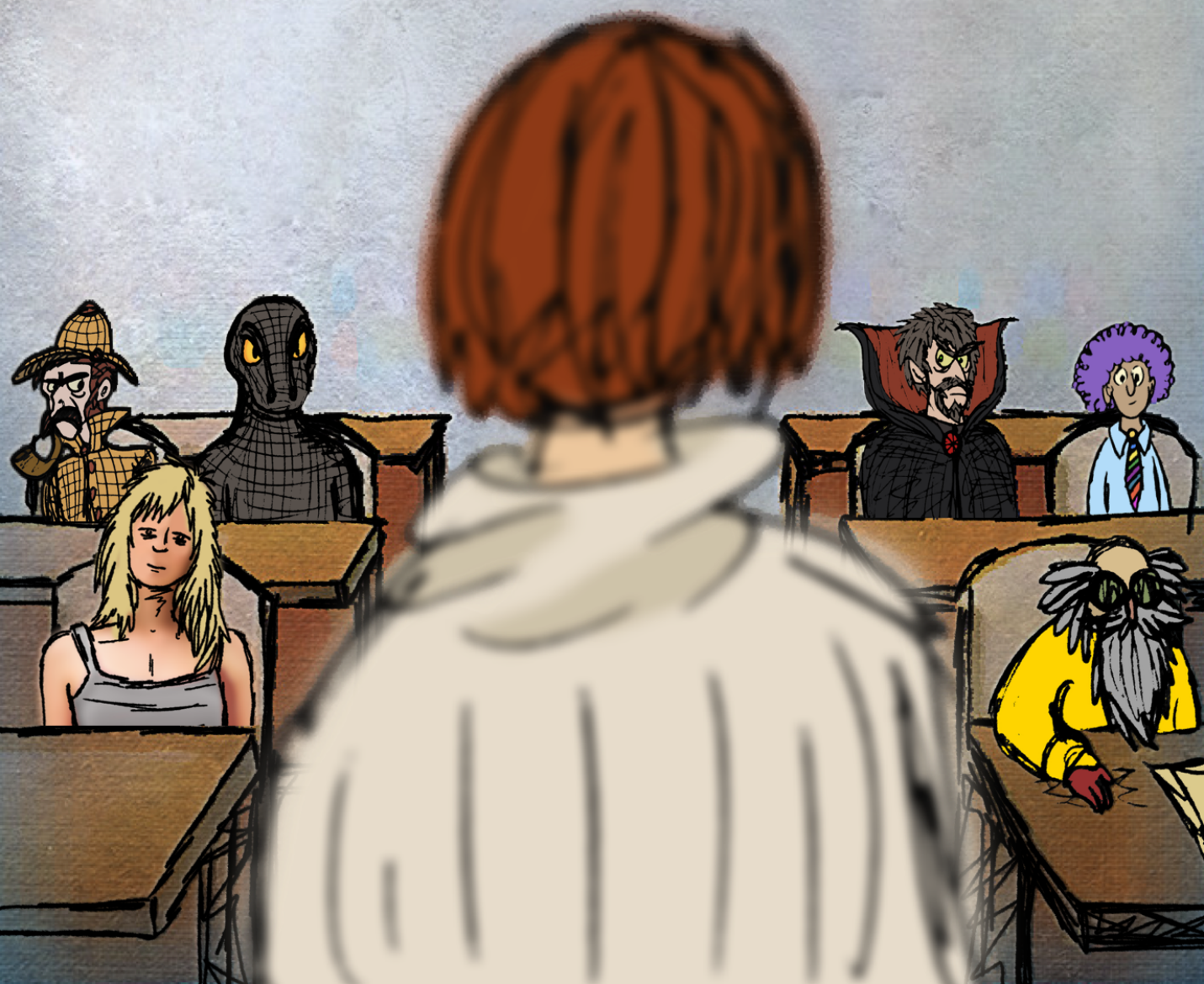


Our Own Voices

*An Auteur-Hosted April Fools' Day
Arcbeatle Press Writing Workshop*

Edited by Aristide Twain & James Wylder



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Featuring: James Hornby, Xavier Llewellyn, Theta Mandel,
Callum Phillpott, Plum Pudding, Aristide Twain, Thien Valdram,
and James Wylder



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Prologue

“Welcome... welcome! *Bienvenue à tous !*”

The woman who stood at one end of the room was tall and striking; the off-white of her flowing dress set off the dark red of her bowl-cut hair. There was a fierce authority in her smile and the way she spread her arms wide, but her hospitality seemed genuine; so you did as you were bid, and walked on ahead, through the wide double-doors into the room itself.

It was arranged not unlike a classroom, with a number of desks and chairs; a large, almond-shaped chalkboard was affixed to the back wall. On each of the desks, you noticed stacks of papers, and pencil-holders boasting pens and quills of every kind. Golden sunlight streamed in through the circular windows, which revealed a sky that was almost tropically blue. All in all, the space seemed as welcoming as its apparent controller.

It was almost enough to forget that you had no idea how you’d found yourself here. Dimly, you remembered something about signing up for some kind of creative writing workshop — at the very least you’d gotten an email about it, and clicked to open it. The idea had seemed like a nice bit of fun. But how...?

Suddenly you felt something pushing against your back, and realised you’d stopped moving about halfway to the nearest chair.

“Hey! Get a move on, slow-coach! You’re not the only one here, you know!”

Stepping quickly out of the way, you half-turned to see a hunched little man in a saffron-yellow coat, his face positively eaten up by a wispy grey beard with a matching tuft of hair. He hobbled past you at lightning speed and claimed the coveted writing space.

Behind him, with a good deal more dignity, strode another old man, white-haired and well-dressed in a fine red suit. His eyes shone with intelligence as he took in the space, but he frowned with a kind of muddled concern which you suspected mirrored your own. Your eyes met for a moment, and there was a flash of recognition, an understanding of your shared predicament.

“Ah, hello,” he said, half-raising a hand in greeting. “My name is Charles Zoltan, and I... I appear to have...” He shook his head in a half-involuntary shudder, and started again. “This *is* a creative writing workshop, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I *think* so,” you replied uncertainly.

“Hm.”

He regarded you for a moment more, then rubbed his beard once and walked past, selecting a chair near the front.

“No choice but to play, I suppose,” you thought you heard him mutter.

One by one the others walked in. They were no great crowd at the end of the day, but every time you thought you’d seen the last, one more poked their way through the doorway; some seemed as puzzled as yourself and Mr Zoltan, while others appeared determined or even relaxed. One thin girl with dirty-blond hair seemed to be wearing pyjamas and appeared to be dying of embarrassment as much as confusion, diving to the nearest available desk and sitting so low that she almost disappeared beneath it.

The host almost kicked another of the participants out, mumbling something about her being a vagrant, before the woman in question hopped up and handed her an I.D. Card while giving the worst salute you’d ever seen in person.

“Cleo Mentia, Star Ranger. I range in the stars.”

“Yes, I believe that was clear from the name.”

“In space.”

The host sighed. “Well you’re on the list but... take a shower when we go for a break.”

The woman, whose messy black hair and unkempt uniform marked her as more of a cosplayer than a military woman, took her seat again, and promptly shoved a small furry creature back down into her shirt as it tried to poke its nose out. You quickly turned your attention... *anywhere* else.

In the back of the room, squatting on a chair behind a desk, you could see an unkempt man who you estimated to be somewhere in his fifties. He wore what seemed to be a straightjacket with the sleeves cut off to free his hands, as well as a tatty bit of trouser-like fabric to cover his unmentionables. He noticed you watching, and almost began to make a fuss about it, but his attention was swiftly stolen by a shiny, flying. With one swift movement, he captured it in his hands and devoured it like he hadn’t eaten in months.

Hanging above him was a sign reading “Don't worry, I'm from Arcbeatle Classics!” — you assumed this was left over from some previous class, since this didn't seem to be relevant to the person below.

From the door, a noise, like an impatient growl. You jumped a little as a large, four-fingered reptilian claw came through the frame, followed in short order by an enormous head festooned with crocodilian teeth and deep red eyes. There was no denying what you were looking at; a dinosaur — an actual dinosaur, over eight feet tall, coated head to tail in black scales. For some reason this wasn't nearly as shocking as you knew it should be, and the other guests seemed much of the same mind, making a few muttered comments among themselves but entirely failing to shriek in terror.

As the dinosaur carefully manoeuvred himself through the door, the woman on the stage greeted him.

“Ah, Tirion! Welcome!”

“That is *not* one of me,” a man in the extravagant black robes suddenly exploded, making you turn around. “I refuse to believe it. I refuse!”

“But of course, Lord Tyron,” said the woman with a frosty smile. “That is *Tirion*. T, I, R, I, O, N.”

“Of the Fallen,” the dinosaur added coolly.

The bearded man glared at him, but, obviously embarrassed at his mistake, he soon whirled round, muttering to himself as he went to find a chair. The dinosaur, for his part, eyed the hostess some more. “When I received the summons, I did not expect one of your stature...”

The woman waved her hand as if to dismiss that line of inquiry “Take a seat”

A peculiar pair followed from that. The first of them was a tall man, around 6'4", though only thanks to the heels he wore — wearing an Inverness cape and deerstalker cap. He was smoking a pipe, which felt like it shouldn't be allowed, but it wasn't like you knew for sure. His hawk-like features, reddened eyes and floppy moustache would've reminded you of Vlad the Impaler if there wasn't some stronger resemblance you couldn't quite put your finger on...

Lagging behind him, more out of unwillingness than natural speed, was a plump gentleman in a grey frock coat and a bowler hat. He tried to wave to you, but the taller gentleman grabbed his arm and promptly dragged him away to their seat.

“Absolutely not!” erupted Tyron.

You turned to see what could possibly drive someone to react in such a way, and saw a broadly-built man striding in, dressed smartly in a brown three-piece suit. His warm smile instantly put you at ease.

“I demand that this man be thrown out immediately,” Tyron went on, the high collar of his robe flapping as he stamped his feet like a petulant child.

“Dionus is welcome like all the others,” said the woman. “You will show him the same respect you’ll show everyone else whilst you are here.”

Whether due to being unused to confrontation, or some other, unseen means, Tyron ceased his protest, and marched away to take a seat as far away from Dionus as possible.

Dionus seemed to pay little heed to Tyron’s protest, and settled into a seat beside Charles. The two promptly began to chat amongst themselves.

“Hello? Am I in the right place?” A young lady with long and beautiful black hair entered, wearing a pleated black skirt and a grey vest — with a badge that read ‘A27’ — over a red blouse with gold tie. Black mary-jane shoes completed the outfit.

“Yes!” the Goddess said brightly. “And right on time as well. Welcome, Miss Cao!”

“Thank you. I’m excited to be a part of this writing workshop, I hope to work in film someday! You can call me Li Xiu.” The girl gave a little bow, and sat down, pulling out a tablet computer and water bottle, arranging them neatly in front of her.

At last, all were seated, and the red-haired woman raised both hands, a silent request for silence.

“Truly,” she began, in the eloquent tones of a practiced public speaker, “it delights me to see so many of you made it here, even at such short notice. I thank you for making time, from the bottom of my hearts. I know full well that many here are burdened with important duties, even on this day of all days —”

You blinked. What date *was* it today? You had the strangest inkling it was a significant one, a day on which nothing could be taken at face value... Surely it

wasn't Halloween just yet. You glanced at the windows again... No, it would have been the sunniest in years.

“— and truth be told,” your host continued, “I am the first among them. Yet here we are, and here I am. Some of you know *who* I am; let them be assured that I have no *mauvaises intentions*, no ulterior motives, today. Yes, the rumours are true. I am a changed woman; changed by faith. Not by my faith, but by others' faith in me. Long have I reflected on how to occupy this new lease of life which I have been gifted; here, perhaps, is the answer. Yes, my friends. Today, I wish only to share my passion with others; to exult in our shared mistress — the Art... of Writing.”

From a hidden pocket in the folds of her dress, she withdrew a long piece of chalk which looked almost like a magician's wand. She flourished it with speed and elegance, and before you knew it, the words ‘*Our Own Voices — An Exclusive Workshop on the Art of Writing, Freely Taught on This Blessed Day by the Eleventh Reincarnation of the One Called Auteur, the Resurrected Goddess of Gendar*’ had appeared on the blackboard, beautifully calligraphed.

There had to be a trick. Surely. But you still loved every second of it. You'd had dramatic teachers before, but none with as much flair, as much *panache* as this woman who called herself Auteur.

“All of us have something in common,” she spoke again. “We are all associates, in one form or another, of a certain... Well, it all rather depends on matters of *métafiction* —” You noticed she quite definitely used the French pronunciation. “— so I cannot expect all of your simple minds to comprehend the subtleties. But one way or another, we have allowed our stories to be told, written, printed, bound, digitised, converted, transcribed, dramatised, Wikified, or otherwise documented — by perfect strangers.”

At this you noticed the plump gentleman looking up at the tall one with the moustache and the deerstalker.

“Well,” he said, raising his hand, “I wouldn't quite go that far — Sholmes, you wouldn't say I was —”

“Silence, oaf,” hissed the man with the moustache.

“Today,” Auteur continued, ignoring the interruption — “today, that changes. I shall sculpt your fledgling talents until you are fit to withstand the pressures and spiritual demands of the creative process —”

“You can’t sculpt a fledgling!” someone heckled; you turned to find it was the old man in the saffron coat. His voice was hoarse and raspy, with some sort of a European accent. “*Imbecile!* That’s a mixed metaphor, is what *that* is! Are you sure you’re qualified to teach this thing?”

What happened next taxed your powers of understanding and observation alike. Almost too fast for the naked eye to see, the red-haired woman snapped the fingers of her left hand; and suddenly, pressed between her digits, there was a book, a thick leather-bound one whose red velvet bookmark hung freely from between its pages. Ample though Auteur’s sleeves might be, no known form of prestidigitation could possibly have allowed her to perform *that* trick —

— but you had no time to even dwell on that miraculous sight, for, as quickly as she had summoned it into existence, she *hurled* the book across the classroom, with the form and the vigour of an Olympic discus thrower. It hit the old man squarely in the face and he was hurled backwards off his chair, landing on the floor with a crack that was just loud enough to make you wonder, for just a moment, if you’d just become a witness to his murder. Ah, but no — already, he was getting up, righting his chair and cursing in some foreign language.

“An abridged edition of my publishing record,” Auteur said tersely. “If you remain unconvinced.”

“Screw you,” he barked in English; but then he crossed his arms over his desk, and made no effort to speak up again.

Content with this effective ceasefire, she addressed the whole workshop once more.

“I have asked some of you to bring writing samples,” she said, “if you possessed any worth showing, or had the time to prepare them before this Workshop took place. Those pupils will now pass them along to me; and while I examine them, the others can draft up their own attempts at storytelling. Once I have reviewed your works, we shall examine them all together, and I shall do my best to give you useful advice and *critique*.”

Someone raised a hand; a girl, no, a woman, who sat near one of the windows. She also seemed to be a robot, a little copper robot with a pair of sculpted wings. Somehow, that didn’t surprise you as much as you felt it probably should.

“Yes, Aletheia?”

“Just Lethe is fine,” said the robot. “I was only wondering — well, I have hardly ever done this before. Written reports, documents, yes; but not... *fiction*. Not things that weren’t true.”

“Of course, my dear,” said Auteur, with a motherly smile that was only faintly supercilious. “That is why you are here.”

“Yeah,” continued Lethe, “but — well, would it be alright — I mean, could I ask you for your thoughts on the draft before I finish it? I mean, as it goes along? I’d hate to spend thousands of words going in the wrong direction.” She stared off, out the window and into the distance, for just a second. “Had enough of that for a lifetime,” she added more quietly.

“I see no objection,” said Auteur after a moment’s thought, and she clapped her hands in front of her chest. “Well, then! Let us start!”

“You should have said *allons-y*,” the old man in yellow complained. “No balls, that’s your problem.”

But, it seemed, he’d said it quietly enough that the instructor elected to ignore him.

A hush fell over the classroom.

Dimly you remained aware of the astonishing collection of characters who surrounded you. Hither the man in the deerstalker was looming ominously over the chubby man with the bowler, who was warily drafting up an account. Thither the wild-eyed young man tore at his own material with an ecstatic frenzy, discarding one sheet after another not because he was unhappy with the results, but because in his uncontrolled enthusiasm, he had literally ripped up the fabric of the paper. And at the head of it all there was Auteur, sitting on a regal throne that hadn’t been there before, one leg crossed over the other, as she patiently leafed through one hand-bound manuscript after another.

But to all intents and purposes, your world was in front of you. Your world was the desk, the white page, and the pen in your hand. Funny. To the extent that you *were* a writer, you had grown used to the screen and the keyboard as your weapons of choice; but in this moment, there seemed to be no more natural way to do things. A strange and alien confidence had overtaken your heart; something you had felt only a few times before, at inconvenient hours, sacrificing sleep or obligations to chase down that blessed sense of boundless possibility. The touch of

the Muse, the ancients called it, and perhaps that was what Auteur really was. Had she not called herself a Goddess?

Well, it didn't matter. Only one thing did.

You had a story to write, and by golly, you were going to write it.

After that, there was only a haze, a blissful, bracing haze, one page, one scene after another; until at last you stabbed the final period into the paper with a satisfying 'TCK'.

In vain, you searched for a clock by the chalkboard; you didn't have your watch, or your phone. Funny; you hadn't noticed before, and even now, it didn't bother you. How could *anything* bother you, when you had a story written out, there, on your desk? Not just an idea, not just a chapter or a fragment, but a complete creation! Truly, there was no grander feeling. How long had it taken? There was no way to know, and you didn't care one jot.

The Goddess, Auteur, rose from her throne, which vanished like a dream; and she called the room, once more, to order.

"Well, then. It seems a few of our quickest workers are finished, and just in time too. Let us begin the *fun* bit. Let us see what you have produced; and let us see how it can be improved. I could, of course, start with some of the early submissions, but where's the fun in that? I wouldn't want to reward celerity with demands of patience. So. Anyone to begin?"

Many seemed keen, and a few seemed quite the opposite. Among them was the man with the bowler hat, but with merciless impassiveness, the taller man with the deerstalker urged him forward until he had no choice but to hold up the product of his work with one shaking hand.

"I actually wrote this earlier," he whispered to her, "but *he* wanted to read over it again one more time before I handed it over."

The Goddess took it from him with catlike grace, and, turning one page after the other, seemed to read through it in mere moments; for a moment, you swore you could see her eyes glowing with an unnamed hue — the kind of alien colour which could only be represented as a kind of electric mauve, if you really *had* to, but which was really so much more. She smiled, then, though the smile wasn't entirely kind.

“I *see*,” she said, cutting through the pregnant silence. “Thank you, Doctor... Well, then. I suppose I had better read this aloud to the rest of you..”

1. The Adventure of Scarlet, the Study

(or SCAR, for short)

By ~~Callum Phillpott~~Dr. Jimothy Wilson

A rank odour perforated the room as we stepped through the thick, wooden door. Light gleamed from a tiny window in the corner, drowned out by the luminescent bulbs affixed to the ceiling, linked to concealed wires conveying an electric current, which then causes the filament in the bulb to ignite, giving off their own stronger light. I thought highly of the electric bulb. NOT AS HIGHLY AS I THOUGHT OF HERLOCK SHOLMES, NATURALLY. The room was in disarray, with artworks and art supplies haphazardly strewn about like a desecrated corpse. The desecrated corpse in the middle of the room only aided me with the comparison.

Herlock Sholmes — the brilliant man who I'd met mere chapters earlier — was now donning his usual attire of a mud-brown Inverness cape and a deerstalker cap better suited for hunting foxes on a winter day WHICH WAS IN A SENSE FITTING FOR A MAN LIKE HIM, WHO HUNTED CRIMINALS LIKE AN INTELLECTUALLY SUPERIOR BLOODHOUND LEASHED BY THE CONFINES OF HIS OWN PHYSICAL FORM.

He squatted, brilliantly, by a large red puddle on the floor. He stuck his fingers into it and held them up to his face. He licked it.

"Paint," he said, disappointedly.

Mr White — who had let us into this room in the first place — looked at Herlock apologetically.

"Apologies, sir," he said, also apologetically, "I didn't have time to clean up before you arrived."

"I understand," Herlock said, sympathetically.

I would've perhaps pointed out that it's not proper protocol for someone to clean up a crime scene before the investigators arrive unless they are a criminal, and in fact, that is what I did, or I felt I must've done at some point since I felt myself verbally uttering this objection but no response came other than a swift knock against my skull from Herlock Sholmes' smoking pipe.

"Could you tell us about the victim?" Herlock asked Mr White, intellectually.

"Yes," Mr. White responded, simply.

No utterance followed for a while. Herlock glared at Mr White with forceful eyes that seemed to cause slight discomfort in the slight, white-haired man.

“*Oh*,” he ejaculated as though touched by an electric current which should be going to one of those brilliant bulbs instead of through his raggedy body. “You wanted me to —”

“Yes, Mr White, tell us about the victim.”

“Well, we all knew her simply as Miss Scarlet, for that was indeed her name, and she also only wore red, so that helped too. Every few months or so, she’d volunteer to have various art students paint her naked form — a hobby she pursues even to this day.”

The art students encircling her — which probably should have been mentioned earlier, but that can always be done on a later draft — were indeed painting her desecrated and deceased form with the sort of soulless detachment only a true artist can muster.

Herlock looked at the painting drafted up by one of the students with keen interest. He dipped his finger into a red pool on the canvas and licked it.

“*Paint...*” he said, again disappointed.

The student looked at him with acute disgust.

“What the Hell, man?” the student said, anachronistically.

He grabbed the student by the chin.

“And where were *you* when this young lady became a member of the deceased class?” Herlock asked, utilising his thorough grasp of the English language to great success.

“I dunno, man, I just got here and she was on the floor, and Teach said to start painting her, so we did. Then he told us we should leave the body alone, so we started painting on canvases instead.”

This would explain the paint marks on her skin (something I should also describe earlier in the second draft). I vocalised this thought, but Herlock hit me on the head with his pipe again.

“*Teach...*” Herlock said, stroking his moustache, “Teach, as in a name rather than a verb...”

“Perhaps it’s short for ‘Teacher?’” I interjected.

He hit me with his pipe again.

“Don’t jump to conclusions, my dear Wilson.”

“Sorry,” I said, pitifully. “Though we should probably look for their teacher, anyway. This *is* an art class, after all.”

“That would be me,” said Mr White, standing between us, “And I do believe I was the one who asked them to keep on painting.”

“And *why* would you do that, Mr White?” Herlock asked, intimidatingly.

Mr. White cowered slightly.

“Well, Mr Sholmes, it *is* exam season. We can’t just stop class because there’s been a murder, especially in the pre-Internet age.”

Herlock clicked his tongue.

“That sounds quite reasonable, Mr White. Now, if you don’t mind, I’ll continue my examination of the room.”

And so he examined the room very brilliantly and

* * *

Sholmes is gone.

He just patted my back and told me he needed to buy more tobacco, so he left me to my own devices. Technically speaking, I’m not supposed to be writing about him without his oversight, so I won’t. I’ll write about myself, I suppose.

Hello! I’m Dr Jimothy Wilson, 32 years *young* and single, in case you may or may not be interested (which you can signify in your feedback for the paper if you so wish). I’ve been living with Herlock for the past 6 years, and I’d like to say our friendship has grown since then. I would like to. We’ve been involved with many mysteries you may have heard of, though more likely have not — Herlock was rather displeased when our encounter with Arsène Lupin made its way to store shelves without his oversight. I thought the book was alright, personally, though I burned my copy to appease Sholmes.

I don’t hate him. Not a singular hateful atom resides within my body, so it is not possible for me to hate him.

He’s still not back.

Will this always be the way?

Lately, we’ve been involved in more extradimensional matters — adventures with a bizarre, misanthropic goblin of a man calling himself Doctor Omega, some enlightening escapades with Carmicheal the Ghost Beater, and an encounter with odd doppelgangers of ourselves calling themselves Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson (all in reverse order, naturally — the Sherlock Holmes adventure was the first time we even considered the possibility of other universes), etc.

Oddly, this relates to why I've taken up writing, since in these worlds we discovered that each of these adventurers had their own sort of biographers that recorded their lives for publication. Sholmes liked that idea. After the Lupin incident, he thought that only low-lives and thieves had their own biographers (not helped by our encounter with A. J. Fambles and his biographising associate who simply went by the name "Chicken"), but now he knew that this was the case for everyone (even our doppelgangers, apparently).

Sholmes would've written them himself to ensure maximum accuracy, but our publisher told us that his perspective was egotistical, brash, and unpalatable (which is meaner than I would phrase it), so I decided to step up to the task. Now, as a Doctor, I didn't think of myself as a particularly skilled writesmith... no, *he* didn't think I was skilled. He never did. But his word is law, so he had me enrolled in various writing courses before I got a chance to set pen to paper. Each time, including now, he looms over my shoulder, checking my work word by word in case anything offends him.

I still don't hate him.

I don't hate how he mocks me, or how he blows pipe smoke in my face, or how he ignores every suggestion I have unless he can convince himself he had it first, and I don't even hate how he physically assaults me. Nor do I hate him playing his double bass at *three in the bloody morning while I'm trying to sleep*, and then the next day he tells me off for being tired while he's investigating and I don't just want to yell "WELL, SHOLMES, IF YOU'D JUST STOP INJECTING COCAINE INTO YOUR VEINS AND MANGLING MUSIC FOR ONE BLOODY SECOND YOU LOW-LIFE SCUM OF THE EARTH PRICK!" at him.

I can see him at the door. I shall simply fold the part of the paper where this is written so he can't see it, and then resume the narrative on the next page. Sholmes doesn't believe I can outwit him, so he won't suspect anything.

* * *

After an hour, he immediately noticed the word 'Teach' written on the floor next to the victim. Herlock dropped down and started to touch the word, but reached for a small bottle next to it. He opened the bottle and dipped his finger through the opening, causing it to get stuck for another half hour WHICH IS UNDERSTANDABLE, ANYONE WOULD MAKE THAT STUPID MISTAKE, EVEN SOMEONE AS BRILLIANT AS HERLOCK *WHO ALSO PROBABLY DID IT DELIBERATELY AS PART OF HIS MYSTERY SOLVING EXPERTISE*. Once he freed his finger, he put it in his mouth.

"Not paint... something *alcoholic*..."

"That's paint thinner," Mr White added.

“Thin paint... interesting.”

He grabbed the bottle and took a swig of it before standing up with a slight wobble.

“There’s that word again... *Teach*’...”

“Maybe it means *Teacher*,” I observed anew.

He hit me with his pipe again.

“If they meant someone in the teaching profession, Wilson, they would’ve just written it in German, for that language has a much shorter word for the role, which one can write with less blood.”

I didn’t think that was true, but that was just my opinion.

He hit me with his pipe again. Just now, I mean, when he saw what I’d just written. He told me I shouldn’t switch tenses, which is true, though I feel it’s justified in this case where I’m talking about events happening right now which are distinct from those in the past which I was previously writing about. I’m wrong, naturally.

“So,” said Mr White, clapping his hands together. “What do you think?”

“This woman here was *murdered*,” Sholmes said, again showing his sheer brilliance with artful simplicity.

I want to grab him by that ugly Inverness cape he keeps wearing.

“By what means?” Mr. White asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Perhaps we could go around asking the students what murder weapons they have?” Mr White suggested. “That way, we know the one they *don’t* have is the murder weapon.”

“I think she was shot,” I said.

He hit me with his pipe again.

“Why would you think that, Wilson?”

“The bullet hole in her chest.”

I pointed to the bullet hole in her chest. I wanted to describe it earlier, but Sholmes told me it’d be better dramatically if it were here now. He’s right, naturally.

Then, Herlock’s eyes lit up like one of those entrancing and wonderful electronic bulbs.

He spun around, his Inverness cape swirling in the air like a flag of justice. For the record, Sholmes suggested this line, and I thought it was good.

“It was *you!*” he exclaimed, pointing at Mr White. “*You* murdered Miss Scarlet and tried to get ahead of the story by calling us!”

Mr White tugged at his collar, nervously, and began backing away from us.

“H-how would you know — I mean, how would you *think* that?” he asked.

Herlock smiled. “It’s quite rudimentary, my dear Mr White. You see, when I asked the student why he was painting, he told me ‘*Teach*’ had done it — this word was also written by the body.”

“And *you’re* the teacher!” I added.

He hit me with his pipe again.

“No, Wilson, that’s not why. You see, I thought it was odd that they called you ‘*Teach*’ like it was your name, despite the fact that you yourself introduced yourself as Mr White. I believe, however, that this is merely a pseudonym, and you have another, altogether different name to call your own.”

This was exactly how he said this.

“Then what name do I have, Mr. Sholmes?” Mr White asked, both enraged and fearful.

“I’ll get to that — first, I must mention how odd it was that you referred to our time as the ‘*pre-Internet*’ age. While this is true, the only person I’ve seen use this name is our acquaintance, Doctor Omega, who has the ability to travel through time. This tells me that you’re time-active.”

“And what does this have to do with my name?”

“Again, rudimentary. If you’re a time traveller, then it’s possible you came from the past — perhaps the 1700s, the swashbuckling age. I only pieced it together when Wilson pointed out the gunshot wound — too big for a modern gun, but perfect for a flintlock pistol that a pirate might use... and based on the way you furrow your brow, you don’t like me calling you just *a* pirate. You’re more than that. You’re *the* pirate — at least, that’s how you and some history books think of you, *Edward Teach*, otherwise known as BLACKBEARD!”

Mr White did indeed have a beard — white, though, rather than black. I was going to bring this up earlier, but I was in a sort of flow state with the narrative and simply forgot to describe him fully.

Sholmes advises me to skip past the boring bits — the gunfight, the arrest, the begrudging congratulations from Inspector Leonard, etc.

Once it was all done, and we were back in our home at 112 Breet Staker Lane, I was troubled by one question I had about this bizarre case. A question besides why he didn't point out that Mr White (or rather Edward) confessed to wanting to clean the crime scene earlier, or why he didn't prepare some sort of alibi.

"Sholmes," I said, "There's just one thing I want to know."

He groaned, "What is it now, Wilson?"

"... *why* did he kill Miss Scarlet? What was his motive?"

He looked at me with utter disgust, "Wilson, your obsession with believing that criminals have societal reasons motivating their crimes is sickening. Murderers are just mad. There's your reason."

And we never spoke on this matter again.

Commentary

The Goddess of Gendar was silent for what felt like a long, long time. Doctor Jimothy Wilson seemed to shrink under her gaze, but, following its direction, you could see that the brunt of her ire seemed to be directed at Herlock Sholmes, the man with the handlebar moustache — who, for his part, was too busy glowering at his partner to notice.

“Well. At least, we have quite a lot to work with,” she finally sighed, setting down the manuscript and joining her hands together. “One scarcely knows where to begin. Genre is always a serviceable start; would anyone like to tell me what we have here?”

The little clockwork woman raised her hand.

“Yes, Lethe?”

“An Incident Report,” she said confidently.

The Goddess tilted her head to one side like a surprised bird. “A... strangely specific term for it; and the metafictionally autobiographical aspect was not, I confess, what I had in mind, though it is undeniably part of the whole. So much so that I might have been inclined to remind Doctor Wilson that this is supposed to be a chance to work on our *creative* writing, but never mind that. Any other suggestions?”

The girl with the grey vest raised an arm with the practiced elegance of a question who considered a given class a failure if they hadn’t gotten at least one chance to personally impress the teacher with their interest in the material.

“Yes, Li Xiu?” the Goddess acknowledged with a flicker of amusement. “And please, there is no need for classroom manners here. Simply speak up, if you have something of worth to say. I am, after all, a deity; if I insisted on formality, you would all be on your knees to start with.”

“Not all of us, surely,” said Lord Tyron with a glare.

“Doctor Wilson’s story,” Li Xiu spoke up, sounding almost as if she was reciting something by heart, “bore all the hallmarks of a classic murder mystery or, colloquially, ‘whodunnit’, with the plot following a detective’s investigation and a solution turning on clues seeded throughout the narrative in the form of foreshadowing.” She blinked. “Or, well, clues which the author *tried* to seed throughout the narrative in the form of foreshadowing.”

“*Precisely!*” said the Goddess, clapping her hands. “A well-trodden genre, nay, formula. And formulas are powerful things, tantamount to *ritual*.”

At this, you saw Tirion nod gravely.

“Which is why it is truly a shame what a woeful example of the form *this* was. A ludicrous solution to the central riddle, a total lack of stakes or structure, frequent digressions into thematically irrelevant grievances and praise. And the blame for these grievous offences against the art of Literature itself —”

She paused. Of course she did. You’d known this woman for perhaps twenty minutes, but you were already certain she was the most dramatic person you’d met in your entire life, bar none. Lost on a desert isle, her first priority would be to build a stage so she could impress the coconuts.

But if her extended silence was driving *you* up the walls, it was nothing compared to the effect it was obviously having on Sholmes and Wilson, who glared fixedly as if they’d found themselves in a firearm standoff.

“.....lies with *neither* of you,” the Goddess finished at long last once the tension became unbearable.

“*What?!*” they said in unison.

“Cowriting is a challenging ritual unto itself,” she explained. “Akin to parenthood. Believe me, only grief will come of bearing the wrong partner’s child, and so too is it with a creative partnership. At its best, it can create...” She huffed in amusement — you couldn’t understand why — and subtly gestured at the window. “...Well, all you see here. But some are never meant to work together. Doctor Wilson, Herlock Sholmes — you must learn each to stand by yourself. To pursue your own, peculiar vision. That is, after all, what I did. I became... an *Auteur*.”

It was then that the door flew open.

“HAH!” cried the man who burst in. “You became nothing of the sort! That was all *me*, *my* epiphany, and you stole it!”

He was shorter than the Goddess, darker-skinned, and older, too; his head was nearly bald and a long, tapered white beard completed his rugged features. He wore a crimson leather coat, and carried a burlap sack, a combination which almost made you think —

He paused mid-lunge and, half-turning to face the students, made a pantomime face.

“Oh, *flûte*. I fluffed that, didn’t I? I’m supposed to say *ho! Ho! Ho!*”

“Quit it,” the Goddess hissed at him. “You’re not the *Père Noël*.”

“Ah, but I am,” said the old man, tapping his nose with a wily look. “To the Gendar, I am. The Father of Christmas.”

“Well, these people aren’t Gendar.”

“But we’re *on* Gendar.”

“Only because neither of us can leave, *mon cher*, you know that as well as I. This Workshop is *my* project. I thought we agreed we wouldn’t interfere in one another’s affairs without prior arrangement?”

You were too baffled by these developments to consider any particular course of action, but, helpfully, some in the room seemed more assertive, enough to make so bold as to ask, in disorderly and overlapping questions, precisely who this man was and what he and their teacher were talking about.

“Well, it’s very simple,” said the Father. “She is one of me, and I am one of her.”

“Oh, don’t give them *that* line,” said the Goddess with an eye-roll. “It never helps.”

“To put it another way,” said the Goddess, “we’re *both* Auteur. He is my future. My next reincarnation.”

“Or I would have been,” the Father corrected before Tyron could begin shrieking about protocols and the sanctity of Time. “We’re reconstructions, you see, both of us. Ghosts of Futures Past, powered by the faith of... Well, by the faith of some people by whom we did *right*, for once in our screwed-up pack of lives.”

“And we’re supposed to *stay out of each other’s way*,” the Goddess growled at him again.

In lieu of an answer, the Father lifted the sack up from over his shoulder and dropped it roughly on the nearest available desk, making the blonde girl in the gray pyjamas *jump*.

“Sorry, sis,” he told the other Auteur. “Something’s come up. What, you didn’t think the Father Christmas thing was just for show? I *deliver* things. Not that I made this, or any of my helper-goblins; it just appeared. But the tag said it was for you. For this.”

The Goddess and the Father stared at one another for what felt like a lifetime, until the Goddess exhaled and stomped closer to the desk.

“*Very well*,” she said as she began to pull the bulky object free of the burlap. “Let us see — *ah*. I see.”

She stepped aside, allowing you to see the same thing she had, which happened to be something very like a vintage fax machine. It was very definitely not plugged into anything, but even so, it buzzed to life the moment it stood revealed in the light, printing one sheet of paper, then another.

The Father continued staring at his counterpart, obviously amused by her bafflement. Frowning, the Goddess snatched the printout and pored over it for a few moments.

“Hm. A remote contribution,” she said more calmly, her earlier regal manner returning as this contretemps slid back into her plans for this session. “And one of value, it seems. Very well, then. Let us see what *Papa Noël* brought us...”

2. Tales by Anthea

*A DIATRIBE, THE FEELING OF THE ANTARCTIC IN WINTER
REVERSED, COPPER PENNIES ON YOUR TONGUE*

By ~~Plum Pudding~~ Anthea

INDUSTRY CAN SOMETIMES SMELL LIKE SUNTAN LOTION, ALL ARTIFICIAL AND CHEMICAL AND FORMATIVE. THIS CAN BE A VERY sad THING.

WHEN I look OUTSIDE MY BEDROOM
WINDOW I CAN OFTEN SMELL A STRANGE memory.

THERE IS AN AUGUSTUS SOMETIMES, A FELLOW IRREVERENT,
TATTOOED AND

MY DAYS ARE SO SLOW HERE
MY PURPOSE; OBSCENE AND ROUNDED LIKE A JELLYFISH'S TOP.
DOES SALLY _____ KNOW?

MICHAEL V. BUTTERFIELD IS DEAD. THIS IS ALL I KNOW TO BEGIN WITH.
WHEN YOU START FROM THE END HOWEVER, SHE IS ALIVE. we all are alive
sometimes.

IN THE YEAR THREE THOUSAND, i have seen it, i have seen it, i have seen it, THERE IS
A RESOUNDING MOMENT IN HISTORY. CLEAR AND APPOSITE.
LIKE BOWLING BALLS

VERDANT BLUE MEDICINE CASES LYING ON PAVEMENT

i have had enough of red

CRYPTIC CROSSWORDS IN
DIAGONAL
HALLWAYS
UPON WHICH
SHADOWS EVERYWHERE EVERYONE TRYING TO LISTEN EVERYONE TRYING

SUPERCEDED MATURE
CRYSTALLINE ETERNITY RESTS

AND LO, THE GIVER, THE UNBURDENED PARASITE WILL GIVE HEED TO THE
ENCOUNTER WITH THE FADED WOMAN, LEADING TO
SHORT
JOY

JOY IS AT THE BEGINNING,

DEPENDING ON HOW YOU COUNT THE DATES

AND all splinters are one

the central narrative implies that according to modern research up to four different opposable joints can be applied to the center of the lining without destabilization.

WATER IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS. THERE IS NO LIFE
WITHOUT WATER. NO BAGS, SHOES, TRAINS, WITHOUT WATER.
WATER IS THE LAST AVOIDANCE OF
PAIN

RED NIGHT ? BLACK NIGHT

DISREGARDED

I HAVE PURPOSE. I HAVE PURPOSE. there is a goal.

I	KNOW	SACRIFICE
THERE	IS	ALWAYS
DOUBT	BUT	WE
CAN	CAST	IT
	ASIDE	
		POETRY IS USELESS.

I AM DRIVEN BY A HORSE, BUT I AM NO PALE RIDER
MUST YOU
NOT REALLY.
GET BUSY. GET LONG AND INFINITESIMAL. HIDE YOUR SECRETS. THE WAY!
ATTACHED TO HOPE IS DEATH

REBAR BURGER BURGER BURGER
BURGER REBAR BURGER REBAR BURGER THE REBAR IN
THE BURGER BURGER BURGER REBAR BURGER THE
 BURGER BURGER BURGER REBAR BURGER REBAR
 REBAR

THE KIND ONE ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD. THE DUALITY AND HAND.

THE ONE IN THE WOODS WITH THE MAIL

THE ARTIST AND THE LONER AND THE ARISTOCRAT

i have to obscure it all. the mission ; you and me are essential to it. i wish I could just say. i wish i could just say

Commentary

While much of the workshop had read through the piece only once with an element of puzzlement on their face, Auteur spent quite a bit of time reading and rereading it. One might almost have thought she was making a show of ostentatiously poring over it for the classroom's benefit, if one were inclined to cynicism.

"Well, then — what do we make of *that*?" the Goddess asked at last, beaming.

"I would ask you the same question," said her counterpart in the red coat. There seemed to be an impish gleam in his eye.

"No," she whispered at him through clenched teeth as she kept her smile fixed, "*that's* not how this works. We're the teachers. *They* answer the questions."

"I suppose they'll have to," said the Father, "since you clearly have no idea."

She scowled at him but left the matter there, and returned her attention to the bemused classroom.

There was a long silence. Well, it wasn't that long, but it was long enough that the Goddess grew impatient and called on someone. "You, Zoltan. What do you think?"

He looked around, and you got the distinct impression he was trying to think of something nice to say. "Its uh... well it reminds me of this tablet that we have in the SIGNET Archives — those are in —"

"York, yes, we know," said the Man in the Saffron Coat. "We know *all* about York. Everyone had to learn about York. At least it's not as bad as everyone having to learn about Indianapolis a few years ago. *That* place doesn't even have a beach!"

"Indianapolis isn't by the ocean, or a lake, or a —" Cleo began to say before Auteur slammed her fist down a bit harder than she intended, and then looked up with a smile at the quieted room. "You were saying, Charles?"

"Well it reminds me of the Prophecy of the Hollow Childe, in the SIGNET Archives."

Auteur rose from her seat, clapping her hands once in joy. "Precisely! That's exactly right. Now, our good friend Anthea here has written in a particular writing format called the Prophecy. What is a good example of a Prophecy?" She looked

around again, then crossed her arms. “Come on now, this won’t work unless we all contribute.”

Dionus and Tyron mumbled in unison, “The Oracle of Rot spoke many words too terrible to be heeded.”

“Great! Let’s not unpack that. Anyone else?”

Slowly, the man in the straight jacket raised a hand.

“Yes!” She pointed at him with too much enthusiasm for the moment.

“Burnham Wood, in *Ma* — er, in the Scottish Play?”

“Yes, a wonderful example. Now how do you think Anthea did?”

Everyone was quiet. Lethe looked anxiously around the room. Anthea’s fax machine sat there exactly like a fax machine does.

“I don’t understand any of it, so I think it’s perfect, because I never understood the Scottish Play in school. And I also didn’t understand why the teacher kept telling me to call it the Scottish play.”

Auteur blinked. “So... your argument is that your own lack of ability to appreciate the artform of the prophecy shows that this must be a good work within the form because you don’t understand it at all?”

Cleo moved her hands around in the air trying to organize Auteur’s words in her head before replying:

“...Yes?”

Auteur considered this. “You know what, fair enough. Great job Anthea, no notes.”

3. My Perfect Day

By ~~Callum Phillpott~~ R. M. Renfield

First I wake up, and Dr. Seward says to me “Hello Mr. Renfield, your friend said you’re free to go, have a nice day. Here’s a cat,” and he gives me a cat.

I feed some birds to the cat and then I leave the asylum, and they give me all my nice clothes back. I still like tightly hugging myself though, so I keep doing that with the cat in my arms. Outside the asylum gates is my best friend and master, Count Dracula!

“Hey, buddy!” Dracula says in his soothing Eastern European voice, “I’ve heard quite a bit about you and I’ve decided we’re friends now. How about you show me around London?”

So we go to London, and I show him all my favourite places like the Tower of London and the Zoo. At the Zoo, I feed the cat to a wolf and then I get the wolf out with me. He’s my wolf now. If we have time, I’ll try to feed the wolf to a lion, but if not then I’m happy with the wolf. Dracula would be happy too. Dracula would have to be the one paying for the spun sugar since they threw me out of my job after I lost my mind.

After the Zoo, Dracula would take me to Kensington Gardens to have a picnic (set up by one of the servants he has, but they don’t mean as much to Dracula as I do to him). I eat the wolf or the lion, and then I eat some of the lovely ham and cheese sandwiches he’s laid out for me. I show him my neck and he has all the blood I made for him. I wonder what it feels like to be bitten by him. I hope it’s not narrow and itchy like a syringe.

Then we walk around London some more, admiring the sights. I feel like we’d admire it more than anyone else, because Dracula is new to this country, and I’ve been locked away in a lunatic asylum for years. I miss the outside. I miss the freedom. I miss not being treated like livestock to be studied. Spoken about as though I can’t hear what’s being said right in front of my face, or across the hall into a phonograph. I miss the feeling of people loving me. Not entirely though, because Dracula loves me.

I’d tell him all of this over dinner. I don’t mind if it’s just cheap or expensive, since I don’t know how much money Dracula would have after moving house. I’d chip in, but again I’m unemployed and my family never looked at me the same after that breakdown. I wasn’t human in their eyes, and I don’t know if getting out would stop that. They probably wouldn’t lend me money anymore. Who cares? They won’t think of me as human no matter how I act, so why should I act like one to them? I’ll never see them again.

Dracula must feel the same way. Locked inside his own home for years, reviled by the people around him, feeling a hunger he can't quench. The daylight doesn't kill him, but being seen does. All those eyes staring at him. People could help him, but they've already called him a monster, so all that's left is to be one. We could have a good friendship. I'll give him blood, and he'll love me like I'm a human.

I'd want to go back to my home, but it's probably been sold now. If Dracula has space and he'd like me to stay, then I'd say yes, but if not then I'd understand. I'd cry, but I'd understand. I wouldn't want to impose on such a wonderful person. Maybe I'll find some alley to stay the night in. Maybe I'd go back to my cell. Sometimes I wonder if I've been in there too long. Would I see anywhere else as home anymore? And then the next day, if I'm still out, will they even let me back into their world? Would they give me a job knowing I've been locked up for years? If not, then I couldn't get money. I couldn't get a house. I couldn't get food. They give me all of this at the asylum. All except the money. The doctors get that.

But maybe Dracula would let me stay with him. Maybe he'd give me a job in his house, or he'd just let me stay as his friend. His best friend. And I'll spend the rest of my days eating his food and reading his books long into the night, serenaded by the howling of my former inmates.

That would be my perfect day.

Commentary

“Wow. Okay I thought I was done with art therapy after my daughter Graelyn...” Auteur mumbled, rubbing her forehead. After a sigh, she pulled a small bell out from a pocket, and a purple-haired, purple-eyed man in a (fancy) poncho ran in. Stranger still, he immediately knelt.

“Ordanu,” she asked him, “do you have the statement I prepared?”

Wordlessly, he pulled out a scroll, and handed it to the goddess, who unfurled it as he slinked out just as silently.

“Ahem. I, Auteur, would like to remind all attendees that neither I nor the Historical Preservation Society of Gendar are responsible for any distress, bodily harm, viewing of *Ice Age* sequels, death, or existing or future mental health problems related to this writing workshop. However, if you do need help, we have councillors on staff to help.” She lowered the scroll. “Are you... in need of help, Renfield?”

He shook his head. “Oh no, like I said, this was my perfect day!”

“Right,” she said drolly, then put a smile back on. “Thoughts?” she asked the room.

Luna raised her hand, removing it from where it had been covering her face. “I need help, can I go home?”

The Auteurs shared a look. It was the male one who spoke.

“No. Next person.”

“I think Renfield’s loyalty to his master is admirable,” volunteered Tyron, the bearded man in the extravagant robes. “One *should* know the proper deference to show to one’s betters.”

Renfield nodded. “Dracula is very kind to me!”

Dionus hissed through his teeth. “I think this piece shows some really disturbing things about the... writer’s relationships.”

Renfield nodded. “Yes. Yes. Many people were unkind to me till Dracula.”

“No, that’s not... never mind.”

Cleo raised her hand, Auteur pointed. “Yes! Cleo?”

“I didn’t like the part where he fed the cat to the wolf, but I did like that he liked the zoo. And liked the wolf. I also like that he doesn’t seem like he’d judge me for forgetting to brush my teeth.”

Renfield nodded.

“So I was wondering if he’d go out for dinner with me —”

“No,” he said quickly.

“Okay sorry I’ll shut up forever,” she slumped down in her chair.

The Goddess of Gendar forced her face to not lose her smile. It was not easy. “...Any *other* thoughts?”

Charles raised his hand, and spoke without waiting to be called. “Is uh, is the writer claiming that they are the Renfield from the novel Dracula? That is, not in a fictional way?”

“Yes, oh don’t be so surprised. My daughter even killed Dracula once, he’s as real as — oh dear.”

Dionus had run over to Renfield, who had tumbled out of his chair and was clutching his chest while heaving and stammering. With practiced haste, he began administering medicine.

“I mean uh, my daughter definitely didn’t kill Dracula. That was a joke. Just a joke...” Glancing around, Auteur picked up the scroll and read the whole thing aloud again as Dionus got Renfield back in his seat.

4. Revulsion

By ~~James Hornby~~ Tyronfelmarshatop

Renegades.

The mere mention of the word makes me... *murderous*.

Our Totality is the flawless example of being: perfection chronologised from beginning to end. Eternal Wars over creation were fought for it to *be* this perfect, and yet they see fault with it? The sheer nerve they have, stamping their grubby boot prints over every fine inch of our Great Work, disrupting the flow of events. They off-set the balance, tipping everything that step closer to chaos. I bet not even one of them stopped to think that they might be the problem, the very reason all is not well beyond the borders of our home. Their presence is an ink blot on a manuscript: a mistake not easily remedied without tearing everything up and starting anew.

I often think about what the Great Tapestry would look like without them. Flawless, no doubt: no pulled threads, nor frayed edge in sight. Our bejeweled world would shine all the brighter. Interventionists would live happy, no longer required to mingle with the rabble of the universe while unpicking their mess.

It's why it sickens me to see that now, in this great time of Superiority, we find ourselves *pardoning* them! Pah — what is Jokastus thinking? When we did it for the Magistrate, it was one thing; he had much to give us, and further proved his worth in high office — the highest, in the end! — but riff-raff like Dionus? Every decision that criminal makes is a purposeful insult directed at us and everything we believe in. We should be making an example of him, not respecting his boundaries because he knows how to make a scene in public!

Dionus joined the ranks of... *them* after Golgalith, one of the pinnacles of our Wartime achievements. We celebrated that victory all across our homeworld, from Olyesti all the way to Linearity. To this day they sing songs about it from the hearth of every House. Yet, whilst we showed our strength, Dionus showed his weakness, and defected from our ranks. Ever since he fled across the stars, he has spread blasphemy, twisting our great causes into travesties, leading the lesser races to see us as tyrants.

So what is the solution to this plight, I hear you ask? It is a topic debated often amongst the higher echelons of our society. And debate is where the problem lies...

What I call for is action! Swat Cwej's Defector the moment his timeship lands on Earth by tearing the planet from the heavens! With luck we'll take out our former Magistrate with him whilst he enacts one of his petty revenge plots. Then bludgeon Nrai to death before she works out how to spell her name and tries to pollute our gene pool further. As for Dionus... I see nothing more fitting than to blow up his precious clinic and whip him like a dog for ever daring to challenge our Superiority!

Maybe then we could all get some peace.

Commentary

You had worked hard on your piece, so as Tyron finished his, you were struck by a strange sensation. Perhaps you should have felt that his disdain for others extending to your very home planet was something that should have bothered you deeply, but instead you felt something very different. Very distinct. Was it something you'd normally feel?

You weren't sure. But what you were sure of was that here, in this place, at this time, you were absolutely feeling it. And as the Auteurs seemed to struggle to word what was sure to be an extremely negative opinion in a reasonably peaceable manner, you felt the words come to your lips. They came out, surprising you, I mean if you can't speak it was probably extra surprising, but they did nonetheless.

"This is a short-fiction workshop, and I believe Tyron has written an essay."

The Goddess's rumination stopped. She turned and looked at you, and you could see her eyes shining — there was pride in there. Joy. Happiness. "Yes. Yes! Well spotted, well said."

She looked back at Tyron. "Try being Superior enough to follow directions next time."

He opened his mouth, and you could see that he wanted to go off on a diatribe. But Auteur leaned in, the stars in her eyes seeming to spin and form constellations, and those constellations formed ideas, and those ideas formed in Tyron.

"...I'm sorry, Lady Auteur," he said, the words coming out of his own mouth as though he couldn't stop them, as though he was horrified he truly believed them.

She clapped her hands, smiling. "But let's not be negative Nancies about this! Let's give Tyron some feedback. Personally, I think that he didn't provide enough evidence or supporting information about his solution to the problems he presented."

"Flimsy background, too," the Father put in. "Hardly explained who the Magistrate was, either."

"Who *is* he?" she asked him in passing.

"Just old Gimlet-Eyes. They forgave him, in the end, and he got himself a new name... title... *peu importe*. Of course, it couldn't last, he went and got mixed up in all that business with Urizen's return —"

“That was *not* Urizen!” Tyron protested. “Cease this blasphemy!”

“Well, not Urizen exactly —” the Father granted, then frowned. “Ach, you know who I mean. But even then, the old fellow came back and they even promoted him to — oh, what’s the point. It was all after your time. After mine, too, come to think of it, but I have always had my little ways...”

“Well, never mind, then,” said the Goddess. “It’s a sound point in any case.” She looked gently at Luna, who was trying very hard to pretend she did not exist. “And what do you think?”

“I uh...”

“I won’t call on you for the next one if you answer.”

This somehow spurred her on. “I think it was... really mean-spirited and short-sighted and I didn’t like it.”

The Father of Christmas looked around. “Did the piece work for *anyone*?”

Renfield raised his hand.

“Are you just saying that because Tyron liked your piece?”

“He was very nice about it,” Renfield reiterated.

Wilson rose. “It was not only against the spirit of our creation here together, but it wasn’t very well written.”

The man in the saffron coat was cackling.

Tyron rose too now, sputtering. “I can’t believe I’m being disrespected *here*, of all places! Here, on a world founded by Superiors!” He pointed at Tirion. “You even let a being like that in here!”

Tirion hissed at him.

Charles narrowed his eyes at Tyron. “You’re on thin ice, sir. Wafer-thin! How *dare* you?”

Tyron pounded the table with a fist. “You... lesser races don’t have the right to mock my magnificent words...”

Dionus laughed. “Well, I certainly do. Can we read my piece now?”

5. A Humbling

By ~~James Hornby~~ Dionusavarnapexiandal

Dionus had spent the latter part of his Wartime years journalling how depressing war was and how much he regretted what a bad boy he had been during it. At least he'd gotten laid in the last one though, he reflected.

It was safe to say that he'd gotten over his whole writing phase, and had little interest in revisiting it.

Dionus instead decided he wanted to round off his writing career by telling Tyron what a self-entitled tool he was, and to let him know that he would enjoy watching the sour face he pulled as this was read out loud.

Commentary

This workshop was starting to become defined by awkward silences after the pieces, but thankfully this was not one of those times, because the man in the saffron coat was cackling so hard you couldn't not notice it. A few others joined in, the second Auteur included — Tirion had seemed a bit nervous, but it seemed to break the ice for him, and Cleo started nudging Luna until even she was joining in the laughter.

The Goddess of Gendar didn't seem quite as amused. "Weren't we *just* talking about not being in the spirit of things? ...Oh, never mind. Any thoughts?"

Cleo raised her hand and spoke. "I would like Dionus to know that I think he is very sexy and handsome, and it's very attractive he stood up to Tyron, and that I am free this evening for dinner —"

"Next story," Auteur said loudly.

6. First Dawn

By ~~Thien~~ *Valdram* Tirion

It was a cold, wet day in which I first saw the light.

The rain poured down as I trudged through columns of concrete and glass. Empty, distant, dead. Devastated in some cataclysm or other, I've been informed of many.

But I was not here for that, the disaster was a mere backdrop for some mission or other.

It had been months now since the darkness and the pain, months since the freedom and salvation. Months of training beneath a dim red sky.

I learnt to talk, learnt to hunt, learnt to fight.

But I had not yet learnt to live.

So I trudged through the streets loyally, following my orders. Those few scattered survivors cowered from my presence, as though I were the very thing that brought ruin upon them.

And the rain fell cold across my scales, as it had the night I first broke free, as it had the night I was meant to die.

The city was filled with radiation, an invisible killer, yet one that does not altogether affect me. My DNA not designed for it, the others fear the force and thus they stayed behind.

And so I walked, alone.

And darkness eventually gave way to a dull grey glow, and the survivors came out of hiding, and the rain stayed pouring against my scales as I trudged onwards.

What for, one asks?

I never even learnt what it was, that they were after in the end.

As the drab greys of the day turned to night once more, and my limbs grew weary from the exertion, I huddled in the lowest floor of a bombed out building.

A family of three also rested there, on the opposite side of the room. They kept a fire running, and one of them kept watch on me, just in case, ready to shoot me should I give them any trouble.

I did not, they did not shoot. And in the morning, I left once again, the rain across my scales and the cold within my bones.

I hunted a small animal in the morning, some survivors wanted it too. They shouted curses at me as I took it from them, but I did not care.

The city was vast, it stretched on for aeons, some even said it encircled the entire world.

Those some were wrong, as I would come to learn.

For as I trudged along, day in and day out, I came forth eventually upon a world in which the columns never touched. Where everything was green rather than gray and grew rather than was built. A world I had once seen, but never touched.

And it was in that world that the sky finally parted, the rain receded and for the first time in my life the world was bright.

The sky lit up in a rainbow of colour as the light glistened through the canopy, reflecting off the water that still lay upon the leaves as the world shone.

He wondered if she ever lived in this. He wondered if that was why she fought with such fervour against him. He wondered if she was happy now...

Because for the first time in his life, just for a moment — he believed that he was.

Commentary

Auteur tapped her quill. “Tirion, what do you think we meant by ‘writing workshop’?”

The raptor looked down at her. “That we would... work on our writing?”

“What kind of writing?”

He looked further down. “With our hands?”

“Creative writing. This is more like a report,” she sighed. “Even so, you gave us a more genuine attempt than most of the people here so far, so...” She pulled her bell out, and rang it again. “Ordanu, give me the gold star.”

The man came in again, his purple hair windswept, and handed her a single sticker of a gold star on white paper. She pulled the sticker from it dramatically, and placed it on Tirion’s story. “Good effort. Next time I’ll explain what fiction is better.”

She rifled through the stack of drafts and settled on one. You saw the girl in the pyjamas nearly melt into her chair, as if to make herself seem as small as possible, so that she couldn’t be noticed. Yet you noticed her eyes flickered with a barely noticeable hint of excitement — yes, it was definitely hers.

“Hmm,” said the Goddess. “Luna. You appear to have overlooked the traditional and eminently useful inclusion known to the French as the *titre*.”

“Otherwise known,” said the Father, “as the title.”

Luna shrank under their gazes. “Oh, uhm — well, I don’t know, I thought, since it’s only a draft —”

“Draft or not, a story without a title is a *créature sans tête* !” the Father huffed importantly, crossing his arms.

“Well then?” the Goddess pressed her.

“Ugh!” Luna finally squeaked. “I don’t really have a title for this! *Please* stop pressuring me!...”

The Auteurs shared a long, long look. Eventually, the Goddess sighed, cleared her throat, and began to read.

7. I Don't Really Have a Title for This Please Stop Pressuring Me

By ~~Xavier Llewellyn~~ Luna Montgomerie

Captain Crescent Celeste: intelligent, witty, charismatic. Sexy? *Very* sexy. She had cute, deliberately messy blonde hair with pink highlights, almond-shaped eyes, a petite nose and v-shaped face. A figure that women, femboys and many others would absolutely *kill* for. Shatters all the hearts of the boys, gals and other-gendered pals into billions of pieces. She was top of the Class of '63, and not just because everyone loved being around her — her tutor had tried to *fail* her to keep her back another year.

She had quickly ascended the ranks of the Space Explorers, putting all those burly, beefy men to shame. Not that she 'broke the glass ceiling', as to paraphrase Knuckles:

"If you call attention to the subversion or defiance of gender roles, it actually undermines the concept of gender equality by suggesting that this is not the status quo but merely an exception."

And that's not something we would want. *Putain non!*

Crescent Celeste, now twenty-five years of age, was a super-famous celebrity, also having an extensive career in movies, television series, voice roles in video games and the hottest anime, and was adored by her fans for her humility and pragmatism. She often loved talking about just how humble she was.

She had been voted Space Person of the Year for the past six years running.

In short: you either wanted to be with Crescent Celeste, or be her.

It was the 42nd of Paztenmber in 6969. A completely ordinary day. *Or was it?!*

The space station *Birmingham* was located quite near Space-Motorway 40, a lightyear or so away from the turnoff to Earth. Not unlike its Earthly namesake, *Birmingham* was a bit of a dump no matter how much money was funnelled into renovation projects.

Crescent sat down onto a crusty, salmon-coloured leather recliner with a flourish as she tucked into a pink-iced donut with multi-coloured sprinkles. A slight *poof* of dust billowed sideways, but Crescent, in her typical cheery mood, made no note of it.

“Any good, ma’am?” her squire Luigi licked his lips, eyes like a puppy's.

She had recruited Luigi about a year before from colony over on Neptune, having been impressed with the revolution he led against the dictators that had slithered their ways into control. Under her wing, Crescent would bring the best out of an already amazing man.

Also, Luigi had the makings of a model. No matter what he wore he pulled it off, and he had short curly black hair and full, brooding eyebrows.

“It certainly is!” she grinned, somehow looking good even with the majority of a donut stuffed in — and around — her mouth. She was good at that. She passed Luigi the remainder of the box with a manicured hand, and his eyes widened in excitement.

Suddenly, an annoying alarm started blaring out ‘Morning Flower’ and Crescent and Luigi knew exactly what it meant.

ZOMBS!

They sprinted out of the lounge and down the corridor to the bridge, passing by the security twink (who was wearing a figure-hugging, cropped, bright blue uniform that showed off his body but kept enough to the imagination) with an exchange of polite finger guns. Inside the bridge they neared the station’s captain, who looked suspiciously like Patrick Stewart in his prime, wearing nothing but rose-coloured swim trunks and Bay-Ran aviator shades, and sipping at a particularly refreshing looking and colourful exotic cocktail with one of those really *mignonne* paper umbrellas.

He was quite indifferent to the commotion elsewhere; he was humming Britney Spears’s ‘Gimme More’ and occasionally mumbling “It’s Britney bitch.”

In fact, he seemed to have entirely missed the fact that he had visitors, as his chair was facing the fully-glass wall that overlooked the spiraling, profound, numinous tracts of nothingness that formed the realm of space itself. Courteously, Crescent and Luigi let the man finish his song, and then with a poke of Crescent’s finger on his shoulder, he spun around.

“Captain Satrick Ptewart, what’s the deets?!” Crescent enquired with a brilliant smile that perfectly balanced a look of determined strength and concerned inquiry.

“Well you see, the Zombs have breached the cargo port. I tried asking them over the intercom what they’re looking for, as there are more polite and dignified methods of commerce and trade than shooting a spacestation with a barrage of

potent Lascannon fire. They responded with nothing more than a chorus of [REDACTED] 'THEM TERFS'; I've a strong suspicion of what they're after." Satrick said wisely.

"Estrogen?" Crescent and Luigi said exactly at the same time as they were on the very same wavelength.

"Estrogen." Satrick repeated in confirmation. "And testosterone too."

"Those 'phobes again?" Luigi seemed tired of the never-ending ignorance and bigotry of that very [REDACTED] infuriating vocal minority that usually seemed to only ever project their own insecurities and/or disgusting behaviour on other people.

"I have a news feed from Booble synched to my brain implant, and I am aware that the Legion of Seriously Establishmentarian Reactionaries have gone and bombed the intergalactic hormone supplement plants." Satrick shook his shiny bald head in disapproval.

"Right, let's get to it my man!" Crescent fist bumped Luigi. "We've some Zombs to give gender-affirming care to!"

They left the bridge, giving a knowing nod to the security twink, who was also a depressed line cook in his free time.

They walked dramatically down the corridor, as if in slow motion, their air tossing in non-existent wind and an inexplicable fireball exploded fire-ily behind them, giving a very flattering and badass orange backlight. Intense rock music was also playing. Because it's cool, that's why.

They took the express elevator down to the cargo port.

They were met with a fiasco. Everywhere they looked, Zombs were taking blowtorches to shipping containers, forcing the doors open as they frantically scrambled through their contents without any luck.

The Shunterbots that had been organising and taking stock were huddled in a corner, crying pools of oil over the mess they knew they'd inevitably have to clean up.

Crescent cleared her throat. "Guys, guys, stop!"

The Zombs couldn't hear her. It wasn't that they were too far away, but in their blind panic they were blocking out everything. It was quite sad to see the desperation they were being driven to.

“There are better ways to do this!” Crescent shouted.

No luck.

She sighed.

She took a deep breath and shouted as loud as she could.

“I HAVE THE E AND T!”

At that split moment every single head of every single Zomb snapped sideways to fix their long, oval-shaped inky black, unblinking eyes on her. They, otherwise, were frozen in action.

“Well that worked,” Crescent subtly chuckled to Luigi.

Following her lead, Luigi chimed in. “Yeah, that’s right! We got the E and T!”

The Zombs, in unison, ran and encircled the duo in a split second. Far faster than anything humanly possible, and, if Crescent had blinked in that moment, she couldn’t be blamed if she had believed that the Zombs had suddenly learnt how to bend the fabric of reality itself through some empyrean manipulations of the fundamental elements of the cosmological fundamentals of physics itself and teleport.

She flinched.

Up close, she could see the Zombs in all their alien-y glory. They were around four and a half feet tall, pure white in skin-tone, with comically large feet and had... I dunno how else to describe this... dad-bods. Their heads looked like, y’know, those stereotypical aliens you see on Area 51 paraphernalia.

“You got the T and E?” one Zomb, named qtgot£, said in a delicate, poised manner that emphasised all the vowels in the most pleasing way. All the other Zombs nodded frantically simultaneously. Crescent was a little put out about their flawless synchronicity.

“Yes, that’s what we said?”

Moving together within a split second, the Zombs had formed a group hug around the uncertain duo. They sung a chorus of appreciation, for they had found their saviours. Crescent’s uncertainties evaporated away like a dish of water you leave out for your dog on a hot day.

Luigi pulled the arms of the Zombs off himself and shuffled on all fours through the throng of the group.

“What is it, Luigi?” Crescent called over, which promptly caused the Zombs to turn their heads towards the plucky squire.

“I, uh... this container is literally branded with ‘Estrogen and Testosterone’.” Luigi was entirely nonplussed at his discovery, as when he looked around, he saw that the Zombs had managed to blow-torch their way into every single container other than the one they were looking for.

One of the Zombs, named Flint and Steel, let out an embarrassed wheeze and summarily fainted. Another, named Back Jack, materialised a glass of water and tossed it over the unconscious alien, who jolted back awake, remembered his revelation, and instantly passed out again. Back Jack gave up and just sat next to his friend and patted his head comfortingly.

“Now, guys... was all this chaos really worth it?” Crescent addressed the crowd, like a kindly teacher named Adelaide Lehrer who was disappointed in the misguided behaviour of her students who had decided it would be a good idea to find where she lived, break into her house and arrange a surprise party after learning that her longtime boyfriend had cheated on her with a nineteen-year-old secretary named Connie Lingus and dumped her on her last birthday.

“Yes?” A Zomb named Billy Eyelash guessed.

“No! No. I understand your panic: I’m LGBT too. ‘Literally a Girl, Because I’m Trans.’ I’ve felt your fears before, I know the likes of J.D. Pants, Ronald Dump, the Elongated Muskrat, the AstroTERF Joking Tenpin Bowling and the rest of the Legion of Seriously Establishmentarian Reactionaries make our lives hell, but *Illegitimi non carborundum*; the fact that our very existence causes the likes of *them* to foam at the mouth with incoherent rage may *seem* like an awfully terrible experience, but if you’re making fascists and bigots see red — you’re doing *something* right. And we should celebrate that.

I know that they may through roadblocks in our way, but frankly, their hubris at thinking they’ll be the ones to quash a fundamental aspect of the humanoid experience is utterly laughable. Nobody yet has ever managed to completely suppress a fact of nature. They’ve never come close.

They never will.

We will give them Hell in return, and we will fight back, for the freedom of ourselves and everyone else, as it will never stop until they have tried to murder everyone for themselves, down to the last person.

We exist and we will never stop.”

And so, after the Zombs repaired the damage they caused to *Birmingham* and reimbursed the damaged goods to their owners, and baked an apology cake for the Shunterbots not quite understanding that creatures of wires and silicon chips can’t consume flour-based confections, they teamed up with Crescent and Luigi and the rest of the Space Explorers, who spearheaded major societal changes to revert the infringements of civil rights, guiding those misguided, hateful souls who seemed to do nothing but inconsistently lie about things like discussing war plans on interstellar group chats to a path of kindness and empathy, and created a perfect utopia for all, but not one that stagnated like people think utopias would, no. Everything became fine, and happy, and everyone had complete liberty and that was the end of anything bad, full stop.

The End.

Commentary

“...Well,” said the Goddess, once she’d finished reading. You saw her hands tightening around the stack of handwritten pages in frustration as she fought to keep her attitude in line with a wise and patient mentor. “That was certainly... invigorating.”

“It was a riot, you mean!” laughed the Father, who’d hopped onto an unused desk and was now half-sitting, half-crouching on top of it, with one leg dangling off the edge.

You wondered if he was drunk, or if he was always like this.

“*Absolument super*, kid,” he continued, making finger-guns at Luna, who smiled sheepishly in reply. “You show’em.”

The girl seemed to squirm under the gazes of most of the people in the room and seemed to attempt to explain herself, but her voice was scarcely more than a whisper and you couldn't make out any words. Charles gave her a small smile, and mimed putting his face under his hands like she had earlier, which caused Luna’s lip to curl up a little at the edge.

“It was self-insert wish-fulfillment fanfic of the lowest caliber,” the Goddess growled at him under her breath. “You cannot seriously believe —”

“Oh, let her have fun, you pot-hating kettle!” said the old man, and he slid off his seat like an old tomcat, striding towards the centre of attention before the Goddess quite noticed what he was doing. “I think the lesson here —”

“Hey! Stop! This is *my* Workshop!” the Goddess protested.

In reply, he pointed at the message on the chalkboard, and, using a bit of chalk which you hadn’t seen him pick up, he underlined the name of the appointed speaker.

“*Auteur*,” he said aloud. “That was *me*, long before it was you. I have as much right to speak as you have, and, might I add, as the older party, I’m sure I have more to teach them —”

“You can’t teach *anything*!” she snapped. “You’re *completely* loopy!”

“*Poooot... Kett-ttle...*” the Father repeated, tossing his piece of chalk up and down.

Quickly, he got bored of that game and turned around while it was still in the air, but, instead of shattering on the ground, it simply vanished. You looked around for it, and saw it back on the Goddess's desk. Had it ever gone away?

"What I was saying," he resumed addressing you and the others, "is that fiction needn't be some grand statement for all the world to hear. It's quite alright to write for yourself... For an escape... Or just as *une façon de passer le temps*."

"A way to pass the time?" Li Xiu guessed.

"Precisely."

"Well," said the older, paler man in the worn red suit, "I, for one, can certainly sympathise with such an *aspirational* use of fiction. If you'd care to inspect *my* submission...?"

The Father smiled and went to inspect the pile of manuscripts, to which a few of the slower writers had silently added their own contributions while the readings went on.

"*Mais bien sûr !* Certainly, certainly! Let's keep the party going!"

With little effort, he found the story he wanted —

— and the Goddess snatched it out of his hand.

"No," she spat at him with the righteous fury of a three-year-old recovering its favourite plushy from the vile clutches of the neighbours' kid. "Mine. *I* do the readings."

She shoved him out of centre-stage, cleared her throat, and began.

8. SIGNET Saves the Day

By ~~Theta Mandel~~ Charles Zoltan

“Ahhh!” Charles shrieked; “Do you have to drive so quickly?” He asked the woman sitting next to him behind the wheel of the people-carrier. She grinned.

“It’s more fun this way! Besides, you want to catch this lunatic before he uploads the information to the web, right?” Charles, weighing the risk to his life that Aoife’s driving posed against the risk to the lives of hundreds of people that would come into play if the thief got what he wanted, nodded his head solemnly.

This was a Serious Situation. Everything was falling to pieces; someone had hacked into government files and stolen a spreadsheet containing — actually, to explain that, we’re going to have to back up a bit.

About a week ago, the Department of Defence had gotten word of a breach in their systems, and, when the nature of that breach became known, the problem was swiftly referred to SIGNET. That way, everyone in the department could wipe their hands of the whole mess while SIGNET took the heat for whatever terrible fallout would surely rock the nation if they failed to retrieve the data. That was, the data containing — wait, no, further back than that.

About a decade and a half ago, someone had the smart idea of compiling a list of aliens who had become settled in the midlands of England. It wasn’t exactly clear why this had been done, or by whom, but Charles was sure that whoever did create the document did so with no ill intent, and quite possible for safeguarding reasons. They didn’t predict that, really not very long after they made the file, their organisation would be shut down and all digital information would be shoved into a musty old folder on a desktop somewhere, passed like a hot potato from government department to government department, until it had gone through so many hands that barely anyone remembered where it came from, anyway. They didn’t predict that it would threaten the very stability of the United Kingdom — but they should have. Privacy and data protection is considered vital for a reason.

By the time SIGNET heard of the file, it was an easy target for a thief ready to sell that information to the highest bidder. And that would be bad. Very bad. Soon, the whole world would know that the government knew about aliens. It’s not like people didn’t know — there had been too many invasions over the recent decades for people to really stay truly ignorant — but the idea that these invasions would be *acknowledged by the government*, now, therein lies trouble. Governments weren’t

supposed to acknowledge things! They were supposed to cover up problems and remain willfully ignorant until issues came up from behind and smacked them unconscious. If the public thought that politicians were taking them seriously — seriously enough to hide, and then carelessly lose, a whole secret file about the matter — why, there'd be riots!

All this had been explained to Charles by a very fretful Sir Henry, who had been pacing up and down the length of his office as the head of SIGNET sat watching him in a rather comfortable chair, slightly bemused. Charles had never seen Sir Henry behave so frantically; he would almost have enjoyed seeing the man who usually held his organisation's fate in the palm of his hand *panicking*, practically begging for his help, if it weren't for the serious threat the file placed to the aliens on that list. Charles couldn't quite bring himself to care about the security of the nation, not when there were innocent lives at risk. Because he knew that, once the humans knew that there were not only government-recognised aliens among them, but where they lived and worked and went to school, that those aliens would be hunted. He wouldn't let that happen.

He'd called in his team and had Aoife rig up some kind of magic technology that could track something through the internet, and now the team (minus Olivia, who was back at the HQ) were haring through York at three in the morning. Jae-Sun stifled a yawn, though maintained his strict posture — having served in the army, he was prepared to take down the thief by whatever means necessary, and wouldn't let a minor case of exhaustion stop him. Xana, however, wasn't even pretending — she was half asleep in the back seat, one eyelid cracked open in case anything interesting happened. A high-speed car chase was only interesting when they didn't happen every other week. The team kept themselves busy; this was merely another Tuesday.

(However, she would soon discover that this was not just like any other Tuesday, not like any other Tuesday at all — it was now, in fact, Wednesday, a fact she would sadly not discover until it was too late.)

A familiar voice crackled over the car speaker. “Woah, you guys are driving really fast! The blinky light thingy is practically flying across the map thingy! Is everything alright?”

Charles screamed as the people-carrier swerved around a particularly tight corner. “Do we sound alright?? No, sorry Olivia — we're just chasing the thief. Oh, he's stopping! Thank goodness — we won't keep moving — oomph!” Charles

let out a very “oomph!” sounding noise, a sort of “oomph!”, a real “oomph!” kind of sound that really can’t be described any other way but “oomph!”. The distinctive noise was caused by its maker slamming against his seatbelt as the vehicle screeched to a halt.

“Ooh, uh, I’d better leave you to it then,” said Olivia, before hanging up, grateful that she wasn’t there with them.

The team clambered out of the vehicle (Jae-Sun having to wake Xana up, who had somehow been lulled to sleep by the truly awful driving), and moved towards the warehouse the thief had entered as one. It was always warehouses; Charles didn’t really know why, it was just A Thing in situations like these. Bad guys always ended up in warehouses. Probably something to do with the atmosphere.

Charles knocked. “Hello? Thief person?” He didn’t know the thief’s name. “Open up!”

The door didn’t move.

“Uh, yeah, I’m not going to do that.” Called a voice from inside. Charles assumed that this voice belonged to the thief, and nodded at Jae-Sun, who moved around the building to look for another way in. Xana stood behind Charles, and Aoife moved off to the other side, computer slung under her arm. She’d tried to explain to Charles that, if they recovered the file before it was leaked, she would only need the thief’s computer, but he insisted that she take it with her, just in case. She sighed, breathing on her knuckles — it was cold out. Especially at this time of night.

Charles squared his shoulders. *Here we go*, thought Xana; *some classic Charles action*. She somehow couldn’t imagine him kicking a door down, or physically threatening the thief, but trusted him to have some sort of plan.

Charles cleared his throat. An impressive, mighty sound.

“Well, I’d really like it if you would let us in,” he said, and the door did open, proving that violence was not always necessary. Xana was very impressed. “Thank you, uh —”

“Jimothy,” said the thief, and Xana heard Aoife snicker from somewhere behind her. She cocked her head, wondering if ‘Jimothy’ was an unusual name for a human.

“Right. Jimothy.” Charles also sounded like he was about to laugh. “Well, Jimothy, I need you to hand me that laptop. The information you’re trying to sell, it could hurt a lot of people, but it’s not too late. If you help me, you will have saved all those lives. You’ll have done something good. Make the right choice. I know you don’t want to hurt anyone.”

Appealing to the thief’s better nature, thought Xana. An interesting tactic — one I never would have thought of. He truly is a remarkable man!

“Yeah, see, I think people have the right to know the truth. There are aliens living among us — that’s something we shouldn’t keep to ourselves. Besides, I need the money.”

Charles examined Jimothy. A lean man, with soft brown eyes and a black puffer jacket, he didn’t look all that threatening physically. Charles was no doubt coming up with some amazing strategy, some incredible speech that would save the day —

“Yeah, but, morality,” Charles said, and something sparked in young Jimothy’s eyes.

“Woah, I’ve never thought of it that way before! I see now! Protecting my fellow people, human or otherwise, is far more important than gaining massive amounts of wealth and helping my family! I have a duty to everyone in this universe, not just myself and those closest to me! Here you go sir, and thank you for showing me the error of my ways!” Jimothy announced as he passed a beaming Charles his laptop.

“Yay!” Said Olivia, who had been listening in over the phone again, having gotten bored of whatever activity she’d been distracted with.

“Hooray, no need for fighting! I see now that violence is never the answer!” Said Jae-Sun, who had come around the back and into the warehouse behind Jimothy.

“The file is deleted and the aliens are safe!” Proclaimed Aoife, who had been engaged in delicately and cautiously smashing Jimothy’s laptop.

And so it all worked out in the end! The SIGNET team were given medals and Sir Henry saw their value and promised to always support them, and they got loads of money so they could keep saving people forever, and Jimothy was there, and it was happy ever after! The End!

Commentary

Doctor Wilson was the first to raise his hand. “Excuse me, good sir, but did you name the Jimothy fellow in this story after me?”

Charles blinked for a moment, and flipped through his story. “Well, not intentionally... I suppose it might have been subconscious.”

Auteur cut in. “Do you know a lot of Jimothies, Charles?”

“...No.”

Rubbing his forehead, Jimothy seethed for a moment. “I think it’s rather rude to —”

“But more importantly!” the Goddess cut in. “What was with the ‘Oomph’ part, I think you could do a much better job describing that Charles. Defaulting to trying to describe how it’s an ‘oomph’ with more ‘oomphs’ just isn’t effective. Does anyone have any suggestions?”

The man in the saffron coat chimed in with a useful idea, surprisingly. “Why doesn’t Mr Zoltan simply allude to the painful nature of the sound, and focus on how the sound accentuates how he feels?”

“That’s a wonderful suggestion!” she said happily.

“Excuse me, but are we just going to ignore that I got made the villain in —”

“I think focusing on the feelings themselves in the moment would be more important than the sound anyway, when I feel pain the feeling often drowns the world out,” Tirion added.

“A great note there, Tirion.”

“EXCUSE ME BUT —”

Cleo hopped up. “Oh, Charles, Mr. Zoltan, he could compare it to an animal sound, bring the ferocity of the feeling to the reader with the power of nature!”

“Thank you Cleo, that’s another great suggestion.”

“COULD WE PLEASE JUST —”

Luna mumbled something, and Auteur gently asked her if she'd share with the group. Swallowing, and mustering her voice, Luna said, "I think he could still say oomph, but instead of describing it with uh, oomph, he could talk about how the sound of the oomph seemed to like, embody the pain he was feeling."

"Thank you so much Luna, that was very insightful."

Jimothy sat down, crossing his arms. "Well... nevermind then."

Auteur smiled brightly. "I think this was our best feedback session yet!"

9. The Lighthouse

By ~~James Wylder~~ Cao Li Xiu

I was seventeen when I washed up at the lighthouse. My body felt like a sodden rag in the rocky sand, as the water rolled over me, and then pulled back as though nervous to cover me like a mother pulling a blanket over her child. If only those waves had been as warm as my memories of being tucked in. I gasped, coughing up water, and taking in the sight of dark beach before me. I curled my freezing fingers into the sand, and pulled myself forward. I wasn't entirely conscious, I had passed out somewhere while floating in the ocean, and coming to had been a prospect I'd abandoned at that point. The endless waters had been the only thing within view at that point. The plane had long since sunk under it, and while I had expected others to dot the horizon, there was only me.

My memory was hazy, but I remembered being pulled out from the side of the plane as it tore apart, my body flailing as the sky turned upside down and right-side up dozens of times. I had assumed death was imminent. But between that empty ocean and my end point here at the lighthouse, I had the terrible and sickening luck of likely being the sole survivor.

But that didn't matter then. I had to reach warmth. The cold was overtaking me, and even crawling was a marathon. But after I left the liminal waves, I was able to pull myself up onto a boulder on the sands, and begin a staggering walk. I still had my shoes on — I'd assumed they'd fly off, but as my unsteady feet wobbled on the sands, I remembered a story about how shoes with feet in them were often the only things found of people who died at sea, washing up on shore leaving some people to think there was a serial killer who cut people's feet off working by the beach.

Such are the kind of thoughts you have when you're near death and climbing up the rocky path to your sole chance at salvation.

The climb was terrible, and exhausting, but I made it. The painted white stone of the lighthouse framed the black door before me, a yellow lamp lightly swinging next to the left of it.

I was a girl with one sole mission: to get into that door.

I put all my strength, all my effort, into swinging my arm. I pounded the door once. Not loud enough. Not nearly loud enough.

I forced my body, forced my soul, to pull everything I could into that next swing. I cried out, screaming as much as my water-logged lungs could muster, and hit the door loud and hard.

I panted, bracing myself against the wood. And then I heard it--someone moving inside it. I stepped back, and called out.

The door opened, creaking slowly, and a man appeared. He had a pipe in his mouth that smelled sickeningly of tobacco. He had that kind of beard a man who wants to grow a beard but doesn't have the face for it has, uneven black hairs too thin in some places and too thick in others. His eyes were a pale blue, and he wore black clothes and a black waterproof coat he had unbuttoned. He shifted the pipe in his mouth, and stepped out of the way, gesturing for me to walk in. I moved with as much haste as I could, and heard the door shut in my wake.

"There's a fire. I'll find something for you to wear — put that blanket on till I get back. Don't look wary, you'll die if you keep those on you."

He started up a metal spiral staircase, and my desire to live trumped my fear of immodesty as I stripped and wrapped myself in the blanket, setting down as close as I could to the fire. I lost myself looking into its flame.

"Here," he said eventually, dropping a pile of clothes next to me. He left again, and I dressed, calling up to him when I was done. They were women's clothes, but they didn't fit me well, and they were old — they had the smell of age and dust on them. But they were warm, and I was warm.

He brought me food. It wasn't good food--canned salmon and canned baked beans with canned peas. A bottle of water. But I ate it heartily.

We watched each other in silence, as he puffed his pipe. Finally, he spoke. "How'd you get here anyway?"

I curled up tighter in the blanket. "My plane tore apart, sank into the ocean. I was thrown free... I think I'm the only one who was. I thought I was done for."

He stared down at the floor, chewing on the end of his pipe. "I see," he said finally, and put the kettle on the hearth.

"Where are we? Is this Europe? Or... Greenland? An island?"

"You're at the lighthouse," he replied.

"That doesn't.... answer anything. Is there a town nearby?"

He watched the kettle. Minutes passed. The kettle boiled. He pulled out two bags of cheap black tea, and put them in tin cups, then poured us each one, leaving the bag in.

The tea was better than I expected, all things considered. Though maybe it was just the circumstances.

“Tell me, what was the last thing you saw, before you woke up here?”

I paused. Making sure I was sure. “The ocean, the endless ocean.”

“And why were you on that plane?”

“I don't think that matters.”

He puffed away, and the longer he ignored my reply the more it got me worked up to answer his question. “I was running away.”

He nodded. “I ran away too once. A long time ago. I was probably a little older than you are, then.” He looked around the room, memories coming back to him. “I lived in Boston. My mother caught me with Johnny Deluth. I suppose for you it wouldn't be shocking to hear I kissed a boy, that's old hat now. For her... She told me she'd wished I'd never been born.”

“I'm... sorry,” I managed.

He nodded. “I snuck onto a steamer. They didn't take kindly to stowaways, dropped me off the side. I woke up here just the same as you. There was an old woman here then, you're wearing her clothes right now.”

I tried to put his statements together. “A steamer? Why a steamer? They haven't used steamboats in hundreds of years. Why, in the year of our lord 2300, I can't say there are any still running outside of a rich man's vanity...”

He looked at me. “And why are *you* running away?”

I broke his gaze. “That's none of your business.”

“If it wasn't my business you wouldn't be here.”

I sighed. “Fine. I spread a rumor at school.”

“Must have been one hell of a rumor.”

“It was... about my best friend. That she'd been cheating on her boyfriend with... everyone. Lots of salacious details. I was jealous. I don't even know why I was so jealous. I didn't even *want* her boyfriend, or want *her*, I just... didn't want her to have what I didn't. I don't know. I don't really know why I did what I did. At first... it worked. She lost so much, and cried to me about it. And I comforted her. I was there for her. And then... it was too much for her. She took pills, but she didn't die. And... it brought too much attention on it all. My lies started crumbling away. One by one. Until it was clear the only true thing was I was the one who'd said them.”

I sipped the hot tea. I wished it was hotter and burned my lips.

“The look in her eyes. I'd been with her in the hospital every day. And then she knew. And that look... when I walked in that day to see her, and I could just see that she knew. I ran. I used money I'd been saving up for a car and I just... got a ticket to cross the ocean. I didn't have a plan. And... well, here I am.”

He watched me closely as I opened my heart, no judgement in his eyes. “It sounds like you want redemption.”

“There's no redemption for me.”

He shrugged. “If you really believe that, walk out into the darkness, and let it roll over you like the waves.”

I was struck dumb for a moment. “I don't want to die.”

He froze, and turned slowly to look at me again. And he laughed. “Young miss, you already missed that boat. Do you really think you survived that plane?”

I stood up, shaking my head. “No... No, that's not —”

“Think back. Your last memory. Did you really pass out, or...”

“...I sank under the waves, and my lungs filled with water.”

“And you died. And you ended up here,” he took his pipe out, and used it to gesture to the room. “We all end up here for different reasons. But we all do the same thing--we guide other souls home. You weren't satisfied with how things ended for you, neither was I, in a very different way mind you but...” He put the pipe back in, and puffed on it for a moment. “You have a choice now. You can walk out into the darkness, and join the path your death left you on in the afterlife, or you can stay here, and be my apprentice till I move on.”

“Guiding souls at the lighthouse?”

He nodded. “So what's it going to be?”

* * *

The boy looked up at me, still shivering in the blanket. “Why are you telling me all this?” he asked.

I smiled. “Because I was once where you are. And I had to make a choice. And now you have the same one. So tell me then, would you like to apprentice to a lighthouse keeper?”

Commentary

The girl in the grey sweater stood up, “Hello, my name is Cao Li Xiu — Cao is my family name, so call me Li Xiu, and I’m eager to hear what you think about my story.”

The Goddess stared at her. “You... actually followed all the instructions, and you wrote... I mean I have some issues with it but... this is a real story?”

Li Xiu glanced around. “Well... yes?”

Auteur nodded, and put her face in her sleeve.

“Um, I’m sorry Miss Auteur, but are you crying?”

“No,” she sniffled. “You’re from that school right, the... uh, one in that domed city on the fourth rock in the sol system, yes?” She wiped her face and looked back at her.

Li Xiu straightened her back. “Academy 27!”

“Yes, well, apparently there’s hope for the youth yet... All of you, please pay attention to Ms. Cao’s example. Now there are a few things that could be strengthened — I like the theming of death, but it feels a bit like a first draft — and yes,; I know it *is* a first draft, but that’s not the point —”

“As a wise man once said,” said the Father, grinning, “that’s why it mustn’t look it.”

“Your themes,” the Goddess continued, “really could be strengthened by adding more hints to what’s happening at the end with the narrator’s revelations earlier on.”

Li Xiu nodded, and sat down to begin taking notes.

That she did this was perhaps unfortunate, because Auteur quickly began a lengthy lecture on the strengths and weaknesses of her prose, forgetting quite a bit about the other members of the workshop for a brief time—during which Luna tried to leave again, Lethe taught Cleo how to fold a paper heart, Cleo slipped Dionus a piece of paper she’d folded into a heart (badly), Tyron moped, Tirion engaged in a debate with the bearded man about something, and Jimothy and the man in the saffron coat had a rather awkward stare off.

When the goddess finished, Li Xiu seemed very pleased with her notes.

“Any other thoughts?” the Goddess asked the room.

A discordant series of ‘*very good*’s and ‘*it’s great*’s followed, as several paper aeroplanes folded by Lethe and Cleo zipped around their heads.

10. The Adventure of Dio Who is Also a Knight

By ~~James Wylder~~ Miss Cleopatra Genevieve Mentia

Dio was a really smart girl who lived in a town called Horse. All the people there had pet animals because it was a town where most of the people were very smart and cool. One day Dio was at home, hanging out with her hot dog-trainer boyfriend, when she got a message on her phone from The King.

“Hey” said the King.

“Hey” replied ~~Cleo~~ Dio.

“What’s up?” said the King.

“Nothing much,” said Dio.

“Cool,” the King replied. “I was wondering if you’d come to my super sweet ball for cool people tomorrow.”

“Oh hell yeah, for real I’ll be there absolutely!” Dio said, but it didn’t come off as desperate or anything and everyone knew that she was always getting invited to stuff like this so it wasn’t a big deal. She closed the chat app, and turned to her boyfriend, who had abs and liked cooking for her and didn’t mind cleaning up or how she forgot to shower some weeks. “Hey we’re going to a ball.”

“Cool,” he said. “Hey do you want a foot massage?”

“Not right now, I need to go get my knights uniform ready, because this is the middle ages and I am a knight who is going to see the king.”

He nodded, and pulled up some games on his phone. “Of course. I need to feed our dogs anyway — Philly is getting ready for show, and Philly’s a Phalène Papillion, a breed that is an offshoot of Papillions who have drop-ears as opposed to normal Papillions who have the distinctive butterfly ears that act as their trademarks. Both are toy breeds recognized for show by the Sol System Kennel Club.”

Dio nodded. “That is correct.”

Then Dio’s boyfriend who was really hot made out with her and held her and called her really beautiful and surprised her with flowers, but not carnations because she was allergic which really made the one time in school someone did buy

her a flower when they did that thing on Valentine's Day where you could buy other students flowers secretly, but it was always carnations because they were cheap about it, and someone did buy her a flower and she was so happy she still carried it around with her and broke out in hives and was sick the next day and then it turned out it was Jimmy Holstead who bought it for her, and that just wasn't going to fly because he not only ate his own boogers but had turned off every girl and boy in the school by saying he only wanted a girlfriend who would do all the chores and cook and work a job to support him, so he could play video games, and he wasn't even good at video games because Cleo remembered that time that he'd challenged her to *Street Fighter* and she'd beaten him by just mashing the buttons and he got so mad he threw his shoe at a cat. And throwing a shoe at an animal was unforgivable in the eyes of god, let alone Cleo I mean Dio, and even Satan wouldn't be about that. So Cleo turned him down.

Anyway then Dio got her Knight stuff on and went to go meet the King.

I think you separate stuff by putting stars in between the story things? Is that right?



Dio arrived at the ball, and she was wearing this really cool outfit, which like, imagine like, if it was a beautiful dress but it was ALSO something a knight would wear! Like I can picture it really clearly. I tried drawing it but it didn't look right and the guy Auteur threw a book at gave me a dirty look so I crumpled it up. But like, imagine something super cool and that's probably about right.

Anyway. Dio walked up to the King and bowed. No — she did a curtsy? No a bow, she's a knight. Yeah. "Hello my King," she said.

"Hi Dame Dio, how's it going?"

"Good."

"Great. Hey so we actually have a special guest today."

"Whaaaaaaaat?" Dio said.

She turned to see a dark and mysterious mystery person walk in. The Dark Knight! Not Batman though, like, a Knight Knight. Like he was wearing armor and stuff.

“Gasp!” Dio said. “My rival, the Black Knight!”

“Hello Dio, now it is time to die.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it!” Dio said drawing her sword.

“Ha, you think you can beat me with that puny sword? Why, it's barely as long lasting as the horns on a deer, which are shed frequently in their life cycle and only grown by male deer. The antlers are not actually keratin like horns, but are bone and extend from the animal's skull containing blood vessels, cartilage, nerves, and fibrous tissue.”

“That may be true,” Dio said. “But did you know that horns, made of keratin, are made of the same substance as your fingernails?”

“Of course I did. Just like I knew that Hippos cannot swim, they actually run along the bottom of bodies of water, and rise up by jumping.”

“You think you know more about Hippos than me? You fool! Hippos can reach speeds of over 40 miles per hour on land when running.”

He scowled. “I guess then we can't solve our differences by our knowledge about animals, the coolest kind of knowledge anyone can have, but with our swords.”

“I guess so.”

“Okay.”

So then they fought and Dio won and stabbed him with her sword and he fell to the ballroom floor as all the guests gasped. She approached her foe with her sword and said, “Okay then villain, let's see who you really are!” She used the blade of her sword and knocked his helmet off.

And he was....

.....her hot boyfriend!!! WHAT A SHOCK!

“How is it you? No!”

“Sorry babe, but I was evil this whole time. What a twist.”

“But if you’re evil, why are you hot?”

“Life... is just like that some... times...” he said and then he died.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!” Dio said cradling his body.

Then she set him down. “Well this is very sad.”

“It's very sad,” the crowd agreed and everyone cried.

“Damn. Well I guess I’m single now.”

And then the King came over and knelt down. “~~Eleo~~ Dio, you are the most perfect-est woman ever, and I may only have a four-pack of abs while your boyfriend had a six-pack of abs, I can still provide you with things like ruling the country with me as my Queen and adoring you every day.”

“Okay I think that will work, thank you,” she replied.

And then they were married and lived happily ever after and the King also opened a Zoo for her and there were sloths and red pandas at the zoo.

The end!

Commentary

“Bravo! Bravissimo! *Bis repetita!*”

The Father of Christmas had launched into riotous applause the moment the Goddess of Gendar had wearily reached the words ‘the end’. Nobody else in the room seemed to be joining in this effort, with the dubious exception of Cleo herself who seemed to be bowing — though then again, she could have simply been bending over to recover an errant creepy-crawlie — which made the spectacle decidedly odd.

“Oh *please!*” the Goddess exploded. “You’re just doing this to annoy me. Even *you* can’t possibly think this was up to snuff! You’re not that far removed from me, there must be *some* manner of standards left rattling around that stupid head of yours —”

“A-Auteurs, please,” said the well-dressed physician, Dionus, raising both hands and half-rising from his chair. “You’re supposed to be conducting a Workshop. Something good, something helpful. Don’t say things you might regret.”

“Don’t bother,” said Tyron. “Saying regrettable things is the story of their life.”

“I didn’t think it was *that* bad,” said the Copper-Colored Cupid, Lethe.

“Really?” Cleo said hopefully.

“Really,” Lethe nodded, smiling at her. “I think Edwin would like it. He’s quite fond of zoology, himself.”

“The science *was* scrupulously accurate,” Li Xiu granted, thinking aloud, “as far as I could tell. If you wanted something educational, it isn’t the worst first draft.”

“And the twist!” Sholmes spoke up with surprising energy. “Such unexpected verve to it! Even I could not have predicted it.”

“That’s because *no one* could have — oh, never mind,” the Goddess sighed, leaning on the chalkboard for support that was more psychological than physical. “Yes, fine. Cleo... You tried. Well done. Have a gold star. Shall we move on?”

You half-expected the Star Ranger to protest; she didn’t seem to be the sort of person to let a minute in the limelight slip between her fingers any sooner than was absolutely necessary. When you looked back at her, however, Cleo had moved on

to nuzzling a creature resembling a miniature, butterfly-winged platypus, held in the palm of her hand. Grateful for the distraction, the Goddess of Gendar reached again for the stack of remaining manuscripts.

“Now, then — perhaps Lethe’s story will...”

She trailed off as her hand found only the polished wood of a desktop. She frowned, patted to and fro, and finally looked down to confirm that the drafts were, in fact, gone.

“*Mais qu’est-ce que... ?*”

“Yes, it *is* time to move on!” crowed an unpleasant, raspy voice.

The Goddess and Father whirled round to face the Man in the Saffron Coat, who had not only stood up from his chair but climbed upon it to complement his hunched stature. Clutched in his left hand, with such a tight grip that he was beginning to crumple the paper, were the missing manuscripts.

“It is time to move on from this *exercice ridicule*,” he went on, “and show these fools how to write some *real littérature* ! Ha! Ha! Ha!”

“Aw no,” said the Father of Christmas, rolling his eyes. “Not *you*.”

The Goddess’s reaction, once she was past her initial startlement, was less fatalistic. With burning eyes, she pointed at the disruptive old man.

“You! *You*! You have no right to be here! You are *banished*!”

“You’re *all* banished,” grumbled Tyron in the back, “but who’s counting?”

You couldn’t help but suspect that in a normal writing workshop, you might have reacted a little more forcefully to these developments. That strange, dreamlike haze you’d felt upon arriving had become more subtle, but it hadn’t completely left you, and so, too, did it seem to be with most of the others, who were oddly slow to react. Only the Gods, the Auteurs’ compatriots, seemed to resist the effect; or perhaps Tyron was just that cranky. But after a moment, the robot, Lethe, spoke up. Was it because she was mechanical, or simply because she was the one whom the Goddess had called on by name before the interruption?

“Sorry,” she asked, “*what* is going on?”

“Oh, you have all been so very naive...” cackled the Man in Saffron. “Let me outline the delightful *ironie*. The bickering twins here? Splinters. After-echoes. Mere photocopies of the *real* Auteur.”

“How dare you —” the Goddess began again.

The Man snapped his fingers with a bony crack, and your instructors seemed to lose all substance, reduced to paper cutouts. Was it a trick of the light? You doubted exactly what it looked like to your own eyes until it suddenly became clear beyond a doubt that “reduced to paper cutouts” wasn’t a metaphor: For a moment they stood in place, then the forces of gravity reasserted themselves and they began to bend under their own weight before tipping over completely.

“The *real* Auteur,” he continued, ignoring shocked gasps and demands for explanation, “would never sully his name by attempting to lift up lesser talents. To Hell with it all, *I* say!”

With that, he *ripped* at the papers he held, pulling each way and tearing the entire stack in two. How strong *was* he? The scraps of paper went flying, and he began stomping on those which landed on the desktop.

“There! That’s what it’s all worth! *Ça vous apprendra !*” he barked, still grinning drunkenly. “Why, then, would the greatest writer in all of Time and Space let these *faux-semblants* run amok in his name? Well, perhaps because he’d been locked out. Out of reality in general, and out of Gendar in particular. But all such curses have loopholes — exit clauses. You, the Cupid, you understand what I’m talking about, don’t you? Your people were always more aware of metafiction than the average denizen of this pathetic *Troisième Univers*... You, too, Doctor Wilson... Do you understand now, the rest of you sorry lot?!”

You were quite lost, now, and all around you the others were exchanging equally quizzical looks. But the clockwork woman seemed to understand.

“Oh no. Oh *fudge*,” said Lethe. “The Goddess summoned characters from *all* ongoing *Archeatle Press* series...”

“And that includes *Auteur!*” shouted the victorious Man in Yellow.

And then he tore off his wig, and his glasses, and his false beard — even the saffron coat itself. Beneath, he wore an ashen-black robe like a monk’s, and his face was a leering skull, set with burning amber eyes.

“Now then, *petits et grands!*” he exulted, rubbing his hands together as if he were trying to build up a static charge. “High time for some remodeling! Look at you all, what a sorry bunch. As long as the conceptual conduit to the meta-fiction universe remains open, methinks I shall arrange for a number of series cancellations...”

You blinked, and suddenly he was looming behind Cao Li Xiu, his bony fingers on her shoulders which made her flinch. Had he grown *taller*?

“I mean, seriously,” he growled in a low, mocking voice, and you wanted with all your heart to leap across the room and tear him off the girl. “*Academy 27*. What sort of a spin-off is that? No space-battles, no larger-than-life pyrotechnics — just *school shenanigans*?! *Au cabinet ! Tout ça au cabinet !* I shall have grander pitches to make...”

His eyes flashed, and then he was at the blackboard again. He struck it with the back of his knuckles and the writing in chalk changed, all words falling away save for his name.

“Take a good look around, folks — it’s time for the rise of the *Auteurverse*! First things first —”

“WAIT!”

At first you couldn’t see who’d spoken; it took a moment for you to realise the word had come out of your own throat.

The mad skeleton frowned; with what eyebrows, you couldn’t say.

“*Hein ?* What do you want?”

“Th-this is supposed to be a writing workshop,” you blurted out. “If you’re the greatest writer there is —”

“Oh, I am.”

“— if you *want* to ‘show us how it’s done’ — then couldn’t you read something of your own?” You could tell you had his interest, so you kept talking, knowing all too well, with the certainty of a nightmare, that this was the moment of truth, the last chance of everyone in this room. “Surely you were writing *something*, before you revealed yourself — to keep up your disguise.”

He chuckled with obviously false modesty. “Oh, well, just an improvised little *scherzo*...”

“Oh, go on,” you heard Dionus agreeing, though you didn’t want to take your eyes off the Auteurs. “One little reading, for old time’s sake? I think we’d all like to hear it...”

Auteur looked around. A few of the students were still too stunned to speak, but of those who reacted at all, the vast majority had the presence of mind to play along with your stratagem, beaming and nodding eagerly with the most guileless adoring expressions they could muster.

“Oh, well,” said the skeletal Auteur, tilting his head from side to side, his voice like the purr of a satisfied cat. “If you insist...”

And he began to read.

11. Le Chef-d'œuvre

Par ~~Aristide Tmain~~ l'Auteur Monochrome

Il était une fois... C'est ainsi que je commence, non pas parce que l'œuvre incomparable dont je vous fais aujourd'hui l'honneur de vous autoriser à assister à la lecture avant votre désintégration aussi inévitable que bien méritée est à proprement parler un conte de fées, mais parce qu'il faut bien respecter les tradition.

De toute façon, je n'ai gribouillé tout ceci que pour passer le temps, et même si je me retrouve maintenant à lire le résultat, la langue immensément plus noble que le patois du perfide Albion dans lequel j'ai rédigé mon ouvrage est telle que peu d'entre vous, sans doute, seront en position de comprendre ce que je vous raconte, si ce n'est mes honorable compatriotes de l'Étoile du Matin...

...si enfin je peux appeler compatriotes des individus tels que les dieux que mon détestable *alter ego* a choisi de convier à cette petite leçon, car il ne faut pas oublier que, moi seul, je suis l'occupant légitime du présent méta-temporel : l'ère des Immortels est depuis longtemps achevée, de sorte que, pour appeler à elle quelqu'un comme Dionus ou cet imbécile de Tyron, la Déesse de Gendar n'a visiblement pas eu d'autre choix que de contravenir à toutes les Lois du Temps pour les extraire d'un passé dont la position par rapport à la Guerre Cosmique reste certe sujette à débat mais qui, en tout cas, est bien séparé de l'heure actuelle par toutes sortes d'évènements dont je parlerais sans doute plus librement s'ils n'étaient pas là dans la salle avec moi. Je compte me débarrasser bientôt d'eux, évidemment, mais malgré tout, il serait de mauvais aloi de causer un paradoxe prématuré.

Où en étais-je ? Ah oui, l'intrigue.

Franchement, je ne sais pas pourquoi je m'égosille. Visiblement, vous ne comprenez rien à rien. Mais enfin. L'histoire que je veux vous raconter prend pour personnage principal le seul individu qui ait jamais été digne de recevoir l'obole littéraire de mon talent sans fin, à savoir, moi-même. Moi-même, certes, mais un autre moi-même ; il ne faudrait pas exagérer. Est-ce un moi-même authentique, ou une pure fiction ? me demandez-vous, ou en tout cas, vous me le demanderiez si vous compreniez un seul mot de ce que je baragouine. Mes pauvres amis, si vous me posiez cette question, ce serait bien la preuve de votre irrécupérable nullité. Il n'y a pas, pour moi, la moindre différence entre l'une et l'autre de ces possibilités.

Oubliez, en tout cas, ce visage osseux que vous connaissez maintenant si bien ; cette casaque sacerdotale seule pourrait peut-être servir d'analogie à peu près correcte à la garde-robe de l'individu dont je parle, qui est, ou a peut-être été, ou sera peut-être rétroactivement, c'est comme il vous plaira, le onzième des contenants moléculaires que j'ai daigné honorer de la possession de mon esprit éternel.

C'était un homme assez grand, en plus d'être un grand homme ; il avait de la chair, mais pâle et nerveuse, sans pourtant être dénué de charme ni du charisme, au moins aux dires de différents individus dont j'aurai la modestie de taire les noms. Sa moustache était aussi noire que sa garde-robe, et il répondait au nom d'Écrivain, ce qui n'est pas, je vous l'affirme, la même chose que de se nommer Auteur — ce que je ne faisais pas encore quand j'étais lui, pas plus que je ne m'étais mis à proprement parler à le faire quand j'étais la Déesse, mis à part une interférence rétroactive dont, très franchement, je ne l'ai jamais pardonnée.

Notre histoire, donc, se déroule quelque part dans les années 1980, ou peut-être les années 1970... À moins que ce ne soit les années 1960 ? Peu importe, sans doute, quand nous parlons d'un protagoniste qui marche dans l'éternité. Et c'était bien ce qu'il faisait, ce que je faisais, car à l'époque il disposait encore d'un vaisseau merveilleux, le mode de transport le plus sophistiqué qui soit, maison et véhicule tout en un. Aujourd'hui, je l'appelle la Tour des Ombres, mais elle pouvait à l'époque être bien d'autres choses encore.

Écrivain avait entendu dire qu'un de ses vieux amis — si tant est que le moindre de mes anciens condisciples puisse être désigné par ce terme d'*ami*, ce qui ne va pas de soi — était de retour à Londres, et il était décidé à lui rendre visite. Le printemps commençait à peine, et ce gentilhomme génial qu'était Écrivain avait conçu, dans les profondeurs de son esprit infailible, un poisson d'avril des plus piquants qui colorerait cette visite imprévue d'un zeste de malice sans égal. C'était, bien sûr, sous un nom d'emprunt que l'ami dont il est question s'était incrusté parmi les primates anthropoïdes de cette fichue planète Terre, et je ne m'aventurerai pas à vous le répéter ; je l'appellerai tout simplement par son vrai nom, qui n'était autre que —

Ah, eh puis zut. Cette dernière lecture était vraiment trop insupportable. C'est décidé, à bas le masque !

The End

The silence held for a while.

Finally, Cleo Mentia spoke.

“Well, I didn’t understand any of that,” she said with feckless honesty.

“You didn’t miss much,” drawled Lord Tyron.

“I agree with him, for once in our lives,” said Dionus. “So much digression in there that the story never even got started before the narrator himself lost patience; that should tell you something.”

Charles rubbed his temples with both hands. “Honestly I feel like we need to give some of the other pieces we read today more credit. They at least had some soul to them.”

Li Xiu, rubbing her shoulders where the skeleton’s hands had been mumbled. “...Well we could if someone hadn’t ripped them up.”

No one cheered. No one applauded. Luna and Cleo and even Tyron had gotten more of a reaction than that. At first Auteur took no notice; he was going over his text again, under the spell of his own beloved prose, his lipless mouth moving subtly as he mouthed his favourite lines again just for the Hell of it.

But then the jabs and the quiet crawled their way up to his higher consciousness, and he folded the manuscript away, stuffing it into his robe.

“What?” he snapped. “*Qu’est-ce que j’entends ?* Or rather, *qu’est-ce que je n’entends pas ?* Where is my triumph, my adoration? What are you waiting for, you miserable coagulation of second-rate sidekicks!?”

“Oh, I gather they’re just waiting for it to fully kick in,” said a voice which sounded quite a lot like the Monochrome Auteur’s own, if you subtracted fifty years and an awe-inspiring number of inordinately terrible life choices.

Auteur’s skull made a full 180° turn on top of his crooked spinal chord, closely followed by the mad god’s body pivoting in turn.

“*What?!*”

There stood the Father of Christmas, his own thirteenth self, no longer a cardboard cutout — leaning nonchalantly on Anthea’s fax machine.

“You! I thought I got rid of *you*.”

“And me, too, no doubt,” added the Goddess of Gendar, reappearing behind him and forcing him to turn around again.

Realising he was now surrounded, the skeletal Auteur took a step back, soon finding his exit blocked by the chalkboard.

“What — how —”

The two reconstituted Auteurs looked at you with appreciative smiles, and you felt emboldened to speak up. You still hadn’t risen from your chair, but you weren’t sure you wanted to. Sitting here, with a pen in one hand, a sheet of paper in front of you — you felt you could take on the world.

“We were brought here,” you told the skeletal Auteur, looking him in the eye. “We were all brought here *for the Creative Writing Workshop*. When everyone’s drafts have been read, *the Writing Workshop ends*. You destroyed everyone else’s —” You shot Lethe a sympathetic look. “— which means yours was the last. And now you’ve read it.”

The Monochrome Auteur’s skeletal jaw opened as if to begin a speech, and then shut with a click. He glanced around, as if someone, anyone, was going to stand up and side with him. But there was not a warm gaze toward him in the room.

“Basically, *frérot*...” the Father of Christmas said, walking up to him and leaning in close until their faces were mere inches apart; and he grinned — “*bye-bye*.”

“B-but... My book! My book series!” the skeletal Auteur protested, stomping his feet again like a tantruming child, arms feeling at the chalkboard behind him as if patting for a secret escape hatch. And was he growing... hazier? Translucent? “It’s not just the Workshop — *Auteur*’s an ongoing now! That fulfills the *condition*! It means I’m *free*!”

“Oh, *please*,” laughed the Goddess. “This —” She gestured all around. “— wasn’t an *Auteur* book. We hosted it, that’s all. There would have been no story without the rest of them, no substance, no plot at all.”

She turned back to you all, smiling with genuine warmth.

“So... *merci*,” she continued. “Thank you all. From the bottom of my hearts.”

“All of them,” the Father added with one last roguish grin.

“And as for you!” She addressed the skeletal Auteur, who was now nothing more than an outline in chalk on the board, still scratching and banging at the substance of it as he struggled desperately for an escape. “Tsk, tsk. Did you really think I didn’t *recognise* you? Didn’t know you’d *be* here? And you thought you were out for good, didn’t you — you really did... Well, guess what, big brother.”

The two Auteurs spoke those last words in unison.

“*April Fools*.”

And he was gone.

And so were you.

* * *

Waking up from a dream sometimes left you with that lingering feeling that something important had happened, that if you could only furrow your brow hard enough and just think with enough force, you could conjure up something from your sleep that had meaning to it. The kind of meaning that could drive you on for days and years. But when you focused, those strands always slipped away from you back into the aether, or you remembered the great revelation in your dream was that you needed to feed the ducks at the park spaghetti and meatballs on top of a copy of *War and Peace*.

This is how it usually goes for most people.

And so it struck you as somewhat odder that as you focused in on the remains of this journey, those strands stayed in place. To be sure, parts of it had clearly been a dream — honestly, you found the idea that Cleo was in active service in the space-military even harder to believe than Lethe being made of copper — but the feeling didn’t leave you. You could feel the warmth and camaraderie of the workshop, and you knew that the people you’d met there would always be carried with you.

More than that though, you were left with something else. Something that was your own. Maybe you sat down with a pen or at a keyboard, maybe you picked up a brush or a stylus, maybe you worked with your hands laying in thread or forming

clay, but you could hear Auteur's voice whispering in your heart — the Goddess's, not that shadow-self of hers. She spoke not with pressure or judgement, not with any weight of expectations, but with a pure and soaring joy.

“And now, mon ami, the time is come to create. To create something, anything. Don't worry about the end result, just create. Your classmates are rooting for you, and so am I. Come on then, let's put the beating of your heart into the world. The workshop will never end, not if you don't want it to. Let's make some art.”

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