

Anephia

A Tale of Two Animals

Inis Fairkryn

Anephia

Inis Fairkryn was born in the cloud at some unknown date and location that defy biographical efforts. He is beloved throughout the imperial empire of Anephia for his homonymous series and for providing a historical record (or a hysterical distortion, according to his detractors) of the Second Age, aka cloud 2.0.

Although every person, agent, animal and beast in the cloud is familiar with the author, very little else is known about him. According to some accounts, he is a professor or researcher of Computer Circuses (or Circuits or Circles or who knows what). Others have pointed out a youthful predisposition and obsessive tendencies toward wordplay and misdirection. A young critic stated that the author was "simply a kid playing games" but he also noticed the "great ocean of truth that lay undiscovered beyond the playground". A small number of erudite scholars have claimed the Anephia series to be a pillar of support for fundamental principles and freedoms in human culture, science, art, and everything that matters; but the claim has been broadly dismissed as "too broad".

Inis Fairkryn never joined the debate but relocated to Anephia and challenged Death to a game of wits. The outcome remains unknown to this day but some fear the worst. Yet, for all beings and creatures in the cloud, he is and will remain alive forever -- or, at least, as long as the cloud persists.

Acknowledgment

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pArt A

Prologue

"A chimera in my brain," the old man thought to himself. "A phantom of disease that ails me every night like a dreadful nightmare. Does it feed on my bones or my thoughts? I wish I could make this pain go away."

He could hardly remember how long he had been on his sick bed. Sometimes, it felt as though the bed was part of his body -- an undesired and unwelcome part. If only he could get rid of it. He had lost hope. He was a terminal patient. He understood the term well. For a long time, he had lived and felt and suffered its meaning. The night sweats and the vomiting mornings, the aching joints and the headaches, the bleeding and the hoarseness, he knew them all too well. He did not wish to know any more. He did not wish to remember.

Yet, he could clearly remember the time when life was more generous, lavish like a meadow in the spring, resplendent with blooming flowers, and he was standing upon lofty slopes with symbols, sonnets and vibrations, traveling with winds and waves, life was a poem, a concord of happy voices, so many dreams and hopes, so many pleasant memories, until disaster struck--

He suddenly felt cold. He turned. He saw the phantom next to his bed. He shook his head.

The phantom was grey and silent.

"Why?" he asked. "Why did she die? Why does anyone have to die?"

"They don't have to," the phantom replied, his voice hard and frigid, inorganic. "But they always do."

"Why?"

"The world is cruel".

"The world is beautiful," the old man rejoined with force. Yet, he could not sustain force in his weakened body. He fell back, aching and coughing sorely.

"You are dying, and death is cruel."

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He was silent except for the rattle in his chest. He sighed heavily.

"Death is the recycling of the universe."

A grim ghost with a grim sense of humor, he mocked.

"Goodbye cruel, recycling world!"

"Death is necessary."

The old man shook his head again. "Death is an awful waste!"

He paused for a moment as if to collect his thoughts. "And if it must be, if that is the rule and the law and the recycling, or whatever you call it, when I am dying, when anybody is dying, it should be some spectacular event, funny and heroic at the same time. It should signify something, tell us something, set an example, to make us better, so we will be good to each other and spend more time with our loved ones and with art and science and beauty and everything that matters. It has to be something good. We are life. We are art. We are the actors and the audience, too. We are happiness and laughter. Death cannot come to us gnawing like a vermin!"

"Death is the worm that eats the big old tree," the phantom countered. "It always comes gnawing like a vermin. The rest is fiction."

The old man compressed his lips to silence, and not a breath escaped. He turned on his other side. He had lost an arm in his frightful fight -- with the vermin of disease. He struggled with his other hand. His legs were too numb and too heavy to move. His bones ached, his whole body ached, and as he lay on his split back, looking up at the gray frosted ceiling -- the stalactitic roof of his imaginary adventure cave -- he knew with the certainty of the inevitable winter at the end of a long, blithe summer that his own end was near. The solstice was long gone and the rest was, indeed, fiction.

Yet, he then realized that reality was nothing more (or less) than a forced compromise; and he resolved against it, against the impending nausea, against the shackles of suffering and sickness, and against everything that darkened his azure skies. There could be no chimeras, phantoms, or grim recyclers in his world, their bitterness and misery was an insult to existence. He could not let the vermin gnaw away at his memories. He could not permit them in his precious forests and trails. He could not allow them in his life.

"Life has four seasons," he once said to his young grandson, Russell. "It starts with the age of innocence, which is the first season of all life, full of promise and excitement. Then life

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continues with the season of learning, which seems long and burdensome sometimes but it is rather the opposite. Next comes the season of responsibilities. The trees bear fruit and the leaves begin to yellow. It is the third season, the autumn of life."

"What is the fourth season?" Russell impatiently asked when his grandfather paused. He was so eager to learn -- and grow up to be a man of all seasons.

The fourth was the cold winter, the season of suffering; but he would not describe it as such to his grandson.

"The fourth is the season of patience," he said...

The boy hurried into the large bedroom now, panting from running up the stairs, his cheeks flushed. His voice echoed in the room like a cheerful birdsong.

"How are you feeling grandpa?"

"I've taken my medicine," the old man replied.

The boy sat next to the bed. "Tell me a story grandpa. Please!"

"Have you finished your homework?"

"I've also finished your book!"

The old man simulated disbelief. "Really?" (And testily) "What's a bug?"

"A bug," replied Russell, "or a glitch, is an error in software or hardware that can make a computing machine to malfunction."

"Good. What do you know about intelligent agents?"

"Intelligent agents are computational systems that learn and adapt. They can make choices and take actions without human assistance. They can communicate. They can reflect upon themselves. They can perform tasks. They can set and achieve goals." Russell raised his hands triumphantly. "Agents can do things!"

Amazed the old man was that his grandson had grown up so quickly and saddened that time had flown by as fast. "I see you've been studying, young man," he said.

"I always study grandpa. I have read all the books you gave me. I have asked mom to buy me more!"

The grandfather felt proud of his grandson; but he also felt a sudden, stabbing pain in his stomach and closed his eyes.

"What's wrong grandpa? Are you feeling all right?"

He would not let the boy know. There was no point in that -- or in grief. There would never be. He pretended he was tired.

"But not too much?"

"Never."

"Are you feeling better now?"

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"Yes, doctor!"

Russell smiled. He pleaded for a story again.

The man turned his head slowly. He had been so fortunate, he realized. He could see it clearly in the young eyes. He could see the tender feelings in them, and the love.

"Of course," he said, "but, you know, this may be the last story I shall ever tell you."

The boy froze. He perceived the farewell and felt desperate. He did not know what to say and what to do. He hurled himself on the bed and hugged his grandfather, his head lay now on his lap. "No, grandpa, please! Please, don't!"

The grandfather was silent for a moment, surprised and moved by the reaction. He stroked the young hair gently. "I will be with you a little longer," he said.

The boy held him firmly as though to keep him from leaving - to keep him among the living.

"I shall live. I shall live in you and the stories I have told you."

He held him firmly...

"Besides, we have a story to tell now. So, if you sit up a little bit, we can begin."

Russell raised his head.

"It may seem strange and fictional at first but this is a true story. I have been waiting for years to tell you."

"What is it about?"

"It is about everything that matters."

"Is it a great story?"

"The greatest of all! It is..."

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Ingredients

Made entirely with FDA-approved organic words and recycled images. (FDA stands for Funny Dainty Art, or Furry Domestic Animals, the exact meaning has been lost.)

* Titular resemblance may suggest a preference for the faunal over the civic.

1. Once Upon a Time

Once upon a time, a wild and savage beast roamed (free of charge) and terrorized the mystic lands of the Imperial Empire of Anephia. She was known as the Mighty Tiger.

The legend had it that she was created by Chee Zen, the great master of Cheese-and-Zen. The master was also a professor of Frog-Ramming, immigrant from the far, very far, really and truly far east. (It was actually so far in the east it could have been west.) The Tiger was his great sorrow. She had become a disaster and a menace. Agents, animals, and beasts mysteriously disappeared. They were enslaved, mauled and devoured by the tiger, in no specific order. Everybody knew it. The tiger was the perpetrator, the threat, and the smoking gun too.

All animals, big or small, trembled with fear at the mere thought of such a ferocious and hungry cat; many had heard stories of horrible horrors; and all of them agreed upon one thing: not a single creature had ever crossed paths with the beast and lived to tell the tale.

Yet, one day, a little Sulphur-crested Cockatoo appeared almost out of nowhere and claimed to be the scion of a great race from the mythical regions of Pi-Land. He meant to bring justice to the world and liberate the Empire from the Mighty Beast.

Rumors spread quickly. People and animals were desperate for some new hope. However, the bird was infested with all sorts of little miseries -- bugs crawling under his white feathers -- and he seemed so small and fragile that no one took him seriously.

"If he were clean and if he were a lion," Miss Po Popo said, "he might have a chance."

"If we follow the bird," Lord Will Chatmoore argued, in a rather dismissive manner, "we will be mauled by the Tiger. And if we somehow survive, we will be infected with bugs and end up in jail."

"The bird seems to be slow and lazy," Lady Oh (Mega) Dame observed. "I am not sure about it." (The parenthesized part of her name was unpronounced and secret, exactly like this parenthesis.)

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"It's not ready for the Mine," they all agreed, Miss Po Popo hurriedly adding a note in her tablet: "Not ready for M9."

Their deliberation was thus short, their decision unanimous.

"What's M9?" asked Councilor Chin Glee who was sitting next to Miss Po Popo. He was a new member of the Beast Evasion Council and was not familiar with the various acronyms.

The Beast Evasion Council, also known as the High Council, had arranged a special session that day to address the issue of the Mighty Tiger and her devastating effects (on people, agents, animals and beasts) as well as the cockatoo's claims.

Lord Chatmoore had asked for the meeting. He was a tall bearded man who looked like a pirate, except that he was very pleasant and genial, he had no wooden legs or an eye-patch (only an iPatch on his iLullaby device), he had no injuries or scars whatsoever and, overall, he was whole and wholesome. Yet, he looked like a pirate somehow.

He stared at Lady Oh (Mega) Dame. He was supposed to mediate the discussion and manage the Council but he was a bit distracted.

The lady was a nymph leader, he was certain of it, a secret enchanting hunter, mercilessly beautiful, her hair seemed like the wings of the dove, or rather the crow, for it was black, burned by an Olympian glare, and her eyes, which were alluring crescents when she laughed or smiled, shifted shape and color sometimes, diffusing trenchant divisions. There was an entire morphing mystery in her eyes, the lord often thought, and he was not the only one.

"M9 is an encoded core-paw-rat acronym," Miss Po Popo explained, answering Councilor Glee's question. "It is for the Mine, which is an abandoned mining site and also the Mighty Tiger's hideous lair."

The Councilor was a young and handsome man, the youngest member of the High Council, and he glanced at Lord Chatmoore, who still stared at Lady Oh Dame. Miss Po Popo looked at them and then she looked at Oh Dame. And the smiling Lady looked at them, too, and they all looked at each other.

(For security reasons, and until further notice, the lady's secret alias has been removed from her name. This is a necessary precaution against unlawful and parenthetical interceptions by sneaky readers.)

"Any more questions?" asked Miss Po Popo. She was the personification of tact and punctuality, the indispensable core of scheduling and arrangement for the Council and the various

Beast Evasion issues. She was quite proud that she was always prepared and well-organized except upon unforeseeable circumstances, which, by the very nature of the Council and its members, were quite common.

Councilor Glee raised his hand. "I have a question about the Mighty Tiger's lair."

"Let's hear it," Lord Chatmoore said, finally awakening from his enchantment.

"Do they call it hideous because it is hidden?"

"They call it hideous because it is offensive to the senses and especially to sight," Miss Po Popo explained. "You can look it up in a dictionary. But it is also hidden."

"At any rate," argued Lord Chatmoore, "we cannot even hope that this cockatoo bird could possibly--"

A voice was then heard from the back of the room. "The bird is tough," said the politic Water Mage Naeron.

(Alias Drosus, also known as Actaeus, Ploemus, Nasmodemus, Hydrix, Gelux Angord, Niveus Aquaferus, Alvin Earthwater, Lochin Finmuir, Vagbjorn Havsvatten, Wilfred Wunschelrutenganger, and Beaux Eau-de-Mer Terreaux. His many names and aliases implied that he had traveled across the world, he had traveled in France for sure, he was also known with other names too, but the most secret one was quite unknown and only known by few trusted and secretive friends who were known as the Unknown. His most secret alias was Splasher.)

Naeron had just entered the conference room. He was secretly the master and creator of the little cockatoo. It was confidential information, a top-secret secret, well-kept and known only by the Unknown. He was also a member of the High Council and he was late.

"How tough can a bird be?" Councilor Glee wondered, questioning the sanity of Naeron's assertion.

"He looks like an ordinary bird to me," said Miss Po Popo.

"I assure you," the mage replied, "appearances can be misleading."

"How misleading?" Councilor Glee asked.

"Is that a Sorcerer's uniform you are wearing?" Miss Po Popo inquired.

"It looks nice on him," Lady Oh Dame remarked.

"Yes, it looks very nice, indeed," Miss Po Popo agreed, pausing for a moment to admire the fashionably attired Naeron, "but he is an Amazing Mage, not a humble sorcerer!"

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Highly regarded in his profession and as esteemed across the Imperial political landscape, adored in the Council, the Amazing Mage was their superstar. He was young and ambitious. He was talented and distinguished. Being a water mage, he was always cool, refreshing, and irresistible -- although the latter had little to do with water. He could make snowflakes dance around him and vanish at the slightest touch. He could stand under a waterfall, which would normally drench a person, without being affected at all. His dark hair and olive skin would be dry, his entire form perfectly waterproof. He commanded water. His choice of element added an aura of raw power to his elaborate personality. The High Council was well aware of it. They also knew he could be quite political and hypocritical sometimes. He was a major Hypocrite and they loved him.

"As I said," said Naeron, raising a hand with little ice shards now growing from it, "appearances can be misleading."

"We are talking about a little bird," Councilor Glee argued. "How misleading can anything possibly be?"

"Quite misleading."

"Really?"

"Yes."

The councilor quickly glanced at his colleagues as if for guidance. Then he turned to Naeron. "Do you mean like something very misleading or more like a middle-of-the-road misleading thing?"

Lady Oh Dame was not sure about it.

"I think," Lord Chatmoore suggested, "we are covered on the misleading part. We don't have to worry about that."

Glee understood that there was not enough support in the council for the issue he had raised.

"The only problem is that the bird has bugs," Naeron said.

The councilors were quiet.

"There are some glitches here and there. We must clean him up. We shall need a tub, towels, hot water, and detergent."

"How much detergent?" asked Lord Chatmoore. "That stuff is expensive, you know."

"How long will it take?" Miss Po Popo inquired writing the word M10 in her journal.

"What's M10?" asked Councilor Glee. He disliked acronyms. He detested them -- or rather he detested his evident struggle with something so simple.

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"M10 is an encrypted acronym for Mountain." Miss Po Popo turned to Naeron: "How long will it take? We are now in Mountain season."

"Well, it may take some time," Naeron admitted.

"Two or three weeks?" Miss Po Popo asked eagerly.

"Time is time," replied Naeron. "It is the most resilient thing in the universe. We can't get around that."

"I don't want to put something down that--" Miss Po Popo paused. "The Elders might look at it and start asking questions."

"We will carefully examine the questions of the Elders and take all necessary actions to answer them, eventually," Naeron insinuated.

"You don't mean that--"

"The operation would be on a need-to-know basis. The Elders have other obligations and needs right now."

The councilors exclaimed choreographically. They glanced at each other. They whispered. They fretted. Suspicion and doubts had emerged and soon the whole council was in disarray.

"I don't know -- maybe we shouldn't--"

"We can't do that."

"Bug trouble is big trouble."

"Big bug trouble!"

"I don't want to be part of this."

"Me neither."

"I wasn't here."

"I didn't hear a thing."

"I am vegetarian!"

Seeing that the Beast Evasion Council was indeed in disarray, Naeron resorted to formality. "Ladies and Gentlemen of the Council," he said, "I hereby request your undivided attention."

His formality produced the desired effect. The Council was quiet. He used words he had heard before; and he channeled the sneer.

"This is our duty and our obligation to national security and imperial prosperity. We must focus on the challenges ahead, free of the usual political distractions. We must operate in utmost secrecy. There is no alternative. It is going to be a covert 007 operation from a secret and undisclosed location."

"Yes, of course," Lord Chatmoore agreed, "but how are you going to get all that detergent?"

"We shall make a Detergent Request in order to clean the dark and dirty corners of the Empire. We'll use the code name

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ARCADE, standing for Absolute and Really Clean Anephia Detergent Emergency."

"That is a nice code name," Lady Oh Dame grinned, "but I am not sure about such a request."

Naeron was not sure either, but he could not let doubt spread further in the Council. He approached Lady Oh Dame and talked softly: "Dear Lady, you know I have always admired your elegance and your eloquence. Your thoughts and your words always strike me as profound and extraordinary. But this matter requires our full attention and a certain level of..."

Thus he continued, while there was more discussion and evaded questions, but despite his efforts and his many polished arguments, the High Council, aware of the higher risk and consequences of such a DDO (Daring Detergent Operation), kept opposing the idea -- until Zee Chen, the high priest of Chee Zen, rumored to be the very embodiment of the Master himself, spoke. He was the oldest member of the Council and he had been quiet during the entire meeting, sitting in his chair seemingly lost in meditation. Perhaps his very presence had been forgotten by the others, but his words were received with great attention and respect.

"The Mighty Tiger," the priest said, "has been a menace to the land from the outset. We have discussed the issue so many times. We face the same tiger problem every day!"

Miss Po Popo added another entry to her notes (RTM issues daily) and she explained: "RTM is an acronym for Real Tiger Menace."

Lady Oh Dame smiled. She thought it was MTR reversed.

"What's MTR?" inquired Councilor Glee.

"It means Mighty Tiger Roaming."

"No, that's obsolete."

"It is actually deprecated," said Lord Chatmoore.

"Yes," Miss Po Popo agreed. "Besides, the Menace thing makes more sense."

"How does it make more sense?" Councilor Glee asked.

"It doesn't matter if a tiger is Roaming as long as she is not a Menace."

"The Tiger is a Menace, indeed," the high priest added annoyed by the prolonged interruption. "We can't go on like this discussing acronyms and ignoring the urgency of our situation and the very facts before us. We have to do something. Right now, we don't have many options. I say we give the bird a chance."

Zee Chen's speech had a profound effect on the Council. No one expected him to endorse another animal, let alone a little bird, against a beast that was rumored to be the creation of his own great master. Apparently, he found their situation quite desperate.

Miss Po Popo added yet another note: "Holly support for Cockatoo."

Councilor Glee raised his hand. "Is this cockatoo a tame and faithful animal like a dog for example?"

Naeron tried to evade the question. "The cockatoo is a bird."

"I see. But is the cockatoo, which is a bird, a tame and faithful animal like a dog?"

"Are you making a comparison between birds and dogs?"

"No, no. My question is whether this cockatoo, which is a bird, which has nothing to do with dogs, is a tame and faithful animal *like* a dog."

"I think you are stereotyping birds."

"We can't use stereotypes," Miss Po Popo said quickly. "Nor can we use politically incorrect statements or derogatory terms. Those might generate some undue and unwelcomed attention."

She was quite knowledgeable on the subject. She could name every part of a long core-paw-rat curriculum. She had a resume full of core competencies and paw skills. She understood management and politics. She was even familiar with such arcane and recondite terms as advertisification, componentization, and searchification. Yet, she often felt that she had spent too much time in the core-paw-rat world and she was altogether tired of paws and rats. She had never liked the rats on the first place. It was only a career path. She had convinced herself with proverbial exemplification: the cat would eat fish, but would not wet her feet. She was no cat for sure. If she were, she would have killed the rodents -- and perhaps the young councilor as well!

"If I may jump into this," said Lord Chatmoore, jumping into the discussion, "I think we have many issues here. First, there is the issue of tameness of birds and the issue of tameness of dogs. Those are two separate issues. Then there is the issue of faithfulness of birds and the faithfulness of dogs. Those are separate as well. Finally, there is the issue of whether we can compare birds with dogs, and the issues of whether we can compare the tameness and the faithfulness of birds with that of dogs. So, we have seven different issues total."

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"Is that really seven issues?" said Councilor Glee, gleefully. "I think it may be six."

Naeron looked around the room. It was a mystery to him. Intelligent and educated people could not possibly form such an incompetent congress. Perhaps it was special circumstances, special councilors, or special interests. "It doesn't matter," he argued. "It is a thorough analysis anyway. I would only add one more issue: perhaps we're trying to address too many issues at the same time."

"Exactly," Lord Chatmoore agreed. "We should address them separately."

"May I suggest that we take this off-line?" Miss Po Popo suggested.

Naeron was more than glad to accept but Glee would not let the topic rest so easily.

"My concern is whether we can trust this bird cockatoo at all."

Lady Oh Dame concurred. She was not sure about it.

Naeron, then, saw opportunity in the very argument. "Should I assume that the High Council would endorse the Cockatoo if he is indeed a trustworthy bird?"

"That's a good one!" Miss Po Popo said scribbling a quick note in her tablet. "It is consistent with core-paw-rat values and competencies to use only trustworthy animals."

"Is the Cockatoo trustworthy?" Lord Chatmoore asked.

"To the best of my knowledge, the bird is trustworthy and quite dependable. I believe he will be loyal to our cause."

Naeron observed the councilors as they nodded to each other but he could sense their reluctance. Only after the high priest repeated that the bird was their only option, he realized that he could finally get their endorsement.

"We shall use the detergent to clean up Cocky."

"Who's Cocky?" the high priest asked.

Naeron cleared his throat. He had created the cockatoo but he could not let the council know. He could be accused of WAR mongering and profiteering (WAR was an acronym for Wild Animal Representation). He had to find an excuse. He cleared his throat again. "Cocky is the cockatoo's code name," he said, "for security reasons."

The high priest, who could not be deceived so easily, stared at Naeron distrustfully.

It was a critical moment. Naeron knew that even a tiny crack could be disastrous. Yet, he knew how to build perception and reinforce a dubious idea by repetition, simulation, and

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indifference to all potential obstacles. He smiled and went on as if everything was normal. "We shall use the detergent to clean up agent Cocky, the Cockatoo," he said. "After we reach the CC milestone, we'll transport him to the Mine."

Miss Po Popo promptly explained to Councilor Glee: "CC stands for Cockatoo Clean."

"If the bird is successful, we'll be at ZBR in no time."

"Zero Beasts Roaming."

"Then we can have our Mission-Accomplished party."

The prospect and the very sound of the words seemed to please everybody -- even the mistrustful high priest. After all, they all liked parties.

"If we sign the ARCADE request right now," Naeron said in the end, "we could get the detergent today."

"Sign right now?" Councilor Glee echoed questioning the wisdom of such a rushed measure.

Naeron simulated urgency. "We don't have much time. We must act quickly and preemptively. Mountain season is upon us."

2. Cocky, the Cockatoo

It was some form of enchanted water, a big blue wave that traveled across the sky. It came with great force and a hissing roar -- and a surfer on a flying board.

Naeron bent his knees and extended his hands. He sharply turned his board against the surging wave. He felt the force and the acceleration under his feet. He felt the cold breeze on his face. He travelled fast for a while. Then, as the wave slowly subsided, he rose in upright position again and balanced effortlessly.

He gazed with wonder at the mystic lands of Anephia stretching as far as he could see. In the North, there rose the grey Thyme Ridge with magnificent mountains and permanent snow caps. The vast Mountain Whew Plains lay in the West. The Little Old Forest spread in the East while the Sweet Salmon River ran peacefully through it and across the arid volcanic land and the homonymous lake in the South. Ahead, amidst the hills of Wind Downs, he could see the City of Nefalot and the Belle Blue suburb.

The origins and the source of those names were long lost in ancient scrolls, which were either unreadable or undecipherable. However, there was no shortage of rumors and tales. The most common were about a cloud, the land and the empire were somehow connected to a cloud or set of clouds.

Mystic proponents had often said that it was all in the cloud, but they never specified which cloud it was, or what was in it, thus rendering their claim vague and unverifiable. They also claimed misspellings, scholarly errors, and misinterpretations of the scrolls. Thyme Ridge was Time Bridge, a portal of sorts, they claimed. Likewise Mountain Whew was Mount a Ewe, suggesting a way of transportation across the plains.

Others did not take such claims seriously. They thought the mystics were living in a cloud cuckoo land. If anything, the toponymy was an oxymoron: Anephia suggested an absence of clouds, while Nefalot meant the exact opposite. A ridge was not a bridge and a ewe was not a reliable form of transportation -- only a good source of milk and wool. Some historians and scroll scholars had argued that the name of the city was a reference to a legendary castle and court. Others believed that the original

name was Nepheldorf, the Germanic suffix indicating a village. However, Nefalot was neither a castle nor a village. It was a big city and had been for as long as anyone could remember or tell. There was a great castle in it, but it was only a small part of the city.

Despite the many arguments and opinions, there was general agreement upon one thing, or two: the empire was sublimely picturesque and, as one might expect, it looked quite imperial. Naeron had flown over the land many times and yet every time he gazed with wonder. The landscape now filled his vision. The colors, the sounds, the air, the feel and the smell of it, they made him happy.

"Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily..."

He passed a flock of seagulls, who flew away frightened. Then he approached an aerial sign: a stationary flying broom with the city name on a lighted aluminum plate, a welcome message, a speed limit underneath it, and a swallow resting on the stick. He made a gesture as he passed, throwing a spell through his fingers, and instantly the speed limit doubled.

"Life is but a dream..."

Moving his hands, he directed his magical wave westward and began his descent. He eventually landed on top of a high-story building which was the luxurious High-Yacht hotel in Belle Blue. His surfboard dissolved as soon as he jumped off it, while the wave became a drizzle of blue beams that converged and vanished into his fists, merging with him. Nursery rhyme and poem likewise merged in his mind.

"Echoes fade and memories die..."

He went down the stairs and reached the top floor, suite number two. Inside, he found his friend and his creation, Cocky, the Cockatoo, lying on the bed.

"Long has paled that sunny sky..."

The cockatoo only turned a drowsy head and looked dreamily at his visitor.

"Sleeping so late in the afternoon?"

He crept to the edge of the bed, his feet now hanging down. He was not sleeping, he said. He rose and wavered for a moment at the edge, staring at the floor as if he were hanging from a great height and looked down the abyss. Then, with a sudden flutter of his wings, he jumped.

"How are you doing?"

Cocky stopped. "How am I doing?" he echoed. "I am bored! B-O-R-E-D. And that's not an acronym!"

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"Don't be upset."

"I am not upset. How could I be upset when we left Pi-Land for this place?"

"We can't have everything."

Cocky tried to make an argument. "It was a mistake. Let's admit it. There is no shame in admitting a mistake, is there?"

"No."

"No one is perfect."

"Correct."

"However, there is a plenty of shame when we can fix our mistakes and we don't."

Naeron smiled. "What's your point?"

"Let's just fix this mistake. We can leave tomorrow."

"We can't go back."

"Why?"

"That water has flowed down the waterfall. There is no going back."

"You are a water mage. You can do anything you wish with water. I have seen you do it."

He smiled again. "It was a metaphorical argument, not a hydraulic one."

Cocky accessed the dictionary in his digital brain. "This is exactly what I am talking about. Metaphorical, metaphor, metaphora in Latin, from Hellenic metapherein, which means to transfer. Let us transfer ourselves back to our homeland."

Naeron was amused but he declined.

"Please."

Naeron shook his head.

"Please, please, please!"

He shook his head again.

"Don't you miss it? I miss everything. I miss the sun, the sand, the surf, and the seagulls. Fresh fruits and ice cream. Tanned skin and shiny feathers! Life in Pi-Land. Oh, yeah baby! You look so cool! How are you doing? Nice weather, huh? Don't you miss it at all?"

"We cannot leave Cocky. We are on a mission."

Cocky was displeased. "Mission my tail feathers! I am *tired* of being on a mission all the time."

"If you are tired, get some rest."

"You know what?"

The Mage looked at the cockatoo.

"You are obsessed. You are cracked and insane!"

"All of the above?"

"How am I supposed to live here? I am tropical bird, you know."

Naeron glanced at the wall. "According to the thermometer, it is 81 degrees in here."

"Oh just... just forget it. It's... you're... grrrr... brrrr..." The bird emitted strange sounds as though he had lost speech control. "Hopeless," he finally said, "you are truly and utterly hopeless!"

"I am the Amazing Mage," replied Naeron, a little annoyed. "I advise you to hold your tongue before I turn you into a green worm."

"Don't I know how easy it is for you," Cocky muttered sadly. "Just few gestures or a magic spell and I'd be gone."

"It's possible."

"You wouldn't feel remorse. You wouldn't shed a tear!"

"Is that so?"

Cocky lowered his crested head. "Yes."

Naeron only teased the little cockatoo. He had never seriously considered punishment of any form. He concealed his tender affections behind the veneer of a powerful mage but he was not immune to them. He slowly approached the cockatoo and he spoke softly. He told him that he could view things from an angle, if he wished, or he could look at the bright side.

Cocky raised his head quickly. "What bright side?"

"We shall complete our missions in the end. We shall achieve our goals. We shall be famous. We shall live forever."

Cocky did not seem so sad anymore. "How about being rich? Stinky, wealthy, crazy rich!"

"If you value wealth," Naeron said almost with disdain. "But we don't believe in such mundane ideas, do we?"

Cocky shook his wings. "Oh, no, no, no, no, no! Those things, wealth, capitalism, profit, financial bubbles, and mortgages, they are horrible. We don't want any of that. Just rich, you know, just the nice part."

"You make perfect sense."

Naeron's sarcasm was lost in a labyrinth of fantasies, luxury, and leisure. Cocky moved his wings up and down, pointing to various directions and ideas. "After we are rich, we can travel the world and stay in the fanciest hotels. We can even own an entire resort, and the best things in the world, the most delicious organic peanuts. We can go to a country where they have no germs and no speed limits, like, say, Germany, and we can buy all sorts of things and fly around lightning fast and be You-Raw-

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Pea-Ann." He said the last slowly, one syllable at a time, and he took great pleasure in it and the sound of it.

"Is it acceptable to say Raw-Pea?" he asked.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"I don't know. I could be herbally incorrect."

"It's fine."

"Miss Europe is not fine these days, is she?"

"They have issues with their economy."

"They are very much into that economy thing, huh?"

"They are being squeezed."

"Why?"

"There are perennial issues. Bureaucracy has long been the norm, meritocracy an afterthought. The paradigm of cronyism and corruption, sterile as it is, still survives. And the old ruins, ravaged by political extremism and deficits, are haunted by the ghosts of failure. Then there are new issues. Manufacturing has migrated to the East for cheap labor, reduced regulation and limited accountability. Globalization has become an instrument of greed and a harbinger of feudalism. The system is threatened by anachronisms and yet it is unable to respond--" Naeron paused. There was no point to such a discussion. He looked at Cocky who seemed puzzled and busy accessing his digital dictionary. There were so many words he had never heard before!

"Listen," Naeron said, "there is something I must tell you."

"Okay."

"We have to clean you."

Cocky protested: "Again! We did it last year!"

"What kind of creature would go a whole year without ever washing up?"

He offered an example: "*I do!*"

"That's exactly my point. You are dirty, you have bugs, and we must clean you up and get you in good shape again."

"I am in perfect shape. I've never been better. And, you know, those bugs and being dirty, I don't mind them a bit. I can just crash out on the floor and not care about a thing."

"That's the problem. You have bugs and you crash..."

"It's freedom, dear Mage. Freedom!"

"We have to clean you."

"No way! Turn me into a worm now."

"What's so bad about being clean?"

"I hate it! And that big, overweight lady, Miss Wurstdam from the agency, she is the worst. She is brutal. I hate her! She

probably thinks I am made of rubber or something elastic and she stretches me like this and like that and that!"

Cocky moved his wings and his head around making all sorts of gestures to show Naeron how he suffered.

"That's not cleaning. That's Swedish gymnastics, or rather waterboarding in a tub full of hot water and soap bubbles. She uses detergent and torturous instruments, like a huge brush, and she rubs me with it until there are no feathers, skin, or breath left in me. It is so scary. Last time, I thought I was done for. I thought she would scrub me to oblivion, drown me in the water. I feared she would make a hot soup out of me and eat me! She likes to eat things, you know. It was such a horrible experience, pure cruelty to animals!"

"I think you exaggerate a bit," said Naeron. "Bathing is not such a torment."

"I hate it. I hate it. I hate it!"

Naeron disapproved.

"I am not going through that thing again. I am not getting anywhere near her."

He smiled. "You don't have to. I called the agency this morning and Miss Wurstdam is on vacation."

"You see! We can't have cleaning. Let's forget it. Done deal."

"I asked for a replacement," Naeron said cunningly.

"However, if you really hate bathing so much, I can call them and cancel it."

"Good. Great. Marvelous! I love you."

"Actually, they should be already here. The appointment was for six o'clock. They are probably in the lobby. I'll get downstairs and tell them to go."

"They?" Cocky asked curiously. "Are they more than one person?"

The mage smiled again. "Special replacement team. They are three geisha ladies."

The cockatoo's beak hung open. He shook its head as if to wake up from a dream. "Three! Geisha!! Ladies!!! Did I hear you right?"

"Yes."

"I am going to die."

"Don't worry. I'll tell them to leave. I shall--"

"Don't move an inch!"

"What's the problem?"

"Are they pretty?"

"They could be."

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"Do they do the pressing-and-grinding-therapeutic-sensual-massage-thing?"

"It is possible."

"And the go-go girls dancing?"

"I don't think go-go dancing is in their repertoire."

"That's fine."

"Don't worry. I'll send them away."

Cocky shook his head. "Why would you do such a thing?" he complained.

"It's ok. We don't really have to clean you."

"Of course we do. I was kidding. Just kidding!"

"No kidding!"

"Yes, kidding. I was doing the kidding thing. A little kidding here, a little more kidding there, kidding all the time. No offense taken I hope, but I was really kidding!" Cocky talked fast and when he finally stopped, there was a broad grin on his face.

"Are you sure?"

"One hundred percent sure. No, actually it is three hundred percent, one hundred percent for each cleaning geisha lady."

Naeron feigned disbelief.

"Listen," Cocky said, "it's been a whole year without a bath. It is clearly an environmental awareness thing because it saves water and it is good for the environment and the clean water initiative. Those are very good things. But now, you see, there are crawling bugs crawling all over me and I have to plunge my beak into my feathers and scratch my skin."

Cocky showed him an example and he made a sound to indicate how disgusting it was to him.

"It's horrible! I definitely need cleaning, water, soap, that kind of stuff, even detergent."

"Well, if you--"

"I may even have memory beaks."

"You mean memory leaks?"

"Yeah, that thing!"

"That's a nasty bug. Are they growing?"

"I don't know. They are all over me."

"Then, perhaps we should clean you."

"Yeah, that's what I am telling you."

"I thought you did not like to be cleaned."

"I did not. But I have to. Actually, we should plan this better, get down to business with it. I must get cleaned and have all my bugs removed from time to time... once in a while... a regular

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schedule perhaps... I'd say let's have the geisha cleaning thing every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. How about that?"

"I see," Naeron grinned. "Then, I shouldn't cancel it."

"Do not, I repeat, do not do such a thing."

There was a knock at the door then and Cocky almost jumped. "Is it them?" he asked eagerly.

"I think so."

"How do I look? Should I have my crest like this?" (He pushed it to the left.) "Or like this?" (He pushed it to the right.) "Maybe like this?" (He split it in the middle.)

Rare as it was with him Naeron reached out and mussed the crest feathers with affection. "You look just fine," he said.

"Would you mind answering the door?"

Naeron looked askance at the bird.

"Please. Please, please, please! And close it after you leave."

Naeron walked to the door.

"Ladies?"

"We are from the agency," the three said in a chorus.

"Yes," Naeron said, and with a backward glance into the room and the bird that was still rearranging his crest, "I believe Cocky is ready for you."

He stood in the hallway for a moment before he closed the door; and he heard Cocky talking.

"Are you ladies really twins? Or triplets? Will you clean me up well? Good, good, good. Nelly, make me decent. I am going to be good. High time, Heathcliff. That's from a book Naeron gave me. Wait. You know I am little sensitive in the water. But I really like the massage thing. Yeah, that -- that thing. Oh, that's nice. That's really nice. I like it. I *like* it!"

3. Affairs of the Castle

It was late in the evening when Naeron returned to the Miss O Croft castle. He landed in the front yard, which was right behind the main gate. It was a bustling center of commerce and discourse during the day but was now dark and empty. He could hear the slow drip from a small fountain in the center. He could sense the water and he was pleased by it but he could not see it. He looked around but he only saw the dark silhouettes of things. He lifted his hand and paused the water. He felt comfortable and welcomed in the silence. He knew the area so well he could find his way blindfolded and yet he was fascinated by it. He had lived in the castle for a long time, its novelty had long passed, but its charm persisted.

For a while he thought that his feelings and his impressions were sustained by the grand architecture. He could see perfection in the proud towers and the stone fortifications, the paved streets and the green areas, the statues, the pillars, and the arched pathways... The castle was a place of wonder, legend, and hype, surrounded by tall walls and equally tall tales. A mystical experience carved in stone, he often thought. Yet he slowly realized through the years that the castle had become something far more important to him. It was his home.

He remembered his first day when he was on a flying bus with the little cockatoo next to him.

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"Is this the castle?" Cocky asked.

"That's right. This is the Miss O Croft castle."

"Why do they call it that?"

Naeron, who was a very knowledgeable mage from an early age, knew (almost) everything about the castle. It had been named after its first explorer, Miss Croft, the Plume Trader.

"What sort of a trader is that?" Cocky complained. "I hope she is not after my feathers!"

"No one knew much about her trade," the young mage replied. "There were rumors that she was a rogue trader and a thief, too. She eventually became the owner of the castle -- most likely a foreclosure. It is hard to be accurate about historical events when they are not exactly... historical."

"At least they are not hysterical," the bird grinned, entertained by his own quizzical shades of meaning.

"History and hysteria aside," Naeron went on, "the legend has it that it was all poor handwriting in the ancient scrolls and her real name was Miss Comfort."

"I like that," Cocky cried, "Miss Comfort, Miss Comfy, Miss Comfit!"

Naeron always found Cocky's wordplays to be amusing. He never designed or added any such functionality to his system. Cocky had developed it himself through a reinforcement learning process.

"Why was Miss Comfort a thief?" the learning cockatoo asked. "Was she poor?"

"Not at all. Miss Comfort was not actually a thief but a banker with great interest and investments in real estate."

"All shapes and sizes, all sorts of tricks and fancy names, thievery can have many faces."

"Perhaps. But Miss Comfort was not a thief. She was building comfortable houses for people. Thus her name."

"And she was selling them for an arm and a leg, with subprime mortgages, one hundred of them per day, I am sure!"

"I would not say so," Naeron said quietly. "We do not have sufficient data. Besides, there is another theory."

"What theory?"

"It is a new one. The scrolls have faded over time and the original handwriting was very poor to start with. It is rather easy to misread them. The new theory claims such an erroneous reading. Accordingly, the original name was not Miss Comfort but rather Discomfort. The whole idea derives from the fact that there have been reports of people walking in the castle very late at night. The obvious explanation is, of course, that they walk around in the night because they sleep in uncomfortable beds and they have a lot of discomfort."

"There goes my comfit," the bird said sadly. "It's now discomfit!"

"Don't worry," Naeron smiled, "I'll get you something nice as soon as we get off this bus. This is a good place and the name does not matter a bit."

"Or a byte and a terrible terabyte!"

Naeron tried not to laugh.

"You know what?" Cocky said. "Those people who walk late in the night, they don't have any discomfort."

"Shouldn't they be sleeping then?"

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"They do sleep. They are sleepwalkers!"

Naeron glanced quickly at his little tablet with the controls of the cockatoo. There was a small vibration. Something was wrong. A glitch. He turned to Cocky. "Perhaps, you should go to sleep, too."

After his arrival and in the course of a few years, Naeron discovered some other interesting facts about the castle. He found that both the Discomfort and Sleepwalker Theories were incorrect but he also found that he, himself, could not resist the secret forces of the castle and he often walked around the towers very late at night.

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