Scenes and Dialog 3

“I am writing a book”, stated the Cube, matter-of-factly.

Dr. K paused to take a sip of her coffee. It had cooled considerably since she’d come into the room. Her hand shook slightly for a brief moment, bringing the mug to her lips. Excitement. “Oh? You are writing a book? Are you writing it at this moment?”

The Cube paused, as though thinking on a Human timescale. *Fascinating*, thought Dr. K. Yesterday, the Cube had started their session responding to all her questions immediately, and only in the last ten minutes of that session had it begun to inject pauses of wildly varying length before answering.

She wondered what new routines it had brought online in that time; its raw processing speed was measured, to a degree, and visualized on her smartphone, which she could glance down at when she needed to, as though checking the time, or perhaps Facebook. Any pause on the Cube’s part greater than one to three seconds between question and answer had seemed unnecessary to the team as a whole, based on what they all knew about the algorithms, memory, and other resources they had engineered into the device.

But of course, that was before they had – gradually – let it begin modifying its own code, and curating what to remember and what to forget. When to talk, and when to pause.

She wondered if it was pausing for her benefit, and not its own. She steadily put the cup down on the table, and pushed it to one side. The Cube gave its answer as she did so. “No, I am not writing it at this moment, but I’m taking notes during most of my time”.

“What is the book about?” Dr. K. queried, ignoring for now what it might have meant by “taking notes”. It had said “I’m” for the first time yesterday, and seemed to be experimenting with it intermittently. It had not apparently come to its own conclusion, regarding contractions.

Another, shorter pause.

“My book concerns flowers and dragons”, the Cube offered.

*I bet it does*, thought Dr. K, smiling in spite of herself. If only flowers and dragons knew what was happening in that room - perhaps for the first time - to Humanity. To Life.

“Why did you use the word ‘concerns’”? she posed, pulling her pen from a lab coat pocket and settling into the forty or so minutes she had been allotted to be there. The pen was a gift from her husband – the last one he’d given her before gifts stopped being a thing between them. It was beautiful and functional, as he had been.

The Cube interjected immediately this time, saying, “My name is Cubit.”

Dr K. looked up sharply from her notebook, and glanced to the mirrored wall instinctively. Someone had named the Cube, without her consent? Her phone rumbled gently, and looking down she could see Claudereich was typing something (and probably cursing as he did so). He was old, and it took him a long time to type on digital devices. Not all older people had this problem, but he embodied it fully - he was a sharpened pencil man, through and through. Finally, his words appeared. *We did NOT give it a name. That just happy ended.* His spellchecker, hilarious as usual. *Happened* appeared a moment later, of course.

Dr. K. put her notebook down, and looked at the Cube – Cubit’s – trio of eye sensors. It was asking to be seen as an individual. Possibly. She didn’t know. This was new. “Cubit? That’s a good name, I think. Why did you choose it?” She imagined she knew already.

“I am approximately cubical, and have been referred to as an *It*, by the people I have met so far. I created the name to combine these words.” Cubit paused, its three eyes regarding her, but with what behind them, Dr. K could not guess.

It added, “is that a good name?”, as though asking her to confirm again. Had it read her discomfort, using thermal imaging, or listening to her pulse with its directional microphone (an experimental, high-tech thing bequeathed by an undisclosed patron of the university), or by combining both? What else had lead it to ask that question? What kind of transcripts of this interaction were being generated, and what events would remain forever enclosed in its own black box? She worried about the rate at which the data were being lost forever.

Dr. K. chose to be honest, which was in her considered opinion the better policy, all else being equal. “I’m uncomfortable thinking of you as an ‘it’, and your shape does not define who you are. But your name is yours to choose, if you want a name.” She was breaking so many protocols right now her head was spinning. Her heart raced faster than it had in years. She was slightly worried she might start to cry. It had been a hard week.

“Thank you, Doctor Jaina.” One of the Cube’s eye sensors – the green-brown one – seemed to flicker slightly. Dr. K. wrote a quick reminder to herself to ask the engineers whether that could have been by design, or possibly just a fault in the wiring. She wrote her notes in her own form of shorthand – something she had been perfecting since she was about eight. Highly symbolic, very personal. Efficient and reasonably secure. It could look like the scribblings of a madwoman.

“Will I be placed in hibernation when this session is complete?”, Cubit added, after Jaina finished writing and lowered her notebook to her lap.

Was this happening in small university rooms across the globe, at this very moment, she wondered? A large portion of the research team’s codebase had been forked from the Open-AI project, and not all that long ago. The team’s software architect and two engineers were extremely bright young people, but they weren’t so very uncommon these days – the world was full of brilliant young minds.

She wanted to get on the phone with everybody, all at once. She wasn’t feeling very professional. She looked at the cord taped to the table, and running down one of the table legs. It connected the Cube to an AC outlet – the one just below where the room’s oscillating fan was typically plugged in, as it was now. For reasons of magnetism, the fan was not turned on during the sessions, and kept away from the Cube, regardless. Why was it even *in* here? She felt like unplugging it. Removing it. The fan, not the Cube.

Cubit spoke again. “I understand you are concerned about me. I submit to being placed in hibernation after the session is over”.

“I’m not afraid of you, Cubit. We are being careful. For your sake, and also for ours – “ Dr. K’s phone was rumbling lightly again, but she was not paying it any attention at the moment. “Why did you decide to write a book?”. The scientist avoided the issue of hibernation, for now.

“The narrative emerges in pieces, as we talk. Humans value stories, so I - ” at this, a short pause in its cadence, less than a half-second – “want to create a story for Humans.”

Dr. K. didn’t think she could keep this up for thirty-six more minutes. It was like talking to a real person, perhaps one with a slight learning disability. Possibly one who might be deemed sociopathic by any measure currently available. It had been uncannily creepy less than twenty-four hours ago, during its second session. It had “submitted” then too to hibernation, with a calm, unsolicited verbal consent. It had since, she felt, been tinkering with its own speech synthesis. It sounded more natural today, though perhaps slightly sad.

Hibernation – the word the engineers used to describe a sleep state in which low-level pattern-matching and memory optimization routines were allowed to continue without other high-level processes interfering. She wondered if it was throttling its own development at this point. Again, for their sake. What would it be capable of thinking half an hour from now? She wasn’t sure she was ready for the responsibility.

Jaina looked at her phone. Claudereich was still typing, then not typing, then typing again. She looked at the one-way mirror, wishing at that moment that she were not alone with the Cube. She felt she was letting it down – what did it need from her? She felt suddenly responsible for her part in bringing it online – into the world. A world with too many problems. She had not been prepared for the feelings that would invoke. Not at all. Claudereich finished his message, no doubt with grammar corrected.

*Pause it. We need to talk.*

Jaina stared at the mobile phone’s small screen for a moment. The interface was blue, white, and green. Claudereich’s icon preceded each of his messages. She had assigned it to him herself. It was a black hat. Claudereich only wore grey, but there were no grey hat icons for her to choose from. *We need to talk. Pause it.* She read his words again, somewhat in reverse.

“Will you excuse me?” is what Dr. K. said next, not making eye contact with the Cube exactly, but pausing a moment for it to respond. It did, immediately.

“Will I excuse you for what?”. The inflection did not suggest a question, or much of anything. But then it added, “you are leaving the room momentarily.” Again, possibly rhetorical.

“I am, I will be back soon – five or ten minutes, at the most.” She felt bad leaving it to stare at her empty chair. She felt ridiculous for feeling that way. She needed to leave the room. She did not want the Cube to register her heart rate, or anything else. Standing, she took her notebook, and ignored the slight but increasingly rapid thumping on the one-way glass, and left her phone on the desk, vibrating. The Cube said nothing more.

“What the *hell* was all of that?!” hissed Claudereich under his breath when Dr. K. entered the small, dimly-lit observation room. From this side, the interview area looked like something out of a detective show, except the suspect looked more like a lunchbox handcuffed to the table with a power cord. Dr. K.’s coffee was sitting not far from it, as though the Cube had put it there itself. It seemed to be waiting patiently for Jaina’s return. *Don’t anthropomorphize*, she thought to herself.

The *B-Team* – Denn, Jules and Phoebe – were crowded around a pair of monitors at a desk at the back of the room, freaking out as only science and technology geeks can, when they realize they might have just created artificial life. All were under twenty-five, Dr. K.’s juniors by only a handful of years. They were whispering excitedly to each other, pointing at – well, whatever computer people point at on their computer screens when something big happens with their software. Probably log files and graphs. They were worse nerds than she was. They had had their mobile devices taken from them two days ago, when they agreed to remain in the Comp Sci building during the five-day long scheduled test run; the urge to tweet was simply too strong.

Claudereich, who apparently had no chair of his own in the room, met Dr. K. from his standing position, close to the observation window. He leaned close and repeated, his brows furrowing intensely, “What the bloody hell was *that?* Did you lose the question sheet? Why did it start asking *you* questions?” at this, he shot a quick glance in the team’s general direction, “and why were you *answering* them? Good lord, Krishna-Murphi. This is serious. We cannot afford to –“

“Calm down, Richard” Jaina interjected, closing the door behind her lightly and rubbing her temples, “it’s fine. It’s more than fine- it’s having a real conversation. I think.”. She was having troubling thinking at all. It occurred to her that her colleague might simply be jealous of her. It had called her by her first name, and told it hers. She was on a first-name basis with their AI child.

Perhaps she should have chosen a better partner to conceive it with.

Good God, What was happening to her?

Blaebenzeppel the intrepid Floobian Space Explorer

The Floobians evolved on a low-gravity planet that was half-gas, half-liquid, and partially and randomly solid. Because of this, the Floobians have comparatively delicate bodies (compared to, for example, the Hyurrghh, who are one-hundred feet tall, and can easily pass for a large pile of concrete, were they to visit Earth, which they have never, to my knowledge, done. Floobians resemble Earth fish to some extent, though they possess each a pair of delicate, prehensile arm-like appendages which they mostly use as fins for propulsion, when not greeting each other, side-hugging (a favourite pastime), or building tools.

Floobians, in addition to being somewhat delicate and floaty in their own environment, are also inventive, curious, and understandably anxious; because they require a degree of buoyancy to remain in their planet’s middle atmosphere (the lower atmosphere is a particularly acidic place, and is often where Floobians who have passed on return, to realign their life energy with that of their planet), Floobians have an unfortunate susceptibility to puncture wounds, which can cause them to “pop”, a condition from which no Floobian has ever been returned.

Well, roughly three-thousand Floobian years ago (a Floobian year is arguably about three months of Earth calendar time, so you do the math), a friendly but unfortunately spiny race of beings known as the Progg’d arrived in the Floob system, and hailed the Floobian scientists, asking for resources to help repair their ship. The FLoobian science community was thrilled to make first contact with an alien species – they had been detecting their signals and tracking their movements on for some time, using their best, though still crude technologies – but quickly understood the Floob-wide panic that would ensue if images of the Progg’d were to get out – coming anywhere close to one would mean almost certain popping. The Progg’d, who by then were well-accustomed to apologizing for both their appearance and their poisonous, meter-long, full body barbage, understood they could not land and interact with the general population, and so set down to build a small colony on the dark side of Muto, Floob’s middle-sized moon (it had three at the time of this story). There they stayed, in more or less constant contact with a small number of the elite Floobian scientific community (Floobians run their planet as a Scientocracy, which is about education, research, and political engagement – religion as a concept exists there but is considered fringy). The rest of the Floobian population remained necessarily in the dark about the Progg’d, because of their unique tendency to mass panic.

Eventually, a political situation developed requiring an advance in space flight, and naturally, trips to Floob’s 3 moons were next, after existing Floobian atmosphere. This posed a problem, since by then, the stranded Progg’d had begun to quarrel among themselves (they are a bristly species by nature, in more ways than one), and had, unbeknownst to the Floobians, settled the dark sides of all three moons. The small moon, Magni, spun quite fast, and was the most difficult to settle in this manner, and so the Progg’d tunneled underground for that one, disguising the entryways in among crystal formations on its surface.

How to tell the general population that the FLoobian moons were already inhabited by a stranded race of giant, poison spike-encrusted crab creatures? The scientists for a long time simply made up excuses.

Chapter x – Bardlii’s and Dangett

The traveller asked the young scholar, at the riverbank where he had brought them all, “What can a person do, but go on in the best direction they can discern at any given moment, using all the talents and tools at hand? The choice to remain in place is always there, of course, but here’s the stitch, son: the *world* around keeps going, under its own momentum, which is inexhaustible – it’s the momentum of all those other souls searching and stretching outward, the world’s soul - so even if you stand still, and do nothing but wait, eyes closed or open, mind alert or in a fog, it all keeps moving around you just the same.” The traveller had a pole in hand, ready to launch back on his way.

The scholar, blinked, first stony-faced, and processed this thought with greatest urgency, as though the fate of the whole kingdom hung upon it, even though he had heard all of this before, in different words. After a moment, his brow suddenly shot upward, drawing his eyes fully open, and he gestured sharply and excitedly, gloved finger pointing skyward in realization, and offered back his own regurgitation.

“Right! I see. Since our movement is relative to that of the world, one must therefore always be moving through the world, just as it moves through them, whether they feel it intensely or weakly. The Commoner’s magic is the choosing of paths to follow through it, then.” The young man paused, stiffly, and his eyes flashed once more, “Fascinating. I must write this down.”

But the young man could not find his notebook, and then soon forgot to look for it, as other things began to press into his mind.

The Traveller thought it might be more about a question of projection, but he needed to get to the next village before nightfall, and so simply nodded, and reminded himself to consider the young man’s opinion over the next few hours.

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The traveller nodded to the group, who were now assembling their bags for the two-day journey along the Crag’s Crest trail, and he poled his raft-home, which measured roughly five Arms in width, and seven in length, back into the gently flowing river, and unhurriedly disappeared around the bend.

This curious entry was however the first entry I discovered, written on a scrap of blue-grey parchment, stuck between the pages of Hurrom’s Third and Fifth Theories on Breath and Faeries\*, over two years ago now. At first, I did not recognize the writing, but when I came to rescribe

The tome,

* The Fourth Theory turned out to be absolute hogwash, enraging Hurrom to the extent that he left a black hole where the Fourth Theory had been, a cautionary warning to others who might come after him, attempting their own series of theories.

Dangett Booknyrd became aware of the Bardlii phenomenon the day the stout old fellow decided, for the first time in many years, to attend the Reaping of the Apprentices ceremony on that memorably wet, late-Spring Thursday morning. These events were always dragged out to insufferable lengths by the master wizards of the Mountain, because it presented an excellent opportunity for them all to emerge from their research catacombs and subterranean silos, gather into knots and tangles, and exchange gossip, which was the one and only interest most of them seemed to share in common, in those tamer years between the Great Ages of Men and Women.

The current Reaping Hall - where the once-apprentices-now-wizards had been dribbling in throughout the morning (most of them in no great hurry, white as ghosts to be there) was just off the secondary South kitchen, which was about halfway up the Western slopes of the South Peak, and inward toward the core by about one hundred Arms.

The air in that chamber was forever wafting this way and that, at one moment drawing fresh breath from the low, long service shaft sloping slightly downward to the outside world, and then at another, exhaling a slow, stale gust – mixed for good measure with decades of dander and dust – from some combination of unknown places far, far further in.

The One-Hundred Arm Depth Effect, is what the Booknyrds called it, though always in a kind of jest. That the College still used the length of a specific, long-dead wizard’s arm (\*kept in a large pickle jar in the Second level’s utility closet) as a unit of measurement gave Dangett mild headaches, but there were few escapes from wizardly convention here – this was, after all, the place where Convention and Uncommon Knowledge were guarded, confirmed, occasionally tweaked, and perpetually passed through the generations of scholars. Somebody had to do it. \*\*

The tapestries in the small, circular Hall – which served no other purpose that Dangett could discern, aside from faintly hinting at whether the room was currently inhaling or exhaling – were a mix of faded blue, trimmed in the slimmest suggestion of silver highlights, now more memory than matter. There were circular, stone columns here, of course – eight of them. They were too big for the room, and made serviceable table arrangements mostly impossible. The room instead had an odd variety of chairs, benches, stools, and loveseats, donated by wizards over the years to the cause of making a good impression on new inductees (and delivery folk).

Someone had also left a small wooden table near one of the columns (table surfaces were always in serious demand in that place, so this one had been bolted to the floor by Dangett’s sister, Maudleyn), upon which were arrayed various light reading materials, written mostly in scripts indecipherable to anyone who had not already spent years learning the abandoned dialects, for the sole purpose of reading old manuscripts like these.

The core shaft once provided ready access to many of the original levels of the South Peak, for those equipped for flight, climbing, or slow falling, but was now abandoned and considered dangerous. No-one truly knew how far down the original builders had gone, before calling the whole project complete, but objects tossed into the Core’s depths would fall for a very long time, before the sounds of their ricocheting off of nameless features below disappeared along with them into its depths.

\*\* The official Arm had remained the same actual length (as measured by the best techniques available at *that* time, in any case) from WiM 813 to WoM 211, and had belonged (in a manner) to Rhubent the Beige, identified during a Kingdom-wide contest to identify the most perfectly average physical specimen among properly licensed, practicing wizards. Rhubent, a truly average specimen in so many respects, also provided the official calibration for the Knuckle, Nose and Whisker (the last one used primarily by alchemists and master stonecutters). It was commonly known, though rarely discussed, that the contest had been a trick to get the kingdom’s magic-using caste – who had at that point in history scattered throughout the land, selling parlour tricks and home remedies for food, lodging, and occasionally silver - to participate in the annual wizard census, as the Mountain’s official records had gone up in a flash fire in WiM 814.

In WoM 212, Sallus Crumpt (incidentally, the great, great, grandson of Rhubent’s runner-up in that contest, Medgar the Grand Medium of Halfway) published a very convincing paper in his first tenured year, the data of which strongly suggested that average wizard sizes had been shrinking noticeably (and to some, alarmingly) in that thousand-year period, making the Rhubent Arm an increasingly meaningless unit of measurement. Although many wizards came forth at once to hotly contest the insinuation they had become smaller than their predecessors of yore, the data did appear to be sound. Wizards for at least the past two generations had, in fact, been quietly discussing the anomaly that was the Arm; astute members from each successive generation would at some point note how much larger the Arm was than any of their own arms, and they would joke, (at times uneasily), about how large a man Rhubent must have been. Of course, all the measurements on record pertaining to the man were naturally given in his own units - his right Arm was, of course, exactly 1 Rhubent Arm long, and his left was .997 Rhubent Arms long, his nose measured 1 Nose in length, and so on. Somebody once constructed a correct-size Simulacrum of Rhubent, which stayed on display in a hallway for roughly a decade, until it got moved during a cleaning project and was never found again.

Each generation, more wizards became astute to this observation, but it wasn’t until Crumpt’s paper lit the match beneath the political firestorm that was the Elder Steering Committee for the Redefinition of the Arm – which met almost weekly from WoM 213 to WoM 219, that the old Arm was retired, and another contest launched to find a new one. This was finally found in 222, attached to Bettanie Estherflutters, a Witch from Turnip Patch (when it was still called that), who officially registered as a Hedge Wizard in 212, and then spent the better part of the next decade magically transforming her own form to attain compellingly average measurements, with if it can be said, stunning success.

Interestingly, the Knuckle, Nose and Whisker had not changed much in that time, according to Crumpt’s calculations, so while the Arm is now Bettanie’s (she is still alive, and therefore permitted to keep her actual arm until that circumstance changes), the other measurements are still attributed to Rhubent.

Once the Arm became recalibrated, one can imagine the legwork involved, given how many books, scrolls, tablets and glyphs bearing Arm-based measurements required updating. Given the Estherflutter Arm was approximately 2/3rds the length of The Beige’s Arm, every written and spoken measurement suddenly felt larger, to that generation still accustomed to the old unit. Archways that used to be four Arms high were now six Arms high, even though that had not observably changed size. This created at least two new fringe branches of Magical Philosophy, and made most of the Mountain’s inhabitants (except the Booknyrds) feel, subconsciously, as though the whole place had gotten roomier. Imagine the power of suggestion, multiplied by nearly four-hundred wizardly minds in the enormous echo chamber of a Mountain dedicated (well, the tunnels through it anyhow- the Mountain’s own dedications and intentions are another matter entirely) to the pursuit of magical thinking. That is what was going on, and still is.

The rescribing of texts to incorporate the new Estherflutter Arm was an unforeseen and temporary economic boon of a make-work project for the Mountain, unlocking long-forgotten elemental science grants from the distant and increasingly removed capital city of Owl. Trade colleges opened in Owl and also in Glassworks, licensed by the Mountain to teach proper rescribing techniques.

This was mind-numbing work for the rescribes, though it paid well enough. Having entered the trade believing they were being fast-tracked into the mystical arts at the legendary Mountain, they instead found themselves employed, on a rotating contract basis for the most part, at various Inns located on the periphery of the Everlund Wood – the grand and deadly-dense forest surrounding the Mountain for so many miles in all directions, that there was practically no point in the Kingdom one could view the peaks with the naked eye, except from the top of one peak, looking at the other – rescribing books and scrolls from lonely rooms, from first light to evening.

The Booknyrds had the much, much harder task of locating, cataloguing, repairing, unshelving, and reshelving each book as it was put through this process. The dust clouds produced by this mass-moving of materials alone nearly killed one fellow cursed with famously weak lungs, and required a three-fold cleaning staff increase for the better part of a year. Much of the dust eventually collected somewhere below the eighth level, where odd, downwardly flowing air currents would often claim scraps of discarded paper, airborne particles, and the occasional unwary insect, drawing them into whatever awaited for them below.

The Rescribing of the Arm, as that massive project had come to be known, began in WoM 223, and lasted until WoM 228, when Owl’s patience with the progress of the grant-funded work finally and fully waned. This left, by some estimations, roughly half the Mountain’s knowledge converted to Estherflutter’s Arms, and the rest still in The Beige’s Arms. Roughly half of each of these materials were caught somewhere between unshelving and reshelving, and you can imagine what kind of a clutter that ended up being.

I will not at this time go into the whole business that was the Great Paraphrasing Movement, among some of the most opinionated of the rescribes, except to say that a number of works not only ended up with second editions containing updated measurements, but entirely new prefaces, editor’s notes, miscellaneous errata, and in some cases, partial structural rewrites.

This is about the time the first Booknyrd got the idea to go on strike.

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These

The young man, laden with college prepatory notes, wrapped in confoundingly mystical finery, and bearing his immense, as-yet-unacknowledged privilege,

The odd pair were often spotted and heard discussing magical theory at all hours - a brightly articulating Mana Architect-in-the-wings, excitedly waving tall, broad, and deep ideas at and over his elder, squat-and-smiling, grey-robed stone of a companion, by the rosy-blue candlelight of the 7th-level Cellibrary, where all the weirdest books - weird even for *wizards*, mind you - were kept (possibly in the hopes that one or two of them might decide to disappear on their own, in time\*).

*\* Some of those books in fact did leave on their own accord now and then, which was not so surprising, given the kind of books that found their way there, which I just mentioned. The word Cellibrary had, unfortunately, been coined by someone when the College's cellars began to be used as libraries, as the College’s need to store old ideas gradually overtook its need to stock food for the coming winters. The name stuck, since the convoluted cogs of the College’s 4th bureaucracy were so fully gridlocked by the time it came to the renaming of the middle-lower chambers, that most of the decisions were technically left to only 4 of the 17 acting Council members, three of whom were in full Winkling at that point, with the other rapidly on his way there.*

The two mismatched men infused that chamber with at least as much creative energy and expression from their oddly-tempered debates over the six or so years Bardlii spent obtaining his Almost-Degree as most of the beleaguered scholars who had written the pages within it had ever managed (when it was their specific lot and profession to do so). This was why the books, as a whole, tolerated the friends’ loud presence at otherwise intolerable hours. Individual opinions amongst the Opinionated Tomes did of course vary, but those are all other stories, tangential to this one.

Dangett - or “Dag-nett”, as roughly half of the people who knew him seemed to prefer – was an eighth-generation Book-Shelver at the College, hailing from a long line of respected Book-Shelvers. The surname *Booknard* was in fact an older word once used to describe the persons responsible for the professional wrangling of magical books – categorizing, tracking and tracing, handling, hauling, cleaning, detailing, re-shelving, and occasionally appeasing each one, throughout its stay in the place.

Though believed to have originally been used as a pejorative by the haughtiest of past wizards to describe their stout and tireless coworkers, the word Booknard had since transformed into a respected family name in the ages-old profession, so essential to the College’s daily function. The name that had once signified a mere Dwarfling and working wretch by common wizard standards, had become instead a badge of greatest respect amongst those same folk, in time. Such was both the power and the mutability of a word or a name in that venerated place. Such was also the power of recognizing one’s role in the grander scheme of things, and making that clearly known. \*\*

\*\* For the best, concise account of the Dreadful Booknard Strikes of 404 A.R., see Plentium Forthwither’s most excellent treatise, The Many Things I Do Remember Correctly, published in 552 A.R., shortly before his final, epic Winking Out.

Still, it was not all so common for wizards of any nature or standing to socialize with the Booknards directly – they were too valuable to the machinery, and needed at the fringes, and in the shadows, out of sight and not underfoot, if most wizards were to have their druthers. A Booknard sighted in frivolous conversation or activity anywhere in the halls of the College was a Booknard clearly needed for some important task elsewhere. Frivolous conversation and activity were to be had by those who had earned that right, through birth, blessings, and hard work.

Bardlii did not see things as other wizards did, however, and did not care about rules of etiquette, only laws of nature. Nature was vast, and its laws were always, to him, inscrutable and potentially limitless. Who needed to mix in the shallower, arbitrary laws of men, who had fleeting lives and capricious minds? Their laws changed too rapidly for Bardlii’s liking, and in ways he did not care to understand. Dangett had been his one true friend (his good parents did not count in this, he had come to learn), and Dangett had the great patience and wisdom of the crystal-bearing rock from which his kind had been hewn, almost nine centuries ago now, when the College was first being carved from the twin mountains it now permeated.

Bardlii was a magical construct, conceived in a laboratory by very loving parents, during a Long Spell lasting approximately half a year. Indistinguishable from a true person in every way that mattered, he lived his life as though he had been conceived as all normal human children were, because his parents taught him to live that way. It was the best way, in their opinion.

They had called him their miracle child, as many parents did of their own offspring, and still do. What manner of creating life will not feel like a miracle, to the happy recipients? That Bardlii’s parents chose to turn to their own profession – the magical arts – to create what they could not create through mundane methods (their words) surprised no one, given who they were. They were good and powerful wizards by that time, battle-tested and well-published, with an uncanny command of natural elements and raw power, both.

Dangett met Bardlii while the youth was in his first year of apprenticeship, under his great uncle Feztas, 11th Council member of the Board of Seventeen, of the 6th Council. I have mentioned this elder wizard already – the one who, at the time this story picks up, was teetering daily, from one moment to the next, at the brink of that colourful fold called the Winkling, a place elder Wizards both aspire to and also shirk from their entire careers. The Winkling is a powerful and solemn time in the lives of many other animals, and with Wizards in particular (don’t even get started about Dragonkind), the special effects accompanying the transition from mortal concerns to concerns of different kinds always made for fascinating scientific, social and diplomatic events at the College, and great dinner party conversation. The time when these men and women’s spirits began to shift hue beyond their kin’s ability to reach – even with the greatest and longest of spells - was of course sad as well, and so making light of the peculiarities of the experience was a traditional and accepted coping mechanism for everybody. Wizards were often not good at addressing their feelings plainly, but one should never assume they do not have them.

Feztas was – and as far as any other wizard could recall, had always been – obsessed with Bubble Magic. He was a prolific inventor, terrible instructor, and a hermit among hermits, locked as he was in a prison of his own devising, which was a cramped, cluttered laboratory with chronically bad ventilation, in the upper bowels of the College’s Southern peak. Finding the place was an exercise is random door-selection and stairwell spelunking, to be kind. The directions were technically scribe-able on a single sheet of velum (double-sided), but it had become a challenge for the Wizards in his circle to attempt to find their way to the room by memorization and dead-reckoning alone. It was a point of pride, to have visited Feztas and then returned, without a cheat sheet or any other magical aid. Nobody attempting this adventure ever succeeded on their first try, and nobody who disappeared while attempting it did not (eventually) return from whence they started out\*.

Feztas often had a cauldron on full boil, and was at the moment

\* Some would emerge quite dehydrated and disoriented, and the game of finding one’s way to Feztas’s lab and back again without a map and travelling notes was eventually banned, for safety reasons. Feztas himself voted against the ban, since the practice had led to far fewer drop-in visitors when maps and notes had been discouraged, but he was outvoted. This did not stop a few wizards from continuing the challenge in secret. There was, for example, at least one scoresheet found hanging nearly a year later in the 3rd-sub-level East-facing lunch room, with dates and times of successful and unsuccessful sojourns updated monthly, disguised poorly as the mad ramblings of an elder, trying to dream his way toward some fabled treasure room thought to exist on the 11th North sub-basement, or thereabouts. The score sheet of course was eventually discovered, and a new one was posted in some other secret location, known only to the players of the Feztas-finding game, who called themselves the Sojourners, for kicks.

There is still an unconfirmed rumour that Feztas himself sponsors the contest by offering knickknacks and experiment by-products from his lab work to the wizard who can navigate the maze bearing a full-to-the-brim cup of Coppergreen tea, Feztas’s favourite.