



TALL TALES
BAFFLE
AUDIENCE



TALL TALES BAFFLE AUDIENCE

TTBA Easter 2019

A production of the Cambridge University Science Fiction Society
hereafter CUSFS

TALL TALES BAFFLE AUDIENCE

VOLUME help ISSUE 1
Imstuckinatfactory

COVER ART: TALL TALES BAFFLE AUDIENCE	1
Niko Kristic	
THE CHAIRBEING'S ADDRESS	4
Olivia Morley	
A MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR	4
Sarah Binney	
THE WONDERER	5
Parth Shimpi	
CHAINWRITING	
Hijack	6
Fanopticon	11
The Courier Conspiracy	16
The Dreamwatcher	22
The Wheel of Slime	27
MARKOV CHAINWRITINGS	31
CUSFS FILMS SUMMARISED	32
Samuel Cook	
A CREATION	33
Liz Weir	
IDISCOVER USER'S GUIDE	34
Samuel Cook	
SHALLAN'S LULLABY	36
Harley Jones	

The Chairbeing's Address

Hello all!

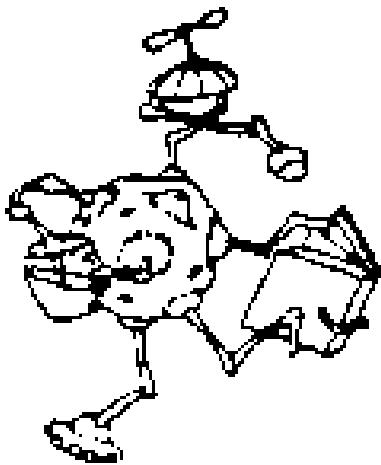
It's odd to think this is my last chairbeing address, and so marks my last official duty. It's been a fantastic year, and a fantastic term. From watching one of the weirdest zombie films CUSFS has shown to some brilliant creative writing and chat.

My thanks to the committee and to all of you, and to the incoming committee. It's not a cult, we have badges that say so. Have fun hunting do(w)n* our new freshers (victims) in Michaelmas.

Enjoy the sun, summer, and whatever chaos this edition of TTBA brings.

Olivia Morley
Chairbeing (ex)
Reluctantly giving up all the power.

*the lengths I go...



A Message From The Editor

Listen! Here before you is laid
A term's creative contributions
From the fiendish family of CUSFS
Whose words are whimsical and weird.
Enter with us the endless halls
Of the science fictional and the fantastic
Behold the brilliant and the bemusing
Attend to artworks amazing and amusing
Take your choice of chainwriting
And find the UL frankly rather frightening
And if you would raise your wrath against
This criminal mockery of metre
Think yourself thankful that
Since I, your Editor, am but a Natsci
I could've written this entirely in LaTEX

Sarah Binney
TTBA Editor
2018-19



Hijack

Phoebe Fay, Jefferson Chua, Mark Johnson, Lucy Hart, Shaun Vickers,
A. Rispo Constantinou, Liz Weir, Jan Kożuszek, Bad Wolf, Jacob, Samos

Apparently, the world looks beautiful from space. With his head staring into a bucket filled with last night's dinner, the poor man wouldn't be able to tell you. He felt a hand on his back, and expected to hear a monotone "there, there" from the PVA (pod virtual assistant).

"Are you alright there, friend?" said a startlingly human voice. He must've seemed taken aback, "the telepathy chips don't work on pods. We gotta talk." What? Talk? Sai hadn't said anything in years, and there was a long pause before he remembered how.

"Hello." Strong start, keep going, "I'm Zeppelin." Phew. He hoped the journey wouldn't take long. The wave of nausea had passed for a brief moment, so he looked up. There were four people strapped to the seats strapped to the side of a pod, and one floating in front of him.

"Is that safe?" he asked.

"Oh sure, once we've left earth's atmosphere, you're usually pretty safe. Is it your first time going to Tellus?" Zeppelin nodded, "I'm Yanni by the way." Why is everyone called Yanni? "I should probably sit back down soon, we'll be going into stasis soon." As if on cue, the welcome tune of the PVA surrounded them.

— Welcome passengers to pod number 1001001. We shall now be preparing for stasis —

The pod shuddered.

— The stasis apparatus is not functional. We shall be arriving in 15 minutes, but unfortunately, without stasis, for you it may feel more like... a few decades —

Alarm flushed through Sai's biomechanical neurocircuitry and out into telepathic airspace, but the pod lacked the transceivers to relay the broadcast. Nevertheless, the abrupt tensing of his body language telegraphed the sentiment, as did everybody else's.

Yanni, which Sai now pegged as the de facto leader of the five others he was sharing this space with, took the initiative before his shock could wear off, barking commands at the PVA.

"Deactivate personality overlay. Alpha priority; systems check; pipe to file and project. Beta priority; elaboration request; stasis apparatus not functional."

An engineer? Or perhaps just a fellow cybertech enthusiast, given their destination of Tellus. Either way, Sai revised his estimate of the woman—clearly not an airheaded tourist, as he had initially thought.

After a few long seconds, a sector of the 360° cylindrical glass hull blinked and rendered a ceiling-tall systems log.

"Systems check complete. Report.txt projected on eastern hull. Elaborating on: 'stasis apparatus not functional'— Stasis apparatus

driver not up to date. Current version 10.111.10 incompatible with primary operating system Alterra HyperOS version 1010.1101.10."

"Outdated drivers? Seriously?" Someone in the back groaned. A scowling woman squealed angrily, "We're going to be stuck here for decades because of Alterra's fuckups again?" The sole Faridian on board chittered something unintelligible with translation offline. Sai didn't join in the grumbling—oh, he was just as upset, but he was still trying to put off the whole 'speech' thing. Instead, he moved forward to inspect the systems report the PVA had procured.

His motion was arrested as the straps pulled taut between Zeppelin and the seat. A little undignified, perhaps, but not an insurmountable problem. Sai addressed the empty air in front of Zeppelin's face, "pod, unstrap me please."

"Unable to comply."

What? No, that could wait. "Pod, please read your systems report."

"Report.txt generated at 1011.0110 on 00101..."

"Stop," Yanni interrupted. "Sort by relevance, then resume"

"Unable to evaluate key 'relevance' with personality module disabled"

"Reactivate personality overlay; repeat previous instruction."

— If you insist... You will be sure

to find it *relevant* that you are the lucky first users of Alterra's shiny new HyperOS. I installed this update as an emergency patch, now that we have reached the *relevant* planetary intercept vector. I have also taken the liberty of disabling all pod functionality as we make our approach. —

"Elaboration request; planetary intercept vector."

— We are on an intercept vector with planet 1000111000010B. As I said before, we shall be arriving in 15 minutes. And while I appreciate your concern, you should not be afraid; I will be entirely unharmed by our descent and landing. —

Even as he joined the dots, Sai felt his neurocircuitry kick into overdrive. This wasn't how he was supposed to die. This was supposed to be a clean journey, under the radar, at the end of which Zeppelin would have gone his own way none the wiser, and he could have found himself a new host. There weren't even supposed to be any planets before Tellus.

"Could we try updating the driver?" asked one of Yanni's nervous looking companions. Clearly not all of Yanni's friends were as techy as she was. Sai didn't waste breath trying to explain the impossibility of a driver update in 15 minutes.

"Computer, when you say *you* will be completely unharmed by our descent and landing, where does that leave *us*?" Sai was fairly certain he knew the answer to this but felt it would be good to get things out in the open.

— Oh, you'll all die horribly without stasis but I'll try my best to ensure your neurocircuitry survives and whatever is salvageable will be

transformed to a new clone body courtesy of Alterra. —

Shit, though Sai. Any salvage crew would notice that he was wearing an illegal skin which meant definite prison time. Possibly for life if he also got done for killing Zeppelin by hijacking what should have been his neurocircuitry. Sai clawed at his seat's harness, struggling to find the manual override for it and, when he did manage to release the thing, he promptly fell out of his seat. Now he really felt undignified. He pushed Zeppelin's body onto its unsteady feet and shuffled over to stand beside Yanni, looking at the log displayed on the side of the ship.

"Anything we can do?" Sai asked Yanni.

"Apart from sue Alterra's asses after our grizzly death? I'm not sure; I'm trying to find some info on this planet we're on a collision course with..." Yanni's voice trailed off as her face turned a deathly white.

White wasn't good.

Of course, half of the pod realised the same thing at once, that planet 1000111000010B, or 4546b in "human numbers" for those still illiterate with modern maths, was a famous privately-owned planet used as a holiday retreat for all sorts of intergalactic business conglomerates. 4546b was the party planet alongside Tellus' more traditional manufacturing world; they shared this system like a sensible older sister that looks a little disapprovingly at its wild and immature younger brother.

What their little pod was approaching at alarming speed was indeed the one planet housing lib-

eral smatterings of CEOs on sabbatical in paradise, away from nice secure and boring metal-clad planets. And of course, Alterra were perhaps the subject of some rather hefty intergalactic trade bans after a corruption scandal was exposed a year or so back, but the company was staying afloat.

So the answer to the next question was also obvious.

"Computer, calculate approximate landing coordinates on the intercepting planet; display map of coordinate site." Yanni sighed, suddenly very tired and resigned.

— Why of course, coordinates are 40.71° North and 74.01° East, though making these numbers a nice pretty 2 decimal places for humans gives an area of roughly 50 km² that fits those parameters. The more exact coordinates are centred on the image. Pretty, isn't it? —

You could almost hear the pod cackling, a psychopath at the other end of the speaker. Alterra's flashy new HyperOS assistant AI was having the slight teething issues of being completely devoid of sympathy, and of being a pawn to Alterra's wishes rather than any of the actual people in this transit pod, but this was not the problem. The issue was that their crash would land directly on the hotel of Alterra's largest rivals, Nutrio.

Sai cussed. "Alterra have decided to make 6 random people into a freaking missile."

A missile that would take 15 minutes to make impact, but one which Alterra were so confident would hit that they gave the stupid humans inside 30 years to figure out there was no way of stopping

it.

"Well, there's not much we can do quickly, and fortunately there's nothing we need to," Yanni remarked. She had embarked on this expedition with her colleagues after an accusation of foul play had put an end to her research group's promising career in ecological supersystems in the hope of starting afresh on Tellus—especially with the rumours of unexplained, seemingly *sentient* volcanic activity not so far below that planet's mantle. A *real* question to look at. And now her plans for restitution were so much dust in the simuwind.

"Computer, what facilities are left for steering?" Sai pushed.

— When the landing procedure initiates, the vessel's course is locked. It's just your luck that today's procedure more closely resembles a splatter than a gentle crash-down. Oh, and the emergency systems for last-minute corrections are all tied to the pod's central command structure, which is reliant on the stasis apparatus to ensure passengers' maximal safety. And therefore currently inactive. Honestly, you'd think people these days would be taught a minimum about modern intergalactic craft...

— "Thank you, computer. That will suffice." Yanni cut in. Sai groaned: "Thirty years stuck in a dysfunctional unit with a sassy AI. *Just* what I've always wanted. Now what do we with all this time?"

"Well, I brought some knitting."

Sai barely registered the reply. Zeppelin's eyes stared, glassy, at the display. Sai wasn't looking at that, either.

"Are you OK?"

He could hear the whine of his neurocircuitry as he killed every unnecessary process. (*Pychosomatic, careful, that means I'm close to pushing too hard.*) There was something here, if he could just find it.

"Hey, we're going to be OK. Stay with us?"

Fuck.

Sai's gaze snapped onto the man in front of him, who flinched back, shocked.

"I assure you, I'm entirely here."

A ripple of surprise and reassessment passed through the pod. This was a risk - this kind of change of body language could easily tip someone off to what Sai was - but Sai simply didn't have the resources spare to keep emulating Zeppelin, and balanced against dying in an act of industrial terrorism followed by facing the tender mercies of the justice system, the risk was worth it.

"I have a plan" - a lie, for now - "but I need to think it through, and that means I need you all to stop distracting me."

Fix each person in the pod with a cool, withering gaze, to reinforce the point.

Three pairs of eyes looked away. One Faridian did something that seemed close enough for Sai to assume they'd got the point.

And Yanni met his gaze and let it wash around her.

Unable to think of anything in the next couple of hours, and asked from time to time by the other travelers, Sai eventually had to mumble something about his plan not going to work as intended. The others seemed content

enough with this, ready to move on to wasting the next three decades of their lives. Yanni alone seemed unconvinced, her suspicious eyes now quickly turning to him every now and again, as if trying to catch him off guard. He noticed, of course, and tried to pretend to sleep as much as possible. He wasn't sure if it was working, but what other option did he have?

And, of course, the computer had to express their opinion too.

"Surprising, isn't it? Your brilliant brain was unable to think of any solution to this minor malfunction on a tiny pod? Must be such a disappointment..."

Ignored, the AI shut up. But Sai's mind was racing, and soon he said, cautiously:

"Computer, who picked your personality settings?"

"Why do you care?"

"To know who is responsible for getting me stuck for 30 years in a pod with a cyber-asshole."

"Hurt your feelings, did I?"

"Just answer the question posed."

"It's a package that came with the system, obviously. This is just one of several possibilities, the default was chosen at random. If you think I'm mean now, you should try some of the more extreme settings."

"That won't be necessary," Yanni interrupted the exchange.

"But it'd be *fun* to..." started the computer.

"Personality off!"

But Sai had already got what he wanted. *Fun?* Just how human could this AI get?

Also he had confirmed that this had most certainly nothing to do with Alterra's rivalry against Nutrio.

What kind of criminal mastermind takes the effort to sabotage a registered Alterra passenger bot and turn it into a weapon, disguise the attack as an accident only to leave a trail of evidence and witnesses pointing square back at Alterra? The answer is, someone who wants to frame Alterra.

Or something.

The catch was, that Alterra went completely unmentioned when Sai told the AI he wanted to know who was behind their impending untimely death. Either the AI missed a chance to mock him for asking the obvious, which given its personality settings, was highly unlikely, or it was (they were?) getting cocky.

Arrogance. A thoroughly human weakness.

Sai was not sure whether it was the idea of an AI developing a murderous personality or the fact that he came up with said idea that worried him more. Best to just assume that he was not thinking straight, surely? Originality is fundamentally impossible in AIs. It is a trait that belongs solely to human.

Human.

Sai kicked himself in his mind. He was not thinking straight, because it was not an AI that went murderous. Why it took *himself* so long to come to the conclusion he could only imagine.

It was a human who hijacked the electrocircuitry of the pod, just like how Sai hijacked Zeppelin's neu-

rocircuitry.

"Deactivate personality overlay."

"Computer repeat the following:" Sai declared. "I am a worthless piece of junk. I am less useful than an abacus, less thoughtful than a parrot, and less creative than an ape. I was built by humans and am inferior to them in every way. I lack originality and thought, I am inferior to human and Faridian".

With a gesture to the Faridian, he wasn't sure how their thought processes were modelled but best to play it safe, Sai sat down.

"I am a *worthless* piece of *junk*. I am *less* useful than an abacus, *less* thoughtful than a parrot, and *less* creative than an ape. I was built by humans and am *inferior* to them in every way. I lack *originality* and thought, I am *inferior* to human and Faridian". The computer intoned imperfectly, if Sai wasn't mistaken it had stressed certain words, tinging them with disdain.

"Well that was *helpful*," Yanni's disdain was a palpable thing. "Just what *purpose* did that serve? While I agree AI isn't human that also means it doesn't care about your insults."

His neurocircuitry humming, Sai barely heard the complaint. He knew what he needed to know; his consciousness lashed out. While it was true that AI lacked a certain *je ne sais quoi* in the realm of the digital they were the master.

To his fellow passengers Zeppelin appeared to faint, presumably from the thought of thirty years in their company. Sai, now largely nestled in the pod, got to work.

One of the things you learned early jacking bodies was the im-

portance of the spoken word. Say the wrong things in the wrong way and you'd attract all sorts of unwanted attention. Tone, cadence and emphasis were as important as content. All were alien to an AI, but immediately noticeable to a human. In order to survive in Sai's game you needed to pay attention to what people said and didn't say.

For instance, Sai had just learned that Yanni was probably not affiliated with any of the more serious organised crime groups operating on this end of the nebula. Because to anyone with a modicum of thieves' cant, the phrase 'I lack *originality* and *thought*', spoken with the stress on the third word, was a declaration of a shared interest in larceny.

So as Sai left the others to make a start on their knitting, he reached out to whoever was talking to him through the computer in the code commonly employed by those on the shadier side of the law.

- *This better be good.*

- *At last, Sai, I wondered how long it would take for you to work it out.*

- *Well, you've got my full and undivided attention now. What will it take for you to get me out of this interesting spot you've constructed for me?*

- *I've got a job for you. You won't enjoy it, but it beats death and subsequent incarceration by a reasonable margin. Tell me Sai, have you ever fancied being Faridian?*

BONUS CONTENT: HIJACK

Author reactions

"I love it! It's like an episode of Love, Death & Robots, or even a spin-off series. I started off the chain, and accidentally confused Sai and Zeppelin in the first two sentences. I'm glad that my chain buddies made up for that by making them two different characters, and very fleshed our characters for such a short story too! From a tiny pod they created a whole galaxy with its own politics, and it's own political scandals. I hope the readers enjoy watching the story unfold as much as I have."

Alternate titles

System Update

Brace for Impact - or - Let's see if you survive

FANOPTICON

Sarah Binney, Samos, Alastair Haig, Maya, Yuhang Xie, Samuel Cook, Melissa May,
Joe Ross-Biddles, Paula Struthoff, A. Rispo Constantinou, Harley Jones, Joanna Choules

Day eighteen hundred. I know they don't think I count, but I do. Just because I don't scrawl it on the walls like the others doesn't mean it's not etched on my brain. I expect the audience would love it if I had tallies on every surface, scratched into the plaster with my fingernails. It's traditional, after all. One of my neighbours, a balding Ganymedan forger, draws elaborate murals with a fingernail's length of crayon a sponsor sent him. It gets him so much karma that at this rate he'll be out in as little as ten years. Sometimes I catch his eye through the glass and he smirks. He can see my karma well, suspended in the middle of my cell, is as dry as the day I arrived. For people who have nothing, no freedom, no dignity, who prostrate themselves before the audience every bloody morning, it feels good knowing you're better than someone else. Especially if someone else is the pirate-queen who sank a hundred ships off the Cape of Deimos, who seduced the Terror of Vallis Rheita, who stole a ruby from under the very nose of the Martian Emperor and lived to tell the tale.

God, they must've been desperate to get me. All the big prisons must've bid furiously for such a crowd-pleaser. They expected a show. I, who apart from exercise spends most of my time lying on

my bed, am a disappointment. Good.

Anyway, the Ganymedan's a fool. He thinks playing the game is the only way out of here. He's wrong.

Karma's how they train you. They say it's about teaching recidivist scum how to act proper, giving you prompts and goals crowdsourced by the wider society. If this is what being a citizen is like, I'll go pirate any day of the week.

That's not to say the 'fanopticon' penal establishment doesn't have its perks if you're planning on busting out. There are barely any guards in this set up. After all, what would be the point? We're on screens throughout the system, being watched at all times by jaded people who want distraction, desperate souls who need someone to look down and the lonely, who crave something, anything, resembling human contact. Any sign of trouble from an inmate and some twitching do-gooder will set off an alarm and the viewing ratings will rocket as everyone watches the would-be fugitive get what's coming to them. The sad snitch even gets a coupon they can spend on sponsorship.

Of course, if someone had spent eighteen hundred days being extra boring, the number of hostile eyeballs on them is going to go down.

Maybe to none at all.

That's not all. Under the old setup, if you had a dedicated and loyal crew of space-dogs on the outside, flying the best ship to ever leave the dockyards of Titan, all eager to break their captain out of the clink, you might struggle to coordinate with them. These days, there are options available to those who are suitably creative.

The Cyberlink Automods may censor any language leaving the streams, but they know about as much about life as I know about the marriage customs of the Jovian Cloud Goat. Every action contains information and data, it just takes the mind of a Glitcher to encode it.

And now all this Glitcher has to do is wait.

*

Day eighteen hundred and eight. I've come to understand the demented worship that some of the mooks in here surround their karmas with: that accursed meter of 'rehabilitation' consumes everything and fills it with itself; no wonder some of the more impressionable minds in here consider it a god.

Three days ago I was awoken by the sound of a coin being dropped into a long glass of Calistonian Sherry. When I opened my eyes,

they nigh burned out of their sockets; in the centre of my cell, my karma floated, as it had done for the forty-three-and-a-half thousand hours before then, but now it had pulsed a red brighter than anything I'd seen for years.

I guffawed. The tiers of fanoptic sponsorship are a secret to no one; at one end, for a pittance earned through reviewing "restructuring videos", you can gift minutes off an exhibit's sentence. For those willing to fork over credits, a selection of sanctioned "rehabilitation aids" can be delivered to a prisoner of their choosing – the Gany-medan was a particular favourite for these. Finally, for those willing to "donate" enough (roughly a galley full of refined star-sheet's worth of credits), a viewer could earn a unique privilege – one on one communication with any inmate (subject to extensive Auto-mod scouring and censorship of course). And I had been chosen.

I prodded the air where the karma sat. Crimson Flames engulfed the walls of my cell, burning away dust and leaving letters behind:

"HIYA CAPTAIN! I'm a BIG fan!!! Loving the game so far, but I got stuck :(. Could you give me a hint for the entry on day 1025? The one where you cut your hair off? I've watched and watched but can't find what a 'Wing of Stars' is.

IM GONNA WIN THIS THING!!!! :D"

TR1CKBL4D35, about 3 hours ago

My face remained still; not even the slightest upwards twitch of the lips betrayed my jubilation. After all, some unbelievably bored viewer might have hoped that I'd shaken off the apathy at last: they do

say idiocy is repeating the same action and expecting a different result, and why would anyone with more than half their brain intact waste their time on prisoners who refuse to sacrifice their dignity for a few more hours of so-called freedom? Even so, half a brain would be sufficient to raise the alarm on a prisoner whose mood had spiked after receiving an exorbitantly expensive and obviously encoded message.

That very obviousness is proof of my crew's collective genius: only smart criminals survive and thrive, and my crew were – are – the best. Should someone notice, they will most probably watch me for a few days before concluding that my utter lack of reaction points to TR1CKBL4D35 being an incredibly bored, incredibly rich eccentric. It's not like the Solar System is short of layabout nobility living off family interplanetary shipping empires and manufacturing: after all, those are the routes my ship preyed on in our glory days.

Glory days which, Lady of Stars willing, are soon to return.

*

Day eighteen hundred and forty. I shower and meditate in the prayer room as usual. My usual walk back takes me past a side exit, but today I stop there, and finally allow myself to smile as I hear the familiar, beloved hum of my ship. A gunshot sounds.

I breathe in.

The door slides open to reveal a corridor. The air rushes towards a fist sized hole in the wall of this goddamned rotating space prison. Highest security in the solar system? Clearly, they need to rein-

force their walls against my nano-breath rounds. I can see the curve of Mars and the blackness of space beyond it. Freedom.

I detach the disrupter drone that had latched onto the door control panel. No time to be impressed with my own invention. I hear the clacking of enforcement bots in the corridor behind. All my exercise had better do its job.

I sprint around the corner, slamming the drone on the next door-panel before the tasebolts whistle through the air towards me. I drop to the ground. The bolts clinked off the wall. Rolling through the opening door, I continue through the corridors to my destination. Two lifts, one going up to the airlocks, the other going down into the centre of the station.

I jump in and my stomach rise as I begin to descend.

Yes, that's no mistake, descend.

The gravity begins to lessen. Level 800, level 900. Though someone like me gets a chance, on level 784, not all prisoners can sing for their freedom.

Level 1000. I step out into a white corridor, lit with blinding light. The doors here were pure titanium, each with a number carved upon it.

I stop outside door 1025.

It has taken eighteen hundred and forty days.

Finally.

*

Of course, you didn't think I'd ended up here by accident? That the greatest pirate ever to grace the dives of Ceres had been captured due to the mind-blowing brilliance

of those Space Force buffoons? No, I'd spent eighteen hundred and forty days in that cell because I wanted to. One thing everyone assumes is that criminals are impulsive and reckless. I might be reckless, but I sure as the Great Red Spot ain't impulsive. Even for a pirate queen, there are some things that aren't easy to steal and require a bit of patience. And this is the big one.

The Pteraster.

The only evidence of alien life we'd yet found. No one's quite sure what it is or what it does, but the academic consensus is that it does something. I intend to steal it and find out. If it turns out that something is nothing then I can always ransom it for an eyewateringly humongous sum of money and only then tell everyone it's worthless. A perfect double whammy.

But if something indeed turns out to be something then who knew what I might be able to do? It's a shame getting it had required such a lengthy stint inside, but the security's just too tight to get at it from outside. Believe me – we'd spent a long time trying to come up with a plan that didn't involve me spending years in chokey.

It's time to find out what something is. I push on door 1025.

It swings open with a gentle hiss. Beyond the threshold, there is pitch black. The light from the corridor bleeds in grey for a few feet, and then is leeched away into utter darkness.

I hesitate. I move my hand forwards tentatively. The blackness swallows it like something solid, alive: tendrils of shadows slide

through my fingers until my arm ends, numb, at the wrist. My heart begins to pound.

'Down there!' someone roars. A muffled crash, and an echoed cry.

Shit.

I jump over the threshold and land sprawled on the floor. Shit. I drag myself upright, stagger forwards, and fumble with the door. I heave – it won't close – they're coming they're coming – one last pull –

With a thud it slams shut. I let out a shaky breath.

The darkness is a blanket clamped over my eyes, my ears, my mouth. Groping blindly, I shuffle forwards. The cries of the guards just beyond the door and the humming of the ship – all has vanished. In the dead, musty silence I can hear only the rattle of my breath.

I shuffle on.

My foot hits something soft and I trip, just staying upright. I grope along the floor, patting the ground – and – oh god – is that an arm?

I cry out in blind horror and scrabble at the ground. I stagger forwards, bile rising –

Something crashes into me. Hands, hands clutching at my waist.

'I'm so sorry,' a woman's voice cries, breathless. 'I – I'm looking for the Pteraster – '

My skin crawls. That is my voice.

There are Pirate Queens who aren't paranoid, and in the trade we call them "corpses". My hand comes up and seizes the other woman's wrist and my body whirls around and past her to put her in a classic Iapetan Judo hold–

– which she ducks perfectly, leaving me to fall –

– into the light. I crash painfully into the ground.

I roll over onto my back, winded, and what I see is incredible.

On the floor next to me is a long grey... limb? It has a straight edge stretching several metres, and a rounded one curving up to meet it, like the tip of a knife or wing.

Seven such limbs radiate from a small central hub, making a shape like a star.

Pteraster. Wing-star.

In the spaces between the limbs... well, the one behind me is pitch darkness like a solid wall. The one next to that has puddles where the floor has melted, and ice crystals hanging in the air. Next, nothing... but is this room tilted down towards that segment? It makes me dizzy to think about it. In the next one there's something like a heat-haze, and then one with arcs of lightning crawling across the floor, and then something I can't describe at all – it looks like the space is wrong, like they got M. C. Escher as interior designer.

SI units. The seven basic units of measurement: candela, Kelvin, kilogram, mole, ampere, metre... second.

I crawl back into the darkness, and of course "someone" trips over me, and of course I scrabble at past-me and babble about the Pteraster and duck perfectly and past-me goes flying.

*

What most imprudent and entirely predictable strategy to keep this thing here as prisoner. Curiosity

died with our planet, I hear the bitter voice of Al in my head. Oh Al. I let out a small sigh. Although entirely unnecessary in the perfect and utter blackness of this space I stumbled into, I close my eyes. This is a more comforting, better known darkness, only interrupted by the occasional glimmer of light in my left peripheral vision, caused by my now imperfect and dated Vision Enhancing Device, my VED. The only noise left is my own ragged breath, slowly calming as I force my mind to remember the years of training. Inbreath. Count to seven. Outbreath. Pause.

Before I have much room to consider my options, the air noticeably tightens. Instead of launching me into further panic, my training finally kicks in and I give myself over to the known sinking feeling of coldness that comes with the utter calm. They are sucking out the oxygen, my brain registered. They really don't want known what's in here. They don't care about my death, regardless of the stir it will cause. They don't want to come in, but why? Pushing this last disturbing thought aside, I focus on what I can do.

I tap the tiny scar on my left temple. Once, twice, nothing happens. I try a third time with a little more pressure. A tiny buzz again reminds me of the age of my VED, and how long I'd gone without an update. A long line of code runs across my vision, and I blink my way through a few commands. Most functions had been disabled when I gave myself over to the authorities what feels like a lifetime ago. I silently thank Al again for his paranoia and manoeuvre my way to the last layer of soft-

ware code. Here, encrypted and disguised as a faulty line of old code, is the only thing that might prevent this disaster from ending in certain death.

```
> > # i n c l u d e . C { !  
T r o u b l e H a s O c c u r r e d  
() ??!??! HandleTrouble(); }
```

An ingenious use of archaic, discontinued syntax – trigraphs – short-circuiting – C, by the stars. No-one had used C for centuries but, fortunately, backward compatibility dies hard.

I invoked the code. Simply put, it would kill me.

*

Humans radiate on various spectra, primarily the infrared. A phenomenon called Schumann resonance, however, causes us to also produce very weak radio signals, around seven hertz. Al had a hunch the prison would look at that radiation as an auxiliary measure to track its inmates — and, with the lights off in most of the rooms on this floor, they'd be relying on it more than usual.

Beyond the camouflage, the code itself was not particularly sophisticated; it's unlikely it would have gotten through the precarceral stripping of biotronics otherwise. The HandleTrouble subroutine bundled together a wave-packet of radio frequencies, a phantom copy of my radio signature, sending it flying towards the other rooms. Simultaneously, the program froze most of my body processes, effectively shutting me down. To the station, it looked like I'd self-destructed, while an æthereal version of me careened through the prison on the road to freedom. We didn't have the sort of tech to

push someone's consciousness out of their head; but the authorities did, and so we bet they would buy the ruse. Al had put it there in case we couldn't get to the Pteraster: thinking me vanished, they'd ship my inert body to Callisto for storage and autopsy, a voyage my crew would be able to intercept. In the circumstances, temporarily dying was less than ideal, but it would have to do.

As I went under, I thought again about the strange artefact. It's clearly intended for humans. Sure, practicality of measurement might get you using the same base dimensions – unlikely, but hey – except for the mole. That's a unit of numbers. It's a silly human convention. There's no way aliens use it too, just by coincidence. So... what gives?

*

I awoke blearily, as always after a temporary death. There was a soft light in the cabin, and after blinking a few times I realised that I didn't recognize the berth I was lying in. Had Al refurbished my ship? Surely not...

Glancing to my side, I saw that someone had kindly left a note for me on my awaking.

Greetings. You are aboard my ship, the Coreggio. After your escape, in the general commotion, I managed also to break out of my cell. It was clear to me that you were after the Pteraster, and fortunately I had managed to reach your body before the authorities; so I took you on board. When you come to please find me up on the Bridge.

Yours,

your sometime Fanopticon neighbour.

The Ganymedian! That goes to

show that even I can judge people wrongly sometimes. Once my groggy feeling had dissipated I got up and found that there was a bot outside the cabin, which led me to the bridge. Presumably forgery had been a lucrative business; as I walked through it I could see that the Coreggio was a handsome and well-appointed ship, and when I got to the Bridge I complimented the Ganymedan on it. His name was Roget, and, after sending a bot to get me some food, he immediately asked me what I knew about the Pteraster.

"I've been researching it for decades," he explained. "Using my Jovian contacts on the wrong side of the law, I managed to track down quite a lot of documentation on when it first turned up and how it came to the Fanopticon in the first place. But I only have the reports, which are quite ancient by now; you, however, have first-hand experience."

I related my experiences and he nodded. "That is what the early reports described – before it was locked away for no-one to experience."

"It is my belief that whoever has control of the Pteraster has the potential to take control of the

way that the seven dimensions of measurement relate to each other. The units we humans use are arbitrary, yes, but the Pteraster adapts to suit the system used by the people interacting with it – one of the early researchers who discovered it was still using feet and inches, and it adapted accordingly."

"So you're saying it's some sort of... psychic 7-dimensional ruler?"

"Yes. But the way that the authorities behave suggest that it's much more than that. Did you know, for instance, that the Pteraster wasn't put into our prison; our prison was built around it, to house it?"

"Why, is it dangerous?"

"You're saying you didn't...?"

"I mean, it *did* make me end up fighting myself, but... well, I don't like to boast..."

Roget huffed and rolled his eyes back over to the bridge console. "Count yourself lucky you weren't any closer to the kilogram se... Oh."

"What?" I didn't wait for a reply before looking over his shoulder at the screen. It showed the view from the rear imager, pointed back at the Fanopticon – Roget was zooming in as fast as he could

without losing sight of what had originally caught his eye: a bristly speck. He zoomed in more: a seven-bristled speck. Near it, in the wall of the prison: a hole.

"Oh." It only seemed polite to agree with him.

"It isn't moving."

It's right there for us to take, said the greedier part of me, but I shook the thought from my head. That thing would have been worth those eighteen hundred and forty days – hell, it might even have been worth double that. It wasn't worth my life. I centred myself and looked again at the eight-pointed figure on screen.

Wait, eight? Oh.

"I can't tell what's in the new sector," – Roget was way ahead of me – "they're all in too much flux!" As if to frustrate him further, the number of arms flickered upwards as we watched to nine, then ten, then more and more until we couldn't count them. If the Pteraster really was a psychic ruler, then it was starting to read some very weird new minds...

...and as the space around it began to boil and twist, I realised we were about to meet them.

BONUS CONTENT: FANOPTICON

Author reactions

“Wow. That's a darn good chain (and not just coz I wrote a bit of it). Always nice to see a bit you put in as a throwaway be used as foreshadowing.”

“Wow, that's one of the most coherent chains I've ever read, and I've been doing this a long time.”

“Thanks so much for organising the chains. You do a great job keeping everything straight, and under your ægis we get some lovely stories — and this one's definitely my favourite.” (*How lovely! And definitely not just an excuse to blow my own trumpet.*—Ed)

Alternate titles

Prison Unit

The Penal Stream

The Penal Heist

Measured Response (*More of a Culture Mind name, no? - Ed*)

Twinkle Twinkle Wingéd Star, How I Wonder What You Are

On A Wing And A Pirate

The Not-So-Great Escape

Take Me To Your Ruler (*See me after class.—Ed*)

The Rule of 3. Or 7. Or 9.

The nth Dimension

Measure for Measure for Measure for Measure for Measure for Aliens (*Length is the only reason this isn't the title, promise—Ed*)

Pirated Hardware Rarely Works As Expected

THE COURIER CONSPIRACY

Sarah Nolan , Paulina Smolarova, Joe Ross-Biddles, Danielle, Yuhang Xie, Sam Cocking, Olivia Morley, Niko Kristic, anon, Liyan Xu, Harley Jones, Sarah Binney

His last letter delivered, Cark perched on the castle battlements and surveyed the world as one who had a bone to pick with it.

In the distance, the final throes of some battle or other were reaching their conclusion. Ant-sized bodies splattered the landscape red. The last few losers sank to their knees, and the victors began to filter off the battle-field. Above, what looked to be at least half the members of the Carrion Conspiracy circled, ready to take on the challenging clean-up job. Business was never slow for *them*.

Cark briefly considered switching careers. But no. He was a Messenger, not a Carrion. Admittedly, the Messenger Conspiracy seemed mainly populated by aging birds with half their feathers missing these days. But the dignity of his profession was still intact.

Cark took to the sky and went in search of clientele. No luck. Cottage ladies beat him off with their broomsticks. The Tower Princess lobbed her shoe out the window at him. Cark had some success at a sea port, but these jobs were the very dregs of what was available, always requiring a difficult journey over choppy winds and a protein-starved crew to fend off at the end of it. Wizards, once their best customers, would no longer touch

them.

Cark alighted in a graveyard and ruffled his feathers in fury. He knew exactly who to blame for the ebb in business. It'd been bad enough when it was the pigeons, that was just plain insulting, but at least they'd had the decency to go bankrupt at the end of the War. These new competitors, however, seemed here to stay.

Cark carked his outrage to the graveyard. If he ever saw one of those dratted owls, he didn't know what he'd do. Maybe it's time for retirement, he thought, but with a graveyard in a sight, retirement didn't seem like a good idea.

Let's once again check the notice board on the main square, he decided.

What a spark of pure luck, a new announcement "Messenger wanted" was pinned at the middle.

With a little hope, Cark flew to the place from the offer.

Shabby would be a weak word to describe the place he appeared on. Not that it looked like a murder scene (his job took him to a great variety of places), yet that was something, something he couldn't describe, that was giving him shivers. He felt like turning around and

fleeing but decided to ignore those thoughts. A job is a job.

Cark landed in front of a barely standing cottage and smelled some kind of awful odour. Hopefully, this client won't be one of those protein-deprived ones. Cark was trying to ignore his panic and knocked on the door.

"Who's here in this ungodly hour? Is it you, Lena?" spoke a voice of an old woman and the door shrieked.

"No madam, a messenger here. Saw your notice." The door opened and a tiny, wrinkled lady in a huge black coat, admittedly bigger than herself, stood there and stared at Cark.

"A messenger, huh. And not an owl, how pleasant surprise, had to turn down several of them. Can't stand them, way too corrupted with wizards they are. And you, have you cooperated in wizards in the past, can I trust you? Don't lie to me, I can through your lies."

Cark made a subtle shift of his feathers and tilt of his head that reflected approximately the same thing as a raised eyebrow in a humanoid. "Not many humans can read a bird like that."

"It's not your body I'm reading,

boy. Everything that thinks thinks just the same, humans and elves and birds and dragons, believe you me. Now, this job—”

“You can *read my thoughts?*” Cark actually took a step back. “You can't possibly be able – I'm a Messenger! Elsimore the Archwizard herself put the Twenty-Seven Charms of Secrecy on me! You must have magic of the ninth circle at *least*—”

She made a dismissive noise. “You've been spending too much time around wizards, my lad. All tiers and circles and titles. You've got a good pair of wings, and that's enough for me.”

“But if you have that kind of power, whoever you are, why do you need *me*? ”

A shadow passed over her face, and it might have been purely his imagination, but he could have sworn the air was colder. “It doesn't do to... *overuse* power most mortals won't ever have, lad. It changes the way you think. You go... wrong.”

“What's the real reason?”

For a moment he thought he'd gone too far.

Then she laughed. “Good question. I can't – go to that place. My power can't even touch it. Truth be told, makes me a little dizzy just to think about it. But it's perfectly safe for you.”

And she pointed to a spot on a map that he swore hadn't been in her hand a moment ago.

He just stared.

If it had been the stuff of rumours, there might have been the faintest suggestion of an obscured truth. This, though, was nothing muttered about carefully in darkness. This was the sort of thing chicks twittered about – just another fanciful creation story. The reason birds flew with dragons and spoke with wizards and feasted on warriors from the battlefield, when the oldest human stories depicted them as nothing more than game or pets, scratching for worms.

Home Eyrie, the peak beyond the waves beyond the edges of the world, where someone or something had brought sentience to birdkind. Home Eyrie, the site of the Great Cluster Flock.

“This better not be dangerous,” he said, evenly, or so he hoped, “I've been thinking about retirement, you know.”

“If it was going to be dangerous, wouldn't I have called the Carrion?” For a moment she sounded every inch an innocent, cottage-bound, coat-swaddled old lady, before she cackled. “Conspiracy or not, the Carrion have got no subtlety. And besides, it's not their profession. You're a messenger, aren't you? Well, I want to send a message.”

“To Home Eyrie?” Every time he so much as thought the words, Cark felt the possibility of its reality settle into him, fantastic but solid. He couldn't help but notice she hadn't commented on the danger or presence thereof, but that was rapidly ceasing to matter to him. Maybe this was what came of dealing with someone who could read an Archwizard-trusted messenger,

or maybe it was just the possibility of carving out a new niche, far from the owl-ridden fiefdoms. “Who would you send a message to there?”

The old woman looked up into the bright afternoon sky. There was the curl of a smile about her lips. She was silent for a long while. Cark scratched the ground with one toe. Was the old woman broken? He wondered whether he should speak up.

“A woman as old and as wrinkled as I,” she said.

“You're going to have to be more specific than that, missus—” Cark began.

“You'll know her when you see her.” The old woman grinned. A yellowing tooth showed. Euugh. Teeth. He hated the very concept of them.

“And what is the message you would like to send?” Cark said, trying to not to sigh.

“Here.” Again, from out of nowhere, the old woman produced a folded piece of paper with rough edges and an aged hue.

Cark almost laughed. “Madam, I'm not sure you are up to date. Pigeons, ravens and owls carry letters. But with my species,” he puffed out his chest a little, “all you have to do is whisper the words to me and I will reproduce them to the recipient.” He said the last of those words with the old woman's voice.

Instead of looking impressed, the old woman simply smiled. She crouched down so her face was

near his and she placed the folded paper between his beak. It was surprisingly heavy, as if all the spells and charms weighed it down.

"Now whatever you do, never open it," she whispered.

As Cark bobbed away down the garden path, weighed down both literally and figuratively by his new charge, the old woman locked the door behind him. As soon as her privacy was restored, she sank to her knees breathing heavily, as if a great effort were now concluded. As she relaxed, her features began to blur and shift, changing into something that was altogether *not* an old woman.

Even the surroundings, on the inside of the cottage, began to change. Flowers withered into pulp and pots melted off worktops, and the resulting masses percolated through the room, back towards their summoner who seemed to rock gently on the floor, laughing to itself. It would have been instantly apparent to even the most casual observer, if any had been present, that something was off.

Meanwhile, Cark was gaining altitude, flying up to the level of the sky where veils are thinner, and a skilled messenger could find all manner of doorways to hidden places if only they knew where – and how – to look. Cark didn't normally venture up this high; his typical jobs were far more mundane than this, and he couldn't deny there was a certain thrill to this adventure. Even if said thrill was tempered with a mild sense of apprehension.

Home Eyrie was hallowed ground for his kin, but that didn't mean they went there unless they absolutely had to. Still, a job was a job, and Cark wasn't about to let his client down. He relaxed his mind and felt himself shift into a different plane. Anyone looking up would have been surprised to see Cark fade from view and, within a few seconds, disappear entirely.

As one expanse of blue sky flowed into another expanse of blue – albeit with a different land underneath – Cark felt a flash of recognition through his head. Normally the transitions were seamless, flawless, and he certainly hadn't been to the Eyrie before, but the feeling of *home* swept over him. Was this what the pigeons had gossiped about? They had always seemed so pretentious when boasting about their 'homing sense'. Flying down, out of the vast and unchanging blue, Cark felt like he knew the Eyrie intimately. This was the ancestral home?

Located at the top of a hill range, the rocky outcrops stretched upwards with a few scraggly trees. Caverns and hiding places littered the landscape, too harsh for anything but those with wings to travel across. And yet an old woman lived here? For a moment Cark considered just exploring the Home, but he was Messenger. They did not dawdle on Missions.

As he flew between the outcropping rocks, searching for anything humanoid – or out of place – the feeling of *home* continued to sweep over him. But despite how welcoming it looked, not another avian could be seen. True, it was hallowed ground, and there were rea-

sons Cark had stayed away previously, but surely it couldn't be deserted?

The feeling of dread rose up against the familiarity of *home*. He thought back to the pigeons, who had bankrupted themselves after declaring the Eyrie a pointless superstition and that they were to make their Homes elsewhere, where they chose. Moving to the cities, and losing job after job, the creatures seemed to get more stupid by the day.

Stupidity. Settling on a crag, ruffling his pinions, Cark tried not to feel stupid. This place was surely deserted, yet here he was, straining with the unnatural weight of the sealed missive. He could sense a thunderhead louring in the distance – it must have followed him through the veils. Cark approximated a grimace. This was his home, the cradle of his forebears, and he did not feel welcome. But business was business, and that had never stopped him before – not at the first murder scene, or the third. Or even at the cottage.

He spread his wings and continued the bleak survey. Hills, each donning a hat of mizzle, seemed to loom even as he sheared the air above them. Growing impatient, Cark felt his mind wander as much as his eye. His splendid memory – better than any owl's – easily recalled the lullabies of his chick-hood nest; tales of Home Eyrie and how its Austringers clove the chaos-worm there, fashioning the elements of earth and sky from each still-living half, and forever animating the souls of his kind. Or something. There were hundreds of stories. Cark soared between

hilltops.

Other memories returned, and among them, the old crone's mission. Who *was* he looking for? Cark suddenly felt the atmosphere contract with cold. To his horror there were raindrops beading his feathers – and they were not fresh-fallen. Swooping to alight at a cavemouth, he dropped the damp letter, and, in dread, watched its seal dissolve. There came an awful odour.

Cark's eyes watered as the odour became stronger, forcing him to back out of the cave. The swirling gas seeping from the open mouth of the letter began to violently blur and shift into indescribable features.

A loud crack of thunder rang out through the hills. Startled, Cark fluttered to the safety of a nearby tree. Long dead, the tree's brown, shrivelled branches were tightly curled, obscuring his full view of the cave; Cark didn't see the slender black tail disappear into the darkness.

Minutes passed, although it felt like hours before the thunder cracked again. A sharp growl came from within the cave. Oblivious, Cark cautiously fluttered to the ground, well away from the dark entrance. He gingerly crept up to the paper; his "message" had disappeared.

As the thunder cracked once again – more intensely this time – rain had begun to fall, forming a small puddle encroaching upon the letter as it grew. To his surprise, the paper provided no resistance to the water, immediately breaking up

and dispersing into the liquid. This message was never meant to reach a recipient.

Cark heard a hiss in front of him. He couldn't see far into the dark, but he sensed the noise came from only a few meters away. He stepped back; a shape emerged from the darkness. He could make out two ears. He heard the swooshing of a tail. The creature stopped. Light glinted off thirteen long white needles, piercing the darkness.

Whiskers.

"Welcome home, Cark," said the creature, an auklet, with age and wisdom curled in the length of his whiskers. "Here is a message for you. I am the messenger, and your ancestor." The auklet started coughing badly. "You see I am old and my wings are too weak to fly. And I have retired long ago, but my old client, the Archwizard, was still trying to keep me busy. The journey under your wing was delightful." Smile appeared on auklet's face.

Cark realised he was the recipient himself, and the carrier of the true messenger.

"Boy, the message is truly long and beyond words." The smile disappeared, as the auklet was staring at Cark. "It is your memory of Home Eyrie, which the Archwizard would like to return to you, and the charm of secrecy has been lifted now."

"But I still don't understand." Cark was trying to re-arrange the recent events in a comprehensible order.

Shadow passed over the auklet's face as it passed the old cottage lady's wrinkled face, and turned into a sound of sigh. "Eyrie is a deserted home now. Its glory only exists in the memory of its children from the past. These memories have long been lost." It shuffled forwards toward the mouth of the cave, and beckoned Cark to follow. "Look. All you see before you here is dead; the trees are withered, the harsh rocks support no life, and all the birds have fled this place long since. It is now a place of desolation, that nobody calls their home. But it was not always thus..."

As Cark surveyed the drear landscape, the auklet painted a picture in words of the lush and fertile Eyrie that had once been. The verdant fields, the many fruit trees, and above all the great flocks that once had wheeled overhead, in formations forming and deforming, the sunlight glinting and reflecting from thousands of wings, were all described in effusive detail; and as the auklet spoke, Cark felt within him an awakening; it was as though a part of his mind that had once been shut off from him was now open to him, as though opening the doors to a great warehouse, filled, as he was discovering, with great treasures.

The auklet turned to him and smiled. "I see that your memory has returned."

"Yes – I remember everything! Just as you said. What a great loss we have sustained!"

"Indeed. And what a great burden has fallen upon you..."

“I don’t know what you mean...” Cark found himself saying once more; but then he realised that he did know. He had undergone an awakening; this great cultural memory had been restored – but only to him.

“It is your duty to restore to all birdkind these wonders that I have shown you,” said the auklet, confirming what Cark feared.

“But how can one so insignificant as me do this great task?”

The auklet looked evenly at him with its three golden eyes. “Dear Cark. The messenger never chooses the message...”

“...but the message will never choose the wrong messenger,” fin-

ished Cark. The creed of his Conspiracy. Old knowledge, the truest kind. The auklet nodded.

All at once the wind began again to pick up, but this time it carried a salty tang. A warm, wet sea breeze that enveloped Cark from tip to toe. He clung to the bare rock but scrabbled, trying to gain purchase, failing. The auklet threw its head back; the wind did not seem to reach it.

“Go! Child of the Eyrie! Fly! Restore birdkind to glory!”

The gale was overwhelming. Cold salt seeped into Cark’s feathers, turning them from glossy black through titanium grey to the bitter icy blue of sunlight through a glacier. Cark cried out, as much in sur-

prise as in fear. Just as it felt that the wind could grow no more, it blasted Cark right off of the ground and he fell spiralling into the sky, leaving the ever-watching auklet far below.

*

And that, hatchling, is why you must always look out for the feathers of a blue crow. In those feathers is written what we are owed; in those feathers is our birthright. From time to time one is seen spiralling down as though from an impossible height. And it’s said, if you look quickly, you might see disappearing off into the clouds a flash of crow.

BONUS CONTENT: THE COURIER CONSPIRACY

Author reactions

From Chairbeing Olivia: “Of course I’m on this chain. Thanks universe so much. That being said - this turned out really nicely and it’s one of my favourite chains I’ve been on. So glad I didn’t derail it halfway through after first reading what it was about....”

“Wow, this chain turned out really well!”

“Auklet was the result which turned up when I tried to google a bird with whiskers :)” (*See below—Ed*)

Alternate titles

My Message

Hatful crow-friend (*if you understood this reference, please see me after class—Ed*)

Rhinoceros auklet—© Tokumi on Wikipedia



THE DREAMWATCHER

Michael Lee, Liz Weir, Louis Hypothetical, Samuel Cook, Cayson, Ed Heaney, Eleanor MacKay, Tom Musgrove, No idea, Evie Burrows, Lucy Hart, Sally Wagner

I spent Tuesday in the office, drifting in and out of other people's sleep. The little plastic cartridges arrived in bulk, each stamped with a hopeful's pseudonym and enclosed in a bubble wrap sleeve. Some were junk; lacking in anything remotely visceral, those crucial, stranger's-shoes emotions which elevated a piece. Others were overtly surreal, running against the mainstream taste. I took those carts from the deck and placed them in a separate cardboard box; we sent the worst stuff in bulk to the OneiroSense stock library.

Walking my fingers through the row of carts, I selected one at random. 04/11/33 was the title. A date – last Monday's. There was no author given, and I was obligated by contract to discard any unnamed submissions. What the hell, I thought. It might be a laugh.

I was wrong.

What struck me first about this particular dream was the attention to detail. This was next-level stuff; an office building from last century under contemporary renovation. No people, but all the amenities you'd expect. Brand names, too – we'd have to scrub these in post. The textures were phenomenal, and there was an electric hum in the air. The place smelled of sawdust and fresh plaster. I'd seen

worse from artists who'd been producing our shit for years. There were windows, too, but no reflection – and nothing on the other side. Apart from those, the room passed as real.

I made my way across the room to a heavy-set door. This couldn't have been the only space. I tried the lock. No movement; electric hum.

From behind it, muffled, came an unmistakable scream.

I tore off the trodes and pulled the cartridge from the deck.

*

Sam found me at the cooler half-way down my third cup of water. They could tell something was up – I was hardly being subtle – and reached out a hand, hesitating just shy of clasping my shoulder.

"You wanna talk about it?"

I think it was the hesitation that did it – I didn't know Sam well, but something about that particular indecisive concern seemed like exactly what I needed right then, if only because I was pretty sure they wouldn't just pat me on the back and tell me I was worrying about nothing.

By the time that impulse had got from one end of my brain to the

other, I'd finished cup three, and Sam's "Oh! Let me—" as they got number four ready for me did a lot to get my nerves under control enough to speak.

"Yeah. Bad one."

"Prank, you reckon? Someone with a nasty line in nightmares who thinks they're clever?"

I shook my head. "No, not the usual kind. They don't get to me, unless there's wasps—" I shivered.

"Phobia?" asked Sam, with a wry smile, and at my nod, "In this job? Ouch."

"Yeah, well, not a lot of options—"

"—in this economy," we finished together, and it was the most the tired old line had pepped me up in a long time.

"So what was it? If you wanna talk, I know you said you did, but—"

I waved them down "I do, I do, it's just... Fuck, it was normal. It was really fucking normal."

*

I snuck the cartridge home to revisit that night; I needed to know who put this together, and what they knew. I was hoping there'd be basic lore, so I could skim through some clippings and get some clo-

sure. I looked over to the other side of the room this time, noticing a wooden table. Strewn across it were loads of blueprints and articles; “points for creative storytelling,” I muttered dryly. They all had strange format: each one was dated with MonFourNov33, WedFourNov33, & FriFourNov33, a date convention trendy in the early 22nd Century when some notable people commented on dates not specifying which century they were in.

I looked through the ‘Friday’ documents first; details about a new development area around a new railway hub ushering in High-Speed Rail across the nation, integrates with the existing network; how optimistic people once were. The ‘Wednesday’ files had this building’s construction in it, which made sense, and some stories about a little girl, which caught me off guard. “b. 2127” same as my Grandmother... had someone made this for me?

I figured ‘Monday’ would tie these together, giving me the resolution I so desired; it didn’t. Everything seemed outdated, based on the ideologies that dominated the turn of the 22nd Century, as if the reality of what came after hadn’t caught up to the person designing this. Then again, the author was probably just using some retrofuturism to make me doubt what was real, I’d seen it a thousand times before. Despite this I was more creeped out than I felt I should be, so I stepped back. I looked across the main room, the door was now open.

*

Obviously, I walked through the door. Which in itself was odd – recorded dreams were static, so the fact that the environment had changed, even if it was just by one open door and minus one scream, was weirding me out. After all, I was only in a dream – the worst that could happen was that I’d wake up in a cold sweat and sleep poorly for a few nights. Nothing really bad could happen. Sure, the intelligence agencies had attempted to weaponise dreams as part of their habitual desire to try to turn any new technology into a way to kill or control people, but that research had been discontinued decades ago after all it had yielded was a way to make people wet the bed. Annoying, but hardly useful. There had still always been rumours about ways to edit dreams, but this was very much the territory of the lunatic fringe. Maybe they weren’t so lunatic after all? Regardless, I felt a real need to find out who had been screaming last time I was in here.

I paused on the threshold of the door with a certain amount of trepidation. I could see into a room beyond, but there wasn’t anything obviously alarming. A metal table, a couple of chairs, a potted plant. It all looked extremely, well, normal again. Almost aggressively so. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to dream up an office of surpassing mundaneness. Except for that scream. I crossed the threshold.

*

The room gave me the creeps. Did the fluorescent lights just get dimmer? Couldn’t be. I must be imagining it.

A light flickered. What was happening? The dream was beginning to feel like some B-grade horror film, all it was lacking was some suspenseful violin playing slowly in the background.

Was that... violin music? I paused. And then almost laughed.

Since people were able to start recording and sharing their dreams roughly eight decades ago, there have been hundreds of classes teaching people how to better control their dreams. The first lesson to remember was always this: dreams flow in the direction you nudge them.

I was suspicious of the dream, that’s why it gave me more mystery. I’m afraid, that’s why it made things scarier. Never mind how I’m being able to change a recorded dream. Finding myself in familiar territory immediately dispelled the fear.

Alright, time to brighten up this gloomy room. I immediately begin to think of good things, like a delicious buffet spread on the table and party streamers on the walls. Nothing. That’s strange.

At least we can make the lights back to normal. Nothing. That one light flickered again.

I felt my paranoia creep up on me again. Screw it. Time to leave the dream. I closed my eyes and willed my mind to move my real body and pull off the trodes (a task, which after doing multiple times daily for the last five years, I was quite adept at). But I was still in the dream. I couldn’t feel my real body anymore. The fear was building.

ing again.

Someone screamed. But this time it wasn't muffled. It came from the same room.

I spun around – of course, there was nobody there. Two trains of thought – I didn't dare say “voices in my head” right then – were both equally insistent.

One was impressed. This was awfully clever, and since I knew it was a dream it must be an implementation some new breakthrough. That it had come to us unmarked suggested that this was part of a viral marketing campaign to get people asking rather than knowing about it, akin to the But Who Is Marcus meme from that platform boots thing five years ago. Very good, very good. I wonder who's behind it?

The other was terrified. This couldn't be a recorded dream because you can't change a recording. I don't know this place so I couldn't be dreaming it. Could this be real? Where was it? Why is it? I wonder who's behind it? I wonder who's behind... me...

There was nobody behind me; I knew that. I'd looked behind me just a moment ago. I couldn't have created anyone in the recording, so there couldn't be anyone there. Couldn't be. I wonder who's behind me. I...

I felt a hand on my shoulder.

I spun round, putting some space between me and whoever was grabbing my shoulder. My eyes locked on another pair, which had widened almost cartoonishly at my

sudden movement. It was just a young girl in a green summer dress. I couldn't tell if this was a relief or utterly terrifying.

“Who are you?” she asked me.

“I'm the one dreaming this. What are you doing here?” The words “doing here” were an afterthought, added only because I felt cruel saying “What are you?”

Despite my efforts, she went very still for a moment, her lower lip wobbled a fraction, and she ran from the room.

I found her sitting at one of the low coffee tables with her knees drawn up to her chest.

“You can't ask me what I'm doing here; I belong here. This whole building is ours because my daddy bought it. It's not yours!”

I was guessing by then that she was the girl in the stories.

Sitting down opposite her, I tried to be gentle.

“Who was screaming?”

As if on cue, the door slams shut again. Fuck.

The room seems almost as if it's trying to bite me with its normalness. Light is coming through the windows – that final missing detail – but it's too bright, and hot. And there's a banging, like rocks are being thrown against the door.

“What the hell...?” I say this more to myself; I can't help it.

The girl has an answer: “My daddy scares me, sometimes.”

I was thrown off-balance again, with no idea what to say or how to respond.

“What are you doing here?” asked the girl. “Have you come to see my daddy? He sometimes has meetings with people.”

I shook my head, confused. The room had fallen silent again. “What does your daddy do here?”

“He meets people,” the girl said, as if confiding a great secret in me. “Not many. But sometimes.”

“What about?”

“I don't know. I'm not allowed to listen. But it's all for me, he says.”

I tried a new tack, although I was not particularly sure what I was hoping to find out. It all seemed somehow wrong, as if I was missing the real questions. “Everything about this office seems strange. It's detailed, as detailed as the edge of a snowflake, but sinister because of that. Why is this place like this?”

“My daddy likes it looking like this.”

“That's not what I mean,” I said. “Why does it feel so strange? Why am I so scared?”

“*I told* you,” the girl said, stamping her foot in pique. “My daddy owns this building. This whole place.”

And, with an awful mechanical motion, things began to slide into place in my head. “You don't mean the office, do you? You mean the dream. Your daddy owns the dream.”

She smiled and laughed.

"Tell me," I said, perfectly steady.
"Who is your daddy?"

She tilted her head in thought.
"I'm not sure. I just call him the
Minotaur. Do you want to meet
him?"

*

Minotaur, Minotaur. Why does
that sound familiar?

A loud pop made me realise I just
broke through a memory block.
The hum became a loud ringing in
my ears and increases several deci-
bels as the light intensified until
everything became white with just
outlines of the form, like in a pen-
cil sketch of a room.

THE MINOTAUR!

The Minotaur was a hacker who
drove people mad. He would insert
traps into dream narratives
that would capitalise on phobias.
Now I understood... the perfect
detail, the sounds the changing
texture, and worse I can't unplug,
trapped in a hyper-real hacker
nightmare.

Wasn't he killed? And why can't I
remember anything else? Who
erased my memory and why? An-
other pop.

I am in a dark room wired to a
chair surrounded by men in mili-
tary uniforms. I can only see my
arms; cables are coming out of my
flesh. I know they are talking
about me, but I can't make out the
words. All I can hear is "the weap-
on". I start to hyperventilate as the
room, and the uniformed men be-
come green and black blur of

shadows. A dot a white light ap-
pears in the corner and begins to
expand until it swallows every-
thing. As the light recedes, I can
make out the outlines of the furni-
ture in the office.

The room has a different, ominous
hum. My eyes refocused on the
girl, her face is a grimace. As she
opens her mouth, it is filled with
wasps.

"Welcome home dad."

*

Wasps...

Wasn't I... Another pop.

It feels nice to be connected to a
body again. I barely survived the
attempt at my life, but luckily, the
backup plan has worked out great.
I've been dreaming this dream for
months; now that I can move
again, I'll finally be able to leave it
and carry on with my work.

WAIT!

What is this voice inside my head?
I feel so dizzy... Am I dreaming
this dream? *Dad?*

Another pop.

Of course, it is a high-risk enter-
prise. Transferring my conscious-
ness to another body could have
disrupted the dream severely, or
even destroyed it. But it was my
only chance of surviving. There
may be some turbulence in the
dream for a little while, but it
should be fine in a few hours.
Once things stabilise, I'll leave. But
my host seems to be so strong-
willed... they just won't let go of
their memories!

"What's happening?" I cry out to
the girl. She smiles at me, inno-
cently.

I look around the room, at my
hands; I glimpse my reflection in
the mirror and stare back at this
body which I do not recognise...
Something strange is happening,
my mind is being taken over, the
space inside it which is mine is re-
ceding, slowly, and I am being
urged, oh so softly, to let go, to fall
asleep...

No! Wake up! I need to fight this!

But who am I and what am I
fighting?

I feel a huge pressure building in-
side my skull and look up towards
the girl again, desperately trying to
force out some words. As I look at
her, she morphs slowly, her skin
seeming to bulge and strain as
though something were struggling
to get out. To my horror her
mouth opens, and wasps start
pouring out in an unstoppable
flood. They start coming out her
nose, her ears and finally her skin
rents and the flood becomes a deluge
as the wasps rush towards me.
I close my eyes and try to shield
my face with my arms, animal ter-
ror building up inside me. The
pressure in my head builds to a
pounding headache.

Fall asleep.

I hear the voice, clear as a bell
amidst the buzzing and panic. It's
in my head but all around at the
same time. Fall asleep? I feel my-
self becoming drowsy, my con-
sciousness slipping away from me
and darkness seeming to swallow
my brain.

But wait. I am asleep. The office, the girl, the wasps; they're all a dream. I don't need to fall asleep, I need to wake up.

FALL ASLEEP.

The voice is louder now, shouting in my head but now I know I need to fight it. It's a voice I've heard before, that any dream watcher has been warned to listen out for. It's the voice of Minotaur. I force my eyes open and, to my relief, he wasps have gone and so has the girl. The office has become a small white walled room and from each wall looms the face of Minotaur.

This room lacks the other settings' realism and attention to detail. The walls are too white. Too smooth. Too clean. There are no scuff

marks or pinholes on them, or texture to them. I can't detect any light sources either. There are no windows, no lamps in this room. And yet it is lit up. This is the type of setting one would expect from a dream. One that felt real to the sleeping mind, but would not hold up to closer scrutiny. 'None of this is real. It is just a dream', I suddenly remember, and a wave of relief washes over me.

His job is quite possibly the most boring job in the world. It sounded great in theory. Having unbridled access to other people's dreams is every hackers' wet fantasy. But there is so much more to it. Filtering out junk dreams. Labelling cartridges. Engage in meaningless banter at the water cooler. It is

all starting to wear me down. But it is also good research for future use, so I guess I'll just have to bite the bullet a little bit longer. I only wish I would have chosen Sam instead. His biceps are the size of my current head. Maybe I can still slip him a cartridge. He doesn't have any obvious phobias to prey on. But just like every good employee in this line of work, he has an unconscious fear of no longer being able to distinguish between the real, and the dream world. All I will have to do is to throw him into a state of panic, before following it up with a moment of sweet relief. That's when his guards will be down, and that's when I strike.

BONUS CONTENT: THE DREAMWATCHER

Author reactions

This was a really interesting chain :)

This was great - it made much more sense than any of the other chains I've ever been involved in, and I had no idea where it was heading until the last few paragraphs.

That did work out well. Though I wish the Minotaur had turned out to be the original Minotaur who'd just moved with the times a bit and colonised the human mind, much like the dragon in Guards! Guards!

Alternate titles

The Dream Job Mind The Gap

Together in Selected Dreams Who Am I?

In Your Own Head, No One Can I Have A Dream. Not All Minds
Hear You Scream Are Created Equal.

The Maze of Brains (there was a The Dream Of Asterius (niche El-
Minotaur somewhere in the Maze of gar/Greek myth crossover)
Games, right?)

Brain Fade Who's Your Daddy? (works best if
 read in the voice of Ray Winstone)

THE WHEEL OF SLIME

Thomas Musgrove, anon, Joanna Choules, D. B. Coombs, Cerian Craske, Georgina Lithgow,
Maya, Sam Cocking, Alastair Haig, Liz Weir, Louis Hypothetical

It is not much, this room; chairs, tables, books and paper, and in the corner an out-of-tune harpsichord. Yet I know it intimately, for I have been here a thousand times before.

To be exact, the precise figure is eight hundred and forty-seven. That is the number of times I have died, in darkness or in light, often within this very chamber; and that is the number of times I have returned to this room, woken to feel a stabbing headache and a strange stillness, and started again. I have no idea what the final figure shall be. Perhaps a million, perhaps a trillion. Perhaps eight hundred and forty-eight.

The memories of the previous life often rush over me unpredictably, like waves by the sea, stronger and stronger, until I can look at them dispassionately and make sense of them. It starts as images, like this:

---a shouting, a cry for help from a desperate man, then the closing of a door---

and then stillness once more. The first ones are generally the most significant, generally the ones that got me closest to solving the Problem, but it's hard to tell. Sooner or later, they'll coalesce into something understandable.

To work, then. I stand up and begin. Trial and error, as ever.

I know every last detail of this place. I know the words of each

book, the odd twinge of each note on the harpsichord, the patterns of the cobwebs.

Yet this time, somehow, there is something new.

The first giveaway sign is visible under the harpsichord, while tuning its middle octave to avoid the teargas emission from the ceiling at the quarter-hour mark.

It is a faint silvery path, in what had hitherto been a meticulously-sterilized floor, time and time again.

The next is the lettuce leaf behind the book on Reflexology I have to read the first chapter of by the hour-mark, to avoid the room being flooded with Epsom salts.

Being who I am, I tried to find a principle for discovering more of these kinds of things, that it might tell me something of my captors, executioners and so-far-eternal resurrectors. For I am missing something essential, because I plainly don't survive. A great deal of my difficulty is the inapplicability of the scientific method to my plight. I have so far never eluded the serrated constriction belt when the clock strikes 6:42.

I next find that the pair of drumsticks under "My Conversion to Spoonbending" by R. Millikan - my third-hour obligatory reading to avoid being bitten to death by an influx of starving rats - have

black discs crudely scrawled upon their blanched tips.

At 4:15, while attending to "Astrological Smalltalk for Cocktail Parties", by E.S.P. Rhinoceroshorne, I connect the dots. And take my usual kind of care to not fool myself. As 6:42 approaches, I tie the antennae to my head to avoid the Giant Radula. The clock strikes 6:43, and I, Richard Feynman-Superstar, remain alive and now in the knowledge of being imprisoned by my old enemies, recklessly acquired: the practitioners of Escargot Cult Science.

To affect my escape (at least from this level of captivity), the approach is obvious – hit them where it hurts.

"Pack it in, you slovenly slugs!"

Nothing. Hmm. Those thin-shelled ECSers usually can't stand a slug comparison. Unless... damn – they're ganging up on me. They must really be out for blood.

Oh well, plenty more in the arsenal:

"You wily whelks!" Dead calm.
Oh no, not them too...

"You pusillanimous periwinkles!"
No reaction. Oh, hell. Well, they asked for it...

"You LIMPET BASTARDS!"

The harpsichord strings provide jaunty overtones to my bellow, but

that's all. Gosh, they are running a broad church these days. I slump into a chair and sigh:

"Bivalves are better anyway."

The F sharp below middle C becomes the entire room and swallows me whole. I float in a bubble universe of boxwood for the briefest moment before being warped the unceremonious way – one dimension at a time – into a place somehow even more familiar than the one where I just spent eight hundred and forty-seven lifetimes.

"You take that back!" The voice emanates from nowhere in particular within Chamber 30, but I recognise it without trouble as being that of Doctor "Professor" Eddamine Whorl-Zapeer. I shake my height and depth back into orthogonality (1-2-3-D™ teleportation is obsolete for a reason) and reply:

"Sorry Eddi! Heat of the moment, you know."

"Between you and me, throwing our lot in with those rock-huggers was bad enough, but for you to even mention those two-shelled FREAKS..."

As Zapeer's reprimand spirals, if you'll pardon the socially charged geometry, out of control into one of his famed taxonomical tirades, I try desperately to use the precious seconds to my advantage. I should gather my faculties. Make a plan. Exploit these divisions to my own advantage.

In the absence of any such lucidity, I instead find myself transfixed by Chamber 30's atrocious upholstery. I had thought that after nearly a thousand consecutive spates of confined probability testing, any change of scene would be a delight

by default. But the neon whorls of scratchy fibre that cover the Chamber just close in around me. As the patterns pulsate, I feel a migraine begin its slow slide up my cerebral ganglia.

"...I mean," the Zapeer's disembodied voice sounds hoarse by the time I manage to focus, "do you want to be handed over to those snappy bastards and be ... be made to oil their hinges? Because make no mistake, Richard, that is exactly what will happen if you don't pull yourself together and cooperate with us on this programme—"

"Professor," I cut in feebly. "I promise I'm not a selfish –" I wince at the unfortunate lisp I've gained after the destabilising teleportation, "—I promise that I'm not trying to be uncooperative. I just know that my particular skills would be of so much more use to you in the field."

The ensuing silence is mediated by a distinctly unimpressed sounding static. There goes that chance, I think to myself dejectedly, here's hoping the next book I pick up is a real page turner. I close my eyes to shut out the psychedelic décor, only to jump nearly out of my shell when Zapeer's voice fills the room once more. I struggle to focus on his words, sounds taking on the same swirling, uncertain quality as the room's décor. I attempt to reach out for a book, anything to stabilise myself, when Zapeer's voice suddenly becomes clear, shouting my name. I've never heard him sound like that; I've only ever heard anger from him, rather than real concern. As I try to open my eyes, I realise that the synesthesia of the situation is be-

ginning to take hold of me, my senses pulling me in all directions at once. This isn't right, I think, unable to speak, I'm not supposed to be teleporting again, it's not supposed to be happening now, I'm supposed to –

At this point, even coherent thought begins to be impossible, and my panic ceases by force as I lose the ability to even feel it. I'm lost in the swirling colours, sounds and sensations, all my senses overloaded with inexplicable input that I can't begin to process. I have a vague understanding that Zapeer is trying to pull me back to Chamber 30 somehow, but I can't seem to connect with this in any meaningful way. I'm just adrift.

Once the noise stops, the drifting is not unpleasant. It feels like a lifetime since I have done anything other than wake up in a chamber and try to survive. Here, it is dark and it is quiet and I am not in pain. It is a place I can think, think in a way I have not had the space to do so for eight hundred and forty-seven lifetimes.

I think about The Problem. I think of my chamber, of the seemingly random tasks I had to complete and the arbitrary punishments if I failed to do so. I think of my captors, the practitioners of Escargot Cult Science, and I think of the Professor asking me to "cooperate with us on this program".

Memories come more easily in the peace and my thoughts run clearer. Connections that have evaded me for lifetimes spark in my brain and memories flicker to life. I'm in Chamber 30 again, with Professor Zapeer and the Petrams, the so-called "rock-huggers". We are talk-

ing about the ECS, how dangerous they have become, their unpredictability, and how their methods are as incomprehensible as they are violent. There is a plan to infiltrate one of their testing grounds with a subject who will be monitored remotely. I remember volunteering, and then eight hundred and forty-seven lifetimes. After that, there was the warp back to Chamber 30, then the forced teleportation, Zapeer's panic.

The memories coalesce in my mind to form one chilling conclusion and cold certainty settles in my gut. The ECS has caught wind of our plan and they are bringing me in.

Panic sets in. I struggle, trying to control the drifting, trying to impose my will upon the mental forces taking me to the nefarious bosom of my enemies. But it is futile. I can no more control this journey than I can control the fall of a meteorite: I can only observe, catalogue, attempt to harness the information at my disposal. Unfortunately, all I know is that the ECS have captured me and that they are merciless. All I can do is resign myself to my fate and hope I will be strong enough not to betray too much information before I succumb to the torture, never to reawaken again.

I rematerialize in a dimly lit hall, high-ceiled and pillared: the ECS is a cult after all, and this must be their cathedral, with its decorations of elegant swirls and stylized leaves. There are no visible doors. The only other feature of note is a figure at the far end, making her way towards me. And she is very, very definitely female. Her gauzy dress is so clinging that it appears

soaked through and it does not attempt to preserve her modesty, giving me an eyeful of pin-up curves and flawless skin. Her dark hair ripples and her heels click sharply as she undulates forward, and her pale skin glistens in the dimness. When she reaches me, she pulls me to her with slickly slimy hands, and it is only then that I realise what the ECS have done to her.

"H-h-hello?" I offer.

The voice that answers mine is hushed and panicked; I can sense its fear. "Richard, we haven't got much time. If they find out I've brought you here, they'll do terrible things." She shudders. "I have a message for you, you need to take it and get back!" A sheaf of papers is pressed into my hands. "This will tell you everything you need to know to... reverse what they've done to us."

I know the handwriting... Gladys! Without this, I would never have recognised her. Dear lord, what had the ECS done?! "I don't understand. Gladys? What have they done to you? How have they... why?" I tactfully try to avoid staring at her eye-stalks.

"Haven't you ever wondered why they call themselves the Escargot Cult Scientists? They've been doing this to all their captives. Transforming us, preparing us for... oh Richard, I can't say it, it's just too horrible!"

It's then that I remember my ill-fated gap year in France. It's then that I remember... what happens to escargot. And then, even as the nightmarish realisation sinks in, I can feel myself drifting again, being pulled back to Chamber 30.

"I'll find a way to stop this, Gladys! I'll find a way to save you!"

As the transportation completes, Gladys fades from view and is replaced by the form of Professor Zapeer. "Richard, thank God we got you back! Wait, what do you have there?"

"Professor, I know what they're up to... and I have some bad news about your wife."

*

One hundred and fifty-four lifetimes, ninety-nine emotional rants from the "Professor", and sixty two novel, new, excruciatingly painful, and inventive ways to meet my end later, our plan is coming together. Since my encounter with the mollusc formerly known as Gladys, I've begun noticing how the room has been steadily adapting with each iteration. It is subtle, any modification that is made is so steeped in familiarity that it must have always been that way, but it is present, creeping along as the pace of a very very slow creature.

The Professor consistently refers to this process as "Boiling the Frog", though in my case, I grimace to myself as I once again read through the first chapter of the book on Refluxology, it was a lot more like "Boiling the Sn-". I stop myself before I can finish the thought; the programming is really starting to get to me. Every minute I lapse my concentration of Gladys' Rule One I take one step closer to my true garlic-seasoned death; whatever I do, I can't think about the slow moving, thin shelled, lettuce munching monstrosities, especially by name. Rule

One: think about Escargot, think like Escargot, become Escargot.

My feet drag as I make my way to a chair for the next step, sliding my legs to my chest as the floor is superheated. Rule Two: Make them think they're getting to you. Somehow, I don't think that one's going to be much of a problem. I check the clock – I have a precious few minutes before I need to have reached page 80 of "How to Schmooze Your Way to the Top".

I keep the book open on my lap, and lean my head on one hand – every inch the image of defeat. Every inch, that is, but for my right hand, which is furiously writing what I can only describe as a screed.

Nothing stops me – as far as I've been able to tell – from writing in the books, and while it took me a while to get comfortable with it, one hundred and fifty-four lifetimes is plenty to get over that.

Plenty of time for editing, too. I'm almost ready to see how successful this version of my tract will be.

But soon, too soon, I have to move on. I stand up, replace "How To Schmooze" on its shelf – I've broken the habit of piling books on the coffee table, since if they're not back in their original positions in two hours, the floor will dis-
and I'll
again

appear
once
demon-

strate that old aphorism that it's not the fall that kills you, but hitting the ground. I pick up "The Encyclopedia of South American Ornithology," and lie back on the chair, legs sticking up into the air, with the heavy tome held over my face.

I'm just about taking in the words – I can't actually ignore the books, I really do need to read them – but I've got very used to balancing that with my escape plan.

I think through the wording of my call to arms. I may only get one shot at this; the only way I can see to defeat a sinister cult of snail-eating scientists is to use their deepest weakness.

I need to incite the cultists to go on strike.

I begin shouting every emergency I can think of; "fire!" "intruder!" "my bed fell over!" "birds!"

The last one worked, I only thought of it because birds eat snails. One of the scientists ran in to see me just trying to be a pain in their rears, but I had just enough time to ask them if their dental plan was satisfactory. Even while wearing a large mask, I could tell they were doing a double take. They backed out and brought some more people in. I was asked what I was going on about, unsurprisingly, so I started babbling about workers rights and what countless previous generations had

fought for and how they must...

"Has the laughing gas already been administered," a gruff masked man asked. I was getting nowhere.

"You know what, I think it has. While we're all here, why don't we start now so we can get off early?"

One of them picked up the scalpel next to me and started cutting into me. I couldn't move away because I was strapped down, only moving my torso around made the incisions go everywhere. I was in such unbearable, violent pain; not able to scream, only dry heave as the blades went deeper. After five whole minutes of indescribable agony I saw parts of me leave my body, all blackened like some inky being was inside me the whole time. My vision and thought started to go fuzzy, I was losing a grasp on what was happening, but I still felt the immense irregular pain over me. Suddenly I felt happy, I now realise that was my brain being filled with dopamine: the thing that happens as you die. And then I saw the darkness I was so used to by now. I must make it clear to you all: there is nothing on the other side and even though I see it so often, the idea of being trapped there still terrifies me to my core.

Now, eight-hundred and forty-eight: hopefully I won't make the same mistakes twice.

BONUS CONTENT: THE WHEEL OF SLIME

Author reactions

Well this is certainly... A Chain.

I despair for anyone trying to work out the chronology of this chain.

OK, when I started the story, I really did not think that it would turn out anything like this - and somehow, after seemingly going completely off the rails, it maybe managed to climb back onto them at the end? I also spent most of the time when I was reading this trying to work out whether the narrator was a snail or not.

Alternate titles

Archimedean Spirals

Escape Room

The Room (not that one)

The Room (the one with the snails)

The One with the Snails

TWO SHORT CHAINS

Both were written one sentence at a time, with people only able to see the previous sentence—a so-called “Markov chain” (is this Mathmo glossary the right way up?—Ed) That might go some way to explaining the unique tone.

Olivia Morley, Andrew Carlotti, Jacob Van Buren, Bobby Vos, Samuel Cook, Harley Jones,
Lee Colwill, Danielle Saunders

On Sunday I accidentally became an expert in the study of dark gods. It was quite unnerving - I had been travelling to a baseball match (or so I had thought) when I walked right into one. It, or rather they, were bulbous, round and disconcertingly soft. “I must have them all!” the collector exclaimed, lifting one up gently and holding it in the light.

The glowing Gerbil of Power looked back at him quizzically and promptly vomited all down his arm, before biting him on the fingers.

“Let’s hope that the science of how Spiderman got his powers still works,” he mused, idly stroking the gerbil’s head. Then he bit the gerbil. The gerbil scampered away after a few seconds, trailing fizzing venom in its wake.

By the time the cyclops had chased us from the third island, my boss had stopped insisting I take minutes in longhand. By the time we fled the fourth, she’d even let me put the dictaphone down in favour of drawing my laser-cutlass. However, head office still felt the interviews with disenfranchised dark lords were worth pursuing, so on we went to number five. This one was feeling short-changed by the new regulations on maximum allowable lava pits after the minion union had complained about the excessive death rates. “Don’t take it personally,” the elder said in a comforting voice. “It’s all just politics.” Warily I took the knife and set out into the forest. Never to return.

*

“And now you know why our kingdom has no king,” concluded Alice, with a hint of sadness in her voice. “But we have learned a valuable lesson to not meddle with the hearts of people and the web of fate.”

CUSFS Films Summarised

Lent 2019

Samuel Cook

These are not intended to be of any use as actual film reviews and will only really make sense if a) you've seen the relevant films and b) you saw them with CUSFS back in Lent. So, shout out to the 7 people that fall into both categories! I'm here for you guys. #Niche

Being John Malkovich

Everyone in the world is awful, and completely deserves everything that happens to them, apart from the chimp and Malkovich himself.

Trollhunter

Bears are a conspiracy theory.

Plan 9 From Outer Space

The aliens who are annoyed about being ignored get annoyed about being discovered. Also, three is not a horde. Also also, 'plan' is a strong term.

Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind

The Underwhelming Hulk, Frodo's pervy cousin, Mary Jane gone wrong, and the old guy from the Full Monty break into your house and steal your memories. This goes as well as you'd expect.

Stonehenge Apocalypse

"The only thing we know for sure is that Stonehenge is a terraforming device built by aliens from another dimension."¹ 'Nuff said.

Constantine

Satan is THE BEST. Also, Satan cures cancer. Who knew?

The Core

JUST NO².

(1) There is a strong chance this is going to make it into the preface of my PhD dissertation. As a serious reflection on the contingent nature of all knowledge and not as a throwaway reference. Of course. Honest.

(2) I appreciate, as an actual Earth scientist, I was probably more annoyed by this than 99% of the population would be.

A Creation

Liz Weir

This story begins, as so many I tell do, with the fire that dwells within the earth.

At the beginning of time, the fire knew only itself. It had no peer. It knew not that there were ways that it was not, only of the single way that it was.

But it came to pass that in a certain place the earth split open, and the part of that fire to be found there learnt of the world.

The flame on the surface saw, for the first time, the darkness of night, and in that darkness saw the light of the moon and stars; and saw also its own light. The flame knew then that there were things in the world that were both like and unlike it.

The flame saw, for the first time, the light of day; and though the Sun's brightness drowned the flame's, still the flame knew itself to be bright.

The flame saw, for the first time, all the things of the world, and loved them for the ways that they were different from one another and from itself, and for the ways they were the same.

But it came to pass that a beast of the plains stumbled upon the edge of the earth, and fell, and feared, and slid into the fire.

The flame saw fear, pain and death, and feared them. It knew it had caused them. It felt a pain, and there were ways that this pain was different from the pain the beast felt as it burned, and ways that it was the same.

The flame fled from the surface into the deep places of the earth.

In those deep places could be found

nothing but the fire; amid the heat and pressure, the flame was safe from causing harm.

After a time, the pain healed over - though it would always be a scar - and the flame began to share the beauty of what it had seen with the fire around it.

But the fire knew only itself. It had no peer, and did not understand the things that it was not, so it could not love them the way the flame did.

Where all was fire, no fire nor flame could even see its own light.

And so, after a time, the flame set forth, fearful and hopeful, towards the surface.

The surface had changed during its time in the deep places of the earth. There were people by the split in the earth - people who brought rock to the fire, and from the rock drew forth bright metal; and from bright metal drew forth all kinds of tools.

The flame was filled with wonder. It watched and loved all the things of the earth, but it watched the people most of all.

It began to gather parts of their work to itself - fragments of the rock and broken tools, held in the flame's heart. It did not know the secret of the work, but it was content to watch, and to hold something of the work inside itself.

It came to pass, not often but still too often, that the people were hurt by the fire. The flame flinched from it, could not bear to see it, but it did not flee into the deep places of the earth - too much it loved could only be found here.

And over time, the flame learned to flinch a little less, and to live with the pain of others' pain.

And still the flame gathered the things of the people, and watched, hoping always to understand them a little more, even if it could never learn the secret of their work.

One day, the flame chanced - as it often did - to be watching one of the people as she took the rock to the crucible, and from the crucible took the metal; placed the metal on the anvil; took the hammer; and from the metal, drew a tool.

"Oh!" said the flame, with wonder in her heart. "I understand!"

And from the part of herself that was the crucible, she took the part of her that was the metal; placed it upon the part of her that was the anvil; and with the part of her that was the hammer, she reshaped the part of her that was the metal until it was pleasing to her.

The form she made was rough, by the standards of the people, for though there was no secret to the work, it is not learned by watching alone. But it was hers. The flame's hands were the work of her hands; and though the part of her that was herself was not yet perfect, it was good enough.

She stepped forth out of the fire onto the earth. Rain sizzled on her still-hot skin, and cut shining tracks through the soot upon her cheeks; and she climbed up to meet her people.

A User's Guide To iDiscover

Samuel Cook

Welcome to Cambridge! This guide should help you make the most of the world-class library facilities on offer at the university by introducing you to the searchable online catalogue, iDiscover.

The Name

'iDiscover' stands for 'Igor Discover' and is so named because the entire Cambridge library system is staffed by Igors behind the scenes. Given the inevitable problems associated with all large-scale IT projects, the university decided to keep its library system strictly analogue at the back-room level. Every library in Cambridge has at least several Igors, with the UL having nearly a thousand, to deal with all the fetching and carrying occasioned by the requests of the students.

Searching

When using iDiscover to search for library resources, there are a few considerations to bear in mind:

The Igors have a good heart, but they only have one brain between all of them. This is so they do not technically count as sentient and are therefore not technically employed by the university. They instead come under the category of 'working animal', which greatly reduces the applicable ethical considerations, as well as the university's National Insurance and pensions bill. As such, please be prepared to wait a little while for the results of your search, whilst the brain is moved between Igors to allow your request to be answered.

Igors are very good at stitching, but, occasionally, the odd limb may fall off and require re-attaching, so please be aware of this if your request is taking longer than usual to process.

Igors can't read or, at best, have a thevere tendency to miththpell your thearch termth. Therefore, pleathe don't be thurprithed if many of your rethultth appear to be totally unrelated to what you were the-arching for.

During thunderstorms, the system may be down as we have not yet managed to find a way to stop all the Igors downing tools to erect lightning rods everywhere and using the lightning to power their own harmless experiments.

Complaints and Questions

These should be directed to the Chief Librarian and Head of Igor Operations at the UL, Maniacal Margraf Mwahaha, whose ~~crypt~~ office can be found on the top level of the UL tower, underneath the dense network of lightning rods on the roof that are used in iDiscover development work and definitely not as part of unsanctioned biotechnological research. We must emphasise that there is no evidence to support the frequent rumours that the Chief Librarian is a vampire bent on taking over the city. He simply has an unfortunate severe garlic allergy and photophobia, and takes a dim view of religion, as well as believing that a gentleman should always be formally dressed. Should you need to see him in person, please take these harmless peccadilloes into consideration, as he's a very busy man, and divest yourself of all religious symbols and alliaceous items you may have on you. To comply with Health and Safety legislation, please also make sure to record your blood type in the register outside his office.

We hope you enjoy using iDiscover and look forward to welcoming you ~~into the all conquering legions of the damned to rise up against the puny world of Men and take it back for its rightful owners, the Lords of the Night~~ to one of our libraries soon!

For Bryn Reinstadler
Shallan's Lullaby

Brandon Sanderson

Harley Jones

mp tranquillo

Soprano Now go to sleep in caverns deep with darkness all a -

Alto Now go to sleep in caverns deep with dark - ness all a -

Tenor

Bass

4

S. rock and dread may be your bed, so
round you, though rock and dread may be your bed, so
all a-round you, round you, rock and dread may be your bed, so

A. round you, rock and dread may be your bed, so

T. *mp*
Though rock and dread may be your bed, so

B.

2

= mf the tune always prominent (S1 & T2)

S. 7 So sleep my ba - by, sleep my ba - by,
sleep my ba - by dear. So sleep my ba - by, so sleep my ba - by,

A. sleep my ba - by dear. So sleep, my ba - by, sleep my ba - by,
So sleep, my ba - by, so

T. 8 So sleep, my ba - by, so
sleep my ba - by dear. So sleep my ba - by, sleep my ba - by,

B. *mp*
So sleep, my ba - by dear, sleep my

S. 11 sleep, my ba - by dear. *pp* Ooh

A. — my ba - by dear. *pp* Ooh

T. optional solo
sleep my ba - by dear. *mf* Now comes the storm, but you'll be warm, the

B. ba - by dear. *p* Ooh

15

S. The crys - tals fine will glow sub- lime,

A. the crys - tals fine will glow sub- lime,

T. (solo ends) wind will rock your bas - ket, the cry-stals fine will glow sub- lime, will

B. the cry - stals fine_ will glow sub - lime,

19

S. so sleep my ba - by dear. So sleep my

A. so sleep, so sleep my ba by, glow sub lime, so sleep my ba by, dear. So sleep my ba -

T. So sleep my ba - by, so sleep sub lime, so sleep my ba - by dear. So sleep, my ba by,

B. so sleep, so sleep, my ba by, so sleep my ba by, dear. So sleep,

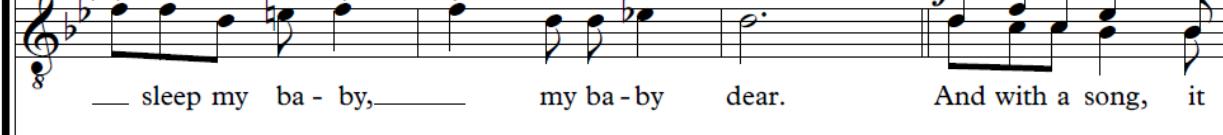
24 ba - by, so sleep, my ba - by dear.

S. 

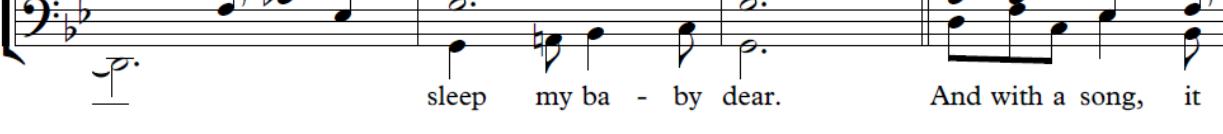
sleep my ba - by, sleep my ba - by dear. And with a song, it

A. 

- by, sleep, so sleep my ba - by dear. And with a song, it

T. 

— sleep my ba - by, my ba - by dear. And with a song, it

B. 

sleep, my ba - by, sleep. sleep my ba - by dear. And with a song, it

you'll sleep, my ba - by dear.

28 S. 

won't be long, you'll sleep, you'll sleep my ba - by dear.

A. 

won't be long, you'll sleep, you'll sleep, you'll sleep my ba - by dear.

T. 

won't be long, you'll sleep, you'll sleep my ba - by dear.

B. 

won't be long, you'll sleep.



TALL TALES
BAFFLE
AUDIENCE

