

.....And I feel Fine.

(A Tale from The Hanged Man Club)

They were a quiet bunch these days, The Hanged Man Club. The membership used to number into the hundreds before (they whisper the words, for fear of remembering too much) The Fall. The club itself sat at the exact address that it always had, which was a comfort in itself: Right at the end, just past the last light. The door was as secure as ever. The furnishings as luxurious as those inside could afford (and, therefore, extremely luxurious indeed). Several (very) carefully chosen doormen watched attentively at the portico, guarding as if the World itself depended on it. Which of course, in a manner of speaking.....

Jackson wandered in and ordered a gin and tonic, Sam wasn't too bothered about work tomorrow (even though, by definition, it would be her first day), so she pulled a bottle of vodka from under her coat tails and topped up a half empty cherry cola that appeared to have been left on the bar. The bartender gave her the look of general disapproval, but he owed her money, and therefore scarpered fairly quickly to serve someone else at the other end. At this point the thousand year old Buddhist nun in the corner of the room (the one in the red cloak, not the one in the blue trouser suit) imploded.

Sam finished off her vodka and cola. "I told you we should have got the later tram!"

Jackson looked at his shoes nodding, realising that he'd worn odd ones again, "Yep, you did."

Calumny Jacobson pushed his way in through the fire escape and joined them at the bar. His coat was soaking wet and the broken umbrella pooled water onto the floor as he struggled to get up onto the high stool. He brushed his greying hair out of his eyes and nodded to the

others. The bartender pushed a martini forward. Calumny Jacobson riffled through his various pockets with a lessening degree of effort until Sam finally sighed and paid for the drink. Some things never changed.

“Thanks. Has the game started yet?” Several of the club staff had begun clearing away the remnants of the nun and Callumny Jacobson waved at them as they swept and mopped.

Sam ordered another cherry cola with that weird finger pointing up and down thing that bartenders seem to be able to interpret perfectly well every time. “Not yet. The Absurd has only just arrived. Her Train was late apparently.”

Jackson flicked a piece of dried chicken off his lapel and examined the end of his finger with growing curiosity. “Lincoln and The Burmondsea Collective arrived quite early, which may be a good sign.”

Calumny grinned as he sipped his first drink of the hour. “Indeed my boy, it may. But let us not presume too much, for the game is long and the stakes are the highest possible. Talking of Steaks, I’m starving.” Callumny Jacobson spun around and addressed the other members of the club who were in the bar for this most auspicious of evenings.

“Does any one of you useless ingrates happen to have a steak sandwich about their person?”

Each one of the other club members suddenly became engrossed in their own conversations, or found a massively interesting article in the newspaper they were pretending to read. Each had, on at least one former occasion, been subjected to Callumny Jacobson’s quests for food, money, lodgings, or Presidential nominations. The list went on and on. No one came off the better in these things, saving Callumny Jacobson himself of course.

Jackson picked up his hat from the floor and looked inside it. “Here you go” He pulled a small turquoise paper bag from the hat and handed it to the small dripping man.

Sam chuckled “That’s a skill that is J. You should go far with that”

“I once went all the way to Pickerninnie. I didn’t like it.” Jackson ordered another Gin and Tonic.

Callumny Jacobson picked a small morsel of steak from his teeth (at least, he now considered them his. He had won them fair and square after all). “We might as well get comfortable, that game in there is going to take a while.” He nodded towards the oak double doors at the other end of the bar, the doors which led either to the Inner Sanctum of the Gaming Room or the toilets, depending on which aspect of the Chinese calendar it happened to be. “Who’s dealing, do we know?”

Sam had given up all pretence of hiding the vodka and filled her cherry cola to the top. “Gilgamesh I think.”

“Jeese, this is going to take forever. Which is the whole point I suppose.” Callumny Jacobson jumped down from the high stool and handed the empty turquoise paper bag back to Jackson, who then folded it carefully and placed it back inside his hat.

“I’m going to get some shut eye. Wake me when anything interesting or debauched occurs.”

With that Callumny Jacobson rolled up his wet coat and headed off into the billiards room, where he ensconced himself beneath the table and began to snore lightly. The two Prussian officers ignored him and carried on their game.

Jackson pulled a small battered cardboard box from inside his hat and waved it in front of Sam’s face.

“Scrabble?”

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“Cunnilingus” said Callumny Jacobson, which made Sam jump slightly. “On the triple word score.”

“Thanks, I’d spotted it.” She put the letters down and smiled at Jackson triumphantly.

“How long was I asleep?” Callumny Jacobson stretched to his full height of four feet and seven centimetres and yawned.

Jackson started to clear the board away, carefully scooping the letter tiles into the turquoise velvet bag.

“About half a summer’s width and twice as long as usual” The box slid neatly back into his hat.

“Really? Wow, that’s quite good for me!” Callumny Jacobson brushed his lush ginger hair out of his eyes and nodded to the door. “Any word?”

Sam wandered back from chatting to the Venusian string quartet that had arrived about ten moments earlier.

“Oh, hello. Word is that the cards were getting nowhere, so they’ve elected to try tag team Connect Four. It’s worth a go.”

Callumny Jacobson stroked his beard (which seemed to be a new addition. He thought he may keep it). “Anything’s better than existential croquette. Do you remember that one! Jeese, we were rectifying that bugger for a long time!”

Jackson smiled (which for him, constituted full on hilarity). “Don’t remind me. It took me considerably longer than three score and ten to work my way back to the club.”

Sam's eyes widened, "Gosh yes! Didn't you get married to that industrial complex on the way?"

Jackson stood up to make his way back to the bar, "I said don't remind me. Gin and Tonic, cherry cola and a Martini please mate."

Callumny Jacobson pushed himself into the comfort of the big leather armchair. His eyes scanned the room wistfully. "I love this place."

Sam looked up too. "Has it always looked like this? I can't remember."

"I have a faint recollection that an earlier rendition had more fountains and, if memory serves me, a Gnu. But it has been pretty much like this since Sisyphus bought it from Francis Bacon. It was spun back and has dutifully served its purpose ever since. Though they redecorate every now and again"

Sam curled her arms around her knees "I like the library best, it seems to go on forever"

"That's an optical illusion; the end wall fell off due to subsidence during The Interregnum of Crows"

"Oh. It looks good though."

"My favourite is the Cacophony Lawn. Especially just after, you know, just after they've decided and it's all started. The Lawn is amazing in those first moments. Like it's never existed before!"

"Well, technically it hasn't"

"You know what I mean!"

Sam smiled and nodded.

Callumny Jacobson grinned "I wish I could stay in the Club forever"

“Only because you never pay for your drink or food in here!”

“Samantha, how could you say such outrageous things? True, but very harsh my lady!”

Sam chuckled, “Anyway, you can’t stay here. It doesn’t actually hold its place outside of this moment does it?”

“You always tread on my dreams madam. Ah, thank you Jackson. Good Man”

Jackson sat in the other chair and sipped his drink. “The Bartender seems to think this could be a quick one. They were all in midnight before last for a preliminary meet up and thrashed out most of the details beforehand.”

“Shoddy behaviour!” Callumny Jacobson banged his fist on the walnut table, spilling absolutely none of his martini whatsoever. “In my days at the top table, we went in cold and took whatever came out. Professionalism that is!”

Jackson mopped up his Gin and tonic with a turquoise beach towel out of his hat. “Indeed Sir you did and the rest of us had to sort it out later! I mean, six days for the whole thing to be up and running and then one day’s rest? Everything fully formed and off! That was a great one that was!”

Sam emptied the last dregs of the vodka into her glass and threw the bottle into the fire. “And what about the one where we were all water dwelling mammals? No opposable thumbs! Nightmare!”

Callumny Jacobson held up his hands in supplication “Fair points, my friends, fair points indeed. Let us hope this next one will be a bit of a rest. I know the last one was a bit, well...”

All three of them went quiet for a moment, each lost in thought. Jackson stared into the flames of the fire. “It was difficult for every one of us. Have you noticed how few made it back to the Club?”

Sam touched his hand “Let’s talk about something else. Who fancies a bite to eat?” She waved to one of the stewards who glided over and produced three menus from beneath his apron. “Thank you”.

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“How can you possibly eat monkfish? It’s endangered|!” Sam wiped sauce from the side of her mouth.

“Actually everything’s endangered.” Jackson waved his fork to encompass the whole table full of food.

Callumny Jacobson nodded. “Different game once the big wigs have finished the...”

He was broken off by the sound of a great bell chiming. It seemed to be coming from outside of the Club, and from deep within it at the same time.

Jackson stood and placed his small turquoise cloth cap on his head. “Well, here we go.”

“Ah, Old Bess! I never tire of hearing her call to arms.” Callumny Jacobson stood and dropped his napkin onto his plate. He turned and addressed the whole room. Many of the members were already standing, putting on coats, buckling on helmets. Several were stretching, ready to begin.

“Ladies, Gentlemen! Let us go from this place, to another place!”

Some clapped and cheered. Many glanced at each other with trepidation. Somewhere near the back a penny whistle started up a tune and the whole group headed for the front door of

The Hanged Man Club. Callumny Jacobson marched at the front. His damp, broken umbrella held aloft.

Jackson and Sam walked behind him. One of the (very) carefully chosen doormen opened the great front doors and light poured in. Sam shielded her eyes and took Jackson's arm in hers.

"It's bright out there now"

Callumny Jacobson turned and with a wink pushed through the doors,

"Well my Lady, as they say 'Morning has broken...'"

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