

RETROZINE

Two Fandom
Elders,
One More Time!

Summer B 2025 * Issue 15



In This Issue:

Part 3 of "Seeing Double" by Fara Shimbo

Episode 2 of "Mithras" by T. E. Hodden

And Season 2 Episode 3 of the Adventures of the Trouble
by its crew

RETROZINE 15

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Got questions?

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Seeing Double, Part 3

by Fara Shimbo

Chapter Eleven.

An Introduction to the Real Universe.

They walked through Main Dome, and made a right on Darwin Avenue and then through a tube into Campus Dome. Campus Dome was relatively new. Everyone liked it because it spread people out so much more than they were used to. The only people who, in fact, didn't like it, were the people whose job it was to keep meteors from hitting the domes.

There had been the usual architectural brouhaha when the place was built. Even though there was neither rain nor snow nor wind to protect one against, most of the classrooms were, nonetheless, indoors. There were some open-air rooms, but they were rarely used, because one couldn't hear one lecture over the voices of people lecturing next door.

The class area was filled, with all the seniors who had signed up, and three satamuri. And professors and students, and some Genuine Wargentines, filled almost every available space. They sat on rooves and in other class areas, and hung out windows of classrooms. It looked like very few other classes were actually in session.

Thobo pointed out a place for Jon to sit down. Jon looked at it, and then at the rows of desks. "This is not right! This is a tyrannical arrangement!" he said to Thobo.

Thobo grinned and said, "I know." He stood up on one of the desks and clapped for attention. "Before we start here," he said to the crowd, "I'd like to make an important announcement!"

People grumbled impatiently but quieted down. Thobo consulted his clipboard. "I, ahem, seem to be getting a little tight on memory here so some day Real Soon Now I'll be doing a little housecleaning, as it were. And I just thought I'd mention that I could (for a price) ... uh, let's say, *forget* a few little incidents that have occurred in the last few years." He scanned the crowd for the people who Knew Who They Were. "For a little extra consideration, I could even forget to back up a few things...."

The audience murmured ominously.

"My office hours are from 1400 to 1600 on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

"That's extortion!" screamed a professor in the crowd.

"Eh, you're just jealous!" Thobo said as he sat down.

"Let's get rid of these desks," Jon said. It couldn't be done, because the desks couldn't be moved. So Jon walked up and sat in the middle of them. He put his spacesuit down on a chair, and pulled out a small metal hoop. "Let me tell you how it is where I live," Jon said, placing the hoop on a desk, "so you will know why our culture and customs are the way they are."



In what was the front tier of seats, the satamuri harrumphed.

Jon scratched the palm of his hand (or at least that's what he appeared to be doing) and laid it on one side of the ring. It hummed gently, and in the air above it, an image began to form. "There are two localities in the Universe you should understand. One of them is the Klysadel." The image swirled and condensed, into a pair of stars, a brilliant, electric blue giant and a smaller orange companion with a white dwarf companion of its own. "The pair of stars in this universe corresponding to the pair in ours, you call Albireo."

Most people just stared. "So there really are parallel universes," a student said.

"Indeed, there are. Some exactly parallel. Some not quite. Some which started out parallel and diverged. Some entirely different. Our two universes are parallel-diverging."

"How do you know?" said an awed professor.

"I've visited most of them," Jon said.

Several cosmologists who had rushed out from a conference gagged and grumbled.

"Have you ever met yourself?" someone else offered.

"I'm a crashing boor," Jon said. "Anyway. Around the blue star, usually, orbits Tashauneh, Maki's home planet. And theirs too."



The image enlarged and a blue speck orbited among the two stars. The orbit was extremely erratic-looking, and once the small planet left the orbit of the blue sun completely to circle the orange star twice before returning to a more usual route.

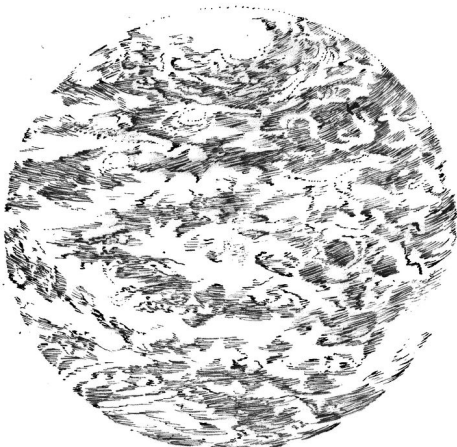
"'Tashauneh' means 'conductive to rearing first contactors.' That's why this planet was chosen." The two stars vanished, and the solid-looking image of the planet enlarged until islands and continents could be seen.

The world was mostly ocean, and the ocean, it seemed, was mostly ice.

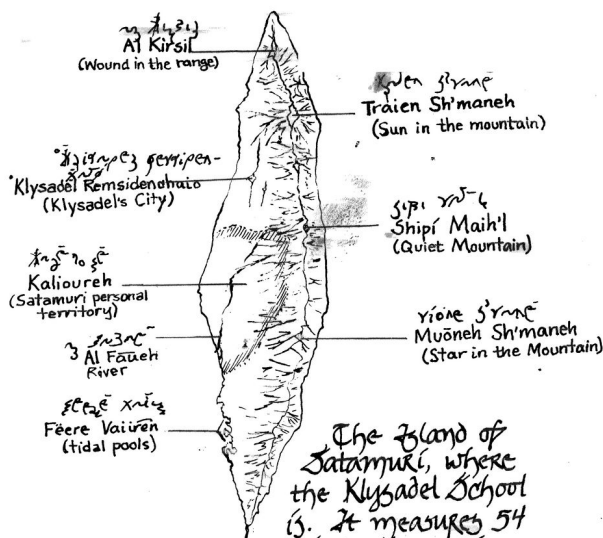
"Tashauneh meets our criteria for a home-world in a number of ways. It was cold enough for satamuri and various of

the prey and other related species to live healthy, long lives. The two stars were beneficial to them for the timing of various annual cycles. The orbit is so unstable it makes it rather a bitch for people to come to visit us much, as we never publish next year's projected orbit in advance. The inhabitants we found when we arrived were almost entirely ocean dwelling, so we were not displacing anyone. And it has the neatest cave."

The image of the planet dissolved, and in its place was the interior of a crystal cave. Probably the only people who didn't gasp when they saw it were the satamuri, Jon, and Thobo—the only people there who'd seen it before. Jon and Thobo were quiet. The satamuri howled in tribute to Home.



The Klysadel, a class H planet with a very turbulent atmosphere and four moons. It revolves around the blue component of a double (class A7) star in 3.395 earth years. Klysadel rotates in 31 hours, and its axis of inclination is 14° .



The Island of Satamuri, where the Klysadel School is. It measures 54 km in length, and its location is marked by the arrow in the upper right of the picture at left.

Klysadel's City Location & Layout

The architects of °Klysadel Remsidenchaio were people who were out to build a great city of their own, in all respects; one fortified, not against warriors, but against the curious—who can often be far more dangerous. By means of great levers, the roof of the cave can be pulled up, or lowered, leading only a meter wide entrance. It was built to look natural in its surroundings; its power comes from geothermal energy—the only fuel burning plant is used solely to move the roof and the cliff-face when necessary.

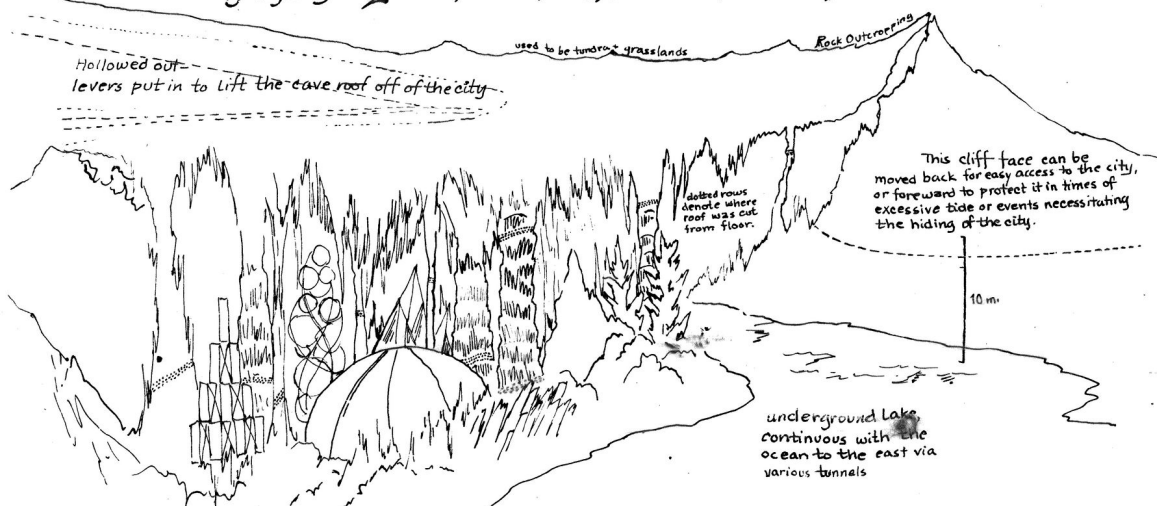


Illustration reprinted from Monkey of the Inkpot. I (Fa) no longer have the zine so I don't know which one; it was probably in 1975 or so. I had just discovered calligraphy pens when I did this. Please forgive me. I was young and stupid at the time.

The image changed, as it would if it were being seen by someone walking through the cave. The path led through a tunnel of white crystals into a tunnel of clear ones, and then into an enormous room. To get to the main part of it, one had to walk across the tops of what must have been enormous stalagmites and columns, which had been sawn away just a few inches above the waterline of a subterranean lake. The image stopped to look down on the top of one of the columns. One could see layers of onyx, then a row of crystals embedded in agate, then a layer of other crystals embedded in jade.

The satamuri smacked their lips. Jon said, "The satamuri named this spot 'Columns Halved.' They're very unimaginative."

The image 'normalled' again and the viewers were moved on. On the other side of Columns Halved were mounds of beautiful crystal forms bordering a mosaic path.



At the end of the path was a building made of large spheres of opaque glass or marble, wound around with a filigree of brass. "That's unnatural!" said a Geology major. "All those minerals in one place?!"

"Well, yes," Jon said, "it is unnatural. The Klysadel has been in many caves, but you must know that solar systems and planets in them are often unstable. We have left three other planets, two because of novae and one because of a meteor impact. We took the best of each place with us. But this is where the Shauneh are trained. And this is where people like myself live. From this point, we radiate out—"

The satamuri hooted and screamed.

"Like plague from a bad well."

One of the twins threw a wad of paper.

The image went dark as Jon took his hand off the ring. He rubbed his eyes. "So now that you have seen our home, what kind of people do you think we are?"

The students sat, dumbfounded. Someone ventured an "uh..."

Finally someone growled, "That's a trick question!"

"It is indeed," Jon said. "But I will say this. You have, now, what many in the uni-verse wish they never had.

You have," he said, turning and waving inclusively at the satamuri, "the opportunity to find out."

The satamuri grinned in an awful and terrifying manner.

"You see, what we do at the Klysadel is train these things in the art of being first contactors. Some of them actually, when they are done, go into this line of work. Most do not, partly because the job is difficult and partly because there are not that many new people out there right now to contact. Its the most who do not that you have to worry about."

"Well, we already have a first contactor here," said a kid in the nearest row.

“Yes, and from both your cordiality to us all and the way you all kept your distance, I’d say sahn’s done sahn’s job well.”

“So why are the other satamuri here?”

Jon leaned forward. “You wanted to learn about intergalactic customs, right?”

“Yeah...”

“Well, on account of the fact that most people in the universe are deathly allergic to most other people in the universe and thus really don’t have much to do with one another except by mail, there’s really only one intergalactic custom you need to know about.” Jon turned around and pointed to the satamuri. “Them.”

The satamuri screamed, and in a swirl of motion and ungodly noise were gone.

Thobo leaned over to Jon. “Yes,” he said, “but what is it that the others do?”

Jon’s eyes turned golden. “Well,” he said, “primarily, *they steal things.*”

Thobo patted Jon on the shoulder. “You’re old enough to take care of yourself,” he said. He got up and raced back to his flat. He threw a pile of laundry off the pot that his asparagus fern once (and possibly still) lived in, and fished around in the soil for a key. He pulled open the refrigerator and used the key to open a tiny box hidden inside an old milk carton. Inside the box was another key.

“Great so far,” he said to nobody because it seemed to be the thing to do. He put the second key in his pocket and ran with it to the Campus Administration building. No one was there (they were all trying to listen in on Jon’s lecture). He threw aside a carpet, pulled up a large glass tile, and used the key to open yet another box and retrieve a mag strip card from inside it.

He took the card to Mr. Jimmie’s restaurant, and presented it to the proprietor. “Ham and eggs,” he said.

Mr. Jimmie said, “Oh... oh! Oh yeah. Ham and eggs, you said. Right.” He disappeared downstairs into his kitchen, and returned a moment later with an egg.

Thobo took the egg and the first key, punched the egg with it, and out came the opal. Thobo slumped back in relief.

Jimmie Giordano smiled. “You know, you’d save yourself a lot of trouble if you’d go out and get these things the night before you want ‘em, you know what I mean?”

“And let everybody follow me and find out where they are?” Thobo harrumphed.

Giordano shrugged elaborately. “So, it’s better than get ulcers or whatever it is you guys get.”

“Probably,” Thobo admitted, as he slipped the opal into the hip pocket of his favorite old jeans and headed out the door.

There were no satamuri behind him. There were none in the trees. He couldn’t hear any echoranging. There weren’t any in front of him either. He grinned and returned to the class.

Chapter 12.

The World Falls Apart.

Jon was busily describing a people called the Viffrakket, who except for one well educated and thus “poorly adjusted” bunch who were fairly decent at building spaceships, still lived in tribal villages and spent most of their time practicing geomancy, and become quite wealthy from it besides. “They spend their time in the forest eating trees and you bring them rocks and they tell you your fortune and then they eat the rocks.”

“Speaking of which,” Thobo said as he sat down next to Dark Jon. He closed his eyes very smugly and hoped the appropriate people squirmed.

“They don’t have it yet, eh?” Jon said.

Thobo reached in his pocket, took out the opal and held it up for everyone to see. Everyone gasped at the sprintling colors and was about to say “oooo!” when the gemstone disappeared right out of Thobo’s fingers.

Thobo screamed.

Serai Yodo hooted and jumped up and down.

Thobo jumped the animal, but sahn was out of his way too quickly. He landed face down across a desk.



Serai, in a tree, looked down like a puppy and hooted pityingly. Sahn held out sahn’s hand, and the opal glittered in sahn’s palm. “That was too easy,” Serai said, dropping the stone in front of Thobo, who snatched it up. “We never steal anything unless you’re paying attention to it.” Sahn cackled and galloped away.

Off in the distance, The Bell rung, signifying the end of the period. Little Krilla Milla giggled, scribbled, and scooted away.

Like moths to a furnace, professors and students alike crowded around Dark Jon, asking all kinds of questions at once. But Jon had learned a lot from the satamuri over the years; he whirled around and snapped at the learned scholars until they backed off in panic. It showed that the professors had learned a lot from satamuri too, because they did, indeed, back off.

“Nobody gets an advantage over anyone else,” Jon said. He ran over to Thobo and said, “Want to see my latest invention?”

Thobo considered swallowing the opal. “Wait a minute,” he said. He stood on a chair and scanned the crowd, looking for Ranger, who didn’t appear to be around. “Yeah,” he said at last, “But I’d like to find my kid brother first.”

The two pilots marched out of campus dome and into Main; and there they noticed Ranger flipping through a copy of the Wargentín Daily Demagogue. “What are you reading about,” Jon asked as they reached him.

Ranger put the newspaper down. “Oh, just scanning. Besides you, the most amazing thing that happened in the solar system today seems to be the theft of an old Victorian era chair from the Sotheby’s in New York.”

Thobo said, “Never mind that, I need a favor.”

Ranger widened his eyes a little.

“I need you to hide this for me,” Thobo whispered.

“Beg pardon?” Ranger said. “I know fewer hiding places than you, I suspect.”

“No, no,” Thobo said hurriedly. “I mean, hide it in you somewhere!”

Ranger was utterly aghast. “Why?!”

“Serai Yodo is after it.”

Ranger backed off. “No thank you! I’m not having any satamuri rip ME apart!”

“Well, wherever they are they surely heard you!” Thobo turned to Jon. “Hey, can we hide it in your ship?”

Jon leaned down, stared into Thobo’s eyes and said “No.”

Thobo growled, but it didn’t do any good.

Chapter 13.

A Homecoming Of Sorts.

The twins and Serai Yodo returned to Soaru, where Maki had not set foot in almost seven Lunar years.

It was a very strange sensation, to be in the deep, purple halls again, to look through the floor at the lunar surface and see it in crimson and browns. The blue and gold lights which raced up and down the wall were still as familiar as the scent of sahn’s own fur.

Maki had spent almost as much time as a Roamer aboard Soaru as sahn had as a shauneh. Now sahn raced around the rings and struts of the ship, delighting in its sameness, happy beyond voice that all was as sahn had left it, that the walls reverberated with the same echoes as they had long ago.

Maki galloped and swung on and on, just for the joy of being able, for once, to move quickly in long, straight lines without a space-suit. The ropes and chains were still where they had hung. The trees had grown, though.

Along the outer rings were the private compartments that each crew member made for sahn’s self. Where the outermost ring met the Eastern Strut, Maki’s own den was still preserved, with all sahn’s old junk lying on the floor exactly where sahn had left it.

Reki Nahi and Serai Yodo followed at a discrete distance, nuzzling and embracing as their old companion seemed more and more at ease.

Maki entered the room and curled up in sahn’s old nest. It was as if sahn had never left, as if the last seven years were a side trip somewhere. Outside the window, the individual muonet sat at their stations, even Fa Chen who, granted, enjoyed visiting sahn’s old friends. Maki had been annoyed by this at first; without Fa Chen, it was very easy to feel stranded on the Moon. But the feeling wore off after a while, as Maki and Thobo had become fast friends. Fa Chen now sat in sahn’s accustomed place, next to Hama Kii, Reki Nahi’s starship companion, next to Okaoeh, next to Sapa—

Where was Sapatoth? Maki could not re-member even once seeing Brebi’s starship out of place.

Maki sat up, still staring out the window. “Soaru: ha’naikh!”



Almost immediately, an image of the star-ship's imbi appeared in the room. "Mae?" sahn said in an almost ethereal voice.

The very tip of Maki's tail began to twitch. "Has this become commonplace?" Maki ask-ed, pointing to the spot where Sapatoth had been.

"Sapatoth disengaged early this morning," the imbi replied.

"And went where?"

"I do not know."

"Brebi went also?"

"That is so."

"Thank you," Maki said, leaning down again.

The imbi bowed and disappeared.

The fur along Maki's spine stood on end, but then sahn shook and looked around... all the old junk!

Pieces of starship hull material in brilliant, transparent colors were piled here; sound recordings were piled there... Maki carefully stepped over a few blankets, artfully embroidered but whose colors had faded over the years, and picked them up. Music from five worlds and nearly thirty species. Sounds of the wind in the forest. A recording of wild satamuri howling....

Maki shook the latter one—it still played!—sahn added sahn's own voice to the ancient song.

Down the hall, two other voices joined in.

And happiest of all was Reki Nahi, who had waited for this day for a very long time.

Chapter Fourteen.

A Talk With An Old Satamuri.

Back on the Lunar surface, Thobo and Jon were strolling down Darwin Avenue extolling the virtues of their ideal spaceships when Erika Kaye raced up to them, grabbed Thobo by the arm and proceeded to drag him toward the spaceport. She succeeded, too, and Jon felt compelled to follow. Kaye dropped down into her chair. "I've been tracking that big ship," she said, "you know, just for the hell of it, and..."

"And?"

"And a few hours ago, this little ship Chen's size disengaged from it."

"Okay..."

"Well, you know, I worry. I just want you to tell me it's okay when this happens. So anyway, you see, this little ship is back and has not docked again."

"So?"

"Well, you know, I thought maybe it's just Chen but it's not Chen!"

"Well, you know," Thobo said, shrugging. Jon was less unconcerned. "Show me," he said to Kaye.

Kaye was delighted! It was so rarely that she could get anyone to agree that things really were as bad as she thought they were. "Yeah, sure, now you look here," she said, vacating her seat. Soon a video image of Soaru appeared.

“You know,” said Jon, “it’s considered phenomenally impolite to scan people or keep track of them like this.” He leaned over. “But with Soaru around you sort of” He looked up at Thobo. “She’s right, it’s not Chen.”

“So?”

“It’s Brebi Kissim’s ship.”

“Big deal.”

“Well, yes, on the great cosmic scale that’s true, but it’s still interesting since to anyone’s knowledge, Brebi’s ship hasn’t undocked in over 100 years.”

“So?”

Thobo suddenly stopped. “Wait a minute.”

“A-HA! As you say.”

“I thought satamuri only lived for 30 years or so.”

“This is true.”

“And ships were never ‘handed down.’”

“Also true,” Jon said, rubbing his eyes.

“Oh, no.” Thobo leaned against the wall with a thud.

“Oh, no?” Kaye said sheepishly.

“You know how I’m what Asavenet get when they build *maileiau* and Thobo’s what you get when you do the same?” Jon said to her.

“Uh...”

“Brebi is what satamuri get when they tried to build a *maileiau*. Three millennia ago,” Jon said, and he didn’t sound very re-assuring.

“Oh, no!” Kaye said, leaning on Thobo with a thud.

Thobo put his elbows on her shoulders and his chin in his hands. “I wonder where my brother is?” he said to a wall.



Scene from *The Perfect Crime*, dating back to the 1990s, but relevant here. *The Perfect Crime* was nominated for an Ursula Major Award back in its day.

Thobo’s brother was, at this point, a guest in a very old muðnet starship, one which had not flown free for a great many years—anybody’s years. He had been out checking tunnels when a spacesuited satamuri had come up to him and led him away. He assumed it was Maki, but watching it he saw that it was just a hologram of a satamuri in a spacesuit (he wondered about that) ... and on seeing the starship, he knew it was not Maki. The only other muðnet he had ever entered was filled with carpets, small chewed-up toys and a few ropes and books. This one too had all these things, but it also had a very antique and exquisite mahogany writing desk, dark, brooding wainscoting along one partition wall, and a map of London hanging behind him.

“So, what is missing, then?” Brebi said.

“Gas light,” was the only thing Ranger could think of. A top hat, which he thought of next, would have seemed very out of place on a satamuri.

Brebi leaned back. “Yes, I have done some research into it, but I think a holographic imitation will have to do. Gas being so dangerous in a closed space.”

Ranger nodded. He wanted to ask where Brebi’d gotten this stuff but he decided he was better off not knowing. He pointed to the map and when Brebi turned to it he asked, “Planning to rob the Crown Jewels, are you?”

Brebi turned back and stared at Ranger out of one eye in a way that conveyed utter disgust. “I would never do anything so easy,” sahn said.

Ranger shifted and just said “Oh.”

Brebi grunted and slowly turned away. “However....” sahn said, fingering an elaborate glass paperweight.

“Yes?”

“However, since you have shown me the direction my career will take, I am willing to make a deal with you.”

“Which is?”

“I will agree to leave you out of all my future plans, out of... let us say, gratitude. On one condition.”

“Well, since I don’t know exactly what your future plans are, I don’t see how I could possibly enter into such an agreement.”

Brebi grunted.

“Perhaps if you were to tell me what you had in mind?”

Brebi spoke slowly and softly. “I have in mind glory. Not only for myself but for my former companions, whom, you may possibly have noticed, have grown a little soft of late.”

“I don’t know your companions well enough to judge them,” Ranger said, seating himself on a rug.

“You know one of them, and have, for many years.

Forsaking Soaru and actually becoming a shauneh is the worst form of becoming soft.”

“And you feel the others may go the same way?”

Brebi leaned forward and for the first time met and held Ranger’s eyes. “I know the others are becoming soft. Serai Yodo has made no attempt to add to our ranks since Maki and Nahi were added. Usually the Soaruet are six or eight. Now they are only two. I fear that soon they will be only one. Reki Nahi has been ... has been skittish and most unexciting since Maki left. I fear that seeing Maki again, and seeing that Maki is apparently living comfortably, may cause the other twin to waste sahn’s self as well. With only Serai Yodo—even with as much damage as Serai Yodo can do—the Soaruet will be gone.”

Brebi sat back and sighed. “And the celebration and relief that will abound in the uni-verse on that day will be too awful to bear.”

“So what do you propose to do about it then?”

“Hone their skills a little, perhaps.”

“I see. Give them something to live for, then.”

“I have always fancied the idea of an enemy so skilled and cunning that he honors you by opposing you. I have never seen the idea so well expressed until you pointed out to me the most perfect role model I have ever be-held. I am grateful to you.”

“And you are willing to repay your debt of gratitude to me on one small condition.”

“Well put, *sharethe maileiau*.”

Ranger leaned forward onto the desk and held the satamuri’s gaze. “Which is what?”

“That you answer me honestly two questions.”

“About four things?”

“Do you agree?”

Ranger sat absolutely still until Brebi began to squirm. It was a long time. “Agreed,” sahn said at last.

“Two questions,” Ranger said, leaning back but never for a second breaking the satamuri’s gaze. “Then I’m leaving.”

“Where,” Brebi said, picking up a pencil and fingering it, “does Thobo Haradu get his famous gems?”

Ranger smiled. “Underground. Next question.”

Brebi began to chew on the wood, then dropped the pencil. “What would it take to return Maki to the Soaru?”

Ranger folded his arms across his chest. “Why do you want to know that?”

“Reciprocal questions were not a part of our agreement.”

“Then, in honesty, I don’t know.”

Brebi cocked sahn’s head, but Ranger said nothing more.

“You may exit the way you came,” the old satamuri said at last. Sahn got up and disappeared into another part of the ship. A door behind Ranger slid open, and he was very happy to be able to jump out of it. He picked up his gas-checking equipment and started walking toward the domes. Behind him the starship lifted off. He did not turn around to watch it go.

Ranger walked through the spaceport airlock and into the lobby of the spaceport. The place was deserted. He could hear three different answering machines all being used continuously. They were saying, “Due to circumstances beyond our control, Wargentopolis is closed. Tourist visas will be honored at a later date. We will notify you when we reopen.”

Ranger wondered what Kaye would think if she realized how beyond control he suspected circumstances were going to get.

Then he got a really nasty idea.

He walked into Campus Dome where class was just letting out. When he reached the corridor which led to Jon Seales classroom, he began skipping and whistling merrily.

As if on cue, Seales stalked out of his room. “YOU!!” he shouted. “What do you want?!”

Ranger stopped in front of him and smiled grandly. He grabbed Seales by both shoulders. “I just wanted to let you know that I have achieved the purpose for which I was created. Congratulations!” He kissed Seales on both cheeks, shook the man’s pale, limp hand and went skipping and whistling merrily on down the hall.

All Seales could do was blather.

Down the hall, Little Krilla Milla said “Wow!!” She chewed her pencil into a point and scribbled on her clipboard.

To Be Continued...



by T. E. Hodden

Season One: The Defence Of The Realm

Episode Two: Secrets And Origins

January 1993

Prelude

The Overture

To: All Romeo Clearance

From: Sir Clifford Briggs, MITHRAS

Ref: EMERGENCY BRIEFING

Within the last six hours we, and our allies around the world, have detected the arrival of Karnache Probes, in Barghest Bridge, Wales, in Neame Creek Australia, and in Port Abadon, Alaska. These alien devices use a mix of magic and technology to create a zone of Silence. Within a radius of six miles around each of these probes all humans and other Sentients have been rendered into a deep, unnatural sleep, all electronic devices have been nullified.

This department last encountered the Karnache in 1973, when they such probes identified superhuman champions who were abducted, to fight in their gladiatorial contests (a ruse to identify the greatest warriors, who would be cloned, to fill the Karnache's military with cheap, expendable cannon fodder).

Today their aims seem quite different.

The Australians have requested the aid of MITHRAS under the Wildfire Protocols. Journeymen One and Four are on their way, along with Professor Sylvester, one of our analysts.

The Americans have requested the aid of the First Family, including a former MITHRAS agent, John Bardiche. We are coordinating our efforts with them.

By the time you read this, I will be travelling to Barghest Bridge with Journeyman Three, and Miss Tillinghast, our other analyst.

We are hopeful that with our combined expertise, the situation will be quickly, and safely, resolved. But their appearance at BarOkghest Bridge is especially troubling.

Anybody Roseta Clearance or above should now refer to files labelled SLINGSHOT.

Sapphire City, USA

Phillipa ‘Flip’ Jones’ comm-watch buzzed on her wrist, the clock-face flashing bright red.

She sat up, and glanced around.

None of the students had noticed. They were all sat in rapt silence, mesmerised by Professor Tennant’s lecture, most of them too enthralled to take notes.

Tennant’s lecture on Grey Numbers, his field of research, trailblazing new frontiers in Mathematics and Chaos Theory, was probably going to be of limited use, or interest, to the eager students on the Pre-Med syllabus, but he was the star player of the University faculty, young, handsome (if you liked skinny men who were all cheek bones and puppy dog eyes), and rock-star famous (with as many hours spent on TV as in a lecture hall over the last few years). There were a few kids on the course who had only chosen Sapphire because it promised at least one lecture with the somewhat dashing Irishman.

He paced constantly as he spoke, gesturing wildly with his hands.

Tennant paused, and drew back his sleeve.

He too wore a Dosela-First comm-watch. And its screen was also flashing red.

For a moment he stood frozen, then he cleared his throats. “I am very sorry. I will be unable to continue. I have a matter of urgency to attend to. If you will all excuse me, I thank you for your attention, and... And I will return to see you all again as soon as I have time.”

Flip tapped the screen of her watch. The dot matrix of the LCD display melted away, replaced with a simple scrolling message: I’M AT THE QUAD.

She gathered her belongs, and slipped out the hall with the crowd.

A few moments later she was stepping out from the blissful air conditioned cool of the campus buildings, and out into the muggy, merciless heat of an afternoon in Sapphire.

She hurried across the campus to the grassy quad at the heart of the university.

A lot had changed over the last six or seven weeks.

It wasn’t just that Flip had moved to an entirely different city, that she had cut her hair short and dyed it black, or even that she had taken to dressing less fashionably, and a little smarter (mostly wearing a blazer over a polo shirt and khakis).

The whole world had changed after Neo-Jorvika.

The horrors of that day had been impossible to carry. Cassie, Flip’s former best friend and then roommate, had coped in her own way, by throwing herself into a romantic relationship with the magician Grace, and dropping college in favour of learning the arcane arts.

Cassie had been hanging around with the First Family full time, acting as Grace’s apprentice. At first they had kept in touch. Then, since Christmas, Cassie had tended to be busy whenever Flip called, and their conversations had become less and less frequent, until they were pretty much forgotten.

Flip had gone home for the holidays, but hadn’t been able to face Christmas. She had spent a lot of time in sweatpants and her cosy hoodie, hiding under blankets from all the thoughts that were waiting to pounce on her, in the quiet moments.

Artemis Dosela-First had been true to her word. The First Family had pulled some strings, and helped Flip find a place at a new college, that would let her pick up on the Pre-Med syllabus, and continue her studies.

Then Hank's identity had been revealed to the world.

Apparently, for years he had been using his journalism as a cover for doing legwork for the First Family, burrowing into history books and public records to chase leads and dig up information.

But now... the world knew that Hank Wessex was an alias for one of the world's foremost superheroes. He couldn't do any subtle investigations because he drew attention wherever he went.

So, in the slack-water days between Christmas and New Year's, before Flip had even started packing, Hank had dropped from the sky. They had sat on the swing bench, on the porch, drinking hot chocolate (Flip's mom made the best hot chocolate, with whipped cream, and grated candy-cane), while Hank asked if she wanted to do something kind of cool.

"Come on kid," he said with a smile. "I know you will be good at this."

"What?" She scowled at him. "Why? I mean... I'm nobody. When the crisis hit, all I could do was work in the kitchen."

Hank chuckled. "Do you know what I saw that day? I saw a good friend, who, when her friend was a witness to a terrible and dangerous criminal, stood by that friend. When her friend was brought into my world, into the Sanctuary, she still stood by that friend. And when the world fell to pieces, she stepped up to ask what she could do."

She had sipped her drink. "That might have been Cassie."

Hank raised an eyebrow. "Okay, but it *had* to be you who stepped up to Grace, and warned her to play gently with Cassie's heart."

Flip couldn't argue that.

"You are good people," he said.

"But, that's all I am," she whispered.

"Maybe for now," Hank said. "But you are already learning to be so much more. Your grades are excellent. You are going to be a Hell of a doctor, whichever kind of doctor you choose to be. I fully expect you to excel in your studies. And... We need good doctors, with the heart to do what they can for people."

Flip smiled. "Maybe you think too much of me."

"Maybe. But you will prove me right." He smiled. "And... If you want to make your college experience more interesting, I will do a deal. If you help me with a few little jobs here and there, I will see that your tuition costs are always covered, right up until you get your PhD. Or beyond. And, if you enjoy the work, I will make sure we add some more interesting courses to your syllabus. Forensics, criminology... Stuff that will, if nothing else, make you look interesting when you interview for placements."

Flip had agreed without hesitation.

Her comm-watch had gone off a few times over the last few weeks. Usually it had been fairly simple research tasks, digging around for simple answers, but it had always been interesting, and had never been boring.

It was Artemis First who was waiting on the usual bench in the Quad, dressed 'incognito' in jeans and a gilet, with a baseball cap over her white-gold hair, mirrored glasses over her amber eyes, and scuffed trainers.

She had a tray of milkshakes from the place in the mall.

"Flip!" Artemis hopped to her feet. "Hey!"

Flip braced herself. Arti was cute as a button, and sweet as honey, but she never settled for a handshake when a hug was an option, and tended to forget her own strength, when she scooped people off the ground.

“Hey!” Flip managed to squeak as the bear-hug stole her breath away.

Arti set her down. “We have... a situation. Have you seen the news?”

“Port Abadon?” Flip asked.

Arti nodded. “We are going in to investigate. I’m pretty sure I can handle the alien monolith thing...well, with a little help. We need somebody to help John dig around in the local library, and the city archives, to try and work out why the Monolith is there. We need to know what the Karnache are looking for.”

Flip blinked. “You want me to... go into the town, where people are falling asleep, because of alien magic?”

Arti smiled. “I know it’s a big ask, but you will be safe. Hank will be with you, and...” She looked past Flip. “Professor!”

Professor Tennant strolled across the green, in his tan suit, and Panama hat, his hands in his pockets. “Arti! Hello! And... the only Pre-Med student who brought a notebook to my lecture for notes, rather than an autograph.” He smiled. “Port Abadon? Is it them?”

Artemis nodded.

He frowned. “What are they after?”

“We don’t know,” Artemis admitted. “Flip is going to find out.”

Tennant glanced at Flip. “Okay.”

He didn’t have time to brace himself, before Artemis grabbed him in a hug.

Barghest Bridge, Wales

“We are three minutes out,” the pilot reported, over the Comms-Net. “Your orders sir?”

Sir Clifford Briggs reached up and touched his earpiece. “Circle around the Quarantine Zone first, please Lieutenant. I want a look-see before we touch down at the mobile command.”

Cliff was tall, dark, and (at least to Talia’s eyes) matinee-idol handsome, in a way that had only grown more appealing as he’d started to silver. He was built like a wrestler, but was reliant on the ornate cane that sat beside him. He usually dressed like a gentleman, in a three piece suit; but today he was wearing his leather jacket over a field suit.

“Aye sir,” the Pilot reported.

Talia ‘Tinkerbelle’ Tillinghast braced herself in her seat, as Orca Three Three banked into a turn. She glanced out the window, down at Barghest Bridge.

She thought herself to be squat, plump, and cherubic, with owlsh eyes, and a dorky gap between her two front teeth. Usually she liked to dress office smart and clean cut, in skirt suits, but today she was wearing her wire-rimmed glasses, and pale blue hijab over a drab grey Field Suit (a baggy, light weight but heavy duty suit of overalls, reinforced with protective layers, and flexible armour pads).

Everything was unnaturally still in the town.

The cars had stopped in the road, some at junctions, many in the middle of the road, and many of those had run into the back of each other, or shunted into the parked cars at the side of the road.

There were sleeping bodies scattered around the town, on the station platform, outside the shopping centre, and at the school gates. They had all lain down, quite deliberately, in repose, their heads pointing towards the multi-storey car park in the centre of town, towards the Monolith.

The town itself was a fairly modern market town, with a few quaint old buildings scattered amongst the post-war concrete. The centre of the town had been fairly recently redeveloped, with some modern department stores, and large shopping centre that had assimilated the bus station.

The monolith was a distant glint of light, as bright as the sun against the dank grey sky, atop the multi-storey car park.

Talia's heart was lodged in her throat, terror twisting at her chest, crushing her breath from her lungs. It made her grip the arms of her chair so tight her knuckles were white.

In the corner of her eye, she caught Dusk looking away from the window, glancing at her.

Dusk was the new boy on the team, and... she was still trying to figure him out.

Her first impression, a couple of weeks ago, had been of somebody who seemed nice enough, and kind enough. He was a little taller than her, with an average build, a lop-sided smile, and rusty brown hair swept into side parting. In theory his usual shirt, tie, and tan trousers should have looked reasonably smart, but something about the way he carried himself made them look...a little shabby and scruffy.

Today, he too wore a field suit, along with a tactical gilet, knee pads, and a utility belt.

For a few days, she had thought that was all he was. A...pleasant, amiable, scruffy guy.

Then she had started to notice stuff...

He was younger than she had originally thought, younger than he acted. He carried himself like he was middle aged and needed to rest his back, but he was probably only in his twenties, about her own age, give or take a year or two.

Then she noticed his eyes. They were flint dark, and cold as an ocean abyss. His amiable little smile never reached his eyes.

Once she saw that, she couldn't help but notice so many other things. She noticed the faded scar across the left side of his face, that pulled his expressions askew. She saw the way his body language changed when he was sparring with Andraste down in the training rooms. As soon as they were in the boxing ring, or on the judo mats, he stood taller, and held his head higher. He moved more like a soldier, or a predator.

What she had found really weird was how little he seemed to know about the world. He knew the big stuff, the stuff that would end up in the history books, and he could tell you what was happening *now*, from the news, sports, and TV, but he blanked, or avoided talking about anything more than a year or two old. He apparently never watched TV, heard a radio, or read a single newspaper when he was growing up.

The guy didn't even know what he wanted for lunch. He would always decide that something somebody else (usually Andraste) had ordered sounded really good. He would *seem* to enjoy it too.

"Are you okay?" Dusk asked. His Welsh accent made his voice sound soft and gentle.

She nodded. "I... think so."

He looked her in the eye. "Tink, if you are having second thoughts about getting more field experience, it's better to tell us now, than later. Are you okay to do this?"

Talia stared at Cliff. "I can do this."

He flashed her one of his big, whole milk smiles. "I know you can, Tink."

He almost made her believe it.

Cliff glanced at Dusk. "Are you okay?"

Dusk nodded. "My shields are buzzing, but I think they have this under control."

Cliff's expression softened a little. There was something sorrowful in his eyes. "That's not what I meant."

Dusk nodded again, but didn't say anything. He looked out the window.

Talia glanced between them. "So... do we know what the Karnache are looking for?"

"No," Cliff said, puffing out his cheeks. "But we know they aren't the only ones who have been looking for it. And... It must be buried pretty deep." He cocked his head. "Maybe, once we shut this nonsense down, we will learn a little more about it."

That made Dusk scowl a little.

"Sir," the Pilot reported. "We are on our final approach."

The Mobile Command Centre had been established in the car park for the large supermarket on the edge of town. The Command Centre was formed from a train of three lorry sized vehicles. It was surrounded by military trucks, fire engines, and ambulances.

More military vehicles blocked every road into the town, enforcing the quarantine.

The Orca set down, the engine wash sweeping across the car park like a hurricane.

"Thank you, Khadka," Cliff said, as he put on a paratrooper helmet, modified with a honeycomb pattern of hexagonal tiles. "Are you sure this will work?"

Talia nodded as she put on her own helmet. "Resonance shielding should make us immune to the spell, as long as we are awake. If you take a nap, however, there's a pretty good chance the spell will take hold, and you won't wake up."

Cliff nodded. "Well, there's lovely."

Dusk stepped over. "Do you need a hand?"

"No," Talia said, with more force than she had intended. "I can manage."

She clipped her helmet in place, and stepped into her chair. Because electronic devices, and machinery would fail instantly in the Silence, she had been forced to resort to a chunky, heavy, unpowered chair, with all-terrain wheels.

Cliff gave Talia a quizzical look.

Talia sighed and drew a deep breath. "Can you give us a moment?"

"Understood," Dusk assured her, as he stepped down the ramp.

He scratched at the spiderweb of implants under his scalps. The ones that Cliff had forbidden her to scan or study.

Talia looked at Cliff. "He doesn't need a helmet?"

"He's psionically shielded," Cliff said. "It should be good for magic."

"Okay," Talia said, slowly, trying to keep her voice measured and her anger in check. "So... what is he?"

Cliff thought for a moment. "He's good people. And he's got skills we can use."

"I don't doubt it," Talia said. "But *what* is he? I want to trust him, and I do trust you, but I don't like being lied to, even by omission. So... You should have told us he was an alien."

Cliff choked on a laugh. "What?"

Talia glared at him. "He's an alien. It's why he has no past, why he can't tell us about his childhood, why he has freak-tech wired into his skull, and..." She gestured wildly. "Okay, so on Friday, when I suggested kebabs for lunch? He copied Andraste's order. He always copies her order. So he thought a mixed kebab with all the salad, and burger sauce sounded good. Except... When I went to buy them, I didn't order his with burger sauce. I gave him hot chilli sauce, and lashings of strong garlic sauce."

Cliff's expression hardened. "Tink, this is sounding like something that HR should be involved in."

"He put on a brave face, and ate it happily," Talia said, slowly, "because he didn't know it wasn't what he was asked for. He's alien."

Cliff winced. "He's not alien. Tink, please... It's...complicated, and classified, and... Do you really have to bully him?"

Talia held up her hands, defensively. "Bullying? No. It was an experiment... No. Wait, that sounds worse. I mean..."

Cliff looked her in the eyes. "Trust goes both ways too. Give him a chance to earn yours, and maybe he will trust you enough to be a little more...open."

Talia gritted her teeth, and tried to keep her frustration on a tight leash.

"Please?" Cliff said, gently.

Neame Creek, Australia

Orca One Seven soared through the open skies.

Siobhan Pennywise sat in the co-pilot's chair, watching the clouds, trying not to let her racing heart, and cold terror show through in her 'say cheese' smile.

Today Siobhan was wearing the face she was most comfortable with, the one she still considered her truest self: an impish twenty something, with dark eyes, raven curls, and a hint of freckles. Her field suit was (apart from being a lighter, bluer, shade of grey) more or less the same as the ones she had worn on Black Bag jobs in the past.

Professor Sylvester was in the main cabin of the Orca, sprawled across three seat, wrapped in a blanket, and snoring like a buzzsaw. Apparently one of his many talents was to fall asleep anywhere. He even boasted that he did his best thinking in lucid dreams.

Siobhan had come into the cockpit to escape the nasal cacophony.

Saraswati Khadka glanced over at Siobhan from the pilot's seat. "So... Are you ready to be a big time superhero?"

Khadka was an old friend, the youngest sister of one of Siobhan's oldest and truest friends. Siobhan had known Khadka since she was at primary school, and had watched her grow up. Now days most people assumed Siobhan was the younger of the pair.

Siobhan tutted. “I don’t think I count as either big time, or a superhero.”

“And yet here you are,” Khadka said, raising an eyebrow.

“Ryleth can be the hero,” Siobhan said, quietly. “I’m still just an investigator. I’m just... working more regular hours, with more colourful team mates.”

“Speaking of which...” Khadka muttered, as she checked her display screen. “Here she comes.”

Outside a streak of silver-white light ripped through the clouds. As it got closer, Siobhan could make out the handsome, athletic woman with the buzz cut hair, and aristocratic features flying in the halo of light.

Andraste Ryleth, codenamed Minerva, pulled alongside the Orca, and mimed a salute.

“Good morning!” She declared over the Comms-Net.

Siobhan rolled her eyes and tapped her earpiece. “Nice of you to join us. Did you stop somewhere for coffee?”

Andraste chuckled. “No such luck. Set down at the Quarantine line, and we will proceed in on foot.”

“Understood,” Siobhan responded.

Khadka grinned at her. “So... You are going into the Silence Zone are you? Like... well... a big time superhero?”

“I can’t investigate from out here,” Siobhan muttered.

Khadka adjusted her controls. “Well... Here we go!”

The Iceberg, London

Robin Wren stepped the command post at the centre of Operations Room Three and looked up at the holo-display.

Robin was a dollish trans woman, with a puckish smile, elfin eyes, and a swish of hair whose colour was fluxing between ice white, blossom pink, and baby blue. She leant heavily on the crutch, that had been her constant companion since being injured in the line of duty.

Marius St Germaine was watching her over his mug of coffee.

Robin glanced at him. “What?”

He raised an eyebrow. “I’m wondering what happened to the punk rocking kid.”

Wren glanced down at her silk blouse, heavily embroidered waistcoat, and beige tweed trousers. “I’m briefing Downing Street later. I wasn’t sure they would listen to somebody in a Ramones tee-shirt and stomper boots.”

“Very wise,” August Azrael said, as he swept into the room, with his bodyguard, the Widow. “The Prime Minister may have talked about Chopin and Copland on Desert Island Discs, but he is in fact a Cliff Richards fan, and thinks Hank Marvin is racily rock and roll.” He gestured to the holograms. “Where do we stand, Miss-Co?”

Wren couldn’t help the smile that spread across her lips. “Team One are at Barghest Bridge, and making their way into the Silence Zone. Team two are touching down at Neame Creek, on the edge of the Quarantine, and will be crossing the threshold any moment. The First Family are a few minutes out from the Port Abaddon.”

Marius shook his head. “I should be with them.”

Azrael tutted. “Ryleth can shield her augmentations from the effects of magic. Your augmentations would be shut down the moment you stepped into the Silence. It could kill you.”

Marius stroked his chin. “Even so, there should be a way. I can’t do anything from here.”

Robin smiled. “You could make coffee?”

Marius gave her a look of mock disdain, and sat back in his chair.

Azrael strolled forwards, staring up at the screen. “So... Do you really think this is to do with Slingshot?”

Robin shuddered, as cold shivers ran up her spine. “It would be a remarkable coincidence if not. But it begs the question... Why the interest in these two other locations?”

“Yes,” Azrael said. “That is a troubling thought, isn’t it. Although I suppose everything we learn about Slingshot is likely to be bad news. Even so... if this affords us an opportunity to finally answer the Slingshot riddle... I am intrigued.”

Marius cleared his throat. “And if this wakes up something....incredibly dangerous?”

Azrael smiled. “Then you, and the combined forces of the other RATs will stand ready.”

Marius cocked his head. “Well, here’s hoping coffee is all you need from me today.”

Robin couldn’t stop her misgivings from showing in her smile. “Let’s hope.”

Port Abaddon, Alaska

Flip zipped closed her Hazard Suit, and studied herself in the narrow mirror, before she stepped out into the hold, the whale-belly of Manta-One, the First Family’s jet transporter.

Manta-One’s small bathroom was about as spacious as the washroom on a commercial jet, which left about enough room for her to get changed. The Hazard Suit was a silver and white body glove, with an outer shell that looked like leather, but felt like plastic, and an inner surface that was slightly more spongy, and snug like a wet-suit.

“How does it feel?” John Bardiche (codenamed ‘The Tawny Guard’) asked.

He looked a lot like Artemis, but came across as gangly and willowy, where she was tall and striking. He had the same long, narrow, face, angular features, and white-gold hair. He wore a pair of tinted goggles over his eyes, and an olive drab parka over his Hazard Suit. The quiver on his back contained an antique looking compound bow, and a lot of arrows.

Flip made herself smile. “It’s kind of weird, but I will get used to it.”

John nodded, apparently understanding all too well. “It can take a moment, but you will be fine. The suit adjusts to the temperature around you, it protects from most kinds of radiation, and if you put on the hood and visor, it will protect you from biological, or chemical threats, act as a diving suit, or a space suit.”

The helmet he handed her looked a lot like that for a motorbike, with a streamlined fit, and a narrow visor.

Flip lifted her hood, and put on the helmet. It sealed into place with a hiss of hydraulics. The visor’s tint adjusted to the light levels, and a heads-up-display flickered on. An icon flashed in the corner of her vision.

“You should see a shield emblem?” John asked.

Flip nodded. "Yes."

"Good," John said. "That means the helmet will shield you from the effects of the spell."

"Great," Flip said. "But... These aren't really my colours."

"Mine neither," John said. "But... it's a team thing, right?" He pointed to the semi-rigid, inflatable boat that stood ready on the floor of the hold. "We are assuming the Silence zone will be the same size as the others, which means we will have to set down a couple of miles off the shore of the island, and row in. Once we are ashore, we will head into town. You and I will go dig around the library for clues, while the Professor helps Artemis shut down the Monolith."

Flip nodded. "Okay... so... what's the Professor's deal? Is this something he does a lot?"

John rubbed the back of his neck. "He has history with the Firsts, and with Hank. Artemis trusts him, which is good enough for me."

Flip smiled. "Oh come on, you know what I mean. Is he a robot, or an alien, or..."

"Not as far as I know," he admitted. "And if he was, would it matter?"

Flip's laugh took her by surprise. "I guess not."

John put a hand on her arm. "Are you okay to do this?"

She nodded. "Sure. Yeah. Row a boat, hike into town, and dig through a library? I can do this."

Ninety minutes later, Flip was leaping out the boat, to help John drag it up onto the beach.

Port Abadon was a craggy, rugged island, with rocky hills and dense forests, that rose out of the restless grey ocean. The town was a hardy, pretty, fishing town, that could have been transplanted from anywhere in New England. The buildings along the waterfront were 'Mom and Pop' boutiques, with timber storefronts on the ground floor, and red brick above.

Flip tried not to look at the people who lay asleep on the sidewalk and in the street. She pretended not to see them.

Artemis (wearing the red plastic bomber jacket over her Hazard Suit) watched Flip from behind her visor. "Concentrate on the job at hand. When we shut this down, they will get the help they need. Okay?"

Flip nodded. "Understood."

Tennant (wearing a body warmer over his Hazard Suit) pointed towards the centre of town. "We should get going."

Artemis hesitated, and took John's hand. "Stay safe."

He nodded. "Sorry, but which of us is going to be muddling about with a magical alien weapon?"

Artemis sighed. "Would it be so hard to just promise me--"

"I will stay safe," John said. "I will keep Flip safe. We will be fine."

Artemis' body language lightened a little. "Well, okay then."

Flip took one last look around, at the eery stillness of the town, before she hurried after John, in the direction of the library.

Neame Creek, Australia

Siobhan held back a little, letting Andraste and Professor Sylvester march ahead, through the sprawling, grassy, farmland. She added a little struggle to her steps, pretending the weight of the Professor's equipment cases that had slowed her down.

Andraste was carrying herself with purpose and confidence, with her back straight, and her shoulders squared, her 'holographic' armour of psionic energy shimmering over her field suit.

Sylvester was glancing around, sweeping his gaze back and forth, his face wrinkled in thought. He, like Siobhan had a modified helmet strapped over the hood of his field suit.

Siobhan paused a moment, closing her eyes, and reaching out with her mind.

She felt Kingfisher's presence manifesting beside her. When she opened her eyes, his Echo, the lingering afterglow of the psychic connection they had once shared, was stood beside her, looking just as he had when they had been most in love: dashing and roguish, in his leather peacoat, black tee, and black jeans, with unfashionably long hair tied back to a tail, rough hewn features, pierced ears, and a small, dark, beard.

Alright our kid? He asked, with a grin. *Having second thoughts?*

"Not yet," she said. "Well, not serious ones anyway." She let her shoulders sag. "What am I even going to do here?"

What you are good at, he said. *Watching, noticing, thinking...* He pointed a finger at her. *You know the drill.*

"Observe the scene," Siobhan said. "Spot the evidence, read the clues, ask the right questions." She smiled. "Okay, so... Andi can fly at several times the speed of sound. Why didn't she just land at the monolith and meet us there?"

Because she has to see you get there safe? Kingfisher suggested. He put his hands on his hips and looked around. *You know I saw a show about this farm once. You know this is just one corner of it? It spreads so far they need helicopters to herd the cattle?*

"Actually, you saw half a show about this place, before you fell asleep." Siobhan felt a flutter of happy memories in her tummy. "I miss you falling asleep on me, watching TV."

Kingfisher didn't seem to have heard. His head was cocked. *Do you feel that?*

There was something in the air... a low hum.

"Guys!" Siobhan shouted, as she veered to the left and hurried up a grassy slope.

At the top, she had a fine view of the wide, slow, creek. The olive waters were rippling and shimmering, as a series of pulsating waves radiated across the surface.

Sylvester caught her up a few seconds later. "Ah." He said. "That's... interesting."

"And not the good kind?" Siobhan asked.

Andraste hovered a foot or two off the floor. "It's coming from the monolith. It's... like ground penetrating radar. I think this is how they are searching for...something."

They walked on.

Sometime later they arrived at the monolith.

The mirrored rectangle stood nine feet above the grass, and (according to Mithras files) would be rooted twice as deep beneath the ground. The silver surface perfectly reflected the sky, and the grassy pastures, but not Siobhan, Andraste, of Sylvester.

The Professor paced around the monolith, studying the reflection.

“Curious,” he said, with a tilt of his head. “Put those down over there, will you?”

Siobhan set the cases down, as instructed.

Sylvester rolled up his sleeves, and popped the lid on one of the cases, releasing a tumble of silver mist, that glittered like frost in the sunlight.

For a split second Siobhan wondered what strange and wonderful gadget or gizmo he was going to produce, imagining some strange toy cobbled together from spare parts and old circuit boards.

Instead he took out a mummified hand, the wrist wrapped in tarred cloth, the fingers turned to candles with tufts of wick.

Her stomach knotted and squirmed.

“What is that?” she spluttered.

“A hand of glory,” Andraste said.

Siobhan grimaced. “What?”

“Technology won’t work here,” Sylvester said, as he lit the fingers with a match. “So... we will have to work with magic.”

The flames on the fingertips leapt high, turning from yellow to a dazzling blue.

Sylvester touched the flames and drew them out, drawing a spell in the air with them, a spiderweb of light and sparkles. The kaleidoscope pattern shifted and rolled, changing shape, and changing form.

“Here we go!” Sylvester said.

The surface of the monolith turned a matte, blank grey.

It rippled like raindrops hitting the pond, as a series of etchings and engravings spread across the surface, a complex fractal pattern of cogs within cogs, spiralling down to infinity.

“What is that?” Siobhan asked.

“It’s...” Sylvester puffed out his cheeks. “It’s how the Karnache think. It’s maths, and magic, and a programming language, all rolled into one.”

Andraste folded her arms. “Can you shut it down?”

Sylvester did not answer for several seconds. “I... think so. Maybe. Probably.”

“Professor,” Andraste chided him.

He stuck the hand of glory to the surface of the monolith, and began touch the pattern, moving it and unwinding it.

Port Abadon, Alaska

Artemis watched as Professor Tennant ran his fingers over the surface of the monolith.

The structure had materialised in the middle of a small town park, a grass square with a few trees, some flowerbeds, and a statue of the town's founder. The park was overlooked by quaint little mom-and-pop boutiques, and a town hall that was all classical architecture on a modest budget.

Tennant withdrew his hand as the surface turned matte grey, as a fractal pattern rippled across the monolith.

"What is that?" Artemis asked.

Tennant stroked his chin. "It's... beautiful." He broke into whole-milk grin. "Oh, that is...so beautiful. It's magic as mathematics as geometry, as a programming language. It's...elegant. And perfect. And I love it."

"But can you shut it down?"

Tennant rubbed his hands, and laughed. "I have no idea."

Flip was hard at work in the library.

The records were all on micro-film. Inspecting them all, page by page, would be time consuming drudge work under the best of circumstances, but the micro-film display cabinets were as dead as every other electronic device in the town, so she and John were using mechanical readers, about the size of a personal stereo, that looked like they had been liberated from some cold war spy ring.

They sat quietly in the foyer, where they had the most sunlight to work with, clicking through each cassette, one page at a time.

John was sat beside her, busy at work.

"A chicken who recites poetry?" Flip asked.

John looked up from his device. There was something about the way his brow pinched, and his nose wrinkled that reminded Flip of the pet rat she had when she was ten or eleven. He even scratched behind his ear when he was in thought, just like Pumpkin the rat. "What does the story say?"

"The newspaper received reports that a family on the island owned a black chicken that would, when prompted by guests at a dinner party, recite any popular verse that might be suggested."

John smiled. "It was most likely a party trick, but there is a small chance it was a demonic entity."

Flip stared at his goggles. "Really?"

He flushed. "A very small chance, but we should probably note it."

Flip went back to work, scanning through more pages. "So... Have you met a demonic chicken before?"

John paused. "You don't know terror, until you have been attacked by a demonic rooster."

Flip felt a laugh escape her lips, before she could stop it, despite everything. "I have no idea if you are kidding or not."

His cheeks flushed. "Oh. Sorry."

They clicked on a moment.

"Oh..." John whispered. "Now, hang on... We've already seen stories about ghosts haven't we?"

Flip set her machine aside and checked her notebook. “Yeah, in 1893 there were reports of ghosts on the roads around the island-”

“January 1903?” John asked.

“Yeah,” Flip said. “Reported on the twenty-ninth but the first sighting was the fourteenth.” She tapped the page with her pen, as she scanned her shorthand. “Then there was a report of miners encountering watchful spirits down in Mount Axe Mine, in...” Her crawl turned to sandpaper. “In mid to late January, 1913.”

“And another ten years later,” John said, handing her his machine, “the Sheriff responded to repeated sightings of a tall, shadowy figure, walking around properties, trying to find open windows or unlocked doors.”

Flip thumbed the control wheel, to scan down the page John had zoomed in on, reading the dense text of the column. “It was found within somebody’s home? And the school house?” She stared at John. “Do... you know what this is?”

John gave her a sorry look, and not for the first time Flip wondered what she would have seen in his eyes, behind those dark goggles. “Only that it is a pattern.”

Flip rummaged through the cassettes. “Well, let’s see what happens in January 1923...”

It didn’t take her long to find another story about shadowy figures around the island, and another ten years after that.

“Hang on...” Flip scowled a little. “Why hasn’t anybody put these together before? Why isn’t this in books and on TV? The haunting so regular you can tell when its due?”

John looked distant. “Magic has a way of playing with perceptions. It...is possible to blur details until memories fade to the back of your mind, inconsequential and insignificant, so connections are never drawn or noticed.”

Flip chewed her lip. “Okay, so...They must have a map of the island around here somewhere, and...some pins or something? Maybe we can plot out where these sightings were. Maybe we are only seeing one aspect of the pattern.”

John rose to his feet, and offered her his hand. “Let’s go see what we can find.”

Barghest Bridge, Wales

They found the bottom of the monolith poking through the ceiling of the second floor of the multi-storey car park. The pointed tip had caved in the roof of the car parked beneath, a big German saloon, from the middle of the executive range.

“Thank you Dusk,” Talia said, easing his hands off her chair, as they reached the top of the ramp, so she could scoot over to the car, and get a closer look at the monolith.

“Wait!” Dusk shouted, hurrying after her.

Talia skidded to a halt by the car, and looked up into the monolith.

Her chair was in the reflection.

She was not.

“Okay,” she muttered, “that’s... something.”

Dusk was reaching down to the nano-tech bullwhip on his utility belt. “We are being watched.”

Cliff stepped past them both. “The Monolith is monitoring us.”

Dusk was watching the shadows. His body language underwent the change. He suddenly wasn’t scruffy or unkempt. He was... professional and intense. “Maybe. I’m not so sure.”

Cliff stepped up onto the bonnet of the half-crushed car, and tapped at the surface of the monolith, turning it from mirror to matte, and moving the engraved pattern into a new configuration.

The fractal engravings started to pulsate with a heartbeat.

“Hello!” Cliff said, raising his voice a little. “This is Wales calling. Are you there, Ryleth? Miss Dosela First?”

“We are here!” Andraste said, her voice echoing strangely from the monolith.

“Sir Clifford?” Artemis’s voice was relieved. “It is good to hear your voice. We are... struggling to work out what to do here.”

“It’s okay,” Cliff said. “I will talk you both through powering this down, one step at a time.” He flexed his hands like a concert pianist, about to play. “Now... Rotate the Primary Nexus, the thing that looks like a snowflake, slowly clockwise until it folds in on itself...”

Something moved in the corner of Talia’s eyes.

She got a fleeting impression of two shapes, one more masculine, one sligher and more feminine, emerging from the shadows, figures that seemed both organic, but also hewn from enamel coated metal, and polished chrome, each with a shape that was as vaguely humanoid, albeit with much of the cobra about it, from head to waist, and more like an anaconda for the rest of their length.

The female was armed with a staff.

She pointed it at the monolith, and the pattern changed.

“Down!” Cliff roared, as he leapt from the car, but it was already too late.

Lightning forked from the monolith, striking Cliff, Disk, and Talia in their torsos, lifting them from the ground.

Neame Creek, Australia

Siobhan ducked aside, as lightning flashed from the monolith, lifting Andraste and the Professor from the floor. Something hot hit Siobhan in the back, with the force of a baseball bat, and she fell dizzily upwards.

Port Abadon, Alaska

Lightning flashed from the Monolith.

Artemis tried to push Tennant aside, but the fork of energy hit them both, and lifted them off the ground.

Flip lay the map of the island on the table, with another of the town. A smile spread across her legs. "Okay, so...Where do you want to begin?"

Bardiche paused, and tilted his head. The suddenly he leapt forwards, hurling himself at Flip.

She shoved him back. "What are you-"

A flash of something that looked like lightning flew down the street, stretching out horizontally. It shattered the glass in the doors, as it crashed into the library.

It hit John, turning him weightless and lifting him off the ground, his hair and coat billowing out as though he were underwater.

The light hit Flip, and gravity went of kilter. With a nauseous lurch, she fell towards the ceiling, a blissful white oblivion flooding her awareness as she lost her grip on reality.

• Lionheart's Story

Beware the roar of England's Protector!

In the darkest days of the war, Professor Clifford Briggs and the scientists of Project Merlin were tasked with finding the artefacts and magical weapons that could be used to counter the dastardly Doctor Maelstrom and his Zombie Legions!

Briggs and Agent Kismet have followed the trail of the Atlas Crown to Norfolk, and the lost village of Hogben Bay...

Cliff hung in the air, suspended in the grip of the lightning. His eyes were closed, his breathes shallow and quiet, his arms and legs hug weightlessly, and his head lolled back.

As he slept, he dreamt, the magic drawing out his memories...

On a crisp November night in 1942 Clifford Briggs brought his midnight blue Morris Eight to a sudden halt, with a squeal of brakes, and threw the stick into reverse, and rolled back a little, reaching down to is satchel on the passenger seat for his flashlight.

He had almost missed the gates.

The wrought iron fence that ran alongside the coastal road was choked in climbing vines, thorny brambles, and hardy nettles. The ornate gates were mummified too, their intricate curves and scrolling lost in the tangle.

The night was clear, with a bloated moon, and a sky full of stars, paining the frost bitten grass and muddy fields silver, but the shadows were deep and rich, and Clifford was reliant on the narrow slit of his blackout headlights.

He had not seen the crown of the gate, jutting free of the ivy and vines, until he was already past it.

With his heart racing, Cliff stepped out of the car, and pulled at the foliage. The gates were welded shut, the bolts, bars, and hinges, solidly fixed in place. He shook at the gate, but it stood firm and unmoving.

On the far side was a cobbled track, cracked, potholed, and uneven with age. Grass and nettles grew between the stones, as the track sloped down to the rocky beach at the foot of the cliffs.

Cliff stepped back, and considered the problem for a few seconds.

Seeing no other way to proceed, he secured his satchel, and took a short run up, and leapt at the gate, grabbing the spiked crown, and hauling himself up, and over the gate.

He landed in an awkward heap.

A shadow fell over him.

Cliff looked up to see Miss Kismet offering her hand.

“Where did you come from?” He asked, with a grateful smile, as she hoisted him to his feet.

Kismet was petite, tomboyish, and aristocratic, with dark lips, golden eyes, and jet black hair tied sculpted into an updo beneath her scarf. She was dressed for a hike, in a long waxed coat, fisherman’s sweater, and twill trousers, with stout boots and a rucksack.

Her lips parted in an easy smile. “Come now,” she said, in a voice like cut glass. “Did you really think we would let you run off on an adventure on your own? You could find all kinds of trouble out here.”

Cliff stood up and brushed himself off. “Sorry old girl. I should have called in to Headmaster, but there isn’t time. It has to be tonight you see. It has to be now. And...”

“And?” Kismet chided him, as they began the walk down the slope. Her eyes narrowed. “And you think your enemies know this?”

He nodded. “Maelstrom must know it. I’m... sure of it.”

For a moment, something nagged at the back of Cliff’s mind. For maybe he heartbeat he was sure there was... *something* wrong. But every time he tried to think about it, it...slipped out of reach.

Kismet put gripped his arm. “You bloody fool. I can’t keep you safe if you do this! Never, ever, do it again!”

“I won’t,” Cliff promised.

She sighed. “So... How do we find it?”

The tide had withdrawn from the beach, revealing the dark sand, rocky tidal pools, and swathes of bulbous seaweed. It had retreated far back, beyond the fingers and needles of chalky rock, that groped up towards the sky.

Cliff pointed to the shortest of the needles. “If we are stood, on the beach, facing that one, the Needle With The Eye, in time to see the Cursed Star reveal itself, then... the doorway to the lost town will be opened to us.”

Kismet shook her head. “It all still sounds like faerie stories to me. What if you are wrong?”

Cliff shrugged. “Then we will be sat on the beach, watching the stars until dawn.”

Kismet clung to his arm, and rested her head on his shoulder. "That does not sound so bad. Even if others will talk."

They walked down the beach, and stood, patiently, watching the hole in the spire of chalk.

"So..." Kismet chewed her lips. "Are there treasures like this hidden all around Britain?"

"Maybe," Cliff said. "I have heard some stories about Canterbury, and London I want to follow up on. There was one about Glasgow too, but I don't know if it feels right..."

"What about Barghest Bridge?" Kismet asked. "In Wales?"

Cliff shrugged. "What about it?"

"No stories there?" Kismet wondered.

Cliff thought for a moment. "None that I know. Why, do you know any?"

"Oh I heard a wonderful story," Kismet said. "When I was a child I was told of a war across the heavens, by terrible and ancient beings, devils and angels. And that the devil created three warriors, so powerful they could slay entire empires. After the war was lost, they were too dangerous to allow back into Heaven, or Hell, so were cast out into the abyss. But they broke free, and...."

"And landed in Wales?" Cliff asked.

Again, for the briefest moment, he was absolutely sure this was... *wrong*. This was not how events were meant to have turned.

"One of them," Kismet said. "Well... according to myth. And there she sleeps, waiting to be woken, to be given new foes to conquer, and new enemies to slay..."

Her words petered away, and they stood, holding hands, in a companionable silence, that Cliff hoped would never end.

With in the jagged, lightning bolt 'eye' of the chalk pillar, a dark red candle-flame amongst the silver and white points of light, fading into view.

"Is that it?" Kismet whispered.

As if to answer her, the light pulsed, and the shadows in the 'eye' rippled. The view distorted. Suddenly they were not looking at the barren wasteland of a beach at high tide, they were looking at... an impossible village.

Ancient, mouldering buildings stood askew, their walls coated in barnacles, slime and seaweed, their thatched roofs mostly covered in oysters and clams.

Cliff fought the urge to run for his life, pushing down the terror that burned in his belly, and tried to hide it all behind his big, cheesy grin.

"Bloody Hell," Kismet whispered.

A roar of engines shattered the silence of the night. Dark vehicles, amphibious army trucks, emerged from the darkness on the horizon.

"Maelstrom's ghouls," Kismet whispered, drawing a service revolver from her coat pocket. "I'll hold them off, you go and get your crown."

"Come on," Cliff said, leading her through the eye, and into another reality.

On the other side of the 'eye' the air was sharp and acrid, and the stars were burning brighter, painting the sky indigo and scarlet.

Cliff hurried to the square at the middle of the town, to where a beautifully crafted copper crown sat atop a slab of marble, carved like an altar.

The sounds of the trucks were worryingly close now.

Cliff stepped over to the altar and lifted the crown. It prickled and buzzed, in his fingertips, vibrating with an inner power.

Kismet stared at him. "Do you understand what that will do, if it considers you unworthy?"

Cliff hesitated. "I know the stories."

"And...Are you?" She asked.

He gave her a sad look. "Oh, I doubt it, but if I don't try, if Maelstrom gets his hands on this... If he learns the secrets of its powers..."

The sound of stomping jackboots echoed through the night. Several dozen of Doctor Maelstrom's zombie warriors, undead husks, rotting and decaying, wrapped in smart uniforms, and leather, executioners' hoods, came marching from the streets into the square, raising their submachine guns, as they surrounded Cliff and Kismet.

Doctor Maelstrom emerged through the ranks of his shock troops. He was young and fresh faced, with loose cropped blonde hair, cold blue eyes, and a dangerous smile. He wore a polished steel breastplate, and a pair of ornate vambraces over his leather trench coat, dark blue trousers, and tall boots. A sabre with a basket hilt hung at his hip.

"Don't," Maelstrom said, gesturing at Cliff. He spoke in a velvet soft Canadian accent. "Professor Briggs, please... Do not do anything rash. We both know how dangerous that relic can be. Please... Let me take it. I can keep it safe."

Cliff shook his head. "You know I can't do that, Sebastian."

Maelstrom held out a hand. "Don't make me kill you, Cliff."

Cliff closed his eyes, and put the crown on his head.

Power surged through him. It flowed like a liquid, through his veins, through every fibre of his being. His heart stuttered into high gear, as bloods and adrenaline seared at his veins. A light...elation filled his soul.

His muscles bulged, swelling out and ripping his shirt and jacked open at the seams.

"Kill him!" Maelstrom roared.

The zombies opened fire, with their machine guns. A blizzard of bullets struck Cliff in the chest. They ripped Cliff's coat and jacket to pieces, leaving them in tatters, but flattened and shattered against Cliff's skin, without leaving a welt or a mark.

The guns clicked dry and ran silent.

Maelstrom groaned. "Oh no..."

Cliff smiled, and cracked his knuckles, his entire being filled with the power of a sun, with the energy of a supernova.

He charged into combat, sending the Zombies to their final rest.

The Karnache Sorceress slithered closer to Cliff, and placed her talon fingers against the floating superhero's cheek, with a tender gentleness, caressing his flesh as her mind caressed his dreams, drawing on his memories.

The humanoid aspects of the Sorceress' appearance was petite, and delicate, at least by Karnache standards. Unlike many of her kind, something of her biological form was still visible, behind the enamelled and chromed metals of her current forms. Her mouth was full of living teeth, and sharp fangs, with a forked tongue. Golden eyes, and patches of scaled flesh could be seen in the eyeholes of her faceplate.

Cliff's face twitched beneath her touch. His eyes were moving behind their lids. His jaw set. His thoughts flustered.

"Show me," the Sorceress whispered, drawing more memories to the surface. "Show me everything..."

It was 1963, and Professor Maelstrom had to be stopped...

Rebecca 'The Scarlet Corsair' Birdie was wrestling with the controls of her airship 'The Privateer' about, and slammed the throttle forwards, fighting against the storm that raged above the skyscrapers of Sapphire City.

In that moment, she was quite possibly the most beautiful woman Cliff had ever seen, a hardy, vixen of a woman, her wild autumn curls escaping from beneath her bandana, her features set into a scowl of concentration, one eye (the cybernetic eye) hidden behind the brass eyepatch etched with a jolly roger, her good eye narrowed in concentration. She wore a leather jacket and open collared shirt, over embroidered jeans, and riding boots.

"You better be ready, Cliff!" Rebecca shouted, over the drones of the engines. "I think we are only going to get one pass at this!"

Cliff walked to the hatch. "Just get me as close as you can, then get out of here!"

Outside a portal had opened over the heart of the city, a whirlpool of night, in the clear azure sky. A swarm of pterodactyls were wheeling and swooping out of the portal, to harry the crowds, and giant inflatables of the Thanksgiving Parade.

Maelstrom was stood atop the Liberty Building, the tallest skyscraper in the city, on the viewing platform. He had some ancient relic, some kind of a billhook with a crystal blade, that he had built into the Ethereal Resonator that he had stolen from the University.

It was this, that had torn a wound in the fabric of time and space.

Cliff had not aged a day since he had first put on the crown, since the power had first flowed through his body. He was heavier built now, with the thick slabs of brawn and muscle of a body builder, and a sun-baked golden note to his skin.

At first, during the war, when he donned the crown, and the power was upon him, his clothes had changed, becoming a bright red siren suit, and a dark grey greatcoat. These days the magic had...changed... perhaps to reflect his growing confidence and experience.

Now, when he became lionheart he wore a white cloak, over a royal blue body suit. The emblem on his breast was a white shield, with a red lion standing rampant. In years to come this was how he would be best known, Lionheart, at his best, and in his prime.

A brace of pterodactyls wheeled through the sky, attacking the airship, with razor beaks and raking claws.

"Hands!" Rebecca shouted as she pulled another lever.

Cliff stepped back from the hatch.

There was a thud of circuits engaging, and the tell-tale crackle of arcing. On the outside of the airship, the flying lizards swooped away, shrieking in pain and surprise, as the hull and enveloped were suddenly electrified, with a high voltage.

Rebecca shut off the power.

Cliff glanced at her, and grinned one more time as he leapt from the airship.

For a few moments, as he dropped through the open air, he felt weightless, his long white cape billowing around his muscular frames.

He landed on the rooftop in a crouch, rising up to his full height, to loom over Maelstrom.

The Professor was no longer young or fresh faced. He was silver haired, haggard and weathered, wrapped in a shearling leather greatcoat and thick sweater, despite the sweltering, heavy heat of the afternoon.

Maelstrom continued to adjust the machine. "Oh. It's you. I wondered who would try to stop me..."

"That's enough," Cliff said, his voice blunt and unmoving. "Shut it down, now."

"One moment please," Maelstrom said, holding up a finger. "I have the settings a little off. I was expecting tentacled alien gods, and I got—"

Cliff grabbed the professor by his arm, and threw him across the rooftop, out of his way.

He set to work, dialling down the Ethereal Resonator, gradually, *safely* shutting it down. Once the portal was closed, Rebecca could deal with the rampaging pterosaurs.

"No!" Maelstrom hopped to his feet, and drawing a compact ray-gun from beneath his coat. He levelled the pistol at Cliff. "You have interfered for the last time, Lionheart! I will burn your heart out."

Cliff leapt aside, ducking under the searing white death ray, as it strafed across the machinery, exploding the controls and the transformers in a fountain of sparks.

He lunged forwards to grab Maelstrom, but even as his fingers closed on the Professor's leather coat, he was aware of the death ray striking the spear.

The crystal head of the spear blazed with an inner light, brighter than the sun, and there was a sound like a steam whistle. The gun exploded in Maelstrom's hand.

A lance of ruby-red light flashed out from the spearhead, and struck Maelstrom.

The Professor did not even have time to scream, as his body dissolved into a cloud of sparks, leaving his empty clothes to fall to the floor.

Cliff stared at the empty greatcoat in his hands. His heart was lodged in his throat, his thoughts numbed and clouded by horror.

With a grimace of resolve, he turned and finished powering down the machine.

The door to the stairwell burst open.

Agent Kismet came sprinting onto the roof, dressed for the parade in her psychedelic sun dress, and knee-high go-go boots.

Her face fell into a sympathetic frown, as she put a hand on Cliff's shoulder. "Did he hurt you?"

"No," Cliff said, quietly, as he began pulling the ancient spear free of the wrecked machinery. He looked at Kismet. "This is too dangerous to be in a museum. Can your people take care of it?"

Kismet nodded. "The Americans have their new Omega Vault in Texas. They can secure it."

Cliff nodded. "Good." He handed her the spear. "See that they do."

“Clifford,” Kismet said. “Would you take me to dinner?”

Cliff paused, and laughed. “Shouldn’t I be asking you?”

Kismet smiled. “A woman tires of waiting.”

Cliff smiled. “What did you have in mind?”

Kismet kissed his cheek. “These are your dreams, and your memories. Why don’t you think of where you really want to be.”

Cliff held her hand, and let her lead him through the stairwell door...

... And into a stately, old fashioned dining room. Most the diners scattered around the tables were men, and most of them in their sixties or older. All the diners were smartly dressed, with most of them wearing tailored suits and old school ties.

Kismet paused to look around. She was wearing an ice white trouser suit, over a metallic silver top. “This is... nice. Where are we?”

“My Club,” Cliff said, still holding her hand. He was wearing a navy blue blazer over tan pants, and brogues.

Kismet gave him a confused look. “Your...club?”

“The Sheldwich, a Private Members club near Picadilly,” He explained, with a smile.

A short, stout, man in a pristine uniform looked up from his podium. “Mister Briggs? Your usual table sir?”

“Thank you, Johnson,” Cliff said. “And... my nephew and niece will be joining us again.”

“Of course,” Johnson said.

Cliff held the chair for Kismet.

She glanced up at him. “When is this?”

Cliff sat down. “September, 1989. This...” He frowned. “This will be the last time I eat here. Maelstrom is back from the dead. In a few days he will level this building along with a lot of London. He will almost kill the city.”

Kismet reached over and took his hand. “It is a dream, a memory. Consider it... my gift to you.”

Cliff glanced over to the door.

Fox and Dusk were at the door of the dining room.

Fox always looked uncomfortable when she dressed up smart. Today she was wearing a green jacket over a black dress, with her brown hair hanging down to her shoulders, and a pair of dark glasses to disguise her artificial eyes.

Dusk was wearing a dark suit, and had adopted the poise and confident swagger of a yuppie with a job in the City.

“Oh,” Kismet said, quietly. “She is beautiful.”

“She is,” Cliff agreed. “She was. I... miss her very much.”

Johnson showed the pair to the table.

Both Fox and Dusk smiled at Cliff, nodding in greeting, but neither seemed to register that Kismet was there. Fox shooed Dusk away, just as she had every time they met, every time Dusk had tried to be a gentleman.

“We got your message,” Dusk said, in her homely, rural-American accent. “How can we help?”

Cliff looked right into her eyes. He had so much he wanted to tell her. How much he missed her. How her loss stabbed at his heart. How desperately he wished there was *something* he could have done differently, if there was *some* way he could have known what had been about to happen.

Instead he heard himself saying: “I know there are rules about what you can or can not tell me... But... We are investigating a threat. It claims to be somebody from my past, somebody who I saw die a long time ago...” He drew a deep breath. “Does the name Maelstrom mean anything to either of you?”

Fox and Dusk shared a look.

Dusk rubbed at the back of his neck. “Sorry.”

Cliff slipped a file across the table. “Fair enough. I need help tracking this ‘Maelstrom’. They are running circles around my team. I think they are in my computers. They seem to have a talent for that. I need somebody they can’t see to move on this.”

Fox nodded. “We’ll see what we can do.” She paused a moment. “There is something you should know. Our connection to home is...gone... We haven’t heard from them for a few weeks now.”

Cliff’s face sagged. “Is there any way I can help? Can we... make contact somehow?”

Fox shook her head. “We have a fallback position. There was always a plan for if this happened. Everything changes when Redcap kills Doc Horus. We are going to America. We have a way of contacting the Doc, we are going to do all we can to make sure that event doesn’t happen.”

“When?” Cliff asked.

“Next month,” Dusk said. “It is due next year, but the timeline has been...shifting since we got here. Some events were never meant to happen. Some have been coming too soon. Whenever it happens, we will be there.”

Cliff held Fox in his gaze. “And after that?”

They both laughed.

Fox cocked her head. “We... don’t have a contingency plan for that. We never thought it was a possibility.”

Cliff sat back. “Then this is likely the last time we will work together. I wish you luck with your mission, and... for whatever the future holds.”

Fox smiled at him.

Kismet leant forwards. “These are time travellers!”

Cliff nodded. “Yes. They are very good friends, and good soldiers, who have helped me many times.”

Kismet looked at him. “They are from...Project Slingshot?”

Cliff glanced at her. “Now... How would you know that?”

Kismet laughed. “I’m the girl of your dreams. I know all your thoughts.” Her eyes filled with sorrows. “Your loss. You have to show me Slingshot.”

Cliff’s heart stopped. Anger filled his chest. It burned like an inferno. “So, that’s what this is about? Sorry. I can’t do that.”

Kismet stared into his eyes. There was something cold and dangerous about her expression. “Do not fight me Cliff. I can’t control what you will see if you fight me.”

Cliff shook his head. “I can’t do as you ask.”

And suddenly their table was not in the dining room. It had shifted a few days into the future. Now it stood in a blasted waste ground, the fragmented remnants of the dining room, beside the crater into which most of the Club had collapsed.

Cliff rose to his feet, and stepped through the rubble. He looked up at the streaks of fire, across the sky.

Kismet took his hand. "This is what... the new Maelstrom did?"

Explosions thundered throughout the city.

Cliff nodded. "He took control of the world's communication network, every telephone, television, computer, and radio. Hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions were brainwashed and hypnotised. They became his unwitting soldiers. But this... This was his show of strength. The Americans had orbital weapons platforms, *illegal* platforms, outlawed by the Global Safety Treaty. He took control of them, and aimed them at London, and a few other cities, bombarding them... Burning the heart out of them. And I couldn't stop it."

"Where were you, my love?" Kismet whispered.

Cliff looked away.

"Where?" Kismet insisted, gently.

Cliff pointed upwards.

He couldn't make himself watch, as his limp body fell from the sky, and bounced across the street.

Or as Andraste landed a few seconds later.

Cliff knew it was not really her, of course. She was just one of the ersatz Maelstrom's puppets, held under the hypnotic sway of his brainwashing. He still not stand to see it, to remember.

To look into her eyes and not see his friend.

She was dressed in her Minerva body suit, and wrapped in her holographic armour, armed with a mace and shield.

Cliff screwed his eyes shut, but had to hear the thuds and thumps of the fight. The dull thud of his limp body being stamped to the ground.

His crown being torn away, and shattered under a blow from Andraste's mace.

"No!" The memory-of-Cliff cried out, as his powers were ripped away.

Echoes of the moment still hurt.

"No..." Kismet said, her eyes filling with sadness. "No, Cliff... you have to stop fighting me. Let me see Project Slingshot, show me the future, and this all ends."

Cliff spoke through gritted teeth. "No! I don't know who you are... What you are... But those secrets are safe."

"I'm sorry," Kismet whispered, caressing his cheek. "I'm sorry you had to see all this. You can sleep now, and dream of better time."

"Wait..." Cliff reached up and touched her hand. "Wait, where are you going?"

Kismet didn't answer. She drew back her hand, and pushed Cliff into the deep, empty oblivion of dreamless sleep.

Kismet withdrew her fingers from Cliff's head.

The presence of Mother Ceto entered Kismet's mind.

"Did he know?" The Mother asked.

Kismet's metal skin prickled. The parts of her that were still biological quivered with discomfort. "I believe so, but he fought back, and the nightmare became unstable. The boy knows, but..." Kismet brushed her fingers under Dusks hair, to feel the scars that betrayed his shielding implants. "He can not be reached. Not without doing irreparable harm."

"Then," Mother Ceto said, "that is what you will do."

The First Family's Story

Two foundlings, raised in very different lives, finally united in the midst of a tragedy... Now they stand together, with their closest friends, upholding the legacy of the First Family, as America's champions and defenders.

Artemis Dosela-First was adopted by America's favourite superheroes, learning at their side, as they pushed the boundaries of science and exploration. Her skills and talents were put to the test as she aided her family on many adventures.

John Bardiche spent his childhood bouncing between foster homes and care facilities, until he slipped through the cracks of society, and embarked on a quest to learn the ways of the Tawny Guard, becoming their last Guardsman.

With Hank 'Doc Horus' Wessex, and his band of academics and adventurers, they have become... THE NEW FIRST FAMILY.

The Priestess Patience felt Mother Ceto's patience seeping into her awareness, as she slithered into the foyer of the Library.

For a moment Patience stood still, her powerful arms folded across her chest, as she considered the two figures, floating in midair, held aloft in the flickering embrace of the lightning forks.

The girl was as she seemed, a young woman whose noisome dreams were a blizzard of regrets and sorrows, of fleeting and disjointed glimpses of painful memories.

The boy was far more interesting.

This body was young, even by human standards, but, like the girl by the monolith his soul was oh so very old, and his mind was silent. He had fallen into a meditation-trance to protect himself, and to lock away his dreams.

Patience was stout and burly, at least by the standards of the Karnache. When she had adopted her metal form, she had not refined her appearance, into the ideal and ageless beauty of a statue. She was proud of her intimidating frame, and wore the battle-scars with pride. A pair of khopesh swords were crossed over her back.

Mother Ceto whispered in her thoughts. "Another Celeres."

Patience nodded. "Do they know what they are? Do they...remember?"

"They can be made to remember," Ceto promised. "Break the girl. Crush her will and make her scream."

Patience considered the girl. She set her jaw. "This is not..."

"Honourable?" Mother Ceto snarled with venom. "It is survival, my blessed daughter. The Fallen are on this miserable dirt ball, and I will have them safe, if I have to rip apart the mind of every flea-picking ape on this miserable planet. Do as you are ordered."

Patience fought to keep her temper even. She gestured to the way the boy hung above the girl, reaching out for her. "It is not necessary. The Celeres will give us what we wish, willingly." She hesitated. "If you will allow me?"

Mother Ceto's presence receded, loosening its grip on Patience's thoughts.

Patience rose up, and gently placed her hand to the girl's cheek. "Do not be afraid, my child. I am a friend..."

The noise and fury of Flip's dreams resolved into a single memory... The night she sat on the porch with Hank.

Everything was at had been that night. The same clear sky, the same distant glow on the horizon, and the same slither of a moon shining silver. But it wasn't Hank who sat beside her. It was a stout, giant of a woman, with broad shoulders, sculpted muscle, and more than her share of scars. Her dark hair was clipped short on the back and sides, and slicked back on top.

"Do not be afraid, mu child," the giant said, in a vaguely European accent that Flip could not place. "I am a friend..."

"What is this?" Flip said, setting her jaw and folding her arms over her chest. "How are you in my head?"

"My name is Patience," the giant said, patting the swing seat. "Please? I want to explain."

"I can hear you from here," Flip said. She tried to soften her voice. "Please... explain."

"I am not as you see me," Patience said. "I am of the Karnache. My people sent a probes in search of terrible and dangerous weapons. I believe they fell to this world many, many, centuries ago. We... followed their trail here."

"Weapons?" Flip asked.

Patience nodded. "They are called the Fallen. Did... your friends not tell you this?"

Flip felt her shoulders sag. "My friends?"

"The Celeres, the... white haired ones. Surely they are here to protect the Fallen? Was not that why they are here?"

Flip shook her head. "They... came to work out why your probes sent so many people to sleep, and... how to shut them down before somebody got hurt, or worse. Why would they know?"

Patience gave her a sorry look. "You speak the truth. They did not know? They... do not know what they are?" Her brow furrowed. "Then, no wonder the Contact has gone awry. They we attempted to communicate, but their minds are closed to me. They are fighting against the process, and... They may be in danger. Please. We do not intend harm. I wish only to make this right. Would you help me Child?"

"It is hurting Artemis? And John?"

"It is a possibility, but I hope not." Patience rose to her feet. "What is your name child?"

"Phillipa Jones," Flip said, offering her hand.

Patience frowned. "Perhaps once it was, but that name has...withered and failed. It holds no power. Who are you?"

"Flip."

Patience nodded. "Call out to them, Flip."

"John?" Flip said, her voice raising. "Arti?"

Patience took Flip's hands in hers. "Again. The boy. Call to the boy."

"John?" Flip said. "John, if you can hear me, please... I think we need to hear what Patience has to say!"

"Ah..." Patience said, quietly. "And there we are..."

The dream blurred out of focus and melted away, revealing a very different vista.

Flip was suddenly stood in a vast and airy hall. Half of it was the baroque stonework of an old museum, probably one of the ones in London, that Flip had only seen in movies. She might have thought it was a cathedral, were it not for the bronze replica of a plesiosaur skeleton suspended overhead by a web of steel cables, caught as though in a snapshot of the long necked Nessie plunging down, jaws open to scoop up a fish.

The other half of the room was the pristine white marble and strip lighting of a Dosela-First laboratory complex, maybe their offices in Neo-Jorvika, or maybe their research and development facility in New Mexico, judging by the holographic engineering diagrams of Manta-One hovering overhead.

Artemis and John were sat cross legged, either side of the blurred threshold between their dreamscapes, apparently in conversation.

They both looked over at Flip and Patience, moving as though synchronised, wearing matching expressions.

"Flip?" Artemis asked. "Are you okay?"

John looked Patience up and down. "How did you get here?"

Patience stepped forwards. "You are connected, through the Probe. I am sorry. We were attempting to... communicate, but... You have shielded yourself to us."

Artemis nodded. "Yes. It seemed... wise. We thought the monolith was defending itself."

"In a way, perhaps," Patience conceded. "It was assessing if you were a threat. We hoped, given your experiences in the war, you might—"

"Our what?" Artemis asked.

John's gaze was unflinching. "I'm sorry, but if our minds are shielded, how are you here?"

Flip couldn't help but feel there was something...*calculated* about the way Patience seemed not to hear John and focussed on Artemis.

"Your experiences," Patience said, "in the lifetimes you spent before coming to Earth. Your time as a Celeres."

That word must have struck a nerve with both of them. Artemis flinched at the word. John rose to his feet.

"But," Patience said, her tone softening, "your friend here suggests your memories are... damaged... that you were not on Earth to protect against the Fallen?"

Again, that word stirred something in them.

Flip looked between her friends. “She says she wants to help, and she says that whatever is buried on this island is dangerous.”

“Oh, extremely,” Patience whispered. “It does not belong here, and... We are not the only ones searching for it. We at least have the intention of putting it somewhere safe. Others might want to use it.”

Artemis rubbed at her forehead. “The Fallen? Why do I feel like I should know that word?”

“Because part of you remembers,” Patience said, her voice a purr. “Part of you remembers exactly how scared we should all be, right now.” She gestured to them. “The Karnache have techniques to unlock memories, even those thought lost. I can help you remember, to understand why we are here. I think... I think this is the easiest way for us all to come to an understanding.”

John seemed uncomfortable. “And what other techniques do your people have? Once you are inside our mind?”

Artemis looked to Flip. “Do you trust her?”

Flip nodded, cautiously. “So far. I mean... Trust has to be earned, and I guess that goes both ways.”

Artemis turned to Patience. “My other friend, Professor Tennant?”

Patience smiled. “He is sleeping. His dreams are... imaginative. For all his potential, and all he can do to push human boundaries, he is... of little interest to us. He will be allowed to dream in peace, as with the other townsfolk.”

Artemis closed her eyes. “Very well, I will do as you ask. If it is successful, then John can decide if...”

John shook his head. “You know I can’t let you do this alone.”

“Of course not,” Patience said, with an approving smile.

“Very well,” John said, his expression open and earnest. “It seems we have to trust you. Where do we begin?”

Patience thought for a moment, stepping over to John. “Oh, that’s simple, we begin with what you can remember...”

Patience stood over John’s sleeping form, and brushed his hair back behind his ears.

“This will not hurt,” she promised, in a soft whisper, “unless you fight me. Open your thoughts to me.”

Her fingers turned to liquid, and slithered down, through the pores of his skin, seeping through his skull, and his cranial membranes, threading into his brain itself...

The dreamscape melted away into sparks, another layer of the onion peeling away. It revealed a... shifting... changing cityscape, a series of residential streets, closes, and estates that blurred and overlapped, a tapestry of homes, some larger than others.

They were all British, Flip decided, and probably English, most likely all from the same city, or maybe from a few towns centred on the city. The styles of the cars evolved a little, suggesting a decade, or maybe more was passing.

Patience watched, thoughtful, but unspeaking.

Artemis smiled. "Were all these...home to you? At one time or another."

John shrugged. "They were places I lived, the people who took me in... None of them for very long."

Places he lived, Flip noted, *none of them a home*.

"Why?" Patience asked.

The shifting dreamscape became a patchwork of living rooms, bedrooms, classrooms, and even some play-parks, and other places Flip could not quite recognise.

Each of the glimpses, each of the moments, was a nightmare. There were ghosts, zombies, aliens, and monsters, supervillains and robots.

Flip reached up to cover her mouth. "All this... happened around you?"

Artemis put a hand on Flip's shoulder. "We have always been drawn to... strangeness, or perhaps the strangeness is drawn to us."

The images radiated a sense of loneliness, of fear, guilt, and of being...other.

John turned away from the memories. "Whenever somebody offered me kindness, and took me in, I was a curse upon them. Eventually I had to find another way."

Patience looked to Artemis. "And this was your experience?"

"Not exactly," Artemis admitted, reaching out to touch the dreamscape.

The mosaic of memories changed, becoming brighter, and far more colourful, radiating love, joy, and... excitement. The images were all of events Flip vaguely remembered from the news, the countless adventures of the First Family, but these were not grainy news footage, captured from a safe distance... Artemis had been in the thick of the action, always protected by her adoptive family.

Flip grinned. "You make it all look so...fun. Weren't you afraid?"

"Always!" Artemis admitted, with a giggle. "I was terrified, but looking back now... I know it was all okay. When my family was around, it was always safe..." Her voice trailed off. "Until suddenly it wasn't."

Patience gave her an understanding look. "You were raised by champions of your world... but they did not know or understand your true legacy."

Flip stood, enthralled by the images of hypersonic test flights, archaeological digs in ocean depths, investigating the strange creatures trapped in Antarctic glaciers, or protecting cities from a swarm of giant ants.

She almost didn't notice the cadence of the memories turning sad and lonely. She looked to Artemis. "You must miss them very much."

"With every breath," Artemis admitted.

Patience considered the images. "Did they train you?"

The images changed to Artemis and her brother, Alexander training in a holographic simulator-room, learning free running, martial arts, and all manner of strange and wonderful skills.

Patience nodded. "They trained you well."

“Trouble always had a way of finding my family,” Artemis explained. “Mom wanted me to be able to look after myself.”

Flip looked at John. “Did anybody train you?”

John squirmed, a frown pinching at his features.

“No...” Patience whispered. “Please do not fight me, child. Your secrets are of no consequence.”

Still he resisted.

She wormed the tendrils of her finger deeper into his brain, manipulating the currents of his thoughts to soothe his concerns, and ease his troubles.

“Open yourself,” she whispered. “Let it happen...”

The dreamscape melted away, this time revealing the entrance to a temple carved into a natural cave. Echoes haunted the darkness, and the air was damp.

Flip looked up, at the to the tapered opening of the cave onto the sky, far above, and realisation dawned on her. “Are we inside a volcano? A long extinct volcano?”

John nodded. “Mount Dumas in France. We came here on a school trip in year nine. I was thirteen years old. We did a tour of the caves, in which were told about how a natural spring filtered through the rocks to make the mineral water in plastic bottles. Nobody else seemed to see that doorway. When we were allowed to explore a little on our own, as everybody else ran to the gift shop for sweets, I came back here, and... well... My entire life changed.”

“Oh?” Artemis asked, rubbing her hands together enthusiastically, as she pushed open the iron gates, and marched into the temple.

The vaulted tunnel of the entrance opened onto a cloistered walkway, like those in a cathedral, but instead of a green lawn, they looked out over a natural pool of dripping water.

Artemis pushed open one door, to find an armoury, and evidence of a wooden model targets used for training. Memories of John, insubstantial echoes of him as a gangly, awkward, teenager, were busy running through combat drills, armed with swords, staves, and a variety of other weapons, shooting arrows at a target, or punching the wooden men with bare fists.

Behind another door Artemis found the hall, where John had made himself at home with a sleeping bag and camping equipment.

Behind a third she found a library.

Her lips parted in a smile, as she stepped into the vast hall, for a closer look at the leather bound books that lined the shelves.

Flip studied John. “You... taught yourself?”

He nodded. "I do not know if I am everything a Tawny Guard should be, but I taught myself everything I could from these book."

Patience smiled. "A noble endeavour... However I suspect you did not learn combat techniques from a book. Those came... naturally, did they not?"

John shifted uneasily.

"Yes," Artemis said, without hesitation. "They came...easily to me. I just...knew them."

"You remembered," Patience said. "An echo of a former life."

Artemis grinned. "As a Celeres?"

John was still trying to resist, but it was too late, Patience was in too deep now, and had numbed most his faculties. But she had reached as far as she could push. The last step was for John to take himself.

"Don't you want to remember?" She asked, gently. "Your past? Your capabilities? Your duties?"

John didn't answer.

Flip stared at him. "Isn't this what you wanted? To know who you are? Where you belong?"

John looked at Artemis. "I have somewhere I want to belong."

Artemis smiled back. "You have somewhere you do belong."

He rubbed the back of his neck.

"But.." Artemis added, gently. "There are some questions I've always had... And this might be the only chance we have to find some answers. If you are asking if I want to do this... I really do."

John nodded. "And if there is some weapon concealed here, then... What choice do we have? Lives might be at risk." He looked to Flip. "What do you think?"

Flip's heart stuttered in her chest. "What do I think?"

He nodded.

Why would he ask her? What was she meant to be here?

Patience stared at her.

"I..." Flip cleared her throat. "I... agree with what you said. If this saves lives, I don't see a choice."

The resistance weakened.

Patience reached deeper.

John's body convulsed and thrashed.

The dreamscape melted away once more.

Flip stared in awe at the new images that stretched beyond the horizon. There were countless alien worlds, under skies full of alien stars. And there was war, a terrible war, fought with machines far beyond Flip's imagination.

The memories covered countless battles, across many centuries.

And at the heart of this flaming crucible, there were four warriors, human, at first glance, tall, lean, and angular, with long narrow faces, hawkish features, and white-gold hair. They all wore piecemeal, personalised armour, over dark grey robes and light weight fatigues.

The two men were unmistakable.

Both John and Redcap were much older than she knew them, leathery and wrinkled, with hardened expressions, both carrying bill-hook like polearms, with high-tech crossbows slung at their sides.

One of the women might have been Artemis, but her gaunt, mirthless face had known of Artemis's joy and wonder. It was... haunted and her eyes suggested that it carried a terrible burden.

The fourth was another woman, her white hair clipped single fan of spikes, her neck and shoulders wrapped in tattoos. She appeared to be the leader, armed with a pistol and sword.

Something about their appearance made them step back.

"Good!" Patience said. "Now, focus on the Fallen. Hold the word in your mind..."

The multitude of memories fell silent, leaving only one.

They now stood in the ruins of a once great city, reduced to rubble and cinders, the buildings shattered, and the streets torn apart by craters. A dense fog of smoke and dust blotted out the sky, and swaddled the sun.

A shadow loomed over the city. A silhouette the size of an apartment building, that suggested something as much like a toad as a bat, with a suggestion of leathery wings, glowing eyes, and flaming horns.

Flip's heart ran cold and fast. Every fibre of her being urged her to run, to flee for her life. "What is that?"

Patience seemed in awe. "Is it not beautiful? It is... a corruptor of worlds. A killer of Empires..."

"What is it?" Flip demanded.

"A weapon," Artemis whispered. "The Fallen are living weapons."

Patience nodded. "And it is here. Search your memories. We must know how to access it! We..." She fought to keep her voice calm. "We must protect it."

Artemis and John shared a look.

"Please," Patience whispered. "Somewhere... in your lost memories, you must remember how the Fallen is secured? How to reach it? We must--"

"No," Artemis and John said together.

"No," John said, firmly, but kindly, "we must not."

Artemis looked at Patience. "Don't you see? The Fallen must never be found. The memories were clearly destroyed so, even well meaning people like you could never reach them. We must never risk them waking, even by accident."

John nodded. "The one thing we must never do..."

“The one thing,” Artemis said, her voice suddenly carrying a note of natural authority, “we can never do, is remember.”

Flip nodded. “Right. I’m with them. Let sleeping frog-demons lie. The key is missing? Good. We’ll keep a watch and make sure nobody tries to pick the lock.”

Patience’s shoulders sagged. “No. Please. You have to do this.”

“We can’t,” Artemis said.

Patience shook her head. “You do not understand. I wanted to do this the kind way, without hurting you, but if you refuse...”

Mother Ceto’s presence grew, filling the space around Patience.

“Mother, please,” Patience said, her voice trembling, “let me try to-”

“Enough!” Mother Ceto said, with a sneering laugh. “You tried mercy. Now... we shall do what must be done.”

Patience knew better than to try to resist, as Mother Ceto twisted her hand, and pushed her reach down into John’s mind.

His body arched, and he screamed in agony.

“Show me!” Mother Ceto hissed. “Show me!”

John fell to his knees screaming.

The dreamscape filled with images of war, of cities burning, of spaceships exploding, of poison gasses and barren wastelands.

Patience loomed over him. “This stops when you show me the key. How do we reach the Fallen?”

Artemis shoved Patience away from John. “Stop this!”

Patience tried to shove Artemis away, but the younger woman dodged under her reach, and lashed out with a roundhouse kick.

Her boot smashed against Patience’s chin, to no effect.

Patience chuckled, and grabbed Artemis by the top of her head, tossing her aside like a rag doll.

Flip glared at the hefty giant. “Who are you? Obviously Patience isn’t at home any more, so... Who are we dealing with now?”

Patience smiled. “My name is Mother Ceto, and... I will be obeyed. One of you will tell me how to access the Fallen. It is only a question of if I have to kill you, or rip your minds to shreds first. But... I will know.”

Artemis hopped to her feet. “That will not happen. And if you hurt him...”

Patience gestured with her hand.

John clutched his head, screaming in agony.

“Enough” An Australian voice boomed, from everywhere at once.

Professor Sylvester stepped out of a door, that had not been there a few seconds before. He was... younger and more vital than his reality, with a moustache and a mane of curls. He was dressed in his superhero costume, in the cloak and tunic of the Jack of Wands, and armed with his Omega Staff.

He levelled the staff at Patience. "That is enough, Ceto. I warned you long ago, this world is protected, and I will not let you hurt my friend."

Patience scoffed. "Foolish mortal. And what power do you think you hold her-"

Sylvester thrust out his staff, and projected a lance of sun-fire from the tip. The energy beam blasted Patience, vanishing her in a plume of fire and sparks.

"We have to move," Sylvester said, hurrying to grab John.

Flip helped him drag John to his feet. "Where did you come from?"

Sylvester chuckled. "It's a neat trick, isn't it? Come along now. I only brought us a few seconds. We need to get John's Self well away from his body, out of their reach. This way..." He ushered them back towards the door. "Quickly!"

Artemis took one look back, at the confusion of memories, before she followed them through the door.

Jack Of Swords' Story

Once upon a time, Professor Sidney Sylvester was the masked adventurer known as Jack Of Swords, a master magician, and intuitive sorcerer, an explorer of Dream Doors, and Other-Realms, and Australia's most notable superhero.

In the late 1970s he was drawn to England, when he inherited Labyrinth House, where he occasionally aided MITHRAS as their 'consulting sorcerer'...

Vulcana, the favourite of the Mother Ceto's warband, emerged from the shadows, and approached the remote monolith, in the wilderness cattle farm.

Her humanoid torso and features of her robotic form were sculpted to be considerably less human, and more eel like and serpentine than her 'sisters'. Her sculpted head-dress might have been the fanned hood of a cobra.

She considered the three figures floating in mid-air, suspended by the lightning bolts.

The handsome woman was too well protected. Her body was riddled with psionic-cybernetics, centuries in advance of what humanity should have been capable of. It had cocooned her in holographic armour.

The second was an older man, who, although apparently asleep was sat cross legged in a meditation position, and was surrounded by a complex snowflake pattern of fractal spell forms.

Mother Ceto's presence manifested in Vulcana's awareness.

"Is it him, mother?" Vulcana asked.

Mother Ceto answered with a venomous chuckle. "After all these years, the Jack Of Wands remains as defiant and... infuriating as ever."

Vulcana approached the last of the three, the plastic doll of a woman, dressed as a twenty-something, the Cuckoo created to infiltrate nests.

Anticipation prickled Vulcana's soul as she placed her hand to Siobhan's cheek, and wormed her way into her dreams...

Mrs Roper stared at Siobhan over the top of her horn rimmed glasses. She clucked her tongue disapprovingly. "Well?"

Siobhan could feel the way her classmates were watching her, with sneering grins and judgemental stares, as she made her way to the front of the classroom. There was nothing on the chalkboard. Surely that couldn't be right? Didn't Mrs Roper always write the title of the project on the blackboard?

Her fingers were trembling, as she took her spot.

It wouldn't be so bad, if she hadn't been called first. The kids at the front of the class always wanted to go first; Dribbly Jo, or Speccy Tim always bounced in their seat, as they raised their hands, stretching like they were trying to reach the ceiling.

Siobhan had always been good at bluffing her presentation, failing to hand anything in, but 'proving' she had it all in her head by slightly altering points already made by other kids.

But going first, she was unarmed.

She looked down at the exercise book in her hand. She had written the date, neatly in one corner, and had copied the title down: 'How Concrete Works.'

The rest of the page was blank.

Her heart was racing. Her cheeks were burning scarlet, and her tummy was full of coiling snakes and eels.

Siobhan tried to speak, but her words were drowned by the laughter of her classmates.

In the corner of her eyes, she saw the woman easing the door to class 7F open, and slipping inside. She was skeletal and nimble, with a ballerina's build, reptilian skin mottled with leathery scales, and eel-ish features. Her lips parted in a cruel smile, revealing too many teeth, all of them as thin and sharp as needles.

Siobhan slipped into a fighting stance, placing her feet, and readying her fist, bringing them up to guard.

The stranger chuckled. "What wonderful creatures humans are... Of all the horrors the Universe can offer, *this* is the terror that haunts you?"

Siobhan grinned. "That's easy for you to say. You never had Mrs Roper as your form tutor!"

The reptile woman paced forwards. "I will teach you what you should fear, human."

"And I," Siobhan said, making her voice just cocky enough to be infuriating, "will teach you to check the corners before you walk into a room."

Kingfisher kicked the door closed, as he stepped from the corner. A click of his fingers activated the magi-tech implant in the palm of his hand. A telekinetic sword blade extended from his fingers.

The Reptile woman glanced at him.

"Hello," Kingfisher said, with a roguish smile.

The reptile woman kept her gaze locked on Siobhan. “Your memories and dreams can not hurt me.” She cocked her head. “But for you the pain will be all too-”

Kingfisher slammed the reptile woman against the blackboard, and put the tip of his sword under her chin.

The reptile woman seethed. “This is not...possible.”

Siobhan nodded. “I know. And I have to admit, it’s pretty cool.”

“So...” The reptile woman growled. “What do you imagine happens now?”

Siobhan shrugged, and produced a bottle of scotch from under her jacket. “I have no idea. The Prof didn’t have time to explain the whole plan, just the ambush...”

“Sylvester!” The reptile woman screamed. “Show yourself!”

The dreamscape melted away, revealing the great hall of Labyrinth House.

Sylvester and Ryleth were waiting there.

The Professor saw himself as much younger, and much more vital, in his super-duds and cloak. He toasted the reptile woman with a cup of tea. “Hello Vulcana. It’s been a while. Is life good?”

“What is this?” Vulcana demanded.

Sylvester sipped his tea. “This? Oh... This is your chance to release my friends and go in peace.” He tugged at his cloak. “Oh, introductions, by the way... Andraste Ryleth, codenamed Minerva, and Siobhan Pennywise, codenamed Magpie, may I present Vulcan, one of Mother Ceto’s Warband. You see, I was right, but I was wrong. I was right that the technology is of the Karnache, but we are not facing the combined might of an empire that spans a thousand stars... We are facing an extremist faction, who want to spark a civil war so they can usurp power.”

Vulcana scowled. “That is no way to speak about the Great Mother. You will show her the respect and reverence she is due!”

“I am showing her the respect and reverence she is due!” Sylvester snarled. “Now, I know my corrupted harpy of an ex has a tendril in your mind, so tell her this. If she released my friends, if she acts like the woman I once knew. I will show you...some of what you want to know. I will show you why the Fallen is here on Earth. I will show you why they are under our protection, and why you will never access them. If you do that, you will be allowed to leave in peace.”

Vulcana’s eyes turned jet black. Her body language changed, it became looser. She tore free of Kingfisher, and strode towards Sylvester with a definite swagger. She spoke in a different voice. “Very well darling, show me what you have to show me. Then I will release your friends.”

“Who’s at the wheel?” Andraste asked.

Vulcana bowed her head. “Mother Ceto. You should be honoured to be in my presence.”

Siobhan looked to Sylvester. “Can we trust her?”

Sylvester looked at her, and winked. He had a gnomish, mischievous smile. “Oh no. She is deceitful, wily and utterly dedicated to her cause. But... the woman I once knew was honourable, and would keep her word, more or less...” His expression hardened. “And she wants to rule an empire, not destroy the cosmos, so...I hope she will see reason.”

Mother Ceto chuckled through Vulcana’s lips. “We shall see.”

Siobhan swallowed back the urge to slap the smirk of Vulcana’s face, and concentrated on keeping her cool.

She was not prepared for what happened next.

Sylvester waved his hand, and summoned a mirror from nowhere.

He's a lucid dreamer, Siobhan reminded herself. *He does his best thinking in his sleep.*

He paused a moment and took Siobhan's hand, tracing a pattern on her skin with his fingertip, the astrological symbol for Gemini. His touch prickled.

"Don't worry, my dear," he said, his voice low and gentle. "I know you are afraid to face what we will find on the other side, but I promise you will be in no danger."

He winked at her again.

Then...

Then Siobhan had the strange sensation of being torn in two. She watched as part of herself, her...*twin* walked through the mirror, with Sylvester, Vulcana, and Ryleth. Part of her could feel the shimmer as she passed through the threshold, and could see the memories beyond.

But part of her remained in the Hall.

Another Sylvester, the older Sylvester she knew and recognised, stepped from the shadows.

"Sorry," he said, with a smile, "I know a Gemini Spell can be... disconcerting the first time it happens, but... your mind is remarkably well suited to it. I suppose you are used to compartmentalising and going undercover." Sylvester grinned at Kingfisher. "And you have something of an advantage."

"So..." Kingfisher said. "I really hope you have a plan."

Sylvester grinned. "Well... I have an idea. I'm working on the plan." He summoned another mirror. "Come with me. We have work to do!"

The other thread of Siobhan's awareness followed the others into a memory of a drizzly morning in a barley field, surrounded on three sides by dense hedgerows, and on the fourth by a tangled woodland.

The thing that stood in the middle of the field was vaguely person-shaped but was too tall and too thin to be human, standing a little over nine feet tall. Its entire body was jet black, with a plastic-like sheen, except for its head, which was more like a goldfish bowl full of lightning and fire.

Ryleth froze in her tracks. "What is that?"

"That," Sylvester said, his voice taut, "is called a Moros. It is an alien robot from the future."

Vulcana narrowed her jet-black eyes. "The future? This is the start of Operation Slingshot?"

Sylvester gestured. "This is the prelude."

The Moros robot leant back and looked skywards. Its crystal ball head glowed scarlet, and a beam of energy shot out, with a banshee howl, striking a helicopter flying overhead.

The helicopter spiralled down from the sky, leaving a trail of flames and smoke, crashing into the field.

The Moros marched over and reached in, dragging a Royal Navy Admiral from the passenger seat, and holding the officer aloft.

Before the robot could execute the officer, Lionheart, and the Jack of Wands came flying down from the sky in a blur of colour, and a swish of a cape.

Sylvester gestured at the memory. “Of course, we didn’t know the robot was from the future, back then. Back then we only knew it had targeted Admiral Chandler, to sabotage the Global Peace Conference. We fought the robot, and defeated it. It was only later that we learned the truth...”

The Dreamscape changed, becoming one of the secure labs in the MITHRAS Vaults on Medhurst Island. The remains of the robot was lain out on a surgical slab, undergoing an ‘autopsy’ performed by a number of robotic arms.

Lionheart, and The Jack of Wands looked on from the corner.

One of the robotic arms retrieved a strange crystal-like device from the chest of the Moros. Lionheart took the crystal and held it up to the light, to examine the intricate circuits within. There was a *whoosh* of choral-displacement, as the reality of to the laboratory swirled out of focus, twisting and warping, before resolving itself into... the craters and ruins that were all that remained of Medhurst Island.

A group of soldiers were waiting for the two superheroes. They wore ragged and threadbare battle-dress, in mismatching camouflage patterns.

Vulcana turned on Sylvester. “When is this?”

“The year 2032,” Sylvester said, his voice low, and heavy with regrets. “Over a decade after the Moros invaded Earth. Humanity is not entirely defeated however. The Free Peoples have fallen back to their strongholds in Australia, India, Canada and Japan, and what is left of the American Navy fights on... In Britain however, the resistance is fighting a losing battle, completely overwhelmed by the enemy.” He smiled. “But they were warned where and when to expect us. Their hope was that if they helped us infiltrate a Moros stronghold in Barghest Bridge we could use their time machine to travel home, and put history on a better path...”

Vulcana grabbed Sylvester’s arm. “Show me! Show me Barghest Bridge!”

Sylvester smiled. “Dearest Ceto, you have no idea how much I have missed your...commanding ways. Nevertheless, this story has a purpose. The journey is the point. We will get there...”

Vulcana squeezed his arm until there was a crunch of bones. Sylvester’s knees buckled and he cried out in pain.

“Show me!” She snapped.

“Very well,” Sylvester said, as the Dreamscape melted away around them, revealing a long abandoned motorway, where long reedy grass and nettles grew through the cracks in the blacktop, and through the rusting, charred remnants of cars and vans.

Something about the post apocalyptic scene gripped at Siobhan’s chest, and turned her blood cold. She tried not to picture the weapon that had incinerated the traffic jams, or to imagine the panic and horror of those days.

The Resistance soldiers crouched amongst the cars, with Lionheart and Jack of Wands.

Sylvester freed himself from Vulcana’s grip and strolled over to his alter ego. “Ah, here we go...”

A scrawny figure crawled out of the scrub and brush of the embankment. As the figure straightened, Siobhan saw it was a scrawny, underfed boy, maybe eleven or twelve years old, but already with eyes that had seen too much, and an expression that had been tempered by a fight for survival.

Some kind of fortified skyscraper, a heavily reinforced tower, stood over the horizon, blotting out much of the sky.

Ryleth walked in circles around the boy, studying him close. He looked like her heart was breaking. “Dusk?”

Sylvester didn't answer. He pointed up the slope of the embankment. "What you want, dear Ceto, is up there."

Vulcana pushed her way through the others, and marched briskly up the slope.

Ryleth shook her head. "Is this real Sid?"

Sylvester nodded.

His eyes suddenly looked as though he was carrying a tremendous weight on his soul. "It is only going to get worse, I'm afraid."

They made their way up the slope.

Long before they reached the top, the dizzying scale of the fortified tower became apparent. It stood three times taller than any skyscraper that Siobhan had ever seen.

Siobhan glanced at Ryleth. "I guess Barghest Bridge changes a lot in the future."

Ryleth was about to answer when they reached the top of the rise.

The town was gone. Where there should have been streets, and houses, and buildings, there was just the Tower, and a vast open cast mine, where thousands of men, women, and children clawed away at the bedrock and clay with picks, slowly carving their way down deeper and wider.

Sylvester gestured. "So Ceto, what do you see?"

"The Moros are fools," Vulcana spat, in Mother Ceto's voice. "They think they are digging for a real treasure? Magic does not work that way." She cocked her head. "Although I do sense that the veil between worlds is thin around this...odd little world of yours. Magic and Fate flow with interesting currents and eddies here."

Sylvester tutted, and shook his head. "The Moros are no fools, Ceto. They are powerful psychics, for whom magic and science are indistinguishable and inseparable. That is how a relatively small army of invaders can control their legions of robots. It's how they time travel. Yet here they are, burning through armies of slaves, countless lives ruined and ended, in the name of a fool's errand."

Siobhan understood. "You think something is influencing them?"

"The Fallen," Ceto whispered through Vulcana's lips. "It calls to them. Once they start looking for the Fallen, when they are close, it...feeds... on the misery and the pain?"

Sylvester nodded. "No matter how good your intentions, Ceto, no matter what difference you might make with the Fallen, I beg of you to walk away now. It will consume you. It will corrupt you. It will not let you find it, it will not let you use it, until you have become evil, until you are twisted, and broken, and suit its purpose."

Vulcana's voice softened. "The Karnache Empire has already corrupted and broken countless star systems, my love. I have no desire to be here, but I *have* to be. We have to end the injustice. What is one more planet, and a few billion lives, if... if it restores a greater good, for thousands of systems? Countless worlds?"

Sylvester scowled. "The Ceto I once knew would see one world as far too many. Has it already begun? How, exactly, did you come to be here?"

Vulcana smiled. "You told me about it, once... We were curled together in the four poster bed on my yacht, watching comet debris burn as it hit the shields. I asked what your nightmares were about, and you... told me of this mission."

Sylvester's frown turned as hard as steel. "And you came searching for the source of my nightmares?" He stepped close to her. "Very well. Let me show you what I saw that day... down in the vaults beneath the tower."

He clicked his fingers, and the Dreamscape dissolved away, revealing a dungeon. It was a modern construction, with concrete walls, and metal girders supporting the ceiling, but it was a dungeon.

Sylvester pointed to one of the barred cells. "We heard that a Resistance leader was being kept here, and came to free him, on our way to the time machines. But when we reached the dungeons I felt... another presence."

A cold chill spread down Sioban's spine.

The cell was full of ink dark shadows, but something moved within.

Vulcana hesitated. For the first time since she had been channelling Mother Ceta, her voice sounded her own. "What is it?"

"Just a man," Sylvester said. "A slave, brought here by the Moros to feed the mine. A few, those with psychic potential were...changed...in the mine. The Rebels called them Wrights. Everything that made them human, all the warmth and compassion, their heart and soul was just... gone."

Vulcana flinched, and Mother Ceto was back in control.

She walked to the bars at the front of the cell.

Something moved within the cell. A figure emerged from the shadows, to lean upon the bars. His once-handsome features were haggard and gaunt, his half naked form skeletal thin and covered in countless small scars where he had caved ancient runes into his skin. His eyes were as black as night. His forked tongue was unnaturally long, and studded with thorn-like bones.

He looked straight into Vulcana's eyes. "Have you come to free me... Queen of the stars? Have you come to unleash my wrath and plagues, to cleanse this fowl universe of life? Who would you see suffer? Who would you have me feast on?"

"Enough!" Sylvester snarled, throwing a banishment spell-form at the cell.

The holographic snowflake slammed the Wright against the back of the cell.

Ceto snarled through Vulcana's lips. "So... it is here. And..." She laughed. "And the shielded man holds the key. Very well... I shall take what I need another way!"

Dusk's Story

The man known only as Dusk was born in a dark and terrible future, under the shadow of alien invasion. Sent back in time, he dedicated his life to diverting fate onto a better path.

His mission is finally over- at a terrible cost.

Now he fights to defend a better future...

Talia 'Tinkerbell' Tillinghast dreamt of spending the Holidays at her mother's place in France.

The big stone farmhouse was bustling with activity. Outside fresh snow was tumbling and drifting over the mountainside and through the pine forests. Inside it was full of light, and chatter.

The Queen was on the sofa, with Robin Williams, sharing a bottle of cooking sherry, and wearing the same novelty sweater. Freddie Mercury, Brian May, Elvis, and the Ramones were gathered around the piano. Mum, Mara, and Marilyn Monroe were stood around the fire, talking with three different Harrison Ford's from three different movies.

Mara looked up from her drink, and flashed Talia the kind of smile that only a big sister was capable of. She gestured at the kitchen, an eyebrow arching.

Talia took the hint and stepped away from the living room. She snatched the mistletoe from over the door, as she strolled down the hallway to the large country kitchen.

The man from the coffee advert was in the kitchen, doing the washing up.

The actor from the coffee adverts had been in her dreams a lot over the last few years. They spent a lot of time walking by rivers, or being stranded by car troubles at a country B&B (which invariably only had one room). He was always a man of few words, mostly communicating through hungry smiles, and soulful eyes haunted by his unspoken desires.

She kept meaning to ask his name, but never seemed to find the time.

As always he was dressed in ensembles borrowed from a mail order catalogue. Tonight he was wearing the 'Rugged Country Autumn' collection, with a chunky knit fisherman's sweater, a dark grey undershirt, stone grey chinos, and walking shoes.

He looked around at Talia, as she stepped into the kitchen, and turned to face her.

Talia held the mistletoe over her head, and strolled forwards.

He met her with a deep, hungry kiss, and lifted her effortlessly off the floor, sitting her on the table, and leaning in, dangerously close, his hands exploring her. When they finally surfaced from the kiss, Talia was gasping for air, but he was lifting her hijab away, and his lips were already teasing her neck.

Somebody hammered on the back door to the garden.

The lovers froze.

A rosy smile burned at Talia's cheeks.

"Tinkerbelle?" Sylvester demanded.

The coffee advert man frowned. "Who is that?"

"Not the man of my dreams," Talia muttered. "Shh. If he doesn't hear us maybe he will-"

A fist pounded at the back door again.

Talia hopped off the table, and hurriedly straightened her jumper, and tartan skirt.

She pulled open the back door, and was confronted with Sylvester, Siobhan, the new girl at the office, and a roguish man she didn't know.

Talia locked her eyes on the roguish man, and fondled her sprig of mistletoe. "Hello."

He smiled back, an eyebrow rising. "Hello?"

Siobhan elbowed him. "Oi! I'm right here."

"I know," he said through the side of his mouth. "I'm only saying hello."

"Oh, I know what tone you were only using," Siobhan whispered.

Sylvester cleared his throat. "Sorry Tink, I know this is a dream, and you might not believe this, but we have to go save the world, and... I need a favour."

"Of course you do," Talia said, with a sigh. "Okay, what do you need?"

Sylvester looked her in the eye. "The Karnache are going to try and reach into Dusk's mind. He is shielded, but... they will break through eventually. You need to get in there first."

Siobhan rubbed the back of her neck. "And how am I meant to do that?"

Sylvester suddenly didn't seem sure what to do with his hands. "Well, I can send a spell through the Monoliths that will wake Cliff, and... will knock out Dusk's shields for a little while. And... Magpie can slip you into Dusk's head undetected."

Talia looked at Siobhan's roguish friend. "Oh, so... Are you like a warlock or something?"

"No pet," he said, gently. "I'm a ghost. But it's ok... The dead have a sort of connection. When somebody dies, we feel it. You know, to show each other the way and stuff."

Talia let out a nervous laugh. "But... We aren't going to kill Dusk? Are we? I mean... I don't like the secrets, but I don't want him dead."

Sylvester held up his hands. "We aren't going to kill him, but, for a short time, he is going to be *technically* dead."

"Oh." Talia looked down at her feet. "How short a time?"

"Well..." Sylvester cleared his throat. "That depends on how quickly Cliff manages to revive him. Of course, the slight issue is I haven't been able to warn Cliff, so it's going to be a surprise for him, but..."

Talia drew a deep breath. "Okay. Okay. Assuming I get in there, and he doesn't die... What am I meant to do?"

Sylvester pressed something into her hand, a coin made of holographic light, but cold to the touch. The emblem on the coin was a nebulous, ever-changing fractal spell. "Tell him he has to let his guard down, and let them see the Fallen, for no more than seven seconds. This spell will protect you both, for that long."

Talia frowned. "That sounds a really bad idea."

Sylvester nodded. "All the best plans are bad ideas."

Kismet, the Kanarche Sorceress, redoubled her efforts, trying to break through Dusk's shields. Her fingers dug into his face, as gripped him tight, and forced her will down against the barrier. His body bucked and thrashed, convulsing and spasming. She withdrew a little, to catch her breath and muster her abilities for the next assault.

A discordant howl filled the air. A fountain of sparks exploded from the monolith, as the mirrored surface turned matte black.

The lightning faltered, releasing Dusk and Cliff.

Only the young woman of no consequence, the scientist from the wheelchair, remained caught in its grasp, apparently still fast asleep.

Cliff hit the floor with a grunt, and sat up, rubbing his head.

Kismet backed away.

A direct confrontation was never the plan.

She slithered over and reached for Cliff's head, her long fingers caressing his brow. "Sleep, my darling, sleep and dream of my voice, of..."

Cliff's eyes snapped open. He gripped her wrist and heaved her hand away, as he stood.

Kismet retreated slithering back into the car park.

Cliff took two steps towards her, curling his hands into fists, before he saw Dusk laying at his feet.

Kismet held up her hands, in surrender.

Cliff reached down, feeling the boy's neck.

The younger man was laying at an unnatural angle, his body sagging and unmoving.

"No..." Cliff lay Dusk out flat, and tilted his head. "No... Come on, Dusk... Don't you bloody dare..." He clamped Dusk's nose, and blew into his mouth, until his chest rose. "Come on..."

Dusk remained limp, and unmoving.

Cliff glared at Kismet. "Help me. Please."

Kismet shuddered. "I... did not..."

"Help me or he dies," Cliff snapped.

Kismet slithered over to Dusk, and placed her hands carefully upon his chest, and began to pump his heart, as Cliff breathed into his lungs again.

Talia followed Magpie through the mirror, and emerged... a vast, empty, darkness. The floor was some kind of stone, as black as darkest light and utterly seamless. The air was frigid and dry.

Talia wrapped her arms about herself, against the cold of the grave.

Dusk was sat in the darkness, his chin resting on his knees, huddled up, and... lost in despair.

"He's alone," Magpie whispered. "Was there nobody to wait for him?"

Talia shrugged. "I don't know."

Magpie glanced at her. "Then I guess I better go tell him that now isn't the time. You best not let him see you yet. Meeting in a dream is one thing, meeting here has... consequences."

"So? What do I do?" Talia asked.

Magpie didn't answer. He strode towards Dusk, with his hands in his pockets.

For a moment Talia watched him.

Then somebody touched her wrist, with fingers as cold as frost.

Talia looked around to see a pretty, capable looking young woman, with dark hair woven into a tail, beneath a cowboy hat. She was wearing a leather jacket, and bootcut jeans.

"Hello?" Talia whispered.

"You shouldn't be here," the woman said, with a homely, American accent.

"No," Talia agreed. "I'm a friend though. We have a plan and I need to talk to him."

“Okay, but you don’t want to be left here, when his brain fires back up.” She took Talia’s hand and dragged her into the darkness. “Come on, you will be safe in the deep stack.”

Talia hesitated. “Wait... What’s the—”

Suddenly the cowgirl wasn’t holding her hand any more, and Talia was falling...

Landing in the memory felt like hitting an air pocket.

Talia found herself in a crowd of children, following them through a network of tunnels underground. She wasn’t sure how she was certain it was underground. The whitewashed bricks, overhead lighting, storage heaters, and concrete floors could have been in any industrial building, in a factory or depot, but something about the *feel* of the corridor suggested a tunnel, no matter how hard the posters and notice boards tried to make it look like a school.

The uniforms the children wore felt... odd. Both the boys and the girls were wearing dark blue berets, blue-grey tee shirts, and dark blue cargo trousers.

Dusk was maybe twelve years old, scrawny, skeletal and lean. His eyes were intense, and his fingers were constantly drumming at his side, as he joined the queue of kids outside of a classroom.

Talia trailed him through maths and English literature classes, before a gnarled, haggard looking military officer, wearing a full length plastic trench coat over threadbare fatigues, in mismatched camouflage patterns.

The bell rang for the morning break, and the kids started to make their way out the class.

The teacher stopped Dusk from getting up. “Stay there. You will be running an errand this afternoon.”

The memory shook, and Talia fell into another, with the same lurching air-pocket jolt.

Dusk was laying still, in a dense thicket of brambles, overlooking some kind of open cast mine, a far bigger quarry than any Talia had seen before. There was an ominous, fortified tower standing sentinel over the quarry.

He was wrapped in a long plastic raincoat, with a deep hood. There were circuits built into the hood, to shield him from psionics.

He scratched notes on in a pocket book, with a nub of a pencil, recording the robots, aircraft, and transport vehicles that came in and out of the tower.

Something flew in from behind, coming in lower than the other aircraft, a flying saucer with engines that sounded like whale song.

Dusk paused, holding his breath.

Talia felt the cold burn of his fear, spreading through his entire body, (now spreading through her body) as he wondered if this was the time they would see through his shields and detect his mind?

The memory stuttered, between day and night, from summer into autumn. Dusk was there for many days, some sunny, some rainy, some frosty, always making his notes and keeping watch.

Captain Llewellyn, the officer Talia had see in the school was there sometimes, asking questions. Not just about the vehicles, and the robots, but the workers, the *slaves* in the mines, and the human guards.

He always had a flask of hot, sweet, tea, and a bag of hand mad biscuits.

"They have a Resistance officer in there," Dusk said, on the rainy day.

Llewellyn frowned. "What makes you say that?"

"A transport landed this morning, on platform Three," Dusk reported. "The guards within were Special Ops, wearing balaclavas and black armour. They dragged somebody out, with a bag over their head, and lots of bruises. I would say he was resistance."

Llewellyn nodded. "We already had intelligence pointing to that." He frowned. "And have you been watching those ways in and out the tower?"

"All the ones you listed," Dusk confirmed, "and the other."

"The other?" Llewellyn asked.

Talia grinned. "The ventilation channel."

Dusk pointed to the base of the tower. "There's an intake channel for the ventilation system near the base of the tower. The basements and tunnels run deep, and they need air, to keep prisoners alive. If you can get past the fans, you can get inside, but you will be right down at the dungeon."

The memory flickered.

Dusk was alone again, keeping his watch.

Something went very wrong, in a heartbeat.

One moment he was scratching the note, the next... the next the *feel* of the memory changed. A prickling sensation crept down Talia's spine, as she suddenly could not shake the feeling of being watched.

She and Dusk turned and looked along the embankment at the same time.

There was a...ghost watching them, an image, a projection... It appeared to be a man, a topless slave, left withered and half mummified by the toils of the mine, but carrying himself with strength and purpose, bloody runes carved deep into every inch of his flesh.

But as Talia stared at it, she saw past the man to something else. A woman, older than the stars, rangy, imperious and poised, with hooved feet, curling horns, lavender skin, and curling horns, whose barbed tail whipped and arched from under her loose robes like a serpent, whose bat-like wings wrapped around her like a cloak.

Whose predatory smile was dangerous beyond words.

Instinctively, Talia gripped the spell-coin, shielding herself in its cold.

Young Dusk gripped his head, and ran, he ran for his life.

The memory lurched...

For a few moments there was a confusion of images, of Dusk's long walk back through the wilderness, avoiding Moros robots all the way... And haunted by the Fallen every step.

And then they were back in the underground school, in the gym. The rest of the class were being taught to fight with knives, to throw an assailant over their shoulder, pin them to the ground, and end their lives in a rapid flurry of stabs.

Dusk rose to his feet, and helped his 'victim' up. They stepped to the sidelines, making room on the mat for a pair of girls.

"Okay," Talia said, standing beside the kid. "You aren't an alien, but you are all kinds of messed up. Your voice hasn't broken, and I am betting the puberty fairy hasn't given you any confused feelings yet, but you are already serving in the army? Even as a spotter, that is... wrong."

Llewellyn, and another couple of resistance soldiers and teachers gathered in the corner. They called Dusk over for a discussion.

Talia couldn't hear the words, but she *knew* he was telling them that he hadn't shaken the Fallen from his mind. The school's shielding helped, but he still glimpsed her, and she was still in his dreams.

The conversation blurred into focus.

"It makes him useless as a field asset," the English teacher said. "Once he goes topside, somebody in the Moros dungeon knows where he is."

"He has latent psionic abilities," the School Doctor said. "We missed it on the testing, otherwise he would already be shielded. He's still young enough for the implants to hold."

Llewellyn nodded. "So... we move him to the Covert Action Track. He will make a good messenger."

The English teacher shook his head. "Isn't he a little old to change track?"

Llewellyn shook his head. "Prep the implants, and give him a reading list. He'll do fine."

Talia shook her head. "Covert Action? What the Hell is that meant to be? Don't do this. Please..."

The memory jolted as the needle skipped once more.

Dusk had been training to be a commando since he was eight. Transferring to the Covert Ops track meant he had four years of schooling to catch up on. It was fairly common for kids to flunk out of Covert Ops and sidestep into the much larger commando class. Movements the other way were much rarer.

With a shaven scalp, and fresh scars on his head, from the matrix implanted on his skull, to shield his mind, Dusk began his new intense regime of training.

Lieutenant Chapel, Dusk's Primary Instructor, made their situation quite clear. "You can't just pass, boy. You have to prove to us that a mistake was made, and that you should have always been on this track. Passing isn't enough. You have to excel."

In some lessons Dusk did excel. He was the fastest kid on the assault course, surprisingly good at close combat, and he was picked first for Escape and Evasion. In other lessons he was... far from spectacular. He drilled, he practised, he stayed up late reading, and studying, and he struggled to catch up with the other kids.

He had always been good at watching people, but learning to mimic their body language and their mannerisms, to fit into a crowd, and to bluff through a conversation didn't come naturally to him. They were skills he had to learn, through failure, and through practise.

Learning to condition his mind was the biggest challenge.

"Your body is changing," Chapel told Dusk, as they ran combat drills in the gym. "As will your mind and soul. Love, desire, relationships, these will become powerful influences on you, they will be tenants that make life worth living. Unfortunately, you will have to learn to armour yourself against them, as those implants shield your mind. Attachments will place yourself, or those you care about in danger. The Moros are not above sending agents to seduce you, or putting a gun to the head of the girl you are sweet on. This is why orphans like you make such good agents. You have few attachments, fewer...vulnerabilities."

Talia paced restlessly around the mats as they sparred, her stomach sickened by the lesson.

Chapel knocked Dusk down with a savage punch, and knelt beside him on the mat. "In an ideal world, I would teach you to have no attachments, to feel nothing. The Moros do not hesitate to cut us down, because they have no qualms about taking life, no horror or revulsion to overcome."

“In an ideal world,” Dusk said, wiping the blood from his nose, “you would not have to teach me any such thing.”

Chapel scowled. “Don’t be smart. You know what I mean. We need our human nature, but to survive, we need to suppress as much of it as possible, to be cold, and dead. We will have plenty of time to have our regrets in the future.”

Dusk looked the teacher in the eye. “Do you ever worry, Sir, that the Moros and the slaves might not be the only ones the Fallen have been manipulating?”

“Yes!” Talia shouted. “Good boy! That... that makes far too much sense.”

Chapel gurgled on a laugh. “If they are messing with our heads then... We need to use it to our advantage. We need to see everything as a fight, assume everything is a trap, and do our bloody best to survive. Bleeding hearts get us killed. Hearts of iron endure.” He rose to his feet. “Which is exactly why I will make damned sure you never remember me fondly. Now get up. A punch like that shouldn’t put you on the floor, and the split second while a Moros Guard tries to work out why you are still on your feet will be your only advantage...”

To Talia’s relief, the memory lurched forward once again.

The next memory only lasted a moment.

Dusk was maybe sixteen years old, and was running for his life, through the ruins of a long abandoned city. He ducked into a crater, and pressed himself to the wall, as three flying saucers came in low, and bombarded the ruins of a government building with energy weapons.

“Is that the school?” Talia asked. “Did they route out the Resistance?”

The memory leapt onwards.

Suddenly they were inside a building that was functional and industrial, but also oddly futuristic. Dusk looked to be sixteen or seventeen, and was wearing a space-age dark green battle uniform, with a slight metallic sheen to the material, and a plasticky, weatherproof texture. His body armour was matte black, and he wore a balaclava rolled up on his head.

He was terrified, his heart was hammering in his chest, and there was the taste of bile in the back of his throat. Talia could feel echoes of his emotion, but none of it showed on his face. He had the same grim look as the other soldiers hurrying through the building.

Dusk stepped into an elevator, and produced a key with a magician’s flourish, using it to access the restricted floors in the basement.

“What was that?” Talia said, her voice sharp around the edges. “Did the whole Resistance die?”

The doors hissed open onto a dungeon. It, like the rest of the building, was functional and industrial, but it was still a dungeon. He steeled himself and marched out through the dungeon.

Talia hurried to keep up.

Something made her stop. She paused and looked into one of the cells.

The half naked man, covered in scarred runes stared back at her. His blank, expressionless eyes, and mirthless eyes made him look like a shark.

Talia gripped the spell-coin, suddenly unsure if she was seeing a memory, or if something else had slipped in while Dusk’s shields were down.

She backed away from the thing, that might not even have been a man, and ran after Dusk.

A guard wearing the same uniform stepped forwards to stop him. “What are you doing down h-”

Dusk lashed out, a high-tech, segmented whip suddenly in his hand. The tip of the whip wrapped around the guard's throat. Dusk yanked on the whip, and bounced the guard's face off the bars. The guard went limp, and slumped to the floor.

Dusk stepped over him and opened the cell.

Within were four soldiers, wearing camouflaged battle dress that was newer, and more high-tech than the Resistance's had been. One was a man in his fifties, two were men in their thirties, and one was a woman in her early twenties, the dark haired woman that Talia had met in the void.

They stared at Dusk.

The elder man folded his arms. "We were told to expect a squad of Resistance Commandos. Where are they?"

"Gone," Dusk said. "There isn't a Resistance any more. It's all gone. But... your fleet don't know that. They have been receiving comms that will lead them to believe you made contact, you received the Chronal Resonator, and they are coming to extract you, but it's a trap..." He took a small device from under his coat. "Here. You need to get this into the right hands."

The cocky looking man with the tattoos choked on a laugh. "So, assuming we can get out of here alive, and avoid detection, the enemy has hacked our comms, so...the moment we warn the fleet, the Moros will be coming to kill us, and we will probably all die?"

The man with the world weary eyes, and the untamed beard rolled his eyes. "And how exactly does that sound worse than sitting here and definitely facing a firing squad in the morning?"

The cocky one pouted. "Condemned men get a last meal?"

The woman stepped out. "Okay kid. How were you planning of getting out of here?"

Dusk nodded. "I do, but it has to happen in less than three minutes."

Two minutes later, the alarms started sounding.

Dusk used a skeleton key to get them past the locks to the service door, and into the bottom of the ventilation shaft.

There were ruck sacks, combat rifles, and grappling guns waiting for them.

Talia looked up through the shaft, through the giant fans that were droning away. "You are working to a time limit, so... Did you put a bomb on their power relay station?"

A distant explosion shook the building.

The lights blinked out, the alarms went silent, and the fans slowed.

The back up supplies thumped on.

There was another distant explosion.

Darkness and silence fell across the building once more.

"Clever boy," Talia whispered.

The woman took aim with her grapple gun, and sent the line sailing up the shaft. It lodged in the underside of the lip of the exit.

The others followed her lead, and began their climb upwards.

Talia saw the next three days in a series of lurching, jolting glimpses.

The Americans were heading across the border into what was left of England. There was a nuclear bunker under an old USAF airfield where Lieutenant 'Easy' Sunday thought that they might find useable communications equipment to contact the fleet.

Dusk tended to walk at the front of the line, with the woman. She was the squad's sharpshooter.

On the fourth day they reached the bunker and sent the message.

Within an hour they were running for their lives, through a forest, trying to evade one of the flying saucers. The energy beams turned the forest into an inferno. Dusk dared not look back, he didn't see the others die.

Soon it was just him and the woman.

An energy bolt hit a tree, exploding it splinters and flame.

Dusk threw himself over the woman, a split second too late.

Pain seared one side of him, ripping at his face and body.

They lay together in a ditch, as the saucer left them for dead.

Talia crouched beside them. The mess the splinters had made of the woman's eyes turned Talia's stomach.

The memory lurched.

Talia found herself on the deck of an aircraft carrier, somewhere off the coast of Australia.

There must have been at least five years that Talia had skipped over. Now Dusk was in his twenties, his scars fading, his face falling easily into a thoughtful frown. The woman was maybe in her late twenties, maybe in her thirties. Her face showed little signs of scars, but her eyes had been replaced by cybernetics, blank orbs of gunmetal that she hid behind mirrored glasses.

Both wore battledress, with no insignia or rank.

An officer approached them. "This way please."

Talia followed them inside, into the briefing room.

Lord Augustus Azrael, and the Widow were waiting within.

Talia's heart leapt into her throat.

Azrael rose to his feet. He...looked unchanged from how Talia knew him now. The Widow was still strong and silent, stood in the corner. He gestured to the flask on the desk. "Would either of you like a coffee?"

The woman gave Azrael a hard stare. "Why are we here?"

"Because," Azrael said, his tone even, "some years ago, this young man helped the Resistance escort time travellers, superheroes, to safety. Then, a few years later, you both brought us the Chronal Resonator, the key to time travel. In the years since, you have both proven yourselves to be...excellent assets, in a war we are losing. The Moros have sent agents back in time. They are planning to accelerate their invasion, to rewrite history so our resistance, our war, is over before it begins." He shifted uneasily. "We have been training select units to travel back, to counter these threats in the past, and perhaps, to prevent the invasion from ever happening. You are being assigned to one such mission."

"And if we refuse?" The woman asked.

"Will you?" Azrael asked.

"No," Dusk said.

Azrael nodded, and handed him a file. "Travelling to the past comes with... certain dangers. You will be unable to use your names, or reveal your identity, except to some select contacts who are prepared to aid your mission. From now on you will be known as Dusk."

The woman groaned. "Well, I can't let him do this alone, can I?"

"Of course not," Azrael said, with a hint of a smile. "Miss Fox."

Talia's eyebrow raised. "So... not an alien, but definitely messed up, and... now you're a time traveller? Okay. That...fits. That makes sense."

Memories lurched, forwards for Dusk's memories, but back in time, to a rooftop in London, sometime before Maelstrom Day reshaped the city.

There was an assassin, dressed in tight black fatigues, and robot-like mask, lining up a shot with a heavy, anti-material rifle. It was going to strike an antique black staff car as it crossed Westminster Bridge.

Azrael's stately old car.

Dusk lashed out with his whip, and snared the assassin, pulling him into a lightning fast punch, that knocked the would-be-murderer out cold.

Fox took the assassins rifle, adjusted the aim, and gunned down the other two snipers who were going to catch the car in a crossfire, from the other side of the river. She wiped her prints from the rifle, and looked at Dusk. "Are you done?"

Dusk handcuffed the gunman to a railing, for the police to find. "Yeah. We should get a wobble on. We don't want to be late."

The memory skipped again.

This time Talia found herself sat at a table with Cliff, in the dining room of a Private Members Club.

Cliff rose to his feet as Fox and Dusk came in. He shook their hands and had them sit down. "You must be Fox, and..." His smile changed to one Talia hadn't seen before. "And it is nice to see you again, Dusk." He gestured. "Please. Sit. A lot of the food here is very rich and a little pretentious, but I think you will like the chicken, or the steak."

Fox brightened. "Steaks would be good."

"They would?" Dusk whispered.

She gave him a big sister smile. "It's beef. Like, a slab of beef."

Dusk looked unsure. "Okay. Yeah. The steak would be good."

Cliff poured them some wine. "So... I take it you don't know what is under Barghest Bridge?"

Dusk shook his head. "Only what we knew when you...visited. It's a weapon, it's powerful, and it radiates a psionic field. The Moros call it the Fallen."

Cliff raised an eyebrow. "We have a watch on the town. Now, as for your mission. We have been sharing intelligence with your people. Because we don't know how deep the Moros have infiltrated your work will be off the books. Officially, MITHRAS will have no knowledge of you, or your mission. Unofficially we have set up some equipment drops in self storage centres around the country. What we will expect are regular reports. As grateful as the Director is not have fifty-calibre holes in him, going forward, we will expect you to find the threats, then pass me the information. MITHRAS will contain the threats, is that understood?"

"Yes," Fox said.

Cliff nodded. "And, this is all beyond secret. Even if you are brought into the fold, you will never divulge anything of Slingshot without my personal permission. No matter the cost. You understand?"

Dusk nodded. "I understand."

Talia sighed. "You were working for us." Her face pinched in a scowl. "And secrets or no... I really don't like being kept out of the loop when it comes to psychic weapons of mass destruction."

The memory froze, like paused video.

Somebody stood behind her, not the memory of Dusk, but... the man as he saw himself, colder, uglier, and greyer, with livid scars, and the military uniform he had been wearing in the future.

"What are you doing here?" He asked, his voice even on the surface, but with undercurrents of fear and concern. "How are you here?"

Talia rose to her feet. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to see any of that, but... Sylvester sent me. He said I had to find you. I had to give you this..."

She produced the coin from her pocket.

Dusk studied it, His brow pinching. "I don't understand. Professor Sylvester knows I am shielded how did he..." His eyes widened. "Did you kill me?"

"Sylvester did," Talia whispered. "A little bit."

"Here?" Dusk rubbed his head. "No... No... If he shut down my shields *here*..."

"The Fallen will get in," Talia agreed. "I think that's the plan. I think he needs Mother Ceto and the Karnache to see it, to see what it really is. He needs them to...realise it isn't a weapon they can use, it is a disaster waiting to happen."

"Oh," he said quietly. "So... I'm letting everybody I don't want in my head inside today?"

Talia stepped closer and put a hand to his cheek. "The woman, Fox... She was in Neo Jorvika with you?"

Dusk nodded.

"I'm sorry," Talia whispered. "I know you were taught, conditioned, not to love, not to have connections, but...I saw the way you two were together. I... I lost my sister too, when I was fifteen. I wont pretend to know what you are going through, but... I have a fairly good idea how lonely it can feel without her. I'm sorry."

Dusk tried to play his usual stoic self, but Talia could feel the pain beneath his words. "How much did you see?"

"Too much," she said. "If you ever need to talk..."

He lifted her hand away. "Talking is something I can't do. I have no idea how we even handle this kind of... breach." He closed his eyes for a few seconds, then considered the spell coin. "Sylvester has a plan? Is it... a good one?"

"He seems confident," Talia admitted.

Dusk looked her in the eye. "You better go. You don't want to be here for what happens next."

"Rubbish!" Talia chided him. "Sylvester would not want me here if the plan was for you to do this alone."

Dusk shook his head. "You can't--"

She gripped his hand. "I know what we are going to show her. I'm ready."

Dusk nodded, and the memories faded. There was no jolt this time, the transition was...fluid.

And suddenly they were stood on the motorway embankment, overlooking the quarry and the tower, where Barghest Bridge used to be.

The figure who was waiting for them in the memory was a robot supermodel dressed as a space princess. She was elegant and beautiful, with skin of chrome, and eyes like copper, with a nest of serpent droids instead of hair. She wore a loose silk gown, and moved with a seductive fluidity.

Talia glared at her. "Mother Ceto, I presume?"

Ceto nodded. "I am."

Dusk stepped forwards. "You are looking for the Fallen?"

Ceto smiled. "And you will tell me where to find them, or I will tear your soul to shreds."

Talia felt the...*thing*... watching her, before she saw it. The prickle of its gaze upon her. She looked past Ceto to the shadow behind her, to the figure that might have been the Wright, a skeletal man with runes carved into his flesh, and was sometimes a nightmare-demon-woman.

Dusk gestured. "He's behind you."

Ceto turned.

The Wright smiled, stepping forwards. "Princess of the Stars, rightful Empress of the Karnache... High Priestess with a war band of warriors, who outlived mortal flesh, through bodies of steel and souls of ice..." He spread his arms. "Your ambitions are too small. You seek to rule one little Empire, a few thousand star systems, but...I offer you the cosmos."

Dusk wrapped his arms around Talia, and took her hands in his, pressing the spell-coin to the palm of her hand.

The protective spell unfolded around them.

As the Wright touched Ceto's cheek, it transformed into the female demon, with the batwings and hooves.

"I did not call to you," the Fallen whispered, seductively, "for a few thousand stars? I will give you the fire to burn down creation and rebuild it in your image. I will give you everything. Let me show you... Let me show you all you can be..."

The Fallen's eyes burned bright.

Ceto's eyes flares with the same light.

She fell back, clutching her head, screaming. "No. No... No... I will never be that. I refuse to be that!"

The Fallen shoved Ceto to the ground. "That can change. In time. Release me. Let me free you, from everything and everyone who holds you back."

"No..." Ceto howled, lashing out with a psychic blast that staggered the Fallen. "No!" She clawed at her head. "No... All of this... All of this was you... in my head? Get out! Get out!"

Ceto vanished in a flash of magic.

The Fallen turned to look at Dusk, then Talia.

It sneered, and reached out a finger towards Dusk's head.

The spell-coin glowed, and the Fallen snatched its hand away.

Dusk closed his eyes. "Shields up."

The Fallen writhed as it was expelled from Dusk's mind.

Talia shuddered. "Are you okay?"

"I will be," Dusk said. "But..."

Talia sighed. "I shouldn't be here. I know." She kissed his cheek. "Time for us both to wake up."

Aftershocks

Port Abadon, Alaska

Flip landed on the floor of the library, and John leaned over her.

For a moment they both lay there, groggy.

"Are you okay?" John asked.

"Was..." Flip blinked her thoughts back into focus. "Was the woman in our dreams a robot snake?"

"I think so," John said, helping her up. "Are you okay?"

"No," Flip said. "Yes. I don't know." She stared at him. "All this research and you kind of knew the answer? That's... a waste."

They smiled at each other.

"We need to check on the others," John said.

"We do," Flip agreed.

When they reached the monolith it was hovering above the ground, spinning slowly.

Artemis ran over to grab them both in a hug.

"What's happening?" Flip asked.

Tennant looked lost. "I think it's going home. Did anybody else have... weird dreams?"

Neame Creek, Australia

Siobhan opened her eyes, and lifted herself from the parched, tufty grass.

The ground shook, as the monolith withdrew from the soil, and hovered, spinning in the air.

Ryleth stood over Siobhan, and helped her to her feet. "Are you okay?"

Siobhan nodded her thanks and they walked together to the bush where Sylvester had landed.

"So..." Siobhan cleared her throat. "Does this sort of thing happen a lot?"

Ryleth laughed. "Yeah. But this wasn't too bad. Aliens and demons? That's just a Tuesday. Some days are really weird."

Sylvester grinned as they hauled him back to his feet. "It worked! I did it!"

Ryleth rubbed her head. "What worked?"

Sylvester gestured to the monolith. "I gave Mother Ceto a glimpse of what she wanted. There was enough of her good sense left to realise that whatever the Fallen truly is, it had been manipulating her, and... that she doesn't want to be what it would make her."

Siobhan cocked her head. "I thought the plan was for Dusk to do that?"

Sylvester dusted off his field suit. "Well, yes, but... It was my plan. And... It probably didn't burn out his entire mind."

Ryleth tapped her earpiece. "Miss-Co... Please tell me you can hear this?"

Robin responded in an instant. "You have no idea how glad I am to hear your voice."

"Hey," Siobhan said, tapping her earpiece. "Are the others okay?"

Barghest Bridge, Wales

Talia hit the floor and jolted awake. She rolled over and dragged herself up.

Cliff was kneeling, cradling Dusk's limp body.

A robot woman, with a giant snake instead of legs was backing away from them, as the monolith hovered up through the ceiling of the car park, and out into the sky.

"I'm sorry," the Karnache said. "I didn't do...that."

"I know," Talia promised, as she heaved herself into her chair. "I know."

"Thank you," Cliff said.

The Karnache vanished in a pulse of light.

Outside noise began to fill the world, as the town woke up.

Cliff stared at Talia. "Something happened with the monolith. He took the worst of it. I think he shielded you, but--"

"It stopped his heart," Talia said. "I know. Sylvester didn't see another way."

Cliff looked like his world was falling apart. "Sylvester?"

"He knew you would save him," Talia said, knowing how thin the words felt in her mouth. "It was a plan. I think... I think it worked." She tapped her earpiece. "Robin. We need a medivac on this location. Journeyman Three is down."

London

Talia spent what time she could, at least a few hours each day, sat at Dusk's bedside, reading her book, or watching TV, just keeping him company, while the web of machinery beeped with his heartbeat, or wheezed with his breath.

It seemed such a small thing, but he deserved more than to be alone.

On the third day, she started to tell him stories, just to make herself feel less lonely.

“My sister was stolen from me,” Talia said, as she sipped a coffee from the little shop in the hospital. “She came to see me at University. I was young, sharing digs with other students who were older than me, but all still kids, and Mara always worried they would lead me astray. But, that weekend she needed to work, so she stayed as late as she could, drank lemonade and lime all night, and when the pubs closed, she went to drive home. But... she didn’t make it. Some boy racer in a hot hatch pulled into her lane without looking, and crushed her against the crash barrier. They say she died instantly, that she had no time to feel any pain. I don’t know. In those last few seconds, in that last blur, she must have been so afraid.” She looked away. “She was there, then... I got a phone call to tell me she would never be there again. Weird thing is, I dream of her. She always has opinions on my boyfriends. And... it helps. When I dream we talk, and there is stuff I would talk with her about that no living soul knows.”

His breath wheezed some more.

“Okay,” Talia said, chewing her lip. “You will probably never try a kebab again, but you really should. I messed with your order. In my defence I thought you were an alien, but...” She laughed. “If you gave them another chance, then I think you would like them.”

“Are you sure you mean kebabs?” Dusk asked, his voice muffled by the plastic mask feeding him oxygen.

Talia laughed, and took his hand. “Well, yes, but you could give me another chance. I grow on people too.” She pressed the buzzer for the nurse. “Hey.”

“Did it work?” Dusk asked.

“They left without the... whatever the Hell it was.”

“Good.” He opened his eyes.

“Welcome back,” Talia whispered.

He smiled. “Are you okay?”

“Am I okay?” She shook her head. “Yeah. I’m not the one who was technically dead. Which... I think may get Sylvester technically fired. We aren’t meant to kill team mates.”

“Noted,” Dusk said.

The Adventures of the USS Trouble

Season 2, Episode 4: Trouble Comes In Threes

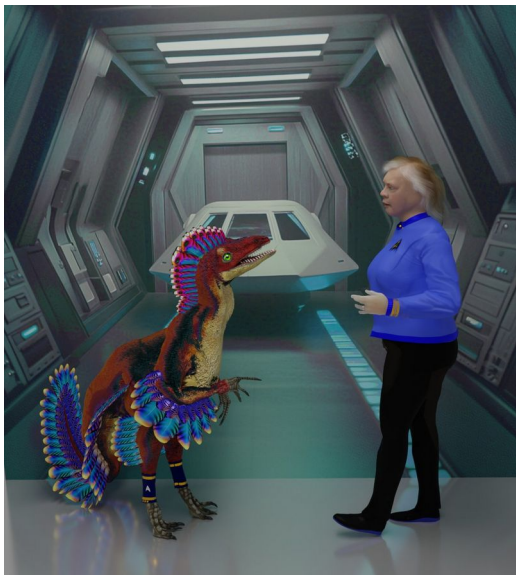
1 INTERIOR, Shuttle Bay.

The CAPTAIN watches as the shuttle lands and DORCAS and CHIP exit.

CAPTAIN
How'd it go?

DORCAS
(after the briefest hesitation)
Went well. Very well. Went well. Yes.

The CAPTAIN reaches up as if to scratch her (the Captain's) head; actually she's tweaking the Babel Fish Device she wears.



CAPTAIN
(skeptically)
That well, eh?

DORCAS
(ruffling her feathers)
Yes. That well. Be proud of me.

The CAPTAIN shrugs.

CAPTAIN
Okay, meet me in the ready room in 20 minutes for a debrief.

DORCAS
Aye. Will do.

DORCAS walks away. CAPTAIN stands and watches, somewhat puzzled, and then leaves in a different direction.

Thursday April 11, 1974

Evening

8:00 **10** **COLOR** BATMAN—Adventure

A crime wave erupts in Gotham City when butler Alfred and King Tut announce their engagement. Batman: Adam West. King Tut: Steve Martin.

42 **COLOR** TROUBLE IN SPACE—Science Fiction

As the crew returns home after a long trip, it is assigned to investigate a star system on the far edge of Federation space. The captain is ordered to hand over the Murchee she picked up on Beta Kerrotyn by a Commodore with whom she's had an ongoing mutual grudge since fourth grade. Admiral: Germaine Swanson. Captain: Fara Shimbo. Dorcas, herself

86 PERRY MASON—Drama

Mason is called upon to defend Hamilton Burger, who has been arrested on charges of stealing an ice-cream truck. Perry Mason: Hamilton Burger. Hamilton Burger: Della Street. (Rerun)

Thursday April 18, 1974
Evening

8:00 **42** [COLOR] **TROUBLE IN SPACE**--Science Fiction
Harry Mudd throws a fit after finding that the Captain has sent his pet and companion Moriarty on a Top Secret Mission. Harry Mudd: Roger Corman. Moriarty: Iza Sudanim.

86 [COLOR] **GET SMART**--Comedy
CONTROL and UNCLE get into a turf war when CHAOS and THRUSH decide to take over all bagel manufacturing on the East Coast. CHAOS agents: Pinky and the Brain.

99 **STINGRAY**--Adventure
The World Aquanaut Security Patrol is paralysed by an enormous school of actual Stingrays demanding residuals for the use of their name. Troy Tempest: Zero Mostel. Marina: Tina Turner.

2 INTERIOR, A CORRIDOR

ADMIRAL and T'PRYL are walking along slowly, chatting in Vulcan. CAPTAIN catches them up and taps ADMIRAL on the shoulder.

CAPTAIN
(sotto voce)
Germaine, got a minute? Or maybe 20 minutes, I donno...

ADMIRAL

What's up? Sounds important.

CAPTAIN

I'm meeting Dorcas in my ready room in a couple of minutes for a debrief. I... would like you to be there.

ADMIRAL

Why?

CAPTAIN

Well, she's saying everything went fine. But she's acting very not-fine. This is not like her. Dorcas tells you what she thinks, no matter what. Something is up and I'm ... to be honest, I'm not exactly sure how to proceed. Auties are lousy at this kind of thing, as you know.

ADMIRAL

Sounds interesting. You want me to observe?

CAPTAIN

Yeah, that's more or less it. I may be paying attention to the wrong thing and there's nothing going on, but if there is something troubling Dorcas, I probably ought to know.

ADMIRAL

Did you want me to probe, or verify truth?

CAPTAIN

(vacillating)

I'm not sure, really. I just don't want to act on my first officer being upset if she's not really upset and I'm picking up the wrong signals.

ADMIRAL

I'll sit in, but T'Pryl is better at distance

monitoring than I am.

CAPTAIN
(quietly)

I'd like to keep this between us Old Friends.

T'PRYL

Would you like me to go on without you?

ADMIRAL
(to T'PRYL)

That'll be fine, I'll talk to you later.

3 INTERIOR, Ready Room

3

CAPTAIN and at least one CAT are sitting there. DORCAS and CHIP enter. DORCAS pulls up a stool and perches on it. CAPTAIN gets up, gabs CHIP and puts her on the table (so she can be at eye-level with everyone else). CAPTAIN takes her seat again. ROSIE comes in, passes around tea (or whatever).

CAPTAIN

Ah! The Tea Lady. The most indispensable member of any crew.

ROSIE snorts and leaves.

CAPTAIN

This meeting is called to order, or something. First Lieutenant Dorcas, your briefing, please.

DORCAS sits up straight, ruffles her feathers, looks around for the camera, and faces it. She speaks clearly and precisely.

DORCAS

Most meeting, already seen, recorded I assume.
Offered chance to speak. Took chance.
Spoke to someone. Identity unknown. Said they,
"Hello, Federation. We are Effiyeh Confederacy.
State purpose." Surprised they speak Federation
Standard. I say, "Trouble is science and exploratory
vessel. Not here before, wish to explore." Soon
another voice.
(speaking with ever-so-slightly less assurance now).
They say, "Federation never go somewhere only to
explore, always want something. What is wanted?"
Think fast, say, I want nothing from you except
permission to explore and meet. I hear discussion, I
think. Second voice it says, "We will consider your
request. Your ship stay where you are. You yourself
may go back to it." So, I back.

DORCAS shifts on her seat.

DORCAS

But surely know all this, were watching on main view screen, yes?

ADMIRAL

It's just protocol. You'd have to do this after any mission.

DORCAS

Ah. Understand. Capiche, wakarimashita.

CAPTAIN

Chip, what have you got to say for yourself?

CHIP

(flashing antennae)

This Self detected only the most subtle interrogation scans. This Self assumes that the Effiyeh-Selves were trying to determine the capabilities of the Trouble. Looking for hidden weapons or scanners is a probability. This Self has no idea what Those Selves might have discovered regarding this.

CAPTAIN

Everything on the Trouble is in plain sight, or radar or whatever. The only surprises it's got are its crew.

CHIP

Perhaps Those Selves understand that now.

CAPTAIN

Well, I suppose we just wait here and see if they have anything to say. In the meantime, I've got Lewis and his minions studying the star systems, so I guess that's it for now.

DORCAS

(wrong-footed)

That all?

CAPTAIN

Yeah, it's the end of my shift anyway, I need a nap. Dorcas, want to come by for a movie later?

DORCAS

No. Rest before shift starts. But thanks. Some other time.

CAPTAIN

Sure.

DORCAS leaves.

CHIP

Someone put This Self on the floor please?

CAPTAIN gets up, picks up CHIP and puts her on the floor. While CAPTAIN is leaning down over her, CHIP whispers,

CHIP

Talk to This Self later, privately?

CAPTAIN nods. CHIP exits. CAPTAIN sits down and pours another cuppa. Turns to ADMIRAL and shrugs.

ADMIRAL

If that is her normal way of speaking, everything is fine. But I sense that she's withholding something. Possibly involuntarily. There's a hesitancy in her speech, perhaps a mental interaction.

CAPTAIN

I wonder if she knows she's doing that.

ADMIRAL

Time will tell. If you want me to observe her more closely, you know where I live.

4 INTERIOR, MORIARTY's Starship 4

MORIARTY sits behind an ornate, oak desk. BANE, very proper English Butler of approximately the Victorian era, stands before the desk, holding GEORGE.

BANE

And shall I make a compartment for your friend here, Professor?

MORIARTY

If you would be so kind. And provide it with every luxury.

BANE

Begging your pardon, Professor, but I am not

entirely sure what this creature would consider
'luxury.'

MORIARTY

Hmmm. An excellent point. Just do your best.

BANE

Very good, Professor.

BANE turns to leave, taking GEORGE with him. MORIARTY sits back in a very elegant leather-upholstered chair.

MORIARTY

Oh, and Bane, one last thing.

BANE

Yes, Professor?

MORIARTY

Please send a coded message to our dear friend Captain Shimbo and tell her that I have done as promised. And that I shall be expecting some small compensation. Also, send a message to Mr. Mudd and tell him I said, "All has been arranged."

BANE

Very good, Professor.

X INTERIOR, CHIP's quarters X

CAPTAIN enters, sits down. CHIP appears from the water with one or two DOLPHINS following after.



CAPTAIN

So! What's up?

CHIP

There were things that Lt. Dorcas did not say.- This Self does not know why, but as Dorcas did not say, This Self will tell you now.

CAPTAIN

(considering)

Were these things something the Admiral should not have heard?

CHIP

Not Admiral no, not *per se*. But This Self is wary of the Vulcan.

CAPTAIN

Don't get me started...

CHIP

Understand. But this is about Vulcans. They have been here.

CAPTAIN

Why am I not at all surprised. In what capacity?

CHIP

Unknown. But This Self has intercepted much coded traffic between the ship of the Effiyeh and the

worlds of Those Selves. Vulcans were mentioned. This Self will study the transmissions further as there is much that I find new. Interesting. In addition, if This Self judges correctly by what Those Selves were transmitting, Those Selves are vast in number and type—and know a great deal of Federation business. But This Self thought that Your Self might want to know about this.

CAPTAIN

(thoughtfully)

Roger that. Please keep This Self up to date on what Your Self finds.

FADE

X INTERIOR, Bridge of the Trouble X

The CAPTAIN is standing, facing forward. CHIP is at the station usually occupied by DORCAS. SANDOR and MIRIN are at their respective stations. On the viewscreen, Commodore Mayell is livid.

CAPTAIN

(speaking with the kind of über-politeness that native Brooklynites reserve for nuns, Mafia dons, and People They Wish To Destroy).
With all due respect, Commodore, I don't have the Murchee in question. It was stolen. I cannot send you something which I do not have, sir.

MAYELL

Your private ship is reported to be at your New York home.

CAPTAIN

Oh yes, sir. I sent the *Amelia* home. Considering our current mission, and the lack of storage space on the *Trouble*, of which I gather you are cognizant, I thought it prudent to free up space which I may need for other purposes.

MAYELL

(turning even redder, being snide)
You always have an explanation, don't you, Captain?

CAPTAIN

I try my best, sir.

MAYELL

I am holding you personally responsible for that creature. And if it has brought any diseases or germs or anything with it, I am holding you personally responsible for them, too. In addition, I have sent a team to your ship to scan it thoroughly for any indication of the creature or whatever contraband it may contain.

CAPTAIN

An excellent suggestion. Please do keep me informed of your findings. I'm always losing stuff.

MAYELL

Mayell out.

The screen goes dark. The CAPTAIN shrugs and returns to her chair. She notices that most of the bridge crew is staring at her.

CAPTAIN

What?

SANDOR

With respect, Captain, what exactly *did* happen between you and Mayell in fourth grade?

CAPTAIN chuckles, smirking. Leans back in her chair with her hands behind her head.

CAPTAIN

Oh, I'll tell you someday.

CHIP

Captain, Effiyeh-Selves are hailing.

CAPTAIN

Open Channel D...

The Effiyeh starship appears on the screen.

EFFIYEH SPOKESPERSON

(V.O.)

We grant you an audience. Please follow.

The Effiyeh starship moves away. As it does, the lift doors open, and DORCAS enters. She sees the Effiyeh ship and stands very still, her feathers slightly raised.

Bridge crew, not noticing her, all look at each other. Captain shrugs.

Deal us in, Sandor.

CAPTAIN

Aye, Skip.

SANDOR

The Trouble moves off.

FADE

*Tune in next issue for the **next thrilling episode!***



SS ELEGY

THE FINAL WORD IN TRAVEL