

Greetings, science-fictioneers!

The most recent issue of TTBA (*Troubled Teen Bait Alligators, Volume (6 – 2i), Issue 139*) contains a non-linear chain, wherein twelve writers in turn added piecemeal to a story, inserting new bits in the middle instead of adding them to the end. Several people have expressed that they'd be very interested in seeing how it built up over time, and I saw their point and put this document together. I would recommend reading the full story first if you haven't already, either in the magazine or way down on page 41.

Curtis Reubens
TTBA Editor

P.S. If you want to read several different stories, rather than twelve iterations of the same one, try TTBA!

1.

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The door to the primary lab was open, just a crack. She nudged it open. For half a second, a figure stood there - then vanished in a flash of light.

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

Her hand shook as she pressed the phone to her ear. "You've reached the Metropolitan Police Arcane Crime Division."

"Someone's trying to talk to angels."

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

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

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

And beneath that, in bold type - '~~DO NOT~~ BE AFRAID.'

"I don't want to be the epicentre of a rapidly-expanding cloud of smitons."

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

Then everything went white.

It was only when the quiet hum of the warding circles stopped that Anna realised she found it reassuring. When she started working at the Paracelsian Institute for the Occult's¹ Department of Experimental Theurgy², she'd found the constant noise a distraction but, after a few months and several narrowly averted apocalypses, she had grown to appreciate the sound and the protection the circles provided.

She quickly shut down as many of the experiments as she could from her desk.

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Anna jumped and heard Sophie gasp beside her. She looked again at the centre of the rig, blinking. *The figure was back, but then, it wasn't. The figure flickered in and out, disappearing the moment Anna's eyes noticed it.*

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“Ready?” she asked, although she already knew the answer.

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

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

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

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

The wheels hung there, turning and staring; each within another, the flames licking the spokes made it impossible for Anna to tell how many wheels the being⁴ comprised. A message burned into the ground. And beneath that, in bold type - ~~DO NOT~~ BE AFRAID.'

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

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

"In this line of work, it pays to take precautions. I don't want to be the epicentre of a rapidly-expanding cloud of smitons.⁵"

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

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

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

"This is the point, I'm sure of it. This is where it'll start."

"I don't want to be the epicentre of a rapidly-expanding cloud of smitons."⁵

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

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

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

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

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

Snapping smashing severing shattering the world tears apart-

The spell imploded. Anna fell to her knees, utterly drained. "We can't beat it. We just... we just can't."

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

She quickly shut down as many of the experiments as she could from her desk. *Paused. Given the circumstances, it was worth taking precautions. She pulled a post-it off the block beside her monitor and sketched a rough, freehand circle, filling it with something that looked like the web of a dreamcatcher. The exact shape of the circle wasn't important; it just gave the ward something to bind to.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hughes broke the silence with a hiss, his fear palpable. "I don't want to be the epicentre of a rapidly-expanding cloud of smitons."⁷

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

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

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

"3!" cheered the crowd on the monitor. "2! 1!"

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

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“And you’re just... leaving it there?”

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

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

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

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

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

“We’d better get searching then.”

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

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

"Agreed."

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

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

"We'll send someone right over."

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

click

Damn Arkie bureaucrats – so suspicious of magic they wouldn't even carry on a telephone conversation with a theurge for any longer than they thought they could get away with. Still, it gave her a bit more time to think of a good explanation for whatever had just happened.

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We'd better get searching then.”

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁷ If Anna had been more diligent in an Introduction to the Taxonomy of Superspatial Species, she would have recognised it as one of the Ophanim and known that there were exactly 3.14159265358979323846264338327 wheels, all of which were perpendicular.

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

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

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

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

Anna was frowning at the wall, lost in thought.

"What is it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The booster cracked.

Snapping smashing severing shattering the world tears apart-

The spell imploded. Anna fell to her knees, utterly drained. "We can't beat it. We just... we just can't."

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

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

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

"3!" cheered the crowd on the monitor. "2! 1!"

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

Then everything went white.