialisation as a magic trick.

“Oh, sorry- I should explain I dabble in magic myself, though I'm mainly a writer. I usually stick to cards and coins, but your thing caught my attention. I've never seen anything like it: full body materialisation in an uncontrolled environment- pure brilliance! P.V. Tims, at your service.” He stuck out his hand.

“Prectis Knowller,” I said, taking it as I caught up and tried to think of a way out of this ridiculous situation. “I'm afraid my partner creates all our tricks. I just handle the presentation side of things.” Inspiration struck. “Hey- if you leave your email with me, I'll tell him you're interested in buying the illusion. You never know, he might sell.”

P.V. Tims thanked me profusely and scribbled down his email before walking out of the café, whistling jauntily.

“What a blood weirdo,” I muttered to myself, watching him go.

Breadth

The reality of my situation hit me when I tried to use my bank-card to pay for my next cup of coffee and found it frozen. By then, the sun was coming up and everyone left in the café had dark circles under their eyes. The man behind the counter glared at me while I repeatedly tapped the card against the contactless reader. His facial hair- dirty and bristling- evoked a jungle in a state of decay: each black, curly follicle caught and trapped droplets of sweat as they slid down his jowly face. I couldn't help but imagine that all the moisture was making his moustache rot at the roots.

Forced to look away by my mounting sense of revulsion, my eyes alighted on a shit-brown coffee stain, streaked with lines of grease like the bars of a cell. A lateral shift occurred in the overloaded crevices of my brain and I realised what was happening. I had escaped from jail after being arrested for a violent crime. The crime itself would probably have landed me a few months in prison, thanks to my previous 'good character'. Coupled with the jail-break, I was probably looking at a substantial number of years. In those days, the law- that supposedly majestic and impartial institution- cared more about how much people respected it than delivering justice. It loved criminals- it needed criminals to justify its existence- but it hated that rare subset of criminals who got one over on it. A crook who made a fool of the law was likely to receive a much harsher sentence than even the most dangerous, unhinged psychopath, provided the psychopath could feign docility when confronted by an imbecile with a truncheon or a gavel.

Goodness knows why I panicked. I now had the power to simply walk out of any prison I was thrown into. Perhaps I did not yet wholly believe in the gift Trépalle had bestowed on me- it's hard to say now that so much time has passed. Whatever the reason, I did panic: I dropped my blocked and useless bank card, gave the man behind the counter a single, terrified look and bolted for the door, just as I heard sirens starting to approach. Doubtless my card had been traced.

The café's lumpen, hairy owner stared after me with the dull, malevolent eyes of a particularly stupid and vicious cow. However, he made no attempt to follow me and for that I am grateful.

"There he is!" I heard an unmistakably cop-ish voice yell behind me. I jinked to one side and found myself sprinting down a blind alley. Flat, angry footfalls pursued me- I have no idea how many: I didn't bother to look back. A wall loomed up ahead of me.

The twisting of mind and body that had challenged me when I had the leisure to take my time with it came with ease now that I had adrenaline and fear pumping through me. I launched and twisted my way into the fourth spacial dimension, watching the wall compress to a flat oblong in front of me. I vaulted over it and continued sprinting across the squashed rendering of Slagton, ignoring the shimmering otherscape above me and the majesty of the higher-dimensional cosmos all around. The idea that I could enter other worlds as well as circumnavigate the tricky bits of my own

hadn't yet fully hit me. Thus, I ran until a stitch burned in my side and my breath came in short, ragged twitches.

I staggered to a halt, feeling foolish. Running had been spectacularly unnecessary: it wasn't like the police could follow me out of the 3D plane. From their perspective, it must have looked like I ran into the shadows at the end of the alley and simply vanished.

I looked at where I was standing and didn't recognise it. There didn't seem to be any people around, so I revolved down into ordinary existence to catch my breath.

I had run into a quiet part of town that I didn't recognise. I stood, gasping for breath, and tried to take stock of my predicament. I had no money, I was a fugitive from the law and if anyone found out what I could do, there was a pretty good chance I'd end up on display in the Hunterian Museum as a medical anomaly. I wouldn't necessarily be alive when this happened.

Of course, I wasn't helpless: to all intents and purposes, I could walk through walls or- when necessary- vanish altogether. But I couldn't spend all my time in the fourth spacial dimension just to hide from the law: my own plane of existence had food and beds and other things I needed to live. As such, I wasn't exactly sure what, if anything, my powers availed me.

I looked around the street on which I found myself: a couple of mini-supermarkets, a greengrocers, a bakery and a big shiny bank-branch confronted me.

"Bank," I thought, distantly.

"I can walk through walls," I thought, more distinctly.

After several seconds of inexcusable stupidity, the two thoughts finally joined up.

"Oh," I said aloud, and twisted myself out of the 3D universe.

If you ever want to add breadth to your catalogue of experiences, I recommend robbing a bank in broad daylight without being detected. It's a uniquely invigorating sensation and gives one a truly wonderful sense of heroic power. In those latter days of capitalism, banks were irredeemably corrupt, you have to understand. Hurting them wasn't a victimless crime, but it was a crime with a richly-deserving victim: a victim who preyed on the hapless and the desperate with bad loans and blood-sucking overdraft charges designed to keep the poorest in debt.

I simply walked into the bank's main vault, stepping over the walls in the fourth dimension, then re-entered the 3D plane, stuffed the pockets of my ragged charity-shop blazer with wads of currency (keeping my head bowed away from the CCTV cameras), then walked out the same way I'd gotten in.

Wonderful. I now had funds.

Rather than re-entering the 3D plane the moment I left the bank, I kept walking, admiring the otherworldly rippling of fourth-dimensional space and letting the rush wear off. Actually, I walked for hours, putting as much distance between me, the police and the site of my most recent crime as possible. If I recall correctly, I ended up a couple of towns over in a place called Chimes.

In Chimes, I bought new clothes, got a haircut and generally did everything I could to change my appearance. I even bought an hour on a tanning bed to rapidly change my complexion. This turned out to be a mistake: I don't tan, I simply burn. I came out looking a potato that someone had left in the oven for too long.

All things considered, however, Chimes was a much better place to regroup than Slagton. It possessed that species of anaemic cleanliness that accompanied most bastions of the rich and elderly in those days. I felt safe enough, spending time there, though it wasn't precisely my type of town.

I went to a café that was almost the polar opposite of the one where I'd nearly gotten myself caught. The floors were polished wood, the walls were papered with a pleasing design and the staff were friendly (especially when they saw my smart new clothes, which included a silk shirt and wool overcoat, and decided I might be a good tipper).

A pretty waitress brought over a pot of tea, which I'd ordered precisely because I had been a habitual coffee drinker in my previous life. I had a clear idea that survival, from this point on, would depend on a complete reinvention of my entire being.

I started to say 'thanks' and changed it to "Much obliged, my dear," as the tea tray descended onto the table in front of me.

As I sat there, sipping my Earl Grey, a vague plan began to form. My bank robbery was going to have to be the first of many. I'd need funds for a false passport and driving license: the makings of a whole new identity. I'd live in hotels rather than tying myself to an address where I might be found if my old and new identities were ever connected. Above all, though, I'd get even, on behalf of all the people who couldn't. I had been born into squalor and poverty, forced to navigate wilfully humiliating and impenetrable government systems in order to survive, crapped on by every petty armchair Hitler with a modicum of situational power and finally arrested when- inevitably- I snapped. The thoughts of robbing the powerful, the petty, the venal and the undeserving blind filled with me with a sense of purpose. I'll also happily admit that it filled me with a sense of glee.

In short, my single encounter with Mr. Trépalle turned me into the renowned cat-burglar and general larcenist I am today, whose exploits have undoubtedly reached your ears through folk legends and old media clippings.

Length

I have now fulfilled my promise and related the defining incident of my life. However, I suspect that you're not quite sated. You want to know what happened next, and how my unique capabilities ceased to be, well, unique. As luck would have it, I'm in the mood to tell the story fully: now that I've started, I find I'm reluctant to stop at the moment of my transformation. So then- let us continue.

You have to understand that the thrill of robbing from the rich, the powerful and the generally unlikeable wore off very fast, for the simple reason that it was easy. It never stopped being satisfying, which is why I kept doing it, of course, but it ceased to be exciting with alarming rapidity.

On the other hand, testing the limits of my powers never bored me. Having mastered the general principle of twisting myself out of the world's depth, I quickly began to experiment. For example, instead of rotating myself so that the world compressed to a flat screen beneath my feet, I sometimes tried another angle, so that it became a shimmering screen in front of me, which I was able to turn away from at my leisure. This also made it remarkably easy to step casually over into the plane of existence next door.

Unlike alternate dimensions in fiction, this one bore no resemblance to Earth, even in passing: it wasn't a different version of the same basic world, but its own place in its own right. Some sort of azure, leafy foliage crinkled beneath my feet and similarly hued tree-ish things stretched up into the purple sky around me. I say 'tree-ish things' rather than 'trees' because their branches had more in common with wavering octopus tentacles than with the stiff wooden branches I was familiar with.

I explored this world for days, enjoying the respite from my criminal career, and drinking in the sight and scent of the alien flora.

The world seemed to be uninhabited by anything that could be characterised as sentient life, of course, and so- deprived of another culture to investigate- I moved on to explore other worlds. If I listed them all, this retelling would rapidly turn into a Homeric epic.

Eventually, leafing through the planes of existence which were separated only thinly in the fourth dimension, I came upon an inhabited planet. Inhabited, to be precise, by winged, vaguely anthropoid creatures the size of flat-blocks and possessed of many arms and faces. They roamed a landscape of blue-grey mountains, each one topped with a person-scale building that had clearly not been constructed by the winged giants. There was something oddly votive about these structures: their golden pillars and ornamented roofs spoke of ancient rites and a deep philosophical respect.

I asked one of the giants who had built them, not expecting an answer. I had, at that time, no reason to suspect that the entities spoke my language. However, I did receive an answer, and in perfectly fluent English, too.

“You did...” the creature intoned. “A long time ago in the future.”

The grammar of the response was correct, but its meaning was opaque. There was something so ominous about it, however, that after that incident, I returned to my own world for quite some time, and only used my dimension-bending skills to steal money and valuable artefacts from the rich and richly-deserving.

After a year, my fascination with the multi-complex beyond drew me, inexorably, back to the exploration of other dimensions. I returned to experimenting with the limits of my abilities and quickly discovered that, like Mr. Trépalle, I could do more than twist myself out of alignment with depth: I could also turn away from length and breadth, so that I was inhabiting three entirely separate spacial dimensions and therefore stood in a landscape with no connection to the universe I had always known.

If I had thought the alternate planes of reality were strange, I had drastically underestimated the bizarreness of the universe. Those worlds had had length, breadth, depth and time, just like my own: they were merely out of phase with it by a few scant metres measured out in the fourth dimension. The landscape in which I now stood had dimensions of its own, and these followed very different rules to those of my own reality.

In place of space, stars and planets, I found a crowded, abstract reality in which luminous platonic solids swam through a membranous latticework of interlocking bridges and irregular shapes which reminded me, curiously, of the neurological structures of the brain writ large. I was nothing more than a tiny, microbial organism, standing helplessly on one of the many taught, stretched bridges of indefinable matter that dominated the local environs.

Having (from my own, subjective standpoint) compressed my original reality to an invisible point in order to unfurl this one, I grew afraid that I wouldn't be able to find it again. Besides, I was overwhelmed by the otherness of this unsuspected piece of the universe. The realisation that it existed all around me and my world, invisible in the usual three dimensions but always present, disconcerted me deeply. Almost immediately, I reversed the process of higher-dimensional rotation that had brought me here and found myself, to my intense relief, standing back in my latest anonymous hotel room with a cup of tea slowly going cold on the bedside dresser.

It was after this encounter with the ontologically terrifying that I conceived the idea of involving another human being in my work. In truth, this had taken far longer than it really should have: Mr. Trépalle had never said I couldn't take another person with me, and I already knew that 3D matter travelled perfectly safely through higher dimensions, because my clothes and stolen goods always arrived back in my world in one piece after a jaunt through the unimaginable elsewhere.

By now, roughly five years had passed since I met my alleged father- long enough to have introduced others to my unique abilities. However, I have always been a solitary man by nature, and while I am friendly with a great many people, I wouldn't say I'm actually friends with anyone.

Thus I made the decision to start trawling the internet for a likely candidate- someone with whom I could share my secrets.

The problem with announcing that you have superhuman powers on the World Wide Web is that you're in such very good company. I had a hundred messages within two days of advertising for an open-minded individual who was ready to believe in other dimensions and the human ability to access them. Unfortunately, they were all from cranks who believed that they, too, had visited the higher planes and communed with deeply spiritual entities after opening their third eyes.

Comparing their descriptions of other dimensions to my own, concrete experiences, I concluded very rapidly that they were talking bollocks. For these people, other dimensions were mystical things in which secret knowledge was stored. I knew this to be anthropocentric nonsense of the highest calibre: the only entities I'd come across that seemed to recognise or care about humans (even slightly) were the winged giants. They only cared because they seemed to think that either me or my species were going to go build temples on their world in the future which, to them, was somehow also the distant past. The rest of the dimensional Infinite cared as little about the human race as it did about cockroaches, pocket-lint and boy bands of the late 1990s.

In short, after several days of slogging through online correspondence, I was no closer to finding a suitable partner than at the start of the process.

If nothing else, though, I had a newfound empathy for those rare sane, well-adjusted people who found themselves on online dating sites.

I shut my computer and roamed out of my hotel in search of an acceptably swish café.

After a brief interlude of morose meandering, I found myself in a tiny, deserted tea-room. The dark-wood floors and handful of tables draped in white linen bespoke good taste rather than obscene wealth. The waitress- frizzy-haired, tall and gawky- looked like a new recruit: she possessed the deer-in-headlights expression of someone who'd never had to deal with customers face-to-face before.

As she nearly spilt the pot of tea handing it to me, I remembered how Trépalle had explained away our mysterious appearance in another café years ago.

Goodness knows what prompted me to do it, but I said, “Do you want to see a magic trick?”

I picked up the tea-cup, as yet innocent of beverage, and held it at arms length. I twisted my wrist through the higher dimensions, leaving the rest of me where I was, released the cup, and twisted my hand back into dimensional alignment with the rest of my body.

From the waitress’s perspective, I made the tea-cup vanish into thin air.

After leaving a pause for her inevitable gasp, I reached back into the higher dimensions and plucked the receptacle back.

“Can you show me how to do that?” the waitress asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Yes I can.”

The young woman’s name turned out to be Etty and- as I had suspected- she was a fairly recent employee of the café, having stumbled into the job after a long stretch on the dole.

Because I had to tell someone (and because the internet had proved to be a dead end), I invited her round to my side of the counter and took her by the hands.

“Okay,” I said. “This may alarm you, but I’ll explain everything afterwards.”

I twisted us out of alignment with depth so we stood on top of the flattened sheet of the world, below another shimmering reality-plane. After a moment, I twisted again, leaving length and breadth behind and revealing the strange alternate world.

Etty stared around. From her perspective, I thought, this must be a little sudden. I had surprised myself, after all. To her credit, however, the expression on her face was one of wonder and amazement rather than the ontological dread I had felt when first encountering the irreconcilable other. This perfect stranger, with no preparation, was coping far better with the truth of reality than I had myself. Though, in some ways, this seemed natural. After all, following my initial trip with Trépalle, my explorations had been conducted solo. In contrast, Etty was being introduced to infinity via someone who seemed to know what he was doing. She had less reason to be afraid.

“Shall I return us to our plane of existence?” I asked, politely.

Etty shook her head.

“I think I know how you did it... let me give it a go.”

I had thought that I was the only human being who could turn dimensions like Trépalle. Etty’s admittedly inexperienced first twist of reality took me completely by surprise.

After I had helped Etty situate herself properly in three dimensions, we walked out of her cafe and through deserted Sunday streets. The sky above us was a tessellated cloudscape of light and dark patches with only intermittent combustions of blue. It was the kind of sky that only England could produce: it lacked the naive charm of a clear, tropical sky, but offered something else. It was a sky that aimed for profundity rather than beauty.

As we ambled, I explained to Etty what had happened; what she could now do. She nodded solemnly.

“Why show me?” she asked.

“I needed to show someone and you struck me as... not a terrible sort of person,” I replied. It was, I knew, an abysmal answer, but it was the truth.

“You should tell more people,” she said flatly.

“Why?”

“Because this changes everything.”

I half-shrugged. She had a point, but it was hard to really feel the burden of historic responsibility. In case you haven’t already picked up on this, I should reiterate that I am not noticeably attached to the human condition.

“You’re welcome to share these skills with whoever you see fit,” said I, magnanimously.

“Maybe I will.” Etty mused, smiling.

???

Etty was as good as her word: she spread news of the higher dimensions in a way that I never did. She practically proselytized about them. Not that she abandoned me to pursue this course of action. For years, we travelled the higher dimensions together, on and off, funding our explorations with increasingly elaborate and daring burglaries. She took to that aspect of my life far more readily than I expected, in fact.

“It’s interesting,” she told me one day, as we mapped spacial dimensions seven through nine. “Not everyone can do it- turn through dimensions. Whenever I tell one of my friends from the dole queue or some menial job I used to work, they seem to get it straight away. But I tried to show an ex-boyfriend how to do it the other day, and he just couldn’t. I thought he’d take to it right away: he studied physics at Oxford. He understood the maths of it, but that didn’t seem to help him.”

We puzzled over this for quite some time, but neither of us hit upon the obvious explanation: that living under conditions of precarity in some way prepared one for the mental contortions demanded by the higher dimensions.

In any case, the important thing is that extra-dimensional powers spread exponentially, with each user teaching many more.

While Etty and I meandered our way through other planes of existence, the newspapers filled up with a crime wave consisting of impossible, locked-room thefts. My way of life was, it seemed, contagious.

Governments and police forces couldn't keep up. Even when they found out how the thefts were happening and started employing people to police the fourth dimension, it was no use. Burglars just used any of the other infinite dimensions to circumvent the new security measures. For thousands of people, a precarious life in which the slightest choice could lead to ruination had been replaced by a life of instant plenty without consequences.

It took years- decades, in fact- but the war of attrition between the Ancien Regimes and the new criminal super-class did eventually end. The day the old powers waved the white flag and the economy finally collapsed under the strain of emptied bank-vaults and purloined masterpieces, it was my birthday. At least, it was the day I'd arbitrarily started telling people was my birthday after leaving my old life behind.

Etty, her face now creased with laugh-lines, gave me a strange, rounded parcel and I opened it delightedly. Inside was a grey hat. A grey bowler hat. We were sat in the strange, twisted dimensional realm that had once reminded me of the synaptic structure of a living brain, sharing a bottle of champagne on a chequered picnic blanket.

"Do you like it?" she asked. "It matches your taste in suits."

I did like it. It also explained something that had been nagging at me for a long time.

Another five years has passed since then. The last of these years I used to find precisely the right light grey suit for a very important meeting. When I put on the bowler hat and looked in a mirror in the guest-house I was staying in at the time, I saw an all-too-familiar face.

Time, you see, is just another dimension. Rotate yourself properly and you can see it and even walk backwards through it; wade through it like flowing water. Soon, I will do just that, following the luminous trail of my own time-stream back along its course until I intersect with myself. I will introduce myself under a name that suits my well-turned-out appearance and I will set in motion the chain of events that has created a generation of dimension-bending super-beings. I will become the estranged father of the new world we all now inhabit; a world without money or borders or limits.

Generations from now, my ideological descendants will reach back even further to build high temples in a world of winged giants and the final plane will slide into place on the closed-cube of

humanity's history. Maybe then- and only then- will everything that has happened be fully understood.

Returning the Screw

Based on characters and settings created by Henry James

Have you got a match?

My name is Quint. And no, growing up with a name that sounds like a cross between ‘cunt’ and ‘squint’ didn’t do me any favours. You might have heard of me. If you’ve ever read *The Turn of the Screw*, or seen the film *The Turning* or watched that rambling bloody Netflix thing, you’ll have heard of me. I’m the bad guy, see. In some versions of the story I’m the ghost that haunts the manor. In others, I’m just a bad memory, with my long-lost life sitting like a poison in the veins of the old place. Whatever way you slice it I’m the one they pinned it all on. When the governess killed herself, it must have been because Quint broke her brain during their torrid little affair. When the kiddies started going mental, it must have been because of old Quint’s influence. The governess-Jessel, if you must know- was a lovely girl, and we did have a little fling, but she also had a history of mental health problems and a chip on her shoulder. Not a great combo for people wanting to live long, happy lives. I should know, since I fell into roughly the same category once upon a time. The kids... well, I’m not a child psychologist, but I reckon the sudden death of your parents will mess you up pretty bad, especially if you’re then raised by their bowin’-and-scrapin’ servants ‘cause your actual relatives can’t be bothered to show up and put in the work. I’m not what you’d call a ‘responsible adult’, let alone a ‘great role model’, but I tried my best with those poor sprogs, I really did. Especially the boy. Reminded me of myself at his age, only posh. It wasn’t me who cracked their impressionable little skulls open and poured all the horrors of the world in. The world did that all on its own.

Of course, the reason I’m the bad guy is simple. My real crime wasn’t corrupting the oh-so-pure governess or telling the wee bairns that booze and gambling existed. My real crime was wanting a chunk of that old money- that unearned, inherited money; wanting a little piece of luxury for myself; daring to think I was as good and deserving as the rich fuckers who employed me because, here’s the truth, it wouldn’t take much. I mean, all they ever did was own land and cultivate gout. Pretty sure that doesn’t require a rarefied heart or even a particularly taxing skill-set. But they had everything, and I had nothing. So, since they were never going to notice anyway, I made no bones about helping myself to the wine cellar, borrowing the odd tuxedo or overpriced watch, and pumping my little governess over their snooker table. While we’re on the subject, who actually uses snooker tables for snooker? Fucking nobody, that’s who. Snooker is, by a considerable margin, the

most boring game ever invented. Those are fuck-tables: that's what they are. Rich people buy them so they won't have to shag their mistresses in beds and then explain the stains to their cleaners. If a white stain shows up on a snooker table, it's just chalk from the cue and nobody has to get suspicious about anything. Fucking genius.

The point is, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. And if you can't join 'em, work for 'em and help yourself to their crap. And people hate that. Britain's still a classist toilet. If anyone spots a working class fella taking the same liberties that the rich do- or even just failing to tug the forelock- they lose their minds. Especially a certain type of other working class people- the ones who are oh-so-happy-to-serve 'cause they haven't got the imagination to do anything else. The trouble with being brought up to lick somebody else's boots is, well, you get used to it. Some people can't imagine a world without the taste of shoe-leather on their tongue and they'll bite you if you try to take it away. They'll also bite if you don't want any yourself, 'cause if there's one thing they hate more than someone trying to fill in their comfortable little rut, it's being reminded that there's a world outside the rut. Sorry, I know my metaphors are mixed. It happens when you've been dead as long as I have- language as the living understand it starts to slip and blur.

Yeah. Maybe I should clarify. I am dead. Not as dead as Elvis- that guy's majorly dead- but pretty fucking dead. If I've still got a body at all, it's just a bloated husk somewhere, eaten up by maggots and fungus. Mainly fungus. Fun fact: mycelium will get into literally fucking anything if it's dark and squishy enough. Being dead ain't so bad. It's not like I have to sit around in my body while it decomposes, and there's no class system to put up with in death. All ghosts are equally fucked. The only thing I mind is being here. Not this plane of existence- think more specific. I'm talking about the manor house where it all happened. Where my governess killed herself; where the fine lord and lady died leaving a distant prick of an uncle to manage two kiddies; where those kiddies went mad; where another governess nearly killed one of them and got carted off to the nearest loony bin; where the fucking housekeeper of all people decided to make me the bad guy in it all, just because the idea that I'd lived and laughed and loved and screwed one of her colleagues on a snooker table that I didn't personally own offended her Victorian sensibilities. I really don't want to be here any more. Especially not when I'm trapped here with her and poor Jessel. One won't stop talking and the other won't stop crying. I want to save one and rid myself of the other. But I need your help, whoever you are. Whoever's reading this, let me ask you, as a fellow human being, for just one thing. This property's owned by the National Trust now. I don't know what they're calling it nowadays, but it can't be too hard to find out from your side of the veil. Go to the blasted place and bring kerosene. Burn it down. Burn it until there's not a stone left un-charred; until this symbol

of pointless wealth and English feudal deference is just a blackened crater. Maybe then I can move on. Have you got a match?

Notes and Commentaries

I always enjoy finding little commentaries and wry asides by authors at the end of books, whether novels or collections of short stories. I don't know why, there's just something endlessly entertaining about a writer explaining what on Earth they were thinking when they wrote something. Sometimes, it's actively frustrating when such a commentary is missing. Case in point, I would quite like to know what was going through Frank Herbert's head when he wrote *God Emperor of Dune*. Why, specifically, did he depart from the established allegory of Middle-Eastern history and how it's been shaped by energy resources to give us a tale about a giant stropic worm with a human's face? That book really could have benefited from some authorial unpacking.

Anyway, with my own work now out in the world, I thought I'd write my own set of notes in the hope of explaining what I thought I was playing at. May it entertain you, even as it totally fails to enlighten you.

The Collection

When Culture Matters suggested that I write a collection of working-class and leftist fiction for their illustrious site, I immediately knew what I didn't want the collection to be. To be precise, I didn't want it to be an "identity" book. You know what I mean, I'm sure: one of those tomes where the fiction is secondary to whatever statement of class, racial, or gendered identity the writer is trying to make. While there are plenty of good, lefty messages in this book (I am, after all, a dyed-in-the-wool socialist), I wanted to avoid on-the-nose revolution fic in which plucky, cloth cap-wearing rebels take down evil capitalist mega-corps. Nor did I want to populate my book with dour dystopias in which the unfettered crapness of modern economic reality has led, inexorably, to some species of terrible future. I definitely didn't want to create a book that reinforced the idea that "working-class fiction" is a distinct, separate category to fiction in general, as though the former is a cheap, self-involved knock-off of the latter. That's not to say this book is apolitical – it's extremely political, I should hope, and absolutely jam-packed with painfully obvious metaphors – only that I wanted it to stretch further than that. Good sci-fi, I think, isn't just about rehashing the terribleness of the present- it's a tool for seeing further; for imagining other futures and other ways of being. To that end, I went out of my way to include the most bizarre, buoyant and unlikely stories I was capable of writing. It might shock you to realise how few of the stories in this book even include or mention human beings. Because, ultimately, what I did want this book to be was a crowbar – a crowbar for jimmying open the brain and pouring in the Infinite. But not in a creepy way.

Enlightenment for All!

It might surprise readers to learn that I didn't initially conceive the Stack as a metaphor for the class system. I'd actually been trying to write this tale for some time before Culture Matters approached me and the idea behind it was purely philosophical. What did I believe the meaning of life really was, and what would a group of people have to go through to truly know that meaning for certain? The Stack, which dominates Enlightenment for All therefore started off, not as something analogous to the class system, but as an engine of testing and refinement that would grind through protagonist after protagonist until one of them finally reached its summit and learned the meaning. Turning it into an explicitly left-wing piece of fiction made this slightly strained concept a lot easier to write: it gave the world a natural structure and texture and also allowed the narrative to take the form of a classic Hero's Journey, with the final protagonist returning to the home of the first at the end of the story. The result is one of the better stories in this book, expressly political without being nothing but politics. Of course, if stories about the nature of enlightenment are your sort of thing, I should also point out that Enlightenment for All takes a lot of cues from the cinematic epics The Holy Mountain (Jodorowski) and The Iron Circle (which owes its existence to Bruce Lee, oddly enough). Oh yes, I'm a cinema geek as well as a sci-fi geek. I'm a genuine double-threat when it comes to boring people rigid at dinner parties!

What Atoms Really Want

The limits of the human imagination have always interested me. It's generally accepted, for example, that it's impossible to actually picture sub-atomic particles in a way that's consistent with scientific and mathematical reality. For example, how does one go about visualising the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, which requires a particle to effectively occupy multiple locations at the same time while moving at different speeds? Likewise, how would the outside universe look from the perspective of something that's in multiple places at once? What Atoms Really Want came from a desire to answer these questions satisfactorily; to give the reader a way of meaningfully visualising something that deliberately eludes visualisation. Of course, after a certain point, the story transitions from scientific fact to sheer whimsy, but this too serves a purpose. Actually, it serves a double purpose. Firstly, it provides the emotional message of the narrative, which I like to think has applicability to socialist ideology, even though it isn't overtly political. Secondly, it establishes a cosmological structure that can comfortably contain all the worlds in this book and, indeed, in every other piece of fiction of I've produced. More on that later.

Death in Chessland

Fun fact: Death in Chessland was one of the only stories written solely for inclusion in this book. Most of the other tales were either written already or existed in my head before Culture Matters gave me a shot at PDF-flavoured fame. Despite the apparent purity of its origins, the process by which Death in Chessland came about is actually quite hard to explain. Partly, it owes its existence to my friend, Paul (or “Alternate Paul” when we’re both in the same room), who invited me along to chess club and got me interested in the theory of chess. Chess doesn’t just have good moves and bad moves based on context, it has entire schools of thought and specific names for each tactic or situation that might arise. Most of these have a mysterious, slightly sinister quality and would be utterly incomprehensible to someone unfamiliar with the game. Some moves even seem bizarre or counter-intuitive if don’t know the named school or system to which they belong. At some point, chess therefore acquired an association with noir fiction in my head, after all, noir fiction is also built upon occluded information, connections that aren’t immediately apparent and systems of behaviour that only make sense within the very specific contexts of the baroque narratives. Add in a few bad puns (because I love bad puns) and the story became inevitable. In case you’re curious, the name of the protagonist, Fian Chetto, comes from, well, *Fianchetto*. It’s a term for when a pawn is moved out of the front rank by just one square to make way for a Bishop.

Gunweeds

The world in which Gunweeds takes place and the characters who inhabit it had had a fully-realised existence in my head for a long, long time before I even crossed paths with Culture Matters. The story, however, only suggested itself when I knew I was putting together a book with a general leftist vibe. You can probably infer how I feel about the arms industry and general death-profiteering from what happens in the story. I also thought that a self-contained yarn of just a few pages would make a good palette cleanser for the brain after a longer, more substantive story (which turned out to be Death in Chessland, obvs). There’s an argument to be made that Gunweeds didn’t need to take place in a sci-fi universe at all- that human actors on modern-day Earth could just as easily have played out the plot. However, I’m not a big fan of anthropocentrism. The joy of fiction is that it can be used to imagine any world and any set of events, so why should those worlds and events be experienced by some boring human bumcrack? Answer me that. Anyway, the universe in which Gunweeds takes place is more important than is immediately apparent. As I mentioned earlier, all of the stories in this book take place, theoretically, within the same capital-I Infinite cosmology and link up in ways you might not expect.

Saturday Mourning

While I can't make any claims regarding its objective quality, Saturday Mourning is one of my favourite stories in this collection. It's also a fine example of me finally putting my money where my mouth is. I said in my notes for the collection itself that I didn't want to create a book that was entirely about class dynamics and working class identity. Saturday Mourning definitely leans more towards the philosophical than the political, questioning whether the 'self' is entirely a product of its environment or whether there's something inherent within free will that allows a person to become more than the sum of their parts. The story was also an excuse to play with language and modes of speech, combining metaphysical vision-statements about indescribable mechanisms with the simplified, overblown language of cartoons. Of course, though there's no deliberate inclusion of politics in Saturday Mourning (as it was written some time before I started assembling this collection for Culture Matters), no doubt my politics influenced it. One does not simply abandon one's environment to leave its limitations behind or give up when one realises those limitations. Rather, one has a duty to broaden horizons for all, not just for oneself- at least when it's possible to do so. And yes, we are still talking about a story in which a shouty man with a pyramid for a head goes on a quest to meet the cartoonist who created him and ends up getting stoned with a prostitute.

Exoverse

At six stories in, we finally get to the first one with a human protagonist! Exoverse takes place on a version of Earth similar but distinct from our own. It's one of three versions of Earth that crop up in this collection. Why, after all, should the Infinite only contain one variant of each thing? I wanted to write a narrative that took the form of several conversations between the same two people, years apart, with the world changing dramatically in between each meeting. The strand that links these conversations is essentially a thought experiment: what would happen if we ever conquered the problem of limited resources? There's a lot of optimism in Exoverse about our capacity to create a more equal world, but there's also pessimism regarding how our worst instincts can drag us back down. Ultimately, Exoverse's protagonist and her partner find peace by opting out of the human condition in a fairly novel way, which probably seems like a bleak ending. However, its worth remembering that the human race is no longer confined to Earth by the end of the story. We have infinite chances to get it right elsewhere, including in the alternate realm where our protagonist ends up. Make of that what you will. As a fun aside, you might be wondering why our hero, Doctor Yettersley is a plus-size, raunchy pin-up when most high-level career physicists are cardigan-wearing epitomes of androgynous nerdiness. The answer is: screw realism! One of the great compensations of being a penniless writer is that you can make your little word-people look

however you want. True, making my protagonist a curvy sex symbol in a figure-hugging lab coat because I'm both a chubby chaser and a massive nerd might not be especially mature but as the great Marx himself might once have said: Yarbles to you, matey!

The Cascade

I said there were three versions of Earth in this book. The Cascade takes place on version number two. I probably don't need to unpack the politics behind this one, since the narrative involves a poor and beleaguered working chap fighting a corrupt system that exists to keep the rich and powerful rich and powerful. While I wanted to avoid 'plucky underdog versus powerful mega-corp' stories, I had to make an exception for The Cascade. I wrote it before being approached by Culture Matters, like many of the stories in this book, and it was just too good not to include. Well, I think it is anyway, but one can never really judge the quality of one's own work. All I know is that it's a story about magic tricks, which I adore and regularly design- I've even got a Youtube channel called Victor The Magician where I upload my performances. It's also a story that takes place in a sort of criminal underworld, which gives the setting a very specific flavour and allows me to drop reference to the film 'In Bruges' for no other reason than that I really liked it. It's also also a story about negotiating a hostile world while dealing with autism. It's also also also a story with an XXL love interest, and we just got done talking about how much I like those. In short, it's a story with a lot to love... just not a lot that requires an explanation. Oh, I should note that the title has a little bit of a double meaning: a cascade, in general terms, is any self-perpetuating sequence of events triggered by something seemingly small or simple. In magic, the Rainbow Cascade is a classic trick in which cards change colour. Since The Cascade is, at heart, a story about change, it seemed appropriate.

A Small Story about a Large Misunderstanding

Like Saturday Mourning, this was isn't explicitly political, at least, not deliberately so. It's an exploration of semiotics and how you can't assume that visual language and communication precepts are universal. All of these stories take place in the same cosmological framework- in fact, everything I've ever written does- but A Small Story about a Large Misunderstanding actually takes place in the same universe as Exoverse. The humans who appear in it are the descendents of those who left Earth during Yettersley's golden age. It's not really important for the narrative and it doesn't come up in-story, but I like fleshing out fictional universes in ways that make them feel more fully realised and connected, so as far as I'm concerned, the two stories take place in the same space-time, just a few star systems and centuries apart.

The Ballad of the Great Lacurio

One my favourite short novels is *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath*, one of H.P. Lovecraft's rare non-horror efforts, which takes place entirely in a dream and posits that the dream world has just as much validity and import as the real, waking world, despite its apparent lack of substance, and which also suggests that dreams and reality feed off each other to create meaning. *The Ballad of the Great Lacurio* has almost nothing in common with this story, except that I wanted to affect the same epic, cosmic-fantasy tone while writing. In fact, it would be fair to say that *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath* was the direct cause of *The Ballad of the Great Lacurio*, despite the two not sharing a single plot element or thematic preoccupation. *Lacurio* was a hard story to write. In fact, it took years. I kept starting it and finding myself unable to continue, then starting again months later. I knew roughly what the Great Lacurio's goals were and what should happen to him as he tried to reach them, but it just didn't land for a really long time. The story only clicked into place when the character of Cathril occurred to me, along with her little family. *Lacurio* is a very cerebral character- the story needed a heart. Thinking about Cathril's family also meant thinking about how the Last War of the Wizard Kings effected ordinary people, which gave the story its political centre and message. The war that looms over the story was fought because of the ambition and posturing of a powerful elite and it traumatised both the land and the normal people who lived on it. *Lacurio* technically belongs to this elite- at least, he's descended from them- but once he's been through trauma, he chooses to abandon quests of personal importance and assume a more selfless role. In other words, it's a story about how those who suffer by no fault of their own are owed better by those with the power to do better, but it's also a story about how shared suffering can sometimes be the beginning of empathy.

Silver Screen

You've probably noticed that this collection can be divided into two types of story: big, world-building exercises that can run to many, many pages and shorter, more self-contained nuggets of narrative with single-figure page-counts. Of the latter type, *Silver Screen* is probably my favourite, in large part because it's wilfully opaque and resists easy interpretation. Clearly, it's some type of sci-fi horror, but how much of the unnamed narrator's account is accurate and how much is the result of his assumed madness is up for debate. Does the damage to reality described in the story have anything to do with the Last War of the Wizard Kings that might have bled through into other realities, or is there some other force at work? Is it really happening at all? Is the narrator human, or does the tale take place on some far removed planet in the midst of some utterly unknowable species? Certainly, the narrator has his own ideas, but as we've already mentioned, he's not the

most reliable chap and, without an external reference point or other clues, it's hard to be certain regarding any of the tale's more recondite aspects. The best part is that I, dear reader, share your uncertainties, because Silver Screen is not the product of conscious literary effort. It was a nightmare I had and then, upon waking, transcribed. I am as much in the dark as you are regarding its mysteries, and there's something wonderful about that. The story is an elaborate puzzle-box constructed by my subconscious; an instance of my own fictional cosmology surprising me and keeping secrets from me. I include it in this collection because I wanted you to find the same strange, dark joy in its elusive nature that I did.

Cubed: A Story in Five Dimensions

The final longer story of the collection has something in common with What Atoms Really Want, the first shorter story. Both of them involve attempts to imagine the unimaginable. Where Cubed differs is that it is concerned with real-world society and politics rather than philosophy. In fact, it's the single most incendiary story in this collection. It takes place in the third and final version of Earth included in this book and it's the version that most closely resembles our own (with the names of towns and suchlike changed for obvious reasons). I even included a variant of myself in the story, just to hammer home the point. It heavily implies that the best thing that could happen to our modern, capitalist society is complete and total collapse so that we can build something better out of the ashes. The extent to which I agree with this sentiment varies from day to day, but I can never entirely dismiss it.

Returning the Screw

The Turn of the Screw is an excellent horror story that also happens to be an egregious piece of pro-toff propaganda of the kind only the late Victorian era could possibly have delivered. I wrote Returning the Screw, not so much as a fan work as a rebuttal- an attempt to deconstruct the ridiculousness of the original text and its many, many derivations. It's the only story in this collection that doesn't fit anywhere in my shared fictional cosmology. It's also the only one that doesn't contain any sci-fi or cosmic elements. I therefore think of it as the written equivalent of a bonus track- something distinct from the main collection that I included as a tongue-in-cheek extra for you fine folk reading along at home.

The Stories that Didn't Make It

Theoretically, there's no limit to how long an online PDF can be, as there are no printing costs and suchlike involved. However, I was acutely aware, while assembling this collection, that

somebody still had to proof-read and format the thing. What's more, it was the first work of fiction I'd ever been trusted to write and assemble for a real publisher. Thus, length was a consideration: nobody wants to come off as so arrogant that they include everything they've ever jotted down and nobody wants to make unnecessary work for the formatters and proof-readers and editors. Ergo, some stories just didn't make it in. If you're baffled by the fact that this is a sci-fi collection in which nobody boards a space-ship or steps into a time machine, I can only ask for your understanding. Those more conventional stories were cut to make room for the types of stories you could never find anywhere else: stories about chessmen enacting noir mysteries and fallen superbeings coming to terms with corporeal reality; stories about higher-dimensional physics being used to commit criminal capers and stories that are really transcribed nightmares. Of course, that's not to say this collection is definitive. Among the stories that didn't make the cut, there are plenty that I hope to share in some other collection, and plenty more that have yet to even be written. Regarding these, all I can say is that, Metaphysicals willing, you can join me for them next time.