



FUTURES & FABLES

Issue 17 - Semester 2 2024-2025

STORIES

The Lost Treasure
of Naran
by Charlotte Krausz

The Trees go
on Strike
by Eden Leavey

Icebreaker
by Cal O'Neill

REVIEW

Doctor Who (2023)
Season 2
by Ryan Welsh

In association with the St Andrews
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Futures and Fables
Issue 17 – Semester 2, 2024-2025

Editor in Chief

Sara Martin

Assistant Editors

Ailsa Fraser

Max Hayes

Ryan Welsh

Tessa Muhle

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The Lost Treasure of Naran

by Charlotte Krausz

Ilaya sat on a riverbank washing clothes in the rushing waters. She rubbed the folds of the fabric together, removing the particles of dirt. When that was done, she hung the clothes on a vine line between two trees. She began her next task, grinding foraged nuts into flour. After a few hours, she was exhausted. Ilaya wiped the sweat from her forehead and leaned back to catch her breath. There were still two more baskets of nuts to mash.

And even if I do finish early, before sunset, Mother will want me to help the elders with their weaving. Ugh! I hate this--but I'm part of the community. It's my duty.

She cracked open the next shell with an aggressive crunch.

She heard a rustle in the ferns. Freezing, she scanned the depths of the woods. Her heart beat faster and faster. There was no telling what sorts of monsters could emerge from the jungle to gobble down unsuspecting prey. Slowly, she reached for her blowgun at her side.

She heard a twig snap. And then, a yellow bird fluttered from the ferns.

Ilaya sighed in relief.

Silly animal... she thought.

"Ilaya!"

She whipped her head around to see a man standing in the doorway of a hut.

"Father!" Ilaya exclaimed.

This can't be good.

She set her blow gun down and ran to him. His stoic expression confirmed her fears.

"Ruwar is getting worse," he said. "Come inside. Auntie Gola wants to speak with you."

They entered the hut where the only light was a gleaming pile of embers. An old woman tended to a man lying on the floor. Ilaya winced at the sight of him. His left arm had been

amputated. From the stub of his shoulder, several dark green lines streaked down to his chest.

Auntie Gola pressed a wet rag onto his forehead and poured a spoon of stew down his throat. She gestured for Ilaya to kneel beside her. "Once these get to his heart," she said, pointing to the dark veins, "he will die. There is little that can be done with an affliction like this, but there is one cure that may help. I need you to fetch the red star flower. It's the one herb that could save him, but it only grows in the dampest parts of the jungle."

The dampest parts. That'd also mean in the deepest parts.

Few members of Ilaya's community ventured into the depths of the Jungles of Naran. Knowledge of the deep jungle was faint, except for legends of man-eating beasts and ancient ruins. It was the last place Ilaya wanted to go.

I can't get out of this, can I? We're a community. I have my part to play, no matter the risk. But I wish I wasn't forced to do this work forever.

"I'll go," Ilaya agreed.

Auntie Gola looked up at her and smiled. "Thank you, child. Now, do hurry."

Ilaya ran home where she retrieved her waterskin, some dried roots, and her sharpest obsidian knife. Before her father could catch up with her to burden her with advice, she left the village and headed into the dense forest. She soon was consumed by the jungle. Above her, each tree rose high into the air. Vines draped down covered in millions of water droplets. The air smelled of fruity flora mixed with the underlying scents of mold and dirt. Brightly-colored parakeets chirped on branches. Thousands of bugs crawled on every stump and rock. For a moment, she forgot all about Ruwar and her quest, lost in the tangle of vibrance.

It's so peaceful out here. I'm all on my own. So, this is what independence is like?

After a couple hours, Ilaya stopped to feel the soil, digging two fingers into the dirt.

It's not nearly damp enough.

She climbed a tree to get a better view of the surrounding lands. For miles, all she could see was a sea of green. A stream of white clouds drifted like a river in the sky. Flocks of red and orange birds soared high above.

I'd never get a view like this back home.

The tree line slopes down, so I'm on the right course, she thought, but it could still be a day's journey. And Ruwar may not have that much time.

Ilaya began to lower herself but stopped dead when she saw what was on the forest floor below.

The largest creature she had ever seen was sunbathing in a patch of light beneath her. It was eight feet long from snout to tail, with a coat of orange and yellow, and green eyes that gleamed like emeralds. Wild cats sometimes stalked the perimeter of Ilaya's village at night. Their pelts sold for riches in the markets of Port Naran. But those cats were cubs compared to the one below her. The thought of skinning this beast was absurd.

I have my dagger, but I wouldn't even be able to get close to it before it mauled me. And who knows if my dagger could even pierce its hide?

I could wait it out, she thought.

She remained still.

I still have my blowgun, she remembered.

Slowly, Ilaya took the tube off her back and rested the tube in the crook of a branch. She sorted through the darts on her belt. She picked one tipped with blue feathers, the strongest sedative she had. She closed one eye and aimed.

Ilaya lifted her shoulders and heaved as much air as she could into her lungs.

Pfft!

The dart curved downward and crashed through the leaves. The sharp end punctured the dirt, a foot from the wild feline.

The cat stretched, arching its back up and down again. It flicked its tail against the tree trunk and growled.

I'm doomed.

Hands sweating, the blowgun wobbled and escaped her grip. Lurching to grab it, Ilaya lost her balance. She plummeted, the vines twisting around her. Her blowgun fell to the ground with a thud.

Thinking fast, Ilaya tore herself from the vines and ran down the hill as fast as she could. Leaping from the high ground, she glided into another tree. She cried in pain as her ankle slammed against its trunk. With the beast on her heels, Ilaya climbed with all her strength. Seconds later, the wild cat slammed into the tree's trunk, rattling the whole canopy.

She kept climbing, unstrapping her sandals to give herself a better grip on the smooth bark. The creature bore nails into the tree, creating lines of oozing sap. With the snapping sound of twigs, it leapt onto the first branch. Ilaya hurled one of her sandals down. It bonked the beast's head harmlessly.

Ilaya drew her knife.

The cat leapt onto the next branch. Ilaya could smell the saliva on its fangs.

I'm going to jump again. When I hit the ground, I'll run...

She looked down for the best landing spot.

I can do this... Outrun it. --No, it's faster than me, I'll be dead. I have to try.

Then, Ilaya saw a new figure move far below.

Is that... a person?

To Ilaya's shock, a woman stood twenty paces from the tree. She appeared to be taunting the beast with only a small stick for a weapon. Her appearance was unmistakably foreign. She was lean with bark-brown hair and skin as pale as bone. She wore trousers, a dark green shirt, tall leather boots, and lugged a satchel full of supplies.

The woman whistled and threw a rock at the cat. The stone smashed into its snout. The cat roared and pounced onto the ground. Ilaya's wrists started to burn, but she held on for dear life.

"Somebody's grouchy," the woman taunted, twirling a stick in her right hand.

She's speaking Anufor, Ilaya realized, that's the language the merchants from the north use. She's insane! How does she expect to kill the beast with a small stick?

One end of the stick was pointed, the other not. A glowing light shone from the pointed end. Ilaya knew there was only one explanation for the ethereal light.

That's a wand. She's a sigalder!

The woman aimed her wand at the beast. Several rays of purple light sprung outward. They smote the beast, searing black marks into its hide. It yelped and growled. The woman lifted her left hand over her head. Swirls of blue light condensed in her open palm into a sphere. She stepped forward and hurled the glowing orb forward. The blast singed the beast's fur. The sigalder readied her wand for another attack. The beast prepared to pounce, but the end of her wand had yet to glow again.

She won't have enough time! Ilaya thought.

Ilaya let go of her branch. Her legs slammed on the ground with a crash and shot with pain.

"Hey! Over here! Over here!" Ilaya yelled. The beast turned towards her, ready to rip her to shreds.

Ilaya hurled one of her sandals at it. It missed, flying into the bushes. But that had been Ilaya's plan.

The cat turned its head following the sound of the crash.

The sigalder saw what Ilaya had done and seized the opportunity. She pointed her wand at the creature and conjured a cone of fire.

The flames licked the creature's eyes. It yelped and was sent running back into the jungle.

Ilaya sank to the ground, dazed.

I'm not dead, she realized, I'm not dead!

After a minute of panting, she stood up and brushed the leaves and mud off herself. The stranger was waiting patiently for her.

"Hello," the woman spoke in Narani. "Are you from around here?"

"Yes," Ilaya replied in Anufor, "I can speak your language."

"Thank the Allmother!" the woman replied. "Pleased to meet you."

"My name is Ilaya Jaxxpori," Ilaya said. It was strange to introduce herself. Everyone back home knew each other.

"Sarissa Evren," the sigalder replied, "Mage of Larcil, author and scholar, at your service."

Then, Sarissa burst out laughing. She shook her head and ran her fingers through her hair.

"That was *wild!*" Sarrisa exclaimed. "It's not every day you get eaten alive in the Jungles of Naran! Ha! Boy, do I love some good fun!"

How anyone could so easily dismiss a near-death experience like that was beyond Ilaya's comprehension.

"Do you know what that thing was?" Ilaya asked. She was embarrassed by her question. She thought she should know her own lands better than a foreigner.

"That was a king mountain tiger," Sarissa said, "I recognized its picture from *Salazan's Guide to Naran*."

"What brings you to Naran?" Ilaya asked.

"Oh," Sarissa said, flustered. She patted the large satchel on her hip. "Archaeological studies mostly. And you must be a local? I didn't know your people lived this far in."

"We don't. I was sent out to find some red star flower," Ilaya replied, "but it only grows in the wettest areas."

"I see," Sarissa said. Their eyes made contact. Ilaya thought Sarissa's were quite pretty. They were mostly brown except for a ring of green in the middle flecked with gold.

"You may have better luck further inland by the Sunken Cities," Sarissa continued. "That's where I'm headed." Sarissa picked up Ilaya's blowgun and handed it back to her. "Do you want to travel together? It'd be safer that way," she suggested.

"Sure," Ilaya said, swinging its strap over her shoulders again. "I could use the help."

They walked through the woods together in silence. A few hours passed.

In the twilight, Sarissa tripped over a vine.

Ilaya offered her a hand up.

"Thanks," Sarissa said. "Hey, it's getting dark. Do you want to stop for the night?"

I should keep going because of Ruwar, but I'm so exhausted. And Sarissa probably is, too.

"Alright," Ilaya agreed. She pushed the thought of Ruwar and the herb from her mind. "I can forage. You get firewood."

Sarissa nodded and disappeared into the vegetation. Ilaya stripped berries from a nearby bush. Sooner than she had expected, Sarissa returned carrying a stack of wood. Ilaya felt the firewood.

These are too damp, but I guess all the wood here is, she thought.

Ilaya took two sticks and began to rub them together.

Sarissa laughed.

The sigalder pulled her wand from her belt. Close up, Ilaya saw that the wand was inlaid with mother-of-pearl and red lacquer.

Seems like a bit much for an archaeologist, she thought.

A flame appeared at the tip of her wand. Amazed, Ilaya watched as the flames grew until they consumed the logs. Ilaya warmed her hands over the fire.

"How do you do that?" she asked.

"Simple," Sarissa replied. "I use the *siphon* in my wand." Sarissa passed her wand to Ilaya. "It contains an energetic siphon that allows me to amplify the forces of the Galdrane, the great web of energy that conjoins reality. We sigalders can weave its power like a seamstress and her thread. The siphon in this wand is fairly strong, but there's better out there."

"Very nice," Ilaya said. She handed the wand back to Sarissa.

Sarissa yawned. "We should probably get some sleep now." Sarissa found a patch of grass and laid down. Ilaya watched her fall asleep. Ilaya was grateful that in the inhospitable jungles, she had found a companion.

Father would be proud of me for allying with her...or maybe he wouldn't. He'd certainly be suspicious. Well, he's not here to question me now.

Spent, Ilaya fell right to sleep.

She woke at first light. Sarissa was already up.

Ilaya got up quickly and gobbled down some of her dried roots. "You should have woken me!" she exclaimed.

"Sorry," said Sarissa. "I thought you would want your rest."

"No, I have a relative back home who's sick. I have to get the herb to him fast."

Sarissa looked at her, frowning. "Alright," she said. "Let's keep going."

They continued through the jungle.

At noon, they reached a stone wall. Ilaya looked up, squinting, to see that it was the first tier of a massive ziggurat, now overgrown with vines. A relief covered the walls, displaying a continuous narrative. On each register was one large figure -- a man with a tall crown and staff.

Sarissa traced her fingers on the stone relief, peeling away the moss. She pulled a notebook from her satchel.

"What is this place?" Ilaya asked in wonder.

"This was the palace and later the tomb of King Ixtapocchual of Naran. He ruled these lands at the height of your ancient ancestors' might," she explained. "These carvings tell his life's story."

Keeping her nose in her notebook, Sarissa followed the designs on the ziggurat.

She stopped at a symmetrical divide in the relief.

"There's a riddle here written in Ancient Narani," she said.

"What does it say?" Ilaya asked.

Sarissa read aloud, only pausing to reference her notebooks and dictionary, "It reads, 'Find the pond-walker, the life that soars above, the maker of lakes and mountains, and the blood of nature.'"

Ilaya guessed at the riddle's answer. *The life that soars above... birds? No... the maker of lakes and mountains—magma? No. The life that soars above...*

She remembered seeing the stream of clouds in the sky the previous day, like a river in the sky.

Clouds, maybe? But pond-walker? That's odd.

"What word are you translating for *walker*?" Ilaya asked.

"*Nepti*," Sarissa answered.

"*Nepti* doesn't make sense. But it sounds like *epti* which means 'one who hops.'"

Sarissa checked her dictionary again. "Actually... yes, you're right, that's probably a lexicographical error," she answered. "What does *epti* mean?"

"It would make it 'pond-hopper,'" Ilaya answered. "Pond-hopper! Pond-hopper is our term for water droplets."

Sarissa raised an eyebrow.

"Sometimes," Ilaya explained, "the rain is so hard that it bounces off the surface of pools. And water is the life that soars above-- like the streams of clouds overhead." Ilaya pointed to the sky. "And it's the 'blood of nature.' It must be water."

"Water," Sarissa repeated slowly. "That's the key..." Sarissa drew a jug from her satchel. She popped off the cap and poured a stream of water upon the grooves of the relief. Sarissa scraped the moss out of its path. She poured more water. The water flowed down a series of inclines. Ilaya followed the stream of water to the ground twenty feet to the right from where it had begun. The water settled into a pool before dripping into a crevice beneath the ziggurat.

Puzzled, Sarissa bent over and pressed her fingers into the damp ground. "This bottom brick ... it's loose."

Sarissa tore at the brick pulling the ancient stone from its resting place. "Help me remove these bricks. —Help, *please*."

Ilaya kneeled to help her. They removed the moss-covered stones, which crumbled soft as chalk in their hands revealing darkness beyond.

"It's a passageway!" Ilaya exclaimed. She then realized that Sarissa had already come to that conclusion.

"Stand back," Sarissa called. She pulled Ilaya away. The mage stood up and drew her wand. She shot a bolt of light, decimating the remaining bricks with a boom. Ilaya flinched and coughed, swatting away the dust.

"Are you coming?" Sarissa asked.

"What? Inside?" Ilaya echoed.

I shouldn't. I need to look for the red star flower. Then, I'll navigate my way back, somehow surviving this perilous jungle. And Ruwar may only have hours left. I don't have the time.

"C'mon, we'll be quick."

Sarissa offered Ilaya a hand. Feeling queasy, she took Sarissa's hand and entered the ancient ruin.

Sarissa conjured a fire in her palm and guided their way in the dark. The passageway narrowed, then opened into a foot-wide bridge that spanned a deep black pit. Crouching down, Sarissa illuminated the dark with her magelight. There was only more darkness below.

How deep is that thing? Ilaya wondered. She didn't want to find out.

Sarissa crossed first. After years of tree climbing and hopping through the jungle underbrush, Ilaya had good balance. Sarissa was not so fortunate. Sarissa's right foot came down over her left, and she swerved off the bridge over the edge into—Ilaya caught her hand and yanked her backward. Sarissa's satchel slipped and began to fall into the

darkness. Ilaya caught it in her other hand before it could be gone forever. The bag swung like a pendulum in her grasp.

"Allmother!" Sarissa swore, "Thank you."

"It's alright," Ilaya replied, "just let me take your bag from here. Keep going."

More carefully this time, Sarissa walked across the rest of the bridge. On the far side was a large stone door. Two levers were lodged in the wall six feet apart.

Ilaya and Sarissa made it to the far side safely.

This is taking too long, Ilaya thought, I need to head home. This is more than just a side trip. I need to go back over that bridge, find the flower, and get home. I need to explain to Sarissa—

"Ilaya!" Sarissa cried, ecstatic. "I think I've figured it out! There are handles in these notches. They're meant to be pulled, but they're placed too far apart for one pair of arms-- If we work together, we can get past this door and into the vault!"

What vault? Ilaya thought.

Sarissa's hazel eyes gleamed in the light of her mage fire. But this time, Ilaya saw a fierceness in them, an ambition that she had failed to notice before.

"Come on!" she called. "What are you waiting for?"

"Sarissa..." Ilaya started. She tried to be as polite as she could. "I think we need to turn back. This has been quite the adventure, but this can wait—"

"No!" Sarissa shouted. "You're not going anywhere—Ilaya! *Sorry—!* That was loud. But please... I... I need to get through this door, and I need your help. Please, I saved you from the tiger. You saved me from plummeting to my death. And we solved that riddle! Just a little further now."

"No," Ilaya said. "I need to head back."

Sarissa stood unmoved as a mountain.

In the half-light, Ilaya saw something hanging out of Sarissa's bag. Ilaya grabbed it. She felt the wet wilt of a stem. Alarmed, she pulled the plant out. It was a bundle flower with five scarlet petals. Opening the bag fully, she saw a neatly tied bouquet of the red star flower.

"You! You had it all along— Sarissa!"

Ilaya took a step back but found herself backed against the black pit.

"Oh, shut up about your stupid herb!" Sarissa scoffed.

"You knew about it?" she replied sharply.

"Of course I did! The red star flower is the greatest disinfectant in the world. It's number one in *Salazan's Guide*. It's a shame it only grows in a backwater like this."

Before Ilaya could react, Sarissa tore the bag from her. She grabbed the bouquet of red star flowers and burned them in her hand. The charred stems fell into the pit below.

Ilaya ran.

She was five feet onto the bridge before the walkway exploded in front of her. Ilaya stopped. She spun around to see Sarissa back on the landing, her wand extended out and still faintly glowing with the blast.

There was no way back with the bridge destroyed.

Sarissa lowered her wand.

"Help me open the door, and I can get us another way out when this is finished."

Allmother, what am I to do?

Shaking, Ilaya walked back. Sarissa stared her down as they took their places across from each other at the door. She had no way out.

They pulled together.

With a pop, the stone door pivoted back and fell backward onto a new section of floor, revealing a massive chamber behind it. Sarissa stepped out onto the fallen door. Ilaya stared at the contents of the room, dumbfounded. Sarissa cried out joyously.

"Did I mention," Sarissa spoke, "that King Ixtapocchual was one of the wealthiest kings of old?"

Riches like nothing Ilaya had ever imagined lined the floor. There were beaten gold cups, ornate rugs, feathered capes, and long strands of jade beads. For millennia, the hoard had sat there, buried deep in the deserted lands.

Any object from the treasure trove could sell for enough to feed everyone in her village for years. There were limitless things the riches could buy. Ilaya imagined getting a new blowgun, a better dagger, some new clothes, a better hut, expanding the village, buying animals, and building a whole city with the hoard's worth.

We could change everything! she thought. *The village would never be the same. I'd never have to work again... But would that really be a good thing in the end?*

"You know," Sarissa said walking to the chamber's center. "When I was a student in Larcili, I heard the most amazing stories of lands far, far away, of ancient kingdoms and kings. And I dreamed of adventures like the sort only found in fairy tales. Most enchanting to me were the tales of Naran. Your ancestors built ziggurats like mountains and piled gold high as desert dunes." Sarissa kicked aside a golden platter and crunched a string of amethyst beads beneath her boot. She climbed the central tiered dais.

Ilaya saw a glimmering rod at its summit. At first, she thought it was a ray of light coming in through the cracks in the stones above. But looking closer, she saw that it held its shape.

Sarissa continued, "King Ixtapocchual was not only a king, but one of the most powerful sigalders in Oranel. Today, we'd call him an Archmage. He took wand-making to the next tier. His innovations gave him the power to summon fire from the heavens and to turn cities to rubble and dust!" Sarissa ascended the last tier of the dais. She grabbed the rod at the top and lifted it high overhead. The artifact was a Staff. It was six feet tall and crafted of wood plated in gold. It resembled a long totem of animal and human heads. "He created the Staff of Ixtapocchual, the first Staff ever recorded, and the most powerful siphon in the world!" Sarissa slammed the Staff's base to the ground.

A thousand colors of light burst from the end of the staff knocking Ilaya off her feet. The light rose in a geyser to the ceiling and blasted off the top of the temple. Heavy blocks of stone fell from above, crushing the treasure beneath. A helix of color surrounded Sarissa and the staff. When the dust settled, Sarissa walked down the dais and gripped the staff like a king's scepter in hand.

Sarissa crouched beside Ilaya. She offered her an open hand.

Her face softened. "I'm sorry I lost my temper back there," she said. Every word was spoken with a measured calm. "You're very brave, Ilaya. Do you realize what a feat we've done? We've plundered the Staff of Ixtapocchual from the Sunken Cities of Naran! I could teach you to become a sigalder. There is an entire world waiting out there."

I'm always part of something else. I've never been truly on my own, Ilaya thought. Even out here among the trees and ruins, I'm beholden to Father and Auntie Gola. But with Sarissa, I wouldn't have to be.

She met Sarissa's gaze.

I could become a sigalder. With King Ixtapocchual's treasure, I could do whatever I pleased in the world beyond.

But for what? I'm fine as I am now.

"No," Ilaya replied. "Do you really think I'd side with a two-faced foreigner over my home and family?"

Sarissa withdrew her hand. "Fine, have it your way. One day, though, you may regret not having more."

Walking back to the dais, Sarissa raised the Staff of Ixtapocchual. She channeled the weave of the Galdrane around her before slamming the base into the ground. A flash of light consumed the chamber, temporarily blinding Ilaya.

When the light faded, Sarissa was gone. The chamber returned to its undisturbed state as if nothing wondrous had occurred there.

Ilaya's desperation returned. She searched the ziggurat for an exit. She found a large crack in a wall and began to tear away the stone wall brick by brick. Once the hole was large enough, Ilaya pulled herself through and inhaled the fresh air outside.

Where the ziggurat met the ground, she saw a bush of five-leaved red flowers sprouting up. She ran towards the red star flowers. Ilaya cut their stems with her obsidian dagger and knotted them onto her belt. Once they were secure, she sprinted off.

By nightfall the next day, Ilaya reached her village. She raced to Auntie Gola's home, where her mother and father had also gathered. She delivered the herb to Auntie Gola. After a few heart-wrenching days, the dark lines in Ruwar's flesh receded.

From then on, Ilaya never complained about her duties. She found fulfillment in the menial tasks she performed. She never told her family about the adventure she had had retrieving the red star flower. But occasionally, after a hard day's labor, when the village campfire had died low, her thoughts would wander. And looking out into the dense jungle, Ilaya would think of the ancient ruins beyond and the treasure of King Ixtapocchual. But most of all, of the mysterious sigalder-woman and her enchanting hazel eyes.

The Trees Go on Strike

by Eden Leavey

Upon daybreak, below a canopy of black smoke trapping dense air, the trees decided to go on strike. The movement was headed by a fierce young Redwood who, after watching a long line of towering relatives succumb to the clouds of thick dark haze and acid rain that withered their leaves, decayed their bark, and dried out their resin, assembled his closest sapling companions and solemnly declared it was high time the forest took a stance.

"Enough is enough," said the young Redwood. "We must put a stop to these dreary factory buildings."

And so the trees furled up their evergreen leaves like a pill bug poked by a grubby toddler on a sticky summer day and proclaimed a week-long strike. Surely the Operators will recognize the need to shut down their destruction sites by then, thought the young Redwood. Seven days came and went—the iron chimneys continued to pump their fumes. The Redwoods bowed and felt around timidly. "Now what?" they asked.

But the young Redwood was not discouraged; he insisted they would have to listen if the trees continued to strike. The sun set and the moon rose for many days and many nights, a swinging pendulum of orange and blue light, and still the young Redwood's posse refused to serve. The trees withheld their oxygen until the chipmunks and tree squirrels, the insects and birds, the lichen and moss, grew frightened without the protection of the Redwoods and fled their corner of the forest. Both saddened and satisfied by the effects of the strike, the young Redwood affirmed it was time for the trees to resume their role. The Operators would now realize.

"They will regret the loss of the chipmunks and the tree squirrels, and they will end this carnage," said the young Redwood.

Except the next day, the destruction sites were opened once more, unleashing spirals of sour smoke into the atmosphere. Outraged, the young Redwood believed it was time for war. He encased his battle cries in helicopter seeds and sent them through the air in all directions, spinning until they hit more distant trees that did the same. The young Redwood's army grew and a second, larger woodland strike ensued. The trees withdrew their twisted, witch-finger branches, closed their leaves, and shriveled into themselves until all that remained were acres upon acres of coppery stumps.

Again, the trees remained alert for their commander's orders, but the young Redwood needed to know he could be certain of change this time, so he waited until he was confident his point had been made. He held out so long, in fact, that the landscape began to decompose: the streams became dusty valleys, the flowers dulled and wilted, the birdsongs turned to faint cries. As a result, the native Tolowa people were forced to pack up their things and flee. It was at this point that the young Redwood thought he had been heard, for the Tolowa would arrive in the cities, homeless and hungry and afraid.

"To drive away the Tolowa people is to drive out one of their own," said the young Redwood. "And that, they cannot ignore."

I do not need to tell you that the factories opened the next morning. You already know.

Have you heard this story before? I'm afraid the young Redwood had not.

The young Redwood stood, curved inwards as if treating a thunderstruck branch, until a helicopter seed floated down from the sky breeze and landed neatly in his branches. It carried a message— the whispers of a wise Willow tree:

"Young Redwood, alas, this is the nature of their kind. No matter how you try, they will not see the perils of their destruction sites, or perhaps they simply prefer to pretend they do not.

Either way, it is of no use trying any longer. You will be happier conceding to them."

At the wise Willow's message, the young Redwood let out a mournful cry, burrowing his roots deep beneath the ground and grasping for fresh soil to hold him upwards. How could it all be so hopeless, so meaningless, he thought.

A group of travelers approached. As they passed the young Redwood, one of them tossed a cigarette butt into the tree so that it bounced off and landed at his roots, embers still glowing. Suddenly, the young Redwood's despair turned to anger, and the anger turned to a wrath that stretched from his bark to his heartwood. He was inflamed, and soon to be consumed by flames as well. The young Redwood watched as the sharp flickers enclosed him, rampantly growing hotter. A wildfire: the final act of protest. He stood tall as he burned down.

But when the smoke cleared, the Operators chose not to see the charred earth of an entire forest burned to the ground, rather, they saw newly created space. They saw a place to build another factory, another chimney, another fire. They saw construction cranes and silver ladders. Sorry, had you heard this story before?

Icebreaker (Part 2/2)

by Cal O'Neill

"No problems so far. The site has received shipments of mechanical and electrical components, asterium, and bones (human and animal). My suspicion is that they are building an experimental angel, possibly nuclear-armed. You will need to investigate further. I have sent Dej a copy of this message as well. Do not attempt to respond. - K"

Euphemia turned the letter over and over in her hand and rubbed her eyes. She was working late and had her work spread out on the desk in front of her. Pages and pages of glyphs and sigils and fractals. She had begun to feel lost in those patterns.

Some of them were obviously for nuclear bombs, she knew the patterns inscribed on the bomb casings that kept the atomic spirits within bound and soothed well enough. She ought to, considering she'd helped design some of them years ago. That was one part of Kojna's theory confirmed, at least.

The rest were... strange.

Euphemia liked her work as a geometer. Normally it was well-ordered and precise, every line and angle infused with meaning. She considered it a combination of the best parts of mathematics and poetry, and there were few things in the world she found more satisfying than finally perfecting an array she'd been working on.

This was different. The arrays Myros had given her as reference material, the things he asked of her and the others, none of it seemed to make any sense. They were based on superficially familiar forms, but twisted, their meaning obliterated. She didn't quite know why, but the word that sprung to mind was *mutilated*. Erratic lines, sigils cut and spliced together, patterns that bled into each other until they resembled nothing quite so much as the fungal threads of a mycelial network.

Take her current project, half-finished and barely understood. The base for it was pattern 29-G-7, a perfectly ordinary binding matrix, it wasn't one in common use, but it wasn't *unusual*. The central octogram, though, had been ripped out and replaced with the sigils for matter, structure, and life. If she had to guess, she'd say it might be an attempt to manifest or animate... something? Project Icebreaker *could* be an angel, and she couldn't conceive of any other real possibility, but never in her life had she seen an angel created like *this*.

It shouldn't have functioned, all her years of study told her that it *couldn't* have functioned. And yet it was apparently what the Dominion wanted from its geometers.

Then, of course, there were the bones. Honestly she hadn't the faintest idea what to make of that particular revelation.

She was beginning to get the feeling she'd need to see whatever they were keeping in that silo of theirs to make sense of anything on Belkot Island.

Technically she was cleared to enter the CCF, practically, it would be hard to justify. The geometers all worked in the outbuilding and usually Myros was the only one with reason to visit the main facility, meetings with the other department heads or something like that. The control room, however, was another matter entirely. It was the domain of the technical staff first and foremost. Most researchers were barred outright, and those permitted entry for "testing purposes" were closely supervised and lived apart from the others.

She returned to the letter. Dej might have access, or might at least be in a better position to gain access under the right pretenses. Assuming they'd received their copy of Kojna's letter, they might already be working on it.

She tried to return her attention to the bizarrely distorted 29-G-7, and was about to put the letter aside, when Jarik walked past, and backpedaled abruptly, leaning his head in through the door and flashing her a good-natured grin.

Since that short conversation on their day, they hadn't crossed paths. Truthfully, Euphemia had almost forgotten him entirely. Now she suppressed a groan, she'd known having the letter out was a bad idea, but simply assumed no one would bother her at that time of the night. Served her right for getting cocky, she guessed.

He waved and walked into the room without waiting for an invitation. "Good to see a friendly face!" he said, although Euphemia would've guessed she looked like a deer in the headlights at that moment. He sat down and placed a stack of files in between them on the desk.

"What've you got there?" he asked guilelessly.

Euphemia almost choked, but steadied herself. "Nothing interesting," she said, "just a uh... letter from my sister."

He sat down at the desk across from her. "You've got a sister?"

"I do," she smiled fondly, "she's a few years younger than me, works at an architecture firm in Incarnadine. It's weird to think of her back on the mainland, living an ordinary life, I like it though. It's nice to hear that she's doing well, and it keeps me grounded."

She was surprised at how easily the lie came. In truth she'd not spoken to Verina in months and had no idea how she was doing. It was easier that way, safer. It was better for Verina not to be anywhere near her, just in case it all went south. She was no revolutionary and would probably be horrified to learn Euphemia was spying for the Coalition, but enemy though she may have been, she was still her sister.

"You have any siblings, Jarik?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "Not me, no. Always wanted a brother but it wasn't meant to be, I guess."

"Hmm, it's not all it's cracked up to be, you know. I love my sister, but I don't always like her, if you know what I mean."

He smiled again. "That I do. How's the Department of Sacred Geometry been treating you?"

"It's been... weird," she admitted, but did not elaborate.

Jarik looked at her quizzically. "Weird?"

"I don't know how else to put it, really. It's a lot more... *unorthodox* than any other project I've worked on."

He nodded. "Can't say much more than that, I guess, but the situation's about the same over in Conjunction. None of us are really sure what we're *doing* here, just that whatever it is, it isn't normal."

"Stranger and stranger..." Euphemia muttered half to herself. "Any closer to answering your question?"

He quirked an eyebrow. "My what?"

"Your question: what's in the silo?"

"Oh, right!" recollection, then disappointment flashed across his face. "No, no ideas yet. It's hard to think when they've got us this locked-down and busy. I barely have a free minute to spare for anything other than the problem right in front of me at any given moment. Any theories?"

She shook her head. "Nothing here either."

They sat there in silence, the accumulated exhaustion of the past... gods, it hadn't even been two weeks yet, but it hit her like she hadn't had a moment's rest in years. Maybe she wasn't cut out for espionage after all.

"Well," said Jarik at last. "I'd best retire for the night, see you around."

Euphemia just nodded, overwhelmed and fatigued all at once. He gave her a look of genuine concern and started to say something, but she waved it off. He gathered his files and left.

She sat there staring listlessly into the middle distance and still clutching the letter for some time before she noticed something was missing from her desk. It was her variant of pattern 29-G-7. The sheet had vanished from right in front of her. She cursed under her breath. Jarik must have picked it up with his other paperwork when he'd gone to leave. She stalked over to the door and looked down the corridor.

"Jarik?" she called to both sides. No response.

She tried again but in truth her heart wasn't really in it. She needed the rest, and this was as good an excuse as any to actually let herself sleep for once. She could track him down in the morning and recover the document, no harm done.

Unless... unless what?

What was Jarik's accent again? That... slight inflection in his voice, almost unnoticeable, except to someone who'd been trained by the Bureau to really *listen*? It wasn't from anywhere in the Dominion, she was *sure* of that now, though she hadn't yet realized why. The pieces clicked slowly but surely into place as she remembered her basic linguistic training.

Unless—and now she realized that Jarik spoke with a minute Rivenlander's twang, easily hidden or mistaken for any number of regional accents, but impossible to unhear once heard—it wasn't an accident.

*

Come the following morning, Jarik's theft became almost fortunate. It was easy enough to excuse herself from her fellow geometers claiming that she'd misplaced a project file and was going to have a look around for it.

Of course she was hoping to find that file, that part wasn't a total lie. She remembered Gelkin's directive to obstruct the Rivenlanders if they showed their faces on Belkot Island and had no intention of allowing Jarik to steal it away for his own government. More so, though, she wanted——needed——to find Dej. Of everyone on the team, they were the best placed to do some real damage, and Kojna's note carried a new urgency now that she'd become aware of probable enemy action.

She wandered through the corridors, exited the outbuilding, and tracked her way down the gravel path to the CCF. She kept her head high, her ID badge displayed prominently on her lab coat, and her face arranged in an expression she hoped looked purposeful. She'd learned by now that looking like you belonged meant that people usually just assumed you did.

It worked, for a little while at least, until she had the bad luck to run nearly headlong into Myros Hartran.

"Doctor Phrantz?" he asked, staggering back in surprise. "What on earth are you doing here?"

It was all Euphemia could do to keep herself from screaming right there in the corridor.

"I was uh... looking for you actually, sir, and you weren't in the outbuilding so I thought I'd check here."

"Right... and you were looking for me because...?"

"Ah, yes. One of my project files is missing and I thought it best to inform you," she took a long, steadying breath, then hesitantly added: "I'm pretty sure it's been stolen."

Myros had just about recovered. "Stolen? Any idea by who?"

"Jarik," she said, it was a perfect opportunity, one she couldn't afford to pass up. "I... don't know his surname, he's working in conjuration. We were talking last night and... gods, it's stupid, I didn't even notice it was gone until this morning."

Myros shook his head, processing all she'd told him. "Have you informed security?"

She couldn't help herself this time, a strangled cry of frustration bubbled up in her throat.

"Gods above, it's fine," said Myros in a tone that did not seem to agree. "I'll tell them, just don't..." he trailed off, then shook his head "just don't."

No promises, she thought to herself as he scurried off down the hallway. No promises.

*

At Kojna's checkpoint Tyszk's walkie talkie crackled unhappily to life. She put it to her ear and listened intently for a few seconds while Kojna and Anderlin watched with detached curiosity.

"Copy that, on our way," she said in a tone that was suddenly all business.

"What's this now?" Anderlin asked in his usual tired drawl.

Tyszk checked her pistol. "Higher ups say there could be an enemy agent on the loose with stolen documents. Suspect left the lab without explanation and hasn't been seen. Name's Jarik Sarel, described as having dark hair and glasses. They're locking the site down and calling all available security personnel to apprehend him."

Anderlin looked skeptical. "All this for some fucking files?"

"Yes Anderlin, now *come on!*"

Kojna started checking her own gear. Gun loaded, safety on, truncheon clipped to her belt, she was good to go. Two angels glided overhead, scanning the site. One inclined its head towards the other and emitted a series of short, shrill notes, they both shot off out of sight.

That finally got Anderlin moving at more than a snail's pace and moments later they were off at a run towards the CCF, Tyszk leading the way.

Around them soldiers and security guards were kicking in the doors of one building after the next, barking orders at dazed scientists and janitors.

Kojna took some solace in knowing that at least it wasn't one of *them* who'd had their cover blown. On the other hand, if this Jarik Sarel really was an enemy operative, that made their own mission much more complicated. Why couldn't things ever just be easy?

Another three guards met them in the lobby of the CCF, and they divided themselves into pairs. Kojna ended up with Anderlin, and the two of them split off and took the stairs down to the sublevels two at a time.

It was quiet in the lower levels of the CCF, quiet and dark. The motion-activated lights switched as they walked, then shut off again behind them. They moved slowly and carefully, Kojna taking point, Anderlin following behind. Whatever his usual detachment, now he was fully serious and alert. They flinched at each rattle of the pipes that ran across the ceiling or sound of the concrete foundations settling, but nothing and no one seemed to move down there.

Behind them, the clunk of the lights sounded without warning, and before either of them had a chance to react there was a thud of metal on flesh. Anderlin screamed and crumpled to the ground with a sickening crunch. Nearly a decade of military service kicked in in an instant, and Kojna whipped around and raised her gun to fire at- Dej, hefting a large fire extinguisher, now dented and blood-spattered, and behind them: Euphemia, her face a mask of worry.

Kojna lowered her pistol and exhaled slowly.

"What the *hell* were you thinking?" she hissed at her two compatriots.

Dej, still breathing heavily, set the fire extinguisher down and shrugged. "We were hoping to rendezvous with you alone, so..."

"So you thought the best course of action was to sneak up on me in a dark basement and bash a man's skull in with a *fire extinguisher*?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," Euphemia piped up.

"And it worked, didn't it?" added Dej.

On the floor, blood pooled beneath Anderlin's head, and his unmoving body twitched slightly. He might live, but it didn't look good.

"What was your plan if it wasn't me? I could've shot you, you know, anyone else would have!"

Dej sputtered, "I- well- uh- I said it *worked*, not that it was a *good* plan. Anyways I think I could've gotten you before you pulled the trigger."

"Unbelievable," Kojna muttered, shaking her head, "genuinely unbelievable..."

She squeezed her eyes shut and composed herself. "So, there's an enemy spy?"

Euphemia nodded emphatically. "A Rivenlander, he stole a file I was working on."

"Why does the whole site know about it?"

"Ah... the situation... got away from me a little."

Kojna stared at the two of them incredulously. "The situation *got away from y-*"

"Listen," Dej interrupted, "I'm not sure how much time we've got here, we have to plan our next move. *Together.*"

"Do we?" Kojna whisper-shouted. "I mean seeing as the fire extinguisher plan worked so *well!*"

Dej groaned. "Can you just drop it Kojna so we can get on with the mission?"

"Fine. But if we get off this damn island you're *never* living that down."

"We need access to the control room, and this might be the best chance we get for a while," Euphemia said, ending the discussion. "I'm not cleared, so we'll either have to force our way in or it'll have to be one of you."

"The site'll be on high alert for the next few days even if they catch the Rivenlander," Dej mused. "If we can cause a commotion and draw attention away from the CCF... that could give us our way in."

Kojna suppressed her lingering annoyance with them for the moment. "I'll volunteer to take over a spot on the 2 AM watch tomorrow night. I doubt anyone will object and I should have plenty of opportunities to cause an incident. That'll get the guards out of the way."

"I'll see if I can start a fire or a power outage. Some extra chaos couldn't hurt our chances," Dej replied.

Kojna nodded. "It's settled then, now get moving, I'll divert the guards."

Dej and Euphemia dashed off and vanished down a side passage. When she was sure they were well out of the way she pushed the fire extinguisher over and fired three shots down the hall in the opposite direction.

"Trooper down!" she shouted into her radio. "We need a medic on sublevel one!"

*

"How's Anderlin?" Kojna asked Tyszka the next morning. Tyszka just shook her head.

They didn't talk much that day, although for two very different reasons. Tyszka looked... numb, and Kojna sympathized. Sure, they hadn't known Anderlin for long, but his absence at the checkpoint was still strange.

Some part of Kojna felt a little sorry for the poor bastard, but she tried to ignore it. People died in wars and, make no mistake, this was a war.

She watched the soldiers patrol the site in their slate grey uniforms. Every one of them had friends, families, and lives of their own, and every one of them was an enemy combatant in a fight to determine who the future would belong to: Dominion, Rivenland, or Coalition—tyrant gods or free people. The world revolution was hardly going to win itself, she couldn't afford to start getting sentimental now.

Still, the thought of creating a diversion that night weighed on her. Jarik remained at large and was believed to have fled the site, so that simplified things a little, but she hadn't settled on a course of action just yet. Whatever she chose, it would need to be... dramatic. More than that it would need to not implicate her as a foreign agent, at least not immediately.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as she contemplated what would need to be done, and what would happen if she failed, but she steeled herself all the same.

Kojna was a soldier of the Coalition, and a damn good one at that. She'd faced down angels hell bent on separating her head from her body, been cursed in the dying breaths of more than one person, and fired a shot that had killed a demigod. She *wouldn't* fail.

*

Dej spent the night studying their employee manual and the day making a mental map of every vulnerability they could possibly exploit.

They would've liked to cut the power lines but that would require equipment they certainly didn't have access to. Besides, they'd be far too exposed scaling the wall of the CCF or one of the pylons. An explosion would've been nice, they always had a soft spot for pyrotechnics and the fine art of demolitions. Under circumstances where they weren't attempting to beat a hostile nation to the punch, they would've gone for a pipe bomb. Unfortunately, they had one working day.

The unfinished buildings, though, now those would go up nicely without too much effort. All those ignition sources and flammable materials, yes indeed, a construction site would be perfect for their aims.

Their spirits lifted, they wandered through the CFF sublevels from one backup generator to next, meticulously disabling each one as they went. The work went quickly, they were intimately familiar with all manner of generators and knew *exactly* which wires to sever and components to smash to render them totally unusable in ways that wouldn't be immediately obvious until one tried to turn them on.

This was what the generals with all their fancy missiles and superweapons would never fully understand. Dej didn't need any special, experimental weapons to be an asset to the Bureau. God, spirit, or mortal, it didn't matter to them. When the First City—the ruins of which Incarnadine now cannibalized for its own glory—fell from the sky and scorched the land for a hundred miles in all directions, it had been brought down by ordinary planes dropping ordinary bombs. It just went to show, anything that was built could be *burned*.

*

The documents had been found in Jarik's bunk. Euphemia's binding pattern, apparently along with quite a few others. The fact that he'd left the files meant that he'd been in a hurry to escape detention, or possibly that he'd already copied everything he'd needed and taken the notes with him. The two possibilities weren't mutually exclusive.

She tried to work, or pretend to work, but her thoughts kept drifting. It was the strangest mix of boredom and terror, not having anything she could do to directly contribute to their preparations but knowing they must have been occurring right that moment. She felt like she needed to be doing something, but nothing presented itself except more patterns she didn't understand.

It was lucky that her colleagues all seemed to be likewise out of it. There was a tension in the air, suffocating and inescapable, pushing out the usual sounds of idle chatter. Everyone seemed cowed, stunned into silence and afraid of saying anything that might get them arrested or shot.

She was sorry—not much, but a little—to have to give them yet another shock after how stressful the previous day had been. That was the job, though, and she had every intention of seeing it through to the very end.

*

Kojna and Tyszka walked the edge of the site, almost totally alone, turning every now and again to investigate the sound of a cracked branch or rustling bush at the treeline with their flashlights. Searchlights erected atop the guard towers scanned the site diligently.

Active measures. The phrase repeated over and over in her mind as she considered her gun. It felt heavier than she remembered. Active measures - sabotage, blackmail, and, yes, murder.

She'd killed before. Dozens of times, these days it barely affected her at all. Why should now be any different, she asked herself, but she already had the answer. It was different when it was someone you knew, someone you'd smoked with, someone you'd come to regard fondly.

Neither of them spoke as they made their circuit around the site.

Dej was right, spycraft was the wrong line of work for her. It wasn't decent, killing the oblivious. On a battlefield she'd always known exactly who her friends and enemies were, and there was a twisted sort of comfort in that. Killing was killing, of course, it wasn't *decent* ever, not really, but in the army if she'd died, well, at least she'd have had the chance to face it head on.

Anderlin hadn't had that.

Maybe if she got off Belkot Island in one piece she'd request a transfer. Maybe she'd even retire. Hadn't she done enough for the Coalition?

Kojna waited for the searchlights to arc away from the two of them, leaving them in darkness. Slowing her pace slightly and letting Tyszka gain a few steps on her, she racked her pistol's slide and raised the gun. Tyszka froze, then slowly turned to face her. Kojna let her, she at least deserved to know her enemy before she died.

There was fear in Tyszka's eyes, plain as day, but mostly there was an incomprehension that rapidly resolved itself into an awful certainty.

"Oh," was all she said in a quavering voice.

Kojna pulled the trigger.

*

Gunshots rang out loud and clear in the quiet of the early morning, and Dej got to work. They rolled off their bunk and joined the technicians who had just woken up and were groggily making their way outside to see what was going on this time, pretending to wipe sleep from their eyes like the others. It was almost too easy to slip away unnoticed from there.

Guards ran by towards where the shots had been heard, passing them by without a sideways glance. As far as they were concerned, Dej was just another confused technician, one not worth their time.

They'd already chosen their target: a nice, large construction site, one that was probably meant to become another building for the researchers. Well, not anymore, it had a new purpose now.

Dej tipped several rubbish cans over, spilling refuse across the lot. They gathered up an armful of garbage and small timbers and dumped it at the base of the scaffolding. Producing a lighter from their uniform pocket, they lit a small scrap of wood and tossed it on the pile.

Would've been embarrassing if it didn't catch, but it did, and the fire began to crackle and climb. Dej ran, not stopping to look back and admire their handiwork as it flared angrily behind them, consuming the construction site in moments.

"Fire!" they shouted to the open air. "Fire!"

Belkot Island was descending rapidly into complete disarray. Personnel scrambled this way and that, without any clear idea where they were going or what they were meant to do. Commanders shouted orders, and were drowned out by the rising screams.

Watching from the shadows of the CCF, Euphemia had to admit it was an effective—if nightmarish—distraction.

Dej was the first to arrive, panting and almost giddy with excitement. A minute later Kojna joined them, her jaw firmly set. She handed Dej a second pistol. They didn't ask who she'd got it from.

Without a word Euphemia buzzed them into the lobby and together they climbed the stairs to the control room. A pair of officers stood guarding the door. Kojna didn't waste any time. Pushing open the stairwell door, she automatically lined up the guard on the left in her ironsights and fired. The surviving guard didn't miss a beat, firing a retaliatory burst that was cut short as Dej dropped to one knee and shot him dead.

A red stain bloomed on Kojna's uniform and she doubled over as the pain hit her. Euphemia rushed over to prop her up while Dej ran to the dead man on the right and detached a ring of keys from his belt. They started trying them in the door lock one at a time as Euphemia and Kojna stumbled behind.

The door clicked open and Dej stormed in, gun raised high.

"You!" Dej shouted, pointing the gun at a pair of engineers cowering behind their workstations. "Get a first aid kit, *now!*"

Euphemia laid Kojna on the floor of the control room and prised the pistol from her hands as the frightened engineers scrambled to obey Dej's order. Euphemia had always known she might have to wield a weapon in service of the Bureau, but suddenly she wasn't convinced she had it in her to actually *use* it. Hopefully the CCF technicians were too scared of the weapon itself to test her capacity for violence.

She noticed Myros among them, presumably overseeing some late-night test.

"You?" he said simply, disbelief rapidly turning into venom.

"Shut up," Euphemia said softly. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Right," said Dej, gesturing at the closed shutters, "how do we open these?"

The control room staff glanced uneasily at each other.

"I... don't think that's a good idea," Myros ventured cautiously.

Dej leveled the gun at him and cocked their head to the side. "Did I ask if it was a good idea or did I ask how to get the damn things *open?*"

"I *really* don't think you s-" he insisted, frantic now. He shut up and flinched as Dej fired a shot into the ceiling.

"The next one of you who pisses me off isn't getting a warning shot," Dej growled with a look that said they meant it. This close to learning what Icebreaker was, they weren't going to be dissuaded now. "So, *the shutters*."

One of the others pointed at a red button in a glass case then tucked his head down and squeezed his eyes shut, a few of their colleagues followed suit, facing away or covering their faces with their hands.

"Thank you," said Dej. They flipped open the glass case and pressed the button.

The shutters creaked and groaned as they rotated into place, metal shrieking as it scraped against metal. Both Euphemia and Dej turned to face the window, expecting to see some half-built bomber angel lying in pieces on the chamber floor.

There was something wrong with the light, Euphemia realized just a few seconds too late. The shadows it cast weren't right, they wavered and shifted on the floor and walls as if she were seeing them through water or warped glass, and then they saw it.

It wasn't an angel, the thing that writhed in the air, or a god, or anything that walked in the world Dej and Euphemia knew. Its body—if it could've been said to *have* a body—was a wound in space, dark and festering with the colors of an oilslick. Dej's feet were firmly planted on the floor but they felt like they were falling into that absence.

The walls—Euphemia tried to force her watering, burning eyes to focus on the walls, but the *thing* in the center of the chamber kept drawing them inexorably back to itself—were covered in glyphs and interlacing patterns that glowed with arcane energy and pulsed as Project Icebreaker twisted and strained.

The glyphs, some distant part of her mind registered, were forcing it into shape. Matter, structure, life. Sharp spines contorted themselves into long, many-jointed limbs that branched like lightning bolts and became snapping, viperfish mouths, never stable, never certain, but utterly silent.

"Oh gods," Dej whispered, Euphemia had never known them to use that expression in all the time they'd worked together, "it's *looking* at me, why won't it stop *looking at me*?"

That couldn't be right, though, because all of its eyes were fixed unmoving on *her*. It *knew* her, she could feel it in her bones, but she couldn't even begin to guess what it meant to be known by a wrong-thing like *that*.

Did the God-King think to conquer the world with this... Dej didn't even know what to call it. They didn't think Project Icebreaker was alive, not in the normal sense, and if it was it seemed to want very badly *not* to be, but they could hardly call it *inanimate*. Not when it scintillated and distended so violently. Not when it *watched* them like that.

Was that Kojna screaming? Euphemia? The control room staff? It had to be one of them because there was certainly no way that awful sound could be coming from their own throat.

Unthinkingly, Euphemia raised the gun and fired wildly at the observation window. The reinforced glass cracked, obscuring the thing just enough for Dej to break its gaze and slam the button again.

They slumped against the wall, panting unsteadily. Euphemia stood there shaking, still holding the pistol out in front of her. Neither of them was paying any attention to the controllers, but it didn't matter, none of them had fared any better.

"Doctor Hartran," Euphemia said in a slow, hollow voice as Mryos gazed listlessly up at her at the sound of his name, "what have you done?"

From the doorway came the sound of a pistol slide being racked. "He's created the weapon that's going to win the war," a voice replied. The accent was obvious now that Jarik had dropped his facade.

"Guns down please," he said. Neither Euphemia nor Dej were in a fit state for a firefight—and Kojna was even worse. Euphemia set her pistol down on the nearest control panel, Dej shoved theirs across the floor, out of reach.

Jarik smiled. "Very good."

"Jarik," Euphemia said.

"What do you get when you take unmade protoplasm from beyond the edges of creation and give it form?" he asked nonchalantly, ignoring her.

At the back of the room Kojna stirred, unnoticed by the Rivenlander spy. She locked eyes with Dej and began to drag herself across the floor. Realizing what she intended to try, Dej shook their head slightly. It was suicide, they wanted to say, there was no way Kojna could win that fight.

"Jarik."

"What you get, Euphemia, is a weapon of nigh-infinite destructive power that doesn't have to obey our laws of physics and causality. You get the end of the arms race! Suppose the Dominion may have beat us to the finish line, but then, no one's expected to play fair when you're playing for the world itself."

"Jarik!" Euphemia finally shouted.

"What?" he shouted back.

"You can't possibly think you can *control* that thing! It'll *destroy* you! It'll destroy-"

"Oh," said Jarik, his tone suddenly cold, "I see, now that Icebreaker belongs to Rivenland, suddenly it's a weapon too dangerous and terrible for *anyone* to wield. And, presumably, I'll just take the word of a Coalition spy that, actually, *your* government is acting with pure and noble intent, rather than just trying to steal it for themselves."

"It's not like that, Jarik!"

"You didn't see it," Dej said quietly. They had to keep him talking.

"You're right," he said, taking the bait, "I *didn't* see it, so I have no reason to believe anything *you* say about it."

"It shouldn't exist, Jarik, we *have* to destroy it," Euphemia pleaded, "just listen to me, *please*."

It was no use, he was no longer capable of listening. "I will not go down in history as the fool who lost Rivenland the world."

With a last burst of effort Kojna lunged, tackling him to the floor and grabbing for the gun.

"Run!" she shouted raggedly as Jarik flailed and kneed her in the gut. She guessed she wouldn't be retiring after all.

"Kojna!" Euphemia screamed.

"Go!"

Her tone brooked no argument. They ran. Behind them, as they sprinted down the stairs, they heard a single gunshot.

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They were well into the depths of the CCF when they stopped to review their situation. It didn't look good. The site was burning to the ground outside, Project Icebreaker was far worse than they had ever anticipated, Kojna was probably dead, and they hadn't even thought to grab their guns on the way out.

"Shit," Dej said breathily.

"Yeah," Euphemia agreed.

"What do we do now?"

Neither of them spoke for a moment. The enormity of the question cowed them. A look of grim resolution settled on Euphemia's face.

"We let it out," she said.

Dej blinked at her uncomprehendingly. "Are you *insane*?"

"Possibly."

"Whatever happened to *it'll destroy you*?"

Euphemia held up her hands. "Just hear me out, please. I have a theory."

Dej opened their mouth, then shut it and nodded.

"Thank you," she said, "I don't think they're done yet. You saw how it moved in there, how unstable it was."

Dej shuddered at the memory. "Yeah?"

"Whatever they're trying to make it into, they haven't fully figured it out yet. They had a sigil they wanted me to design, binding it to existence I think. I never finished it. If we release it... it might tear itself apart and take Belkot Island with it. It's the only way I can think of to both destroy it and destroy all the research they've done here at the same time."

"And if you're wrong?" Dej asked.

Euphemia nodded, acknowledging the possibility. "If I'm wrong," she said, "then I don't think we ever had a chance anyways."

Dej leaned against the wall, considering her argument. "We're going to die here, aren't we?"

"Most likely."

Dej hummed contemplatively. "The pump station," they said, "it regulates the flow of water through the building. Those glyphs give off a lot of heat, don't they?"

Euphemia nodded.

"Good. We cut off the coolant and the whole system goes down."

Euphemia smiled. "Lead on, then."

They wound their way through the sublevels of the building, encountering no one. Idly, Dej wondered what was going outside, if they'd managed to get the blaze under control. It wouldn't matter for long, they'd have far bigger problems than a little fire soon enough.

They followed the sound of rushing water to a room far larger than others in the sublevels. Enormous steel pipes branched off in all directions. Dej ran to the nearest one and, straining, began straining to turn the discharge valve shut. Euphemia followed suit on the other side of the room.

The temperature climbed higher and steam filled the room as the motors in the blocked pumps began to overheat. Dej wiped beads of sweat from their forehead and grinned as the sound of metal and concrete cracking and tearing echoed from somewhere far above them. The world itself seemed to shudder and their hair stood on end, as if in a lightning storm.

Above the sounds of structural failure a rattling whine came from the pumps as the water inside boiled and cavitated. And above the rattling, the sharp crack of a gunshot.

There was a feeling like Dej had been hit right in the chest with a sledgehammer, then a sharp burning in their stomach, and then they were on the floor, their blood running fast and free over the concrete floor. It hurt, but the pain seemed to fade as they lay there.

They were dying, came the realization, they were dying and that didn't alarm them as much as they thought it would have. They'd done it, done *something*, at least.

Dej smiled faintly as they bled out, or maybe they just thought they did. They'd never known a career outside the Bureau, their whole adulthood had been spent doing terrible things in its service. Fitting, then, to finally give their life for it.

Jarik Sarel limped into the pump room, he'd traded several teeth for a litany of new bruises. Euphemia clapped a hand over her own mouth and dropped down, hoping the steam would obscure her.

"I know you're in here Euphemia!" he shouted. "You're not getting off this island so why not just show yourself and make this easier for both of us?"

Euphemia gritted her teeth and swore inwardly. She had no weapons, no allies, and nowhere left to run, but she'd be damned if she made it *easier* for that bastard. Her eyes darted around as the building above them gave another creak, threatening to crumble at any second.

Jarik strolled languidly down the middle of the room, he stopped briefly to nudge Dej's corpse and put another bullet between their vacant eyes. He'd made the mistake of ignoring Kojna, he wouldn't repeat it again. Euphemia picked her moment and ran while he was focused on Dej.

She didn't get far. Jarik whirled around and pushed her to the floor in one fluid motion.

"There you are," he said cheerily, "always so good to see a friendly face."

He leveled his gun at her forehead. Her vision narrowed to a single point as she stared down the barrel of Jarik's pistol. Then the ceiling above them gave a loud crack and, without thinking, he looked up. Euphemia didn't hesitate, she kicked out at Jarik's legs and scrambled to her feet.

Jarik swore and fired as he toppled over, but the shot went wide. He screamed as the concrete caved in on top of him, burying him beneath the rubble of the CCF. Euphemia didn't look back. If he was still alive, he wouldn't be for much longer.

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The scene was bedlam as a bruised and dust-covered Euphemia staggered out of the ruined CCF into the night. Fires blazed in every direction she looked, and tracer rounds arced overhead.

Project Icebreaker had broken free, and it cascaded and whirled in mad, silent loops through the sky. A squad of angels loosed a volley of gunfire at the not-thing and swooped towards it in a graceful, synchronized motion. As they approached they stopped suddenly. Their limbs and bodies twitched and juddered, then wrenched themselves into impossible shapes. The angels fell to the ground, stone dead.

Someone yelled a command and those soldiers who hadn't fled or changed already fired uselessly in the air. If any of them hit their mark, Project Icebreaker didn't react. That made sense, Euphemia thought, how could you shoot something that wasn't even made of *matter*? Let them try, it wouldn't do them any good.

She saw Myros kneeling in the gravel, badly bruised and staring at nothing in particular. He looked up at her as she passed by, confusion, animal terror, and something like realization written across his face. There was a flicker of recognition in his eyes and he smiled uncertainly and opened his mouth, as if to speak or scream, but all that came out was a drawn-out wail. It wasn't a sound any human throat could have made. With careful, deliberate motions, he removed a pencil from his lab coat and, without breaking eye contact, lined it up and drove it into his own throat. He convulsed and toppled sidelong onto the path. The wailing continued unabated, and Euphemia did likewise.

Something crawling and buzzing pulled itself unhurriedly out of the hollowed out husk of a person. A soldier huddled behind a broken hunk of concrete and rebar and prayed frantically as his skin turned to glass. A lab tech running for the trees beside her faded into insubstantial multicolored lights, and then vanished altogether. Euphemia's ears rang and her vision wavered, but she did not stop or run or let herself be swept up by the panic that surrounded her on all sides.

She was beyond fear as she walked away from the epicenter of the chaos enveloping the island and down towards the sea. She did not mind that the trees were no longer trees, or that the birdsong that filled the dawn and nearly drowned out the ceaseless shrieking seemed so strangely and achingly familiar. The music was pleasant and the things that were not trees did not try to stop her. Perhaps they sensed, somehow, that they didn't need to.

The sky was just beginning to lighten as Euphemia arrived on the beach, the sun peeking over bloody-red waters, casting the sky in brilliant hues of orange and violet. She collapsed onto the sand and stayed there, ignoring the people who threw themselves into the water or tried in vain to radio the mainland and the thing with too many joints and too many limbs

that dragged itself past her and burrowed down into the sand with long fingers. If she was going to die on Belkot Island, she wanted the sun and the sea to be the last thing she saw.

She did wish she didn't have to savor it on her own, but that, she acknowledged, was entirely her own fault. Much as she disliked Gelkin, much as everything he did was wrapped up in endless layers of deflection and obfuscation, he'd never lied to her about the dangers of being a Bureau field agent. Euphemia had known for a very long time that, in all likelihood, she was either going to burn out or die alone and forgotten. She'd made her peace with that as well as she was able.

Gradually, the sounds of gunfire and destruction faded and died. Euphemia inhaled deeply, savoring the silence and the smell of salt and copper. Her flesh began to peel away in ribbons, skin splitting from sinew splitting from muscle, all fluttering down around her. Her veins danced spirals in the air, staining the sand. Her nerves were alight with exquisite agony, though her brain could no longer comprehend the sensation.

The screams began again around her as the air fizzed and flickered with unseen energy, but Euphemia heard and felt none of it, or no longer cared enough to. All she knew was that she was falling forever, every particle that was once her spinning out wildly in all directions, and she would never hit the ground. The world was changing, and she was changing, and there was something that should not have existed watching her. She supposed it would have to do for company.

Doctor Who (2023) Season Two Review

by Ryan Welsh

The second season of the latest *Doctor Who* revival, the fifteenth season since the 2005 revival or, if it suits you, the forty-first season of *Doctor Who* in total, has concluded after just eight episodes. This season parted the Doctor (Ncuti Gatwa) from first season companion Ruby Sunday (Millie Gibson) and instead paired him up with Belinda Chandra, portrayed by *Andor* and *Jurassic World: Dominion* actor Varada Sethu. After a first episode that saw Belinda kidnapped and taken to a far-off planet, the Doctor spends the entire season figuring out a way to get her back to Earth on May 24th, 2025, a date the TARDIS, for some reason, cannot reach.

The one thing this season has going for it that stands out above the rest is the writing. Simply put, the writing, both dialogue and stories, is multiple levels above that of the previous season. Whilst not perfect, Russell T Davies manages to keep the overall feel of Ncuti's Doctor and the Disney-run 'Whoniverse' that we were introduced to in the first season but tweaks it just enough to bring back the Doctor Who that we know and love. The acting, particularly from Varada and Ncuti, who truly grows into and embodies the role of the Doctor, builds upon the improved writing to create a much more coherent and watchable show at surface level. For a *Doctor Who* fan who is more interested in the shows content and quality on a deeper level than just writing, there are plenty of talking points too! Varada's Belinda is a character who, more than anything, wants to go home. Therefore, Belinda is the type of companion to constantly challenge the Doctor, she grounds him and, most importantly, doesn't instantly become infatuated with him – like we have seen from so many companions before.

Furthermore, this may not be seen as a positive to many people, but season one of the revival put a lot of the Disney money into the use of CGI and high quality visuals. Whilst it was incredible to look at, it didn't feel like *Doctor Who*. This season fortunately embraced tradition, with a slightly more practical approach to the aliens and sets. A perfect example of this can be seen in the first episode of the season: the titular robots of "The Robot Revolution" are actually there! Another positive, even if it may be clutching at straws, is that, in my opinion, there isn't a 'bad episode' this season. Season one's "Space Babies", "The Devil's Chord" and "Empire of Death" are episodes that, honestly, I hope I never have to watch again. Whilst this season had episodes that were definitely not great, I could see myself rewatching this season in its entirety with a smile on my face for most of it!

On to the negatives, and there are a few. The season's writing may be exceptional compared to its predecessor, but that doesn't mean it was great by the standards of *Doctor Who* of the last couple decades. The episode with the best reviews, from both critics and audience, is an episode that acts as a sequel to an episode from David Tennant's era. After finishing this season, I had nothing but praise for the plot and writing, but over the few days after the finale aired I rewatched some of the episodes from the 9th, 10th and 11th Doctors

seasons and I realised I had been comparing this season solely to the one before, and not to every season of *Doctor Who*. This season is, compared to the last, a great season of television, instantly stepping up and building upon its mistakes to stand tall as a solid entry into the 'Whoniverse'. It is the kind of season of television that you would praise a writer/director for... if it was their second season ever. That is not the case for Russell T Davies. He has so much experience under his belt that, when you look at his prior work in *Doctor Who*, you expect better. This is why the sequel to one of his episodes from 17 years ago being the most well-regarded episode of the season speaks volumes. When you compare this season to Russell T Davies' last season it is better in essentially every way. When you compare this season of *Doctor Who* to Davies' Seasons 1-4 from the 2005 revival, this season is subpar in almost every way. I am trying to separate the 2005-2022 *Doctor Who* from the *Doctor Who* (2023-) and, therefore, will be singing the praises of this season as a flawed yet improved season of the sci fi franchise.

As for the episodes, consistency was definitely key this season. Each episode had its flaws, but I struggle to find an episode flawed enough that I could necessarily consider it bad. The performances across the board were on point from our protagonists, as well as from all the side characters who were much more memorable this season than the last.

Episode 0: "Joy to the World" (6/10)

Doctor Who has not produced a truly worthwhile Christmas special since "A Christmas Carol" (2010) and, whilst I had no expectations for this one, I still watched it on Christmas Day after dinner. If I was to describe the episode in one word it would be 'fine', because that is really all it was. Nicola Coughlan was not utilised in a way that an actor of her calibre deserved, the plot was all over the place, and the dialogue wasn't great. However, the ending was sweet, and it introduced us to Anita, who is arguably the greatest character of this new era.

Episode 1: "The Robot Revolution" (5.5/10)

There is not much to say about this episode; it was a weak story and premise that was carried by the performance of Varada, and the introduction to Belinda (even if the name Miss Belinda Chandra has haunted me ever since this episode) was exciting as she shows a companion ready to confront the Doctor and speak her mind. Starting off the season with a whimper rather than a bang, this episode is silly at times and forgettable, but it does set up the rest of the season well.

Episode 2: "Lux" (7/10)

When I realised this episode was going to be about a cartoon come to life, I was sceptical, when I heard he was voiced by Alan Cumming, I was intrigued and when the credits rolled, I was smiling. This episode doesn't seem like it will be enjoyable, yet somehow it is incredibly fun and, yet again, Ncuti and Varada are incredible in this trip across the Atlantic. The fourth wall break sequence was another one that had me cringing when I realised where it was going, yet happy by the end of it.

Episode 3: "The Well" (8.5/10)

The season peaked with *The Well*, an episode that is a direct sequel to an episode from David Tennant's first stint as the doctor. This episode, whilst being a sequel to [SPOILERS] actually feels much more like the episode "*Waters of Mars*", the Doctor and Belinda find themselves teaming up with a bunch of space explorers wearing cool spacesuits and exploring a planet they are unfamiliar with whilst a lurking evil picks them off... sound familiar? This episode is great, the presence of this monsters feels much more sinister than previous episodes, and the stakes are undeniably higher.

Episode 4: "Lucky Day" (8/10)

Spiritual successor to last season's "*73 Yards*", this Doctor-lite episode focuses on Ruby Sunday and, whilst I wasn't her biggest fan as a companion, I feel her performance in this episode was one of her best on the show so far. This style of episode is definitely an acquired taste but for those who enjoyed "*73 Yards*", this will likely be right up your street.

Episode 5: "The Story & the Engine" (7/10)

This episode definitely grew on me as time went on. Another unique episode that focuses more on the pantheon/religious side of *Doctor Who*, this episode, much like the others of this season, has a promising premise that is boosted by great acting and then ultimately let down by an inability to stick the landing. That being said, this episode has been stuck in my mind ever since it aired and whilst it wasn't an episode that I would consider to be great, its uniqueness and ability to linger weeks after it aired makes it deserving of a slightly higher rating in my eyes.

Episode 6: The Interstellar Song Contest (6.5/10)

The self-deprecating Rylan Clark jokes weren't enough to save this one. Whilst the episode itself is unique and had a lot of potential, the pacing is off, and the sheer calamity of villainy is not focused on in the way it deserves. Sure, this is the first time we truly get to see Ncuti's take on an angry, violent, serious Doctor, and he did not disappoint. Still, great performances all around aren't enough to save this episode as it tries to do a little too much. An episode with villainy of this magnitude would've worked better across two episodes.

Episode 7: Wish World (8/10)

~~Big Brother~~ Conrad is Watching You... In this 1984-inspired first part of the finale, the audience reunites with John Smith as Ncuti takes on the moniker for the first time. This alternate reality sees many familiar faces living in a world without doubts, UNIT is now a national insurance company, and the Doctor and Belinda have a daughter. Overall, this episode is a wild ride and a very enjoyable one at that. It utilises many characters from this new era and has some of the better writing of the new era on top of that.

Episode 8: The Reality War (6.5/10)

I should preface by saying I got to see the finale on the big screen at my local cinema with around 200 whovians around me and, if you have seen the finale, you should understand that that alone made the viewing experience so much better than it truly was. That said, this episode was still a letdown, the villains were not utilised well at all, it followed a very similar formula to the finale of the previous season, and overall it fell flat after a great build up in the penultimate episode. However, this episode did bring the long-awaited return of fan favourite side character Anita Benn (her first appearance since Joy to the World). Her presence in the finale is well met and we can only hope she and the Time Hotel play a more vital role in the seasons to come.

Overall, the level of this season truly does depend on where you are coming from. A new fan who was introduced to, and enjoyed, *Doctor Who* during the first season of this new revival will be delighted at the increase in quality across all aspects. A seasoned fan who was introduced to *Doctor Who* sometime during the original series, or through the 2005 revival will witness a return to form for Russell T Davies, but will likely still have plenty to criticise. I enjoyed this season, having been a fan since I was a child. I haven't really enjoyed a season of *Doctor Who* like the way I enjoyed this one since season nine with Peter Capaldi. The very fact that this season was as enjoyable as it was has given me hope that Davies is back on track.