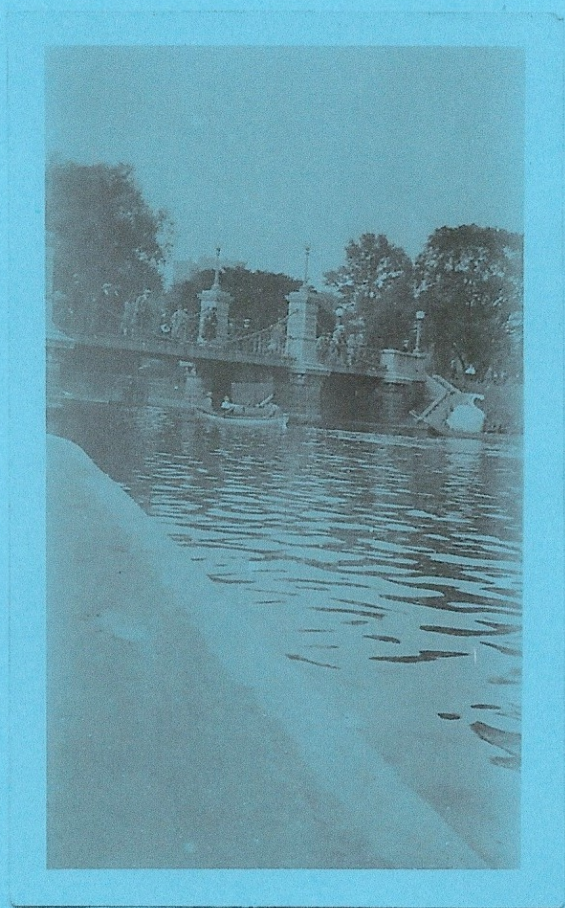


BETA DECAY



NUMBER THREE

BETA DECAY
#3

by ANDREW JACKSON KING



CITY



Traps

There was a clattering of cups against saucers, chairs being scraped against ancient tile. The clock counted down and the war began again for the day.

Alta ran through the streets, dodging shells and crumbling walls. The city was coming in at the seams. She turned a corner and felt lighter, the map in her back pocket having fallen out over the last few steps. She crouched, pivoted, and turned back against the melee. Bending, she grabbed the weathered guide, the dye on the seams broken from countless foldings and refoldings, chips of red and yellow and blue missing forever. Information, missing forever.

She looked at it and realized a narrow alley was up ahead. It was blue, which meant that there was an overhang and protection from above. She groped forward past the carts and stalls and found it. She pulled herself in and slid down the wall to rest.

She unhooked her jacket, rubbing the scar above her left breast. It always itched during the humid days. She thought back to how close the barb had been, how it felt to pull it out, the poison, the days of fever, hallucinating that she was back at the shore, the water lapping at her feet.

A siren tore through the air and in one motion, she had clasped her jacket, grabbed the map, and pulled herself back into the street. She turned back quickly and saw the arched tunnel she had been in caving in on itself. She winced, but there wasn't enough time to care.

Swinging into the street, Alta quickened her pace. She glanced at her watch, realizing there were only a few more minutes. She bent her arm and stuck it out in front of her to protect herself as she looked down at the map. She was gaining

speed as the road began to dip, her toes bending around the edges of the cobblestones where the filler had washed away. Up ahead, she saw that she could turn left across the plaza and be in a café.

A fruit cart peaked out from a wide door opening ahead of her on the right. Alta leapt over it, her right foot gripping the wall as she propelled herself across the street's opening into the plaza. She could hear the mechanical screech-whirl of the bombs a few seconds off and rolled into the café. A droning siren, nearly subharmonic, blared across the city.

Alta stood up, dusting off her jacket and pants. The crush of people from outside poured into the café behind her. She ordered a black coffee with sugar and sat down at a table, gazing up at the television as it switched from white snow to a transmission of the president. He had been able to evade the resistance through a network of archaic and byzantine analog switchboards that the scientists, trained in the new technology, were unable to grapple with. The rooms he was in changed – different safehouses of surviving loyalists, Alta was sure – but it was clear he was still inside the city walls.

Alta listened to the deposed leader speak his rhetoric, a jargon of a bygone time, threats to those living and dead, promises for peace. He spoke of great tests ahead and the need for malleability. Alta scanned the room. Scared families, produce sellers, document arrangers, all standing, watching the television. She pulled out her map and laid it on the table. She wasn't supposed to be looking at it during the calm, but she had noticed a strange street she hadn't seen before when she had looked at it during the run.

She leaned over and checked her shoes as a cover while she glanced at the map. The perturbation lie some way off of the main thoroughfare. It was yellow, which meant that it was consecrated land, outside the bounds of the of the run. She would have to make several turns, deeper into the old district. Alta committed these to memory to relieve herself from having to pull out the map later.

Thinking about the anomalous street, Alta realized that not only had she not been on it before, but it shouldn't even exist. It

had been months since she had been in that area, but she clearly remembered having hit a dead-end there at one point. She remembered having been caught up in the run and instinctively feeling that the calm was going to begin. She had turned the corner looking for a haven and ran into the wall after a few steps. The onrush behind her blocked her way back, forcing her to grab onto antennae grounds, power wires, and windowsills to pull herself up and over the three-story building. She dropped down next to a spice store and was spared.

But there had definitely not been a street running off the wall she had run into. She clearly remembered that. Sitting up, she finished her coffee and tightened the straps on her jacket. She thought about the rumors, the ones about the second city and the traceless ones, but there was no more time.

The siren roared and Alta was already on her feet out the door. She turned north, past the stands of produce, past the burning spices, the textile weavers. She brushed past a family of blacksmiths, turned left through a cross-street. In mid-stride, she smashed kneefirst into another runner.

He was a tall man, dark hair, gaunt face. They were both on the ground for only a second, the shock reverberating through their bodies while they nursed their battered limbs. Alta smiled at him as she got up, picking her map off the ground. There was no time for formalities.

The buzzsaw screech of far-off rockets banged through the streetscape as Alta began running towards the obscure alley. Before the next intersection, Alta stopped, pulling herself against the clay wall. She couldn't remember where to go, couldn't remember how to get to there. Frustrated, she pulled out the map. Looking it over, Alta was confused. The map showed a completely different section of the city, nowhere near where she was now. She realized she had picked up the wrong map during the collision.

Unfolding the new map, Alta scanned the six large squares for her location. She refolded it, with her district in the center. She took in the info on how to get to the dead-end before realizing that this borrowed guide failed to show the cryptic alleyway. The

entire bulk of buildings around the dead-end were green, old city stock, unchanged since before the run. Alta was puzzled, but there was no time to stand and think.

Continuing on to the alley, she narrowly avoided a collapsing tower and a broken pipe gushing dark water across the cobblestones. The herds of people thinned out as Alta got closer to the recondite marker. The run dragged on and on this time. *The drone should have started by now*, she thought. She made the final turn into the dead-end. It was exactly like she remembered it. The three-story brick building, the wires, the old windows. Alta stared at the edge of the building, looking for the alley.

At first glance, she didn't see it. Staring, she noticed the bricks there were shimmering, just slightly. Alta froze in an effort to calm any moving from her heavy breathing. Still, the shimmer remained. She cautiously walked closer, looking around her, but there was nobody in sight.

Four feet, three feet, two feet. Alta leaned closer to the shimmer. It was like the heat rising off a piece of metal, the brick wall quivering as if through a mirage. Alta thought she could see something beyond it, a view catching faintly on the sides of the ripples. She thought she could make out trees, grass, flowers, curious things she'd seen only in books. She reached forward to touch the weak glinting. Her fingers hovered just before the edge, ions pulling at the hair on her arms.

The opening glittered and pulled and Alta looked down and saw a dog, a basenji, golden with a streak of white. The creature walked through and sniffed the edge of the building. She laughed. It had been years since she had seen a dog. She knelt back against the wall and rubbed its head, smiling for the first time in ages. Its nose moved, twitching, and it ran off down the street, away from Alta and the shimmer.

Hearing footsteps, Alta looked up as a man made his way toward her. His movements were deliberate, powerful. She tensed up, slid against the wall away from the now-and-then alley. His face was covered, rags pulled tight, a cloak flapping in the wake of his movement. Bulges under his clothing belied his armament. Alta stared silently at him, wondering if he was one of the

leftovers of the laconic city guards.

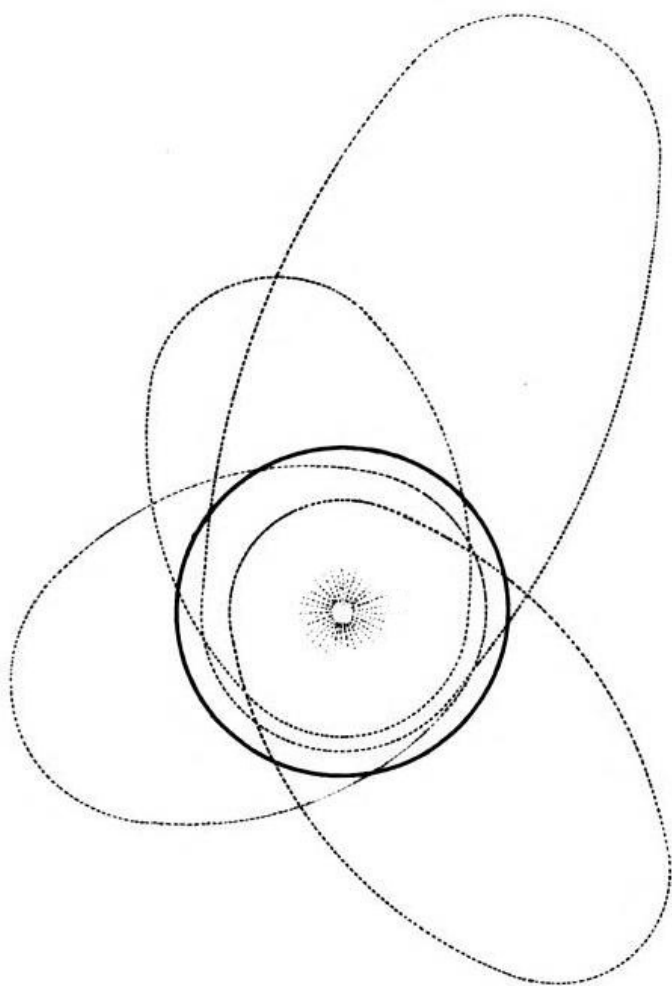
The man glanced at Alta and she saw into his deep black eyes. She realized it was the president, or rather, the former president. She was awed at his flagrant attempt to walk the streets unharmed. With an air of force, he moved towards the alley, paying scant attention to Alta. She realized that one person was too much of a quibble for him to deal with. There were strategies to craft, propaganda to create, power that would have to be clawed back inch by inch.

Alta slid up against the wall. The president drew his cloak further down his face. For a second – and only a second, for Alta watched with a precision worn down by a life of running against a clock – he hesitated in front of the shimmer. Standing in front of the alley that was there and also not there, he stepped forward and disappeared. Alta watched, frozen.

The drone began far off and reached Alta's ears as she was leaning against the wall. She tried to think of a haven, pulled out her new map, her shaking hands fumbling it around. She stepped towards the shimmer, wondering what lie across the threshold. The drone grew in intensity. Alta pulled back, unsure if the possible peace on the other side was worth the risk of leaving the world she knew. The whirls of the bombs tore threw the city.

Alta turned to run, to get away from the shimmer. She searched her mind for a haven. She looked back one last time at the transient alley that was half there as a bomb tore in to the side of the building in front of her, collapsing the three stories of centuries-old brick around the alley. Alta could hear screams as a chain reaction of masonry that was just barely holding itself together came crashing in, more and more rooms and supports falling towards the center, a pile of rubble where the president had just stepped.

Alta turned and ran, ran to find haven. And to find that dog.



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Fractal Heliometry

Elys lay still, trying to calm her nerves as the humming of the ship's systems in the distance finally stopped. The scrubbers had been off for the last two hours and her lungs were beginning to burn. Or maybe she was imagining they were. The darkness had lasted for so long it seemed, that she felt she was starting to lose her sense of reality. Or already had. Certainly, she would eventually. The air was getting thin. She tried to calm herself, but her breaths were becoming deeper and more painful.

Looking up through the port window, she could make out a faint parts number for the glass: 34926-1. *Two times six minus nine plus four minus three minus one equals three. No, no, it's not in order. Nine minus six times four divided by three minus two plus one equals three. Perfect.* Elys closed her eyes.

She tried to focus on her past to relax. Or at least to die content and not panicked. The oxygen deprivation seemed to cut off her attempts to think about the present and forced her to focus on the past, the possibilities, the choices that had led to her to this moment.

She remembered back to a trip she had taken to visit a friend in Vermont when she was younger. They had left early one morning to climb a peak, laughing and telling stories during the ascent. They passed a beaver building a dam halfway up the climb. *How could a lake be this far up?* she had thought.

They reached the top and looked out across the woods and farms spread out around them on the valley floor. It wouldn't be long before Elys had signed up to leave, but what if she had stayed? What if she had been around for the war? What if she was on a ship touring the new territories and not in a metal box with its walls slowly closing in on her...

A glint of sunlight arced off the edge of the porthole in her room. The ship began to whirl and click, cascading energy surges

reigniting the life of the cold metal. Elys took a deep breath and could see a light come on down the hall. She lay for several minutes as the oxygen replenished, her vision returning, the burning in her muscles subsiding.

Her legs weak, Elys was able to get up and walk to the other cabins. Korowitz, dead. Schaeffer, dead. Zhang, dead. Walking towards the control room, Elys collapsed against one of the bulkheads, sobbing.

The ship landed on the trojan asteroid, blasting dust across the bleak landscape. Elys could see the derelict station through the window, it having been abandoned for decades, but unchanged due to the dead, near-vacuum of the rocky satellite.

The ship slowly crawled across the surface towards the station. Elys heard it click into the docking interface to allow for automated unloading. There would have to be some sacrifices on her part due to the ancient nature of the base compared to the modern ones she had seen in the brochures, but the pay would help her avoid the shortages when she returned home. Unbuckling herself from the seat, Elys walked towards the cabins, saying goodbye to each crewmember, accepting the fact that they would have to be reclaimed by the station.

She stepped into the airlock, tapping the pad to ensure that the seal on the station side had engaged and to check the oxygen levels. The door unlocked with a click and Elys could smell a wisp of the stagnant air. The light sensors detected her and clicked the overhead and wall lights on. She walked towards the main terminal and manually entered the reboot code.

“-are unauthorized to continued with this shutdown,” clanged through the empty room, the station’s computer voicing its final command before it was turned off. There was a whirring and a click and the computer was operational again.

Elys typed into a keyboard attached to the wall. Waiting for the screen to change, she noticed that four wall panels came together just to her right. She touched the upper left one, then the upper right, the lower left, and the lower right, in a Z motion, again and again. Again, she did it. The computer screen flicked to

life, but she was only a quarter of the way through the motions. Finishing, Elys realized she had made the motion an odd number of times and tapped the panels once more in succession to round out the count.

The computer awoke. “Hello, Elys Obei-Densu. Welcome to Earth Trojan B108.”

“El is fine. You can call me that.”

“Excellent. You may call me Jack. I am currently processing four decades of information streams. Please relax here while you wait.”

Elys turned down the hall to her left. A tapswitch was on the wall. She turned the lights on ahead of her, watching them glint down the hallway. She walked down it to begin examining the station. The station left only to her. The station she would be alone in that night.

Elys had just finished dictating the message to the board in Cincinnati. The battery loss, the oxygen deprivation, the deaths of the crew. She feared swift reprimand from the members. It had just been so difficult to navigate through the labyrinthine structure of the company. So many friends had never even made it off of the ground floor. There were the years on the waiting list, that chance meeting with one of the boardmembers, the falsifying of her documents. Now it would all be lost. They would send a replacement crew and have her on a return jaunt by the end of the month to face trial. Or worse.

Elys walked to the kitchen and cooked a meal. Quinoa, beans, rehydrated vegetables. She tapped the spoon three times against the pan each time before she stirred.

“El, response received from Cincinnati. Would you like me to read it?”

“Yes.”

““Situation understood. No additional crew to send. Continue with automated mining. Will retrieve in eight months.””

So that was it, Elys thought. As long as they could get their ore, they were happy. Their palladium and osmium. Their molybdenum and rhodium. What of her alone? Was this her

punishment, to wait on this rock for eight months, her only contact delayed video streams and packet mail? She sat back in her chair, the plate resting on her lap. The air cleaners droned off in the distance as Elys watched the stars through the window.

In 1815, William Smith crafted the first geologic map in the history of Earth, covering England, Wales, and parts of Scotland. Working alone, he was able to chart the seams of rocks flowing through the countryside. Jurassic coal, Cretaceous chalk, it was all there, cleanly laid out for the scientist and layman alike, carefully organized into veins and chambers, ordered by nature for the taking. Fossil fuels and metals that would drive the Industrial Revolution were there for whoever was able to get to them first.

Generations later, these stocks would be entirely burnt up, locked in vaults, sunk to the oceans' bottoms, trapped in eternal landfills.

But new maps will always be made.

Elys wiped her face shield. The machines around her kicked up a fine dust from the surface that hung in the air like a mist. She tightened one of the bolts on a crawler with the hydraulic square drive. The machines were fairly adequate at repairing themselves, although in tight spaces, like crevices in their undersides, they often failed. Restarting the crawler, Elys tugged twice on her line. The line grew taut and slowly began to pull her towards the station, her feet dragging carelessly, almost weightlessly, against the surface.

The airlock opened and pulled Elys inside. She waited until the oxygen was replenished before stripping off her suit and stepping into the station. Walking to her cabin to change into dry clothes, Elys stopped. She thought she heard a door slide shut. The hair on her arms stood on end. She turned back towards the terminal.

Nobody is here, she told herself. There's no possible way anybody could be here. I would have seen a ship dock. I would have seen the ship outside! Breathe. There's nobody here.

She walked into the kitchen and grabbed a knife for

comfort. It felt cool in her hand, the single piece of steel forming the blade and handle, the implement feedbacking her fear. She inched slowly down the hall, her heart thumping slowly in her chest. She passed two of the cabins, scanning each for motion. She took a step past these, stopping before the next set of doors. *They should be open*, she thought. She hadn't closed any of the doors since arriving. There was no need for privacy when she was alone.

She leaned against the wall on her right, allowing her to look into the room in front and to the left of her. Empty. She swung into the final doorway and scanned the empty room. She walked back to the kitchen, trying to calm herself, trying to not let the loneliness of the station get to her.

She sat at the terminal to browse the encyclopedia archives, but began smashing the keys uselessly instead. She got up and moved to the couch and laid down to relax.

"Jack, what was the name of the last worker here?"

"Nathaniel Serrano."

"Describe him, please."

"Male, 30 at arrival, 37 at departure. 168 standard pounds. 5 feet, 11 inches."

"He was here 7 years?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"There were errors in calculating orbit motion. This was early in the trojan program."

"Geez. What happened to him?"

"Rephrase."

"Where is he now?"

"Deceased. Last residence was Rio de Janeiro, Brazil."

"How did he die?"

"Unclear. No cause of death given."

"How did he fair up here? For seven years, I mean."

"He had a difficult time."

"Pandorum?"

"There were no biometric indicators of pandorum."

"I see."

“I know you didn’t ask, El, but there was another passenger up here during Serrano’s stay.”

“A worker?”

“No. There are no records of who she was. She arrived a year into his stay.”

“She?”

“Yes, a female. No official name given, although Serrano referred to her as Cristine.”

“What of her?”

“Deceased, on the trojan. Causes unknown.”

“Unknown? How?”

“The system was shutdown and rebooted during her death.”

“Purposefully? By Serrano?”

“I was unable to determine.”

“How can that be? Were input commands given?”

“There was a power surge from outside. One of the machines docked and its converter was unharnessed.”

“Hmm. He could have left the harness off, right? Knowing it would surge and shut down the security system.” Elys felt sick.

“There was no court martial?”

“No. Insufficient evidence. There was no record of who she was and her body was reclaimed, per Cincinnati.”

“Ugh, that’s enough for today, Jack.”

“Very well, El. Would you care for anything?”

“Play some music, please. Liszt. No, Messiaen. If you have any.”

Elys slid across the floor in her chair, happy for the first time in weeks. A packet had just come through consenting to the increase in pay she had requested since she was running the station alone.

“I’m bored, Jack.” She spun in her chair. “Were there any other packets received by accident?” Elys had been briefed that the mail system covered a large swath of space and sent multiple bursts in various directions to counter the amount of debris and smaller satellites in the area. Mail intended for other trojans was often received by other stations and Elys knew it was frowned

upon to read others' correspondence, but the days had begun to stretch on so long.

"Yes, one. From Cincinnati. Shall I read it?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

"Situation understood. Begin quarantine procedures. Sedate and restrain Hanson. Reclaim those killed. No trial at this time."

Elys stopped spinning. "'Killed?' Somebody was killed." She looked at the message on the screen for a few seconds. "That means there was a murderer out there?"

"Yes, according to language protocols."

"How many trojans could have been the intended recipient of that message?"

"Assuming stable orbits and full staffing, there are 17 earth trojans that could have been the designated recipient."

"Why is this job so violent?"

There was no response from Jack.

Elys mulled over the thought of being trapped out here with a killer. There would be nowhere to go, just the five hundred square foot station. She shuddered. Maybe it was for the best that she was alone out here. She would just have to make it another eight months without scaring herself to death.

Elys walked over to one of the metal tables in the filing room to check the daily totals. Satisfied with the amounts, she created a packet, timestamped it, and sent it back to Earth. The packet system would take several minutes to confirm delivery. The machines were busy at work, allowing Elys to take a quick shower before inspecting the machines on return. What had once been a work session for four crew members was beginning to take its toll on the lone survivor.

Drying her hair, she returned to the terminal.

"Error during packet transmission, El."

"Re-try."

"I have resent the packet three times, per protocol. No response. No signals from Earth. No indicators of activity on Earth."

Elys froze. “What? Bring up the live feed.”

The screen changed from charts and graphs showing siderophile mining numbers to a satellite view of the planet. Elys stood up to examine the giant image. The planet was caught half in darkness and half in light. Her gaze was naturally drawn to the light portion first. White clouds swirled above the cerulean oceans and vast deserts. Elys looked towards the cities, the green dots scattered across the landscape.

She studied the half in darkness. There were no lights, no clusters of radiance that normally sprouted out of the city centers.

There was a time stamp in the bottom corner of the screen. 15:31:07. Elys turned the numbers over in her head. She needed to figure out what was going on in Cincinnati, but was frozen until she solved the numbers. *Seven plus five divided by three minus one times one equals three. Perfect. In descending order, too.*

“And there’s no contact at all? No transmissions coming from Earth?”

“Not for the last hour.”

“And there was no report? No distress call?”

“No, El.”

“Well, what could have happened?”

“Most probable answer: electromagnetic pulse. Followed by nuclear war, biological pandemic, natural disaster, and alien disturbance. There are no indications visibly of a nuclear war or natural disaster.”

Elys fell back into her chair, her knees weak and pulse racing.

Five weeks had passed since Elys had last had contact with Earth. Jack had attempted to draw streams from the artificial satellites circling closer to Earth for a live feed, but even these were knocked out. Elys spent hours longingly watching the planet, hoping for some sign of life on the surface. There was simply no activity, no lights at night, nothing large enough for her to see from such a distance. They had conquered luminescence generations ago, yet the blue sphere sat in darkness as days passed. If she could only get to Earth, she could at least find out

what had happened. But with her ship's damaged batteries, she realized she was stuck on the trojan forever. There would be no leaving the blasted rock of rare metals.

She had shut down the machines, cannibalizing them for their fuel. She had shut down the other sections of the stations, living solely in the main terminal room to conserve oxygen. She read often, but long stretches of time were spent studying the view of Earth, coarse as it was from the station's distance. To know that she would die in space, alone and cold, was a long and painful death.

Jack released two sharp beeps. "Ship approaching, El."

Elys' eyes lit up. "Show me it." The screen switched from Earth to the surface of the trojan, tracking the small ship moving towards the dock. It was like Elys', but one of the newer models. She wondered if her crew would still be alive if they had been in one of those.

The ship landed and began crawling towards the hatch. Elys heard it engage and walked towards the airlock. She could hear her breathing, hear her heart pumping as she waited.

A deep voice clanged through the steel walls of the airlock. "Hello?"

Elys hit the switch, opening the door. She caught her breath. A woman stepped through the door, her clothing soaked in sweat, her hair plastered to her head.

She stuck out her hand. "Name's Cal. From Trojan FH8601. This is a 77, right? Iridium? I was on a 45er – rhodium. Hate the stuff, that white color. I swear I could even smell it after a while. Had to leave all that behind, though." She looked through the window towards Earth and shrugged.

Elys took her hand almost in shock. "Uh, yes, yes. Um, sorry, my name is Elys. Yeah, this was an mainly an iridium site." She paused. "Do you know what happened to Earth?"

"No idea. But I saw that you'd be swinging pretty close to me, figured it would be better to spend the last few days with somebody."

"Yeah, I'd say so."

Elys tried to close her eyes. She pictured Earth, not destroyed, but merely crippled. Perhaps it had been an electrical disturbance. There would still be lots of people left alive, they just wouldn't have been able to contact the trojan stations.

She could see Cal through the window, inspecting the ships. The newcomer had put forth the theory that they could try to combine their two crafts to reach Earth. Elys' scrimping had afforded them quite a bit of time and fuel to make the attempt and they would need extra parts from her ship to allow Cal's to make it to Earth in one push.

She rubbed her temples, a headache of too much thinking about to overcome her. But there was something she couldn't shake.

"Jack, bring up that packet you received about the murderer on the trojan." The screen flicked up, showing the text Elys had read months ago. "Cal said she was on FH8601. Could FH8601 been one of the recipients of that packet?"

"Yes, FH8601 was in the group of 17."

"Hmm."

When he was in his mid-30s, the German composer Robert Schumann claimed to have suffered perpetually with the sound of the note A5 in his ears. Ten years later, a young Johannes Brahms would arrive on Schumann's doorstep with a letter of recommendation from the famous violinist of the day, Joseph Joachim. Schumann was quite taken by the young Brahms and would write the *Violin Concerto in D Minor* for Joachim in a flurry of creativity after this meeting.

Months later, Schumann's hallucinations from the constant ringing reached a fever pitch and he attempted suicide by leaping into the Rhine. The famous violinist linked the piece to the composer's madness and attempted to block it from the music world for a century.

Schumann would later confess that his final published work, several variations for the piano and, in fact, based on the melody of the *Violin Concerto*, was passed to him from the spirits of the late Mendelssohn and Schubert. The existence of the

shunned *Concerto*, hidden from the world by Joachim, Brahms, and other friends, was divined by spiritualists in the 1930s and received a world premiere a few years later.

The impetus of Schumann's madness – the ringing of A5 in his ears – was most certainly tinnitus, an affliction that would not be suffered by larger numbers of the general public until decades after his death. Only someone who would be around loud sounds often, like a composer, would have been affected. Schumann must have thought it was a divine punishment for a man of music to be haunted in such a way.

The static crackle of the open transmission channel sparked in the background, while Elys worked in the kitchen. It had taken a week for Cal to decouple the ship's batteries and she was in the workshop joining them together. Elys was cooking dinner and scanning the amount of food left in storage. Three weeks. Three weeks to get off the satellite and make an attempt towards Earth.

Elys pulled open the cutlery drawer. She noticed one of the knives was missing. Her hands flittered across the other implements, searching for the third chef's knife. It was gone.

Did Cal take the knife? Elys thought. *Did she think I wouldn't notice a knife missing?* Images and sensations flashed through her mind. Cal stalking her, the blade tearing into her thigh, laying in a pool of blood. *No, no, this is irrational. This is irrational*, she screamed inside of her head.

Elys opened the refrigerator. The knife was on the lower shelf. One of them must have placed it there by accident. She tried to control her breathing as her heart beat rapidly. She grabbed the knife and put it away.

Cal sat on the couch, studying the battery diagrams, making notations on particularly important components. Elys watched her, studied her, looking for a crack, some kind of indication that she wasn't who she said she was.

She was so tired from having stayed up looking at the

photographs Jack had of Cristine. Nine blurry photos from a partially-damaged sector of Jack's backup. It was almost impossible to make out any details of the woman, but Elys had stared at them for hours. She rubbed her eyes.

"Any progress?" she asked Cal.

Elys lay in bed, her eyes open. Her fear had punched a hole through the two tablets of sleepaid she had taken. She kept hearing sounds, trying to tie them into the processes and routine operations of the station. Clicks, scratches, whirs. She was having trouble keeping up, wondering if any were from Cal. *Was Cal asleep? How could she be sure?*

The bedroom door quavered in the dark as Elys stared at it, waiting for it to move.

Elys stared at the sink, the distinctive iron ring of a hastily-wiped blood droplet next to the faucet. Her head throbbed as she tried to focus on the jagged outline. One solitary drop of blood. She realized that Cal and herself were the only living beings within thousands of miles. Maybe the only living beings left.

Is that breathing? I hear breathing. What if she's standing there, outside my door? Nothing could stop her. Certainly not me. I'd try to get up, trapped in my sheets, falling over. Maybe I should get rid of the sheets. That's better. It's colder now. But I'm more alert. I'm ready. Wait. What was that? It could have been her. 22:47? Seven minus four times two-halves. 22:48? Two plus (two times four all over eight). That was good. 22:49? Nine over (four plus two) all multiplied by two. 22:50? Zero times two plus five minus two. That one wasn't so good. My arm itches. Now scratch the opposite arm in the same spot. Was that exactly the same spot? 22:51? Five minus two times (two minus one). It's cold in here.

The screen flicked on showing a recording bar and level monitors. Elys nervously tapped a few keys, listening to make

sure none of the doors in the station were being opened. Cal was outside draining all of the available fuel from the machines and auxiliary hubs. Satisfied that she was alone, Elys leaned into the built-in microphone on the terminal. She described the packet interception, Cal's arrival, the mysterious sounds, the previous murder at the station. She described her increasing anxiety and fear of Cal.

The pressure change in the airlock squealed across the station. Elys tapped the keyboard, wiped her forehead and walked out.

Cal was excited. The mechanicals of the ship were checked and passed by Jack. There would be just enough fuel if there were no errors. Cal reasoned that the ocean would be the safest place to land without a re-entry module. There wouldn't be anybody there to rescue them in the ocean; they'd have to pray for good currents. But it would be better than staying on B108. Trapped and abandoned on a lifeless hunk of iridium.

Elys stood at the terminal, tapping a few keys while she transferred Jack to the ship. "No use leaving you here, nobody'll be back for a long time."

Elys tapped the screen and scrolled through the files, making sure her distress packet about Cal was still there. *This will prove it*, she thought.

"Come on, El," Cal said, grabbing her arm. "We've got to go now."

Elys stopped at the seal and turned back towards the station. It felt a part of her, like it had suddenly become obsessed with her, clawing her back, pulling her like the tides of a sea going out. She was standing on the shore, the thin slice of ground between here and there.

"Elys!" Cal shouted.

She turned and walked through the seal as the lights in the station slowly turned themselves off.

Nineteenth-century newspaperman Horace Greeley, an avid reformer, is now best remembered for the perhaps apocryphal

coining of “Go west, young man” in a letter to friend Josiah Bushnell Grinnell. Encapsulating the vigor of a still-young nation, this phrase would work its way into the psyche of many traveling across the United States after the Civil War.

Grinnell himself would later work on the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad, informally known as the Rock Island Line. The Rock Island Line was later immortalized to the world by blues singer and Arkansas State Prison inmate Huddie William Ledbetter, known to the world as Lead Belly. The lyric ‘if you want to ride, you gotta ride it like you find it’ certainly became a more fitting phrase for a more mature nation.

Greeley would go on to run in the 1872 United States presidential election against incumbent Ulysses S. Grant. After losing the popular vote, the newspaperman was forced out of his editorship position at The New York Tribune. Before the electoral votes could be cast, Greeley’s wife would die suddenly sending him into a spiral of madness and a nervous breakdown that led to his death that same November.

While the economy of words in “go west, young man,” has led to its historical permanence, Greeley expanded on the idea in the same letter to Grinnell by voicing the enduring dream of escaping the modern world with the maxim that “it is all room away from the pavements.”

Entangled

The blue water slapped against the dock as the boat neared the frayed wooden posts at land's edge. A man standing on the lip of the boat, protected by his dark green oilskin, wiped drops of cold rain from his face as he grabbed onto the timber poles. Reaching out for a metal ring, he attached a rope from the boat to the ring and pulled the small craft tight to the dock.

He knocked forcefully on the hull, signaling to his companions that the boat was secure. Two men emerged from the cabin and drew a tarpaulin tightly across the top of the boat, securing it to the gunwales on either side as they all stepped off the craft onto the dock. Lightning cracked a few miles off the coast of the small island, illuminating the black rock outcroppings surrounding the patch of land.

Between sheets of rain, the men took in the sight of the white brick lighthouse, rising like a church spire out of the rolling green hills on the island. Pushing two hundred feet out of the emerald countryside, the tower's illuminated peak cut across the turbulent, black sky.

Two of the men helped the third down the dock, his wounded leg preventing him from moving easily to the land. The station's light slowly revolved around the peak, emitting weak coruscations across the water and meagerly attempting to cut through the torrential downpour.

The three men eased silently down the slick wood dock. The planks were twisted and bent from years of exposure to the elements. With their bags on their shoulders, the men made their way to the coast and to the stone steps leading up to the lighthouse. The massive granite slabs were polished smooth from years of ascensions and descensions, a record of the importance of the lighthouse in wars gone by. One of the men wrung the rain from his beard.

“Should only be one keeper here, ranks’re too thin.”

The men plodded up the steps, their wet clothes dragging them down with each step. The third man brought up the rear, blood beginning to work its way past his bandages and through his grey pants. While the storm impeded their view of the island, the lamp would periodically swing by them, illuminating the verdant hills and temporary gullies overflowed by the rains.

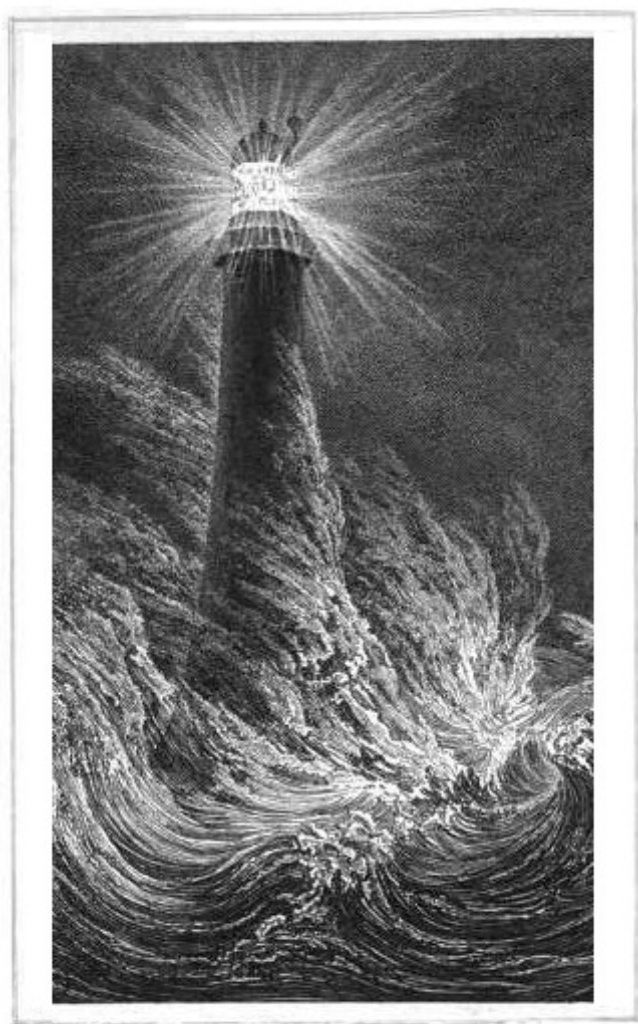
As the group approached the tower, they could see that it was constructed of brick that had been painted white over the centuries. Layers of paint were chipped or broken and several windows dotted the walls. The lantern room was framed with iron and several lightning rods ran down the side of the building into the ground. A heavy oak door stained a deep red was positioned at the top of the steps. The three men wiped their faces, rubbed their eyes, and stood up straight as their leader rapped on the door with the heavy iron, gargoye-faced knocker.

The band of men waited for some time and had a chance to survey the entrance of the building. Several different footprints could be seen in the mud. One of the men pointed down and showed the others. The door frame showed deep gouges, much more recent than construction of the building or a new door would suggest.

The men stood forward when they heard a bolt being unlatched from the inside. The heavy door slowly opened, letting out a slight creak that could barely be heard over the storm. A young woman stood in the doorway, holding an electric lantern. Her dry clothing – an oxford shirt and pressed slacks – and tight, waved hair were in stark contrast to the men standing outside the door. The men held back their initial surprise and refrained from looking at each other.

The leader of the group spoke first. “Sorry to bother you, miss. We had some motor trouble about a league out, looked at the map, and saw the station here. We’d be much obliged if we could wait out the storm here. My name is Samuels, this is Adams, and Flynn is in the back there.”

The keeper raised the lantern up to the faces of the men. “You’re part of the effort?”



HELL ROCK LIGHTHOUSE

Samuels answered for all three. “Yes, we all served on the South American front. Mostly running. We were rifted after they started using the denizens, got put up into shipping and lane clearing. We’re doing reconnaissance to keep lines open up to the pole. Flynn here has got a bit of a gash on his leg that’ll need some tending to.”

“No problem,” the keeper answered. “Please, come in.” Stepping back and motioning with her hand, the keeper watched the three men enter. “Name’s Greta. I’ll take you upstairs. Me and the other hand were just sitting down to supper.”

“Have as much as you want,” Frank told the men as two of the strangers pulled in their chairs at the large wooden table. The room was lit only by flickering lamps, but the men could make out the older keeper’s grey hair and weathered skin. Stray strands from his blue wool sweater caught the light before it hit the brick walls.

The room was off the ground floor of the lighthouse and had one of the windows that the men had seen from the outside. Bunk beds hugged the perimeter of the room with the communal table in the center. Flynn lay in one of them, his freshly-bandaged leg angled on top of a wool blanket. Various tools and implements were scattered across the floor and on various workbenches around the open space. A spiral staircase rose from the lower level they had entered from and another rose to upper levels in the tower.

Samuels spoke first. “Thank you for taking us in and for the dry clothes. It can be lonely out on the sea, even when the wireless is working.”

“I understand completely,” Frank said. “Wireless was jammed here years ago. They finally started doubling up keepers a few months ago. Greta here was a life-saver.”

Adams shoveled forkfuls of food into his mouth, oblivious to the storm that cracked relentlessly outside the windows. Flynn lay nearly passed out, exhausted from the effort of getting to the lighthouse and having his wound redressed.

Greta squinted her eyes through the darkness. “Hey, where

are your guys' shots?"

"Shots?" Samuels asked.

"Your Bulgarian encephalitis shots." She turned her arm over, showing a raised circular scar, an inch wide. "Sofia's fever."

"Oh, right. It's a pill now," Samuels answered. "They wanted to move away from the shots to ease distribution to where we were in the islands."

"I wish they had that when I got mine!" Greta said, rubbing the scar.

Frank poured himself a glass of water. "So what kind of operations did they have you doing. Greta said something about recon?"

"Yeah, we're part of a lane-clearing outfit. We push ahead and make sure there's nothing up ahead before the forces actually get there."

"Anything interesting? Got any new devices they've put out? We're at the edge of the effort and don't see much of the au courant developments."

"Nah, nothing that great."

"You all sunk anybody?" Greta asked.

"A few."

"Wow, congratulations."

"You think it's good for us to sink them?"

"Better than us."

"Hmm." Samuels stared at his food. "So, what do you all do out here to spend the time?"

"Read, watch the horizon, work on the lamp," Frank answered.

"Frank doesn't really read too much because of his eye."

"Old war injury. Nothing serious."

"Where was it?"

"Suriname, off Paramaribo."

"Damn, sorry to hear that."

Greta put down her fork. "Frank, do you think we should secure their boat? The storm is only going to get worse until daybreak."

"Yeah, you want to run down and do that? These guys

don't need their ship smashed to pieces after all that sailing."

"We hooked it up when we pulled in."

"There's a lot of rocks out there, Samuel. Liable to tear your boat up. We've got enough rope to lash it around."

Greta got up, putting her napkin on the table. She moved towards the stairwell before Adams snapped out of his daze. "Hold on, I'll help you," Adams said, making his way quickly to the door.

Greta was a bright woman, one of the youngest in the lighthouse guard, but often acquiescent. "Sure, sure. Come on. You can hold the lantern."

The two made their way to the ground level, Greta stopping to get a bundle of rope from one of the storage lockers. Reaching for his raincoat, Adams stopped her, putting his hand on the rope and raising the lantern. Greta could see his deep brown eyes, his broken front teeth. Clusters of light caught on a slight scar running down his left temple.

"I can do this, Greta. I've already gotten soaked once tonight and I haven't even warmed up yet. It's nothing to worry about."

Greta hesitated, but relented. "Sure, fine. Here take this skin, it's better than the ones you all came in with."

Adams nodded at her, hanging up his old coat and swinging the new one onto his arms. "I'll be right back."

Greta made her way back up the stairs.

Frank's eyes widened. "Hey, why aren't you helping him with that?"

"He said he could do it himself."

Samuels interjected himself into the conversation. "Adams is very close with the boat. He was actually serving on it before we were. You know how some of those old salts can be."

"Ah, okay," Frank said. "I've seen some protective sailors in my day. Wouldn't want to upset him, I guess, Greta."

Greta started to walk around the table to take her seat. She saw the pepper on the counter and went to grab it, looking out the window and catching a glimpse of Adams in the flash from a crack of lightning.

Greta froze, the pepper shaker still in her hand. She wasn't sure, but she thought that she had seen an arm moving out from underneath the tarpaulin covering the boat, limply trying to get out. She waited for another bolt of lightning, something to illuminate the area around the dim orange glow of the lantern Adams was carrying. Realizing that Samuels might be watching her, she fiddled with the lid on the pepper shaker, trying to imprint the vision of the boat and arm onto her mind.

The lightning cracked again and Greta could make out Adams tying the boat more securely to the dock, the arm nowhere to be seen. Whatever had happened, it was over. Knowing she couldn't say anything for her and Frank's safety, she made her way back to the table and sat down.

"So," Greta asked. "Any good stories?"

Samuels' mind was somewhere else. "Sure, a few. I'm pretty tired now, though. Maybe tomorrow."

Frank patted Greta on the arm. He looked back at the bed and saw Flynn, asleep. "You all should get some rest."

"When the storm ends, I'll run down and get some photos we took out on the sea of the platform hydros. They're like nothing you've seen."

Greta's eyes lit up. "That'd be great."

The three heard the heavy, creaking door downstairs open, Adams taking off his raincoat, his heavy boots slogging up the stairs.

"Greta, put another log on the fire, will you?"

She got up and walked over to the hearth, trying to eye the boat. The boat and the tarp...

"How's the storm?" Samuels asked Adams as he made his way back to the table.

"Probably not going to let up for quite a while." He dug his fork into the plate as Greta cautiously made her way back to the table.

"I'm going to turn in," Samuels said, nodding to Greta and Frank and eyeing Adams.

Hours passed. Samuels waited until he heard Greta's footsteps lightly on the stairs. She was making her way up to

switch shifts with Frank. He pulled himself out of bed and leaned against the ladder as he nudged Adams on the bed above him awake.

"I'm up," Adams said. "What are you doing?"

"The girl went upstairs. What do you want to do here?"

"What'd Flynn say?"

"Flynn's passed out and he ain't moving."

"So that's two of us and two of them?"

"They've got nothing to take. No tech we need. At least not that I've seen."

"There could be a stockpile in the basement."

Samuels reached out and covered Adams' mouth as they heard Frank's footsteps coming down the stairs. Samuels slid back into his bed, listening to the keeper's movements as he poured a glass of water from the table and changed into night clothes.

Samuels lay silent as he heard Frank slip into bed. His mind wandered as he tried to force himself asleep. An hour passed before he heard wood creaking behind him. Straining his ears, he could hear Greta making her way down the stairs, softly, deliberately slow. He heard Greta step on the stone floor at the ground level, heard her light the lantern, heard the door open and close.

Quietly, Samuels made his way to the window. He looked out and saw the yellow glow of the lantern swinging from Greta's right hand as she made her way to the boat. He weighed his options and moved as silently as possible to the stairs leading up to the lamp.

The rain fell in sheets on Greta as she moved quickly to the boat, bracing herself for a slip any second. The lantern's handle squeaked as its body swung back and forth. Her boots beginning to sink in the mud, Greta got to the stones leading to the pier and wiped her face.

Maneuvering around to the starboard side of the ship, which was nearest to the dock, Greta grabbed the coaming and pulled the boat towards herself. She studied the name of the craft, the letters crudely painted on: *The Magruder*. It was from around here, all right, she thought.

Bringing the lantern closer to the boat, she could see fainter letters carved into the boat, but covered in fresh coats of paint. Greta traced the letters, *UCS*, with her fingers in the dim light. She couldn't think of what navy sailed with those letters. What nation that could have even represented.

Grabbing hold of the metal ring securing the tarpaulin, Greta attempted to unlatch it, her fingers scrambling for some hard edge in the pouring rain. In her mind's eye, she could still vaguely see the arm reaching out from the boat.

Finally, the ring unhooked and the wind caught the tarpaulin, snapping it back a few inches. Greta leaned in with the lantern and could see a body on the deck. Straining in an attempt to keep the boat close to the dock and maneuver the lantern in to see better while the rain poured down, Greta could make out the face. She leaned in and nearly dropped her lantern. The face looking back at her was the face of Flynn, the man in the bed back at the lighthouse.

Greta froze, running theories through her head when the whole world turned black. She looked towards the lighthouse and her greatest fear was realized: the lamp was out. Pulling the lantern away from the boat, she ran down the dock towards the lighthouse, catching glimpses of the terrain between flashes of lightning. Greta's foot slipped and she hit the ground hard with the lantern. She recoiled as she heard the glass on it shatter, throwing the world into complete darkness.

Reaching forward into the mud and grass, Greta pulled herself up, staggering to keep in the general direction she had been headed. The lightning cracked and she realized she had been headed away from the path she needed to be on. Focused on getting to the door, she wondered if the light had just gone out by accident. There was a small chance...

Samuels leapt down the stairs of the lighthouse, a lantern swinging in his hand. He landed on the same level as the beds, grabbing a length of rope that he had seen hanging from a peg during dinner. He moved towards the beds and landed a solid punch on the face of the lighthouse keeper.

Grabbing his body and flipping him over, Samuels was

able to tie Frank's hands up before he knew what had happened. Samuels dragged him to a chair and lit two more lanterns in the room. Adams sat up in his bed, rubbing his head.

"What'd you go and do this for?"

"The girl was going for the boat. I had no choice."

"Damnit. What about Flynn?"

Samuels swung the free lantern over in the direction of the wounded man, his immobile face and ebbing chest visible in the golden glow.

"The girl. Where is she now?" Adams asked.

"Running back up here, I guess."

The three awake men turned to hear Greta rack the door open and make her way upstairs, taking two or three stairs at a time. She realized too late that it hadn't been a coincidence that the lamp had gone out. Samuels pointed to one of the chairs and she complied. He and Adams now each held one of the lanterns.

"So, who are you all? Where are you from?" Greta asked bitterly.

"A long way away," Samuels replied. "But we're just the landing party."

"Who's that man in the boat? He looks just like Flynn there."

"He's Flynn, too. *A* Flynn, I guess."

Greta stared, puzzled. "What is it that you want from us? You're fighting for them? Kill us and be done with it if that's what you want."

"We don't want to kill you. We want what's not available where we come from. We want your weapons, your technology."

"There's nothing here. Go find a base, this is just a lighthouse!" Greta yelled, pleading with her eyes for the men to go.

Blood dripped from Frank's mouth, maroon rivulets that splattered onto the floor. "Doubles. You crossed over."

Samuels nodded. Frank spit a mouthful of blood onto the ground. "If you had landed a dozen or so miles down the coast, you would have landed at Inchcape, a truly terrible place."

"Yeah?" Samuels pushed.

Greta looked at Frank questioningly.

“To here from another sphere. Certainly, it wasn’t easy. But they must have a way to bring you back. So, that’s it, you just want our inventions? For a world that has done the unthinkable, that’s quite a tall order.”

“They couldn’t expect us to find too much. But you’ve got no lamp now. The boats’ll crash. We’ll clean them up and take what we want,” Adams said.

Frank studied the two men. “Where’d you get the boat? That stuff about lane-clearing and the platform hydros?”

“From the earlier crew. The one we replaced.”

“So, I’m guessing you don’t know what hydros do then?”

“No, can’t say that I do.”

“They trap atmospheric hydrogen and, well, it’s complicated. They create power, essentially.”

Samuels looked at Adams.

Frank continued. “There’s one in the basement. It’s actually running right now, powering the lighthouse. Or it was, until you smashed the lamp. Only a small one, but it should do for your mission.”

Samuels’ eyes betrayed his steel facade. He looked at Greta, her eyes focused on the floor, dejected. “Let’s go take a look at it,” he said, slapping Adams on the arm.

“Take the key on the wall,” Frank yelled. “Right there. It unlocks the door in the floor and you’ll need it to turn the machine off.”

Samuels swung the lantern over to the wall and scanned it for the key. Grabbing it, the two men made their way down the stairs, leaving their prisoners alone in the dark. Hearing the hatch in the floor open, Greta turned to Frank.

“When they turn that switch...” She trailed off.

“They were going to kill us, just like that double.”

“Do you think it will destroy the lighthouse?”

Frank didn’t reply.

Flynn had woken and heard the two men. He tried to yell, but his parched throat stopped his voice. He positioned himself on the edge of the bed, his blood-soaked bandages catching on the

bed and tearing off. He winced and stood up, moving towards the door. Bumping into a chair in the now-darkened room, he tumbled to the ground, the pain surging from his leg up to his brain. Greta could hear the flesh tear in the darkness. Blood seeped out of the wound as the man whimpered on the floor.

Greta heard the hatch close as both of the men climbed down the ladder into the sunken chamber. She could make out a few faint shapes in the room as the feeble moonlight and lightning strikes carried stray light. She thought she saw Frank staring ahead, accepting his choice.

The machine started up as the key was inserted and turned. A low, distant rumble began in the foundation of the building. It won't be long, Greta thought. She looked at Frank and could just barely make out his head hanging down in the darkness. The rumbling grew louder and more violent. Greta closed her eyes.

A brilliant white light shot out of the basement room, making its way through the cracks in the floorboards. Pure, cleansing light that Greta could see even through her eyelids. The two men were surely a mass of particles now, left to collide and separate a million times before the machine would draw them in.

Greta felt pity for them as the machine rumbled. There was no way they knew how it worked, where to stand, how to align it. Frank had been right. There was only one choice.

The rumbling began to die down, the dead man's switch activated. The lighthouse was still standing. Greta opened her eyes, sweat pouring from her brow.

Frank had gotten his hands out of the ropes and was undoing the ones around his feet. Getting up, he untied Greta and moved to one of the cabinets for a spare lantern. He handed it to her and she took to the basement to see what had happened.

Frank lit a candle. He walked over and leaned down to Flynn, still lying on the floor, harsh flashes of pain surging through his body. He got on his knees and put his mouth to Flynn's ear. "You shouldn't feel too bad. I didn't know what the hydros did when I crossed over, either."

Committed to the Deep

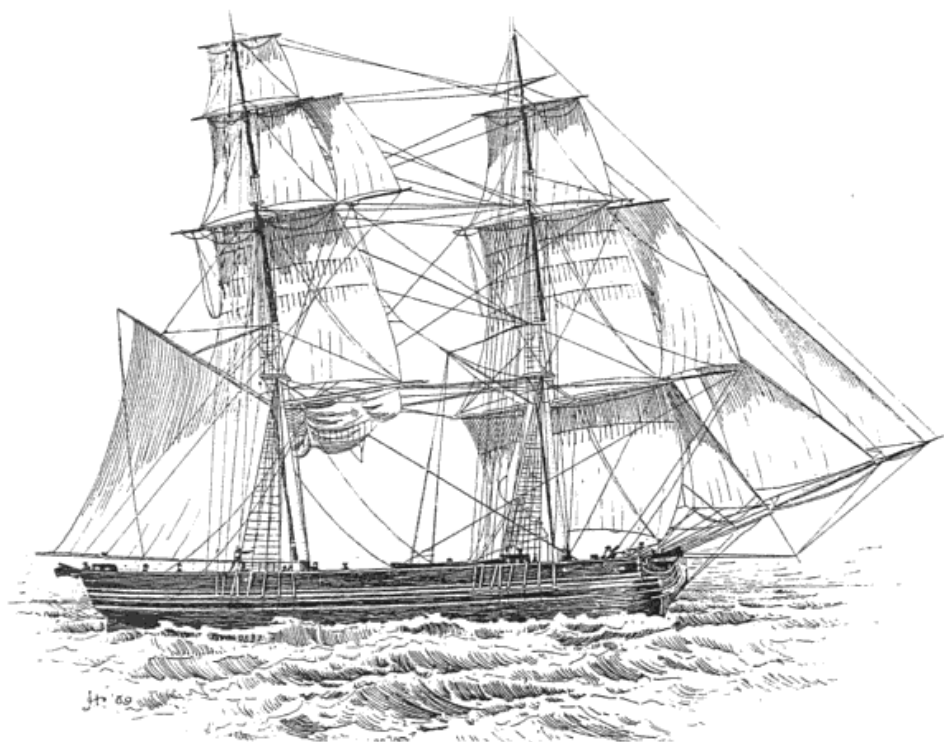
They were upon us before we could rally the men from the holds. Donovan spotted them first from upon his perch, yet he had barely called down before the thunderous sound of their wings roused us all from the top deck. The dogs took up the cry before any of the men had even turned their heads. In the span of a breath, they were there, defying all of nature's controls. Great beasts, larger than elephants, swarming around our pathetic ship, their bodies a mysterious substance, hard, yet translucent like the stalk of a plant. Our rifles struck their forms, tearing the vitreous flesh, but failed to slow the prodigious foes.

The captain had yelled to attention, calling forth men from the cabins, to no avail. The monsters swept huge swaths of crewmen from the deck, flaying and dismembering the Scots and Englishmen, the Germans and Danes. I had grabbed an oar from the small whaling boat and ran not three paces before one had landed in front of me.

The monster was surely six men high if he was a foot. I could see the moisture then from its skin, every surface of the vile thing glistening in the high sun. Its hard frame underneath, bulging and recessing randomly beneath the pellucid hide, was unlike anything I had witnessed in my time on Earth. Was this creature from our world?

It drew back a yellow and green arm, gnarled and torn from a perilous life, an appendage at the end moving disgustingly and shaped unlike anything I had ever seen. The exotic form of the hellion prevents a better description, sadly. Ducking under a boom, I ran as the beast tore into the wooden frame of the ship, showering splinters and spars across the deck. I dove for a passageway and pulled myself in.

The younger sailors were down in the cabins, scared, crying. I had no time to comfort them, running towards my room.



BRIG "CLAIRE JACKSON" 273 TONS
Built at Holt Yard, McGillicuddy Landing, in 1834, by C. Landon Wright & Sons

I threw open the lid of my chest, pulling out the fragile daguerreotype of Lorelai and my pistol before running back to the deck.

It was worse than I had left it, bodies and debris strewn about topside. Men whose only allegiance in their breast was to their homes and families, now cast out from this world a thousand miles away. One of the titans made a swoop around the outside of the ship towards me as I moved to the bowsprit, but my pistol kept him at bay.

I scanned the deck, taking in the chaos. Some of the marines had managed to bring down one of the beasts and were hacking furiously at it. Like a great spider's web, the taut lines, recently switched from hemp to the stronger manila, swallowed up another of the beasts. It wailed as a second legion of men sprang up to dismember it.

It seemed then that the tide was turning for us. It was clear that a fog of confusion settled on the beasts at losing two of their brothers. From where I was standing, I could see that Huxley had cut the tackles and gained control of the cannon, breaking through its holder to spin it to the interior of the ship. Cobb was running towards him with powder and together they loaded the massive gun.

I made my way through the destruction in an attempt to get near one of the other cannons under the mizzenmast. Another of the leviathans landed in front of me, rocking the boat as it hit the deck. It stood there, staring at me with vaguely Earth-like eyes. I began to feel sick and my head spun as I was frozen in place. Others might think a mist or poison subdued me, but I know that it was an otherworldly force or aura that was exuded, purely, from the body of the damned thing. One of the dogs began to attack the creature and I felt its hold on me lessen, but the effect of it was already achieved.

My mind became cloudy as I struggled to stand, the monster already gone as cannonballs began to tear through the sky. The drove began withdrawing in a cloud as others of their kind fell into the sea along with the masts and sails. The men began to huzzah as the ship was cleared of the foreign colossi.

I was on the ground by that point, unable to move, but alas! my poor eyes continued to work. The men spoke of disposing of anything infected by the creatures and I knew my fate was sealed. I watched them gather my body up, along with Hughes, Jergens, various of the marines. I struggled to move my mouth, to make any sound at all, to no avail.

I could see Ashby's arm as he carried me, his corded muscles covered in blood and the monsters' viscera, the dark black ink of his Otahetian tattoos shimmering through. O' Tahiti! We should have stayed. Lord, I could have gone back to Lorelai later in the season. Did I shoot the albatross? No!

He paused at the edge of the deck, my body strung partially over the hull. It was no use. My mind could feel the drop, the few seconds before the water would hit, but I couldn't feel the piercing cold of these murky depths. Yet I heard the dogs. The dogs were still barking. The dogs never stopped barking...

One Possible Center of the Universe

The train pulled in to the station and the man stepped off with only a slight idea of what he had to accomplish that afternoon. It had been some time since he'd been to the town, but surprisingly little had changed. There were places to go, to be sure, but this was just a general vacation of assaying and reconnoitering. The man felt some reluctance at taking part in creating a map, but that was the way the business was now.

The old catchers knew the pattern instinctively. A spiral starting at the coast, down through the mountains, around into the plains, through to the valleys. Well, roughly that route. The new catchers couldn't feel it the way the old ones did. The maps had come to fill that need.

There would be rivals watching him, studying him. The man knew this from his apprenticeship doing the same thing to the competition. It was difficult to get around when on the hunt without a spyglass or two tracking a newcomer across the valley floor.

Noticing his shoe was untied, the man bent over to knot it. The cobblestones here were worn to a smooth polish. Harvest time had come and gone and it was getting colder in the valley. It would be much easier to map the district when the plants died back, although the paths would become quite a mess. At least the food would be better.

Taking a seat on the low stone wall of the bridge into town, the man opened his bag, moving aside the weights and plumb lines, the aldiade and charts, finally pulling out the small journal. He sat for a moment, fingering the softness of the worn, dyed leather as the brook gurgled behind and beneath him. The hills to his left and right, rising up into the blue sky, were golden and burnt orange.

Pulling a pencil from the breast pocket of his jacket, the

man opened the small book. He took care to remove the loose newspaper clippings and encyclopedia entries so they would not fall into the water. He slid them under his leg, the warm tucked wool pushing into his skin.

He wrote forcefully, taking note of the patterns of the land, unseen lay lines passed down through generations of catchers. There was one goal, he knew. He wrote “H. Barnetti,” underlined it, and closed the book.

There were others to fool the new tradesman, certainly. *Orientalis, regis, hewitti, natalensis, rosei, depressa, purcelli.* Only *Barnetti* would do. All the real catchers knew that.

Reaching into the bag, he pulled out a collapsible pole topped with a brass sight, polished to an austere shine. Running it into the ground, he took out a photobook. Glancing back and forth at the photographs and through the eyepiece, he realized the town had shifted. Too far and too soon for the town’s good, he thought. This was going to be much more difficult when he returned officially.

The man rubbed his temples, attempting to stop the headache working its way up from his spine. Leaving the pole but removing the eyepiece, the man packed up his bag and brushed off his suit. He looked down the main street of the town at the women carrying loads of laundry, baskets of food; the men driving their horses, glancing down at their watches, pointing up at the sky. The day was almost done as the crisp air settled.

The man crossed the street in front of the sagardotegia. He feared having to go in. After being away for so long, he knew the people would not embrace him. One could leave, but rarely was one allowed to come back.

The small cluster of houses and buildings he stood within creaked under the weight of traditionalism. Sons followed fathers, daughters followed mothers. Unbroken chains of birthright. The lure of wild places was far from the minds of the town’s inhabitants.

Pushing open the door, the smells of the hall overtook the man. Smoke, oak, apples, onions. A thick blend of the dialects of the outside catchers and the local farmers rose up from every

corner of the room. Arguments on time always had their place over glasses of cider.

“Ah ha! But what I’m saying is tha’ it coul’ fold over on isself and we coul’ end up back where we started. Iss a possibility, right? Surely, you’ll gi’ me that, no?”

“We’ve punched as many holes in it as there are apples in the valley. I say no.”

“Ay, wait ‘til the expedition comes back. We’ll see then.”

“We’ll be dead before they get back.”

“Or mayb’ they could come back ‘fore we were even born! Ah ha!”

The man pushed his way to the bar and pulled out a stool, placing his bag on the empty one next to him. He knew she was there. He could see the worn gingham through the maze of casks behind the counter.

There had been days when that pattern would have made him smile, days of waning summer sunshine, tracing the pattern with his fingers.

She turned around, reaching for a tray. He turned his stare into a casual glance, catching her eyes. She threw her arms down, staring for a second. The din of the bar moved into the background.

She walked over, her eyes giving away her excitement.

“You’ve been away too long,” she said, grabbing his hands in her own.

“I have and I’m sorry.”

“Why didn’t you ever write?”

“It was difficult. The government was strict about those sorts of things.”

“So you’re back? For good?”

He looked down at the bar, distancing himself from her gaze. “No, this is just a bit of work I have to do. I’m working for a small firm now.”

She turned back towards her father, an imposing man in any environment, his fieldworked muscles visible underneath his flannel shirt. She looked at him and signalled to the man. Her father nodded begrudgingly, knowing what had happened before

but understanding that it was futile to interrupt.

Grabbing two mugs of cider, she grabbed his hand and led him towards a corner table to catch up.

They spoke for hours over plate after plate of food. The regulars shuffled out, still arguing, pulling their sweaters and jackets tight against the front of early autumn. A man lingered at the threshold to stare at her before she waved him off.

“You ever think of coming back?”

“Often, yes. But it’s gone. Once you see the other places, you’ll know. So alike, but so different...”

“My life is here. My family is here.”

“I understand. We all make choices. Sometimes they’re made for us.”

She stared at him, rubbing her fingers against the deep grain in the table.

“Come with me. I have something to show you.”

Grabbing his hand, she led him past the tables, still covered in glasses and plates, to the kitchen door. She pushed it open. He could remember sneaking in here late at night with her, away from the main house. Away from her parents.

She pushed open another door to the right of the massive hearth set into the wall. He knew there was a creek back here somewhere. The building actually straddled it, water entering below the middle of the north end of the house and exiting on the south side. There was enough room under the house to crouch over if you absolutely had to hide.

They entered the storage room and she handed the lantern to him. Bending over, she pulled up several floor boards nailed together that had acted as a door. She laid on her belly, sliding over against the wall to give him enough room to lay down beside her.

“Come,” she said, grabbing his hand.

Placing the lantern at the lip of the opening, the man got to his knees and slid them back as he lowered himself to the wood floor.

“Take the lantern,” she said, motioning towards it. “Lower it in.”

He did, cutting a swath of gold through the opening. He pulled himself farther in along with it, allowing his eyes to adjust. He gasped.

“*Barnett’s*.” She watched his face as his eyes followed the swinging lantern. There were dozens, maybe hundreds of the small amphibians at the dip of the creek, their mottled bodies slowly undulating. They were almost still, but not quite, their heads tucked into the water’s edge.

He looked at her quizzically.

“It’s the runnings. From the cider.”

The man watched their small bodies. This many ghost frogs would be worth fortunes in the cities. He could see the small glands on their backs, just above their left shoulders, slowly producing a dull yellow fluid that could slow down entropy and turn childhood dreams into centuries-long expeditions.

“This is too beautiful. I can’t tell them about this.”

She nodded. “They’re for you if you want them.”

“I could move back with only a handful of these.”

“Perhaps you should.”

They watched in silence. He smiled to himself.

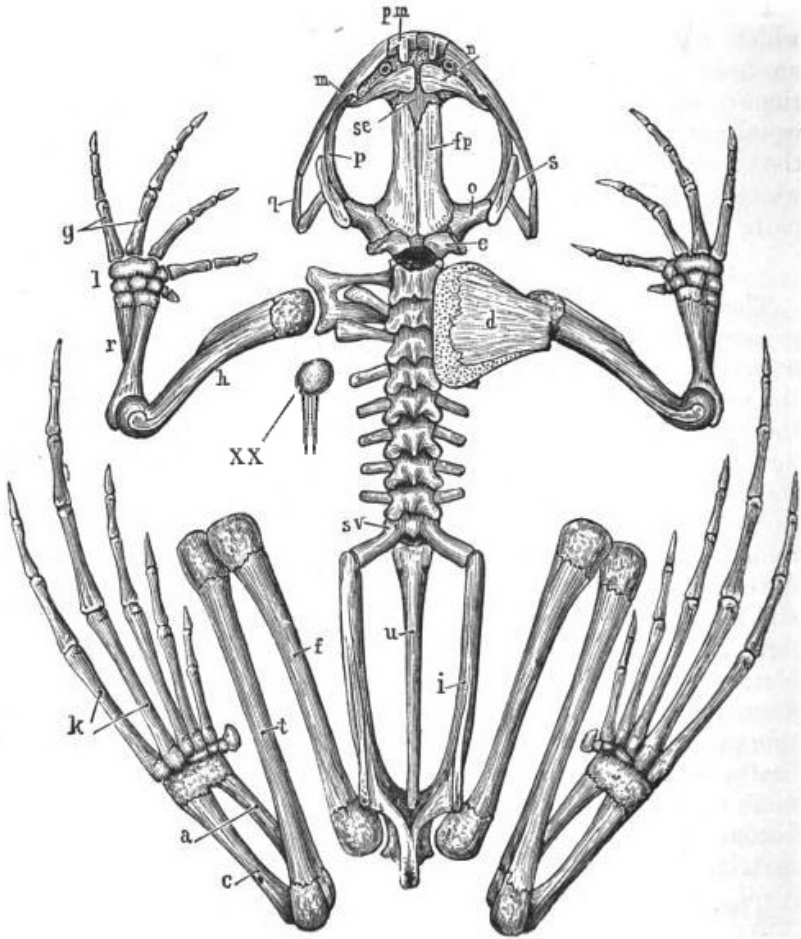
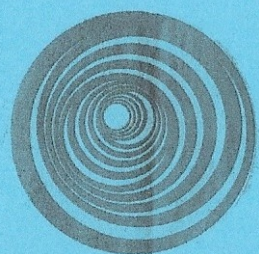


Fig. 10. HELEOPHYRNE BARNETTI



BETA DECAY HOUSE